

Fulbright report - 2016

Dear AFAA members

You may have been excused for thinking that your Executive members have not been up to much this last year. We know, we've been a bit quiet. Partly, this is because our personal lives have been incredibly hectic. Various, we have been having children; starting-up international companies; foster parenting; attending a launch of our work at the UN (and building an alliance with the NY Fulbright Alumni chapter); commencing new and complicated jobs; and addressing personal matters (in other words, what you'd expect from Fulbright alumni).

The Victorian Chapter held four quarterly meetings during 2016, including our annual Salon attended by more than 160 people. This event was featured in many media listings and two Fulbright scholars were interviewed on ABC Radio Victoria's Conversation Hour. The WA Chapter also held a very well-attended annual dinner with a guest speaker, and the SA Chapter hosted their annual Thanksgiving dinner.

On top of all this activity, we have also been extremely busy in our attempts to rebuild AFAA from the Commission's coup d'etat in January 2016. In an attempt to be transparent to our members, the Committee would like to be honest that this has been a difficult and sometimes emotionally draining task. Based upon the 2015 AFAA organizational review, member survey and 2016 AGM, it was voted that we would continue AFAA in the absence of a partnership with the Commission. While we remain dedicated to this task, and believe that AFAA has a distinct role to play in allowing Fulbright alumni to connect with and support one another as well as fundraising to continue to support the WG Walker Scholarship, the road to building a new AFAA has not been without its trials. 2016 has marked a year of survival for AFAA and we hope that 2017 will be marked as a year of growth.

For those of you not familiar with our recent past as an organization, a short summary is below. While I wish to focus primarily on the bright future of AFAA in 2017, I would like to be transparent in what the Committee has sustained over the course of 2015 and 2016 in fighting to maintain and re- envision AFAA:

Our transformational effort began mid-2015, when the new AFAA Executive Team was invited to attend the Commission in Canberra. Thinking that we were embarking on a team-building and orientation exercise (no agenda provided), instead we were presented with a thoroughly-prepared recommendation that we shut down. At this meeting, we were told that AFAA was a drain on the Commission's time and resources, and that we were "damaging the Fulbright brand".

Despite our efforts to repurpose AFAA in 2015, AFAA Executive and the organisation were portrayed as 'the problem'. Yet, as we made abundantly clear with supporting evidence, AFAA's woes were in large part a result of the way that the Commission itself was working; its decision to embark on a 'take no prisoners' approach to AFAA ultimately reflected the Commission's prevailing ideology and culture, rather than one based on appreciating AFAA's transformation

and sharing of information that required both parties to transform. In the first week of January 2016, whilst nearly everyone was on leave and/or recovering from 2015, the then CEO, Dr Tangerine Holt and then Chair, Prof Don De Batts, shut the door on AFAA and advised all alumni and stakeholders via email that AFAA was a poorly-functioning engagement option. Our access to the alumni database was terminated; and we lost what administrative support was provided by the Commission. We also lost the right of reply to the Commission's broadcast. This was in spite of six months' vigorous, transformational effort throughout 2015.

2016's achievements

As mentioned above, 2016 can be defined as a survival and year of new birth for AFAA. In the wake of the division between AFAA and the Commission, the National Committee dedicated substantial energy to ensuring that the day to day business of AFAA could be supported. The new AFAA website, <http://fulbrightalumni.org.au/>, was launched as a means of supporting members in maintaining their own contact details, renewing memberships, connecting to events and finding other members. By mainstreaming all day to day business within a single online platform, it reduces the amount of man power needed from the Committee to support these aspects of running the organisation. We hope that this platform will also allow members to connect to one another through the secure member database. Curious who your fellow AFAA members are? Login, click on the 'Directory' tab and browse the membership directory. We have just launched an additional public directory page, Local alumni contacts, which members may nominate to be included in. This page is meant to allow Fulbrighters and friends to find local contacts. We hope this allows Fulbrighters to connect with one another in a more organic manner without the need for organized events. For example, new scholars looking for local advice might look up relevant local contacts and reach out, or Fulbrighters locating to a new city might email the local contacts listed to meet up and have a coffee. We see this type of one on one connection as a hallmark of what AFAA brings to members: personal relationships that keep people connected to the Fulbright mission.

