International Education in the U.S. Through the Prism of Fulbright Program: Historical Analysis

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Introduction

The scale and speed of global change challenge higher education and other national sectors to internationalize, to have an understanding of the relationship of various nations, including the United States, with the rest of the world, and to realize the importance of the latter.

International education plays a prominent role in the shaping of a new global society. However, it seems there has not been enough support from the federal government in regards to the efforts promoting international education in the United States. Many studies touched on the role of the federal government when it comes to the higher education; however, there have not been enough efforts on providing a comprehensive analysis of the United States higher education system’s internationalization and the role of the internal and external factors.

This study attempts such an analysis from 1944 to 1975 focused on the federal government support in the context of one highly successful program in the international education – Fulbright’s Amendment to the Surplus Property Act of 1946 (or Fulbright Program). The program was identified for its explicit interest in and continuous support for higher education’s international capacity between 1944 and 1975.

This study takes a longitudinal approach to provide the context of the implementation and development of the program under examination during the period of time identified. The study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) how did major historical external and internal events affect the federal support of international education in the USA on the example of the successful program – Fulbright Program? 2) what are the factors that have determined the success of the program?

In order to answer those research questions, it was important to research the context of the time and circumstances in which the program was implemented. That is why at first, I attempted
to describe internal and external events taking place that shaped the environment of the program under examination. Then, it was imperative to discuss what the program entailed and to show its development overtime in regards to its capacity and scope. Finally, I attempted to analyze the factors that determined its success.

**Literature Review**

According to Wit (2002), little research has been done on the historical roots of the major waves of internationalization of higher education (p. 3). However, it is highly important to comprehend the connection of the generally acknowledged focus on internationalization of higher education around the world to the original roots of the university and to place the present developments of internationalization in historical perspective.

A number of scholars, including Thelen (1992), highly support the belief that historians contribute to

the ability to uncover and hold up pieces from the past as alternatives for their audiences to consider in the present - perhaps for action, perhaps for solace, perhaps even for identity. When anything interferes with the ability of historians and audiences to engage alternatives from the past, the conversations are weakened (p. 432).

Ruther (2002) highlights the value of historical approach of studying internationalization based on many reasons. The scholar referred to the fact that internationalization is not a new phenomenon. In addition, she brought up an argument of Thelin who saw the need in longitudinal studies and appealed to “nudge higher education researchers toward increased interest in the structural and organizational behavior of academic institutions over longer period of time” (Ruther, 2002, p. 13).
Kerr (1994) stated that “universities are, by nature of their commitment to advancing universal knowledge, essentially international institutions, but they have been living, increasingly, in a world of nations-states that have designs on them” (p. 6). Kerr saw a “partial reconvergence” of the cosmopolitan university (Wit, 2002, p. 4).

Dubois (1995) took a more specific approach by addressing the issue on a local national level of the USA. In his argument, he referred to the fact that education abroad had been present in the American higher learning since the early colonial period. Given that the first colleges were modeled after Britain's, “many young men sojourned to the mother country in further pursuit of their ministerial studies” (p. 54-55). Later, the study abroad locations for American scholars included Germany, Spain, France, and Scotland. The nineteenth century brought a new wave of historical precedents in education abroad since at that time it became fashionable for upper class society members to go on a "grand tour" of Europe as a “means” to their “indoctrination into the cultured elite” (p. 55).

Both Dubois (1995) and Ruther (2002) also pointed out that historically, the U.S. government has played little role in international education. This can be explained by the American “traditions of isolationism, limited government, education as a local concern, and the State Department's distance from the public at large” (Dubois, 1995, p. 55). The international dimension to date was marginal, certainly conducted on institutional or private levels (Wit, 2002, p. 11). In fact, even if there existed some kind of federal support for private education overseas, this was a result of external sources of funding (Dubois, 1995, p. 55).

It is then not an immense revelation, that overall, one can describe the higher education in the United States as “being one of predominantly nationally oriented higher education,” “more
directed to the development of a national identity and national needs and less to universal knowledge” (Wit, 2002, p. 9).

**Methodology**

The approach used in this paper is historical given that a phenomenon of internationalization is not new and given that it very often involves politically charged debates. With the help of the historical approach, I was aiming to determine the key factors that shaped the federal government support in the context of one of the major and most successful programs in the international education – Fulbright’s Amendment to the Surplus Property Act of 1946.

