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**The World of Cultural Exchange: The Value of Increasing Diversity the Erasmus and Fulbright Exchange Programs**

**Introduction:**

Our increasingly global world impacts many facets of our lives, including the field of higher education. International exchange programs have grown exponentially in the past 30 years.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lauded as a way to increase intercultural communication on an interpersonal level, the idea behind cultural exchange is that students will spend an academic semester or year in another country and in that time gain valuable experience living and studying abroad.[[2]](#footnote-2) Allan Goodman, the President of the Institute of International Education, has stated that “International experience is one of the most important components of a 21st century education, and study abroad should be viewed as an essential element of a college degree".[[3]](#footnote-3)

Erasmus and Fulbright are two of the most recognized student exchange programs currently in operation. The Erasmus Program was established in 1987 by the European Union to increase pro-European sentiment in the next generation. Their rapid expansion demonstrates that more and more young Europeans do have opportunities to interact with other cultures across the European continent. The program has generally been lauded as an overall success.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, some academic studies have raised flaws related to the selection into the program and the representativeness of the participants. Studies conducted have raised doubts about the inclusiveness of the program, including diversity of socio-economic background, level of study, and even academic performance.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Fulbright is an American public diplomacy that seeks to project a positive view of United States culture globally by sending American students to study abroad and accepting international students at US institutions. In terms of Fulbright, the organization has been criticized for being “overwhelmingly white” and not inclusive of wider racial minority populations in their participant pool.[[6]](#footnote-6) While both Erasmus and Fulbright have achieved their initial organizational goals, and made steps to be more inclusive, neither program is diverse enough to truly be accomplishing their respective missions. In the case of Erasmus, students who participate in their exchanges are likely to already be Pro-European and therefore the program is doing little to increase a common European identity.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the case of Fulbright, because the organization does not reflect the diversity of the United States population it is not accurately reflecting the American identity in their public diplomacy. In both cases, Erasmus and Fulbright are not reaching out to groups who have the most to gain from these programs, and therefore not truly fulfilling their respective mission statements.

**Erasmus:**

Erasmus is by far the world’s most successful student mobility program.[[8]](#footnote-8) Since 1987, Erasmus has provided over 3 million European students with the opportunity to travel abroad to study at a higher education institution or train in a company.[[9]](#footnote-9) However, in his article on the identity-building aspect of the Erasmus program, the researcher Iain Wilson argues that Erasmus differs from other exchange programs because their innate program goal is to foster a collective identity; they strive to encourage a common European identity in their cultural exchanges.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Multiple researchers have reached differing conclusions on the efficacy of the Erasmus program. A study by researchers King and Ruiz-Gelices demonstrated that students who have already been abroad were more positively attuned towards issues of European integration than students who have not yet been abroad. Based on survey answers, they point out that growing positivity about a common Europe is a growing trend. They conclude that the Erasmus year abroad has a positive effect on both knowledge about Europe and European identity.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, they do not consider the reverse, that pro-Europeans may be inherently more likely to embrace European mobility.

The researcher Sigalas is hesitant in drawing a direct connection between Erasmus programs and a greater and more widespread European identity. Sigalas' results show that there was “no evidence that the ERASMUS experience leads students to adopt a European self-identity”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Wilson conducted his research with two groups of students: the first were Erasmus students and the second were sedentary students that acted as a control. As there were no significant differences in attitudes therefore according to Wilson*, “*no support for the hypothesis that taking part in the Erasmus program leads to revolutionary changes in students' political views in the short term”.[[13]](#footnote-13)

These articles demonstrate that there is not strong quantitative evidence of a positive effect of the Erasmus term on the development of a European identity. The Erasmus program's contribution to establishing a European identity could be seen as a qualitative rather than quantitative process.[[14]](#footnote-14) Erasmus students are generally more favorable to European integration than peers that did not participate in Erasmus programming. The question, then, arises whether this simply is a result of a rising trend in Europeanization.[[15]](#footnote-15) Nonetheless, there seems to be an inherent ambiguity: as Fernández explains, it is hard to conclude that there is a European identity because of Erasmus.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Therefore despite large numbers of exchange, many of the inter-European programs of educational exchange, including Erasmus, have done little to foster a widespread common European identity.[[17]](#footnote-17) It seems through these studies that a core issue to accomplishing the goal of a common European identity is that Erasmus may be targeting the wrong group of people. Research has consistently shown that the younger and the more educated an individual is the more likely they are to support European integration and to have a European identity.[[18]](#footnote-18) In fact, education is one the most reliable predictors of possessing a pro-European inclination. [[19]](#footnote-19) There are a several explanations for this relationship. First, a higher level of education prepares people to be more competitive in an integrated market economy. Therefore, individuals with higher education levels have an interest to endorse European integration.[[20]](#footnote-20) By reaching out to the same applicant pool, a pool that are likely to carry pro-European sentiments before engaging in the Erasmus Program, the program does not persuade people to its mission but caters to people who already agree.

