

# National Scholarship Competitions As Educational Experiences

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Institutions organize the campus scholarship process differently. Some might rely almost exclusively on a single individual to recruit, mentor and judge potential scholarship applicants, while others appoint entire committees to oversee various facets of one particular program. In either case, scholarship advisors engage in an active pedagogical process, providing students with an intense learning experience, while galvanizing colleagues to get involved in similar ways. Scholarship advisors undertake several distinct responsibilities in the application process.

**Administrative** The first and most crucial task of the scholarship advisor is to alert potential applicants to the existence of particular opportunities and to educate those students about the process of considering such an application. Three concrete things help here:

- Recruit colleagues as “spies” who will alert you to talented students for these opportunities and invite those students to come and chat about an application with you. Do this in addition to more conventional methods involving newspaper announcements, mailings and informational sessions.
- Provide the student with paperwork and web-site resources that will assist him or her in both the reflection process (about the student’s own values and accomplishments) and the application process (researching programs, issues and related opportunities).
- Discuss where the student most effectively meets criteria and sort out what kinds of things would be important to include in an application. NB: The things a student thinks might be impressive and the things that are genuinely impressive will often diverge wildly!

**Counseling** Once a student and faculty representative agree that a student should proceed with an application at the campus level, the first item of business is for the two to *engage in a kind of values clarification exercise*. (See also page 6.) The advisor can look at, say, a resume or a sample application and use it as the basis for questioning the student about the following issues.

- What important commitments has the student made and how does this scholarship program honor the student’s values and aspirations?
- What has the student done in the past that corroborates his or her values, commitments and aspirations?
- What does he or she hope to do in the future that will refine and deepen those values and commitments?
- What mistakes has the student made, what regrets does he or she have, and, most importantly, what has been learned from these?
- When has the student achieved a sense of meaningful accomplishment or realization in his or her studies, work, relationships, community involvement?
- What are the key influences on the student’s own development and how did those influences come to have the role they do?

**Editorial** Armed with information about the student’s qualifications as well as his or her sense of commitment and values, a faculty representative can then proceed to oversee the composition of a student’s draft application. *There is a fine line to be walked here*. On the one hand the faculty representative must work to bring out what he or she judges to be the student’s original and most powerful self. At the same time the advisor must be responsive rather than generative in helping a student to mold the form by which that self will be expressed. In other words: after conversations and counseling to assist a student in identifying and articulating how he or she should approach a scholarship process, the faculty mentor must then allow the student to go

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away and begin writing. Ideas for essays, statements and policies must come from the student.

An advisor can of course bring a student to see that an essay is not very efficacious given the student's goals and then send him or her back to the drawing board. An advisor may also indicate when writing is obscure, incorrect or unclear without literally correcting every error. To maximize the learning process, a faculty representative can indicate the presence of less than adequate work while leaving it up to the student to find out how to fix it.

**Interview Preparation** Scholarship advisors can be part of a larger committee that interviews potential campus nominees for scholarships (this might indeed happen prior to the roles already discussed) and provides mock interviews for those nominees who are named, or are likely to be named, as finalists. A few suggestions for campus interviews:

- Form a committee that includes campus and community leaders to emulate the seriousness of actual regional or national interviews, and to insure diversity of perspective on that committee (members should not be personally known to students for the most part).
- Use the pre-application or application as a basis for asking some but not all of the questions.
- Push the candidate to defend positions, to articulate examples, to consider counter-arguments to whatever ideas have been expressed – rigor!
- Time the interview to emulate the length of time used in actual interviews.
- Provide feedback. Discuss the student's performance shortly after the first mock interview; be direct, detailed and constructively critical. The student should feel there is a lot more that he or she could do to prepare for the interview.
- Invite him or her back a week later for another interview, preferably with some different and some overlapping interviewers. Give more feedback after a second mock interview, this time stressing what is best in the applicant's performance to balance the hard-driving approach of the first feedback session.
- Reassure the student about the inherent worth of the process whether or not he or she is named a winner and suggest ways to glean the most benefit from the experience while undergoing it. Advisors might also provide casual suggestions for dressing, grooming and etiquette if the student in question requires such advice.

### Tips on the Editorial Process

**Recognize that the first drafts will often, if not most often, be generic, unimaginative and unusable. This must be cherished as a key part of the pedagogical process.** A scholarship advisor can help a student uncover his or her best self and to find a way to express that self at this stage of the process. An advisor may indicate that what appears on paper does not do justice to or match the advisor's intuitions about what the student has really thought or achieved.