This study takes a longitudinal approach to provide the context of the implementation and development of the program under examination during the period of 1944 to 1975.

Data required for this paper was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included a copy of the articles published in “New York Times” (“Excerpts from Fulbright Speech,” January 24, 1958). It helped me to reconstruct the image of Senator Fulbright. In addition, I was fortunate to find the report created by the National Academy of Sciences of 1976 under the title “Stewards for International Exchange: The Role of the National Research Council in the Senior Fulbright-Hays Program, 1947-1975” with exhaustive statistics on the participants of the program during the period of 1947 through 1975.

Among the secondary sources were peer reviewed articles and books related to the topic. The sources were obtained by the keyword search through the database available with the Indiana State University (EBSCO and JSTOR archive), also online search, and the archives available with the Fulbright U.S. Student Program and UNESCO.
Findings

Historical Context of Fulbright Program

As the literature review has shown, historically, the U.S. government has played little role in international education for a number of reasons. In fact, even if there existed some kind of federal support for private education overseas, it was influenced by some kind of external sources of funding.

According to Dubois (1995), the federal government's first initiative into educational exchange was undertaken as a result of the Boxer Rebellion in China. In 1900, a number of Chinese (aka a secret society “Boxers”) due to their resent to the constant interference of European powers in the affairs of their country, rebelled and killed a German ambassador and a large number of foreigners at Pekin. At that time, the United States joined Russia, England, Germany, France, Japan and other countries to suppress the Boxer Rebellion. When the order was reestablished, the Chinese were forced to compensate families of the deceased and to offer indemnities to those nations, including approximately $24 million to the United States. The USA found the settlement of the Boxer Indemnity Fund “greatly in excess of the losses actually incurred.” So instead of returning the money back to the Chinese government, the USA proposed to apply those funds toward sending selected scholars to the United States (Beard & Bagley, 1919, p. 551-552). In his message to Congress, the President Roosevelt said,

This nation should help in every practicable way in the education of the Chinese people, so that the vast and populous Empire of China may gradually adapt itself to modern conditions. One way of doing this is by promoting the coming of Chinese students to this country and making it attractive to them to take courses at our universities and higher education institutions (Métraux, 1956, p. 580).
Dubois (1995) referred to this resolution as “one of the most effective measures ever taken by our country [USA] toward the promotion of international good will and the cementing of international friendships” (p. 55). According to Jeffrey (1987), Boxer Rebellion indemnities to the United States “built up a Chinese college and helped send two thousand Chinese to study in America” (p. 40).

In about 1910, Andrew Carnegie set up a special foundation for the promotion of peace. One of the functions of this foundation, known as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was looking for ways to “cultivate friendly feelings between the inhabitants of different countries and to increase the knowledge and understanding of each other of the several nations” (Métraux, 1956, p. 581-582).

After World War I, another external opportunity to sponsor overseas study came. According to Dubois (1995), when millions of Belgians on the territory of occupied Belgium were on the verge of starvation during World War I, an American engineer Herbert Hoover organized the Committee for Relief in Belgium. This relief effort later in 1920 gave birth to the Belgian-American Educational Foundation. Between the two world wars, more than seven hundred Belgian and American students were exchanged. The benevolent service of many Belgians and Americans, sound financial management, far-reaching fundraising, and innovation in programs are the cornerstones of this showpiece of Belgian-American friendship. It is challenging to find another country “where the ideals and purposes of the American people are so well understood and so respected as they are in Belgium” and vice versa (Dubois, 1995, p. 56).

Despite little research available on the period before the World War II, Wit (2002) observed a certain shift in the direction of more international cooperation and exchange in higher
The creation of the Institute of International Education in 1919 in the United States, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in 1925, and the British Council in 1934 indicate the growing attention to international cooperation and exchange.

Under provisions of the 1936 Buenos Aires Treaty, the United States pledged to exchange two professors and two graduate students yearly with other Latin American signatories; however, again, no appropriation of federal funding was implemented (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 40).

In 1938, to counteract Nazi and Fascist activities in Latin America the State Department established a Cultural Relations Division, appealing to American universities to provide scholarships to Latin American students; however, still scarce funding was provided for this activity (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 40).

