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Study abroad Fulbright scholars lead the way

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Winning a Fulbright scholarship is not easy, yet Baltimore college students have been consistently successful in attaining this coveted opportunity to study abroad after graduation. Loyola University has had a Fulbright scholar for the last three years in a row, Morgan State University has had more Fulbright's awarded than any other predominantly black college in the nation and Notre Dame University of Maryland has been a top producer in attaining Fulbright English Teaching Assistantships abroad.

When Senator Fulbright founded the scholarship program in 1946, his intention was to not only provide opportunities for students to study and do research abroad but to also foster good will between nations. One of the keys to the success of these schools in winning multiple Fulbrights is their ability to help students navigate through the rigorous application process. Besides possessing a grade point average of 3.5 or better, students must get two letters of reference from professors and write two essays, one outlining their proposed research project and the other a personal essay.

Students often learn about the Fulbright scholarship programs at one of the informational programs at their campus. In addition, students are often referred by their major advisors or department heads. Once they have expressed interest, students are given one-on-one help with the application process.

"The student needs to be able to describe a project that is feasible," says Arthur M. Sutherland, Ph.D., director of the National Fellowships office at Loyola, and associate professor of theology. "The project must be accomplished in the eight to 10 months that the student will be abroad and the student must demonstrate that the project can only be done in that country."

For example, Francis Quattrone, a 2009 graduate of Loyola, was awarded a Fulbright to study wasp venom in Turkey. This research idea grew out of a senior year cellular-based project involving a wasp and host native to the United States, and, with the help of his advisor, Quattrone was able to connect with a similar project in Turkey. "I worked with a species of wasp specific to Turkey," says Quattrone, "and I was able to make a strong contribution to Dr. Uçkan's lab with my expertise in venom gland dissection."

Sutherland also encourages the Fulbright applicants to think about what they will do if they are selected, what they will do if not and what are the advantages of just applying. Whether or not they become a Fulbright scholar, the process can help them to prepare for applying to graduate school or for a job.

In addition to help with their project proposals, there is a workshop on how to write the personal essay, which is often the most difficult part of the application process for students. "The essay should show 'who I am and how I got that way,'" says Sutherland. He coaches students until they have an essay that really expresses who they are.

At Morgan State University, Carleen Leggett, Ph.D., Fulbright program director and associate professor of World Languages and International Studies, concurs that the personal essay can be the biggest challenge for students applying for the Fulbright. She also gives her students one-on-one coaching in the essay. "It is most important to express a positive image of Americans," says Leggett. "We work on a good opening sentence, and I encourage them to replace their 'nickel' words with 'dime' words to improve their writing."

Morgan students also get guidance in clarifying their research proposal, which must explain what they plan to do and why it must be done in a particular country. For instance, Judith Howerton, a city planning major, received her Fulbright to study urban public transit in Senegal and Dakar. Morgan students have won Fulbrights for research in just about every subject, including art and music and the sciences, and in dozens of countries as diverse as Germany, Peru, Vietnam, Jamaica and Malaysia.

Students at Morgan are encouraged to begin thinking about applying for a Fulbright early on so that they can prepare by including the appropriate foreign language in their coursework. Leggett also impresses upon them that if they win the grant and accept it, they must also accept the requirements. This includes becoming involved in their host community outside their specific project and staying for the full term of their grant.

Morgan students are also encouraged to think about how the Fulbright application process can help them apply for other grants or for graduate school. They are also encouraged to apply for a Fulbright again if they don't make it the first time.

"Many of our students are the first generation in their family to attend college," says Leonor Blum, MA, SSJ, Fulbright coordinator and associate professor of history and political science at Notre Dame of Maryland University. "Most of them have not had the opportunity for foreign travel. So I look for students with cultural curiosity and adaptability during my recruiting efforts." This opportunity for study abroad for a year is available and is often an eye opener for her students.

In explaining the program to students, Blum emphasizes that research projects are more difficult to obtain and that the student must have a contact in the country to which they are applying before they begin the process. Since many of Notre Dame's students are planning to go into education, the foreign English Teaching Assistantship grants are usually a better fit, especially since Notre Dame has developed contacts with schools in countries in the Far East, such as Korea. Blum also coaches her students through the application process, including the essays.

Students winning an English Teaching Assistantship grant will help teach English in a school in the host country. Depending on the requirements of the host country, they are expected to know enough of the host country's language to function in daily life.

Even when things don't go as planned, being a Fulbright recipient can be a rewarding experience. "One of our students had arranged a project in Africa," says Blum, "but after she arrived it fell through, and she was ready to come home." However, the student finished the term of her grant and had experiences in the community of her host country that she would not have had otherwise.

"The overall experience of living in a dynamic country like Turkey, speaking the language and finding my way around the country was unforgettable," says Quattrone. His best advice to students interested in applying for a Fulbright? "Start now. Try to have a proposal that is not only unique but showcases one's skills and is specific to the host country." That, along with an adventurous spirit and some persistence, could be the beginning of a dream come true. •

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