

STRATA

AMERICAN FRIENDS

OF THE ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT FOUNDATION

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

At a time of continuing challenges in transatlantic cooperation, the US Humboldt Alumni Network remains a strong and stable pillar of US-German relations. I witnessed firsthand the vitality of the network through discussions with alumni during an April visit to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and more recently at a Humboldtian reception in Atlanta and visits with alumni in Chicago. I heard from Humboldtians many times over that their time on Humboldt programs was among the most rewarding experiences in their lives. It was inspiring to hear these stories and I hope to hear many more in the coming year.

In 2019, American Friends of AvH will join the AvH in celebrating the 250th anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt's birth and his legacy. Led by its Board of Directors, American Friends will explore and catalogue the experiences of US alumni, secure feedback on interests and programmatic priorities, inform US Humboldtians about alumni opportunities, and foster new network activity.

Our efforts to deepen and enrich the US Humboldt alumni network will build on the accomplishments of this past year. In 2018 American Friends of AvH deepened its engagement with "Humboldtians on Campus." We held quarterly calls with HoCs and provided resources to promote AvH programs at their institutions. The American Friends of AvH Alumni Council also approved 5 grants this year (and 2 more for 2019) to bring together alumni and to introduce AvH programs to younger researchers.

American Friends of AvH is also working to improve communications with alumni and partners. We launched our new website americanfriendsofavh.org in early October and in January will release *Connect*, our bimonthly electronic newsletter. *Connect* will feature news and updates from US Humboldtians, the AvH, and American Friends of AvH.

Part of our rebranding effort is this new, redesigned version of *Strata*. For over a decade, *Strata* has informed alumni and partners about our programs and showcased the accomplishments of US Humboldtians. Since some of these functions will be served by *Connect*, *Strata* will now take the form of an issue brief—providing alumni commentaries and insights into salient issues in transatlantic research. I hope you take some time to peruse our new content and find it of interest.

2018 has been a fruitful year and I would like to wish all our alumni and partners a wonderful holiday season. I also extend my gratitude to the many donors who have helped to make our work possible through their generous contributions. We look forward to 2019, when we, together with the AvH, will celebrate the accomplishments of Humboldtians and the continued relevance of Alexander von Humboldt's legacy in a world of global science and scholarship.

With best wishes for 2019,

Cathleen Fisher, PhD

President

OUR MISSION

To become a leading source in the United States for the promotion of national and international networking, exchange, and creative collaboration among scientists, scholars, artists, and other professionals, consistent with the goals of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation of Germany.

OUR VISION

To mobilize the intellectual curiosity, creativity, experience, and passion of Humboldtians to shape research, higher education, and professional development in the United States and beyond.



ANNOUNCING OUR NEW WEBSITE, AMERICANFRIENDSOFAVH.ORG

In preparation for our celebration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt, American Friends of AvH is pleased to announce the launch of its redesigned website, americanfriendsofavh.org. The new website features streamlined content and highlights our work in sustaining, extending, and leveraging the US Humboldt experience and network. Features such as simplified navigation, alumni testimonials, expanded video content, and newsletter archives will help inform alumni about our work and the many engagement opportunities available to them.



Dr. Katrin Amian, head of the North America, Australia, New Zealand, Oceania Division, Sponsorship and Network Department at the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation with Humboldtians from Emory University and the Georgia Institute of Technology at the October 4th alumni reception in Atlanta.

THE MAKING OF FRUITFUL INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

A Humboldtian's Journey from Mexico to the United States and Germany

HUGO SANABRIA

Education and Exploration

Growing up in Mexico, I was blessed with parents who encouraged me to pursue higher education at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, one of the premier universities in Latin America. It was then, while obtaining my BS in physics engineering, that I had my first academic international study abroad experience. I spent the spring of 1998 at Iowa State University. That experience fueled my desire to obtain a PhD in the United States. It was during my summer break before starting my PhD that I backpacked around Europe—a trip that left a lasting impression. At that moment, I was naïve and short sighted about what my future would hold.

