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You've Graduated So Now What?

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After graduating, many new college graduates often face the question: where do I go from here? While some people opt to obtain a postgraduate degree, other options exist for those who are unsure of what career they want to pursue or those who simply want to take a gap year. In this article, we will explore three unique opportunities for new graduates to consider: The Fulbright Program, Boren Scholarship, and Service Programs such as PeaceCorp and AmeriCorp.

THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

The Fulbright Program is one of the most prestigious educational exchange programs in the United States. Its goals are to improve intercultural relations, promote mutual understanding, and foster community engagement for US citizens including recent college graduates, Master's/Doctoral candidates, and other young professionals. Currently, this program awards around 8,000 grants annually, in all fields of study, and operates in around 160 countries with funding from the US Government.

The Fulbright Program offers several different awards that engage people with diverse areas of interest. One such award is the English Teaching Assistant Program (ETA) which places grantees in schools overseas to teach English from the kindergarten to university level. As a result, you interact with students of different ages and academic levels while serving as a cultural ambassador for the United States. For those interested in research, the Open Study/Research Award allows candidates to design their own travel proposal and work with advisors in a country of their choosing. Field-specific award opportunities in business, arts, journalism, and STEM give flexibility for an individual to create their own research project of interest. This versatility of award types can have students working in a laboratory, conducting interviews, and administering surveys, just to name a few of the wide range of possibilities.

Fulbright also offers special programs such as the Fulbright-National Geographic Storytelling Fellowship which provides a unique platform for Fulbright students to “develop global narratives and discuss commonalities across borders around a common issue or theme.” Grantees, under the mentorship of National Geographic Editors, use various media platforms to create content that will ultimately be featured in a blog hosted by National Geographic.

As previously mentioned, the Fulbright program is highly competitive and prestigious. As such, selection is based on many criteria such as the quality or feasibility of the grant proposal, personal qualifications, and the extent to which the candidate and project advance the aim of promoting mutual understanding among nations. For detailed information on the application requirements, we recommend visiting: <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/>.

While each award varies in its requirements, there are some general components that the applications share. Prior to filling out an application, we would recommend asking for advice from previous Fulbright scholars about their experience and what the programs entail. Regardless of which award you apply for, you should obtain 3 recommendations that speak to your ability to carry out your project effectively; building a relationship with professors is beneficial in delivering such strong letters of

recommendation. In the Statement of Grant Purpose, make sure to demonstrate how your project will be specifically important to the country you chose. The personal statement is another crucial component of the applications, where you get to showcase your background, history, and experiences. You should elaborate on how your experiences and unique background have made you the best fit for the award in the country of your choosing. Emphasizing your plans and how Fulbright will contribute to that career will also help build a strong application. For those specifically applying to ETA, include any relevant experiences of teaching or mentorships done such as working as a TA for a class, or giving English lessons. If you apply for the research grant, have evidence of previous research you've performed. Ultimately, it's important to submit a proposal that you are passionate, will contribute something meaningful to the country you choose and demonstrates why you are the best fit for that award.

No matter where your interest lies, the Fulbright Program is an excellent opportunity for recent graduates to apply to. The program will enhance your resume while providing valuable and meaningful experiences living abroad. By fostering relationships with your host community, you can grow personally and professionally while making a positive impact.

SERVICE (AMERICORPS, PEACECORPS)

Deciding to take a gap year is an important decision but choosing the right programs to effectively use your gap year is crucial. The PeaceCorps and AmeriCorps are well-known programs subsidized by the government, but besides knowing the general gist of it, how do you know which option is the right fit for you? This subsection compares PeaceCorps and AmeriCorps, two valuable service opportunities.

PeaceCorps is a government-affiliated program that allows volunteers to contribute to grassroots efforts in 60 countries in South America, Pacific Islands, North Africa and the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Central America and Mexico, Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. These projects can cover many interests such as agriculture, economic development, education, environmental conservation, youth empowerment, and health. For more information, the list of countries and current projects occurring within each country can be found at: <https://www.peacecorps.gov/>.

