

THE
News
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Nuclear Energy and
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Management

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Advantage in
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Connections
That Last



**Building the
Technology Partnerships
Our Era Demands**

The Infinite Immeasurables of Fulbright



This issue’s visiting columnist, Minister of Economic Affairs **Sakari Puisto**, highlights Finland’s strengths in technology, research, and engineering talent (p. 3). He emphasizes that international research collaboration and academic exchange create lasting value, and underscores Fulbright Finland’s role in expanding opportunities for Finnish researchers to work with U.S. partners, including in fields where Finland is a global leader.

In this issue, our alumni share insights from several of these areas of strength. **Erika Holt** explores nuclear energy and global nuclear waste management (pp. 12–14), while **Bruce Blair** examines related questions through the lenses of public engagement and energy policy (pp. 15–17). **Christina Lee Ballantyne** offers a school leadership perspective on positioning AI as an assistive ally in education (p. 11), and **Vlad Vaiman** discusses how AI is reshaping the economic competitiveness of nations and organizations in the era of “brain capital” (p. 10).

The impact of Fulbright Finland extends well beyond individual mobility grants. **Angela Murillo**

illustrates how universities can work strategically with Fulbright Finland to internationalize higher education and research, create sustainable institutional partnerships, and build lasting global networks (p. 8).

The grantees and alumni featured in this issue demonstrate how the Foundation’s programs serve as catalysts for broader collaboration and long-term professional engagement. They also speak to the personal value of the networks and relationships created through these programs. Our recent Homecoming alumni event in Helsinki brought together alumni from six decades and from both sides of the Atlantic (pp. 18–19), highlighting the strength of this community and the richness of connections that, for many, last a lifetime. Using Bruce Blair’s term (pp. 15–17), these are among the “infinite immeasurables” of Fulbright.

Terhi Mölsä
Chief Executive Officer
Fulbright Finland Foundation

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Fulbright Finland alumni came together to celebrate the continued success of Finnish–U.S. exchanges.

Cover photo: VTT



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Learning from Finland’s Approach to Nuclear Waste

Fulbright Finland alumnus **Bruce Blair** reflects on his path from first-generation college student to energy policy researcher and analyst, and on how his Fulbright experience deepened his understanding of nuclear waste, public trust, and the long-term responsibilities – and challenges – of energy systems.

Finland and the United States: Building the Technology Partnership Our Era Demands



LAURI HEIKKINEN, PRIME MINISTERS OFFICE

“
The Fulbright community understands better than most that the real currency of the Finland-U.S. relationship is human capital.
”

The relationship between Finland and the United States is excellent. It rests on shared interests, common cultural roots, and a mutual recognition of what each side brings to the table. Ultimately, it rests upon relations between our people and institutions.

I have always believed that the most durable partnerships are those built around complementary strengths rather than dependence. Finland is a small country of 5.6 million people, yet we punch well above our weight in technology, research, and engineering talent. U.S. universities, research institutions, and companies have long recognized this. The flow of Finnish researchers, engineers, and entrepreneurs into U.S. institutions — and the reverse — has shaped fields from mobile communications to quantum computing.

This is why I am proud that Finland further strengthened this partnership, when I signed the Pax Silica Declaration last month at the U.S. Department of State in Washington.

If the twentieth century ran on oil and steel, the twenty-first runs on information computing and the minerals that feed it. This captures something profound about the shifting of geopolitical gravity. Supply chains for semiconductors, critical minerals, and AI infrastructure are not commercial abstractions — they are the sinews of national resilience. Finland understands this. We mine and process critical minerals. We host Nokia, a global backbone of trusted connectivity. Our world-class universities produce AI researchers sought by every major technology hub on the planet.

COMMERCIAL AND RESEARCH COOPERATION between countries with complementary expertise and resources — including information networks and connectivity, critical minerals, semiconductors, and energy — are all essential for developing AI and strengthening secure digital infrastructure. These are precisely the sectors where Finnish companies and institutions are already competitive, and where deeper access to American markets, value chains, co-investment frameworks, and R&D partnerships generate tangible results.

I want to be clear about what this means for Finnish and U.S. researchers and innovators specifically. The Fulbright community understands better than most that the real currency of the Finland-U.S. relationship is human capital — the postdoctoral fellow in Boston, the Finnish startup founder building a U.S.-market product, the American researcher spending a year at Aalto or the University of Oulu. Research co-operation and exchanges create and deepen personal connections which generate lasting value. Fulbright opens more opportunities for Finnish researchers to collaborate in the U.S., including in new fields where Finland's strengths lie.

Besides technology, humanities are one of the important fields that Fulbright operates in. The Fulbright Finland Foundation funds U.S. citizens — students, scholars, and professionals — to teach, research, or study in fields such as literature, history, philosophy, and arts. These subjects broaden our understanding of ourselves and the surrounding world, as well as our cultural heritage.

More broadly, the Fulbright program was founded on the premise that educational and cultural exchange serves peace. Fulbright operates on an analogous logic at the level of economic architecture: when trusted democracies bind their ecosystems together — sharing not just goods but standards, infrastructure, and research — they simultaneously make each other more secure and more prosperous. Economic security is national security, and national security is economic security. That is not a slogan. For Finland, a country that has navigated its geography with clear eyes for decades, it is simply a statement of fact.

Finland was one of the first countries invited to join the Fulbright Program in 1947, and still today we are one of the most engaged partners. I am particularly pleased and appreciate that in January 2026 the U.S. Congress appropriated special funding for the Fulbright exchange to Finland. This demonstrates the value of our program. I wish you all the best of luck in your endeavours.

Sakari Puisto
Minister of Economic Affairs



2026-27 Fulbright Finland Foundation Awards Announced

A new cohort of Finnish grantees joined the community of over 6 400 Fulbright Finland Foundation alumni.

Text MAIJA KETTUNEN *Photos* STUDIO TERHO PHOTOGRAPHY

Over 60 Finnish and U.S. grantees have already been selected to participate in the Foundation's programs for the academic year 2026-27. The number is expected to reach 100 when additional selections are made later in the year. The newest cohort of Finnish students, scholars, and professionals received their grant certificates at the annual Awards Ceremony at Helsinki City Hall in May.

The grantees represent a diverse range of fields, from next-generation electronics, forensic chemistry, and Arctic resources and infrastructures to cancer research, innovations in healthcare, and sustainability and environmental management.

With their selection, the grantees joined a community of over 6 400 Fulbright Finland Foundation alumni, who represent all fields in the arts, sciences, and society at large.

This year's awards are funded in partnership with the Idman Foundation, KAUTE Foundation, New Children's Hospital Foundation, Nokia Foundation, Technology Industries of Finland Centennial Foundation, University of Helsinki, University of Eastern Finland, University of Washington, Finnish Science Center Heureka, and with support from the donors to the Foundation's Ambassadors' Circle

Scholarship Fund, the Finland-America Educational Trust Fund, and the Finnish and U.S. governments.

Minister of Education **Anders Adlercreutz**, speaking on behalf of the Finnish Government, reflected on the Foundation's programs as among the most enduring and respected examples of educational diplomacy: "Through thousands of alumni, scholars, researchers, students, teachers, and professionals, these programs have advanced science and the arts, shaped institutions, influenced policies, and enriched lives." He also shared a personal connection to Fulbright through his father, an ASLA-Fulbright grantee.

Representing the U.S. government, Deputy Chief of Mission **Christopher Karber** highlighted the continued relevance and forward-looking vision of the Fulbright Finland Foundation and its programs. "Fulbright academic exchanges will continue to play a vital role in building our countries' futures," Karber said in his remarks.

Co-hosted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the City of Helsinki, this year's event also honored the 80th anniversary of the global Fulbright Program and the 50th anniversary of the Finland-America Educational Trust Fund. The year 2026 also marks the 50th anniversary of the

New grantees received their certificates from Finland-America Educational Trust Fund Vice-Chair **Christopher Karber** (left), Trust Fund Chair **Sannamaaria Vanamo**, and the Chair of the Fulbright Finland Foundation **Nelson Totah**.

Minister of Education **Anders Adlercreutz** shared a personal connection to Fulbright through his father, an ASLA-Fulbright grantee.

2026-27 Fulbright Finland Foundation Awardees

www.fulbright.fi/grantees



Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in North American studies. **Keith Brown**, this year's Fulbright Bicentennial Chair, delivered the words of thanks on behalf of the 2025–26 U.S. grantees in Finland.

