

*The Impact of Fulbright Scholarships on Alumni:
An Analysis of Social Capital Upon Their Return Home*

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Abstract

Educational exchange programs can play a key role in public diplomacy and economic development. During these programs, students acquire skills and networks that are considered valuable in their home country. Eventually, these programs tend to amplify students' socioeconomic status upon their return and strengthen nations' relationships through academic networks. This study aims to better understand the impact of educational exchange programs on international students after their experiences abroad. By using the social capital theory, this study explores the socio-economic experiences of Fulbright alumni from developing countries upon their return home. A literature review was conducted to analyze Fulbright alumni's experiences in their home countries. How are Fulbright scholarships impacting the careers of alumni upon their return home? In what ways have Fulbright experiences abroad impacted alumni's professional development at home? The findings show that Fulbright exchange programs allow alumni to grow their networks with fellow Fulbright alumni in other countries. These international networks not only enable these alumni to maintain relationships abroad but also create links with organizations abroad for more opportunities academically and professionally. The findings imply that individuals who are granted the opportunities of Fulbright exchange programs may benefit in several areas such as advancing their academic, professional, and international networks. While most of these alumni may indeed reach leadership positions, social inequality is deepening in most of these countries with more privileges to Fulbright alumni. The significance of this study is that it helps us understand the role of educational exchange programs in development and diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Students, Mobility, Diplomacy, Social Capital, Higher Education

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Introduction

Within the past few decades, several countries, especially Western states, have extended their soft power in diplomacy and political influence through education. According to Leguey-Feilleux (2009), diplomacy is “the idea of communicating, interacting, maintaining contact, and negotiating with states and other international actors” (p. 1). Originally focused on state representatives and governmental actors, diplomacy expanded to “public diplomacy” with a wide variety of actors and relationships intended to build and maintain connections among nations. In more recent years, countries have extended these international relationships through education. Education and exchange programs now play an important role in promoting national interests and spreading influence across nations. These influences, often referred to as “soft power”, have commonly been used in educational programs to shape friendships between nations through ideas, culture, and social networks. One example of public diplomacy is the Fulbright scholarship, a program sponsored by the US Department of State and designed to “foster mutual understanding between people and nations” (Maluki & Waithaka, 2016, p. 5). This program has led to one of the largest movements of students and scholars around the world and continues to sponsor citizens and leaders from more than 160 countries. Today, the Fulbright program is one of the great diplomatic assets of the United States (US) with participants claiming to have better appreciation for the US and its people after their experiences abroad. While most Fulbright alumni share feedback from their experiences abroad, less has been said about the factors and impacts of these experiences upon their return home. This study aims to better understand the impact of educational exchange programs, especially the Fulbright program, on students from developing countries seeking higher education in the Global North. By using the social capital theory, this study explores the influences of exchange programs on alumni’s socioeconomic experiences upon their return home. In this sense, what are Fulbright alumni’s experiences upon re-entry? In what ways has the Fulbright experience abroad impacted alumni’s professional development and careers upon returning home? Analysis of these questions resulted in five main themes: benefits of better academic and professional opportunities, higher cultural awareness, easier access to community engagement projects, including governmental positions, and acquisition of global capital such as skills and knowledge. This study’s importance lies in its analysis of the role of educational exchange programs in the development field. The implication of this study is to provide insights on policy reforms for better impacts of exchange programs both at the national and global level and to find innovative ways to maintain diplomatic relationships between the US and its sponsor countries.

Theoretical Framework

This study is analyzed through the lens of social capital theory. Social capital theory emerged from the limitations of standard economic theories as they fail to explain economic disparities across countries with similar environments in terms of capital such as financial, physical, and natural (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). For many decades, these theories assumed that economic variables were the only predictors of variations in economic outcomes with less account of social and cultural factors on economic development. However, these limitations brought more attention to socio-cultural factors in economic theories, suggesting that economic activity is deeply embedded in social structure with key cultural factors. As a result, the term “social capital” emerged in the late 1990s with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who originally mentioned it to recognize that not only human capital was important in economic and social outcomes, but cultural factors as well as social factors (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social capital theory argues that economic capital is embedded in social networks as they provide access to more opportunities such as information, social welfare, political participation, and government responsiveness (Lin, 2001). These opportunities are due to the fact that networks are rooted in memberships, relationships, and obligations that foster mutual benefits and collective actions among individuals in a designated social group. As Bourdieu states, social capital represents a “collectively owned asset endowing members with credits” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Over the years, this theory was shaped into four different types: Structural and cognitive social capital, bonding, bridging, and linking social capital, strong and weak ties, and horizontal and vertical networks social capital (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). The first type relates to the pattern of social networks connected by the rules and procedures that govern them. Bonding, bridging, and linking social capital refers to ties among people based on kinship, membership, and related situations. The strong and weak ties define social capital according to the strength of social ties. Lastly, the horizontal and vertical networks refer to the lateral ties between people of similar status in a community (horizontal), and ties between people of different hierarchies among people (vertical). This theoretical framework is important because it makes “economic discourse richer, more valuable, better able to capture the nuances of the real world, and make them more useful” (Guiso et al., 2004, p. 12). For this study, social capital is valuable in the sense that it will help explain behaviors that are embedded in Fulbright social networks both at the micro and macro levels.

