FEATURE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Short-Term Global Exchanges through the Fulbright Specialist Program: One Librarian’s Experience

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abstract: In spring of 2019, the author traveled to Kolkata, India, to work with the staff of the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation, academic and public librarians, and library and information science students under a Fulbright Specialist grant. This article describes the Fulbright Specialist Program, provides information about the application process, and explores what it means to be admitted to and participate in the program. Experience-based tips for applying to the program and preparing for work abroad, if selected, are offered.

Introduction

When the author boarded the first of three flights for the journey to India on March 14, 2019, she joined the ranks of approximately 370,000 researchers, scholars, students, and professionals who have participated in Fulbright programs through the United States Department of State since the cultural exchange plan was established in 1946. Fulbright programs, ranging from a single stay lasting a few weeks to multiple international visits over two years, have evolved over time and differ in their specific aims and objectives. Nevertheless, increased cross-cultural understanding through international partnerships remains a core goal of these experiences. Fulbright opportunities and experiences are available to those in most academic disciplines and fields, including librarianship. Among other benefits, these experiences strengthen scholars, professionals, and organizations in the United States and abroad by using travel to foster mutually beneficial relationships across cultures.

Fulbright Opportunities

Before the author’s journey to India, she assumed that the Fulbright program consisted solely of semester-long and yearlong grants to do research or teach in other countries.
While research and educational grants remain the core of the Fulbright offerings, and perhaps the best-known, they are just two of many opportunities available through the program. In fact, there are more than a dozen different Fulbright awards for United States and non-United States citizens, including grants for early-career scholars, faculty, and professionals in a variety of fields, among them library science. A listing of Fulbright opportunities is available on the website of the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/fulbright-programs. Many awards have subcategories and variations between host countries, creating a wide variety of opportunities.

Fulbright Scholar Programs

Fulbright Scholar Programs, which encourage long-term visits abroad to pursue research interests with international colleagues, are among the best-known exchange opportunities for academics and professionals. These grants, ranging from a few months to nearly a year, typically involve teaching, research, or a combination of the two. A searchable database of Fulbright Scholar opportunities is available through the Institute of International Education’s website, https://awards.cies.org/.

When this author’s Fulbright journey began, she knew it would be challenging to fit a long-term international visit into her schedule, as it would be for many librarians. Fortunately, at a faculty information session on their Fulbright experiences in Finland, colleagues from Minnesota State University, Mankato introduced the shorter-term Fulbright Specialist Grant. This project-based international partnership opportunity seemed more manageable, given the author’s ongoing professional and personal commitments.

Fulbright Specialist Grants

The Fulbright Specialist Program, established in 2001, sends U.S. faculty and professionals to host institutions in more than 150 countries to enhance their expertise, develop and strengthen institutional partnerships, and serve as consultants for periods of two to six weeks. Interested individuals who (1) are U.S. citizens, (2) can travel overseas for 14 to 42 days, (3) have “significant experience” in one of 24 fields, including library science, and (4) are not ineligible due to residency, employment, or the religious nature of a proposed project may apply for a place on the Fulbright Specialist Roster. The experi-
ence required is not explicitly defined. In this case, the author’s MLIS degree and her more than 12 years on the job in three different library settings and positions, paired with the rest of the application packet, secured a place on the roster.

There are two stages to the application and assignment process. Applications for the Fulbright Specialist Roster are accepted on a rolling deadline and assessed by a peer-review panel. To complete the application, candidates must submit personal information like that on a résumé; upload their curriculum vitae; identify any location preferences for Fulbright service; complete an optional survey; identify three references who will provide recommendations after the application is submitted; and answer two essay questions. The first question asks about interest in serving as a Fulbright Specialist and how this service could benefit a host institution and the applicant’s U.S. employer. The second asks candidates to describe previous experiences working in international environments and why they would be effective serving as Fulbright Specialists at host institutions. Individuals without international work experience are asked to describe success strategies they would use during their cross-cultural Fulbright Specialist service. The essays must be short, a maximum of 1,500 words. The author agonized when both essay drafts came in short, at approximately 450 words each, but being succinct was evidently not cause for rejection.

The author submitted the application for the roster and her references completed their letters of recommendation by January 11, 2018. Then the waiting began. Although materials are accepted on a rolling basis, they are reviewed just six times per year. This application missed the January review by days, so it was not until April 13, 2018, that the notification of acceptance onto the Specialist Roster arrived.

Although acceptance onto the roster is something to celebrate, it does not guarantee placement on an international exchange. Instead, it grants access to a database of “open projects” proposed by host organizations and approved for specialist placement by the Fulbright Commission or the U.S. Embassy in the prospective host nation and by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Members of the roster may then apply for these opportunities. Alternatively, roster members and applicants can work with a potential host institution on a “named project,” in which the organization receiving the specialist specifically requests a U.S. professional to serve on its project. However, this approach requires that both the host institution’s project and the individual’s roster application be accepted into the Fulbright Specialist Program.

