

A Critical Analysis of the Fulbright Program from a World Systems Perspective

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Abstract

The Fulbright Program is the United States' flagship educational exchange program. Since 1946, the program has been heralded as a program that promotes mutual understanding across cultures. However, the Fulbright Program's role as a U.S. Department of State initiative warrants further examination of how this educational exchange program functions as a foreign policy effort on behalf of the United States. This mixed methods study uses data presented in five years of data available in the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board's Annual Reports of the program. The study finds seven themes present in the written content of the annual report: Human rights, peace and security; access, diversity, and opportunity; collaboration and partnership; mutual financial investment; excellence as a result of Fulbright; program impact; and solving global problems.

Keywords: educational diplomacy, Fulbright Program, higher education, student mobility

Introduction

The Fulbright Program is the United States' flagship educational exchange program. Since 1946, the program has been heralded as "a beacon of cooperative internationalism" (Lebovic, 2013, p. 281) in its effort to promote mutual understanding across cultures. However, given the significant financial investment by the US and by nations around the world, and the role it plays in funding the exchange of thousands of students and scholars per year, the Fulbright Program's role as a US Department of State initiative warrants further examination. Mutually beneficial exchange programs rely on an equitable distribution of resources, accounting for the needs of both the sending and receiving communities. The United States, as a global superpower, has historically played a hegemonic role in international higher education by shaping research agendas and positioning itself as a premier destination at the expense of others (Lee, 2021). Scholars argue that the United States enforces normative standards in research and exchange with regard to measures such as rankings, quality, and competence (Blanco, 2021; Glass, 2021; Lee, 2021). However, little research has explored the program's enduring power or investigated its impacts in communities around the world. This mixed-method study examines the flow of resources between countries in the Fulbright Program alongside the language presented in five years of annual reports.

Using the Fulbright Program's annual reports from 2013 through 2017, we applied world systems theory by first quantitatively analyzing the flow of students (and scholars) to America from different regions of the world and vice-versa. Treating Fulbright awards as individual allocations of resources helps visualize the core-periphery relationship between America, the rest of the Global North, and the Global South. Our definitions of Global North and Global South align with the "Brandt Line", with the Global North consisting of America, Canada, Europe (including Russia), South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand (STWR, 2006). The Global South thus defines all other countries in the world. China's position within the Global South is also important to note, as an important partner of the Fulbright Program and the richest Global South country and second richest economy in the world (World Bank, 2021).

Literature Review

This literature review aims to demonstrate how scholars conceptualize the power and impact of the Fulbright Program. First, we provide historical context of the creation and development of the Fulbright Program to underscore the asymmetric power dynamics at play. Then, we present research regarding the impact of short-term student mobility programs.

US Power and the Fulbright Program

Senator Fulbright first introduced what came to be known as The Fulbright Act as an amendment to the Surplus Property Act of 1944 (Garner & Kirkby, 2019). The act allowed wartime allies to repay war debt in their own currency rather than in U.S. dollars, in the form of a fund to be spent on travel costs to the United States for academics, graduate students, and teachers who were citizens of the partner nation (Garner & Kirkby, 2019; Xu, 2019). The U.S. government and partner governments created binational agreements under this act, in which the U.S. government negotiated the right to place U.S. academics, students, and teachers in higher education institutions in the partner nations (Garner & Kirkby, 2019).

Some historians have referred to the post-World War II era (1945-1960) as a "golden era" for cultural diplomacy, as it ushered in the United States' formalized international education strategy (Trilokekar, 2021). The global focus of this program, as opposed to its strictly binational antecedents, set the Fulbright Program apart as an educational exchange program at its inception; however, its global reach was limited to nations with U.S. war surplus property (Lebovic, 2013). In fact, Lebovic (2022) argues that the Fulbright Program became the world's primary international educational infrastructure postwar instead of UNESCO, which had plans for an infrastructure that would focus on the redistribution of resources across its member countries but could not afford to put them into motion at the time.

Although most historical research on the Fulbright Program is presented from the United States' perspective, recent critical archival research from partner nations' demonstrates some power dynamics at play; for example, works on Fulbright in Australia (Garner & Kirkby, 2019), Portugal (Rodrigues, 2018), sub-Saharan Africa (Higgin, 2019), and China (Xu, 2019) have all been published within the past five years (2017-2022). The aforementioned analyses do not include research published in non-English languages, which may expand the body of work from partner nations' perspectives.

In these contexts, scholars recognize that the establishment of the Fulbright binational agreement came at a time of asymmetry in the power relationship between the U.S. and the partner nation (Garner & Kirkby, 2019; Rodrigues, 2018). Furthermore, their findings complicate the idea that the establishment of these programs was a golden era because their partnerships with the United States were somewhat coercive in the sense that they came during a time when they were particularly vulnerable to U.S. influence (Garner & Kirby, 2019; Higgin, 2019; Rodrigues, 2018). Higgin (2019) notes that the program increased exchange with the nations in sub-Saharan Africa to assert soft power following "The Year of Africa," in which seventeen African nations achieved independence. This observation demonstrates one of many examples in which the Fulbright Program was strategically employed to benefit the United States' foreign policy aims. This study contributes to this body of research because it provides a recent snapshot of the program's work beyond its establishment.