**Help the student see the emerging application with a stranger's eyes.** What reasoning structures are present when a student makes and supports a claim? What portrait of the student's character seems to be taken here? Has the student shown that he or she has done the necessary research to propose the kinds of ideas he or she has discussed?

**Direct a student to human and archival resources on campus, which are known to professionals but not always to students.** This often results in rich new avenues for student exploration: either the student forms a dynamic new relationship with another member of the community or the student uncovers stimulating material on a subject of interest to him or her.

**Help the student approach potential supporters when seeking letters of endorsement.** Teach him or her how to ask for recommendations in a timely and appropriate manner. This can include advising a student about providing supporters with written and other materials to clarify the nature of the scholarship application being undertaken. Finally, the faculty representative should be available as a collegial resource for those writing letters, answering questions, reading drafts, suggesting tactics.

**Postmortem** Once a student has been through the formal process, the faculty representative should invite him or her to discuss the procedure before winners are announced (if possible). Take note of the student's perceptions and discuss what was learned during the process. If a student later wins, the scholarship advisor should meet with the student to discuss what this means for the next set of decisions to be taken. If a student does not win, this meeting provides the advisor an opportunity to help a student recycle parts of the application for new use in other applications, such as those for graduate or professional school, and also guide a student's thinking about how not winning influences new decisions to be taken. At a later point the faculty representative might wish to obtain official feedback on a student's application and interview from the scholarship

body. This information can be used not only to provide the individual student with a sense of how he or she did in comparison to his or her earlier judgments immediately following the interview, but also to assist faculty committees in future student preparation.

**Public Acknowledgment** Student winners are often feted and honored in public ways after the announcement of their success. Other campus nominees should also be acknowledged, perhaps at a luncheon, in a news article for campus or alumni publications, or by inviting nominees to talk about the worth of applying even when one does not win. We have found students who did not win perfectly willing to testify to the inherent value in making an application when they are asked to speak to new and potential applicants.

### **What Support Can Students Reasonably Expect/Request from Faculty Representatives?**

- ◆ Official information about a program and frank judgment about whether the student ought to consider applying given his or her qualifications and aspirations
- ◆ Discussion about the time and effort required by the process and guidance about how the student might begin to allot space for the application in his or her life; reflection on a student's own strengths, values and weaknesses as an applicant
- ◆ Substantial and editorial advice about changes required within a written application
- ◆ Practice for interviews as well as guidance on improved performance
- ◆ Feedback on the process overall, from the way a student approached the application, how he or she used time, whether or not proper preparation was undertaken or advice followed, and interview performance

### **What Preparation Should Faculty Representatives Expect From Students?**

- ◆ Research programs and institutions of interest. With web sites for the major scholarships and graduate programs proliferating like dandelions, a student has no reason to avoid doing his or her homework. A student should be expected to read official materials, and perhaps previous applications, prior to making an application of his or her own.
- ◆ Reflect seriously about the issues raised by the application. Self-knowledge is central to the creation of a strong application and provides the momentum for a student to maintain discipline when working on many tasks at once. Some of our nominees drop out well into the process, not because they have done insufficient work but because they discover new facets of themselves that no longer lead to the scholarship program under consideration.
- ◆ Start in the summer. A student should be expected to devote some of his or her summer to researching programs (or other opportunities) of relevance to his or her application, compiling information needed to answer all application questions and making institutional connections where appropriate.
- ◆ Return to campus ready to work. Once back at school for the autumn term, the student should be prepared for a second screening interview to present what has been done over the summer. At this point one hopes that all nominees are in place. A student must then plan to spend many hours per week reworking the formal application in consultation with a faculty mentor.
- ◆ Keep up with current affairs. From the time of selection by a campus committee (the spring before or early in fall), a student should make an effort to be conversant with current affairs.
- ◆ Keep up also with developments in your field.
- ◆ Be responsible in managing commitments. Expect students to make time for the application process, but not to disregard their other activities. Students should discuss their scholarship preparation with colleagues, peers, and professors and make adjustments as necessary.

## Asking the Tough Questions

Scholarship advisors and faculty mentors perform a critical function in a student's process of self-reflection: we ask the tough questions. These are questions designed to assist a student in coming to know him or herself, a key step in the process of identifying future priorities and hence the appropriateness of applying to a scholarship program. Here are some examples.

