ELIZABETH “LIZ” PANTALEON HAS A tried-and-true college hack, and it’s not using flash cards. She turned to another resource to attain the experience she desired to develop her career, education and personal growth goals: 

prestigious awards.

Liz earned a BA in International Studies, BS in Public Relations and minor in Arabic Languages and Literature from the University of Florida. She won a Gilman Scholarship as an undergraduate, and a Fulbright and Pickering award post-graduation. These prestigious award experiences shaped her education and career track towards foreign service, despite their details often feeling like a mystery, or simply out of reach. Liz harnessed awards to attain experience that would support her success, and as a first-generation Latina woman, found herself fueled by a desire to overcome statistics. “I’m going to beat this,” she recalls thinking. “And I did.”

The road to achievement in this arena requires determination, discipline, vision and support. Determination to do the work and persevere; discipline to research, apply and network; a vision for personal and professional goals; and support by friends, faculty and staff. Liz’s deeply personal, reflective experiences offer honest advice and inspiration for other passionate students.

Here are her tips to finding your path and becoming your best academic and professional self through prestigious awards.
Getting Started

Defining Points
First, is it a fellowship? A scholarship? Something else? These prestigious awards offer a time-based, funded opportunity to study specific topics or conduct research across the world. The conditions, details and stipulations vary, so research each award carefully.

“I gleaned out the recipe of what I needed.”
It was 2 am at Lib West during a late-night study session when Liz came across the name of US ambassador to UN, Samantha Power. Intrigued by the position, she halted studying and dove deep into researching Power’s career by way of “reverse engineering.” Liz made a checklist of her own; study abroad, Fulbright and a Master’s in Foreign Service suddenly became new goals.

Finding Opportunities
“Put the work in.”
Interested in prestigious awards, but unsure where to start? As the first in her family to attend college, Liz could only rely on the insight and experience of her campus connections for application support.

Crafting her strategy from the ground-up, she identified the following tools and tips:

1. **Spreadsheets**
   Stay organized with a spreadsheet: award name, description, deadline, URL.

2. **Newsletters**
   Subscribe to all the newsletters – UF departments, fellowship sites.

3. **Make Time**
   Block out an hour or two each week to read through opportunities.

4. **Make Connections**
   Liz sought perspective from peers who had completed prestigious awards, deepened connections with faculty; and met with application coaches from the Honors office.

5. **Get Involved**
   “This is the best place to explore,” Liz says of UF. She asserts from experience that the only way to know what interests you is to try new things.
Prestigious Awards in Action – and Retrospect

Liz is an alum of both Gilman and Fulbright, and is currently a Pickering fellow. Here’s the difference between them – and why she recommends you partake in as many as you can.

Gilman Scholarship
Overview

**Duration: 21 - 360 Days**

The Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program is offered through the U.S. Department of State. It “enables students of limited financial means to study or intern abroad, providing them with skills critical to our national security and economic prosperity.” The award allows American students to deepen culture and language skills in diverse regions of the world.

The Gilman Scholarship requires two lengthy essays. Liz’s writing tip: don’t write what you think the program wants to hear. Tell your honest, true and intriguing story – and be sure to answer the prompt. Accepted students are also asked to pay their experience forward through a method of their choice.

Liz was accepted to study in Jordan, shared her journey through a blog and served as a Study Abroad Peer Advisor (SAPA) at the UF International Center to advise students on study abroad programs and opportunities like Gilman and the International Center’s Learning Without Borders scholarship.

What Liz Learned

Any application experience is an opportunity to hone, strengthen and expand your skills. It involves vigorous self-reflection. The top 3 things Liz learned from applying to Gilman were:

1. How to be raw
2. How to link your story with your goals
3. The critical role storytelling plays in a strong application

Keeping connected with your new network after returning is key to sustaining the experience. Liz notes Gilman has a “great alumni network” which offers a like-minded community of role models and friends.
Fulbright Grantee

Overview

Duration: 4 - 24 Months

The Fulbright U.S. Student Program is a cultural exchange program that offers over 2,000 grants to complete teaching, research or combination of teaching/research awards in 150+ countries. There are award options for both academics and professionals.

Applicants make their case to spend time in a certain country through a grant purpose essay and personal statement.