Impacts of Short-term Mobility Programs

While international student mobility has been well-documented in the literature, research on short-term exchange programs (as opposed to scholarships for degree-granting programs) has been comparatively limited. Although some Fulbright Programs fund students for a full degree period, most of its sponsored programs are short-term. In their systematic review, Roy et al. (2019) found that out of over 4800 articles published related to mobility, only 75 studies focused on short-term programs such as those focused on service learning, project-based work, cultural immersion programs, and scholarly exchange for one to two semesters. The review focused on participant outcomes—the authors synthesized that short-term

programs are good for building cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, language skills, and a slew of other sociocultural skills. However, this highlights that evaluations of student-focused programs and their impacts on the host community are comparatively limited

The need to critically evaluate short-term mobility programs is supported by the work of scholars such as Hartman et al. (2020), Shahjahan and Kezar (2013), and Moreno (2021). These scholars argue that the current literature on study abroad reinforces methodological nationalism, or the idea that the nation-state is a natural unit of analysis (Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). For example, Hartman et al. (2020) suggest that scholars should reject the common notion that there is a “typical student” from any given nation-state when researching student mobility programs. Furthermore, Moreno’s (2021) systematic review finds that study abroad research often adopts neoliberal and neocolonial ideologies and suggests that student mobility educators should challenge these ideologies by guiding students through the critical self-reflection process.

Theoretical Framework

World-Systems Theory

World-systems theory is an economic dependence theory that theorizes the asymmetric relationships between “core” and “peripheral” nation-states (Wallerstein, 1974). Wallerstein’s world-systems theory posits that nations in the core stays within their positions of power through the hoarding of surplus capital. By leaving the periphery in a position in which they will never be able to produce at competitive levels on their own, these nations enter a state of dependency in which their economy is fueled by the export of resources. Altbach (2016) extends world-systems theory to institutions of higher education, arguing that universities in core countries facilitate an unequal distribution of research and knowledge production due to their surplus of resources, in which scholars from peripheral nations are drawn to them rather than staying within their home country. For scholars whose homes are in the periphery, their research productivity is dependent on partnerships with countries in the core. Institutions in the periphery serve in more of a teaching capacity, as the lack of funds inhibits the ability to build out research facilities. Through globalization and the modern emphasis on the knowledge economy, these peripheral institutions subsequently suffer from lower perceptions of academic excellence. Naidoo (2008) describes this as the result of the “erosion of boundaries between higher education and society” (p. 88), in which neoliberal policies have commodified the value of higher education. Thus, despite the focus on teaching at these institutions, the core-periphery relationship is exacerbated by an increasing number of students seeking out undergraduate and graduate degrees abroad as well, jeopardizing the peripheral institution’s potential for generating academic capital.

Methods

This study uses data presented in five years of data available in the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board’s Annual Reports of the program. The study first examines how student and scholar mobility is distributed across world regions as defined by the US Department of State. It then illustrates the defining themes presented in the written content of the annual reports. To that end, our research questions are as follows:

1. How are Fulbright awards distributed by regions of the world (as defined by the US Department of State)?
2. How does the Fulbright Program represent its values and impacts through the written content of the annual reports from 2013 to 2017?
3. Through a world systems lens, how does the thematic analysis reflect the concentrations of power between world regions?

Data Source and Sampling

For this study, we took a look at five years of Fulbright grant data and the accompanying annual reports published by the program. The annual reports are published at the conclusion of each year’s program—the 2013 annual report, for example, was written in response to (and accompanies the grants awarded for) the 2012-2013 academic year. Thus, while grant data might say “2012”, for example, that reflects the year it was awarded, and the report titled “2013 Annual Report” corresponds with the same grants. We started with the 2013 annual report and concluded with the 2017 annual report, reflecting grants from 2012 through 2016. This time frame was chosen as it was the most recent data available—at the time of the study, the U.S. Department of State had not published any of the reports from the Trump administration. We acknowledge that these reports have since been published, and a follow-up study analyzing differences between Obama-era and Trump-era reports is warranted. Five years was also reasonable for this scope of the study given the rigorous coding nature associated with thematic analysis, though this study is still couched within a larger project that aims to also evaluate annual reports and grant data published prior to 2013.

The grants data published by the Fulbright program reflects awards for grantees that are visiting the U.S. and U.S. applicants who apply for grants elsewhere. The regions of the world are exclusive of the United States, and are defined by the Fulbright Program as the Western Hemisphere (reflecting Canada, Mexico, Caribbean, and Central and South America), Europe, and Eurasia (the two Eurasian countries being Turkey and Russia), the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia (the northernmost country being Kazakhstan and southernmost being Sri Lanka), and East Asia-Pacific (consisting of Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia, and Oceania). The grant data was separated by those awarded to foreign nationals and those awarded to U.S. citizens. Our data analysis first investigated these separately and then compared them to see if there were differences in the distribution of grants by region (as in, whether the region was the “host”, or the “sender”).

Mixed Methods Design

This analysis uses a convergent mixed methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), in which statistical analysis and thematic analysis were conducted simultaneously and the results were merged and compared. We use a side-by-side comparison (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to compare the results in the discussion section of this paper. The purpose of applying these two methods is to merge and compare the themes presented in the Fulbright Annual Reports with the Fulbright’s student mobility data over time.

