

LEARNING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

While Fulbright awards are individual, they are largely exercised in organizational contexts. These contexts in turn are shaped by attention to communication, control, and continuity as critical mediating factors. We draw on multiple Fulbright positions in the United States and Mexico to address how organizational culture affects award experience, not only abroad but in an under-appreciated setting, the home institutional environment. Anticipating the complex dynamics of organizational culture enhances a quality Fulbright experience.

Keywords: Organizational Culture • Communications • Control • Continuity • Practice Technology



INTRODUCTION

Informational and promotional material for Fulbright programs celebrate the challenge, adventure, stimulation, and personal growth participation bring to successful awardees. Articles in *Fulbright Chronicles* attest to the positive dimensions and impact an award offers as a consequence of teaching/research/study abroad, reinforcing the notion that holding a Fulbright can have transformative effects by opening opportunities and provoking new insights. While Fulbrights address individual aspirations and initiative, they are imbedded in complex organizational networks. The Fulbright award process itself spans government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and transnational collaboration. Most awardees are grounded in education, research positions, or public service, and anticipate returning to those organizations or similar careers after the Fulbright. Thus, although Fulbrights are directed to individuals, they are shaped by and potentially affect organizational arrangements at both the point of origin and destination, whether abroad or in the United States.

As we have been fortunate enough to hold multiple Fulbrights, we thought we should share experience and thoughts we hope may inform prospective applicants as well as awardees going into the field. We frame our joint comments here in terms of organizational culture, that assemblage of values, norms, traditions, routines, and practices that guide our organizational lives. We inhabit organizational cultures without much formal introspection as they provide guidelines for professional action. As a career archaeologist with Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (hereafter INAH), Nelly's work is governed by the National Organic Law concentrating all archaeology within the purview of INAH. When entering the United States on Fulbrights, this well-defined structure dissolves in the chaos of federal and state laws, tribal preferences, regulations, court decisions, and professional practice. To a Mexican archaeologist accustomed to working in a formal

organizational culture, the seeming disorganization American archaeologists accept appears confusing and inexplicable. Yet, American archaeologists navigate their organizational culture while struggling with far simpler Mexican formalism.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: COMMUNICATION, CONTROL, CONTINUITY

Treatments of organizational culture account for a voluminous literature; here we wish to focus on communications, control, and continuity as three dimensions often encountered by Fulbrighters in the course of their awards. Rarely are these overtly flagged. More commonly, we belatedly discover we are trying to make sense of or address a situation grounded in communication, control, or continuity. And such challenges may appear not only in our host country setting, but at home as well. Although Fulbright assessments understandably focus on the experience abroad, a judgment of success or failure may turn on the long-term significance in the home country organizational culture.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: COMMUNICATION

Communications skills are particularly relevant to organizational culture as they make it more likely one can penetrate surface formalisms, experiencing robust interactions with new colleagues and a new culture. Communication skills refer not only to speaking a language, but to commitment to use it, and to absorb non-verbal cues as well. Timidity, a fear of offending others, or uncertainty can be barriers even more burdensome than skills-based weaknesses might be. While there is a certain truth to the argument English is widely used globally in business, science, and medicine, depending on English immediately imposes a veil obscuring multiple aspects of the world you are entering, enabling locals to establish spheres of dialogue from which the Fulbrighter is effectively excluded. Nelly's command of English, greatly enhanced by her Fulbright-funded doctoral studies at the University of Georgia, facilitates an array of opportunities, from collaboration with the National Park Service and the Forest Service to appointments to various international bodies, editorial boards, and to overseeing many contacts between Mexican and Chinese archaeologists, as they are managed largely in English. And these opportunities lead to others.

Of course, there are constraints. Lack of opportunity for practice and reinforcement reduced the Farsi Jack learned sixty years ago in Iran to a handful of disjointed phrases. This simply underscores our argument that what is critical is talking to everyone, listening to everyone. Jack's Spanish skills developed because everyone in the Mexican village where he lived knew him as "Mr. Question". Some questions were silly, or seemed pointless, but every question led to communication, even if it was a request for repetition

or a shrug. And there are no stupid questions. Engagement is a critical communication skill, and sidestepping engagement because you are tired and others speak your language is understandable but ultimately disadvantageous. And engagement also contributes to recognizing non-verbal communications, those pauses or elliptical statements that signal what you are hearing, and the real message, may be different. Deciphering communications fosters a deeper understanding of cultural context, including its organizational dimensions.

