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Michelle Metro-Rolland

Western Michigan University, michelle.metro-roland@wmich.edu

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Fulbright Foreign Student Program at WMU Assessment of Student Needs & Support
Assessment Mini Grant Final Report
Michelle Metro-Roland & Homayun Arian

1. Description of accomplishments (as related to your original proposal): general description of the project's final outcome addressing the degree to which objectives were attained; results of the stated purpose; and the overall effectiveness of the proposed plan. This should include any tangible output/results.

Background

This project looked at the current support provided to Fulbright Foreign Students (FFS) at Western Michigan University. During the grant application WMU was host to 37 Fulbright Foreign Students enrolled in graduate programs which included 13 alumni who had completed their Fulbright funded program of study or teaching and were continuing on to doctoral degrees funded by the university. All Fulbright funded students and alumni enrolled in degree programs receive support from the Fulbright Foreign Student Advisor (FSA). The FSA (now ISA), a term designated by the Fulbright program, does not have specific duties assigned and the extent of the support that the FSA provides varies from institution to institution. At WMU the FSA plays an extensive role in supporting FFS. The objective of this assessment project was to provide a comprehensive understanding of how current levels of support were addressing student needs and identify ways the Foreign Student Advisor can continue to work with the university community, and the placement agencies, to better support success for the students placed at WMU.

The FSA at WMU provides comprehensive support for the FFS from the application cycle through graduation and beyond. This support begins at the placement stage when the FSA works with the placement agencies, IIE, AMIDEAST, and LASPAU (now folded into IIE), the graduate advisors at WMU, and the international admissions office. When students are placed at WMU the FSA works with the incoming students. Along with the Fulbright Student Organization (FSO) the FSA provides detailed information about Kalamazoo and WMU prior to arrival and facilitates communication with the graduate program advisors and other FFS. Students are provided with a Fulbright specific orientation and welcome lunch. The support continues throughout the students' program of study and includes liaising with academic departments and the placement agencies. It often also includes assisting students in navigating other university offices including Accounts Receivable, Residence Life, Sindecuse, etc. The FSA also provides cultural enrichment opportunities for the students including field trips, organized social events and graduation celebrations. This is one of the reasons WMU has been able to increase the number of Fulbright students placed here from eight in 2010 to the current number. Throughout this time the role and the support of the FSA at WMU has developed to address the needs of students in real time, but there had not been a comprehensive assessment of student needs more generally or of the support provided. The timing for this was especially important in light of changes to the Fulbright program at WMU since the pandemic which include the loss of a graduate assistant position to support Fulbright and a scaling back of cultural enrichment activities.

Survey Design & Implementation

A set of survey questions were designed in order to address the various aspects of the FFS experience. Six areas of interest were identified.

- Fulbright Administrating Agencies
- Academic Departments and Advisors
- Fulbright Foreign Student Advisor (FSA) at WMU
- Fulbright Student Organization (FSO)
- Fulbright Graduate Assistant
- Alumni Relations

Each section included several questions related to the area of interest. The survey employed Likert scale, multiple choice, and short answer questions. The survey was submitted to and approved by HS-IRB and was implemented via an email invitation to current Fulbright students and alumni during Summer 2023.

Survey Results

The results of the survey were helpful in identifying areas of strength and weakness for the Fulbright Foreign Student experience at WMU and the support that has existed. The data reveal a generally positive experience among Fulbright students at WMU. High levels of satisfaction were observed in various aspects of the program, including program matching by the administrating agencies, support services and academic instruction from the departments, and advisor support. These findings underscore WMU's commitment to providing a conducive environment for Fulbright students to thrive academically and personally.