Despite the abovementioned, the effective utilization of the remaining funds from the Boxer indemnities and from Belgian relief sources for international education; improvement in numbers of Americans going study abroad after the World War I, on one hand; on the other hand, by using those funds instead of allocating new funds, the government, at the same time, demonstrated its initial indifference to international education (Dubois, 1995). Furthermore, the Fulbright Act was brought to life in quite the same way. The next section describes how the late senator Fulbright made “creative use out of federal funds, which otherwise would have gone to waste, in order to finance academic exchange” (p. 56).

**Senator Fulbright and Fulbright Act of 1946**

Given that Fulbright exchanges still take place between the United States and other countries, the program is a great argument in favor of the strength of the program. Since its inception in 1946, the Act has witnessed many operational changes in the program, but not to its
mission of promoting international understanding. Without going into a detailed analysis of the entire history, I attempted to give a short overview of the founder of the program and a summary of a few phases of the program.

**Fulbright’s early years.** The “father of academic exchanges” (Dubois, 1995, p. 59), J. William Fulbright was born in Missouri in 1905 in a prosperous and respected family. While still a baby, the family moved to the Ozark Mountain town of Fayetteville, Arkansas. There he grew up, attending public school and the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where he was “a solid B student, campus leader, and star football halfback” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 37). Due to the death of his father, Fulbright had to quit the university for a semester in order to help his mother manage the multiple family businesses. That is how at 18, he became the youngest railroad vice-president in the country. At age 20, he won a Rhodes scholarship, an international postgraduate award for students to study at the University of Oxford.

Studying abroad in Britain for four years brought Fulbright two degrees. In addition, he traveled throughout Britain and the European continent. The Rhodes experience broadened the rather sheltered [life] he had and “gave rise to [the] appreciation for international understanding, forming the common basis of [the] foreign education initiatives” (Dubois, 1995, p. 60).

After he returned to the States, Fulbright stayed for a short time in Fayetteville before he moved to Washington, D. C., where he married and finished law school. Then, he worked at the Justice Department and also taught at his alma mater George Washington University Law School. In 1936, he moved back to Fayetteville in 1936, where he taught at the University of Arkansas Law School. He again helped with the family businesses and “lived as a gentleman farmer in a three-story so-called log cabin, Rabbit Foot’s Lodge” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 38). When the university president unexpectedly died, Fulbright, the “dark-horse choice,” at 34 suddenly
became the new college president, the youngest in the nation at that time. According to Jeffrey (1987), “Politics had a good deal to do with Fulbright's becoming president of the University of Arkansas, and politics had everything to do with his being fired from that position” (p. 38). This unfair, politically charged event lay the foundation for Fulbright to become a politician.

According to Dubois (1987), as a U.S. Representative in 1943, he was appointed by Secretary of State Cordell Hull to head the American delegation at a seventeen-nation conference on postwar education in London.

During his first term, the House of Representatives adopted the Fulbright Resolution, which supported international peace-keeping initiatives and encouraged the United States to participate in what became the United Nations in September, 1943 (Jeffrey, 1987).

Having been elected to the Senate in 1944 did not come out as a shock. As newspapers stated, “Congressman Fulbright, in his first term in Washington, has gained more favorable publicity than any other Representative we have ever sent to the Congress” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 40).

In 1945, by then a senator, he served on the Education and Labor Committee. His involvement in education proved instrumental in the formulation of his war-surplus amendment in the future.

According to Dubois (1995), Fulbright was not just concerned with “the pure advancement of knowledge” (p. 60). In his own words:

We should consider transnational educational exchange not solely or even primarily as an intellectual or academic experience but as the most effective means (in the words of Albert Einstein) “to deliver mankind from the menace of war.” (p. 60).
Since the time he won a seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, Fulbright became occupied in the subject of postwar planning: “how to wage a “creative war” in order to secure a “creative peace” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 39).

**Surplus Property Act of 1944.** Fulbright spent a lot of time reflecting on the question of debts that the wartime allies owed the United States. According to Jeffrey (1987), the polemic over repayment of similar war debts had unsettled international relations and the global economy after World War I, and at that moment, it challenged Fulbright's creative peace efforts as the World War II ended (p. 41).