The commitment time varies from project to project but is typically 2 years with 3 months for skills and language training. Additionally, most projects require the participant to have already obtained their bachelor's degree. Ultimately, the PeaceCorps program is perfect for globe-trotters or those already comfortable or fluent in a second language.

AmeriCorps is another government-affiliated program with projects occurring within the United States. The location provides an easier transition into service for those who can't commit years to a program or are cautious about leaving the country. Although volunteers are not required to learn another language, fluency in a foreign language may come in handy. The types of projects they offer include realms of improving education,

economic opportunity, disaster response, environmental stewardship, lives of veterans and military families, and combating some issues plaguing America (such as the opioid crisis, increased homelessness, and food shortages). While serving, AmeriCorps offers course credit for its volunteers. For undergraduates and those with graduate school ambitions, AmeriCorps is a great opportunity to make a difference in communities without leaving the comforts of the US.

What are the benefits of dedicating your time and service to these organizations? From what we have found, the benefits are similar. When serving, you will receive a monthly stipend, free housing, health insurance, most transportations are covered, and connections to their extensive network of graduate schools and employers. Additionally, recent graduates can have their student loans deferred during their time of service. After service, both programs offer awards that you can apply for that will aid in admission and/or financial support for graduate programs within the US. More specifically, PeaceCorps offers Paul D. Coverdell Fellow programs, while AmeriCorps' version is the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. Thus, both programs provide an opportunity to gain a different perspective on local and global communities, and they have the connections to help jumpstart future goals of establishing a career or entering graduate school.

BOREN SCHOLARSHIP

The Boren Scholarship is an excellent study-abroad program to apply to if you are an undergraduate student interested in learning a critical language outside of the Western World. The National Security Education Program (NSEP) funds students pursuing their bachelor's or associate's degree to learn languages in countries crucial to the United States' national security. Over 60 languages are listed as "preferred languages," including Arabic, Hindi, Russian and

Swahili and 80+ countries are options for locations of study. Based on the location and language, you would choose an appropriate study abroad program for the Boren Scholarship to fund. If you are unsure of which country to travel to and are feeling adventurous, Regional Flagship Initiatives for African, Indonesian, South Asian, and Turkish language studies allow you to learn about unique cultures and languages with designated programs. With the initiative, you do not have to pick out the study abroad program as the program would be preset. The time frame for the program is recommended to last at least 2 semesters; however, due to the constraints in scheduling, STEM majors can apply for a special summer program that lasts at least 8 weeks.

In return for all these benefits, NSEP requires that all Boren scholars work for the United States government for at least a year. The requirement is fulfilled by a variety of government sectors from the Smithsonian Institute to the Department of Defense. Thus, when reviewing candidates, evaluators give preference to students who wish to commit a long-term or lifetime service to government work. As a result, if you are considering a career within the government, the Boren Scholarship program is an excellent opportunity to expand your skillset and cultural understanding.

So, what steps should you take to compose a successful application? First, you will want to compile basic background information to confirm that you have met the basic requirements. If you are a senior at the University of Louisville, you can delay your graduation by one year to fulfill the requirements of the program. After compiling your basic information, you want to develop materials that prove your qualifications for the program, including descriptions of employment or extracurricular activities, letters of recommendations, and language self-assessments.

Finally, you will want to research and find a study abroad program that you are interested in and budget your spending for the trip. The maximum reward amounts are \$8,000 for 8-11 weeks (Note: STEM majors only), \$12,500 for 12-25 weeks and \$25,000 for 25-52 weeks. The budget can be spent on tuition and fees, room and board, airfare, and other costs. Longer lengths are preferred for the program and are given priority.

Once you have applied for the program in late January or early February, you should expect to receive a response if you have been selected as a Boren Scholar by mid-to-late April.

If you are interested in learning more about the Boren Scholarship or the Fulbright programs, contact UofL's campus representative, Dr. Charles Leonard at:

charlie.leonard@louisville.edu

Additional information can be found for each of the follow programs at the following links:

Fulbright Program:

<https://us.fulbrightonline.org/>

PeaceCorps:

<https://www.peacecorps.gov/>

AmeriCorps:

<https://americorps.gov/>

Boren Awards:

<https://www.borenawards.org/>