After finishing my PhD in physics at the University of Houston and working as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston, I started attending professional meetings in my research discipline. There, I encountered people from around the world who had come to present their research and engage with colleagues. It was in one of those meetings that I met Professor Claus A. M. Seidel, who later became my mentor and host at the Heinrich Heine University in Germany. He invited me to apply for the prestigious Humboldt Research Fellowship for Postdoctoral Researchers. With the notification of award, and without prior knowledge of the German language, I joined his group in the spring of 2010. Fortunately for me, my wife had studied German for four years during college, which turned out to be a great help in adjusting to cultural and lifestyle differences. Shortly after arriving in Germany, we toured Germany with all the recent fellowship recipients. This provided a unique opportunity to learn more about the country, visit and explore fabulous places, and form new friendships.

My Humboldt Experience and the Birth of Successful Collaborations

Professor Seidel is well-respected by his peers in both Germany and the United States. Through him, I had the opportunity to meet many of his colleagues and collaborators. One particular meeting turned out to be instrumental—the 512th WE-Heraeus-Seminar on Single Molecule Kinetics, hosted in 2012 at the Physik Zentrum in Bad Honnef, Germany. The community that met uses Förster Resonance Energy Transfer (FRET) as a tool to probe the distance between two light-sensitive chemical compounds,



Hugo Sanabria and family during their stay in Germany

typically attached to biomolecules. The tool helps scientists monitor structural and kinetic information with the goal of understanding how biomolecular machines carry out their functions.

One evening during the conference, the idea of establishing a set of standards across the FRET community was born. Fast forward to 2018, in a benchmark blind-study that included over 20 laboratories around the globe, we contributed to the establishment of protocols for data acquisition and processing of the FRET efficiencies that are used to derive absolute distances, thus reducing the uncertainty and increasing the precision of the measurements. These results were recently published in *Nature Methods* (September 2018). My lab at Clemson University is one of the laboratories that participated in such a study. This collaborative effort would not have been possible if I had not been exposed to the networking opportunities that I enjoyed during my stay in Germany as a Humboldt Research Fellow.

To maintain strong ties with former alumni, my former host intuition created the StayConnected@HHU program. This program is partially sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and recently funded the living expenses and stipend of Mr. George Hamilton, a second-year physics PhD student from Clemson University currently under my supervision. He spent 10 weeks in Germany during the summer of 2018. The results from experiments collected during that time will be presented at the international Biophysical Society Meeting in early 2019. We hope that this collaboration will eventually lead to more publications and even greater cooperation across the Atlantic.

Collaborations Transforming Biomedical Research

My research in the field of biophysics¹ focuses on understanding the connection between the structure, dynamics, and function of synaptic

signaling molecules and protein misfolding diseases and helps to not only alleviate the excruciating cost of treatment, but also works toward the prevention of neurological disorders. It is known that the more than 1000 neurological disorders directly connected to synaptic transmission are the leading cause of hospitalizations and lost productivity in the United States, surpassing other diseases including heart disease and cancer.

Collaborations are essential to bridging the various scientific disciplines of the biophysics field and I have found great partners in chemistry, biology, neuroscience, and of course, physics. A recent collaborative effort—sponsored jointly through the National Institutes of Health—with a colleague I met at an international meeting was recently published in *Nature Communications* (September 2018). The article highlights the power of the use of FRET in structural biology by providing a structural model of a fragment of a protein linked to the onset of strokes. This structure can potentially be used to help engineer new drugs for treating stroke patients.

Promoting International Experiences at Clemson

I carry my passion for international collaboration with me at Clemson University, where I served as a member of the university-wide Council of Global Engagement, which reports to the Associate Provost for Global Engagement. Currently, I am a member of the Committee for Global Engagement at the College of Science level, a committee that advises the dean. Among our activities, we prioritize and advise on international partnerships that fit within the university-wide strategic plan. This newest plan explicitly calls for global initiatives that increase “opportunities for students to interact across cultures and national boundaries.” This initiative is part of the ClemsonForward Strategic Plan² and is very much in line with the ideals of Alexander von Humboldt, who would certainly affirm his agreement with the words, “the most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have never viewed the world.”

