



Office of Graduate Fellowships

Tips and Pointers:

Fulbright Selection Process

Introduction

Fulbright is one of the oldest, most prestigious, and best-known student grant programs in the United States. The application process is long and can seem daunting. You may wonder who gets these awards and how the decisions really get made. The Fulbright selection process consists of three stages: Campus Committee, National Screening Committee, and International Fulbright Commission. When putting together your Fulbright application package, it is helpful to consider who will be reading that application and how it will be judged at the campus, national and international levels. This sheet is designed to provide you with some insight into the Fulbright selection process.

Step One: The Fulbright Program Advisor (FPA) and the Fulbright Campus Committee

The first step in the Fulbright application process is to submit the application to the Fulbright Program Advisors (FPAs) here at George Mason University – for undergraduate students and alumni, Dr. LaNitra Berger, and for graduate students, Dr. Kay Agoston. The COMPLETE application is submitted electronically by the student via the Fulbright program’s online application system (known as EMBARK), by 11:59 pm on September 15 annually. The FPAs will review your electronic application to make sure it is complete, and will then turn it over to the Fulbright Campus Committee. The Fulbright campus committee actually consists of two sub-committees, one to read Research/Study applications and one to read ETA applications. Applications to special grants like the Fulbright-Clinton awards will be reviewed by the Research/Study committee, with additional input from faculty specialists as needed. (For more information on the different types of Fulbright grants, please visit <http://us.fulbrightonline.org/about/types-of-grants>.) Each sub-committee is composed of 3-5 faculty members who will read the applications and offer comments and feedback. The committee will also vote to extend official university endorsement to the application. Except in rare cases where the committee has serious concerns about the viability of the application or about academic honesty, the application will be endorsed.

Committee feedback will be summarized by the FPAs and relayed back to the student, who can use this feedback to revise their application before final submission to the national competition. (The application documents will at the same time be electronically “unsubmitted” by the FPA and returned back to the interface in which the student has the ability to edit and revise.)

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At the end of this process it is the applicant's responsibility to resubmit their application via Fulbright's online application system – only this time the application will go forward to the national competition. At this time the Fulbright program advisor will attach a cover sheet that summarizes the committee's assessment of the application and confirms the committee's decision to endorse the application. This second and final submission occurs sometime in early-to-mid-October, on a date set annually by the Fulbright competition (in 2016 it is October 11).

Regarding the FPA / Campus Committee stage of the competition, please note:

- The applications are NOT ranked or scored. The purpose of the campus committee process is to simulate the kind of review your application will receive at the national level and give you the opportunity to improve your application based on the feedback you receive. The goal is to help you – and Mason – put forward the most competitive possible application. Applicants should thus view the campus committee process as a benefit to them, not an obstacle to be overcome.
- The campus committee does not (and in fact cannot) eliminate applicants or prevent them from going forward in the competition. At most, the committee may advise a candidate that they do not believe their application is competitive (which will most likely be reflected in their comments and, in some cases, in a decision not to endorse the application.) However, any applicant who resubmits their application by the final deadline will go forward regardless of the campus committee's recommendation.
- It is very much to your advantage in the first phase of the Fulbright process to cultivate a positive, professional relationship with the FPA. This relationship is in effect like an "interview" in which you have an opportunity to demonstrate professionalism and suitability for the grant. Keep appointments, meet deadlines, and behave with consideration for the FPA, the committee, and other applicants.

Step Two: The National Screening Committee

The next step in the Fulbright selection process is review by a National Screening Committee. Applications submitted by the national deadline (in October) will be distributed to committees that focus on a particular country or world region, and on grant type (Research/Study, ETA, or special opportunities.) For example, on ETA panels, committee members will include people who are qualified to judge fitness for teaching overseas. For research-oriented panels, they will be people who are qualified to judge the soundness and significance of a research project. Applications in the Arts or to specialized grant programs (like the Fulbright-Clinton Fellowships) will be evaluated by committees with special expertise in the areas to be judged.

Applications will be distributed electronically to committee members, who are then charged with reading and rating them on a scale of 1-4 (where 1 is the highest rating). Each committee member typically gets between 50-100 application packages to read. Between essays, recommendation letters, transcripts, language evaluations, and other materials, that is a lot of reading! The committee members have 4 - 6 weeks to read the applications, after which they will convene to go over their ratings and discuss the applications. These meetings usually take place in November and December, in several locations around the country.

