

# **The Fulbright U.S. Student Program Faculty Guide to Supporting an English Teaching Assistant (ETA) Candidate**

Thank you for taking the time to advise, and possibly write a letter in support of our student's application to the Fulbright U.S. Student Program. Indeed, in competitions like these, where many applicants have stellar academic records and impressive achievements outside of the classroom, a strong letter of recommendation is often what sets a candidate apart.

This document provides some practical information about letters of recommendation and further information about writing for the Fulbright. We have also highlighted aspects of the student's candidacy that may be areas you choose to touch on in your letter, which are of particular interest to the mission of this fellowship.

## **CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR A COMPETITIVE FELLOWSHIP:**

Faculty who have served on selection committees often note that letters are particularly helpful when they give details or examples to support any claims made. Your letter should therefore speak to what you know about the student from your first-hand encounters with them, with, whenever possible, concrete stories about your academic or professional interactions with the student. Including such references conveys a sense both of how you have worked with the student, as well as your personal relationship with them. In addition, and as is explained in detail below, this fellowship is looking for candidates who are solid academics and good human beings, those who display robust academic and ambassadorial potential. To the extent possible, it can be helpful to discuss a student's intellectual ability as well as their character and their future potential. At the same time, do remember that unrelenting praise may not persuade your readers. As the Fulbright guidelines put it, "The recommendation letter **should NOT** simply be a character reference, as this will be of no value in assessing [the candidate's] ability to complete the proposed project."

## **WHEN TO SAY 'NO':**

Letter writing is a time consuming task, particularly given the length of a letter, which typically extends to 1.5-2 pages in length. Generic letters that confirm a student's performance in a class or their suitability for an internship are not suitable for this competition and will disadvantage your student's candidacy. If you do not have the time to devote to such a letter, or if you do not feel that you know the student well enough to speak in detail about them, please decline to write.

## **INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAMPUS ENDORSEMENT AND LETTER-WRITING PROCESS<sup>1</sup>:**

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<sup>1</sup>Thank you to our colleagues at the University of Michigan and Yale University, whose materials have been instrumental to developing this page.

In 1945, Senator J. William Fulbright introduced a bill into the U.S. Congress that called for the funding of “international good will through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and science.” Today, the Fulbright U.S. Student Program has grown into the largest U.S. exchange program, providing over 2,000 awards annually in 140+ countries. In Fulbright’s own words, “At its core, the Fulbright program aims to promote mutual understanding and seeks individuals who can be cultural ambassadors while living abroad.” The Fulbright truly aspires to award those candidates who represent young leaders in their field, and upstanding ambassadors of their nation. And, in review and selection, committees weigh these two criteria, academic achievement and ambassadorial potential, equally.

As part of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program application, candidates are required to secure the institutional endorsement of their university. Thus, each September, our office convenes multiple faculty committees to review applications by field or region of expertise, interview candidates, and prepare an endorsement letter for those who move forward to the national competition.

If you have agreed to write a letter in support of a Fulbright candidate, your letter is kept strictly confidential within this setting. And, in order to best facilitate this process, we ask you to submit your recommendation by the internal deadline (in early-September) and that you submit it directly to the Fulbright portal (you will receive a link via email prompting you to do so, once your student has registered you as a reference), where we are able to access the recommendation alongside the candidate’s written application materials. While your student’s application will be read by the campus committee even if your letter of support is not submitted in time for the internal endorsement process, such an application is disadvantaged, as the committee seriously considers the support of faculty who know the student and their work in evaluating their candidacy.

### **WRITING FOR A FULBRIGHT ENGLISH TEACHING ASSISTANT (ETA) CANDIDATE:**

English Teaching Assistant (ETA) awards place grantees in schools across 90+ countries to supplement English language instruction and provide a native speaker presence in local classrooms. The age and academic level of the classroom setting varies by country and, often, within country – ranging from kindergarten to university level. The Fulbright seeks candidates who are keen to gain professional experience in a foreign environment, enthusiastic about embracing and learning new pedagogical methods, while proactive and flexible about their ability to contribute to the classroom, in however the local institution deems necessary. ETA’s are expected to be cultural ambassadors, both within and beyond their assigned classroom, able to draw on the resources of their institutional community and the broader community that they are a part of.

In reviewing candidates applying for an ETA award, selectors look for a strong motivation and seriousness in their selection of country, possession of the necessary and relevant skills – either gained from directly related or transferable experiences to successfully contribute to their classroom, and strong evidence pointing toward their maturity, flexibility, and

exceptional level of professionalism (the ETA may select their country in application, however if selected, they will be assigned their city and institution for the duration of the grant period).

The Fulbright is equally interested in the applicant's potential to make contributions to their prospective local community—to be, in other words, a cultural ambassador beyond their classroom. Please note that in speaking to these criteria, it is recommended that you include concrete stories or examples about your academic or professional interactions with the student where possible. Selection committee members have commented that such examples are the most effective means of conveying sincerity and a sense of your relationship with the candidate (as well as providing an indicator of how well you know the candidate).

*Practical guidelines to keep in mind for letters of support for a Fulbright ETA candidate:*

- The Fulbright Program requires the submission of an ETA Form and **not a letter of recommendation** for ETA applicants. The Fulbright program will not accept a letter of recommendation for ETA applicant in lieu of a completed ETA Recommendation Form (a sample form is available at: <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/instructions-for-eta-recommendation-writers>).
- You will not have access to the form until the candidate has registered you (the recommender) in the Fulbright online application system. Once you are registered in the system, you will receive an email prompting you to open and complete the form online. Once you complete and submit the ETA Recommendation Form, it will automatically attach to the candidate's application;
- In asking for a reference, the candidate should provide you with additional materials that may be useful to you as you write. This includes, but is not limited to: a copy of their transcript, resume, application essay drafts, information about their selected graduate program, and some idea of the role your letter will play in the overall application package;
- At the very latest, please upload your ETA Form by September 30. Applications that are missing recommendation forms cannot move forward to the national competition, thus the applicant will be unable to continue with the application process;
- After the recommendation is submitted, it cannot be edited. Once you submit, you will not be able to gain access to edit or change your ETA Recommendation Form.

Lastly, please do not hesitate to reach out to URF if you have questions. We at URF ([ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu)) are happy to answer any questions that you might have about the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, the English Teaching Assistantship opportunity, and/or the ETA Recommendation form!