**Sabbatical, a time not wasted.**
An interview with Professor Kevin Dougherty.

Upon hearing about an international exchange of academics or students one might imagine a story of confusion caused by the clash or novelty of cultures; still another might anticipate an exciting tale of exploring the unknown. But no matter what, the outcome will always be a bundle of very personal emotions, learning experiences, and tools, which might enrich one’s life.

*Our interviewee*

It is really valuable, if a person shares with others their experiences of international travel and exchange. That is why, we are grateful to Professor Kevin Dougherty for telling us a little bit about his six month sabbatical at the Birkbeck College at the University of London, England during the first six months of 2016.

Presently, Kevin Dougherty holds a position of the Professor of Higher Education and Education Policy at the Education Policy and Social Analysis at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is also an affiliated professor at the Department of Organization and Leadership and since 1997 a research scholar at the Community College Research Center at TC. He has been teaching at various colleges since 1982 and, before arriving at Teachers College in 2000, taught at Manhattan College and Manhattanville College.

*Academic exchange idea*

Professors are allowed and encouraged to take a sabbatical year or semester off every 7 years or so. Some devote it to additional research; some write a book or an article; and some travel with their families. One of the organizations that help faculty combine those different options is the Fulbright Foundation (a program of the United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs). It offers opportunities for international exchanges for both students and faculty.¹

The Fulbright Program was proposed in 1945 by United States Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas to promote the exchange of scholars and students between the U.S. and countries from around the world. The legislation to establish it was signed in by President Harry Truman in 1946. In 2016, the organization celebrated its 70th anniversary. As Senator Fulbright said in 1983: "Educational exchange can turn nations into people, contributing as no other form of communication can to the humanizing of international relations." ([Fulbright Program website](https://www.fulbrightprogram.org)).

The United States Government finances it, but other countries contribute as well.

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¹ EPSA is a host for some Fulbright students from abroad and one of our alumni, Rezwana Chisti, is presently a Fulbright scholar in Macedonia. Prof. John Allegrante, Deputy Provost and Professor of Health Education, is the Fulbright Program Liaison for both students and faculty at Teachers College. You can learn more at [Fulbright Program at Teachers College for students](https://www.fulbrightprogram.org/teachers-college); [Fulbright Program at Teachers College for faculty](https://www.fulbrightprogram.org/teachers-college).
The section of the Foundation that deals with the exchange of scholars is called the Fulbright Scholars Program (Fulbright Scholar Program website). The website of the Program informs us that the organization sends around 800 US faculty and professionals each year to 140 countries to lecture, teach, and conduct research. Almost an equal amount of scholars from other countries visit the US at the same time.

Planning stage

Prof. Dougherty decided to apply for the Fulbright Scholars Program some time ago. He submitted his application in summer 2014 and received a response in March 2015 for a position beginning in January 2016. Having lived for many years abroad, he wanted to return to an international setting and live in another culture for an extended period of time. He thought first about Latin America, where he grew up. However, since he planned it also as a family time, and his wife does not speak Spanish, he researched the opportunities in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands, where English is spoken widely. During his search he came upon an opportunity at the University of London's Birkbeck College.2 Established in 1823, Birkbeck is a public university affiliated with the University of London. The position at Birkbeck interested Prof. Dougherty, because the college focuses on non-traditional students. Most of its students work during the day and take classes in the evening. This structure reminded him of the one at Teachers College. Moreover, many of those students are the first in their families to enter higher education.

Idea turns into action

So how does one get approved by the Fulbright Scholars Program? The process requires careful planning. Most of the positions offered are either in teaching, research, or in some kind of combination. First, one has to review the available positions. The one at Birkbeck College caught Professor Dougherty’s attention because of the college’s unique attitude towards admissions. Prof. Dougherty would have liked to have combined research and teaching, because it would have given him a better sense of what the student and faculty experience is in British higher education. However, the position at Birkbeck was only for research. In any case, the position at Birkbeck, working with his faculty host there, was very fulfilling.

After identifying a possible Fulbright position, the next step is to find a faculty host at the university to which one applies. Prof. Dougherty was lucky because a colleague had connected him to a professor at the University of London, Claire Callender. She is a Professor of Higher Education Policy at Birkbeck and at the Institute of Education (IOE)3 at the University of London. It was a double luck that not only does Prof. Callender teach at Birkbeck, but she also conducts research of great interest to her American visitor. Prof. Dougherty was interested in the role of information and information inequality in students’ college decisions (whether people go to college, which college they choose, etc.). Prof. Callender is a specialist in student aid. In her research, she tackles the topics of access to

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2 Birkbeck College website
3 for Prof. Callender’s profile and publications please review Claire Callender at Birkbeck
the financial aid and access to information about financial aid plays an important role in her studies. The next step in the Fulbright application process is for the visiting scholar to secure an agreement from the host college to host him or her to work there. The college issues a letter of sponsorship and this letter is attached to the application for a Fulbright scholarship. The application also needs to include a proposal of the research that an applying professor plans to conduct.