Opportunities listed as “open projects” are organized by discipline. When the author was accepted and given access to the Fulbright portal, just one opportunity was listed for library science—and the application deadline was less than a week away. April can be a busy month for an instruction librarian like the author, but she decided to scrape together her application materials. Fulbright Specialists must wait a minimum of two years between grants, but they only remain on the roster for three years, so those hoping to complete more than one project during their roster tenure benefit from submitting project applications as soon as they can.

Applications for opportunities on the roster consist of three mandatory sections: (1) submission of the roster member’s curriculum vitae; (2) a brief personal statement, a maximum 2,000 characters or approximately 300 words, about how the applicant qualifies to assist with the project, and (3) a statement of general availability to complete the
undertaking. Although the timeline to complete the application was tight, the author carefully reviewed the project specifications and tailored her personal statement to highlight skills and experiences directly related to the proposal.

The author applied for placement with the “Capacity Building Training Program for LIS Professional” hosted by the Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation (RRRLF) in Kolkata, India. The foundation was established and financed by the National Mission on Libraries in the Ministry of Culture of the government of India. Staff at the Fulbright Specialist administrative organization, World Learning, screened applications and then sent the materials of the five best-qualified candidates to the host organization for consideration and a final selection. This review and approval process went faster than expected. On May 10, 2018, the surprising and exciting e-mail from World Learning announced the author’s placement with RRRLF.

**Tips for Applying**

Although the application to the Fulbright Specialist Roster and subsequent request to work with the RRRLF were succinctly written and, in one case, compiled in a rush, these experiences helped identify important considerations when applying at each stage for a Fulbright Specialist Grant. When asking to join the roster and requesting a project, applicants should read the essay prompts closely and respond to each part of the request. For example, although written as only two sentences, the first essay item for the Fulbright Specialist Roster asks four distinct questions:

1. Why are you interested in serving as a Specialist?
2. How will a host institution benefit from your service on the Roster?
3. How will your institution or employer benefit from your service on the Roster?
4. What are specific examples of activities you might be interested in doing at a host institution?

In her application, the author made sure to explicitly address each of these questions using clear signaling phrases (for example, “A host institution will benefit because . . .”). She also provided specific examples of work that prepared her for specialist service and projects at her home institution that would be enhanced by professional experience abroad.

Similarly, the first essay prompt for project applications once an applicant is approved for the roster merely asks the candidate to describe why his or her qualifications fit the requirements of the host institution. Each open project description lists the need the project will meet, its objectives, the proposed activities, and the intended impact on the host institution. Since this essay is limited to approximately 300 words, the author could not address each area individually. However, she used the project objectives to frame her response and included examples of her activities in the United States to illustrate her qualifications and experience performing each open project description.
activities like those proposed by the host institution. The brevity of this essay response necessitated disposing of any statements of introduction or conclusion. Instead, the author began and ended her essay by directly detailing her qualifications in each of the three objective areas. While this direct approach may not work for all applications, it did in this case.

Finally, each project lists start and end dates, but in most cases, these can be changed and should not deter interested roster members from applying. While the timing of some opportunities is not flexible, host organizations can indicate whether their dates are adjustable or fixed. The author proposed dates different from those indicated by RRRLF in the initial application, and the RRRLF was interested enough in her qualifications to find a mutually acceptable time for the project. In the initial application, however, the author tried to be as flexible as possible in listing dates that would work for travel abroad. In the author’s case, these times coincided with a semester-long sabbatical leave. Librarian sabbaticals are not common, but other scheduling options may permit such opportunities. Applicants should consider less busy times during a typical calendar year and discuss leave options, travel timing, and the potential for a project to benefit the home institution with their employer to determine what opportunities and dates might work for them. Although sabbatical leave made the author’s first Fulbright Specialist Grant relatively easy to plan, if a second project becomes possible during her tenure on the roster, it will likely involve discussions and negotiations with her employer to make time for the experience.

Preparing for and Completing a Project

The roster and project application processes were just the first two steps of undertaking travel to India on a Fulbright Specialist Grant. World Learning takes care of airfare, and the host organization is responsible for transportation in the host country. Nevertheless, working with the hosts and the United States-India Educational Foundation (USIEF), the Fulbright administrating body in India, to arrange dates, apply for a research visa, and determine the specific time in India often felt like a full-time job, especially layered on top of the author’s normal professional responsibilities. Each Fulbright project is different, though, so this experience preparing for travel to India to work with a library foundation may not have been typical.

Despite the unique nature of each Fulbright Specialist Grant, a few lessons from the author’s experience may help others prepare for international projects. First, she had to remain patient when working through the bureaucracy involved with longer-term, work-related international travel. At times, this was one of the most trying aspects of the project, despite expert support from World Learning and USIEF. The Indian research visa process was lengthy and the paperwork heavy.
Additionally, the author carefully researched and kept in mind cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward time and planning when working with the host organization. During the planning, the author recalled an introduction she received as an undergraduate to Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions, the attitudes and preferences that distinguish one country from another. Comparing Hofstede’s cultural profile of India to that of the United States was helpful in understanding and preparing for some of the challenges that emerged during work with an Indian library foundation.