Method

This study was based on a literature review. The literature review was designed to retrieve and locate documents centered on the experience of Fulbright alumni upon their return home. For the purpose of this study, the method specifically focused on an integrative literature review. According to Torraco (2005), an integrative literature review is a form of research that reviews literature on a topic in an integrated way “such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated” (p. 1). This integrative literature review is important because it gathers data from various research designs and provides a broader summary to reach comprehensive and reliable conclusions.

Data Collection

The search strategy was designed to better understand the impact of the Fulbright program on students from developing countries seeking higher education in the Global North. According to the OECD, a developing country is referred to as a sovereign state with less developed natural and human resources relative to other countries (Dimaranan et al., 2004). Data focused on the socio-economic experiences of Fulbright alumni upon their return home. Some keywords were “Fulbright”, “alumni”, “developing countries”, “Social capital”, “socio-economic”, “Diplomacy”, and “Development”. Data was searched on databases and academic journals such as JSTOR, Web of Science, EBSCO, and SCOPUS.

Selection

After review, selected articles were mainly centered around the experiences of Fulbright alumni upon their return home. For the purpose of this study, these articles specifically focused on the student’s professional and academic experiences. Another criterion was a clear research methodology, either qualitative or quantitative, for comparative themes between the statistical trends and students’ quotes on their experiences. However, I excluded

studies on Fulbright alumni from the Global North and participants who were still pursuing their Fulbright program. According to these criteria, 43 articles were selected. These articles were reviewed through screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords to better determine their relevance to the research interest.

Thematic Analysis

After review, 32 articles were retained. Articles include academic peer-reviewed and scholarly articles. Accordingly, documents were analyzed from a thematic perspective to conduct an informed analysis and constructive insights into the student's experiences (Levac et al., 2010). Indeed, this thematic analysis was informed by the research questions and guided the findings. Findings include case studies and research papers and help understand Fulbright alumni's experiences at a wider scale.

Literature Review

The findings depict Fulbright alumni's experiences upon their return home. After analysis of the literature, five main themes emerged. First, alumni tend to have more academic and professional opportunities after their experiences abroad. One of the reasons is that students possess academic credentials from host universities that are considered valuable back home. This is the case in Hong Kong where connections built by education leaders in Vancouver, US increased the value of credentials from the Vancouver-based University of British Columbia and prioritized the careers of scholars who possess such credentials (Roberts, 2016). Another reason is the connection between Fulbright alumni and international universities. As most Fulbright alumni tend to keep their collaboration ties with colleagues abroad, they benefit from more access to research and related academic opportunities upon return. In the case of doctoral students, co-authorships and skills acquired abroad propel Fulbright alumni to faculty hires and further transnational research networks (Shen et al., 2022). These international collaborations show the importance of educational exchange for the so-called knowledge circulation' as "students and faculty need to acquire sophisticated knowledge of the world, including foreign languages, cultures, and perspectives" to engage in this interconnected world (Shen et al., 2022, p. 1329). Eventually, alumni are more likely to engage in academic and professional activities with a broader network of researchers and scholars, making their transition back home rewarding.