Although communication skills may benefit the Fulbrighter directly they may appear far less significant to the home institution, where they may seem tangential to other organizational values. Nelly's English may serve INAH's interests but it also differentiates her from colleagues in ways that can provoke ill feelings. And by enabling her to work across broader horizons, including Fulbrights, it reduces her dependence on group solidarity. A department chair told Jack that publishing in Spanish was irrelevant because the language of the university is English. And even though his home department offers a specialization in Global Leadership and Management, its course in cross-cultural communication is merely optional, reflecting a low priority. To the extent home institution organizational cultures do not value communication skills it is not surprising they challenge Fulbright scholars abroad.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: CONTROL

A prime feature of organizational culture is to establish boundaries, promote guidelines, nurture preferences, and otherwise shape behavior without the burden of investing in oversight or overt policing. The relative flexibility and autonomy available to American academics is striking compared to what awaits in many institutions of higher education abroad. Americans are largely accustomed to operating in circumstances where unless something is forbidden, it is permitted, or at least tolerated, and oversight is limited. On a recent Fulbright at the University of Texas, Nelly's department secretary handed her keys to an office, showed her a classroom, and said "If you have any questions about classroom technology, all the students know how to run it. Anything else comes up, ask." And that was the extent of guidance. In such settings, organizational culture is rarely articulated but modeled, and one must be attentive to the dynamics of modeling.

Compare that to Jack's experience at the Instituto Tecnológico de Oaxaca (hereafter ITO), a federal science and engineering institution. He was given a specific time to report to campus each day, where he was videotaped checking in with a thumbprint. There was an official time for leaving campus, and in the evening security personnel chased out anyone staying late. An inspector circulated during class hours, checking to make sure classes were actually meeting. A proposal to take a graduate class off-campus on a field visit was met with consternation, while earth science classes were permitted to leave campus. There was no authorization for planning classes to do so. In effect, whatever was not explicitly permitted was forbidden, and few faculty had any

idea how to ask for exceptions or who could grant them. And as part of a national campus network, it turned out most requests had to be submitted through the institution for clearance by an office of the Secretary of Public Education in Mexico City. Compliance, not innovation, was a central tenet of organizational culture. There may be a strong motivation to attract Fulbright faculty to promote innovation, but organizational process is a powerful inhibitor.

Organizational cultures of control may appear in other ways. American higher education tends to distribute awards (promotion, salary increments) on the basis of production, e.g., publications, grants received, student recognition. Faculty develop strategies to compete for production-based awards. If organizational culture emphasizes other values, such as group solidarity, production may appear destabilizing or even threatening. ITO's organizational culture valued solidarity as manifested in union membership, group responsiveness, and in general what could be called presence, or "showing up." Jack's resistance to institutional controls over his time prompted little sympathy from colleagues; his pleas that he could be more productive working at home were evidence how little he understood ITO's values. Arguments that his home university valued production more than drinking coffee with Mexican counterparts simply emphasized the gulf between organizational cultures.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: CONTINUITY

Organizational cultures frequently value continuity as it fosters conservation of energy and resources. Innovation, often taking the form of new perspectives or methodologies, must prove itself before complementing or replacing what currently exists. Yet continuity can become a rationale for doing what has always been done because change could be destabilizing or threaten established interests. Prior to Nelly's Fulbright-sponsored doctoral training, INAH managed World Heritage Sites with the same project-by-project focus used for archaeological sites generally. Her exposure to management planning approaches used elsewhere offered new insights and possibilities, but the strong bias toward continuity meant the project-based approach continued to dominate thinking for nearly a generation. While resources flowed to site exploration and restoration, maintenance and interpretation lagged as these were less-attractive as project proposals. Only after the World Heritage Site of Monte Alban, Oaxaca, where Nelly was then director, was designated one of the best-managed sites in the world by outside evaluators did INAH begin to shift its perspective.

