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Educational and Cultural Exchange is in Trouble ^[1]

On May 2, 2025, the Executive Office of the President sent its priorities in the form of a budget  to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Its effects would immediately devastate international exchange programs such as the Gilman Scholarship, the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange Fellowship, and the Fulbright Grant, among others. Perhaps the most well-known of the three, the Fulbright Grant, has enjoyed bipartisan support for over seventy-five years as a mechanism of citizen diplomacy. Worse, the Trump Administration asserts a litany of falsehoods to "justify" those cuts.

The President's "skinny" budget for FY26  recommends decreasing funds earmarked for Educational and Cultural Exchanges by \$691 million, or about 93%. The line-item reasoning for this decrease in funding states that: "Inspector General reports have documented insufficient monitoring for fraud and inefficient, wasteful programming at the expense of U.S. taxpayers. Foreign students receiving technical and highdemand [sic] training leave to take those skills overseas, including back to near-peer rivals, having deprived American students of places to acquire those skills. This program is no longer affordable." Because the Fulbright program promotes academic exchange at the post-baccalaureate level, universities and advocacy groups have reacted strongly against this recommendation, but nobody has yet challenged the statement as patently false.

Grants such as Gilman and CBYX are not mentioned in the Department of State IG database. There are, however, three unclassified reports dated 2009 , 2012 , and 2022  in the database that mention Fulbright. The 2009 report  outlines a review of the Fulbright Scholarship Fund in Pakistan and it outlines eleven recommendations to address weaknesses in budgeting, financial reporting and financial process oversight. The 2012 report  explains that the Embassy in Pakistan had adopted ten of the eleven recommendations. In other words, the problems were resolved. Perhaps most tellingly, the 2022 IG report  includes a *Spotlight on Success*, highlighting that the U.S. Kosovo Embassy's Fulbright program management was particularly innovative. Unless every DOS IG report that details waste and fraud is classified for some reason, there is no evidence behind the assertion that the program is wasteful, and in fact, the public-facing evidence suggests the very opposite.

Because selection is merit-based, with factors including academic achievement, project proposal and leadership potential, foreign students who come to the U.S. to study on a Fulbright grant are among the very best that the world has to offer. In fact, the 2022 Fulbright Annual Report,  which is the most current report available, boasts that 41 heads of state and 62 Nobel Prize laureates are former Fulbright grantees. While these figures may include Americans, they also include smart, powerful people overseas who have been positively impacted by their time in the United States. Additionally, Fulbright grantees enter the United States on an Exchange Visitor (J-1) visa under the Department of State, and they are therefore subject to the two-year home-country residence requirement associated with the J-1 visa. In other words, the U.S. government requires foreign students to return to their home

countries for two full years if they ever wish to return to the United States under a specialty occupation, specialized knowledge, or permanent resident visa.

These outstanding students and researchers bring outside expertise, fresh perspectives and novel experiences to U.S. institutions, sometimes challenging our assumptions and sometimes helping us understand the unknowns that we might not even recognize. In fact, if one assumes that higher education remains a meritocracy, an outstanding foreign student is at worst taking the place of a mediocre American student. Because the Fulbright grant is an exchange program, the United States is similarly sending our best and brightest to overseas locations to learn from scientists and academics in over 160 countries. We bring that knowledge back to our institutions, making America smarter and stronger. According to the [Fulbright 2022 Annual Report](#), foreign students and scholars were placed in every state of our nation, with a majority living in states outside of the Eastern Seaboard and West Coast. Far from depriving American students, international exchange enriches the experience of students who have no ability or interest in traveling overseas.

"We can afford international exchange. In fact, we cannot afford to lose exchange programs such as Fulbright."

We can afford international exchange. In fact, we cannot afford to lose exchange programs such as Fulbright. Fulbright's funding is appropriated by Congress through the Department of State, but that is not its only source of funding. Foreign governments and the foreign private sector join forces with the U.S. private sector in financially supporting this non-partisan program, and in 2022, provided 34% of the program budget. The State Department and the Department of Education contributed approximately \$283 million that year, while the U.S. government took in \$4.9 trillion dollars overall, of which, 54% was through income tax. That means Fulbright appropriations require around .0107% of federal income tax revenue. In 2022, I paid around 48 cents for the Fulbright grant out of my \$4,526 federal income tax bill. Given the safety, security and economic prosperity that academic exchanges provide to all American citizens, these exchange programs are both efficient and vital to U.S. interests.

On May 20th, in a [review of the President's FY 2026 budget request for the State Department](#), Senator John Boozman reiterated some of the points that I've made above, explaining to Secretary of State Marco Rubio that "...I know in my travels, and in your travels, ...any time you're in a foreign country visiting with the cabinet members, ...half of them are Fulbright Scholars, and they're very, very proud of it. Would you be willing to work with us to find a solution which strengthens the program and yet fits with today's challenges, which are different than they have been in the past? But the opportunity for the leadership of these other countries, across the ranks, to have them such that they are very, very familiar with the United States in that way is, I think is really invaluable." Secretary Rubio responded by pointing to the preliminary submission made by the State Department, and noted that the appropriations committee will bring its own ideas to the table regarding their priorities. He pledged to work closely with the committee on its priorities, seemingly indicating a compromising approach.

If the document that Secretary Rubio referred to as the "preliminary submission" was the recently-released [Congressional Budget Justification for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs](#), any compromise on Congress's part will result in

significant damage to international exchange. In line with the President's "skinny proposal," the State Department's budget proposal for FY2026 also cuts 93% of ECA's budget, allowing the remaining 50 million to remain in place for "core program management," reducing the ECA staffing levels by 63 percent and leaving only exchange support in place. Under a heading entitled "Modernizing and Eliminating Ineffective and Wasteful Programs," the State Department declines to request funding for any educational and cultural exchange program, restating the false claim that "these programs are not affordable in their current form." In other words, this year will be the last year that programs such as Fulbright, Gilman and CBYX exist.

Congress must know that the American people understand and support citizen diplomacy through cultural exchange programs. Please urge Congress to maintain the \$288 million dollars for the Fulbright Grant and maintain the \$741 million in funding for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in FY26, as this and all other exchange programs are more important today than ever. And please, pass this information along to colleagues, students, and anyone else who cares about education, diplomacy, basically anyone who cares about the future of our country.
