

# **The Fulbright U.S. Student Program**

## **Faculty Guide to Supporting a Study/Research 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>:**

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

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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.

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 STUDY/RESEARCH CANDIDATE:**

The Fulbright Study/Research award seeks candidates who are keen to place a global lens on their academic area of interest, while simultaneously strengthening the cultural understanding between the U.S. and host communities through their research and extracurricular engagement.

In reviewing candidates applying for a Study/Research award, selectors look for a strong motivation and seriousness of purpose in their proposed research, including the presentation of a specific topic and feasible plan, reasoning for pursuing this project in this country, and possession of the necessary and relevant skills to carry out the proposed research or successfully complete the degree program. For those pursuing a degree program, candidates should outline a particular area of intellectual inquiry that has led them to this desired degree program, and justify how they will be able to deepen their knowledge best through this program, institution, and local community.

The Fulbright is also interested in understanding the applicant’s potential to make contributions to their prospective local community—to be, in other words, a cultural ambassador. Giving an example or sharing a story in your letter that displays the student’s initiative, leadership abilities, their ability to solve problems or grapple with failure, be supportive of their peers, to be creative and have vision, to demonstrate their commitment to intercultural exchange, or speaking to their maturity, flexibility, and professionalism, are all excellent qualities upon which to reflect for their ambassadorial potential too.

If you are an academic letter writer, your letter should seek to explain how the candidate fits this profile and how their candidacy and research project/topic will advance the Fulbright aim of

building academic knowledge and promoting mutual understanding. This is often best accomplished through the presentation of anecdotal examples or experience with the candidate. Committee members have noted that general praise of a candidate (ex: this student is hardworking and motivated) is made more memorable if instead the writer speaks to qualities that make the applicant stand out, even among other highly motivated, hardworking students. If you are familiar with the applicant's proposed field of study or graduate program, explaining why the degree program selected is a good choice will significantly strengthen their candidacy.

*Below is a summary of some of the topics your letter might address:*

- How the student's academic achievements and/or other activities speak to their character and intellect;
- Their academic preparation for the proposed course of study or independent research, through previous research and/or advanced coursework;
- How does this candidate, and their proposed project/degree, fulfill the Fulbright aim of strengthening ties between nations and building mutual understanding;
- How the candidate's proposed course of study/research fits into their proposed career plan, and why this student would be best served by spending time in country;
- Ability to engage inside and outside of the lab/research/classroom, and represent the Fulbright, and on a broader scale the U.S.A., well as an ambassador and leader in doing so.

*Practical guidelines to keep in mind for letters of support for a Fulbright Study/Research candidate:*

- In asking for a letter, the candidate should provide you with additional materials that may be useful to you as you write: a copy of their transcript, resume, application drafts, information about their selected graduate program, and some idea of the role your letter will play in the overall application package;
- A strong letter is typically 1.5-2 pages in length (although Fulbright does not have a maximum word count) and may be addressed to 'The Fulbright Selection Committee';
- Letters must be written on institutional letterhead, signed, and uploaded into the online application system;
- At the very latest, please upload your letter by September 30. Without recommendation letters submitted by the deadline, an applicant will not be permitted to enter the national competition. If you need URF to upload your letter for you, please e-mail it to our office ([ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu)) no later than September 30.
- After the recommendation is submitted to the Fulbright portal, it cannot be edited. However, if there is a significant error, you can email Fulbright directly at [FBstudentsupport@iie.org](mailto:FBstudentsupport@iie.org) to request the letter be returned to you. You may do this up until one week prior to the national deadline, and you must include the applicant's full name and country of application in your request, as well as allow 48 hours for the request to be processed. (Unfortunately, URF does not have access to the application system for the Fulbright, and therefore cannot facilitate this process).

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, so please do not hesitate to reach out!