



# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Higher Education

## Fulbright Program

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The Fulbright Program is an international educational exchange program operating on a binational basis between the United States and over 160 countries. Founded in 1946, the program offers grants for U.S. students, scholars, artists, and professionals to study, teach, or conduct research or professional projects abroad, and respectively, for citizens of other countries to do the same in the United States.

The Fulbright Program was instrumental in promoting international education in the United States and globally after World War II, serving as a forerunner and inspiration for the subsequent development of other international exchange programs. Today, the Fulbright Program has a global reach and is managed by 49 binational commissions and over 100 U.S. embassies. It is among the most widely recognized scholarship programs in the world, with approximately 8,000 participants annually and 380,000 alumni, as of 2019.

## History and Funding

In September 1945, Senator James William Fulbright from Arkansas introduced a bill in the U.S. Congress to promote international goodwill through educational exchange. President Harry S. Truman signed it into law on August 1, 1946, creating the Fulbright Program. The legislation earmarked part of the proceeds from the sale of surplus U.S. war materials in Europe, Asia, and the Pacific to fund exchanges between the United States and countries where such funding was available. By 1953, a total of 27 countries had concluded binational agreements with the U.S. government establishing binational commissions that were entrusted with the management of the exchanges.

With the depletion of the revenues from the sale of U.S. war material surpluses overseas, a new funding approach was necessary. The Fulbright–Hays Act of 1961 made the Fulbright Program a line item in the U.S. federal budget and provided those partner countries with bilateral agreements and commissions with opportunities to contribute toward the costs of the program, making binational cofinancing an attribute of the program. In recent decades, partner government contributions have grown dramatically. In 2017, they totaled over \$100 million per annum, whereas the U.S. government allocation to the global Fulbright Program was \$240 million. In many countries with binational commissions, the partner governments' contributions surpass that of the U.S. government.

Since its inception, the Fulbright Program also has relied on the support of nongovernmental actors, including direct and in-kind contributions from higher education institutions, research agencies, and private foundations. More recently, in some countries, alumni support, private donors, and corporate sponsorship are of increasing importance. There are significant differences between countries in how the program is funded.

The Fulbright–Hays Act also provided the U.S. State Department with the flexibility to extend the program to countries without binational agreements or commissions, which created a different category of Fulbright Programs run unilaterally by U.S. embassies. This multiplied the number of countries participating in the program. These embassy-based programs are funded almost entirely by U.S. government allocations.

## Mandate and Objectives

The preamble of the Fulbright–Hays Act of 1961 defines the mandate of the Fulbright Program: “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange.”

The program can operate in multiple roles. It is an *academic exchange* program that aims to advance science and education. It was founded upon the ideals of *cultural exchange*. As an *international educational exchange*

program, it can significantly impact the internationalization of higher education institutions, and education and research overall. Fulbright can also be viewed as a *public diplomacy* program, and in some contexts, it is seen as a *development* program. The founder of the program, Senator Fulbright, emphasized the importance of Fulbright as a *peace* program. And today, many Fulbright scholars work in areas and projects that have the characteristics of a *science diplomacy* program.

The role of the Fulbright Program is not identical in all participating countries globally. Instead, its role, scope, and emphasis can be distinctly different across countries, contingent upon the governmental agreement and jointly identified priorities in the given binational context. Therefore, each bilateral Fulbright Program operates in a somewhat open and negotiable academic space defined by one—or typically more—of these multiple roles.

## Implementation

With a large number of stakeholders and partners involved in the administration and funding of grants, the organizational structure of the Fulbright Program is complex and varies somewhat from country to country. In the 49 countries, where the programs are administered by independent binational commissions steered by binational boards, host countries, and governments work with the United States through these commissions to set joint priorities and shape the program to meet bilateral interests. Therefore, the programs in these countries can be very different from one another also in terms of programmatic details, administration, and implementation. The over 100 U.S. embassy-based Fulbright Programs share significantly more similarities with each other.

In the United States, the administration is carried out by the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs with the assistance of selected educational exchange organizations as contractors. Policy guidelines are provided by the presidentially appointed William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board.

## Grant Programs

The core funding instruments are the student grants (postbaccalaureate through predoctoral) and the scholar grants for research, lecturing, and professional projects. Both have many subcategories, and over the years, a large number of other program types have also emerged, including short-term opportunities and programs providing only one-directional mobility (inbound or outbound). As of 2019, 75% of the awards globally are for various categories of students. Slightly over 50% of the awards go to U.S. grantees, both students and scholars. In principle, grants are offered in all academic disciplines except clinical medicine involving patient contact. Grant amounts vary considerably contingent upon the grant category and hosting country.

Financial awards are accompanied by additional benefits and entail specific responsibilities. Benefits typically include predeparture and arrival orientations, support services, and cultural enrichment opportunities during the grant period. Among program responsibilities, grantees are expected to serve in the role of unofficial cultural ambassadors of their countries.

**See also** [Comprehensive Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions](#); [Intercultural Competency Development](#); [International Student Mobility Programs](#); [Internationalization and International Students](#); [Internationalization of Higher Education: Impacts](#); [Sponsored International Students](#); [Staff Development](#); [Student Mobility](#)

## Websites

Fulbright U.S. Student Program: <https://us.fulbrightonline.org>

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- United States
- government

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