Finally, both before and during a project, a participant should be specific about professional and personal needs and advocate for them. For example, although the initial application stated travel to Kolkata was possible any time between the beginning of January and the end of April 2019, once a mid-January through February 2019 visit was negotiated, the author began solidifying plans for a separate research project in Australia during March. Imagine her surprise and frustration when the host organization sent an e-mail stating that, due to renovations on their building, the project was moved to March 2019. By this time, the author’s Australia plans were firm and, due to the academic calendars at Australian universities, the limited time frame of her sabbatical leave, and the grant funding for the Australian research, she could not significantly modify her plans. After much back-and-forth communication with the hosts, World Learning, and USIEF, during which the author advocated for her needs, she negotiated mid-February through early-March travel dates. RRRLF modified the project to fit into a time frame shorter than the original 45 days.

Despite the bureaucratic and logistical stresses prior to this Fulbright travel, the staff at RRRLF went above and beyond expectations for hospitality and quality of experiences while the author was in India. During her approximately two weeks working with the staff in India, she gave seven formal lectures and one informal talk to library professionals, LIS faculty, and LIS students in the West Bengal region. At each location, the author saw different types of libraries—from the National Library of India to a small, rural, volunteer-run library—and spoke with a wide variety of individuals invested in supporting library resources and literacy efforts in India. Through these conversations, the author and her hosts discussed common challenges, such as expectations to grow their services on stagnant or reduced budgets, and they shared ways in which they addressed similar challenges through different means. The author was there to serve as an “expert,” but true to the intent of the Fulbright program, she brought home ideas to explore and implement back in the United States.

Personal and Professional Benefits

How the author’s home institution will benefit from her experiences visiting libraries and speaking with librarians and library students in India remains to be revealed, beyond
being introduced to the different services she witnessed in Indian libraries. However, the benefits to the author are already clear.

First, the author gained a better understanding of the culture of origin for many of the international students she works with at her home institution. Indian students made up 17.9 percent of the international student population in the United States as of the 2017–2018 academic year, second only to China. The opportunity to see the libraries in their home country will inform the author’s work to help new international students adjust to academic life in the United States.

Second, on a practical level, the project with RRRLF enabled travel to India without personal monetary expense. In addition to paid travel costs, specialists receive a daily per diem, which helped inspire the author to persist during the many hours of work preparing for the project prior to departure. More importantly, once in India, the author not only experienced tourist locations in Kolkata but also observed daily life in the country thanks to the local contacts who served as unofficial tour guides. She also learned how librarianship functions in another culture. Possibly, these contacts will last into the future and provide opportunities for further collaborative work.

Finally, the Fulbright Specialist application processes and the author’s time in India helped strengthen her professional self-esteem, encouraging her to address her impostor syndrome, a mistaken belief that her successes were the product of luck rather than merit. Although she had compiled extensive documentation about her achievements and qualifications when applying for promotion and tenure, these documents were reviewed by people who either knew her and wanted to see their colleague succeed or who trusted the opinions of her department and dean. Acceptance onto the Fulbright Roster and then for the project with RRRLF required the author’s qualifications to be approved by peers at other institutions who did not know the applicant and had no vested interest in seeing her succeed. Further, the author did not know the topics for many of the scheduled lectures prior to her departure for India, and several of the talks requested after her arrival dealt with subjects not generally covered in the entry-level English Composition and Communication Studies courses she usually teaches in library workshops. For example, she was asked to describe the structure and funding of public libraries in the United States and the practice of embedding library services into learning management systems. Despite a lack of familiarity with the topics, she pulled together lecture materials within a relatively short time, supplementing the experience and knowledge accumulated over her professional career with minimal research. Normally, the author would have spent hours preparing and refining each talk, but this experience helped her feel confident in her existing knowledge and demonstrated her ability to speak on topics related to her profession. The author will look back at these successes related to the Fulbright Specialist Grant for years to come as a reminder of her professional aptitude.

As mentioned, specialists must wait at least two years from the end of their time in a host nation to apply for another project while on the roster. Thus, it is unlikely—but still possible—that the author will have the opportunity to travel on another Specialist Grant before her term ends in April 2021. Once a Fulbright Specialist’s three-year term on the roster expires, he or she must wait two years to become eligible to reapply for
another tenure. The author fully intends to reapply for another Specialist Grant because the benefits of the experience far outweigh the challenges.

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Notes

3. Anne Dahlman and Kristen Cvancara, “Faculty Info Session on Fulbright Opportunities in Finland,” panel discussion, Minnesota State University, Mankato, October 12, 2017.
8. Ibid.
10. Fulbright Specialist, “Fulbright Specialist Open Project Interest Received,” e-mail to Jennifer Turner, April 20, 2018.