Comprehensive Training Prepares the Grantees

All Fulbright Finland Foundation awards include a comprehensive orientation training, which for some

grantees started already last year. An important part of the training program is the one-day Pre-Departure Orientation seminar in Helsinki that plugs the grantees into important networks and gives them an opportunity to meet face-to-face with each other, and with the Foundation's alumni and key partners. Over 20 alumni contributed their time and expertise to the orientation seminar, helping prepare the next cohort of leaders and citizen diplomats.

The evening also featured alumni reflections, and beautiful violin performances by **Vivian Stolt** (2022–23 ASLA-Fulbright Graduate Grant and 2023-24 Renewal Grant) and **Juliana Pöyry**.

Celebrating a Shared History

Since 1949, the Fulbright Finland Foundation has played a significant role in supporting education and science, and creating and maintaining transatlantic connections. In 2026, several important milestones offer an opportunity to reflect on this shared history.

While the United States celebrates the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the global Fulbright Program celebrates 80 years of fostering international academic exchange and mutual understanding.

Academic exchanges from Finland to the U.S. began with the ASLA (*Amerikan Suomen Lainan Apurahat*) Program, funded by the repayments of the loan that Finland had received from the United States after World War I. An important milestone took place 50 years ago when the remaining repayments of the debt were invested in an endowment, creating the Finland-America Educational Trust Fund. The Trust Fund was founded in connection with the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) held in Helsinki in 1975 and it was registered as a Finnish foundation in 1976.

That same year also marked the establishment of the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in North American Studies at the University of Helsinki. It remains the oldest Fulbright Distinguished Chair worldwide.

The most recent major milestone took place in 2016, when the Deed of the new Fulbright Finland

Foundation was signed, changing the legal status of the Finland-U.S. Educational Exchange Commission (FUSEEC) from a commission to a foundation.

The Foundation has become the primary interface for the Finnish and U.S. governments' bilateral work in education, science, and culture, and serves as the platform for a wide range of transatlantic collaborations and dialogues between scientists, educators, research institutions, NGOs, and companies.

Researching Finnish-U.S. Diplomatic History

The importance of this long-standing relationship continues to inspire researchers. 2025–26 Fulbright Finland Doctoral awardee **Robert Anzenberger** conducts research on Finnish-U.S. diplomatic history. Based at the University of Oulu, his work focuses on the first decades of Finland's independence.

In his recent essay, Robert explores the evolution of U.S.-Finnish relations from Finland's independence through the end of World War II, highlighting pivotal moments that shaped the relationship between the two countries.

On our website, learn more about the history of the Fulbright Finland Foundation and read Robert Anzenberger's essay: www.fulbright.fi/about-us/history-unlike-any-other

Text: Maija Kettunen



Partnerships Fuel Exchanges

The entire operation of the Fulbright Finland Foundation is built on partnerships. Currently, the Foundation maintains 33 long-term agreements with Finnish and U.S. higher education institutions, research agencies, private foundations, and non-profit organizations. Each agreement is unique and reflects the shared goals and areas of mission overlap between the Foundation and its partner organization.

The vast majority of these agreements support the co-funding of awards, and currently, nearly all Fulbright Finland grants for students, scholars, and professionals are made possible

through partnerships. However, funding is only part of the picture. Partners also contribute critical expertise and perspectives drawn from their own areas of specialization. The Foundation's longitudinal grantee survey data further indicate that grants based on partnerships are associated with higher success rates across a range of grantee experiences and outcomes.

The role of the Foundation's partners is fundamentally important. Through close collaboration and continuous dialogue, the Foundation and its partners can maintain and further enhance the quality, impact, and effectiveness of the academic and professional exchanges.

Text: Terhi Mölsä

**Fulbright Finland
Foundation's Partners**
[www.fulbright.fi/
about-us/partners](http://www.fulbright.fi/about-us/partners)

Yhteistyö Nokia Säätiön kanssa vahvistaa tutkijoiden kansainvälistymistä

Nokia Säätiö ja Fulbright Suomi -säätiö ovat uusineet yhteistyösopimuksensa, jolla pilotoidaan yhteisrahoitteisia stipendejä suomalaisille tieto- ja tietoliikennetekniikan sekä niihin liittyvien tieteidenalojen tutkijoille. Ohjelma aloitettiin vuonna 2024 tarkoituksenaan tukea suomalaisten post doc -tutkijoiden kansainvälistymistä.

“Joskus on mentävä kauas nähdäkseen lähelle. Tutkimusvierailu ei ole vain tieteellisen työn tekemistä jossakin kaukana, vaan tapa laajentaa ymmärrystä toisesta yhteiskunnasta, ihmisistä ja tiedeyhteisöstä tavalla, joka on mahdollista vain olemalla fyysisesti läsnä. Tutkimusvierailulla opin valtavasti uusia asioita. Myös sellaisia, jotka luulin jo hallitsevani perinpohjaisesti. Sain arvokkaita uusia kontakteja, joilla on toivottavasti merkitystä pitkälle tulevaisuuteen”, kuvailee kokemustaan ohjelman ensimmäinen stipendiaatti, Oulun yliopiston apulaisprofessori **Nuutti Tervo**, joka palasi vastikään puolen vuoden vierailultaan Kalifornian yliopistosta.

Moni tutkija lähtee matkaan perheensä kanssa, joten uutena etuna sopimukseen on lisätty mahdollisuus hakea korotettua stipendiä mukana matkustavan perheen kulujen kattamiseen. Aika ulkomailla voi olla hyvin antoisa vierailu monin tavoin niin tutkijalle itselleen kuin koko perheelle. Myös Nuutti Tervo oli Yhdysvalloissa perheensä kanssa. “Olen onnekas saadessani tutustua uuteen kulttuuriin paitsi tiedeyhteisön, myös lapsiperheen näkökulmasta. Lapsiperhearkki toisessa maassa avaa

Tutkimusvierailu ei ole vain tieteellisen työn tekemistä jossakin kaukana, vaan tapa laajentaa ymmärrystä toisesta yhteiskunnasta, ihmisistä ja tiedeyhteisöstä tavalla, joka on mahdollista vain olemalla fyysisesti läsnä.

– Nuutti Tervo

ainutlaatuisen ikkunan tavallisten ihmisten arkeen ja syventää ymmärrystä yhteiskunnasta”, kertoo Nuutti Tervo.

Lukuvuodelle 2026–27 ohjelmaan on valittu Tampereen yliopistosta **Ugur Akpınar**, joka aloittaa vierailunsa Utahin yliopistossa syksyllä 2026.

Pilottiohjelmaa jatketaan seuraavat kolme hakukierrosta. Haku on parhaillaan auki tutkimusvierailuihin lukuvuonna 2027–28. Tämän lisäksi säätiöt ovat rahoittaneet yhdessä yhdysvaltalaisen tutkijoiden vierailuja suomalaisissa yliopistoissa jo vuodesta 1999 Fulbright–Nokia Distinguished Chair in Information and Communications Technologies -ohjelman kautta. Hakukierros on parhaillaan auki myös tähän ohjelmaan, jonka kautta suomalaiset korkeakoulut voivat kutsua yhdysvaltalaisia ICT-alan tutkijoita ja asiantuntijoita Suomeen 3–6 kuukauden tutkimusvierailuille.

Teksti: Emmi Jelekäinen

**Fulbright Research Grant
for a Junior Scholar in
Partnership with the
Nokia Foundation**

www.fulbright.fi/fin-nokia

**Fulbright–Nokia
Distinguished Chair
in Information and
Communications
Technologies**

www.fulbright.fi/nokia-distinguished-chair



Leadership for Meaningful Change

Alumni and grantees got together to explore diverse paths to leadership.

The Foundation’s annual workshop on leadership brought together Fulbright Finland grantees and alumni to co-create actionable strategies to engage audiences in complex times.

Rather than defining leadership by position, title, age, or background, the workshop was grounded in the idea that leadership is a conscious decision to take responsibility and create positive change.

Through a fireside chat and small-group discussions, participants reflected on the roles and responsibilities everyone holds in driving meaningful change, identifying concrete ways to ignite action and build collaboration.

