The Fulbright Specialist Program is a short-term alternative to the traditional Fulbright research and teaching grants. The purpose of the program is to match US academics with host institutions where they will spend 2-6 weeks engaging in a collaborative project on faculty development, curriculum revision, or delivering lectures and participating in specialized conferences, but not conducting their own research. The emphasis is on activities that directly benefit the host institution.

Several ARES members related their experiences with the program at the IRES sponsored panel at the 2012 ARES conference, revealing a range of activities and experiences. The way it usually works is that an American academic and a foreign host institution develop a proposal together and the host institution submits the proposal to the local Fulbright representative, requesting the identified American academic be assigned. Meanwhile, the American applies to be placed on the roster of approved candidates. If the proposal and applicant are approved, then Fulbright pays for airfare plus $200 per day honorarium and the host institution pays for in-country transportation, housing, and food. Specialists are allowed to schedule additional time for vacation or other business at the destination at their own expense.

Of course, I have to be different. I applied and was approved for the Specialist roster in 2009 as part of learning about the program first-hand before promoting to IRES members. There my name sat as other ARES members developed proposals with host institutions, were approved, and traveled to destinations in Europe and Africa. The first proposal I developed with an ARES partner was turned down by the local Fulbright representative.

On April 19, 2012 I received an email: “Dear Fulbright Specialist Grant Candidate, I am writing to ascertain your interest in being considered for a Fulbright Senior Specialist grant in Thailand….” at an international business college at a university I did not know and that does not have a real estate program for 6 weeks starting in June. I was already scheduled to conduct research in Finland and then attend the ERES and ENHR meetings in Europe, so I couldn’t go to Thailand in June. Plus, the project was to help with their implementation of TQF (what is that?), writing course learning objectives (OK), and assessment of outcomes (We all have to do it, but who wants to spend summer break doing it for others?). Because turning down an offer flat might reduce my chances of other more attractive opportunities, my response was that I could go for a maximum of 15 days in July-August and share my personal experiences with learning outcomes and assessment through a workshop and faculty meetings while learning about TQF (Thai Qualifications Framework) from them—looking cooperative, but sure to be turned down. On May 11, I received another email: “Congratulations! You have been officially selected as the grantee for project #4761 in Thailand.” What? Are you sure? A check directly with the host and the Thai Fulbright representative brought confirmation. They had chosen me off the roster and I was the Specialist they wanted, even if for only 2 weeks and at the end of their summer term. So, on July 21 I was on a plane for the 24-hour trip to Chon Buri, Thailand. The van was waiting at the airport, the apartment was ready, and the next day we started with an administrators’ meeting, followed by a fresh seafood lunch. The two weeks were packed with small group meetings, the workshop, and even speaking to 700 high school students at an open house. However, we also found time to sample some local restaurants, and the college arranged a day tour to Pattaya for its three international visitors led by a tourism instructor who is a licensed tour guide.

On the weekends I traveled to Bangkok where I met with IRES members at Thammasat University and Assumption University to talk about research as well as take in the tourist attractions. After my assignment, I scheduled a short trip to Singapore where I met with IRES members at National University of Singapore and enjoyed more tourist activities, even National Day celebrations.

So, the Fulbright Specialist assignment that I didn’t plan and didn’t particularly want, turned out pretty well. Did the hosts achieve their objectives? I think someone with more expertise in outcomes and assessment might have provided a more structured program, but I was able to provide greater assistance to faculty than expected on identifying two research projects that they could conduct that would turn an administrative burden into possible publications. If someone had worked with them for 6 weeks as requested instead of 2 weeks as I offered, they could have accomplished much more. And what about me? I earned some money for my time, visited new places, met with old friends, and expect to co-author two pedagogical articles. As I have learned through my international work, each opportunity to meet colleagues at other universities comes with unique rewards. This time, my main reward was the appreciation expressed by the junior faculty for the assistance I gave, but I do like the two silk scarves I received as gifts. Learn more about the Fulbright Specialist Program at: www.cies.org/specialists