See SANABRIA

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American Friends of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation serves the members of the US Humboldt Alumni Network and the broader US scientific, higher education, and professional communities. Working with Humboldtians and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, we address the changing needs of US Humboldt alumni over the course of their professional careers.

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* Denotes individuals who made multiple donations in 2017

We are profoundly grateful to our donors.

Your generosity supports American Friends and the US Humboldt Alumni Network.

To donate, please use the enclosed envelope or give online at www.americanfriendsofavh.org/give-now.

SANABRIA

At present, only ~10% of the enrolled undergraduate population at Clemson is able to study abroad. Among the top limiting factors that students have expressed are the cost of international programs and the postponement of their graduation date if they choose to go abroad. While this might be true in some cases, it is not the norm—many programs are reasonably priced and, in many cases, students are able to graduate on time. For those who decide to apply for international programs, Europe is by far the most popular destination, with 55% of applications aimed at

programs on the continent. At the College of Science, shadowing programs such as medical missions are the most popular because they recruit from the large pool of students seeking jobs in the healthcare field. Unfortunately, the hard sciences suffer from too few students to justify the existence of many faculty-led exchange programs and this is something that we, the faculty, would like to change. The clear vision of globalization at Clemson, through the university-wide strategic plan, may take some time, but ultimately promises a brighter future for Clemson's students. ▲

- 1 Biophysics is an interdisciplinary science that applies approaches and methods traditionally used in physics to study biological phenomena. Biophysics covers all scales of biological organization, from molecular to organismic and populations. Biophysical research shares significant overlap with biochemistry, molecular biology, physical chemistry, physiology, nanotechnology, bioengineering, computational biology, biomechanics, and systems biology.
- 2 <https://www.clemson.edu/provost/strategic-plan/>

Hugo Sanabria is an assistant professor of biophysics in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Clemson University. He served as a member of the university-wide Council of Global Engagement and is a member of the Committee for Global Engagement at the College of Science, a committee that advises the Dean. Sanabria earned his BS (1999) in physics engineering at Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico. He then obtained his MS and PhD in physics at the University of Houston in 2002 and 2005, respectively. After his studies, he was awarded an NIH training grant in nanobiology for postdoctoral training at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston and subsequently received a Humboldt Research Fellowship for Postdoctoral Researchers at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, Germany. He received the prestigious NSF CAREER award in 2018 and has several funded research programs. This views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of Clemson University.

On the 250th Anniversary

Born in September 1769 in Prussia, Baron Alexander von Humboldt would become the most important and renowned scientist of his day. A naturalist, explorer, and polymath, Humboldt spent five years in Central and South America measuring, mapping, collecting, and exploring on a journey that would lead him to see the earth as an interconnected organism. His wholistic approach to the study of nature propelled him to collect data that today is the realm of widely varying disciplines, including anthropology, archeology, astronomy, botany, climate science, economics, geology, geography, and zoology. Driven by curiosity and a thirst to advance knowledge, he was also a student of human societies and came to advocate the gradual abolition of slavery and to warn against the impact of human activity on water resources, forests, and the atmosphere. Throughout his life, he sponsored younger scholars with promise. Forgotten by later generations, Alexander von Humboldt has been rediscovered in recent years and rightly celebrated as “the forgotten father of environmentalism” (Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature*).

Established in 1953 as part of Germany's postwar cultural and foreign policy, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation continues and celebrates the work, approach, and ethos of its namesake.

ALUMNI COUNCIL

The American Friends of AvH Alumni Council develops and supports substantive programs to engage US Humboldt Alumni across a wide range of academic disciplines and fields of professional endeavor. The Alumni Council is a standing committee of the Board of Directors and is composed of Humboldtians. We invite US alumni to partner with the Council in sustaining the US Humboldt Alumni Network by applying for small grants to support intellectual and social events and activities for Humboldtians. Recent grant recipients include:



HUMBOLDTIAN

TOPIC

REQUEST

Jianzhong Wu
*University of California-
Riverside*

“New Vistas in Molecular Thermodynamics”

Funding for poster session reception and coffee breaks at AvH-sponsored Kolleg

Matthew Grayson
Northwestern University

“Copenhagen” (a play about the friendship of two Nobel Prize-winning physicists) in which Grayson played Werner Heisenberg