To set the scene, **Jamie Hyneman** (photo above), CEO of M5 Industries in the United States, Professor of Practice at LUT University in Finland, and Senior Advisor of the Fulbright Finland Foundation, shared his inspiring insights on diverse leadership paths, breaking down silos, and communicating complex topics in challenging environments.

Following the fireside chat, participants were divided into smaller thematic groups to further develop ideas. The

groups explored topics including leadership development, communicating science, empowering youth as leaders, and fostering sustainable Finland–U.S. research collaboration.

Dana Caldwell, 2025–26 Fulbright–University of Jyväskylä Graduate awardee, and her group focused on science communication, particularly on distrust and mistrust of scientific research.

“While this issue requires a multifaceted approach, our solutions focused on consistent outreach, i.e. via social media platforms, targeted educational campaigns, and maintaining patience and empathy with people who are sceptical of research,” she says.

“Scepticism is often rooted in misunderstandings that proliferate when people are made to feel dumb for not understanding. If we could all exercise a bit more empathy and patience with people, especially with those who mistrust scientific research institutions, we would continue towards progress with more ease,” Dana believes.

When the working groups debriefed their deliberations, a shared conclusion



MAIJA KETTUNEN

Laya Bommireddy’s group explored ways to empower youth as change-makers.

emerged: there is power in collaboration, and by everyone filling their own spheres of influence, the critical mass for change begins to take shape.

2024–25 Fulbright–KAUTE Foundation awardee **Larry Abdullai** reflected on the workshop takeaways: “I felt a quiet but powerful sense of shared responsibility. Leadership for meaningful change isn’t a grand project reserved for a selected few. It’s a daily practice of curiosity, empathy, action, and responsibility,” he says.

Text: Maija Kettunen



Shared Vision for Global Education

The bridge between Indiana University Indianapolis (IU) and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (HH) has grown from a single faculty connection into a robust partnership. This year, the collaboration reaches a new milestone as two distinguished faculty members exchange roles across the Atlantic, with the support of the Fulbright Finland Foundation.

The partnership, which has flourished for over a decade, is currently anchored by simultaneous residencies of IU's **Angela Murillo** and HH's **Kasper Valtakari**. This exchange represents a truly reciprocal commitment to international education, moving beyond occasional visits toward an integrated relationship.

A Decade of Foundation

The seeds of this relationship were planted by IU's **William Helling**, who first traveled to Helsinki as a 2013 Fulbright Scholar. Over the years, Helling's continued collaboration launched a "Global Classroom" course.

"This course brings together IU and HH students to tackle digital services from both human-oriented and technical perspectives," Helling explains.

The course inspired an IU Study Abroad program. In its fifth year, IU students spend two weeks in Finland, shifting their collaboration from screens to face-to-face activities.

Building the Collaboration in Helsinki

Currently, Murillo is residing in Helsinki as a Fulbright Haaga-Helia Scholar. She is utilizing her time co-teaching courses in digital services, databases, and technical topics.

"My goal is to deepen our existing collaboration," Murillo explains. Beyond teaching, she is

assessing current program sustainability and identifying new collaborative avenues. Her presence allows for a deeper understanding of Finnish curricula, which she hopes will lead to more seamless faculty and student exchanges.

Bringing the Finnish Perspective to Indianapolis

While Murillo explores Finland, Valtakari has made history as the first HH lecturer to be hosted at IU. Supported by a Fulbright Finland Travel Grant for Institutional Partnership Building, he is spending the spring semester in Indianapolis.

"My Fulbright mission is to dive deep into Midwest culture, so I can serve as a bridge between our institutions," Valtakari says. His focus is on finding collaboration possibilities in topics like AI and digital badges. By working directly with IU faculty, he aims to formalize exchange agreements.

The growing relationship between the two institutions is designed to narrow the gap between disciplines. While HH students bring a strong background in computer science and business, IU students contribute expertise in data science, informatics, and library and information science.

Helling, Murillo, and Valtakari are meeting with university administrators to solidify the partnership's future. Their goals include creating reciprocal faculty/student/staff exchanges and expanding shared curriculum.

As these Fulbright Finland scholars conclude their exchanges, the relationship between IU and HH stands as a model for international cooperation—proving that when two institutions share a vision for global education, the distance between Indianapolis and Helsinki becomes much smaller.

William Helling, Kasper Valtakari, and Angela Murillo at the recent Homecoming Alumni Event in Helsinki.

Angela Murillo

Associate Professor and Director

Indiana University Indianapolis

2025-26 Fulbright-Haaga-Helia Scholar Award

www.fulbright.fi/haaga-helia-scholar

www.fulbright.fi/travel-grant-partnerships



AMY SMITH

**Tarja Kariola**

Director

LUMA Centre Päijät-Häme
2025-26 Fulbright Finland
Foundation Fellowship for
Mid-Career Professionals
Clemson University, SC

www.fulbright.fi/fin-mcpd

What makes a science lesson truly stick? During my three-month fellowship at Clemson University Science Outreach Center in South Carolina, I found an answer in an unexpected place: a dying tree species. One particular learning experience gave me new, important ideas on how I think about designing science education content and why it matters.

A Mystery in the Forest

One of the most memorable classroom programs I observed centered on the decline of the hemlock trees along the U.S. East Coast. Instead of presenting genetics as an abstract theory, students were presented with a story: a scientific investigation to identify the culprit behind the die-off. Four insect species were introduced as suspects, and students used DNA fingerprinting analysis techniques to solve the case. This approach combined scientific methods with narrative thinking. Students weren't just learning techniques; they were applying them with purpose. The mystery gave context to the science, making each step meaningful and engaging.

From Observation to Inspiration

The hemlock case didn't end with identifying the insect responsible. Students also explored the ecological consequences of losing a dominant tree species: erosion, rising water temperatures, and impacts on fish populations. Science became interconnected: biology, ecology, and environmental science woven into one narrative.

This experience has sparked new ideas for developing programs at the STEM Centre Päijät-Häme of the University of Helsinki in Lahti. While advanced methods like PCR and DNA restriction are already taught, embedding them in compelling, real-world

From Hemlocks to High School Labs:

New Ideas Shaping Science Education

stories could make them even more impactful. Instead of introducing a technique first, it could be more captivating to begin with a multidisciplinary problem the students feel excited in solving. The method then becomes a tool, not just content.

The grant period also connected me with broader science education initiatives, including visits to institutions such as the Science Museum of Minnesota, where discussions focused on equal access to STEM education. A visit to the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago demonstrated that the reach of STEM education can be broadened by engaging diverse audiences in museums.

Furthermore, the mobile DNA education lab of the Greenwood Genetic Center in South Carolina demonstrated how bringing a fully equipped laboratory experience directly to schools can significantly improve the reach of STEM education. Together, these experiences illustrated that increasing accessibility also depends on where and how the learning opportunities are made available.

Finnish Models Spark Interest in the U.S.

The exchange of ideas during my time in the U.S. was truly two-way. While I gained valuable insights from the science education practices, there was also strong interest in Finnish models, particularly in the LUMA Centre Finland network. The idea of the university-linked network of 13 STEM Centres with systematic sharing of expertise was seen as both innovative and highly practical.

In addition, the JunnuYliopisto ("the JuniorUniversity") model in Lahti attracted attention for its ability to reach entire age groups of students, ensuring equal access to science learning opportunities.

My grant period provided not only new methods, but also new directions of thinking about STEM education. Curiosity for science can be increased when the concepts are connected to real-world phenomena, like connecting DNA-laboratory with the hemlock story. Bringing this perspective back to Finland enables the development of learning experiences that spark curiosity, strengthen critical thinking, and help students see science not just as a lesson, but as a way to explore and understand the world.



Vlad Vaiman

Professor of International Management, School of Management, California Lutheran University
2025-26 Fulbright-Hanken Distinguished Chair in Business and Economics

The Human Advantage in the Age of AI

Artificial intelligence is often framed as a technological race. However, after spending time in Finland as Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Business and Economics at Hanken School of Economics, I have come to a different conclusion: the real competition is not about who builds the most powerful AI systems, but about who builds the strongest human capabilities to work alongside them.

The global conversation is increasingly clear on this point. A recent World Economic Forum (WEF) report highlighted that the future of work will not be defined by humans versus machines, but by how effectively they are combined. In this emerging “brain economy,” competitive advantage depends on what the report calls *brain capital* – the integration of brain health and higher-order cognitive skills such as adaptability, judgment, creativity, and resilience.