One-Way Repeated Measures ANOVA

We started with a descriptive statistical analysis of the scholarship data provided with each report, including the distribution of Fulbright grants by region and country. In order to compare the distribution of grants by region between years, we started with a one-way repeated measures ANOVA, followed by another one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the distribution of grants by year between regions (Girden, 1992). This was done to answer our first research question, “How are Fulbright awards distributed by regions of the world?”. The null hypotheses of these tests are that there would be no significant relationship between regions or years, indicating an equal distribution of grants (Girden, 1992). Because ANOVA is an omnibus test that does not indicate where significance lies, any ANOVA tests that indicated significance were followed by post-hoc pairwise t-tests with a Bonferroni correction to see what the significant relationships were (Maxwell, 1980). This analysis was conducted for both awards given to scholars from other regions to visit America (measuring the flow of scholars into America), and vice versa. All analysis was done in the R programming language.

Our a priori assumption with these tests is that the distribution for the awards would not be equal. There is historical basis to expect that more awards would be given to Europe and the Global North due to the Fulbright program’s original purpose in fostering relationships with wartime allies (Garner & Kirkby, 2019; Xu, 2019). However, there is the case to be made that an equity-centered modern approach to the Fulbright program would assign more awards to the Global South in order to smoothen out an uneven global market, though scholars have been skeptical of this possibility (e.g. Naidoo, 2003; Naidoo, 2008). Regardless of the theoretical basis for expectations around the distribution of awards, our statistical tests were used to illuminate if there were any relationships to begin with, followed by examining what those relationships were. In order to account for the possibility that differences in grant distribution would be due to varying degrees of tertiary enrollment in different regions of the world, we also conducted chi-square goodness of fit tests on the distribution of grants to foreign scholars (Cochran, 1952). The expected number of awards in this scenario was calculated from tertiary enrollment numbers by region according to the World Bank, with each region’s total tertiary enrollment divided by global tertiary enrollment. We acknowledge the limitations of this formula, as not every country in the World Bank’s tertiary education data has an active Fulbright program, nor are each country’s Fulbright programs active every year. However, this serves as an adequate approximation for expected awarded grants as the countries with the highest level of tertiary enrollment in each region do generally have active Fulbright programs.

Thematic Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis, which is a data analysis strategy that allowed the researcher to derive salient themes from the data (Ritchie et al., 2014; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). We used NVivo software to code and organize the written text in the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board's (FFSB) Annual Reports from 2013 to 2017 into salient themes regarding Fulbright's role in cultural transmission and the globalization of higher education. Thematic analysis allowed us to analyze the content that the FFSB chose to emphasize over the course of a five-year period. For the purposes of this analysis, we excluded any visual components of the reports such as graphic design elements or photographs. We followed Terry & Hayfield’s (2021) six-phase strategy of thematic analysis: (a) familiarization, (b) coding, (c) initial theme

generation, (d) developing and reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing the report. The creation of the themes was an iterative process in which both researchers read and coded all of the data and came to a consensus on the themes.

Trustworthiness

A critical element of thematic analysis is ensuring that the data and analytic procedures are trustworthy (Nowell et al., 2017). In terms of analytic trustworthiness, our inductive coding process (Ritchie et al., 2014) ensured that our findings were derived from the data and connected to the Fulbright program's own words. Each author took half of the annual reports for the initial code generation, at which point we met to discuss the codes and establish a consistent codebook. We then read the other's half of the reports and continued coding, such that each report had multiple read throughs. The themes were agreed upon in a collaborative manner after codes were condensed into descriptive categories.

We also acknowledge that the data in this study exclusively represents the Fulbright Program's perspective presented in their annual reports rather than using data triangulation to represent a fuller picture. Independent reviews of the Fulbright program are scant in the literature, and the desire to tackle that was the genesis of this study. Our inclusion of a quantitative evaluation of award data is the first check on the trustworthiness of the qualitative data—to see if the distribution of awards was consistent with the message of the texts.

Positionality Statement

Marisa Lally is a former Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Colombia. Her interest in studying the Fulbright Program stems from her experience as a Fulbright grantee, especially during Fulbright-sponsored training and seminars. Shadman Islem's interest in researching the Fulbright Program is based on an interest in federal policy analysis. We acknowledge that we are affiliated with an institution that receives multiple Fulbright grantees per year and that these scholars embark on this endeavor to make meaningful contributions to our institution and to their home communities. To mitigate bias, the two researchers iteratively analyzed the data and came to a consensus on all analytical decisions in the qualitative portion of the study.

Results

The following section outlines a side-by-side presentation of our mixed-methods results; first, we present the results of the chi-square and one-way ANOVA statistical tests. Then, we describe the findings of the thematic analyses.

