Georgia College Reaps Semi-Finalists for Fulbright Scholarship

By Cindy O’Donnell

Georgia College has produced four semi-finalists for U.S. Fulbright Scholarships – an impressive feat for a university its size.

The renowned, worldwide exchange program gives students and graduates the opportunity to study, teach or conduct advanced research in over 140 countries. More than 360,000 Fulbright recipients have participated in the program since its inception in 1946.

Since record keeping began in the 1970s — only one Georgia College graduate has ever received the Fulbright. That was to Mongolia in 2012. Thirteen students and recent graduates applied this year.

“Awards such as the Fulbright are one measure of excellence and preeminence,” said Dr. Kelli R. Brown, provost and vice president for academic affairs.

“Our students are some of the best in the state,” Brown said. “Having four Fulbright semi-finalists is a testament not only to our students, but also the faculty and staff that work with them.”

The semi-finalists are: graduate biology student Audrey Waits of Charlotte, North Carolina, who hopes to research pathogenic bacteria in reindeer with researchers from the Thule Institute at the University of Oulu in Finland; senior honors student and mathematics major Samantha Clapp of Rockmart, who hopes to spend two semesters in the Budapest Semesters in Mathematics program in Hungary and doing research at the Alfred Rényi Institute of Mathematics in Budapest; senior honors student and economics/history major Kevin Morris of Savannah, who hopes to spend nine months as an English Teaching Assistant in Macedonia; and 2013 theatre graduate and honors alumna Anna Fontaine of Stockbridge, who hopes to complete a master’s of fine arts in international acting at the University of Essex in Loughton, England.

About half of all semi-finalists become final recipients, said Anna Whiteside, assistant director of the Honors Program and coordinator of the National Scholarships Office at Georgia College. Final status will be announced by May from embassies in countries the applicants chose.

Selection for the Fulbright U.S. Student Program is rigorous. More than 3,600 candidates are recommended by 157 subsections of a national screening committee composed of 457 senior faculty and professionals. In the U.S., about 1,900 grants are awarded annually in all fields of study.

“The Fulbright Scholarship is one of the nation’s most prestigious postgraduate fellowships,” Whiteside said. “The fact that we have semi-finalists in a broad range of disciplines – STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), social science, humanities and the arts – really shows the degree to which Georgia College prepares our students and graduates to compete on the national stage.”

Audrey Waits

Audrey Waits said she wouldn’t have felt confident enough to apply for the Fulbright without Biology Professor Dr. Kenneth Saladin’s encouragement and her experience in the lab with Dr. Indiren Pillay, chair of biology and environmental sciences. Working toward a career in medicine, Waits is one of several Georgia College students to discover a new bacteriophage through microbiology research. In Finland, she hopes to explore how temperature affects pathogenic bacterial populations found in reindeer herds. Waits would take classes in Arctic Health and study Finnish, while learning about challenges Sami reindeer herds face in a changing climate.

“I also want to see the Northern Lights, meet a reindeer and experience living abroad,” she said.

Samantha Clapp

Samantha Clapp spent a summer in Bothell, Washington, doing undergraduate research in math. That experience prompted her to apply for the Fulbright. She’s always wanted to study abroad and live in a different culture. The opportunity would also prepare her to get a Ph.D. in math. “Hungarians are strong in many areas of mathematics, and I’m interested to learn math from a new perspective,” said Clapp, who is minorin in French and computer science. She wants to expand and strengthen her mathematical abilities and someday work for a company like Boeing or government agency like the National Institute of Health (NIH). “The Fulbright Scholarship definitely felt like one of those big, scary, awesome, I-am-never-going-to-get-it things,” Clapp said. “But becoming a semi-finalist makes it seem more possible. I am really happy to make it this far.”

Anna Fontaine

Anna Fontaine works as an actor and theatre-education artist in Atlanta. She applied for the Fulbright to deepen skills and pursue a master’s degree. She hopes to study 20 months at the East 15 Drama School in Loughton, England, about 20 miles from London. This opportunity would allow Fontaine to work with an international ensemble, perform on the global stage, see shows and participate in theatre outreach. For her final project, she plans to devise a show inspired by Shakespeare, incorporating stories from local migrants.