According to Jeffrey (1987), the question of the surplus was, indeed, quite “thorny” (p. 41). Over 4 million items (planes, trains, tanks, and bulldozers as well as food, tools, clothing, telephones, and hospitals) remained spread in warehouses and storage depots around the globe after World War II. No one knew the exact value of the property; however, the estimates varied from $60 million to $105 million. A surplus-property law passed in 1944 prohibited sending them back to the United States given that transportation would have consumed most of the value of the surplus. In addition, “racked by wartime devastation and unsettled economies, foreign nations pleaded for some of the surplus”; they lacked the currency, because they were broke, which meant they would be less likely to repay their war debts. As a result, “this excess equipment spread around the globe really meant that the United States had substantial amounts of currency, or the equivalent of currency, frozen abroad” (p. 42). This all added to the Fulbright’s argument about America’s “new and larger role in the world” (p. 42).

Dubois (1995) stated that in 1945, Senator Fulbright introduced amendments to the Surplus Property Act of 1944 in three ways. First, it appointed the Department of State as the disposal agency for the surplus property scattered overseas after World War II. Second, the
Secretary of State could determine if the sale of the property should be paid in foreign currencies or credits “when in the interest of the United States.” Finally, the “amendment authorized the Secretary to enter into executive agreements with foreign governments to finance American educational activities in those countries and to sponsor transportation for foreigners attending American institutions of higher education” (p. 56).

**Fulbright Act of 1946.** President Truman signed the bill into law on August 1, 1946. Among the provisions, a Board of Foreign Scholarships was established to oversee the program. The Board included ten members representing foreign policy and higher education sectors. According to the initial act, American students from a range of academic disciplines were to apply for the merit-based scholarships providing financing for a year of graduate work abroad. The preference was given to qualified war veterans. Non-governmental organizations, like the Institute of International Education, fulfilled administrative functions of the selection process. When it came to the administering the program overseas, binational commissions were set up abroad to oversee the reciprocal program. In countries with low participation, this function was delivered together with the U.S. embassies. The overall mission was with the help of the international exchange program “to prepare the leaders of the future, in hopes of achieving permanent peace based on mutual understanding” (Dubois, 1995, p. 55).

After the bill had been signed, the program started unfolding. According to the National Research Council (1976), it passed two years before all the parts of an operating program fell into place and the first award recipients were selected (p. 2). The Fulbright agreement with China was signed on November 10, 1947; an agreement with Burma, on December 22. Agreements with the Philippines and Greece were signed in March and April of 1948. By the end of 1948,
agreements were also signed with New Zealand, Belgium/Luxemburg, Italy, and the United Kingdom (p. 6). Then began the solicitation of grant applications and the selection of recipients.

**The Fulbright-Hays Act.** In 1961, the original legislation of the Fulbright Act of 1946 was replaced by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act consolidating several international activities funded by the federal government, greatly expanding the scope of Fulbright exchanges. Its preamble also articulately restated the “principles of liberal internationalism,” a statement of which was missing in the initial Fulbright Act (Johnson, 2014, p. 6). Given that the war surplus had been exhausted, the legislation also authorized new sources of government funding.

According to Dubois (1995), other changes included:

- the Board of Foreign Scholarships added two members and there was created a position of assistant secretary of state to oversee educational and cultural exchange;
- foreign governments were invited to share the financial burden;
- additional countries previously not covered under the Surplus Property Act were invited to participate in the program.

The Fulbright-Hays Act reorganized the program much of its present form.

**Fulbright Program Outcomes.** From the beginning, the Fulbright Program was doomed to success. Despite the difficulties in putting everything in place and making it run, from its early inception, it grew bigger and bigger.

Table 1 shows the development of the program and the increase in the number of the applicants and awardees from the USA starting from Program Inception to 1975 (National Research Council, 1976).
Table 1

Numbers of Applications and Awards to U.S. Participants in the Senior Fulbright-Hays Program, 1948-75

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<td>1948-49</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1962-63</td>
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<td>411</td>
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<td>1960-61</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>493</td>
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<td>1961-62</td>
<td>1851</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>1975-76</td>
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(prelim.) (prelim.)

Table 2

Numbers of Applications and Awards to Foreign Scholars in the Senior Fulbright-Hays Program, 1950-74

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<td>1963-64</td>
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<td>1962-63</td>
<td>767</td>
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Table 2 shows the development of the program and the increase in the number of the applicants and awardees from the foreign countries starting from Program Inception to 1975 (National Research Council, 1976).

Today, Fulbright alumni number more than 360,000 Fulbrighters from over 160 countries worldwide. Approximately 8,000 grants are awarded annually, of which over 68,000 are Americans (Fulbright U.S. Student Program).