This meeting is where the first big “cut” in the Fulbright competition gets made. In most cases only about the top 20-30% of applications to a given country or region will be forwarded beyond this stage. Here is how that top segment is identified:

The committee members sit down together and, using a spreadsheet, compare how they each individually rated the applications. In cases where there was general agreement on the score, there is not much further discussion unless the committee feels a special need to discuss a particular candidate. In cases where the committee members differed substantially in their ratings, the application will be discussed in more detail. As a result of these discussions, the committee members may choose to revise their original scores in either direction.

After everyone is happy with their rating scores, the scores are summed up and put in a ranked order. It is common for several applicants to have the same composite score, so the committee then holds another round of discussion to tease out a final ranking. While merit, fit, and feasibility remain the dominant factors, it is at this stage that other factors such as diversity (of academic field, home state, ethnicity, socio-economic background, etc.), veteran status, or a candidate’s unique circumstances may come into play. The committee will also refer back to the country’s stated preferences (which applicants may read on the Fulbright U.S. Student Program web site.) Other factors that can boost a candidate in the ranking include: a research project that is especially creative or that focuses on a less visited part of the country (for research applicants), a special talent or idea for an ETA applicant to contribute to cultural exchange in their host community; superior language abilities, or an exceptional commitment to fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding as part of the Fulbright project.

After the rankings are complete, the meeting is adjourned. Approximately the top 20-30% (the committee will be told the exact number) will be forwarded to the Fulbright Commission in the destination country. In mid-January, applicants will be informed as to whether their application was forwarded to the next round. Those who move forward to the next round are referred to by Fulbright as “Semi-Finalists.” Semi-Finalists will be asked to arrange for hard copies of their official transcripts to be sent to IIE.

Step Three: The Fulbright Commission

After the NSC stage the top-ranked applications are forwarded to the destination country for review by a locally-convened Fulbright Commission (FC).

The FC is usually a larger and more diverse body than the NSC. It will include academics / professors, but also diplomats or foreign ministry representatives, and sometimes even influential members of the business, professional or civil society communities. In some cases the U.S. embassy personnel may also sit on the committee.

The FC assumes that all the candidates whose names are forwarded are fundamentally qualified to receive the grant. They will take note of the rankings provided by the NSC, but how closely they follow these ranking varies. In some cases they may simply go down the list until they run out of funding. In other cases they go down the list but also consider which candidates are the best match (as they see it) for their country.

When fashioning a Fulbright cohort, each country has its quirks and preferences. These are often noted in country profiles on Fulbright's web site, and applicants should pay close attention to these stated preferences when choosing what country and what type of grant to apply for. Some countries prefer Bachelor's candidates to graduate students (especially for the ETA), whereas others strongly prefer doctoral students (particularly for Research/Study grants) – and still others desire a mix. Some countries give strong preference to candidates who have competency in the local language, while for other countries this may not be a priority. Some countries prefer candidates who have had never had a chance to visit before, whereas for others prior experience is an asset. Some desire a cohort with diverse educational backgrounds and professional aspirations (including business, the arts, and STEM fields) while others give priority to specific fields of study. Countries in the developing world often look for evidence of a candidate's maturity and adaptability in challenging living conditions. Politics play a role, too. Projects that touch on sensitive issues in the host country may encounter difficulty at the FC stage – as will topics that could put the researcher or others in dangerous, illegal, or embarrassing situations, projects with an overtly activist tone, research topics that run up against dominant religious values or traditional morals, researchers who seem to have an agenda, or those whose statements strike paternalistic tones (e.g. the young American who wants to save the world.) This does not mean that projects dealing with sensitive or controversial topics have no chance, but rather that the applicant must design and articulate the project from the outset in a way that takes local sensitivities into account.

During this phase of the competition the applicant may be contacted with a request for additional information or an invitation to a phone/Skype interview. Currently only a minority of countries conduct interviews, but the number is growing. In some cases the interview serves to verify the applicant's documented language skills; if you are applying to a country that sets a high expectation in terms of language proficiency and are summoned for an interview, you should expect all or part of the interview to take place in the host country language. (Russian and Spanish language applicants in particular should be prepared for this.) Another purpose of the interview is simply to get a personal impression of the applicant – their professionalism, preparedness, and interpersonal style. Applicants should remain alert to communications during this stage of the competition and respond promptly. If you are contacted, alert Dr. Berger or Dr. Agoston. We can help you prepare for the interview.

In general about half the application dossiers forwarded by the NSC will ultimately be selected for an award – depending on the number of applications received that year and on available funding. However, this statistic can vary widely by country, or even from year to year.