Funding for opening night reception following “Copenhagen” play

Donald Dickson
Texas A&M

“Opera in Germany” lecture by Prof. Darlene Wiley, University of Texas

Funding for meals and venue rental to supplement entry fees

Thomas Khurana
Yale University

“The Struggle for Recognition and the Authority of the Second Person”

Funding for reception at AvH-sponsored Kolleg

Efrain Kristal
UCLA

“Global Histories of German Literature”

Wine and cheese reception at interdisciplinary conference

Prof. Efrain Kristal (center) with Prof. David Kim and Prof. Maite Zubiaurre at the Alumni Council-sponsored reception at UCLA

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER FOR WORKFORCE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A German Chancellor Fellow Brings his Experience Back to Mississippi

Deeneaus Polk (BUKA, 2015–2016) is currently an MPP candidate at Harvard University and is the former director of the Mississippi Apprenticeship Program. He spent his two years as a German Chancellor Fellow at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training in Bonn and took some time to discuss his fellowship experience and its impact on his life and career.



American Friends of AvH: Tell us about your experience as a German Chancellor Fellow.

DP: I served as a German Chancellor Fellow at the Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (BIBB/ Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training) in Bonn. While there, I researched the German Vocational Education System with specific emphasis on apprenticeship programs. I sought to uncover best practices in Germany that would translate to the educational system in Mississippi. BIBB serves as an important conduit for implementing many facets of the German vocational system. While there, I was challenged to look past obvious comparisons and find ways to make my research truly unique. After a rigorous publishing process, I completed a paper on a Mississippi-based career exploration program for K-12 youth and how we could potentially connect a course around this experience that is similar to the *Berufsorientierungsprogramm* (career exposure program) that BIBB manages. My experiences were multi-faceted and fruitful, but even more impactful than the research outcomes were the many friends I made.

AF: How did you first become interested in your current field?

DP: My project is an amalgamation of my two homes—Mississippi and Germany. I was born and raised in Mississippi. As a youngster, life was tough, but I couldn't help but be fascinated by the prospect of what could be if only I had a chance. That curiosity turned into an opportunity to study abroad in Germany while I was in high school (on the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange scholarship) and the experience changed my life. I didn't understand why I didn't see the debilitating poverty in Germany that I was surrounded by in Mississippi. These thoughts followed me as I endeavored to become a diplomat with the US State Department, but I finally decided to act upon them after finishing my Fulbright scholarship. I returned home and got to work trying to create the realities I saw abroad via public policy. I made some headway, but wanted to find more innovative, actionable solutions for the communities I grew up in. I was glad to come across the German Chancellor Fellowship because I

knew it would afford me the additional tools I needed to make a real impact.

AF: What impact has the German Chancellor Fellowship had on you, both professionally and personally?

DP: The State of Mississippi asked me to assist with their effort to expand the number of apprenticeships while I was serving as a Chancellor Fellow. Following the fellowship, I immediately returned home and became director of the Mississippi Apprenticeship Program. During my tenure, I implemented several aspects of my research in our work, truly bringing my life experiences full circle.

AF: What were the most significant things you learned about the German apprenticeship system?

DP: I had a good overview of Germany's vocational education system but until my time at the BIBB, I was unaware of the important role that business and industry play in keeping the system going. The government takes on more of an administrative role, while companies help steer much of the workforce development efforts. Similar to the United States, vocational schools around the country prepare their students for highly skilled jobs in industries where they are needed, but there is much better collaboration in Germany. I wanted to help implement a similar system in my home state so that people would have opportunities to stay in their local communities rather than move away in search of work.

Armed with my experience in Germany, I returned to Mississippi to help design apprenticeships using the German model as a base but tailoring it to my home state's realities. I was faced with various obstacles at the beginning: concern about cost was one issue; also, apprenticeships are often seen as a progressive concept in Mississippi and often associated with unions and thus viewed with some suspicion. I worked with the Mississippi Community College Board to link students with apprenticeships and included business and industry in our planning. We also received a grant from the Department of Labor. When I started, there were approximately 1500 apprentices in the state; over the next year and a half, this number

has nearly doubled—due in large part to team work at all levels. Going forward, there are efforts to increase diversity in the apprenticeship programs, such as including more women in nontraditional trades. I feel strongly that apprenticeships are a way to build community in places like Mississippi—it's not just about jobs, but about individuals having opportunities, feeling valued, and strengthening the social fabric of the place they call home.

