An Interview with Lonnie Johnson, Executive Director of the Austrian-American Educational, or Fulbright, Commission

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The purpose of the Fulbright Program is to promote "mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the peoples of other countries. Established in 1946 under legislation introduced by Senator J. William Fulbright from Arkansas, the Fulbright Program currently operates in 144 countries, including 51 countries with bilateral Fulbright commissions such as the Austrian-American Educational Commission. Since its inception, over 250,000 students, teachers, academics, and professionals have participated in the Fulbright Program, including 5,000 citizens of Austria and the US who are alumni of the Austrian-American program.

Funded primarily by direct contributions from the governments of the United States of America and the Republic of Austria, the Fulbright Program provides grants for US citizens who are recent graduates and graduate students, or scholars and professionals, to study, teach, or pursue research in Austria, and for Austrian citizens to engage in similar activities in the US.

In an interview with Austrian Information, Dr. Lonnie Johnson, executive director of the Austrian Fulbright Commission, spoke about current developments in the field of Austrian-American study exchange.

Austrian Information: During early years of the Fulbright program, life in post-war Austria was fraught with economic hardship and political uncertainty compared to Austria today - now a member of the European Union and a country with social stability and strong economic growth. Based on very different periods in history, have the expectations of American students wishing to study in Austria over the past 60 years changed in any way? And vice versa, for Austrian students wishing to study in America?

Lonnie Johnson: The first generation of Austrian Fulbright grantees grew up during the Third Reich, and they were leaving a recently liberated, war-torn, economically depressed, and occupied country to spend a year in the peaceful and prosperous United States. In countries with totalitarian pasts - like Germany and Austria - part of the idea was to show young people how democracies with functioning market economies work. Conversely, the American grantees were leaving the comforts of post-World War II America to study or teach in an occupied country, which was quite an adventure. I once asked Willy Schlag, the founding executive secretary of the Fulbright Commission in Vienna, about the biggest problems American students had in the 1950s Austria and he said: "No refrigerators; no orange juice." Today, American grantees are impressed by the high quality of life in Austria.

AI: What attracts American students to want to study in Austria, and is that any different from what attracts Austrian students to the US? Are some fields more conducive to Americans wanting to study there in Austria rather than in the US? If so, which ones? And vice versa, for Austrian students studying in the US?

LJ: Austrian culture, conservatories, concert houses, and archives always have attracted and continue to attract many American students. The largest field of specialization among the 2,000 American Fulbrighters who have studied in Austria is German - usually combined with the study of Austrian literature - followed by music and musicology, history, and political science.

Over 3,400 Austrian Fulbrighters have studied in the US; English - combined with American literature or American Studies - has been the most common field of specialization, followed by the natural sciences, engineering, business, economics, and law.

One could say that the arts, humanities, and social sciences have predominated historically among the American grantees, whereas Austrians have focused more on the hard sciences or acquisition of technical expertise, but the program is very broad. We have had American engineers as Fulbrighters in Austria and Austrian artists and musicians as Fulbrighters in the States, too.

AI: What are the most important criteria for selecting a Fulbright recipient? Has the caliber of student changed in any way over the years?

LJ: The mandate of the Fulbright program is to promote mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries, so we are looking for grantees who are good citizens and interested in the kind of unofficial cultural diplomacy that is fostered by Fulbright exchanges. The program is based on annual, open, national, merit-based competition and is conceived to recognize personal, academic, or artistic accomplishments. Therefore, the caliber of the candidates has been consistently high throughout the years.

AI: In what way have the following impacted the Fulbright program for better or worse: the US-Euro exchange rate, new visa restrictions, current economic recession, growing competition with other study-abroad programs, and the increasing price of education?

LJ: The Fulbright Program initially was funded solely by the US government, which made the depreciation of the US dollar starting in the 1970s a problem; but since the 1980s the Austrian government has made an annual contribution to the program, too. Today Austria is among a handful of countries whose annual support for the Fulbright program surpasses that of the United States.

Regulations in Austria and the United States have become increasingly restrictive in the past decade, but Fulbright grantees enjoy the support of the authorities in both countries.

The recession has hit all institutions of higher education, which has made the competition for resources tougher. This has impacted the funding available for graduate students, teaching assistants, and Ph.D. candidates in the US in particular.

The historical importance of the Fulbright Program for Austria was that for decades it was the only real and substantial opportunity for young Austrian students and scholars to study abroad. Austria began to prosper in the 1970s and 1980s, it also started to fund its own scholarship programs for other destinations, but Fulbright still was the biggest show in town. Things change dramatically in the 1990s with Austria's membership in the European Union, which provided a wide range of new opportunities for Austrians. In the olden days, Fulbright was an exclusive opportunity and the United States was the only destination. Now many Austrians have a wide range of opportunities to study all over the world and studying abroad is common. The United States still is a very popular destination.

The costs of higher education are a serious challenge. I recently compared what it cost an Austrian Fulbright student to study at Harvard in 1951/52 with 2010/11. Sixty years ago the costs were zero. Harvard waived all tuition and fees, and a variety of American organizations came up with the funds to cover living costs on-site. Today, tuition and fees are about $50,000 and living costs about $20,000, and a Fulbright award covers less than half of the total costs.
AI: And what about globalization and refocusing on new fields of study in the 21st century?

LJ: Student flows are changing. Formerly, the United States was the dominant magnet for international students, and the great majority of Americans who studied abroad did so in Europe. Other words, international education was focused on the United States for Europeans and on Europe for Americans. The internationalization of international education has entailed getting more Europeans and Americans to seek destinations different from the ones that have predominated in the past. The United States and Europe also certainly are competing for international student and talent, along with newcomers to the field of international education, like Australia. Globalization has made the international educational market a very competitive place.