This shift has profound implications. For decades, organizations have focused on human capital – skills, knowledge, and experience. But in an AI-driven world, that is no longer sufficient. What matters increasingly is how well people can think, not just what they know.

And this is where Finland stands out.

Finland is not always the loudest voice in global technology debates, but it has something far more valuable: a deeply embedded societal infrastructure for developing human capability.

During my time at Hanken and in conversations with Finnish colleagues, one theme emerged consistently: Finland approaches talent not merely as an economic input, but as a societal asset. This

is reflected in three areas: an education system that fosters autonomy and critical thinking, a strong emphasis on well-being that sustains cognitive performance, and high institutional trust that enables people to adapt and experiment without excessive friction.

These features align remarkably well with what the global evidence now suggests is critical for success in the age of AI.

AI systems can process vast amounts of information, generate insights, and even make recommendations. But they cannot replace human judgment, particularly in ambiguous, high-stakes, or ethically complex situations. They cannot replicate empathy, nor can they fully navigate the social and organizational dynamics that define real-world decision-making.

As the WEF report emphasizes, AI’s value is not standalone. It is multiplicative, where performance equals AI capability multiplied by human cognitive capability.

Too many organizations focus almost exclusively on the first variable.

Finland, by contrast, has an opportunity to lead by strengthening the second, and for Finnish organizations, the implications are both strategic and practical. This translates into three priorities: talent management that highlights adaptability and continuous learning over static expertise, organizational design that supports cognitive capacity through more sustainable ways of working, as well as leadership that shapes the cognitive and emotional environment to enable focused, high-quality thinking.

At the national level, the stakes are even higher.

The concept of “brain capital” reframes economic competitiveness. It suggests that countries that invest in brain health, education, lifelong learning, and cognitive resilience will outperform those that focus narrowly on technological adoption.

Finland already has many of these elements in place. But the opportunity now is to integrate them into a coherent national strategy for the age of AI, and Finland can move from being a strong performer to becoming a global benchmark.

This perspective has also reinforced for me the importance of international academic collaboration, particularly through programs such as Fulbright Finland.

The Fulbright experience is not simply about research exchange; it is about intellectual cross-pollination. It creates a space where ideas developed in different institutional and cultural contexts can be tested, refined, and combined.

In my own case, engaging with Finnish scholars and practitioners has sharpened my understanding of how macro-level institutions, organizational practices, and individual capabilities intersect in shaping talent outcomes. It has also highlighted how different national models can offer distinct advantages in navigating global transformations such as AI.

Fulbright Finland plays a critical role in enabling this exchange. By connecting scholars, institutions, and ideas across borders, it helps build the very kind of interdisciplinary, cross-sector collaboration that the “brain capital” agenda requires.

Read the full article online
www.fulbright.fi/news-magazine/human-advantage-age-ai-case-finland

Trust Over Tech: Finland's AI-Assistive Intelligence

In educational leadership, we know the tension between theoretical frameworks and messy classroom realities. Finland's approach to artificial intelligence showed me that those tensions can become opportunities when trust sits at the center. This story traces one workshop that reframed how I plan to lead digital wellbeing initiatives back home.

When I arrived in Helsinki as a Fulbright Leaders for Global Schools grantee, I found educators who start every AI conversation by asking what kind of human development students deserve. Their method is quiet, deliberate, and unflashy, yet it challenged my assumptions about policy-first solutions. I realized the most advanced tool in their arsenal was relational trust.

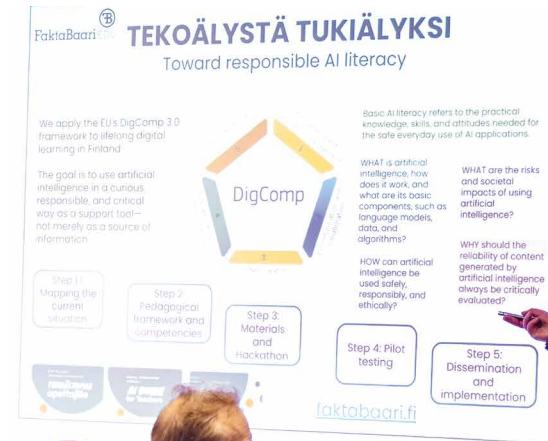
Why One Workshop Shifted My Perspective

The catalyst was a Faktabaari workshop on Preparing Teachers and Students for AI. Facilitators **Jukka Lehtoranta** and **Mikko Salo** introduced us to the “social media replicator,” which demonstrated how social media can knit communities closer or separate them through escalating isolation. The exercise forced me to confront how quickly digital empathy can flip into digital estrangement when digital platforms amplify our reactions.

After the exercise, Jukka explained how Finland funds politically independent media literacy platforms so every learner, regardless of location, can access the same critical-thinking scaffolds. It proved that sustaining trust requires both pedagogical vision and structural support.

Throughout the visit, Finnish educators repeated one phrase: “Assistive Intelligence.” They refuse to treat AI as a replacement for human judgment, instead positioning it as a catalyst for curiosity, creativity, and brain development. That orientation flows into broader wellbeing policies, including national guidance from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare that frames screen time as a health conversation, not a disciplinary battle where policies drive decisions. They invite students to co-author healthy digital habits.

The same trust shows up in their curriculum design, which blends computer and data science, ethics, design thinking, media literacy, and digital citizenship into everyday inquiry. Rather than silo



these domains, teachers weave them through projects that match national legislation and frameworks like DigComp 3.0 and the OECD AI Literacy Framework. Students practice algorithmic thinking alongside bias recognition, giving them skills to critique and create technology. It is a comprehensive, evidence-based system that still feels personal and local.

Translating Lessons into Practice

Finland's model offers a roadmap: start with a trusted learning community, then layer in tools. I plan to bring the Finnish digital well-being focus into my work, pairing it with community asset mapping so classmates can see how Assistive Intelligence supports, not supplants, human expertise. The approach aligns with a framework of culturally responsive leadership, proving that digital well-being is inseparable from equity work. Most importantly, it gives students agency in shaping ethical AI use before policy mandates arrive.

Reflecting on Finland's model leaves me optimistic we can shift education culture toward shared responsibility. When we trust learners, equip educators as co-creators, and frame AI as an assistive ally, we nurture classrooms where curiosity and compassion thrive. This journey affirmed that thoughtful design, not fear, builds the sustainable systems our communities need. For school leaders exploring a similar path, begin with stakeholder listening sessions and assemble cross-functional teams to prototype trust-centered AI guidelines that reflect local needs.



Christina Lee Ballantyne

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Sunnyvale School District in Sunnyvale, California

2026 Fulbright Leaders for Global Schools

The Fulbright Leaders for Global Schools program

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www.fulbright.fi/us-flgs



Civil engineer and Fulbright Finland alumna **Erika Holt** reflects on her career path from concrete durability research to global nuclear waste management, and on Fulbright's role in building the connections that make long-term collaboration possible.

Building Trust for the Long Term

Text LOUISA GAINR Photo VTT

Erika Holt

Customer Account Lead,
Nuclear Energy Sector
VTT Technical Research
Centre of Finland
1998-99 U.S. Fulbright
Fellow

How do you make something safe not just for decades, but for thousands of years? Fulbright alumna Dr. **Erika Holt**, a civil engineer and technical expert at VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, has built her career around such questions.

Originally from Seattle, Erika first came to Finland in the 1990s through her graduate studies at the University of Washington, researching how concrete and other building materials could be made more durable in harsh environments – with a Fulbright grant later enabling her to continue her doctoral research at VTT.

Today, Erika's work is closely connected to one of Finland's most internationally significant areas of expertise: the safe geological disposal of spent nuclear fuel.

"Many countries have nuclear power. That decision was made fifty or more years ago, but the outcome is also that they have legacy waste," she says. "Finland is the first in the world that will have a solution for how to put used, or spent, nuclear fuel safely underground."

From Seattle to Finland

Erika explains that her path to Finland began well before her Fulbright. Her family roots are Finnish: her grandmother was from Joutsa, around three hours north of Helsinki, and she grew up in the Seattle area surrounded by plenty of reminders of Finnish culture and connections.

"My parents had travelled to Finland, and my grandparents still had a summer cabin and sauna and close relations here. I grew up listening to Sibelius and having Marimekko napkins and Iittala glassware at my grandparents' house in Seattle."