Second, Fulbright alumni reported higher awareness of cultural diversity and more empathy for cultural differences upon returning home. In his study on Chinese Fulbright participants, Roberts (2016) states that alumni tend to have a deeper understanding of the US with "profound insights into the society, people, culture, and political systems" (p. 187). Likewise, Fulbright alumni are more aware of other cultures as they build relationships with a broader network of friends, advisors, and mentors from diverse cultural backgrounds. As one participant shared in You's (2024) study, "I met people from different parts of the world and became better at coping with cultural differences" (p. 7). Another participant shared his experience by stating that "there you see people with different hair colors, piercings, tattoos, and you start viewing it as a normal thing. The same goes for the LGBT community" (Jonbekova, 2024, p. 771). Third, the alumni felt more empowered and engaged in community projects for social change. After being exposed to global issues and social movements abroad, Fulbright alumni shared a desire to make a change in their home countries, especially among underrepresented communities (Meeks & Parenti, 2021). This is the case of Fulbright graduates from Kazakhstan who brought positive changes to their

society by improving the workplace with a company that provides filtered drinking water to offices and schools, by introducing up-to-date software and practices, and by teaching eco-thinking with more awareness on reusable water bottles (Jonbekova, 2024). At the educational level, alumni are also inclined to seek modifications to the national pedagogy, with more student-centered and experiential experiences observed in the US (Staton & Jalil, 2017).

Fourth, working for governmental and state positions has been a common experience among Fulbright alumni upon their return. As the US Embassy maintains its ties with Fulbright alumni through alumni association chapters and affiliated NGOs, these networks create opportunities for governmental activities that drive alumni into leadership roles (Campbell & Baxter, 2019). This trend is reinstated in Scott-Smith's (2020) study where participants shared that "many respondents noted the number of high-ranking officials, cabinet members and ambassadors in their countries who were former Fulbright grantees" (p. 222). In Pakistan, for example, Fulbright programs maintain ties with alumni by holding Fulbright alumni conferences where former participants can continue to engage in specific areas of research internationally (Staton & Jalil, 2017). In addition, the program initiated small grants to Pakistani Fulbright alumni in the late 2010s to start and continue projects overseas. Similarly, the alumni network in Georgia led to partnerships and activities with non-governmental organizations for human rights activities. This is the case of the Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW), where alumni receive grants to partner with government ministries for policy changes in the professional conditions of social workers and the creation of new professions in Georgia. As one participant shared, this practice provided memberships to a variety of professionals such as lawyers, psychologists, nurses, and educators as a "platform for discussion to enhance the field of social work in Georgia" (Campbell & Baxter, 2019, p. 7). These affiliations may eventually give alumni access to positions in NGOs and other international organizations.

Lastly, we tend to see a loss of national capital among Fulbright alumni. This perspective of alumni's experiences comes from the fact that distance from a local community detaches the student from this community over time. Therefore, being abroad is often associated with weaker ties with friends, families, and professional networks back home. In Bauder (2020)'s study, a participant from India studying in the US shared having more connections in the US than in his hometown. A Chinese Fulbright also shared a similar experience by stating that "Fulbright scholars enjoy prestige and respect in the United States, but they receive little attention in China, let alone influence on others" (Roberts, 2016, p. 192). While these findings share different alumni's experiences, they each reflect the concept of social capital, which will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

As the role of educational exchange is to deepen knowledge about foreign cultures and strengthen international relationships (Deardorff, 2017), the Fulbright scholarship has provided students with network opportunities that continue to impact their journey back home. One of the main trends is that Fulbright alumni tend to have a broader network with their international connections upon their return. With transnational collaborations and international ties, Fulbright alumni may have better opportunities at the academic and professional levels. These connections allow alumni to easily engage in academic activities such as research projects and transnational co-authorships, and be empowered for social advocacy changes. In this sense, having links with international organizations and peers

provides more opportunities for career advancement and community engagement. Bhandari and Yasunobu (2009) defines this form of social capital as “information channels and flow of knowledge” where actors engaged in relationships and networking benefit from social good attributed to their group membership (p. 488). De Solla Price and colleagues (1966) emphasize this point by mentioning the term “invisible college”, which consists of research group networks and communities that collaborate and can easily control access to resources and information. We can also see these groups of membership during the Fulbright recruitment process where links with a group of friends and supervisors involved in the program tend to be the main way to secure a spot and a scholarship for studying abroad (Meeks & Parenti, 2021). In other words, these social ties “exert influence on the agent [recruiters or supervisors of the organizations] who play a critical role in decision [hiring or recruiting] involving the actor” (Lin, 2001, p. 20). Then, having a network of social interests is becoming key to benefit from opportunities that only the social circle has access to. Likewise, social capital fosters a sense of reciprocity that seeks social productivity through civic engagement, voluntary works, and social connections (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009).

