



Suzanne Louis who has been volunteering at the Fulbright Center since 2006 spearheads the initiative to develop the American alumni program, Friends of Fulbright Finland.

Supporting the International Change Makers

Fulbright Finland alumna Suzanne Louis talks about her passion for internationalization, her belief in the value of student mobility and cultural exchange, and the positive impact international collaboration has on society at home and abroad.

Suzanne Louis is one Fulbright grantee who has made international exchange her life's work. The former director of the University of Virginia's international center, and now the driving force behind the Friends of Fulbright Finland alumni program in the U.S., Suzanne is passionate about intercultural understanding and the value of international experience. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Suzanne describes herself as a "domestic nomad", her family having moved around the U.S. several times in her early years. "I developed early on the capacity to adjust to new environments and develop new relationships with people in each place. It seemed a natural part of life."

This outlook developed and expanded during her time studying cultural anthropology, leading her to study Mandarin Chinese, then spend a year teaching and studying in Taiwan, before embarking on a successful career in international educational exchange. "I've spent my career with students coming from 150 countries around the world. From the earliest days of my

working life, I've been fascinated by the reasons why young people choose to go abroad to develop their education."

Fostering International Exchange and Mobility

In more recent years, Suzanne's nomadism has taken a Nordic turn, moving between her adopted hometown of Charlottesville in Virginia and the other place she feels most at home, Helsinki in Finland, where she volunteers with the Fulbright Center as a Project Consultant and expert panel member.

"I first came to Finland in 1991 to attend a conference in Jyväskylä, and I was hooked! Afterwards I traveled to Finland several times, on holiday as well as business trips related to international education. Eventually it was clear to me that I had to find an opportunity to stay for longer if possible. That's what led me to apply for the Fulbright grant."

Suzanne was awarded a Mid-Career Professional Development grant in 2001, hosted by the International Relations office of what is now Aalto University in Helsinki. "My goal was to immerse myself

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in how international exchange activities were handled at a non-American university, to compare best practices with my home institution, and to learn how mobility programs were being developed in Europe, and how they were expressed at the local level in universities."

"At that time, bringing international students onto the campus was quite a novelty for Finnish universities, but we had quite a lot of experience of this in the U.S., which I was able to share," Suzanne explains. "My host university particularly wanted to develop its intake

of Chinese students, exploring how best to support them during the admissions process and once they were on campus.”

Suzanne was impressed by the number of academic exchanges being organized for Finnish and other European students, especially through Erasmus, the European Union student exchange program. “At the University of Virginia, we had maybe half a dozen one-to-one exchange programs with foreign universities. But the volume being handled through Erasmus was really something else.”

“In the U.S. we had lots of students coming in from abroad from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but very few from Europe. I felt that was kind of an imbalance. The European exchange programs have been extremely successful, and are much easier for European students to manage and negotiate, while U.S. institutions may appear more inaccessible, for example requiring tuition fees.”

Suzanne reflects that this imbalance has remained, but that Fulbright plays a significant role in enabling educational exchanges between Europe and the U.S., something she feels is important not just for the individual but also for the community.

“I think that everyone benefits if students and researchers are free to travel and study anywhere in the world. The more individuals are able to travel in a significant way, not just as tourists, but to really get to know people in the host country, the better. Through media we only get a very lopsided point of view of what other countries are about. It’s not until you spend time with people from different cultures that you can reach a deeper understanding.”

Social Justice and Cultural Understanding

Developing this understanding is a particular success of the Finnish Fulbright program, Suzanne notes. “Coming to Finland is an excellent opportunity for Americans to learn more about the Nordic countries, particularly social justice programs that could be adapted for the United States in some way. Of course we can’t compare the two countries directly, because the population size and history are so different, but I think the societies’ goals are similar, in terms of using research and education to improve our lives.”

Something that particularly impresses Suzanne is the number of Finnish grant applications focusing on environmental issues. “It’s not

just trendy, it’s something that’s very important to these people. They really want to make a difference, and that’s a very compelling argument.”

“We’re very interested in finding individuals pursuing research that has a larger meaning in the rest of the world, who want to reach out to their communities through their work.”

Social justice for Suzanne means the potential to change communities or societies for the better. “For example, we may have someone in medicine doing bench research, but their goal is to find ways to eliminate diabetes. We’re looking for people with this additional mindset, who are passionate about their work because it can have a broader effect, perhaps as part of a larger team. These are people who think ‘I’m not the only bright light in the sky, but I want to add my light to others who are working to solve this problem.’”

The physical sciences are not the only fields that can make this kind of impact, Suzanne points out. “Social justice happens in many different ways and in many different contexts. It may as well come from literature or performance art as it would come from studying biology or medicine. Ultimately, it’s the application of research that’s interesting, valuable and useful.”

Exchange as a Lifelong Process

Currently, Suzanne is spearheading an initiative to develop the American alumni program, Friends of Fulbright Finland. “This is a new aspect of the Finnish Fulbright program,” she explains. “We’re trying to establish closer links between the Fulbright Center and the Finnish experience with the Americans who were in Finland on their Fulbright grant. It’s very common for us to hear from grantees that their year in Finland was life changing, but for it to continue to add value to the rest of their career is something even better.”

“We already have a number of U.S. scholars who return to Finland on quite a regular basis to collaborate with their previous hosts. So we have these ongoing bonds between researchers and students, a creative team approach that includes both Finns and Americans. This type of active participation in the Fulbright community is something we want to develop even further.”

Growing an active network of alumni is an ambitious goal, says Suzanne, potentially including more than 1700 Americans who visited Finland on a Fulbright grant since the 1950s.



At the Friends of Fulbright Finland Boston event in May, Suzanne Louis was recognized for her nearly 10 years of volunteer service for Fulbright Finland.

“Every year, we’re building the Finnish Fulbright community by 35–40 American grantees, so this is definitely a growth industry! But developing an alumni program takes a long time, and is not something that can always show measurable success in just a few years. Because the USA is a huge place and our American alumni are scattered throughout the country, it makes it difficult to have large face-to-face events. A lot of what we do is in very small groups, maybe just a few people getting together informally. We count that as a success too. It’s gratifying that more and more alumni are also taking leadership roles in the alumni network initiatives.”

The value of these ongoing relationships is something Suzanne and colleagues highlight to each new intake of Fulbright grantees. “We talk to them about the alumni program virtually on day one when they’re in orientation with us. Being a participant in Fulbright is a lifelong opportunity.”

To support this, a new grant is being developed specifically for American alumni of the Finnish Fulbright program. “The grant is designed to encourage alumni to continue or renew their contacts with their Finnish hosts or partners,” explains Suzanne. “We aim to develop a large and diverse network of partners who share Fulbright Finland’s vision, which is ‘to empower the minds that will find global solutions to tomorrow’s challenges’”.

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