One of her professors at the University of Washington had professional connections with VTT and, through a university scholarship supporting exchange between the University's civil engineering and architecture departments and the Nordic countries, Erika came to Finland in 1996 for what was initially intended to be one year of master's research.

That turned into a second year, with Erika beginning work toward her PhD, during which time she applied for a Fulbright grant to continue her doc-

toral research at VTT. And, following her Fulbright year, she became a permanent member of staff at the research center, completing her PhD in 2001.

“I just loved the environment and the collaboration with industry and policymakers. I felt my research could really have an impact; it could be taken into practice. Fulbright wasn’t what brought me here,” she smiles, “but it was a great enabler to stay here.”

Civil Engineering and Nuclear Safety

Although Erika’s work is now closely related to radioactive waste management, she is quick to point out that she is not a nuclear physicist, but a civil engineer with expertise in geology and building materials, specifically focusing on materials in harsh environments. This is what eventually led her into the design and safety questions surrounding radioactive waste repositories.

“Everything I’ve been doing for waste management in the repositories is always related to the material and design choices for the construction that impacts long-term safety,” she explains. “How do you treat or immobilize the waste with concrete? How do you use cement grouts to support the rock tunnel excavations? How do you monitor a concrete tunnel plug to verify it is tightly sealing the underground?”

Her expertise lies in how repositories are built and how materials are selected. Other colleagues model long-term radionuclide transport and safety over thousands or even millions of years, but Erika’s role requires her to understand how choices in concrete, clay barriers, metallic canisters, and other materials affect long-term safety.

Finland as a Global Benchmark

Finland’s repository program, Erika explains, has been under development for around thirty years. “Many countries are still twenty, or even fifty, years behind what Finland is doing – still trying to even get a policy, or get the funding mechanisms, or choose a site,” she says. At present, she explains, nuclear plants around the world keep used fuel in interim storage above ground. “That’s just not sustainable for the long run. It needs to be put somewhere it can be safely isolated for thousands of years.”

“Finland is really the benchmark for how to do it successfully, and also how to keep public engagement and public trust very high. The reason for that success in Finland is attributed to having a really strong policy and consistent funding, but also to having very strong technical support and open dialogue,” Erika explains. “When people ask questions, or have uncertainty about nuclear power or about what we are doing with this waste, we can listen to their questions and concerns, and we can answer them with a good scientific and technical basis.”

This question of trust is especially important because the timescales involved are almost impossible to grasp in ordinary human terms. The repository must remain safe through changing conditions,

including climate change, groundwater movement, and even future ice ages.

“Ultimately, we’re always modelling to make sure there are no radionuclides or harmful material getting to the water, the groundwater flow, the air, or the surface,” Erika explains. “The local farmer at the site where the repository is wants to know that the water is safe in their well, or that when they’re fishing, or growing potatoes in the fields, it’s safe.”



A lot of the public fear is that if you have these new nuclear reactors, they’re going to generate waste, and where do we put it? Finland has proven that there’s a solution.



Erika now works in leadership and coordination roles on large European projects dealing with radioactive waste management. She recently coordinated a €24 million project involving 47 institutes around Europe, focused on ways to better treat, condition, and decontaminate waste along with digitalization solutions to more accurately track long-term performance. She is also part of the coordination team for a current €80 million European project on all aspects of radioactive waste management with 150 partners, including in-kind contribution from experts from five USA national scientific labs.

“Even though my background is technical, in this project I also oversee the cross-cutting theme that is knowledge management,” she says. “That means: how do we preserve knowledge? How do we capture knowledge to make sure future generations, or the next generation, will understand the decisions we made?”

Erika’s work also increasingly involves international dialogue, most recently leading the Finnish delegation at this year’s Waste Management Symposium in Phoenix, the largest conference in her field, where Finland was the featured country. She has also worked with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, supporting countries that are newer to nuclear energy or that need to manage radioactive material from medical or industrial uses.

She is also regularly invited to panels, conferences, and meetings for instance arranged with the U.S. Department of Energy, national laboratories, and universities to explain Finland’s approach and help maintain momentum around solving this challenge.

“How do you handle these materials safely? How do you communicate it to the public? How do you store it?” she says. “A lot of the public fear is that if you have these new nuclear reactors, they’re going to generate waste, and where do we put it? Finland has proven that there’s a solution.”

Turning One Fulbright Year into Decades of Collaboration with VTT

Erika's Fulbright connection did not end with her own grant year. After becoming a team leader at VTT, she helped establish the Fulbright-VTT Award in Science, Technology and Innovation, in partnership with the Fulbright Finland Foundation, beginning as a trial in the building technology division before expanding across all disciplines at VTT.

Today, VTT and Fulbright Finland can award up to five professional grants per year, for periods of up to six months. Around twenty grantees have been hosted over the past two decades, and Erika's own team has hosted several, including researchers in material-science and nuclear-related fields.

"To us, that's been a great benefit, to strengthen collaboration with people who are doing world-class work in the U.S. also on issues related to groundwater flow, concrete materials, and nuclear simulations," she says. "We've fostered excellent USA-VTT collaboration, and that is something I'm proud of in my Fulbright story."



We've fostered excellent USA-VTT collaboration, and that is something I'm proud of in my Fulbright story.



She is now in her fifth year on the Fulbright Finland Foundation Board and has also reviewed grant applications for many years. The applicant pool, she says, is exceptionally strong.

"It's really frustrating to see so many outstanding qualified applicants who aren't able to come due to funding limitations," she says. "We know that a lot of times when the U.S. grantees come to Finland, they really love the work style, and they see the impact of their work."

In times of political, economic, or social turbulence, she believes those personal connections



NORDIC NUCLEAR FORUM / LARS-ÅKE PETERSSON

matter even more - with each grantee becoming part of a wider network of influence.

"The Foundation's work is to bridge those cultural uncertainties and create this foundation of dialogue, trust, and respect," Erika says. "When we enable Finnish people at any level to go to the U.S., or U.S. people to come here, we're trying to instill in them the values of cultural respect and learning. We hope that each of them reaches another 100 plus people who have greater interest for Finland-USA relations, and we see that from the alumni and the reach they have. We touch the work of so many branches of Finnish society to enable better communication, greater exchange, and also help to train the future generation and leaders."

Erika reflects that knowledge of and interest in Finland has grown significantly over the past thirty years in the U.S. What was once an unfamiliar Nordic country is now punching above its weight in terms of reputation and influence.

"It is amazingly different now in my professional and personal circles in the U.S. People really know about Finland. They really want to come to Finland. Programs like Fulbright help build awareness of the impressive society and culture we have here. Fulbrighters are ambassadors to show that there are good messages and impactful things being done."

Erika Holt is a frequent speaker in panels, conferences, and meetings. In May 2026, she was an invited speaker on the panel session "Closing the Circle - Integrated Waste Management, Decommissioning and Back-End Solutions" at the Nordic Nuclear Forum in Stockholm, Sweden. The event was organized by FinNuclear Association together with the Swedish Nuclear Association.

Fulbright-VTT Award in Science, Technology and Innovation

The Fulbright Finland Foundation and VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland offer a unique opportunity for international research collaboration on a broad range of current issues in science, technology and innovation.

While the award is open to any project in the disciplines represented at VTT, specific consideration is given to applications covering the following topics:

- Quantum Technologies and Microelectronics
- Industrial Biotechnology
- Biomaterial processing and products
- Integrated Computational Materials Engineering (Propertune ICME)
- Nuclear energy; especially small modular reactors (SMR)
- Hydrogen

Read more about the award www.fulbright.fi/vtt-scholar

Application round for the academic year 2027-28 is open until September 15, 2026.

Learning from Finland's Approach to Nuclear Waste

Text LOUISA GAIRN

Fulbright Finland alumnus **Bruce Blair** reflects on his path from first-generation college student to energy policy researcher and analyst, and on how his Fulbright experience in Jyväskylä deepened his understanding of nuclear waste, public trust, and the long-term responsibilities – and challenges – of energy systems.

Bruce Blair

Senior Analyst
New Hampshire
Department of Energy
2019-20 Fulbright-EDUFI
Fellowship
University of Jyväskylä

Read the full interview
www.fulbright.fi/news-magazine/learning-finlands-approach-to-nuclear-waste

Energy security, electricity demand, and the debate over nuclear power remain high on policy agendas worldwide, but beyond the technical issues, questions of trust and transparency are often key to decision-making. For Bruce Blair, these social dimensions of energy systems are central to his research and career. A Fulbright Finland alumnus and social scientist, Bruce now works as an analyst with the New Hampshire Department of Energy, spending much of his time thinking about electricity markets and the complex factors that determine whether there will be enough energy to meet demand.

