

Summary of “Building Bridges through Exchange” Fulbright Conference

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The “Building Bridges through Exchange” Fulbright Conference took place at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus on May 17 - 19, 2019. It was an outstanding location for this conference since nearby the venue stood the iconic statue and fountain honoring Senator William Fulbright. Part of the “Wunderbar Together” campaign focusing on German-American friendship, the international conference investigated the role Fulbright’s educational and cultural exchanges have played in American public diplomacy and foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. The conference also demonstrated how educational exchange can empower individuals to “build bridges” in society and to become citizen ambassadors advocating for continued international understanding.

The purpose of the conference was to highlight and explore the lasting connections made - personal, professional, and educational - and share those insights made. The dialogue exchanged in this conference highlighted the new perspectives about German perceptions in the region, for the roots of transatlantic relations, and their manifestations today. All the while, asking larger questions about democracies, diversity, changing perceptions, and stereotypes.

Conference participants consisted of academics from the University of Arkansas, “road trippers” and grantees, as well as alumni of the German - American Fulbright Commission. Lectures were given including panels and break-out discussions. The theme was to share the international educational and cultural exchange of diverse knowledge and experiences. Exchange nurtures their appreciation of the value of international engagement, their understanding, and empathy, and fosters important collaborations among nations on such issues as global education, international trade, and mutual security: “Turning nations into people,” to quote the late Senator Fulbright.

The conference began with experts like Prof. Dr. Randall B. Woods (Distinguished Professor of History, University of Arkansas) and Dr. Lonnie R. Johnson (Executive Director, Fulbright Austria) discussing what does the future hold for international exchange.

Another presentation was from the “road trippers” who had had the privilege to participate in the On the Road! Exploring the U.S.-American Heartland program. Their program's aim was to create lasting, meaningful connections in a complex and changing world. For in-depth details about the program, click here: <https://www.fulbright.de/projects-and-initiatives/deutschlandjahr-usa/roadtrip>

Their goal was to develop and share mutual understanding across communities with people of diverse backgrounds. This program focused on the usefulness of intercultural education. It also has the potential to be the foundation for future programs, which include other themes concerning the American “heartland” for study and research.

Some thoughts about the future concluded that building and creating one bridge is not enough. Participation in just one exchange program is not enough, particularly if it is only of a short duration of time, yet due to this program’s success, this is just the start of something which can grow. Involvement in a legacy program or within other format gatherings and alumni events are important in order to ensure a lasting impact. And, of course, creating bridges can create multilateral exchange and development of mutual understanding and peace. With such a successful program, it has the potential to be recurring where new socio-diversity discoveries are made year to year to not just have one attempt to build a bridge, but continuously forge lasting connections, counter misunderstandings, and ensure people and nations work towards common goals.