“I hope to lay the foundation for something I can continue to develop through my career,” she said, “and bring back to the states a means of community outreach to any group that feels disconnected from society.”

Kevin Morris

Kevin Morris applied for a Fulbright to serve communities in Macedonia that lack resources taken for granted in America. Minoring in international studies, Morris spent last summer as a regional security intern at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje. There, he learned people in Macedonia struggle with poverty, tense interethnic relations and a corrupt government. He hopes to go back and teach American Civics, as well as English. He also plans to use community theatre to facilitate public forums on racism, religious bigotry and politics.

“The people inspired me with their humor, insight and hospitality,” he said. “I have great faith in the people of Macedonia to overcome their differences and effectively address the obstacles that impede their progress toward prosperity.”

Morris wants to someday work for the U.S. State Department as a foreign service officer. The Fulbright would be a strong step in meeting that goal, he said.

“I feel pretty excited! Even if I don’t make it any further, just to be recommended as a semi-finalist is a huge validation of my work on and off campus,” he said. “From here on out, I’ll be keeping my fingers crossed!”
The young carry the old on their shoulders—wading through muddy floodwaters to town to sell bananas, buy supplies or see a doctor.

Roads in the small, East African village in Tanzania become dust bowls in the dry season and swimmable in the wet. No one has cars. Potholes are everywhere. Cement slabs under houses don’t keep the water out.

And it only gets worse, as agricultural practices render the land impervious to water.

But one Georgia College Honors student is doing something about it. Weltman said that with only two weeks left in her trip abroad last semester—senior geography major Jessica Craigg took out her handheld GPS (Global Positioning System) to log coordinates. She’s now using the computerized Geographic Information System (GIS) to chart roads and prioritize routes that need improvement.

She hopes to have the map done by May, when she graduates.

“Jessica’s research will help improve living conditions for countless citizens in Tanzania by helping improve travel conditions and linking economic resources to people who most need access to new opportunities,” said Dr. Doug Oetter, her geography professor.

“I am most pleased with Jessica’s attention to applying the skills we develop in geography to a part of the world where knowledge transfer is most needed,” Oetter said. “She has helped pave pathways not just for Tanzanians, but also for other Georgia College students interested in making their education significant in a global setting.”

Craigg was exposed to geography and geology at an early age, growing up in Duluth. Both parents worked as geologists, and her mother had a background in geography.

When she arrived at Georgia College, Craigg didn’t know what to major in. After talking with Oetter, she felt geography encompassed all her interests. It delved into land geography, as well as culture, weather climate, economics and politics.

“It was almost like not choosing a major at all,” Craigg said. “Being undecided, I didn’t want to choose one thing and eliminate other cool things. Geography was perfect, because there’s so many fields you can study.”

Craigg decided to study abroad last fall in Tanzania, after taking Dr. Eustace Palmer’s Intro to African Studies class and Dr. Amy Sumpter’s Geography of Africa. She’s written several papers on Tanzania—which merges aspects of India and Arabia, as well as southern and western Africa.

It’s a country with amazing natural resources and great populations of wild animals—but the average person earns less than a thousand dollars a year, Oetter said.

“She selected Tanzania not only because of its astounding natural splendor, but also because of its incredible challenges,” he said. “Her study examined the interaction of nature conservation and human development at the front line of difficult decisions, regarding how developing societies can and should provide for their citizens.”

Craigg joined the School for International Training (SIT), which exposed her to safari adventures, political-climate discussions and the opportunity to do independent research.

Some mornings her class would analyze lion-hunting behavior from a protective Jeep. In the evenings, students rode the plains in search of wild animals. Craigg saw herds of elephants with their young, leopards and cheetahs. She particularly liked the blue and white “Secretary Bird” which looks like it’s wearing a feather-pen hat and trousers.

One interesting discussion involved a planned highway on the Serengeti, an ecosystem where the world’s largest animal migration occurs. The road would bring needed economic help to villages, but cut off the great journey of wildebeest.