Statistical Results

Our chi-square tests found that actual awards varied significantly from expected awards according to tertiary enrollment across all years. Knowing that award totals were not tied to tertiary enrollment, in order to investigate further we conducted a one-way repeated measures ANOVA with an alpha value of .05, for both scholars originating from foreign regions and visiting the US, as well as for US citizens visiting foreign regions. Our analysis of foreign scholars visiting America found a significant difference between regions, $F(5, 20) = 151.535$ and $p < 0.001$. This test indicates that awards are not equally distributed across regions. The post-hoc tests, used to compare regional variations in award numbers, found a significant difference between 10 of the 15 pairs (see Table 1). In order to understand the practical significance of these results, we will group regions largely across Global North and Global South lines. Europe, Eastern Asia, and the Western Hemisphere comprise Group 1. Group 2 is the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Central Asia. All Group 1 regions were statistically significant from Group 2 regions at a level of at least $p < 0.05$, indicating that the distribution of awards is not equal between Global North and Global South countries. Further, there was no statistical significance between Group 2 regions, indicating that awards are distributed equally throughout the Global South.

Our analysis of U.S. students and scholars visiting other regions also found statistical significance, $F(5, 20) = 787.17$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc tests found statistical significance between every region of the world except between South and Central Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (see Table 2). Given the means of each group (Tables 3 and 4), this shows that U.S. are consistently given more awards to Group 1 regions compared to Group 2 regions, with Europe once again accounting for the highest number of awards.

Table 1*Post-Hoc Pairwise t-tests, Effect of Region on Fulbright Award Allocation (Foreign Scholars Visiting United States)*

Region 1	Region 2	t-statistic	df	p	Adjusted p	Adjusted p significance
East Asia-Pacific	Europe-Eurasia	-12.24	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
East Asia-Pacific	Middle East and North Africa	9.70	4	< 0.00	0.01	**
East Asia-Pacific	South and Central Asia	8.06	4	< 0.00	0.02	*
East Asia-Pacific	Sub-Saharan Africa	16.24	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
East Asia-Pacific	Western Hemisphere	-3.61	4	0.02	0.34	ns
Europe-Eurasia	Middle East and North Africa	35.28	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	****
Europe-Eurasia	South and Central Asia	14.30	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
Europe-Eurasia	Sub-Saharan Africa	108.57	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	****
Europe-Eurasia	Western Hemisphere	4.65	4	0.01	0.14	ns
Middle East and North Africa	South and Central Asia	-3.81	4	0.02	0.28	ns
Middle East and North Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	4.18	4	0.01	0.21	ns
Middle East and North Africa	Western Hemisphere	-9.14	4	< 0.00	0.01	*
South and Central Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	6.94	4	< 0.00	0.03	*
South and Central Asia	Western Hemisphere	-8.48	4	< 0.00	0.02	*
Sub-Saharan Africa	Western Hemisphere	-15.25	4	0.00	< 0.00	**

Note. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, **** p<.0001, ns p>.05

Given that there is a difference in awards between regions, it is also important to determine whether there is a difference in awards between years. Our repeated-measures ANOVA between years found no statistical significance for both scholars visiting the United States ($F(4, 20) = .663, p = 0.625$) and US students and scholars visiting other regions ($F(1.56, 7.82) = 1.228, p = 0.33$). This indicates that the distribution of awards between regions (in both directions) is consistent on a year-to-year basis. As the distribution of awards does not change between the Global North and Global South, and the total number of awards does not significantly change between years, this brings into question Fulbright's claim that awards are based solely on merit to those across the globe. Investigating the possibility that awards are distributed according to tertiary enrollment in the different regions of the world, we conducted chi-square goodness of fits tests on each year's incoming scholar (visiting United States) data. Each chi-square test was found statistically significant, with p-values near zero—indicating that the observed frequency of awards did not meet the expected frequency of awards, if awards were to be determined by the proportion of global tertiary enrollment. Thus, we conclude that the mechanism (or formula) by which the Fulbright program awards grants to scholars is not done equally across the world's regions. Regardless, there is certainly a stronger relationship between America and Europe as shown by the data, followed by Eastern Asia and the Western Hemisphere. South and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa receive less of an opportunity to participate in the Fulbright program, both from the perspective of sending scholars to the United States and from having U.S. scholars visit these regions.

Table 2*Post-Hoc Pairwise t-tests, Effect of Region on Fulbright Award Allocation (Foreign Scholars Visiting United States)*

Region 1	Region 2	t- statistic	df	p	Adjusted p	Adjusted p significance
East Asia-Pacific	Europe-Eurasia	-12.24	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
East Asia-Pacific	Middle East and North Africa	9.70	4	< 0.00	0.01	**
East Asia-Pacific	South and Central Asia	8.06	4	< 0.00	0.02	*
East Asia-Pacific	Sub-Saharan Africa	16.24	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
East Asia-Pacific	Western Hemisphere	-3.61	4	0.02	0.34	ns
Europe-Eurasia	Middle East and North Africa	35.28	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	****
Europe-Eurasia	South and Central Asia	14.30	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**
Europe-Eurasia	Sub-Saharan Africa	108.57	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	****
Europe-Eurasia	Western Hemisphere	4.65	4	0.01	0.14	ns
Middle East and North Africa	South and Central Asia	-3.81	4	0.02	0.28	ns
Middle East and North Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa	4.18	4	0.01	0.21	ns
Middle East and North Africa	Western Hemisphere	-9.14	4	< 0.00	0.01	*
South and Central Asia	Sub-Saharan Africa	6.94	4	< 0.00	0.03	*
South and Central Asia	Western Hemisphere	-8.48	4	< 0.00	0.02	*
Sub-Saharan Africa	Western Hemisphere	-15.25	4	< 0.00	< 0.00	**

