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Fulbright Magic: The Alchemy of an Intentional Experience Abroad

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Fulbright Magic: The Alchemy of an Intentional Experience Abroad

Abstract

The Fulbright program is designed to facilitate cultural exchange and understanding, and Fulbright's Group Projects Abroad allow small, focused cohorts of American teachers and scholars to travel and to learn together. In June 2017, a number of Gettysburg College faculty and K-12 teachers from South Central PA traveled to China to study points of similarity and disparity between the American and Chinese educational systems. Our program was crafted in a way to help us to understand Chinese culture and the realities of Chinese life; we were given the opportunity to view our experiences from the perspectives of our hosts and resident experts, not simply as tourists. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

Leadership, Global Education, Fulbright Program, China, Chinese education

Disciplines

Educational Leadership | International and Comparative Education



Fulbright magic

The alchemy of an intentional experience abroad

By Chloe Ruff and Christopher Fee
September 8, 2017

The Fulbright program is designed to facilitate cultural exchange and understanding, and Fulbright's Group Projects Abroad allow small, focused cohorts of American teachers and scholars to travel and to learn together. In June 2017, a number of Gettysburg College faculty and K-12 teachers from South Central PA traveled to China to study points of similarity and disparity between the American and Chinese educational systems. Our program was crafted in a way to help us to understand Chinese culture and the realities of Chinese life; we were given the opportunity to view our experiences from the perspectives of our hosts and resident experts, not simply as tourists. We were especially lucky in the person of a project coordinator who had fallen in love with China many years before; she acted as a catalyst to inspire our own productive interactions that helped us to see both the Chinese educational system and our own institutions through fresh eyes.

The key elements of any truly fruitful cultural exchange include both the intended and unintended consequences of a given program: Those ephemeral moments where the experience exceeds and transcends the itinerary, one's own expectations, and a group's stated mission. These are the points at which Fulbright magic happens.

On our second night in Beijing, our hosts arranged a mixer with teachers of similar levels with interests related to ours. Talking with these colleagues and hearing their perspectives on teaching was illuminating, as was putting their thoughts in the context of our own group's discussions of contemporary education issues. We especially enjoyed meeting Mandy Jiang at the mixer dinner, a new friend who provided an initial perspective on what it's actually like to be a teacher in China, and how that experience is similar to and different from our own. Toward the end of the evening, Mandy told us a classic joke about teacher's salaries in China: "Chinese teachers take the risks of a drug dealer but get paid like a vegetable dealer." Jokes often don't translate well, but this one certainly resonated with us.

Amongst dozens of fruitful activities during our month in China, perhaps most moving of all was our opportunity to teach an English lesson in a provincial middle school, about four hours from Beijing, where Westerners were almost unknown, and we were treated—almost literally—like rock stars. Walking around the town the day before, we were adopted by a small gaggle of kids who followed us around and provided us with popsicles and other snacks, not to mention the

simple gift of their affection. We felt immediately at ease in a place that might otherwise have seemed alien and forbidding. There was no feeling of any exchange or obligation; these children were simply interested in us as people. Kids are inquisitive, we piqued their curiosity, and they wanted to get to know us. It turns out that we liked each other quite a lot. We didn't expect this encounter, but our program had laid the groundwork for it. These serendipitous meetings and exchanges are at the heart of the Fulbright experience.

Our school visit itself was the cause for some anxiety. We didn't even know that this was to be a part of the program until shortly before our trip out into the countryside. The most seasoned and experienced teachers might quake at the thought of walking into a classroom full of kids of unknown ages and abilities, and teaching a lesson cold.

Stepping into the fourth-floor classroom, we got a sense of what it might be like to teach at that school. The experience was visceral and made a lasting impression upon us: We can recall the arrangement of the room; the many, many desks; the anticipation in the faces of the students, just sitting there, wondering what to expect. We had picked traditional American kids' songs which involved body parts and movements in ways which lent themselves both to assessing the level of the students and to impart some simple English terms and phrases. By the conclusion of our time together, no one was really ready for it to end, and we spent close to an hour just taking pictures and exchanging names and information. Again, the children were entirely genuine; certainly, we were a novelty, but what was transcendent was the simple human thirst for contact and connection. We can hope for a moment like this, we can try to facilitate it, but it can't be forced: Again, this is Fulbright magic.

We attended lectures, made school visits, survived intensive language classes, and traveled to tourist sites, but what really stands out at the end of the day are these unplanned, ephemeral moments of human connection. This speaks to the heart of what Fulbright is all about; if a few dozen Chinese kids grow up thinking even a little bit more positively about Americans, that's an outcome we should all value highly. Our group certainly returned with a deep and abiding love and respect for the Chinese students and teachers we had the pleasure to meet and to get to know.

Chloe Ruff is an assistant professor of Education and Christopher Fee is a professor of English, both at Gettysburg College. The contents of this op-ed were developed under a grant from the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA), U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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