

My Fulbright Experience – the American dream

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Isn't it fun? This was the most frequently asked question of my favorite professor, Paul A. Bodine, while jumping from one leg to the other. Indeed, it was a lot of fun.

Getting a driver's license in less than an hour? Not a problem. "Drive-thru Wedding" for 45 bucks? Not a problem. Launching your business with no administrative headache? Welcome to America!

Early after our arrival to Chicago, I and my wife Zsuzsa decided to head for the closest Driver Service Facility and apply for a driver's license. Americans are crazy for their cars and for driving. We decided to be part of that craze. But before that, we needed the licenses. After arriving to the Driver Service Facility on a sunny Monday morning, we signed our applications in front of an officer. There were five more steps to complete. First, pay the admin fee. Cash or card? Second, take the eye test. Approved. Third, based on what we read in the Rules of the Road, take a test. Passed. Fourth, jump in the car, start the engine, select gear D (drive) and follow the instructions of the officer. Road test completed. And there is still 10 minutes to go. Finally, the last window was for taking the picture. Cheese. Off we go with the licenses in our pockets. All this within an hour. Driving is part of the American life.

Our stay in the US was a memorable one. Among many other things we enjoyed, there are nuances that make life livable and friendly. In this paper I am collecting some of these nuances which build up my Fulbright experience. It is not that life is difficult here or easy there, it is more about the approach of people that makes a difference. And people make things work.

1. Curriculum in School

The very next day of my arrival to the US, I immediately started the Full-time Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program at DePaul University in Chicago. Besides being a full-time graduate student, I also started working for the Economics Department of the university as a graduate assistant ten hours a week. This helped to reduce the tuition bill significantly. I really thank the university for this opportunity. As a graduate assistant I was assigned to three professors, two of whom were conducting a research on Central and Eastern European market adjustment and convergence issues. My responsibilities as a graduate assistant included involvement in and contribution to the research. I was in contact also with the Hungarian Statistical Office (KSH) from Chicago. Apart from that, I graded assignments of both graduate and undergraduate students.

Concerning my studies, I was on the fast track of finishing the program within four quarters (Summer and Fall 2006; Winter and Spring 2007). The courses I took during the first three quarters

formed the foundation of graduate management studies and were offered in a lock step format. I started with a mathematical and statistical course (Applied Quantitative Analysis) and a core management course (Managing Effective and Ethical Organizational Behavior). These courses provided me with the basic skills and theory required for the effective completion of future courses. In the Fall quarter, besides working part-time for the Economics Department, I undertook five classes. These courses heavily built on the first two and offered the knowledge required for managers of any organization, including the principles of human resources management, financial accounting and management of information systems. All these provided me with essential skills to manage and lead any business or organization in the future. In the Winter quarter the courses I enrolled in built on the previous material and elaborated on the various areas of businesses and other entities (Decision Making in Marketing, Operations Management, Management Accounting, Decision Making in Economics). Despite being on the fast track and working for the university in parallel, I completed most of the courses with highest distinction, and the professors I did research for found my contribution extremely useful. Thanks for the help from the statistical offices. By completing the fourth quarter (Spring 2007) of the program, I became equipped with all the skills, theoretical background and practical knowledge that such a graduate program could offer; and



thus, I become ready to contribute to the management of any organization in Hungary upon my return.

Besides the academic and work assignments, I lived an active student life. I was a participating member of the MBA Association at the university and helped to organize a wine tasting event to bring together current students and the alumni. I also had interest in charity events, which are very popular in the States (Junior Achievement for teaching grammar school kids). The Fulbright Program also offered a great opportunity to meet and interact with a variety of people on an individual as well as on a community basis. I was also an active contributor to the social life of the university and to the Fulbright community in our area. I spent a lot of time with my classmates working on school related projects, while I also had time for intense social life. In my opinion, one of the key elements of the Fulbright Program is that it offers opportunities to meet and work with both American and international people enabling the sharing of professional and creative insights as well as daily life experiences.

2. Experience from School

Isn't it fun? This was the most frequently asked question of my favorite professor, Paul A. Bodine, while jumping from one leg to the other. Indeed, it was a lot of fun.

The classroom experience was worth the money. I would not have believed it before I did it. In part it must be attributable to my background. I am a lawyer, and I have

not studied management and business related issues before. But in part it is also the way the experience was delivered to us. Professors were great and experienced. Professors were excellent communicators. Lectures were interactive. And students were part of the classroom experience. We prepared for classes in advance, read the book and articles before the class. In class we were elaborating on the subject we read, discussed some areas of the material, and shared our experience from work. Most of the classes had a consultative nature. Not only professors had real life experience, but they also invited practitioners such as entrepreneurs, senior managers and executives of various organizations. They all brought in their special story. Theory and experience was combined in a unique way.

Walgreens is one of the biggest and fastest growing pharmacy chains in the US. In a marketing class we worked on a project for the company and delivered our findings to board members and high ranked executives of the company. In preparation for the project, we visited different Walgreens stores, interviewed shop managers, conducted market research in form of surveys and so on. We spent several days working in our team, analyzing data and putting together ideas. We were using theory we learnt in class and read in the books. We were working like a marketing team of the company. And we were excited. We felt the pressure. We knew that there will be practitioners listening to our findings at the end. And it worked.

Everyone had ideas. And everyone dared to speak about their ideas. It is especially true for the class room. Every professor started with a statement that there is no stupid question. Anything was up for discussion. Discussing a question can open another insight also for those, who think they know the answer to that particular question. Questions are a way of learning and better understanding how things work. Questions can show the way to results. This is something most people were aware of.

3. Some More Experience

In America, there is a rule for everything. It is guaranteed that wherever you watch you will find a sign saying: “not allowed to...”, “not permitted to...”, “unlawful to...”. What is more surprising, people follow these rules. There are rules for parking a car. Most international students got parking tickets for not following all the parking rules. You better park within 12 inches from the curb. Park exactly parallel with the curb. Vehicles must be parked in the direction in which the traffic is moving. Otherwise expect a parking



ticket. Despite all the fuming these rules have caused, one can get used to it. And really, cars are parked masterly. This was especially salient once leaving the States.

Following rules is also true for people's mindsets. This made our stay very relaxed. As there are rules, people follow these rules, and this is to be expected. We had trust in people. The morning paper was not stolen, credit cards were not overcharged, couriers left valuable packages in front of the door. And many other things.

The same trust-rule applies for businesses. With one single idea and hard work anybody could build up an Inc 500 company. According to a study, the recipe to building a great company is the following. Have extensive experience in an industry; spend developing networks of contacts and colleagues; spot an opportunity when it comes along; develop business ideas with people who would later be your partners, customers, or suppliers; and finally, you can draw on the same network for start-up capital. Having all the rest, as long as someone is trustworthy, can have easy access to capital. Even if one idea did not go through, entrepreneurs

can have second and third tries. Not a problem. If however, someone is caught on cheating, and not following the rules, everything is over for that person.

The same is true for any business to customer relation. Businesses seem to care. Not because they are nice, but because that is what customers expect. And the only way to survival in the long run is meeting the customers' expectations. This was a principle that was followed everywhere. Surprisingly, everyone in the front line serving customers had business acumen. America is a convenient place for customers.

4. Closing

There are many more little nuances that build up my Fulbright experience in the US, I only listed a couple. Many other scholars must have seen similar things, or some may have seen different things, or the same, but differently. Anyway, spending a year abroad is a great adventure. I wish many other Hungarians can go through all the same. A great thank for the Fulbright Commission for all their support.