

Abstract

The Fulbright Program is emblematic of the ideals of internationalization and of US engagement with the world. What is little known is that Senator Fulbright opposed racial integration during his entire legislative career. Students at the University of Arkansas called for the removal of his name and statue, but no similar effort has taken place within the international education community. Considering racial justice, is Fulbright a good brand for US international student and scholar mobility?

The (Other) Race Problem with US Academic Mobility

Gerardo L. Blanco

Higher education in the United States has multiple race problems, as a [special section](#) of *International Higher Education* documented in 2020. Some of these problems include a significant racial participation gap in education abroad programs and reoccurring hostile political discourse, sometimes fueled by geopolitical tensions. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, increased anti-Asian racism targeting Chinese and other international students has emerged as another challenge.

Despite these problems, the United States has remained attractive as an academic destination, as the recovery in international student enrollments illustrated in the [2022 Open Doors data](#) makes evident. However, in the United States, internationalization continues to be overreliant on incoming mobility, and revenue considerations often guide the interest in international student recruitment. The United States, as an academic destination, and US universities benefit from having strong and resilient brands. The Fulbright Program is one of the most visible brands associated with US academic mobility.

Honoring a Segregationist

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of the University of Arkansas is named after J. William Fulbright, one of the most prominent Arkansans in the state's history, and his statue is prominently displayed on the campus, where he also served as university president. In 2020, a group of Black students at the university demanded the removal of his name from the College of Arts and Sciences, and of his statue, given his well-documented record opposing the integration of African Americans in schools and public spaces in the United States. These student protests were reminiscent of movements making similar demands of the University of Oxford and in universities across Africa, which honored the colonist Cecil Rhodes. The Rhodes Scholarship is one of the most prestigious awards for academic mobility. J. William Fulbright was a Rhodes scholar, the first one in

his home state's history, and it is believed that this experience inspired him to create an academic mobility program in the United States.

At the University of Arkansas, a [commission](#) debated what to do in relation to Fulbright's legacy and recommended the removal of his name and statue. However, the [University Board of Trustees](#) decided instead to keep both, citing state legislation prohibiting the removal of monuments from public spaces.

In contrast to the vigorous and open debate led by students at the University of Arkansas, the international education community in the United States seems to have taken little notice of the student protests and the findings of the commission at the university. There have been no public discussions among the international education professional organizations, or public statements made regarding this issue. The [website](#) commemorating the 75th anniversary of the program has removed all references to J. William Fulbright, and a [website](#) of the Department of State acknowledges that "his voting record on civil rights contributed to the perpetuation of racism and inequality in the United States." While accurate, this statement does not suggest any implications.

Not Only a Woke Problem

In [Issue # 110](#) of *International Higher Education*, Carel Stolker discussed the perils of woke-ness in academia and argued against a so-called cancel culture. Regarding the issue at hand, it is important not to confuse critical analysis grounded in historic evidence with cancel culture. Exploring honestly and transparently the legacy of J. William Fulbright does not constitute an attempt to cancel him. Rather, it provides an opportunity to face not only his "mixed legacy," but also that of the professional field of international education, along with potential contemporary complicities with racial injustice. In short, analyzing Fulbright's legacy is much more about our professional field's values than his.

The official brand and [visual identity guide](#) for the Fulbright Program focuses on "Building Lasting Connections for a More Peaceful World" as the program's core brand formula, but it lacks any meaningful reference to J. William Fulbright or his controversial legacy. This, along with his disappearance from plain sight on the 75th anniversary website, which instead highlights prominent Black figures like Maya Angelou, Nelson Mandela (not a Fulbright recipient), and even UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, the first nonwhite head of government in that country, amounts to an effort to paper over or whitewash a complex reality that merits, if not soul searching, at least critical analysis. A recent [article](#) described the current brand status of the Fulbright program as having moved away from Fulbright and toward Fulbrighters instead. Of course, honoring diverse Fulbrighters, whose legacy should not be undermined due to the program founder's character shortcomings, is appropriate. However, in making this transition, an important step is to acknowledge not only Fulbright's personal legacy, but also the program's early history, which largely ignored the Global South, especially Africa.

The Way Ahead

This article is not a call to remove Fulbright's name from the flagship academic exchange program in the United States. Doing so would likely whitewash the racial injustice that Fulbright used his senatorial office to uphold. Given the surprise that seems to characterize those who learn about Fulbright's segregationist background, even among international educators and Fulbright recipients, a first step, and one consistent with academic values, is learning about Fulbright's vision of the world, which also included insightful discussions of American arrogance when engaging with the world.

A good place to start is for scholars and practitioners of internationalization, and for international education academic and professional associations, to learn from, and disseminate, the evidence and analysis collected by the [commission](#) that recommended removing Fulbright's name and statue from the University of Arkansas. Also important is to hold discussions about student movements like #RhodesMustFall and more broadly about decolonization of the university. A very practical consideration would be to consider the perils of naming programs and buildings after individuals, a common practice in higher education.

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Finally, despite some dark aspects in its past, the Fulbright program has a diverse alumni network, which has organized around informal groups like Fulbright Noir, for Black scholars, and Fulbright Latinx. Supporting these groups and bridging existing participation gaps by race should become priorities for the work of this academic exchange program. ▲