

STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE

Margaret Cusack, Spain (Region of Madrid), English Teaching Assistantship

My drive to study and acquire foreign languages defined much of my education, and prompted my initial interest in gaining professional experience abroad to complement my classroom studies. I was fortunate to find scholarships allowing me to realize this goal as an undergraduate, and my time abroad provided an arena for me to explore and merge the various academic pursuits which came to shape my current ambitions. The connections I established as a student and educator informed my understanding of social justice on an international level, and demonstrated to me the profound value of cross-cultural interaction and exchange. Recognizing the Fulbright program's endorsement of this value, I felt compelled to apply for this unique opportunity to expand my teaching experience in a country fundamentally tied to my intellectual interests. As a Spanish Major, I have studied the rich, complex history of the Iberian Peninsula, which has prepared me to contextualize my understanding of Spain's current situation within an international framework. Furthermore, my volunteer work with the unemployed has led to my rising interest in the burgeoning economic crisis, which has motivated me to better understand the social and political forces undermining Spain's economy. I am particularly interested in tracing the efficacy of policies enacted to restore economic security, and initiating community efforts to assist the unemployed and alleviate social unrest. These are the factors guiding my decision to pursue a position in Spain, the country where I will most effectively foster a meaningful cultural exchange and be able to evolve as a teacher and global citizen.

Though I benefitted immensely from all of my experiences abroad, I feel I gained the most from my time teaching English in Hong Kong through Summerbridge, an organization dedicated to providing tuition-free English education to local, underprivileged students. I spent two summers teaching Creative Writing courses there, and the connections I forged with students and fellow teachers alike had a powerful impact on the trajectory of my career. I returned this past summer as an administrator, or Mentor Teacher, to conduct training, review lesson plans, and support teachers throughout their curriculum development. Observing the classes of twenty eight different teachers was an eye-opening opportunity that exposed me to a flood of new ideas. Through careful observation of diverse teaching methods, I was able to identify and learn from the techniques yielding the best results. My work with this organization inspired my current approach with students to set high expectations, empowering them with confidence, and connect personally with them through anecdotes and open discussions.

As a Fulbright Scholar in Spain, I would experience a culture central to my academic interests, adapt my teaching approach to a new environment, and make meaningful connections in a community normally inaccessible to me. The civic engagement project presents a chance for me to utilize my prior experience and work with the unemployed population, offering free English classes to enhance their professional credentials. This opportunity would be invaluable in achieving my future goals to pursue a dual Master's degree in International Relations and TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language), and eventually working to promote education and international diplomacy. My time spent researching this position revealed possibilities offered in Spain, such as placements in secondary schools and participation in Global Classrooms Model UN, that demonstrated the program's unique alignment with my own interests and affirmed my decision to apply. For this reason, I hope to be granted this prestigious opportunity, which will undoubtedly shape me as an individual and allow me to enter graduate school with the practical experience necessary to truly advance in my field of study.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

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It is my belief there exists defining moments in every individual's life that stand out with palpable clarity amid the tangled blur of memories accumulated over time. These are the moments, most often characterized by the people around us, that shape our personality, construct our values, and guide us in the decisions we make during our lifetimes. In this way, I owe much of my character to my family, whose close and extended members lived just walking distance from my childhood home in Tampa, Florida. I am particularly indebted to my grandfather, whom I owe my first encounters with the Spanish language. He was a trilingual, first generation American, raised in the tightly-knit Italian-Cuban community that flourished around the cigar factories in Tampa's Ybor City. Born in the 1920s, he possessed a perceptive wisdom about the world and an undying optimism in everyone's inherent goodness, which I cherished and respected as a child. Our trips to the West Tampa coffee shops are some of my most poignant childhood memories, full of buttery Cuban toast and steaming cups of *café con leche*, encircled by an incomprehensible babble of Spanish. Feeling irritated at my own inability to understand, but exhilarated by fantasies of one day decoding this mysterious language, and adding my own voice to their conversations. Later in life, he served as my conversation partner outside the classroom, always persuading me to take advantage of every opportunity to practice.

Another defining moment occurred in elementary school, when a student named Rosalia arrived from Colombia and joined our class ranks midway through the year, not knowing a word of English. This is the first time I recall observing a newcomer's introduction to a relatively homogenous social environment, in this case, public school in the American suburbs. Her presence forced me to confront the concept of relocating to a new country and school, being taught in a completely foreign language, and I was paralyzed with fear just considering the idea. For this reason, I was mortified by other students' attempts to mock or exclude her and tried to discourage their behavior. As she learned English, I began talking more often with her, and I marveled at her unyielding determination and success in acquiring English and assimilating to the culture of our small primary school. I truly believe my interactions with her at such a young age instilled a deep sense of empathy and respect for those learning new languages or adjusting to unfamiliar cultures, and elicited my interest in teaching English language learners.

My journey through high school was full of defining moments in and of itself, but I attribute my most valuable learning experiences to a series of insightful and motivating teachers, whose careful guidance determined the course of my academic growth. Each educator left a unique and lasting impression on me, from my Spanish Literature teacher, who piqued my curiosity in antiquated prose, to the instructors in my weekend Mandarin classes, who tried to mitigate my challenges as a minority in a class of all Chinese students. I am grateful to have benefitted from such influential teachers, and passionate about extending the availability of such quality education both domestically and abroad. Enriching as my high school experience was, my years as a university student played an even greater role in my maturity. Especially my experiences traveling abroad on scholarship, where my learning assumed a concrete form outside the traditional classroom, an amalgamation of enlightening, real world experiences to which textbooks could never equate. In short, an intricate web of significant moments and exceptional people greatly influenced my decision to apply for a Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship in Spain. If afforded this opportunity, it would undoubtedly strengthen my character and prepare me to pursue my professional interest in education and international relations.