Similarly, Jack's proposals to take ITO's planning classes into the field encountered resistance because they conflicted with the control orientation inherent in the prevailing organizational culture. Classroom discussion of planning theory was consistent with practice, but examining actual applications was inconsistent with institutional oversight. How could ITO be sure students

would be engaged in productive learning, not pursuing frivolity? Even more contentious was the proposal to organize an intensive field study course in Oregon, taking students and faculty alike on ten-day explorations of planning applications in urban infrastructure. These self-financed seminars were initially treated with great skepticism by administrators, embraced by students and faculty, then killed by administrators as inconsistent with institutional practice. While local field-based courses gradually gained acceptance, the international option proved to be a step beyond what organizational culture could absorb.

What may we learn from these two vignettes? First, organizational cultures of continuity shape thinking in both Fulbright sending and receiving institutional settings. Indeed, some institutions attach so much value to continuity that prospective Fulbright applicants are discouraged from doing so because their absence could provoke organizational distress. As one department chair told Jack, “You get to go on a Fulbright and I need to find a replacement for the Parking Committee”. Whatever one might think of the importance of parking committees, the grievance is a reminder that benefits to a Fulbright recipient may have adverse ripple effects elsewhere.

Second, while the arrival of a successful Fulbright applicant may generate formal statements of welcome and expressions of anticipation, not everyone may feel that way. The new arrival parachutes into a setting with established processes, priorities, distributions of power and privilege, and colleagues ranging from receptive to aloof. Some of Nelly’s new colleagues in her Fulbright at Harvard were pleased for what she could contribute, while others were uncomfortable due to assumptions of rivalry, competition, or disadvantageous intrusion. In status-conscious settings such reactions may be real, yet there is no way to anticipate them before arrival. An organizational culture may simultaneously extend a gracious welcome while harboring sentiments of unease or distance. The latter may never become manifest but forms part of the context of the Fulbright experience.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: THE WIDER CONTEXT

We chose to address the organizational context of Fulbrights precisely because it is ubiquitous and frequently forms a sub-context in *Fulbright Chronicles* essays, yet rarely do authors address it in a self-conscious fashion. Consequently, it may assume the form of “exotic” or strange, while one’s home culture is effectively normalized. And we all return from our international adventures with tales of the quaint and curious practices we observed abroad. No matter what our disciplines and careers (full disclosure: Nelly Robles is an anthropologist) we all become amateur anthropologists as we experience foreign cultures. How we interpret those cultures depends in part on how we interpret our own.

Here we return to the ways in which we understand the organizational cultures in our home settings. As we noted at the start, Fulbright awards go to individuals. Individuals apply, individuals travel, experience, and return home. But all of this individual effort takes place in organizational contexts which range from supportive to tolerant to sometimes hostile. Support or hostility may have to do with personal relations between individuals and institutions, but can also reflect the extent to which organizations regard their routines and priorities as sacrosanct. To the extent Fulbright awards, however beneficial to the recipient, disturb the established order their pursuit implicitly assigns a special significance to the applicant. For some institutions the prestige associated with success is seen as a gain for the institution, not solely the awardee. For some institutions a gain in human capital is worth temporary inconvenience or is understood as an investment in the future.

In other cases, organizational culture attributes little gain to Fulbright awards. In effect, they become not net benefits but potential distractions. Both authors experienced circumstances where home organizations regarded Fulbright awards as institutional headaches rather than accomplishments, as awkward interruptions in organizational routines. Parking committees stand as metaphors for institutional inconvenience. The Fulbright program rarely mentions such circumstances and there seems to be nothing but anecdotal references to them. And there is no way of knowing how many prospective applicants never apply because they are dissuaded from doing so. At least some Fulbrights happen despite institutional disinterest rather than because of encouragement.

This suggests Fulbright officials alert prospective awardees they would benefit from more extensive exploration of the organizational cultures they are likely to encounter, perhaps through consultation with others who have worked recently in similar places or circumstances. And discuss with their home institutions frankly and directly how/if their experience will be treated as an asset or a regrettable nuisance.

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THINKING FORWARD: NAVIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Some might say we should learn from experience, leaving navigating organizational cultures to younger colleagues. But in collaboration with other ex-Fulbrighters we are pushing forward with a Fulbright Alumni grant to work with communities in northern Oaxaca. This requires addressing organizational cultures ranging from isolated indigenous settlements to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, the Oaxaca state government, and

nongovernmental organizations in both countries. We hope we have learned enough about threading our way through complex, difficult settings to come out the other end successful in attending to organizational values, community aspirations, and the ideals of William J. Fulbright.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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