

[◀ Back to Search Results](#)

STUDENTS

These Colleges Encourage Their Students to Seek Fulbrights. Here's How It Pays Off.

By *Jonathan Custodio* | FEBRUARY 26, 2020

✓ PREMIUM



Courtesy of Georgetown U.

Emi Koch, a Fulbright recipient from Georgetown U., teaches at a school in Vietnam that engages youth in climate action by encouraging play in the water.

It was early in September 2017, and Ben Rayder was starting his new job as director of national fellowships at the University of Houston. Texas' largest city was still reeling from Hurricane Harvey's unprecedented flooding a couple of weeks earlier, and shellshocked students were trickling back onto the campus.

Rayder, who didn't yet have an office, nonetheless met with a handful of them that first day, providing feedback on their applications for Fulbright exchange grants.

One of his conversations was with a student named Bianca Salinas whose home had been among those flooded. Salinas would go on to win a Fulbright for translational studies in France, and later she would tell Rayder how much it had meant to her to have something to focus on during that tumultuous time. Going through the application process had helped her realize how important the study of language was to her.

“She wouldn’t have had that opportunity otherwise,” Rayder says. “I think she was pretty thankful for that.”

Salinas was among the first in a rising wave of Fulbright recipients at Houston, which saw a dozen of its students win fellowships this year.

In a push to raise institutional prestige and feed their students’ appetite for international engagement, many colleges are focusing creative energy and resources on helping them win Fulbrights and other scholarships. Study abroad, officials say, encourages introspection by students, and inspires their classmates to embark on similar paths.

Fulbright ‘Top Producers’

The Fulbright Program recognized Houston and 17 other institutions as new additions to its “top producers” list for the current academic year. Fulbright officials say that competition for the scholarships was steep this year and that the recipients reflected greater geographic and institutional diversity. The appearance of Houston, a Hispanic-serving institution, among the top-producing colleges is evidence of that shift.

But it’s also true that Houston’s newfound success was not blind luck. The university made a conscious decision to compete for Fulbrights and other scholarships in hiring its first dedicated director of national fellowships in 2017, Rayder says. Houston raised its number of winners to six in 2018, up from two in 2017, and just one the year before that.

“The Office of Undergraduate Research at the time didn’t have the bandwidth to really focus on doing outreach and creating awareness, and then also preparing those students who applied,” Rayder says. He also points out that seeing peers applying for fellowship opportunities helps students overcome their own impostor syndrome. Some Houston students, he says, believe that their peers at Texas’ other large universities and at colleges perceived as “elite” have a better shot at winning a grant.

“Our message often to those students is that you are just as competitive as those students are, if not more competitive. And then we show them the statistics,” says Rayder. He also credits the city’s identity as an international hub and the university’s diversity as being

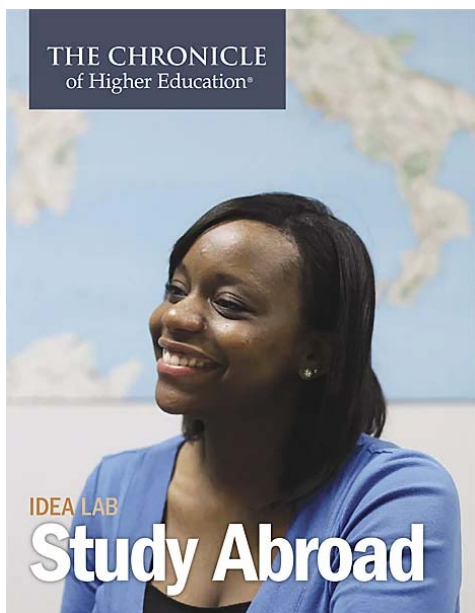
among other factors driving the scholarship growth. “It’s definitely something that we plan to use as a recruitment strategy, especially in the honors college, where we’re trying to bring in some of the best talent.”