The primary source of funding for the Fulbright Program is an annual appropriation by the U.S. Congress to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). The Fulbright Program is also directly and indirectly supported by participating governments and host institutions, corporations and foundations in foreign countries and in the United States.

ECA is the administering body of the Fulbright Program under policy guidelines established by the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board (FFSB) and in cooperation with bi-national Fulbright Commissions and the Public Affairs Sections of U.S. embassies abroad.

**Success of the Fulbright Program: Factors**

Despite the fact that education abroad has been present in the history of higher education since early colonial time, historically it seems that the U.S. government has played an insignificant part in international education (Jeffrey, 1987). A lot of scholars point out the following reasons for its lack of involvement: the American traditions of isolationism, limited government, education as a local concern, and the State Department's distance from the public at large (Dubois, 1995, p. 55).
The majority of foreign academic exchanges continues to be conducted on institutional or private bases. Even the fact that early precedents in history like the Boxer Rebellion Indemnities used for Chinese-American higher education exchanges, Belgian-American program, etc. highlights the governmental indifference to the international education.

So what made the Fulbright program so successful? One of the reasons for the passage of the international education program is that Fulbright shaped the proposal “to combine virtue and thrift in a single package” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 46). According to Jeffrey (1987), a national public opinion poll on the question of what “can be done that will give the United Nations a better chance of preventing wars” found that the overwhelming answer was to exchange students with other countries. Clearly, international education seemed to have quite a great number of supporters. In addition, Fulbright suggested a win-win way of financing the exchange that required no congressional use of tax dollars. Later, Fulbright referred, “I don't think we could have gotten to first base with a request for an authorization for appropriations at that time” (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 47).

The second reason for the program’s success was the strategy used by Fulbright:

I was such a junior member, having been in the Senate such a short time - less than a year - that no one took notice of this legislation at all until it was passed… The bill was allowed to pass, because influential senators who might otherwise have opposed it deemed it insignificant. I was content to have them believe that…It didn't involve a lot of money. So what the hell? Nobody paid any attention to it (Jeffrey, 1987, p. 47).

In addition, following the G.I. Bill of Rights, the initial Fulbright Act gave preference to war veteran applicants, all other qualifications being equal (Dubois, 1995, p. 64). Furthermore, despite the fact that Fulbright wanted to have a broad range of foreign countries participants, at
the beginning he knew that an overall plan would not meet passage, so any expansion would have to come after the program had already established itself (and that is what happened later).

Third, the Fulbright Act served to support the national security. According to Dubois (1995), given its new status as a superpower, the United States could no longer live in isolation: As never before in American history, it became vital to the national security to understand the minds of people in other societies and to have American aspirations and problems understood by others (p. 66).

The program was established at a time when mutual understanding was considered to be the key solution toward the prevention of further military conflict. The Fulbright Act served the national security interests in a dual capacity: 1) the presence of American scholars and students overseas would help foreigners learn about the U.S. institutions firsthand and take the examples back home to their institutions and the Western principles of free democracy, and 2) bringing scholars and students to the United States meant that foreigners would get to experience the U.S.

**Conclusion**

Fulbright's experiences as a result of his studying abroad, traveling and engaging other cultures, educational background in teaching, university presidency created a belief in him that international educational exchange would promote acceptance and understanding among all peoples around the world. Through international understanding, he believed we can achieve a permanent peace.

In order to start a program of educational exchange, Fulbright creatively tried to use the dilemma of war debts and surplus property to build a bridge between countries.

However, not only Fulbright’s personal beliefs added to success of the establishment of the program, but so did the outside influences like the political, economic, and social moods of the
nation. First, the Fulbright program was established based on the funding from the Surplus Property Act, i.e. it did not require appropriations from the federal side. Given the context of the time, giving the preference to participate in the program to war veterans made the program look more pleasant to the Congress. Finally, the fact that the program was supporting and promoting the national security could not but provoke the support from the federal government and their willingness to finance higher education abroad.

When the balance of all these factors is reached, the international educational exchange will benefit the nation. In the words of J. William Fulbright:

Education is a slow-moving but powerful force. It may not be fast enough or strong enough to save us from catastrophe, but it is the strongest force available for that purpose, and its proper place, therefore, is not at the periphery but at the center of international relations (Dubois, 1995, p. 75).
References


Fulbright U.S. Student Program: History. Retrieved from https://us.fulbrightonline.org/about/history