Note. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001, **** p<.0001, ns p>.05

Table 3*Average Awards By Region (Foreign Scholars Visiting United States)*

Region	Mean # of Awards	Standard Deviation
East Asia-Pacific	829.20	39.83
Europe-Eurasia	1,206.60	42.94
Middle East and North Africa	377.60	81.00
South and Central Asia	573.00	80.76
Sub-Saharan Africa	279.20	43.74
Western Hemisphere	976.40	75.75
East Asia-Pacific	829.20	39.83
Europe-Eurasia	1,206.60	42.94
Middle East and North Africa	377.60	81.00

Table 4*Average Awards By Region (US grantees visiting other regions)*

Region	Mean # of Awards	Standard Deviation
East Asia-Pacific	734.00	30.57
Europe-Eurasia	1,302.40	34.90
Middle East and North Africa	126.20	8.32
South and Central Asia	260.40	15.79
Sub-Saharan Africa	198.40	16.98
Western Hemisphere	544.20	70.86

Thematic Analysis Findings

The following section outlines the findings from the thematic analysis of the written content of the five Fulbright Program Annual Reports (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017). As expressed in Table 5, the analysis yielded seven themes, one of which had two sub-themes. Each theme represents an idea that was commonly present across all five of the annual reports.

Table 5
Thematic Analysis of Fulbright Annual Reports 2013-2017

Theme	Definition	Example
Human rights, peace, and security	References to the Fulbright program as a vehicle for peace as opposed to militarization, and the establishment of human rights in partner regions	“In this anniversary issue of the annual report, we honor 70 years of the Fulbright Program’s remarkable impact on fueling economic prosperity, generating scientific innovation and entrepreneurship, driving diversity and inclusion in international exchange, and building a safer, more peaceful, and equitable world” (Fulbright, 2015, p. 5).
Access, diversity, and opportunity	References to the Fulbright program’s efforts to improve access to education for underserved communities, and provide opportunities to scholars from diverse backgrounds	“To promote diversity among the 2016 cohort of Mexican Graduate Student Grantees and conscious of the challenge that many excellent Mexican students face regarding English language proficiency, the United States-Mexico Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (COMEXUS) organized several STEM-focused summer research programs at various U.S. universities for underprivileged Mexican undergraduate students with the aim to attract future applicants to the Fulbright Program” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 8)
Collaboration and partnership	References to bilateral initiatives and programs in regions that were facilitated by Fulbright grantees	“After 71 years, Fulbright represents and reaffirms America’s long-term, commitment with other sovereign nations. Historically, America has built its strength not only on wealth and military power, but also on keeping its word and respecting the rule of law. This helps deepen our relationships around the world” (Fulbright, 2017, p. 2)
Mutual financial investment	References to Fulbright as a cost-effective program that leverages eager contributions from partner nations	“Tangible proof that the Fulbright brand is an internationally recognized vehicle to achieve this goal are the direct financial contributions, tuition waivers and other forms of financial and in-kind support made by partner governments, academic institutions and other private and public organizations in the United States and abroad that leverage the U.S. government’s annual investment in the Fulbright Program” (Fulbright, 2013, p. 6).
Excellence as a result of Fulbright	References to the accomplishments and accolades received by Fulbright grantees, framed as a result of their participation in the program	“Among the ranks of Fulbright alumni are 54 Nobel Prize recipients, 29 MacArthur Foundation Fellows, 82 Pulitzer Prize winners, and 33 current or former heads of state or government” (Fulbright, 2015, p. 3).
Program Impact	References to the establishment of long-lasting effects within communities as a result of the program	“Today, the Fulbright Program stands as a testament to the power of a good idea. Through partnerships with 180 countries around the globe, Fulbright has launched a network of over 370,000 distinguished alumni who have profoundly enhanced our mutual prosperity, security, understanding, and opportunities as people” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 3).

Solving global problems	References to the role of Fulbright in helping scholars perform research in globally significant markets such as science, technology, and healthcare References to the role of Fulbright in establishing programs within communities that address day-to-day issues of poverty, public health, and sustainability	“Professor Cecilia Bitz (2013 Fulbright U.S. Scholar to New Zealand) researched sea ice physics and mechanisms for Antarctic sea ice expansion at the University of Otago. Here she holds a sea ice core extracted from the snow-covered sea ice that she is standing on. Mt Erebus is directly behind the core” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 28). “As a part of his project, Dr. Joshua Apte (2009 Fulbright-Nehru U.S. Student to India) traveled around New Delhi in an auto rickshaw with pollution monitors and a laptop to measure the pollution levels of the city. According to his research, average pollution levels were 50 percent to eight times higher on the road than those found in urban background readings.” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 30).
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Human Rights, Peace, and Security

“Human rights, peace, and security” was coded 55 times and made up 12.7% of the total coded passages. We defined this theme as when statements in the written text in the annual report referred to the Fulbright Program as a vehicle for peace as opposed to militarization, and to the establishment of human rights efforts in partner nations. Throughout the reports, quotes from Senator Fulbright appeared that described education as critical to peacebuilding efforts and in maintaining a “rational and civilized world order” (Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board (Fulbright), 2015, p. 74). In the 2017 report, he is quoted as saying that the program “increase[s] the chance that nations will learn as last to live in peace and friendship” (Fulbright, 2017, p. 20). These values were also reflected in the messages from the chair and throughout the reports’ celebrations of grantee accomplishments.