In the last month of her trip, Craigg chose to research the relationship of a large national park with its neighbor—an impoverished, small community called Mto wa Mbu (mm-toe WAH mm-boo), which in Swahili means “River of Mosquitoes.” It’s located on the edge of Lake Manyara National Park, about two hours west of Arusha in Northern Tanzania.

“The community popped up there because of tourism. But there’s a lot of corruption in the system,” Craigg said. “The national park generates a huge amount of money, but a lot of times that doesn’t end up trickling down to the community.

“For a lot of people, their entire livelihood is selling fabrics or trinkets to the tourists. And they’re not going to come,” she said. “If the roads are flooded.”

Through an interpreter, Craigg interviewed townpeople who told her their biggest problem was poor roads. In the dusty dry season, they cover their faces with bandanas. In the wet season, some roads become impassable for months and are especially troublesome for the elderly and disabled.

“If you’re someone who’s very very poor, you’re going to live in an area that most likely floods a lot,” Craigg said. “Water goes into houses and shops. Everyone’s houses are built on cement blocks to stop the water as much as they can. But the flood level is rising every year.”

In the last two weeks of her trip, Craigg veered from her original research and walked the roads with her GPS, logging coordinates of about 400 roads. She noted the condition, traffic volume, amount of flooding and whether important structures raised a road’s priority status.

She’s now mapping five of the most-used, interior roads and dozens of less-traveled pathways. The GIS, a virtual-mapping software, enables Craigg to make “heat maps” targeting areas that need repairs the most.

“To my knowledge, this hasn’t ever been done before,” Craigg said. “I am really excited for the potential of what I’m doing to directly benefit the community that helped me do my research.”

When done, Craigg will share maps with the Tanzanian community and government. She’s hoping the national park will help fund repairs.

Honors director Dr. Steven Elliott-Gower said Craigg’s research will provide great practical value to the people of Mto wa Mbu.

“It reflects the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that she has acquired here at Georgia College,” he said. “It also reflects and reinforces our commitment to public service—in this case, at the international level.”
Georgia College Joins the #YouAreWelcomeHere Campaign

The #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign encourages universities around the US and globally to create and share their own videos in which the university faculty and students share their welcoming messages for international students. “This campaign is designed to remind students that the United States, and in particular, Georgia College is a place of study and cultural exchange,” said Dr. Eric Spears, Assistant Vice President of International Education. “Prospective students are not always clear about recent immigration regulation changes and associated political rhetoric,” said Spears. “The video serves to remind them they are welcome in the USA and Milledgeville.” Other universities involved in the project include James Madison University, Roosevelt University, University of Vermont, Merrimack College, Long Island University in Brooklyn and the City College of New York.

The IEC Implements a New Strategic Plan

The IEC implemented a new strategic plan in January 2017. This new strategic plan works toward the University’s overall vision to become a preeminent public arts university. International Education is crucial to the ambition to prepare young adults for life, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. The IEC strategic plan focuses on increasing the percentage of study abroad students over the next five years. Currently, GC is a top-tier study abroad participant institution in the University System of Georgia (USG) with 15% of its students engaging in education abroad prior to graduation. The goal is to increase this participation percentage to 25% in five years. Another goal is to increase the international student enrollment to 130 students within five years (GC currently has 65 international students). Included with the new strategic plan is a revised mission statement and a new vision statement.

Announcements:

The 32nd Annual International Dinner
March 11 at 7 p.m. in the Magnolia Ballroom.
Tickets are on sale now and going quickly!

Faculty-led study abroad proposals for spring and summer of 2018 are due on Monday, April 3rd.
Contact Ms. Liz Havey at liz.havey@gcsu.edu for more information.

Faculty development grants for international travel and study abroad program development are due Friday, April 7th. Contact Dr. Eric Spears at eric.spears@gcsu.edu for more information.

Georgia College students attend the annual Georgia International Leadership Conference (GILC) at Rock Eagle in February.

Edited by Caroline Galphin and Madison Enyart