What Liz Learned

Liz was the first Fulbright English Teaching Assistant to the West Bank/Palestinian Territories. “The ‘F’ in ‘Fulbright’ is for ‘flexible’,” she says of the experience, which involved developing curriculums for America House. Creating so much on-site, paired with Imposter Syndrome brought on by the magnitude of the projects, was a challenge – but Liz credits her success to UF’s English Language Institute (ELI), where she worked as a Language Assistant. “I think it’s the best job on campus,” she says, urging anyone with a passion for communication and intercultural connection to get involved. At the ELI (or, “heaven on Earth,” as she calls it) Liz learned to organize and plan activities for people from across the world – an experience she applied to her work at the West Bank.

Another challenge was seeing the daily reality for Palestinians. This motivated Liz to pursue conflict resolution training, which took the form of the Salaam Fellowship, a two-week experience in Morocco completed directly after Fulbright.

Interested in Fulbright?

Check out #FellowshipFridayUF on Instagram to “meet” other Gator alums of the program!
Pickering Fellow
Overview

Duration: 2 years
The Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship Program, based on the fundamental principle that diversity is a strength in diplomatic efforts, attracts and prepares outstanding, historically underrepresented young people for Foreign Services careers in the U.S. Department of State.

The fellowship helps finance two-year graduate programs, two summer internships, mentorship from a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), and other professional development activities. Following completion of the program, fellows—now considered such for life—agree to a five-year service commitment to the Department of State’s Foreign Service.

Liz is completing her Pickering fellowship at her dream school: Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

What Liz Learned
As a current fellow, Liz imparts wisdom on both the application process and her experience in the program.

“There’s a phrase in Spanish that was my motto when applying to this fellowship: lo que esta pa’ti, nadie te lo quita – in English: what is for you, nobody can take that from you,” says Liz. “Every element [of the fellowship] aligns with me, ever since I came across Samantha Power’s name that night in Lib West.”

Despite her commitment early on, Liz was turned down twice from Pickering and its nearly identical counterpart, Rangel.
“I was a top alternate for Pickering in the past. I put it on a pedestal and let my nerves get the better of me,” says Liz. But on the third try, she faced the application with the mindset that, if she were rejected again, she could reach her goals another way. That calmness made all the difference: Liz was accepted. “Persistence is key,” she says.

Now a few months into the program, Liz’s two greatest takeaways are:

1. The value of direct mentorship
Pickering provides each fellow with a sponsor, a mid-career FSO, and a mentor, a senior FSO, who provide advice and invaluable access.

2. The impact of informational interviews
“It’s normal just to message someone,” says Liz. “Everyone is here to help.”

Pickering Fellows Zoom with former US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power
“You need to learn how to tell your story. Telling your story isn’t just recounting – it’s how you learned from your experiences. How will that pull you toward your goals?”

The most major key to landing a formative prestigious award experience doesn’t lie in GPAs or SATS. It’s your unique story – with the condition you share it well. But how does one do that?

“It’s one thing to be academically curious, but to be able to walk the walk – that’s what shows you’re putting in the effort,” says Liz. “Find your passions and link them, because they can be linked.”

Learning to tell your story is a critical skill that will develop, improve and serve you again and again, but it isn’t always easy. One common roadblock: self-doubt. Whether it’s Imposter Syndrome or simply lack of confidence, diffidence is a challenge that everyone experiences. “Sometimes you lose the flair for yourself. Sometimes you don’t see your greatness as well as others do,” says Liz. “When that happens, talk to people who know and love you. Let them shower you in that and give you what you need to tell your story.”

This advice highlights another ingredient for success: a support system. Although prestigious awards are experienced by the applicant, the road to that experience is a group effort. Various assistance – whether a peer pep rally or faculty mentorship – offers clear, objective and informative input, strengthening applications and supporting the emotional wellness of the applicant.

Last tip: utilize UF’s ELI and the UF Writing Studio. While a fruitful resource for all, international students may find involvement particularly beneficial, as most application essays are expected to be well written in English.
Looking Ahead

Liz will enter the United States Foreign Service in 2022.
Next Steps

Is a prestigious award right for you?

If you’re a self-motivated student looking to expand your breadth and depth of experiences: yes. Set goals, hone your storytelling, and get into the habit of reflecting on your experiences. Prestigious awards are achievable for those who are willing to do the work and keep supportive people around them.

Do your award research, then get in touch with UF’s External Scholarship & Fellowship Coordinator, Kelly J. Medley at kmedley@honors.ufl.edu. Kelly is a resource for all Gators, both Honors and non-Honors.

Where will prestigious awards take you?

Quick Links:
http://www.honors.ufl.edu/current/prestigious-fellowships/
https://eli.ufl.edu/