Final Step: FSB Approval

Applications selected by the host country go through one final approval process before notification of the fellow, by a panel of individuals called the Fulbright Scholarship Board (FSB). The FSB is appointed by the President of the United States to supervise the Fulbright program, including by approving Fulbright award offers. As part of this process, members of the FSB consult with both the U.S. Department of State and the executive directors of the Fulbright Commissions. In most cases, FSB approval is not a major hurdle – there has to be a serious concern about the candidate's or the project's suitability for them to go against the NSC and FC recommendations. Examples might be projects perceived to be dangerous or harmful to U.S.

interests abroad, applicants with a prior criminal record, or conflict of interest cases (such as close family members of U.S. State Department employees.) FSB approval is required before the formal offer of an award can be made.

You can learn more about the FSB here: <http://fulbright.state.gov/fsb.html>

Final Notification

The date of final notification for Semi-Finalists varies according to the schedule on which the host country's Fulbright Commission operates. Notification is by country. Each year, some country programs will notify applicants as early as March, while others do not notify until May or even June. Most Semi-Finalists will know their final status by the end of April. There are three possible outcomes:

- You may be offered an award (the letter will state that you have been designated a "Finalist.") The offer letter may contain instructions, including a deadline by which you must accept or decline the award.
- You may be declined (also sometimes referred to as "non-select.")
- You may be designated an "alternate." This means that you are being held in reserve in case additional awards become available, in which case an offer may be made at a later date. It sometimes happens that students who receive an initial offer decline the award, or that a host country is able to fund more awards than initially envisioned. In this case the country will draw from its alternate list. (On rare occasions, ETA applicants may be offered placements in a country other than the one they applied to – usually in the same region.) It is not uncommon for alternates to later be offered awards, but the likelihood declines as time goes on. If you have not received an offer by the end of June, the chances that you will receive one are low.

Memo from the NSC: Fulbright Application Do's and Don'ts

As an official FPA for George Mason University, the Director of Graduate Fellowships has had the opportunity to sit in on Fulbright NSC selection committee meetings. Here are some of the things NSC members say they want applicants to know:

- DO put a lot of effort into polishing your writing. Get feedback from the FPA, the Writing Center, your faculty advisors/mentors, and from peer readers. Being able to express yourself articulately in written English is fundamental to the Fulbright grant, and applications that are poorly written or that contain errors (grammatical, spelling, typos) will not receive favorable consideration, no matter how fantastic the idea. And make it readable! Remember that if you are a Semi-Finalist, most of your readers will be non-native English speakers. Strong, clearly worded essays are your biggest asset.
- DON'T make the reader work too hard or "fish" for information. NSC members have only a few weeks to read a big pile of applications – over and above their regular end-of-semester workload. Your application needs to grab the reader's attention and make it clear why the Fulbright is a good fit for your talents and experience. An application contains a lot of "dots" of information – academics, extra-curricular activities, volunteer and work experience, family background, language skills, future plans, and so on. It's your job to connect the dots into a coherent picture for the reader!
- DO think carefully about what type of grant is the best match for you. Some students apply for an ETA because they perceive it as more accessible, when really they would be better suited for a research or independent study grant. It is usually apparent in these applications that teaching is just a ticket and not the applicant's true interest.
- DON'T adopt a paternalistic attitude toward the host country. The Fulbright is not a foreign aid program and grantees are not being sent out to save the world.
- DO show that your project (for research applicants) is feasible (meaning you have the skills, connections, and resources to carry it out in real life) and contributes to the goals of mutual understanding and cultural exchange.
- DON'T come across as competitive or careerist. The Fulbright does not exist for you to "get an edge," score a shiny new line in your resume, or beat out the competition. There's no need to point out in the application how prestigious the Fulbright is or what a "great opportunity" and a huge honor it would be. These are givens, and this kind of statement just makes you seem like you are out for glory. Instead, show the reader why this makes sense in your life, what you will bring to the table, and how you will grow. Go after the experience, not the award.
- DO make a strong case for the destination country you have chosen. It is true that some countries receive more applications than others, but attempts to "game the system" by putting in an application to a (supposedly) less popular country are usually painfully obvious. By the same token, applicants who can't resist the lure of Europe when their qualifications would be better suited to another part of the world are unlikely to succeed. Take an honest look at what is the best fit for you – not just what sounds fun, or seems like a better bet.
- DON'T omit required documents like transcripts or language evaluations. Follow up with your recommenders to make sure things get submitted on time. If your file is missing documents, your chances of favorable consideration are greatly reduced.