

# Lessons Learned

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## What I learned was important for a successful Fulbright ETA Grant

It's been said before to all of us – you make of an experience what you want. You can certainly sit back and let the time pass while you are here – no one is standing over you demanding anything; however, this grant is an incredible opportunity to do something great. And that something great can take so many forms.... That's part of the beauty of this program – you can mold it to fit your needs and interests, and you have the money, the support, and the time to realize your design. You have the potential to benefit immensely both personally and professionally from this opportunity. A large number of other people also have the potential to benefit from your time here; how much they benefit depends directly on you. It's a huge responsibility, and people are relying on you to make the most of the opportunity. Do with this experience what you will, but I promise that if you set high expectations for yourself, take the initiative to make this responsibility a priority, you will leave feeling fulfilled, and you will leave many people behind also fulfilled. The following is a list of the things that I learned are important to succeed as North American Fulbright English Teaching Assistant; adhering to them will allow for a better experience for all parties involved... I have no doubt.

- **Take initiative.**  
Just jump in! If you have an idea, share it; if you enter a room without knowing anyone, introduce yourself; if you see an opportunity to use your talents or experiences for the benefit of your students, your mentors, or your experiences outside the schools, take it; when a job needs completed, do it. You will find that people are open to your ideas.
- **Take care of yourself.**  
You are own best advocate. Not only is it your responsibility to watch out for yourself, no one is more capable than you. If you have a problem, attempt to fix it through whatever means possible; if you cannot resolve the situation, then go to Fulbright, and they will gladly help you. Use them as a resource or support after you have exhausted the other resources.
- **Manage professional workplace relationships.**  
This goes along with taking care of yourself. Manage your own relationships with the host institutions, the directors, mentors, landlords, etc. Attempt to resolve workplace conflicts or misunderstandings in a diplomatic and professional manner on your own. If you find that matters cannot be resolved, then contact Fulbright for assistance. Obviously, if you are in danger or at risk, contact Fulbright immediately.
- **Professionalism in the workplace and at all meetings, conferences, etc.**  
Unlike college or study abroad, this is considered a professional job and you will be working alongside people in the midst of their professional careers. Respect those around you by assuming this position in a professional manner.

Be on time, contact the appropriate parties if you will be late or unable to make a commitment, dress appropriately for the situation, and do not miss meetings, workdays, or conferences unless it is absolutely necessary. Don't ever let it show that you haven't gotten enough sleep the night before, even if you haven't. Regional conferences are beneficial to the future success of the program, and your participation is key, so actively attend all meetings during the conference. These are mandatory. Again, out of respect for those who worked to make your experience a good one, show professionalism and a positive attitude at all times. You can offer critique and suggestions for improvement while still having a positive attitude.

- **Be flexible and open.**

Wait until you have actually entered a situation fully before fully assessing it. The anticipation and the unknown can cause anxiety. No two experiences are ever exactly the same, so it is quite possible that the schools or mentors may not seem to have a clearly defined pre-existing plan for your role; they are waiting for your input. Don't "jump the gun" about a situation by anticipating a negative outcome. Make an assessment of the situation after experiencing it, so that you can more clearly identify what is working or not and why. If you negatively anticipate a situation and call attention to it, you could potentially ruin the opportunity for mutual growth and understanding.

- **Active involvement in the community.**

Involve yourself in the community outside Fulbright, the host institutions, and the other ETAs. Join a gym; take dance classes, volunteer at a hospital, an orphanage, or the Alianza, and take a class at the university or at the cultural centers. You will learn more about the country by having exposure and becoming acquainted with people from all different backgrounds. You will gain a more well-rounded perspective of the culture and people. Furthermore, you will find opportunities to fulfill the Fulbright goal of cross-cultural exchange and understanding in spontaneous and natural situations, with people that weren't necessarily expecting it, which sometimes makes for the most wonderful experiences.

- **Be sensitive to cultural differences and different approaches.**

The main responsibility of an ETA is to act as a resource for native English, not to assess educational or administrative approaches, nor to judge or critique. No doubt you will observe different ways of doing things, some better, some worse. Ideally, everyone learns from and shares with one another in order to improve the whole; however, it is important to be diplomatic and sensitive when sharing your ideas or methods. Share them, demonstrate them in a positive manner; don't put down someone else's methods or suggest that you have a "better" method. Rather than pointing out a "problem" and telling someone how you think it might be fixed, take the initiative to implement an idea that might demonstrate an alternative.

- **Be diplomatic.**

Simply be diplomatic at all times – in your workplace relationships as well as with the people you come into contact with on a day-to-day basis. This doesn't mean be an American diplomat or to be unbiased in your opinions; just be diplomatic in your approach with people, rather than unbending and overly bold, in an ongoing effort to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.

- **Be a positive example of a citizen of the United States of America.**

This does not mean that you must represent the policies or the government of

the United States; it simply means don't prove the negative stereotypes of American citizens. In light of the current state of world affairs, it is important to understand the way in which citizens of other nations perceive the United States and its citizens. Americans can be seen as condescending, ego-centric, rude, and materialistic; it is important that you don't present yourself in a way that will perpetuate that negative perception. The only way to combat the negative perception that other nations' citizens have of the USA, is to prove otherwise through action and interaction.