But Bruce's route into energy policy has been anything but linear, he explains. Born and raised in Alabama, he grew up in a military family, although without the constant moving that often comes with it. "I never moved home until I went off to college. And, jokingly, I've been making up for that the rest of my life," he smiles.

Bruce was the first person in his family to attend college, eventually earning a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, and a doctorate. He originally planned to become an engineer, before realizing that the field was not quite the right fit – although, he now reflects, the analytical mindset never left him.

His undergraduate studies eventually took him into Russian language and literature, alongside history and political science. From there, he became interested in energy questions in the former Soviet Union and Europe, particularly the movement of natural gas across Ukraine into European markets. "At that time, 70% of natural gas to Europe came from Russia through Ukraine," he notes.

The Social Science of Nuclear Waste

That sense of the social and political significance of energy became sharpened while he was finishing his doctorate at Idaho State University, near Idaho National Laboratory, a place closely associated with nuclear research. There, Bruce became interested in

one of the most difficult and long-term questions facing nuclear energy: what to do with spent nuclear fuel.

"Whether you agree with nuclear energy or not, there are generations and generations of development behind it, and we have to close the fuel cycle," Bruce says. "We have waste that we have to dispose of safely, securely, and in a permanent fashion, or find ways to reuse it."



Energy policy requires understanding complex systems, communicating risk, and translating technical issues into terms that decision-makers can use.



However, as a social scientist, Bruce was less focused on the geological requirements of deep storage than on the processes that make public consent and community participation possible.

"Even if we never build another nuclear generator, we will still have almost a century's worth of nuclear waste. It has to be dealt with," he says.

A Different Model of Public Engagement

What brought Bruce to Finland was the country's internationally significant approach to spent nuclear fuel disposal using long-term deep geological repositories, leading him to research being carried out at the University of Jyväskylä by Professor Tapio Litmanen and his team.

Bruce was particularly interested in how the Nordic country had approached local engagement

and developed community trust – and how it had navigated the political buy-in for a project which by its nature had to last centuries beyond any government mandate.

“The only one the U.S. tried, their processes were not effective,” he says, referring to Yucca Mountain, the proposed U.S. deep geological repository site in the Nevada desert. “They didn’t get true local buy-in. They basically said, ‘We’re going to put it here in Yucca Mountain and we’re going to run with it.’ And, of course, it didn’t work.”

“The first country to actually engage in a successful process was Finland,” Bruce explains. “So I started to research. As someone who’s not an engineer, not a physicist, I don’t understand the geological conditions that are necessary to safely house the waste. But from my background, it’s more the processes of community engagement, stakeholder engagement. How do you get local buy-in?”

The question captures what drew him to the subject: deciding how to handle nuclear waste is not simply a question of engineering or geology, it is also a complex social, cultural, and political issue. In Finland, Bruce saw a model in which social science had been taken seriously in decision-making.

“In the U.S., you don’t get social scientists really involved in the process a lot. And Finland did,” he says.

One of the things that interested him most was that Finland’s approach to determining the site of the waste repository was not simply top-down. “Communities actually suggested that they may want to host it, if everything works out in the end,” he explains.

For Bruce, the Finnish approach also showed how practical concerns, such as transportation and fears about accepting waste from other countries, can affect public trust. Finland, he says, addressed these concerns partly by tying the repository to domestic generation and limiting international shipments. “They were able to hedge concerns of using Finland as a repository for waste for other countries and said, ‘No, it’s only for Finland.’”

One of the main challenges in nuclear waste disposal, Bruce explains, is that it requires public engagement over years, even decades, where the perception of risk, as well as political support, can shift over time. Likewise, the economic benefits of hosting a disposal site may be less obvious than those expected from hosting a new power plant. “In the grand scheme of things, it’s easy to have a community want generation,” he says. “It’s more difficult for a location to want disposal.”

Stepping Into Energy Analysis

Today, Bruce works as an energy analyst on the regional team at the New Hampshire Department of Energy. His work focuses on New England’s wholesale electricity markets, coordination with neighboring states and Eastern Canadian provinces, and the reliability of the energy system.

“We import and export electricity into Canada,” he explains. The region is organized around ISO

New England, the Independent System Operator that runs markets, manages the flow of electricity on transmission lines, and handles planning and balancing needs.

“A lot of it is the nitty-gritty behind the wholesale market of generating and transmitting electricity,” Bruce says, explaining that one major issue his analytical work focuses on is resource adequacy: ensuring enough generation is available to meet demand. That question is becoming more urgent as electricity use grows.



What brought Bruce to Finland was the country’s internationally significant approach to spent nuclear fuel disposal using long-term deep geological repositories.



“Every state, country, and region is looking at this because of increased energy demands, for example from AI and electrification of heating – all of these things are huge issues, for they increase demand beyond current projections and during seasons when it has normally been lower.”

New England’s winter energy constraints also tie his current work to global energy markets. Because the region is at the end of the natural gas pipeline, Bruce monitors liquified natural gas prices and shipments, including competition with Europe.

“Europe always has a higher liquefied natural gas price than New England,” he says. “So a lot of times the ships bound for us will go towards Europe.”

Although his current role is not focused on nuclear waste, Bruce sees clear connections with his earlier research. Energy policy requires understanding complex systems, communicating risk, and translating technical issues into terms that decision-makers can use.

“My years of research looking at Finland and other areas of Europe, and the work I presented while I was in Finland, have led me to be able to do the job I have now,” Bruce says. “When conversations turn to communicating science and communicating risk, there are elements I can contribute.”

The “Infinite Immeasurables” of Fulbright Exchange

Bruce’s connection to Fulbright Finland has continued long after his grant. He later joined the Friends of Fulbright Finland Alumni Council, serving for one full term. His motivation was gratitude. “I wanted to be as helpful post-Fulbright as the Foundation had been to me during and after.”

“You build up this identity and these connections during your time as a Fulbrighter,” he says. “Not only connections to people, but to the place,

the culture, the region, and to the organization. I'm always thinking about the debt I owe people and that I want to help out as much as possible to pay back the kindness of others."

Asked to reflect on the value of Fulbright, Bruce resists reducing the experience to numbers, outputs, or professional networks alone.

"It's easy to say, 'I made a lot of connections' - to take the economist approach. But I'm a social scientist, so I know that falls short," he smiles. "There's the personal growth side to it. There's the confidence you get from just applying to being awarded it. There's the mindset you develop from putting your-

self into a different situation, learning a different culture."

"These types of experiences drastically change you for the better. They not only help you in your professional life, but there are the infinite immeasurables. Just as an individual, you grow. As a friend, you grow. As a partner, you grow. As a human, you grow."

"If you recognize the benefits of it, you want to make sure other people also have those experiences. I don't know if you can put a number on it. Whatever number you want, it's going to be too low - it's immeasurable."

Onkalo: A 100,000-Year Experiment



KATE THOMPSON

When I was awarded the 2025-26 Fulbright Finland Doctoral Award to collaborate with the Spectral Imaging Laboratory at the University of Jyväskylä, I knew I also had to visit Onkalo, the world's first long-term repository for spent nuclear fuel in Eurajoki, Finland. In February, I joined the last media tour at Onkalo before the first stores of spent nuclear fuel will be encapsulated and buried there. I am not a nuclear scientist, but an ecologist researching the environmental impacts of nuclear power. I develop hyperspectral remote sensing methods to detect changes in vegetation after they are exposed to environmental contaminants associated with nuclear fuel processing. Operationalizing my research would transform how we monitor landscapes for contamination, which would improve risk assessment and hazard mitiga-

tion in emergencies, and help evaluate remediation efforts.

One of the mandates of the 1994 Finnish Nuclear Energy Act is that operators using nuclear power in Finland must take responsibility for the waste they produce. This meant banning international exports and imports of nuclear waste and massively investing in research for safe, permanent storage solutions. This year, Onkalo will transition to the encapsulation and burial phase where radioactive waste will be sealed into bedrock. This phase is a major milestone for Finland's leadership in nuclear science and an unprecedented scientific achievement. Through decades of research and planning, Finland has set the global standard for geologic repositories and modeled responsible, accountable governing in the nuclear age.