The Fulbright Program designates winning colleges according to their Carnegie classification. Houston, which is in the doctoral class, has 12 students on Fulbright fellowships this year. Institutions in that category need at least 10 to earn top-producer status.

A Small College Succeeds

Some smaller colleges find ways to thrive with fellowship coordinators who have dual responsibilities.

Idea Lab: Study Abroad



Idea Lab: Study Abroad

\$44.00

Print ▼

ADD TO CART

Robert Saxe, an associate professor of history at Rhodes College, relies heavily on his colleagues in offices like career services in his role as the Fulbright adviser. The liberal-arts college in Memphis has posted some of the biggest gains in Fulbright's baccalaureate category during the past four years, with 11 students winning fellowships this year, compared with three in 2018-19.

"We've really created a culture where it's kind of the next step," says Saxe, noting that the prestige and organized structure of a Fulbright scholarship further increase students' interest. From 2014 to 2018, Rhodes never had more than five grantees in a single year.

Saxe attributes Rhodes's high yield rate this year — nearly half of the applicants won scholarships — to the participation of students who would normally be looking toward law or medical school and the significant amount of teaching and civic experience they tend to have.

A bumper crop of Fulbright recipients, Saxe says, can lift the reputation of a small college like Rhodes among prospective undergraduates.

"There's a lot of benefits from that in terms of kind of highlighting what Rhodes has to offer. Maybe people would skip over us a little bit if they didn't see our name on that list," Saxe says. "We're punching above our weight class."

All of Rhodes's Fulbright students this year are teaching English as a second language. Many of them, Saxe says, have already taught in local high schools and middle schools and with a refugee-empowerment organization.

Bowdoin College has been a perennial top producer of Fulbright students in the baccalaureate category, with 29 percent of the recipients from 2015 to 2018 winning grants for research projects and teaching assistantships in Germany. None of the recipients went there this year, however, a sign that the college is diversifying its applications, says Janice Jaffe, acting director of student fellowships and research at the Maine college.

“We have, for many years, had an amazing German department that has always been successful in recruiting and recommending students for Fulbright, and they’ve always had a really strong record,” says Jaffe.

Reaching students can be a challenge, but so is keeping them engaged with the application process, especially in the summer, when many of them are busy with internships and research projects.

Georgetown University accomplishes that with a lighthearted talk show, says Lauren Tuckley, senior associate director of fellowships. She and her colleague Laura Perille use the show to simultaneously reach out to students who are interested in study abroad and to help those who are already committed to it navigate the Fulbright process.

“We have a little bit of fun with it,” says Tuckley. “We’re trying to connect with them in a real and meaningful way. And sometimes you have to kind of laugh at yourself to do that.”

The pair discuss issues like airline sanitation, and they tackle unrelated questions from students (like the long-debated first purchase from hypothetical lottery winnings), to appeal to prospective applicants, Tuckley says. They also cover more-practical topics, like the different types of English-teaching grants that are available.

Their approach appears to be working. Georgetown had this year’s highest number of Fulbright students, 45. Only one other institution — the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor — has had at least 40 recipients in a single year over the past decade.

Tuckley emphasizes that the process is what really benefits the students. “The irony is that they win a lot more and they maintain a lot more interest when we approach it this way, even though that’s not our intent. Our intent is to make this a developmental process for students,” she says.

Jaffe, of Bowdoin, echoes that sentiment, saying that “what students learn and gain in understanding about their values, their academic and career aspirations, through the process of applying for fellowships” is what stands out. “We certainly don’t do this because of a possible recruitment advantage.”

Jonathan Custodio is an editorial intern at The Chronicle. Follow him on Twitter @jonnycustodio, or email him at jonathan.custodio@chronicle.com.



DISASTER GUIDE | SPONSOR CONTENT

To Avoid Data Loss, Look Toward the Cloud

NetApp® cloud-based disaster recovery solution protects colleges from calamity

Download Now

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037