It's not about jobs, but about individuals having opportunities, feeling valued, and strengthening the social fabric of the place they call home.

AF: What are your future goals?

DP: In the short term, I want to be seen as an authority on workforce and economic development based on the varied experiences I have had in international contexts. Long term, I want to serve my state and eventually, my country, as Ambassador to Germany. When I retire I want to drive 18-wheelers. The German Chancellor Fellowship has had an impact on the reasoning behind all of those dreams. From the experiences to the people to the communities I have lived in, all have taught me valuable life lessons that will continue to follow me.

AF: How has international exposure changed or shaped the way you approach issues in your professional life?

DP: I approach the variety of issues and challenges that I face on a daily basis differently because of the broader perspectives I have gleaned through my international experiences. I am more nuanced in my logic and have more variety in my reasoning. The intangible benefits of several years spent in another country continue to reveal themselves on a near daily basis and I have been able to rapidly rise to heights I would have never dreamed of even five years ago as a result.

AF: Could you share a few career highlights?

DP: Being named as Director of the Mississippi Apprenticeship Program—I can't stress enough how amazing it is to work toward combining the best of the two worlds I love very much—Mississippi and Germany. Being named an Atlantik-Brücke Young Leader was phenomenal. With my selection, I join the ranks of alumni such as Katja Gloger and Cem Oezdemir. I am also

POLK

continuing my work with the state of Mississippi and am helping to create youth apprenticeships for high school students. One aspect of this work will give 7th and 8th graders hands-on career experience and allow them to cultivate their interests in different fields. Finally, I am now pursuing a graduate degree at Harvard's Kennedy School. I am excited to take this next step, as it has been a long time coming.

I approach the variety of issues and challenges that I face on a daily basis differently because of the broader perspectives I have gleaned through my international experiences.

AF: Do you have a favorite anecdote you'd like to share from your time in Germany?

DP: My father was deployed in Germany for a few years and, while there, my Momma bought furniture that she subsequently brought back to the United States. As children, she constantly berated us to be careful around her "Shrank," which was a cupboard set. I remember asking her why she kept calling it that, and she told me that she paid a lot of money for it. Supposedly some German guy told her it was very special because it is called a "Shrank." It wasn't until I began learning German that I realized the guy had gotten one over on my poor Momma! He simply called the furniture he sold her its proper German word (*Schrank*) and overcharged her. She was none the wiser because she doesn't speak German! We still laugh about this today. ▲

AVH-SPONSORED KOLLEGS IN THE UNITED STATES

The aim of Kollegs is to strengthen regional and interdisciplinary exchange and networking among Humboldtians and funding for alumni to organize these conferences is available from the AvH. The Foundation sets program parameters for the meeting structure, but organizers determine the substantive scope and content of their conference. We were pleased to have two Kollegs in the United States in 2018.

KOLLEGS IN THE UNITED STATES (2018)

Jianzhong Wu

"New Vistas in Molecular
Thermodynamics"
University of California-Berkeley
JANUARY 7-9, 2018

Thomas Khurana

"The Struggle for Recognition and
the Authority of the Second Person"
Yale University
SEPTEMBER 27-28, 2018

COMING UP IN 2019

American Friends of AvH will attend the following meetings in 2019

EUROPEAN CAREER FAIR

Boston, MA | February 16, 2019

AMERICAN PHYSICAL SOCIETY MEETING

Boston, MA | March 4-8, 2019

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR MICROBIOLOGY MEETING

San Francisco, CA | June 20-24,
2019

AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY MEETING

San Diego, CA | August 25-29,
2019

GERMAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION MEETING

Portland, OR | October 3-6, 2019

SOCIETY FOR NEUROSCIENCE ANNUAL MEETING

Chicago, IL | October 19-23, 2019