Another trend stemming from my literature review is that the Fulbright program gives access to higher social status and prestige in their home countries. With the credentials earned from host universities, Fulbright alumni tend to have more privileges due to their connections with universities considered prestigious back home. Partnerships with international universities are then becoming beneficial in the sense that alumni have strong ties with distinguished scholars and communities abroad, and then more opportunities for collaborative work. Lin (2001) suggests that the value of contacts in terms of their prestige, status, or credentials has a key impact on the access to highest-status occupation that the student can benefit from. Bao and colleagues (2023) also support this point by stating that “higher-quality interpersonal communication usually provides students with more experiences of participation in organizations, internships, and part-time work” (p. 17).

In addition, these networks are also an opportunity for alumni to maintain and/or upgrade their social status (Bamberger, 2020). Over the years, Fulbright program has been associated with high-income participants and brilliant students recruited from social ties and supervisor recommendations (Alkarzon, 2015). These profiles often present the Fulbright scholarship as a private program only available to wealthy and bright students. However, we start to see a rise of low-income students in the program through new branches of networks that enable them to improve their living conditions (Meeks & Parenti, 2021). These networks were mostly built through social media as they played a critical role in enabling students from low-economic families to access exchange programs and application process info. Bourdieu (1986) justifies this new network by referring to social capital as “a person’s potential to activate and effectively mobilize a network of social connections based on mutual recognition and maintained by symbolic and material exchanges” (p. 11). These networks show how structural and institutional ties play a key role in social ranking and community development.

Moreover, the Fulbright program is an opportunity for students to accumulate social capital. During their journey abroad, Fulbright participants build relationships with friends, advisors, and professors from different backgrounds that make them more aware of cultural differences. Eventually, they are more willing to connect with internationals upon their return home (Stuth, 2014). According to Bamberger (2020), these transnational links enable people from diverse communities to share a wide range of cultural values, knowledge, and resources, that strengthen international ties and partnerships.

However, educational exchange may lead to a loss of national capital among Fulbright alumni. By building strong relationships abroad, Fulbright participants reported weaker ties back home with fewer local networks. Bauder (2020) states that absence in one location diminishes the opportunity to maintain ties and networks in this place. Ultimately, this disconnect tends to make the reentry process challenging with a reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000) and potential rivalry with local peers, especially in the job market (Dudden & Dynes, 1987). Subsequently, in the case of educational research, the US builds collaboration with international students from different disciplines to contribute to its development.

Overall, it is clear from the review of the literature that social capital influences students' experiences through networks, reciprocity, and ties that give them access to opportunities that only membership in these groups can provide. Although we analyzed these trends at the national level, they each have broader implications that inform the role of educational exchange in international development today.

Implications

These findings have some implications both at the national and global levels. At the national level, the use of networks leads to a ripple effect where only Fulbright alumni benefit from social opportunities. With better access to information, resources, and reference contacts, this group of alumni tends to encourage fellow friends and relatives from similar social rankings to apply to the Fulbright program. In his study on Chinese Fulbright, Fu and Zhao (2017) mention that "most alumni reported having become a source of information among their colleagues intending to apply for a Fulbright grant" (p. 13). In a different study on West African students, a participant emphasizes this point by sharing that "I ran into my friend, a Fulbrighter alumnus who shared his Fulbright experiences, so I began to check it out. Even though I've heard of this program before, my friend's recommendation is the primary trigger for this journey" (You, 2024, p. 11). In addition, this network has also been an opportunity for alumni to share their knowledge and experiences about the US, break the stereotypes, and contribute to international relationships and peacebuilding. As one participant shared "Many Chinese have stereotypes and misconceptions about American culture and society, and American values. I feel obliged to pass on my first-hand knowledge" (Fu & Zhao, 2017, p. 12). At the same time, Fulbright alumni tend to be encouraged by their fellow international alumni to apply to related educational exchange programs such as the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD) and Humphrey for further international experiences. In her study on international mobility, Paige and colleagues (2009) support this point by stating that "study abroad experiences can profoundly influence individuals' pursuit of further graduate studies, career paths, and global engagement" (P. 14). Ryan (2011) also argues that "The migrant social network has been theorized as social capital in migration studies and essential to facilitating migrants' moving, resettling, and community formation processes" (p. 9). Unfortunately, this ripple effect is leading to an increased divide between locals and Fulbright alumni, as most of the social advantages in the home country are associated with international mobility experiences.