2016 has also seen the continued work of local chapters to host exciting events such as the WA annual dinner and SA annual Thanksgiving meal. Held in November, the Victorian annual salon, [*Remaining democratic in extreme times: challenges and directions*](#) featured two outstanding Fulbright Scholars, the US Consul General to Victoria, attracted more than 160 participants, and was [showcased on ABC Radio](#). We will continue to support these types of great Chapter events into the future and plan to also host National events. Our aspiration is to support a day long symposium event by 2018.

Re-creating a collaborative relationship with the Commission

It has long been AFAA's wish that we work closely and productively as partners with the Commission. Collaboration, the deepest form of partnership, involves exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and enhancing the capacity of the other partner for mutual benefit and a common purpose.

The Past:

- The Commission would fund national AFAA Executive to attend and host our AGM in the city at which the National Awards Dinner was being held
- The AFAA President would co-present Annual Fulbright Scholarships at the Awards Ceremony

- AFAA Chapter Chairs or representatives would speak at State awards receptions
- Incoming US Scholars and returning Australian scholars would be referred to AFAA for welcoming, orientation or debriefing

The Rapprochement

In September, 2016, members of the AFAA Executive met with the Commission's new CEO, Thomas Dougherty and Dr Pablo Jiménez. We were given a reasonably warm impression that the relationship between AFAA and the Commission might well improve with the election of a new Chair and refreshed Board in January 2017.

Currently:

- Fulbright Ambassadors (a Commission initiative) appear to have no active role — they may play a role at the upcoming Awards ceremony
- The Commission's communication about establishing its Regional Alumni Networks (RANs) makes no mention of AFAA and gives no information about how these will be coordinated. Furthermore, they will, in all likelihood, duplicate AFAA's efforts. We can only see this as exacerbating confusion amongst alumni and visiting scholars alike.
- We have sought information about the current status of the Commission's alumni engagement strategy. We have queried whether the commission has had an opportunity to evaluate its outcomes and impacts.
- We have reiterated our keen interest in supporting the development of an overall, national Alumni Engagement Strategy that highlights the unique contributions of both AFAA and the Commission (and possibly even the US State Dept), and outlines each party's contribution. In view of our shared commitment to a common purpose, we are keen to communicate a collaborative process and outcome like this to AFAA members, all alumni and scholars alike. How can we coordinate, cooperate and collaborate to ensure the best use of our resources to deliver the best outcome for all alumni and visiting scholars?
- The Commission's response to our questions was that "It is clear that as partner organisations AFAA and the Commission will continue the conversation about how to enhance our partnership for the common purpose of promoting and advancing the Fulbright Program in Australia"
- We were advised that "The Regional Alumni Networks (RANs) are flexible platforms to gather different initiatives related to alumni under common frameworks, that comprehend different alumni roles, structures and initiatives... [T]hey include alumni with no particular affiliation or role, as well as Fulbright alumni association members in Australia (i.e. AFAA) and the U.S. (Fulbright Association), Alumni Representatives, and Fulbright Ambassadors. We cannot limit RANs to AFAA only, but we are counting AFAA chapters and members as important part of these RANs. And likewise, AFAA members or chapters can participate in some RAN events and initiatives of interest but not in others. Perhaps we could visualise AFAA and the Commission as two circles of different size which converge in certain areas, initiatives and projects."
- The new Commission website does list AFAA in its Alumni section, but some way down the list (after the US-based organisations).

Next Steps

- Secretary Vanessa Adams and I will be meeting in Canberra with the Commission on Thursday 9th March. We will be able to report our impressions of this meeting and any agreed actions at our AGM later that day.

Great opportunities to discuss at our AGM on 9th March

- We are keen to host an annual Fulbright conference: the University of Melbourne could host this, as the Victorian AFAA Chapter's official sponsor
- We have an opportunity to employ someone to build our outreach and public presence
- We have an opportunity to adapt the NY Chapter's Fulbright Alumnus in Residence Program

Sincerely

Iain Butterworth, President AFAA

Vanessa Adams, Secretary AFAA