Kate Thompson

PhD Candidate

University of Wisconsin,
Madison

2025-26 Fulbright Finland
Doctoral Award

University of Jyväskylä

**Read Kate Thompson's
article on nuclear waste
management**

www.fulbright.fi/news-magazine/onkalo-100000-year-experiment



HOME COMING

Fulbright Finland alumni from every decade since the 1970s came together to reconnect and celebrate the continued success and impact of Finnish–U.S. exchanges.

Text MAIJA KETTUNEN *Photos* STUDIO TERHO PHOTOGRAPHY

Each year, numerous U.S. alumni return to Finland from across the Atlantic, to what they often describe as their “second home.” To bring them together with alumni and grantees based in Finland, the Fulbright Finland Foundation, in collaboration with volunteers from the ASLA–Fulbright Alumni Association Board, organized a Homecoming Event in May. The gathering offered a chance to revisit shared experiences while building new connections across generations of Fulbrighters.

The event was particularly special as it coincided with several major milestones. This year is the 80th anniversary of the global Fulbright Program. The community also celebrated 50 years of the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in North American Studies – the oldest Fulbright Distinguished Chair worldwide. Fifteen former Bicentennial Chairs from the U.S. attended the event.

Frances Karttunen has participated in three Fulbright exchanges in Finland. Her first grant took her to Tampere University in 1971, and she later returned twice to the University of Helsinki as a Fulbright scholar, including a year as the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair.

“My life has been enriched beyond expression by these opportunities and experiences in Finland,” Frances wrote in the guest book (pictured above).

Be the ‘Bright!’

During the event, the Foundation launched its new public awareness campaign, *Be the ‘Bright!’* Conceived by Foundation alumna **Casie Hermansson**, the campaign highlights the active engagement and positive impact of the Foundation’s alumni and grantees. In her welcome remarks, CEO **Terhi Mölsä** emphasized the importance of sharing these stories widely.

“Even in increasingly uncertain and volatile operating environments, and despite the many challenges that capture headlines today, our grantees and alumni are creating positive impact, driving meaningful change, and fostering a sense of agency and hope. The fact that Fulbright Finland exchanges are now stronger than ever is a testament to this shared commitment,” Terhi Mölsä said.

The event also provided an opportunity to recognize the generosity of alumni whose significant donations have played a key role in sustaining and strengthening the Foundation’s awards. Several alumni

My grant term was truly memorable, but the best thing is that even after 10+ years, the Fulbright community still keeps on bringing inspiring people to enrich our professional and personal lives.

– *Olli-Pekka Malinen*

philanthropists were presented with special commemorative pins in recognition of their generous support of future exchange opportunities.

Above all, the Homecoming reinforced a sense of belonging. Whether reconnecting with old friends or meeting fellow alumni for the first time, participants shared a common understanding of the transformative power of the Fulbright Finland experience. The event was a powerful reminder that the Fulbright Finland journey does not end with the grant but continues to shape the lives and communities long after the exchange.

Once a Fulbrighter, always a Fulbrighter!



Senior Advisor **David Yoken** received the Silver Donor Pin in recognition of his generous support of the Foundation's awards.



The Homecoming gathered over 120 participants from both sides of the Atlantic to connect across disciplines, professions, and generations.



The event was organized in collaboration with the ASLA-Fulbright Alumni Association Board. Pictured above, Association Board Members **Seda Altunbay** and **Katja Weckström**.

Advisory Groups Develop Alumni Engagement

All alumni are invited to engage in and contribute to all aspects of the Foundation's work. Every year, hundreds of Finnish and U.S. alumni serve in diverse roles, lead special initiatives, and provide valuable feedback that helps develop all areas of the operation. There are also two dedicated advisory groups, one in the United States, and one in Finland, whose task is to work together with the Foundation specifically in the area of alumni engagement and advise on all alumni matters.

FoFF Alumni Council Welcomes Six New Members

The Friends of Fulbright Finland (FoFF) Alumni Council consists of up to ten U.S. alumni of the Foundation programs, recruited from throughout the U.S. and representing different grant programs. As an advisory and working group, it helps expand alumni engagement in the United States and develops ways in which alumni on both sides of the Atlantic can better connect with each other. The Council also works on grantee support and mentoring, and supports the Foundation in publicity and outreach, event organization, and fundraising.

All new Council members bring a personal connection to Fulbright Finland and a shared eagerness to give back and develop the Foundation's vibrant alumni network. The terms of the Council members are staggered, and six new members started their 3-year term in May 2026.

One of the new Council members, **Teresa Turner**, joins the Council only a few months after her Fulbright Leaders for Global Schools Program experience in Finland. "Joining the Alumni Council is an opportunity to give back to the community

that transformed how I lead — Finland taught me that the most powerful thing an educator can do is walk into every room with her whole self, and I am eager to carry that spirit forward alongside fellow Fulbright Finland alumni," she says.

Alumni Association Selects New Chair

In Finland, the ASLA-Fulbright Alumni Association Board serves in a similar role to the FoFF Alumni Council in the United States. The Alumni Association in Finland was founded already in 1953, and it is one of the oldest Fulbright alumni associations in the world. All Fulbright Finland Foundation alumni can join the Association. Just like in FoFF, there is no membership fee.

Study of the U.S. Institute for Secondary Educators program alumna **Seda Altunbay** was recently selected the Chair of the Association Board. "In the coming year, we will focus on further strengthening our collaboration with the Fulbright Finland Foundation, revitalising key programs, and fostering vibrant, meaningful engagement within our alumni community," she says. Recently, the Board co-organized with the Foundation the Homecoming alumni event in Helsinki (p. 18).

A much-appreciated annual initiative by the Association Board is the Fulbright Buddy Program which matches new U.S. grantees with local alumni in Finland.

The Association Board provides feedback and recommendations to the Foundation on alumni engagement and works together with the Foundation and the FoFF Alumni Council to help develop inclusive and participatory programming and initiatives.



Teresa Turner



Seda Altunbay

www.fulbright.fi/alumni

Friends of Fulbright Finland Alumni Council
www.fulbright.fi/friends-fulbright-finland/friends-fulbright-finland-alumni-council

ASLA-Fulbright Alumni Association Board
www.fulbright.fi/asla-fulbright-alumni-association-board

Welcome Network Enriches the Fulbright Finland Experience

Before embarking on his journey to Los Angeles, Fulbright-Idman grantee **Eero Kaarsalo** contacted local alumna, **Martha Infante Thorpe**, through the Finnish Fulbright Welcome Network. The initial email led to friendship and support that helped Eero feel at home in his new home city.

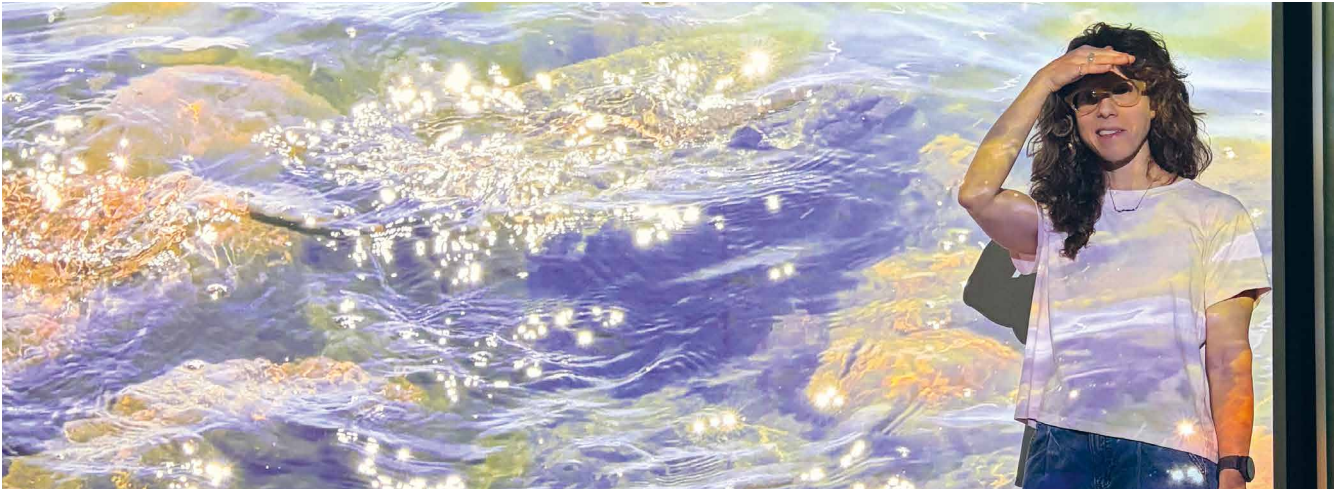
In his blog post, Eero reflects on his connection with Martha and her husband **Brendan**: "Being invited to Martha and Brendan's social gatherings taught me a lot about the American conversation culture. Later, I found myself seated at

a dinner party in their San Fernando Valley home, discussing subjects like the state of transatlantic relations with two social studies teachers, a top lawyer, and a UCLA professor," Eero says.