For example, the 2016 report featured a story from a U.S. Army veteran who said, “After having it broken by war, Fulbright did nothing short of rekindle my faith in the world” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 15). The same report described U.S. Fulbright recipients’ relationships in countries around the world as having “profound implications for U.S. national security and economic prosperity” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 4). As an example of how The Fulbright Program places itself in opposition to militarization, Secretary of Defense James Mattis is quoted in the 2017 report, stating “If you don’t fully fund the State Department, then I need to buy more ammunition” (p. 2) and then describing how binational Fulbright agreements “have helped normalize relations with former adversaries” (p. 2) in a way that is less costly than conflict. These examples demonstrate how the Fulbright Program describes itself in its annual reports as having significant impacts on human rights, peace, and security in a way that opposes militarization.

Access, Diversity, and Opportunity

“Access, diversity, and opportunity” was coded 46 times and made up 10.6% of the total coded passages. We defined this theme as references to the Fulbright Program’s efforts to improve access to education for underserved communities and provide opportunities to scholars from diverse backgrounds. The 2015 annual report touted the program’s orientation to improving diversity in the following statement: “In support of the premise that international education is for everyone, Fulbright outreach and recruitment efforts seek to reach underserved communities, including minority-serving institutions, community colleges, and people with disabilities, to ensure that all applicants have equal access to this merit-based program” (p. 9). The reports also often highlighted the work of specific country programs as well as scholar-led initiatives to increase access, diversity, and opportunity in certain communities.

For example, the 2015 report described a Fulbright seminar that aimed to “explore and celebrate disability inclusion” and invited key figures in the disability rights movement to engage with Fulbright grantees. The same report also described a collaboration between Mexico and the US to provide summer research programs at US research institutions for underprivileged Mexican undergraduate students that would also serve as a recruiting strategy for future Fulbright applicants (Fulbright, 2015).

The 2013 report describes the European region as a “model for promoting diversity” (p. 10) and that Fulbright English Teaching Assistants in the Europe region are “most often are placed outside capital cities to reach underserved and diverse populations who may have had few opportunities to interact with Americans” (p. 10) The reports also highlighted recipients’ engagement with community organizations, such as a scholar from Myanmar’s service experience post-Hurricane Irma in Tampa, Florida and U.S. scholars’ tutoring work with North Korean defectors (Fulbright, 2015). These examples illustrate the Fulbright Program’s description of a commitment to improving access, diversity, and inclusion both within the program and in communities around the world.

Collaboration and Partnership

“Collaboration and partnership” was coded 94 times and made up 21.7% of the total coded passages. This theme describes references in the Fulbright annual reports to bilateral initiatives and programs in regions that were facilitated by Fulbright grantees. The annual reports include discussions of collaboration and partnerships in all of the world regions of partnership/ For example, the 2013 report states that the program’s growth in the East Asia-Pacific region “increased investment and commitment from partner governments in EAP to support Fulbright exchanges in order to develop a prosperous, globalized and secure East-Asia Pacific region” (p. 9) and that “establishing a peaceful and secure South and Central Asia region is a strategic priority for governments in the region as well as for the United States” (p. 12). The reports also provide specific examples of partnerships between nations, whether it is through research collaborations, seminars, or person-to-person partnerships.

The annual reports often described collaboration and partnership as the primary purpose of the program. For example, they assert foreign governments’ position toward the program: “Many governments view the Fulbright Program as a long-standing, mutual partnership with the United States” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 11). They also illustrate the role that individual grantees have in partnership and collaboration, arguing that their participation in the program has lifelong impacts: “Upon returning to their home countries, institutions, and classrooms, Fulbright grantees share their knowledge and experiences and often engage in follow-on projects or continue the work they started abroad, creating a multiplier effect and leading to lifelong collaborations” (Fulbright, 2015, p. 4). These examples demonstrate the Fulbright Program’s commitment to demonstrating the program’s purpose as mutually beneficial to nations around the world.

Mutual Financial Investment

“Mutual financial investment” was coded 28 times and made up 6.4% of the total coded passages. We define this theme as references in the Fulbright annual reports to Fulbright as a cost-effective program that leverages eager contributions from partner nations. For example, in the 2016 report, the Chair of the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board Dr. Trombley writes, “Fulbright is a highly leveraged program, with every \$2 in U.S. government spending matched by over \$1 in foreign government and private sector support. More than 100 governments provide cost share totaling more than \$100 million, and more than 30 governments provide funding that equals or exceeds funding from the U.S. government” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 4).

The annual reports often mention the cost-effectiveness of the program given its returns, including a quote from Senator Fulbright stating that the cost of a modern submarine would fund the Fulbright Program for ten years. The claim for cost-effectiveness is also often paired with the demonstration of partner nations’ contributions to the program: “Foreign governments and private organizations are contributing to the program more than ever before, with over a third of the program’s funds supplied by partner governments or private organizations” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 11).