Research

How did the logistics of his work at Birkbeck look like? Professor Dougherty was given an office space, which he shared with two other researchers. He met with his faculty host every week or so, but otherwise did not have to keep any regular hours at the college. At Prof. Callender’s recommendation, Prof. Dougherty decided to examine not just the impact of inequalities of information in higher education access and success in England but the impact as well of other factors. He also examined the role of financial aid, the academic preparation process in English secondary schools, and the admissions process for UK universities. With help from Prof. Callender and other faculty at Birkbeck College, Prof. Dougherty met and interviewed people all over England on the topic of government policies affecting access to higher education. Those interviewed were government officials, researchers, faculty members, college administrators, advocacy group heads, journalists, and high school staff.

The final report that emerged from this research examines English and American policies to facilitate higher education access and completion. The report examines seven policy strands: academic advising in primary and secondary school; college outreach to students; financial aid; affirmative action or contextualization in higher education admissions; higher education retention and completion efforts; performance funding (financially rewarding institutions for student completion); and reliance on particular types of institutions. The report will be jointly issued in the US and UK and will be converted into a journal article.

Briefly about the UK admission to higher education system

During a six months period, while doing his research and talking to different people, Prof. Dougherty had a chance to observe the university system in the UK. When asked, he talked a little about his observations. Quotas in student admissions in the UK are against the law. However, in the form of “contextualized admissions,” the admissions committee can take a holistic view of a student and decide whether to admit a student. For example, Birkbeck College takes into account applicants’ socio-economic background, full secondary school record, and other learning experiences and often admits students with lower test scores than would other British universities. This gives students from diverse backgrounds more opportunities to get a university education. Also, the college makes available what is called an “Access” program which offers courses for high school students to prepare them for the A level exams that are used to determine university entrance. University academic programs follow the continental system. Students enter in cohorts, following a set program

4 More about the education system in the UK at https://www.gov.uk/browse/education
of studies. British universities do not have the same concept of “crafting the class” as do US institutions. The US concept refers to a process where an admissions committee tries to assemble a group of new students that would have a mixture of backgrounds, experiences, and abilities and would function as a peer group that will work together and exchange their knowledge and their education experiences with each other. U.S. admissions committees often want students to grow together socially, culturally, and academically. In the UK, universities are interested mostly in structuring the program of studies academically. The schools and faculty are less interested in how members of their student cohorts will adjust to and learn from each other socially and culturally. This concept is still regarded as a very American way to do things in higher education. Professor Dougherty sees most of the British elite universities, which are public institutions, as still reluctant to really open up to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, which makes Birkbeck a valuable exception.

**US vs. UK higher education policymaking**

When asked about the main differences between higher education policies in the public universities in the UK and US, Prof. Dougherty indicated that the UK’s system is much more centralized than the American one. While the four nations that constitute the UK (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) each control their higher education systems, there is no equivalent to the 50 different state systems that we have in the U.S. The UK’s political system is also more centralized, with less separation of powers. The chief executive (prime minister or first minister) is the head of the majority party in the UK or Scottish Parliament. As a result, policies can change very quickly with a change of government.

**The main benefit**

Towards the end of our conversation, when asked about the benefits of an academic exchange, Prof. Dougherty called it an opportunity and almost a necessity for both students and faculty to grow academically and personally. Participation in the cultural exchange, where one faces new social systems, beliefs, and behaviors, forces us to evaluate our own values, beliefs, and experiences. He sees exchanges like this as a chance to be in a new context for an extended period of time and to open one’s eyes to how things can be done differently and sometimes better, to learn from others, and to teach others what we consider our strengths. For example, Professor Dougherty was very interested in how English universities are required by the government to develop Access Agreements that specify what activities the universities will take to diversify their student bodies and support students to graduation and beyond. He wonders whether something like this can be done in the U.S.

**Additional advantages**

Beyond the research opportunities his Fulbright Fellowship provided, Professor Dougherty and his wife appreciated the opportunity for cultural explorations into the world of politics, social practices, theater, museums, and travel around the United Kingdom. A well-planned sabbatical does not have to be only work; it can also be a valuable time spent discovering and enjoying a new culture, geography, and cuisine with the members of one’s family. As an
unplanned bonus, Prof. Dougherty was in London during an important time in the UK history, when the country was preparing for the referendum called Brexit (United Kingdom exit from the European Union). With the US preparing for the 2016 Presidential Elections, those two important political issues made up for many interesting conversations. President Lyndon B. Johnson, former US President once said:

"...International education cannot be the work of one country. It is the responsibility and promise of all nations. It calls for free exchange and full collaboration...The knowledge of our citizens is one treasure which grows only when it is shared."

(Presidential Quotes)

Thank you Professor Dougherty for sharing your experience with us. We are looking forward to reading your report.