

***Secrets from the Inner Sanctum:***  
**Helpful Hints from a Truman Faculty Representative's Service**  
**on the Truman Finalist Selection Committee**

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In February 2000, Louis Blair gave me the opportunity of a lifetime – the chance to serve on the Truman Finalist Selection Committee. In addition to meeting some extremely talented and interesting people and eating some incredible food, I came away from the experience with a much better understanding of how to help my students prepare for the Truman Scholarship Competition. The following points are some of the things that I learned.

**The Truman Faculty Representative's Letter:** I didn't think it was possible for the Truman Rep to write a letter that was too long, but it is! The perfect length is about one and a half pages. Letters longer than that are likely not to be read because of the time constraints that readers face. It is almost impossible for the Faculty Rep letter not to repeat some things that are contained elsewhere in the application, but keep repetition to a minimum. Also, the **WORST** thing you can do for your candidates is to rank them, and **DO NOT** send in one blanket letter for all of your candidates in which you compare and contrast them!

**The Importance of the Rating Form:** The rating form that the Truman Selection Committee uses in its deliberations is available to Faculty Reps, but I had never used it with my candidates. That is a mistake that I will not make again. Although 20 points are available, most of the finalists score in the 12 -13 point range. [Note: while decisions are not based strictly on points, rather an overall assessment, the scores are important to the deliberations]. I am going to use the form with my candidates early in the process to see if I can help them fill in gaps. For example, last year I had a number of candidates with no government or political activity, which makes a solid score in the public service category unlikely. This makes a huge difference in an otherwise strong candidate score. I had always thought that strong community service could overcome the lack of public service, but numerically it is hard to do, unless they are superstars in every other category. In the future if my candidates don't have any government or political activity when they first come to see me, I will certainly ask why. If they need help locating appropriate opportunities, then I am going to make sure that they get some. Better late than never, and at least they will have credit for some real public service in their record!

**Community Service When It is Required:** More and more universities are requiring a certain number of hours of community service as part of their general education requirements, and this was very evident in the Truman applications that I read. Readers tend to discount the community service that students are required to do unless it is very significant to the student. The Faculty Rep can address this issue by giving the Committee more of the particulars of the situation. For example, give some examples of the

community service choices available to the student and tell the committee why the student chose that particular activity. How was it significant to him or her? Did the activity force the student to get out of his or her comfort zone? Did the student continue with the activity after the minimum hours were obtained or the class was over? The more you can distinguish your student's service from the run of the mill community service that most universities are requiring today, the better it will be for your candidate. Of course, the other side of this coin is to be sure to mention when your candidate's service is not part of a community service requirement.

**The Policy Statement:** Most of the policy statements were pretty bad, even from the very best students. My advice is that the students should keep their policy statements small and feasible, rather than trying to change the world as we know it before their 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays! One rule of thumb is to always mention the challenges, obstacles, and limitations that they will face when trying to implement their policies, and how they might overcome these. Many readers gave poor scores to otherwise pretty good policy statements when they did not do this.

**White Space:** Leave some!!! In the past, I have been guilty of using every trick in the book to get every word into the space available. I thought more was better, but an application that leaves absolutely no white space leads to reader fatigue, and you don't want the readers to be irritated by your candidate as they read the application! I even saw some readers give penalty points to applications that were aggressively overstuffed! *Good editing is a blessing, and it is the best gift that you can give your candidates.*

**Don't Be Afraid to Appeal:** My lasting impression of the Truman Finalist Selection process is of the seriousness and integrity of the process and of the good will with which all of the readers approach this daunting task. However, I am now also keenly aware that it is a human process—subjective and imperfect. After I had read their applications, there were some candidates whom I didn't like very much frankly. They seemed like resume-builders with little heart, but they were included in the Finalist pool because they had a solid record. There were also candidates whom I really liked because their applications reeked of heart, but they did not make the cut because the record just wasn't there. There were also significant differences among regions. In the weaker regions, marginal candidates made the Finalist pool while in the strongest regions, those candidates would not have been included. My conclusion from this process, is that we must appeal our candidates if we believe strongly in them. I was surprised to find that the members of the Finalist Selection Committee count on this. When we had to make those gut-wrenching decisions over the candidates that were so close, we consoled ourselves with the thought that the Faculty Rep would probably appeal that candidate. So do it – don't be shy about appealing a worthy candidate.