The reports highlight the contributions of the program as a way to demonstrate how low-cost the program is to the U.S. government, even as a possible detriment to US foreign relations: “The bilateral spirit of the Fulbright program comes under pressure when longstanding partners contribute twice, three times - even as much as seven times - what the U.S. contributes. The Board foresees this as a foreign policy challenge that will need considerable thought and attention” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 12). These examples illustrate the Fulbright Program’s commitment to communicating that the program is a low-cost option for maintaining positive foreign relations with other nations.

Excellence as a Result of Fulbright

“Excellence as a result of Fulbright” was coded 48 times and made up 10.7% of the total coded passages. We define this theme as references to the accomplishments and accolades received by Fulbright grantees, framed as a result of their participation in the program. All of the annual reports herald the number of Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, US Presidential Medals of Freedom, and heads of state. Alongside the invocation of these accolades, the reports also invoke the Fulbright Program’s prestige, writing that it has “developed into one of the world’s largest, best known, and most prestigious educational exchange programs, and has been widely hailed as one of the most far-reaching achievements of Congress” (Fulbright, 2014, p 14). In some cases, the reports explicitly claim that the Fulbright Program has an influence on the later achievements of Fulbright scholars: “Fulbright alumni reach new heights and achieve recognition every year. We believe the Fulbright Program had a part in their successes” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 24). Much of the annual reports’ written content is dedicated to highlighting grantees’ elite accomplishments post-grant period.

Program Impact

“Program Impact” was coded 75 times and made up 17.2% of the total coded passages. We coded instances in which the annual reports described long-lasting widespread effects of the Fulbright Program in both general and specific terms. Generally, the annual reports describe a large number of alumni throughout the world, general peacekeeping benefits, and economic prosperity. For example, the 2015 report states that the program “stands as a testament to the power of a good idea. Through partnerships with 180 countries around the globe, Fulbright has launched a network of over 370,000 distinguished alumni who have profoundly enhanced our mutual prosperity, security, understanding, and opportunities as people” (Fulbright, 2016, p. 5).

The reports also highlight the program’s positive impact on U.S. national interests, always juxtaposed with the global: “The Program addresses national and global priorities... Fulbright grantees make substantive positive contributions to humanity as they address critical 21st-century priorities while building relationships, knowledge, and leadership in support of the long-term interests of the United States and the world” (Fulbright, 2015, p. 9).

Solving Global Problems

“Solving Global Problems” was coded 92 times and made up 20.7% of the total coded passages. Generally speaking, these were instances in which the Fulbright program made direct reference to tackling a “global” issue, indicating that the project or scholarly visit would either have an impact beyond the region in which it was occurring or that the issue was prevalent in multiple regions of the world. “Global problems”, in this sense, are topics that are of concern to multiple countries, regions, or parties, rather than topics isolated to just one area. In the words of the Fulbright program, Fulbright “consistently attracts some of the greatest minds and talents in the world to address the challenges that affect humanity” (Fulbright, 2014, p. 12), and we sought to understand what these challenges were. While analyzing the passages that were coded under “Solving Global Problems,” we found that there were two major sub-themes that make up the theme at large. These subthemes are “Breakthroughs in Science, Technology, and Healthcare” and “Infrastructure Developments in Communities.”

Breakthroughs in Science, Technology in Healthcare. Passages within this sub-theme reflect references to the role of the Fulbright Program in helping scholars perform research in globally significant markets such as science, technology, and healthcare. The program places great importance on helping researchers achieve their scholarly goals, and devoted a significant number of vignettes to the scientific breakthroughs that scholars made while on a Fulbright grant. For example, the 2015 report highlighted a U.S. scholar visiting Switzerland in order to research “optical nanolithography in order to construct three-dimensional tissue-engineering scaffolds”, explaining that this could be used to grow healthy brain cells for persons with Alzheimer's disease (Fulbright, 2015, p. 40). This scholar’s research was framed as globally significant as Alzheimer's is a disease that occurs throughout the world, though the research was occurring at a European university by

an U.S. scholar. This can be similarly seen in another example from the 2015 report, in which a scholar from Canada was highlighted for their work on angina (Fulbright, 2015, p. 35).

Other breakthroughs from the same report that were highlighted include the development of an invisibility cloak and the invention of a transparent, stronger version of wood (Fulbright, 2015, p. 3), signifying that the Fulbright Program values scholarly achievements in academic contexts, relying on their potential for global usage even when it is not explicitly stated they will be deployed on such a scale. It should be noted that the majority of these references took place in a European or Eastern Asian context, or otherwise involved a foreign scholar visiting America, rather than occurring in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East.

Infrastructure Developments in Communities. In contrast to the university-centered and laboratory-focused setting of the previous sub-theme, “Infrastructure Developments in Communities” reflect instances in which Fulbright grantees developed a project or solution designed to tackle a global issue located within their host community. These references mostly addressed day-to-day issues of poverty, public health, and sustainability, and were overwhelmingly located in the Global South. The Fulbright program views these projects as significant indicators of the “Fulbright effect”—the ability of Fulbrighters to benefit the public good and enact change within communities and solve problems that communities are unable to address on their own.