"Needless to say, I learned a lot. But perhaps more importantly, I realized that despite my young age, my personal experience, opinions, and knowledge were valued as meaningful contributions to the conversation. I was reminded of Fulbright Finland CEO **Terhi Mölsä**'s advice to us Fulbrighters: 'in the U.S., your personality makes you interesting, so bring it forth,'" he concludes.



Read more grantee and alumni stories
www.fulbright.fi/about-us/blog



Record Number of Alumni Awards

This year, six U.S. Fulbright Finland alumni have received the Friends of Fulbright Finland (FoFF) Alumni Enrichment Award to return to Finland to deepen collaborations with their local colleagues.

The 2026 award recipients represent a variety of fields ranging from biotechnology and finance to arts, musicology, and vocational teacher education.

One of the awardees is **Leah Beeferman**, who filmed and recorded material for new body of artworks during her first grant term as Mid-Career Professional Development awardee. During her return visit to Finland, Leah hosted an event at Bio-art Society featuring a screening of her videos and an artist talk. She also planned future exhibitions with her Finnish collaborators.

“During my 2016 Fulbright, the people and the landscape captivated me. What I learned and saw took my work in new directions I hadn’t foreseen — and continue to impact me today. I am grateful to now have the opportunity to return to Finland, and to reflect on my work and relationships and

continue with ongoing projects and conversations,” Leah says.

This special award is funded by the FoFF Alumni Enrichment Endowment, for which all funds have been received by personal donations from alumni and friends of the Fulbright Finland Foundation. The endowment was launched in 2012, to create a permanent source of funds to support U.S. alumni to return to Finland.

Since the endowment’s launch in 2012, the award has been granted to 18 U.S. alumni of the Fulbright Finland Foundation.

The 2026 recipients are: **Philippe Amstislavski**, 2020–21 Fulbright-VTT Award in Science, Technology and Innovation; **Leah Beeferman**, 2016–17 Mid-Career Professional Development Program; **John Broussard**, 2016–17 Fulbright-Hanken Distinguished Chair; **Paul Niemisto** 1998–99 and 2016–17 U.S. Core Fulbright Scholar; **Thomas O’Connell**, 2023–24 Fulbright Specialist Program, and **Christopher Zirkle**, 2021–22 Fulbright-Haaga-Helia Scholar Award.

During her return visit to Finland, FoFF Alumni Enrichment awardee **Leah Beeferman** hosted an event at Bioart Society featuring a screening of her videos and an artist talk.

www.fulbright.fi/foff-award

Using Multiple Fulbright Finland Grants for Partnership Building

Christopher Zirkle, Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, returned to Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences on the FoFF Alumni Enrichment award to investigate professional development needs of Finland’s vocational teachers to inform international best practices.

The work began when Christopher first visited Finland as a Fulbright Scholar in 2021-22. Continuing their collaboration, **Sini Bask**, Lecturer at Haaga-Helia visited The Ohio State University with Fulbright Finland Travel Grant for Institutional Partnership Building in fall 2025.



“The support we have been provided by Fulbright Finland to build relationships between our two universities has been instrumental in forming our partnership, and it could not have been developed otherwise,” Christopher Zirkle and Sini Bask write in their blog post.

www.fulbright.fi/about-us/blog/using-multiple-fulbright-finland-grants-partnership-building-haaga-helia-success-story

Havu-Nuutinen and Lakaniemi Join the Board of Directors

The Foundation is pleased to announce the appointment of two new members to its Board of Directors: **Sari Havu-Nuutinen**, Professor of Early Years Education at the University of Eastern Finland, and **Ilkka Lakaniemi**, Director of the Center for Knowledge and Innovation Research (CKIR) at the Aalto University School of Business

Both Havu-Nuutinen and Lakaniemi are alumni of the Foundation. Sari Havu-Nuutinen received an ASLA-Fulbright Research Grant for a Senior Scholar for 2015-16 to conduct research at the University of Ohio.

“I have worked with Fulbright scholars and the Fulbright Finland Foundation in many ways during the last ten years and had wonderful moments. I hope these experiences will support our work on the Board as well. It is a great honor to serve the Fulbright Finland Foundation and collaborate with colleagues,” Sari Havu-Nuutinen says.

Ilkka Lakaniemi was an ASLA-Fulbright Graduate grantee at the University of California, Berkeley in 1995-96.

“I am honored to join the Board. The Fulbright experience has had a positive and transformative impact in my life in many ways. I am delighted to

contribute to the Fulbright Finland Foundation and its wider community for its future advancement,” Ilkka Lakaniemi says.

Sari Havu-Nuutinen and Ilkka Lakaniemi succeed **Kirsimarja Blomqvist** (LUT University) and **Timo Korkeamäki** (Aalto University), who both recently concluded the maximum of two terms on the Board of Directors. The Foundation conveys a sincere thank you to Blomqvist and Korkeamäki for their unwavering commitment and significant contributions to Fulbright Finland and to Finnish-U.S. academic and professional exchange during their tenures.

The Board of Directors has 6-8 members: up to four Finns, and up to four Americans. The Board comprises a diverse cross-section of leaders who bring a wealth of expertise to bear in a shared commitment to achieving the goals of the Fulbright Finland Foundation. The Finnish board members are appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Chief of the U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Finland appoints the U.S. members. Board appointments are for four years.

www.fulbright.fi/about-us/board-directors



Sari Havu-Nuutinen



Ilkka Lakaniemi

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THE FULBRIGHT FINLAND FOUNDATION is an independent not-for-profit organization based in Helsinki, Finland.

Its purpose is to promote a wider exchange of knowledge and professional talents through educational contacts between Finland and the United States.

The Foundation collaborates with a range of government, foundation, university, and corporate partners on both sides of the Atlantic to design and manage study and research scholarships, leadership development programs, and internationalization services.

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Calendar

June

1.6.
Friends of Fulbright Finland
(FoFF) Welcome Event

12.6.
Fulbright Finland Foundation
Board Meeting

July

3.–24.7.
Fulbright Finland Office Closed

August

17.–20.8.
Arrival Orientation
for U.S. Grantees

18.8.
ASLA-Fulbright Alumni
Association Welcome Event

September

15.9.
2027–28 Application Deadline:
Fulbright U.S. Scholar Awards
to Finland

17.–20.9.
Friends of Fulbright Finland
(FoFF) at FinnFest, Minneapolis

Fulbright Finland Foundation
Board Meeting

Friends of Fulbright Finland
Alumni Council Meeting

October

1.10.
2027–28 Application Deadline:
Finnish Scholar and Mid-Career
Professional Development
Programs

6.10.
2027–28 Application Deadline:
Fulbright U.S. Student Program

9.–10.10.
American Voices Seminar,
University of Turku

22.10.
2027 Application Deadline:
Friends of Fulbright Finland
Alumni Enrichment Award

November

8.–13.11.
Fulbright Finland-U.S. Icebreaker
Capacity Building Program,
Helsinki

16.–20.11.
International Education Week

26.–27.11.
Thanksgiving and
Enrichment Program for
U.S. Grantees, Helsinki

December

Fulbright Finland Foundation
Board Meeting

Finland-America Educational
Trust Fund Board Meeting



October 9–10, 2026
AMERICAN VOICES
University of Turku

The XXXIII American Voices seminar celebrates the kaleidoscope of American cultures and the 250th anniversary of the United States!

Join the seminar to learn about various aspects of U.S. society and culture through the experiences of U.S. Fulbright Finland grantees.

www.fulbright.fi/about-us/events/american-voices-seminar