

## Alumni Awarded Fulbrights to Support Research in China

May 06, 2014

Forest Purnell '14 and Benjamin Underwood '13 have been awarded prestigious Fulbright grants to pursue research projects in China over the upcoming academic year.

Purnell, who graduated this winter, plans to engage and examine Chinese culture-makers in Beijing, while Underwood will be supporting and learning from an emerging renewable energy industry in the city of Kunming.

The Fulbright U.S. Student Program offers fellowships for U.S. graduating college seniors, graduate students, young professionals, and artists to study, research, or teach abroad for one academic year.

### **Forest Purnell '14**

While interning for the state television channel, China Central TV, Purnell began to think about how his colleagues and other creative people in China are balancing multiple demands: from the market and the state, urban and rural. While artists working overseas have become the face of contemporary Chinese culture, "it is the cultural agents who choose to work within a space of productive friction between state and market whose effects are felt in the way people live," he wrote.

For his Fulbright—which is partially funded by the Chinese Government Scholarship— Purnell will conduct a series of video interviews, which will bring worldwide audiences face-to-face with current Chinese culture-makers: from industrial designers to architects, television producers to online developers. He will examine how these creative designers navigate state and market demands, and what the world can learn from them. The series, entitled *For the Masses*, will be hosted on a bilingual website to give the videos an international reach.

"I see the U.S. Student Fulbright Program as a personal opportunity to engage in a focused way with a culture and society I have witnessed in transformation over the last decade, and to extend and contribute [to] that knowledge" he said in his personal statement.

Purnell also received a language enhancement grant. He will do an intensive language study this summer before his Fulbright year begins.

### **Ben Underwood '13**

Underwood spent the 2012 spring semester studying in Kathmandu, Nepal, where he noticed the presence of garbage in daily life. This contrasted sharply with the day-to-day experience in America, where garbage is bagged and removed from view. However, Underwood grew up near Yellowstone National Park and knew that "nature wastes nothing."

While in Nepal, he came across anaerobic digestion (AD) technology, which converts organic waste—including food scraps, lawn cuttings and manure—into two valuable by-products: biogas, a gaseous fuel; and slurry, a high-quality fertilizer.

In Nepal, biogas can be used to displace demand for wood and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as cooking fuels, a solution to the growing problems of deforestation and dependence on fossil fuel imports.

Underwood sees an opportunity more broadly. The AD waste-to-energy industry inherently links the drive for profit to environmental and social benefits: the more waste businesses treat, the more renewable energy and organic fertilizer they can sell and the more demand for fossil fuels they can displace. Underwood is already staking a claim in the industry, still fledgling in the U.S., with his start-up Fuel City, which aims to originate, finance, and manage AD waste-to-energy projects across the country. The Fuel City website states, "We envision AD diverting 50 percent of the USA's urban waste and supplying five percent of our national natural gas demand by 2040."

With his Fulbright, Ben will be going to Kunming, China, to immerse himself in the booming local AD industry, as a means to both support the businesses he will study and to learn lessons about scalability that he will bring back to his work at Fuel City.

"I'm drawn to the paradox of the least-desirable material becoming a tool for social advancement," said Ben. "If you risk association with unclean materials and places, you can get money, for example, to send your children to school. It's rags to riches, literally."

Ben encourages people who are interested to visit [fuelcity.org](http://fuelcity.org) or to help finance Fuel City's first feasibility study through Kickstarter – the project is entitled "Fuel City."

### **About the program**

The Fulbright Program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government and is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. The primary source of funding for the Fulbright Program is an annual appropriation made by the U.S. Congress to the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Participating governments and host institutions, corporations and foundations in foreign countries and in the United States also provide direct and indirect support. Recipients of Fulbright grants are selected on the basis of academic or professional achievement, as well as demonstrated leadership potential in their fields. The Program operates in over 155 countries worldwide.