Some specific results were noteworthy, including the satisfaction with program matching. FFS awardees are, in almost all cases, placed at WMU by the administrating agencies, rather than by applying themselves. Students, in applying to Fulbright, identify their areas of academic interest and their professional goals, and the placement agencies match those with university programs throughout the United States. The survey data indicate a moderate to high level of satisfaction here. The data for academic programs were equally positive and students showed high levels of satisfaction with their academic departments, the resources available, and were very positive about the support they received from their academic advisors specifically. The support provided by the FSA was highly valued at 90% of respondents saying they were extremely satisfied.

2. Specific outcomes: uses of individual outcomes and how they impact the department/academic unit.

The results of the survey are being used to identify areas of programming that should continue, areas that need more investment, and areas that need improvement or redesign. For example, students wished to have more support prior to arrival from the Welcome Ambassador program. While not directly related to the program, itself students mentioned housing and healthcare as two areas they would have wanted more information about before arrival. These results will help us with the next cohort of Welcome Ambassadors to more specifically focus on these two areas. The FSA will work with the Welcome Ambassadors to provide more specific information to share with incoming FFS. Respondents also noted a desire for more engagement and cultural activities noting that those they did engage in were valuable in creating networking opportunities and connections and these events

helped them learn more about U.S. culture, the Midwest, and Michigan. This indicates that cultural integration activities play a valuable role in the Fulbright experience at WMU. As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic curtailed many of the cultural enrichment activities that had been offered and the loss of a graduate assistant also has contributed to a reduction in activities. The FSA will work with the Fulbright Student Organization to ensure that there is a calendar of events throughout the year beyond those that have been occurring on campus. The other main area to invest in will be alumni relations. The majority of respondents indicated a desire to maintain contact with former professors and classmates from WMU, highlighting the importance of networking and ongoing relationships with the university. Among the responses LinkedIn, social media, email newsletters, and WhatsApp groups emerged as the preferred platforms for connecting with fellow alumni and staying engaged with the university. The FSA is currently exploring the ways to utilize LinkedIn for better alumni engagement and other options will be explored based on the survey results.

3. Summary: your judgment about the assessment impact from the grant.

The impact of the grant has been four fold. On the one hand it allowed for a graduate student to be brought on board to assist with the project. As noted in the background, the Fulbright Foreign Student Program has been intentionally nurtured since 2010 and a major aspect of that was dedicating resources to supporting the students through dedicated time being given by the Foreign Student Advisor at WMU and by having a graduate assistant to support that work. This allowed for frequent touch points with the students and hence the ability to identify and address student needs in real time. With the reduction in cultural programming and the loss of the GA role, having the ability to direct specific attention to formal assessment of student needs through the hiring of a graduate student researcher was very important. Secondly, the data collected offers a good view into how to move forward with support for Fulbright Foreign Students, especially, as noted above, in identifying areas that are working and those that can be added to or improved. Third, the initial work of designing the survey took a large part of the summer as we worked together to identify the areas of interest and the questions to be asked. The survey can now be modified and used to conduct more regular assessment of the support provided by the university to Fulbright students. Fourthly, the results of the survey can be shared with the administrating agencies to demonstrate the continued support that Fulbright Foreign Students receive when placed at WMU. One of the key aspects of our Fulbright Foreign Students is the diversity of the countries they come from in terms of political structures, economic development, educational systems, etc. During the period of the grant currently enrolled students came from Afghanistan, Angola, Chad, Chile, Egypt, Indonesia, Kosovo, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories (West Bank), Papua New Guinea, Russia, Serbia, South Africa, Tajikistan, and Tanzania. In some cases, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indonesia there is a large community of fellow students who share similar backgrounds and form additional supportive communities, but in some cases the student may be not only the only person at WMU from that country they may be one of only two or three Fulbright awardees from their country in the US, which adds extra strain to be successful. Providing a supportive environment that fosters connections and success has been one of the ways that WMU has been able to grow our program and graduate our students and the support provided by the FSA at WMU has been recognized by the placement agencies that work with Fulbright students, especially the Institute of International Education (IIE). Having assessment data to highlight this work will be helpful as we continue to collaborate with these agencies.