In addition, seeking higher education in the US can lead to Western assimilation in developing countries. After being exposed to Western innovative approaches and freedom for critical thinking, most alumni tend to promote these teaching styles and ideologies upon their return. This is the case of Chinese Fulbright alumni who shared that they have become "committed to course design, curriculum development, and educational reform at their home institutions" (Roberts, 2016, p. 191). Unfortunately, some alumni faced challenges in

implementing these teaching practices due to conflicts with local values and existing teaching methods. This spread of US ideology reveals the impact of neoliberalism in education exchange as Western countries tend to maintain their power in the global economy through cultural values. Dobson (2002) illustrates this influence by stating that “the USA may be in danger of another bout of the ‘arrogance of power’ as it unilaterally makes its way in the world, sometimes under the cloak of multilateralism, to spread democracy and the free market” (p. 593).

At the global level, the US tends to take advantage of knowledge sharing from a diverse group of international scholars. One example is the rise of foreign labor for research projects in most US universities to incorporate innovative perspectives in their educational reforms (Kahn & MacGarvie, 2011). This educational exchange also allows the US to build connections with talented workforce across countries. While building relationships with Fulbright participants abroad, the US maintains these ties through alumni associations and collaborative networks. Some examples are the U.S. Government Exchange Program Alumni Association of Georgia (EPAG) in Georgia and the Moldovan Alumni Network (Campbell & Baxter, 2019) in Moldova where the US further collaborates with alumni. Scott-Smith (2020) argues that Fulbright programs also spread US public diplomacy through political engagement while “using exchanges to acquaint professionals with their policy-making counterparts in order to smoothen negotiating processes” (p. 8). Such collaboration with Fulbright alumni shows the importance of educational diplomacy for policy reforms, political agreements, and government support, especially in the education sector. These networks also give Fulbright alumni the opportunity to stay in touch with people abroad even after their return home. In this sense, they demonstrate Fulbright’s commitment to promoting relationship-building and mutual understanding among nations.

Lastly, the loss of national capital can lead Fulbright participants to return or remain in the host country as they have stronger ties abroad. Participants might eventually extend their experiences abroad through related education opportunities in the US, bringing the issue of brain drain in the home country. As Shen and colleagues (2022) state, “Many international students choose to stay in the host countries upon graduation, rather than returning to their home countries” (p. 1331). These student movements imply the effect of Western influence in the development field and reveal the embedded nature of capitalism in the education system. Kumar and Hill (2012) illustrate it by sharing that education has become mostly “driven by the need and desire of capital for capital accumulation” (p. 116).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact of the Fulbright program on student participants originating from developing countries and seeking higher education in the Global North. To study this impact, a literature review was conducted to reach a comprehensive and more nuanced understanding of these students’ experiences upon their return home. Through the lens of social capital theory, these experiences are analyzed based on the networks and relationships built among Fulbright alumni, which foster mutual benefits and collective actions in this social group. The significance of this study is that it helps analyze the role of educational exchange programs in the developmental industry and its increasing trend in developing countries over the years. After review, findings suggest that the network built abroad gives alumni access to more professional and academic opportunities, cultural awareness, and more willingness to advocate for socioeconomic changes back home. At the same time, Fulbright alumni tend to lose national ties over time

due to their weaker connections in their home country. The social capital theory justifies these experiences by arguing that networks are rooted in memberships and relationships that foster mutual benefits among individuals in this social group. Eventually, Fulbright alumni are more prone to encourage friends and families with similar high social ranking to engage in the program, leaving low-income communities without the benefits of educational exchange. At the global level, this program allows the US to expand its diplomatic relations and maintain its global power with the spread of its ideology and cultural values in developing countries.

While these trends seem beneficial for both Fulbright alumni and the US government, they raise questions about Western hegemony and the impact of modernity that suggests assimilation of developing countries to the Global North. Are educational exchange programs still fulfilling their roles of cultural exchange and relationship building, or are they becoming a way of neocolonialism where Western countries tend to exploit talented workforce in the Global South for their benefits and power? Like Easterly (2007) mentions “Development ideology is sparking a dangerous counterreaction. The ‘one correct answer’ came to mean ‘free markets,’ and, for the poor world, it was defined as doing whatever the IMF and the World Bank tell you to do” (p. 31). Thus, some pressing questions remain, and should be explored in future studies: To what extent are the relationships built among Fulbright alumni contributing to the development of the home country and the promotion of local values? What are the implications of the US Fulbright diplomacy in educational development initiatives in the sponsored countries? What is the impact of educational diplomacy on the sovereignty of the receiving country? These questions will further help to explore the role of education exchange programs in the development field.

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