**Fulbright:**

United States Senator William Fulbright established the Fulbright Program in 1946.[[21]](#footnote-21) Fulbright is an American scholarship organization for international educational exchange for students, but also facilitates exchanges for other roles in the academic world like researchers, teachers, scientists, and artists.[[22]](#footnote-22) The program was established with the mission to increase understanding between the people of the United States and other countries. It integrates US public diplomacy into academic institutions across the globe.[[23]](#footnote-23) The impacts of the Fulbright Program as a public diplomacy tool have been extensively studied. However, in the existing research on Fulbright there is a heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence that make current findings very abstract.[[24]](#footnote-24)

What has been cited as a major flaw of the operational structure of Fulbright is the lack of racial and economic diversity of program participants.[[25]](#footnote-25) To combat this lack of diversity, during the past 10 years the State Department has been successful in increasing the participation of black participants in addition to other underrepresented minorities. However, despite these increases the Fulbright Program’s student participants remained mostly white, at nearly 63%, and black and Latino students are still underrepresented when compared to the American undergraduate population.[[26]](#footnote-26) Since the early 1990s, the State Department has focused on increasing diversity. The department’s efforts have paid off in the increase in overall applicants. The number of Fulbright applicants has almost doubled in the past 10 years, to more than 10,000, but this general increase in turn increases applicants in all racial and ethnic categories.[[27]](#footnote-27)

While the State Department has tried to characterize the program as "elite, but not elitist," minority students and even practicing academics still perceive Fulbright as a program for others, and not for them.[[28]](#footnote-28) Therefore, the State Department is exploring new ways to get information about Fulbright opportunities to a broader audience, increased communication with minority-serving institutions and other campuses through webinars, social media, and other outreach, while acknowledging that these efforts can take years to produce institutional changes.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**The Importance of Study Abroad Opportunities:**

As the world grows both more profitable and more interconnected, there are an increasing number of students who are studying abroad. In 2014, the number of international students in the United States and the number of American students participating in study abroad programs were the highest they had ever been.[[30]](#footnote-30) And while many students pursue study abroad programs through their specific university, a large number of exchanges are made possible through grant-based organizations like Fulbright and Erasmus. The importance of study abroad goes beyond the formal channels of economic and institutional connections made through these programs. The commodity of shared experiences is the quickest way to create a common identity and increase understanding.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Barriers to study abroad programs limit who is able and therefore ultimately eligible to pursue these opportunities. In reality, those who would have the most to gain from living abroad rarely apply or have the option to apply to programs. In the 2014 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange stated the number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States increased to a record high of 886,052 students in 2013-14, confirming that the United States is the top choice for higher education.[[32]](#footnote-32) The United States hosts more of the world’s 4.5 million globally mobile college and university students than any other country in the world. The report also found that 289,408 American students studied abroad for academic credit from their U.S. colleges and universities.[[33]](#footnote-33)

However despite these seemingly high numbers, in the US only 10% of undergraduate students participate in study abroad.[[34]](#footnote-34) Although this is an all time high of American students studying abroad, it is still a small amount of participants in proportion to the amount of students pursuing higher education degrees. Therefore Fulbright and Erasmus are both part of a larger trend in the need to diversify their participants in the world of higher education cultural exchange. According to the Institute of International Education, of the students who studied abroad in academic programs in 2013-14, about 74% were white, 6% black, and 8% Hispanic.[[35]](#footnote-35) That means that this opportunity is incredibly underutilized by an enormous percentage of American college students. Refining the goals of exchange programs can help us implement infrastructure to better service the desired audience of these experiences.

**Conclusion:**

Elizabeth Bloxam, the Program Assistant at the Fulbright Commission for Educational Exchange between Belgium, the United States, and Luxembourg and a former Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in, reflects on why Fulbright, and other programs like it, is important in our world today.

“There is a saying that the most difficult part of diplomatic relations between nations is "the last three feet" because it represents the distance between individuals. I believe that programs that bring young people together from different parts of the world and that place an emphasis on culture exchange do more to increase our understanding of other cultures and bridge that three-foot gap than any diplomat ever could.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Both the Erasmus and Fulbright programs have made strides to diversify their candidate and participant pools. Enacted in 2014, the new Erasmus+ program has made more vocational programs transnational so students who will not attend university still have the chance to obtain an international educational experience.[[37]](#footnote-37) In addition, Fulbright has implemented programs that make efforts to reach out to underrepresented communities, like specific outreach to students and faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.[[38]](#footnote-38)

However, while these are good first steps, currently neither organization places enough value on including diverse participants. For Erasmus, students who participate in their exchanges are likely to carry Pro-European sentiments already and therefore there is little increase in the cultivation of a common European identity.[[39]](#footnote-39) For Fulbright, because the organization does not reflect the diversity of the United States population the program is limiting their capacity to perform accurate public diplomacy work. While there is generally support for the idea of diversifying study abroad programs like Erasmus and Fulbright, there has not been a standard set of good practices for how to do this.[[40]](#footnote-40) While both cite the general value of diversity as a concept, neither Erasmus nor Fulbright recognizes that without making their respective participants more diverse they neither organization is achieving their respective missions.

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