Examples of such projects include the development of an app to call for emergency medical services in Bangladesh (Fulbright, 2015, p. 41), the construction of HIV Counseling and Treatment centers in South Africa (Fulbright, 2013, p. 27), and the distribution of solar lanterns and water filters in areas of rural India that did not have reliable access to electricity or clean water (Fulbright, 2014, p. 18). It should be noted that while these examples were in reference to U.S.s visiting foreign regions, there were also examples of Fulbright grantees coming to America to learn how to tackle issues in their home community, such as the story of an Indian professor learning techniques during his visit to Arizona State University to help market the wastewater and sanitation management devices that he had invented (Fulbright, 2013, p. 38).

Discussion and Implications

Our findings suggest that the Fulbright program engages global communities across a wide variety of contexts. There is a collaborative relationship, on both the program level (between governments) and the individual level (between grantees and the communities they visit, both in the U.S. and globally). Scholars have worked to build peace-centered relationships, provided scientific and technological services to solve issues related to public health, sustainability, and infrastructure, taught in underserved communities, and generally seek to contribute to the global common good. Fulbrighters themselves feel empowered by their experiences and reflect on their time in the program as transformative for their lives as well as for the lives of others.

On the systemic level, there is an imbalance of grants awarded between regions and the differences in program scope across countries, which is consistent with a priori assumptions. These findings demonstrate how power structures between the Global North and Global South are potentially replicated through the Fulbright program. For example, in accordance with the theme of Human Rights, Peace, and Security, there were strong narratives of Fulbright scholars in Europe working with migrant and refugee communities to provide goods and services. It was also notable that the vignettes capturing “Breakthroughs in Science, Technology in Healthcare” were much more prevalent among scholars in the U.S., European, and East Asia-Pacific regions. As discussed in Altbach (2016), this reflects the fact that premier research universities with the facilities to conduct academic research are concentrated in the Global North. It would make natural sense that these are the regions in which scholars would go for their research endeavors.

However, as argued in Naidoo (2008), continuing to focus policy efforts regarding massification and the expansion of access to higher education in these regions only serves to widen the gap between core and periphery nations. Therefore, the findings comport with a priori assumptions. The Fulbright program fits within this power dynamic by focusing on research projects in these areas, and by sending Global South scholars to America. It would be more equitable on a global scale if the grants related to scientific research at universities and laboratories were instead redirected to Global South regions, in an effort to build their research capacity. In contrast, the grants related to “Solving Global Issues” in terms of science and technology for regions in the Global South were more focused on hands-on projects related to public health,

infrastructure, and sustainability. While these projects most likely had positive effects in the short term in these areas, we argue that there needs to be a long-term evaluation of these efforts— not only by other scholars but preferably by the Fulbright program itself. Core-periphery relationships and the gap in capital between regions will not be solved if these projects and initiatives diminish once the scholar finishes the terms of their Fulbright grant.

Moreover, the sentiment that there is a mutual financial investment between countries deserves a closer look. The Fulbright program boasts that this is a low-cost effort from the U.S. government, with supporting examples highlighting that over 30 governments provide funding equal to or more than what the U.S. contributes (Fulbright, 2016) and that some countries contribute double, triple, or even seven times as much as the U.S. (Fulbright, 2014). It is also reinforced that scholars from foreign nations must visit U.S. universities in order to learn what is best for success, and the norms and pedagogical standards of U.S. education are imparted by U.S. scholars visiting other countries. While the scope of this project did not investigate each country's financial contributions to the Fulbright program, further research should delve further into this aspect. This project illuminated a number of further research questions— is it the European and other Global North countries that are contributing the lion's share of foreign financial investment into the program? And if so, is that why the majority of awards are awarded between Global North nations? What is the mechanism or funding formula in which America awards Fulbright grants? If this is a situation in which more contributions simply result in more grants, then it is another example of inequitable distribution of power and opportunity between countries in a supposedly united endeavor to solve global issues.

From a world-systems perspective, the analyses offer several implications for research and practice. The thematic analysis shows that the Fulbright Program has demonstrated a commitment over a five-year period to concentrating resources with some world regions (Europe and East Asia & Pacific) far more than others (Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Hemisphere, and South and Central Asia) for financial and foreign policy reasons. When applying world systems theory, there are differences in engagement with these world regions, both through the concentration of resources (i.e. the flow of grant funds through the student and scholar mobility data) and the types of activities that are represented in the reports. Further research can consider the financial data that are provided in the annual reports, which include contributions from foreign governments, international organizations, and private donors. This analysis would contribute to our current understanding of how power is created and distributed through the program through the material impacts of money. A critical discourse analysis that expands beyond the thematic approach in this study could provide additional historical context and could consider the full catalog of annual reports that begin in 1976.

Conclusion

The Fulbright Program has endured over seventy-five years of major change in global higher education as one of the world's premier educational exchange programs. However, little research has explored the program's enduring power, nor investigated its impacts in communities around the world. This study aims to offer an exploration of how power is distributed through student and scholar mobility and how the Fulbright Program represents itself thematically in its annual reports. As a program whose scholars live, work and study in university communities throughout the world, these questions will continue to be important in discussions of educational exchange.

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