- ◆ When have you been so immersed in what you were doing, that time seemed to evaporate while you were actively absorbed?
- ◆ To what extent do your current commitments reflect your most strongly held values?
- ◆ What errors or regrets have taught you something important about yourself?
- ◆ What really makes you angry?
- ◆ Under what conditions do you do your best, most creative work? Under what conditions do you do your less worthy work?
- ◆ Would you say you are a person who can motivate and guide others in an efficacious manner? What is your evidence for believing so?
- ◆ To what extent are you a typical product of your generation and/or culture? How might you deviate from the norm with respect to your generation and/or culture?
- ◆ Does America stand for something? If so, what? Why?
- ◆ What ideas, books, theories or movements have made a profound impact on you?

A faculty mentor can pose questions that facilitate the process of student self-knowledge, which can then be used to make decisions about the future. We must value the reflective relationships that form around the steps of student preparation. *These relationships benefit faculty as well as students and form the core of what a college experience ought to be at the level of its most vital and lasting influence.*

**What about institutional support? What is appropriate support for an institution to provide?** This is a tricky issue. Every institution is different; levels of commitment are determined on a range of institutional priorities competing for finite resources. Let us assume at the start that the institution supports scholarships at least to the extent that a senior administrator appointed a faculty representative to receive materials. What is the argument for institutional support beyond that?

On the one hand it can be argued from a strictly prudential standpoint: academic integrity accrues to those institutions whose students participate in scholarship application processes beyond the scope of the campus community. An institution that can adequately prepare and present students for consideration shows itself to take intellectual as well as active life seriously. On the other hand it might be suggested that the most talented students deserve to know about and compete for opportunities which enhance their educational experience and that scholarship preparation resources support those students. Either way, there will always be those who feel that directing resources toward a handful of qualified scholarship applicants is not justified given the relatively small number of student participants involved from year to year. We think such feelings are misguided.

Although students might enter the office of a scholarship advisor for a particular scholarship, they leave with other kinds of advice and directions. Most of the students faculty representatives see are not viable candidates for major national awards, yet they learn about expectations and standards of writing and presentation, discover other more suitable opportunities, and receive individual attention and support for post-graduate planning. Thus, scholarship advisors can end up working with a larger range of students than many of our colleagues suppose. We often play roles related to but not coming under direct scholarship advising--graduate and professional school essay feedback, resume counseling, career clarification, how to handle a difficult relationship with a professor. This, we believe, justifies setting aside substantial advising time that includes but is not limited to scholarships.

Beyond support of scholarship advising, institutions might devote resources to activities designed to prepare candidates. Some institutions offer informal seminars, which may or may not carry credit. These offer an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss issues on the public agenda with peers, faculty, and community leaders. Candidates might also be invited to university functions as student representatives. These interactions raise a candidate's comfort level in talking about issues that

matter outside the classroom. Some institutions will demonstrate support also by making funds available to cover finalists' interview expenses.

Perhaps the most critical type of institutional support is recognition to candidates and faculty mentors. Recognition may take a number of forms. For students, institutions might:

- present a special book, certificate, plaque or gift at a campus-wide academic honors and awards program;
- invite them to a reception, meal, or meeting with the university president, Board of Trustees, and senior administrators;
- note candidates' achievements in the commencement program; and/or
- feature the students in campus and alumni publications.

Recognizing faculty involvement is a particularly important form of institutional support. It lets faculty know that their investment of time and energy is appreciated as service to the college community, in addition to the individual student. An effective means of recognition is to consider faculty's service to the scholarship program in the tenure and promotion review process. Public recognition might include acknowledgment at the campus honors convocation or a reception for candidates and faculty mentors with senior administrators. In whatever form, institutional support of faculty mentors and candidates sends the message to the campus and larger community that there is significant educational value in the scholarship process. **Institutional recognition sustains the scholarship effort on campus.**

**How do institutions organize scholarship advising?** Generally speaking, the decision is between a centralized or de-centralized effort. A centralized scholarship program is coordinated in one office or person (appointing a single person as faculty representative for grants as diverse as Fulbright, Truman, Rhodes, etc.). Much of the mentoring described above, however, is often delegated to specific committees of faculty and staff (Goldwater Committee; Truman Committee; Udall Committee), where each committee has a chair of its own and a precise scholarship program to work on during the year.

The decentralized program operates solely on the committee system. Committee chairs are appointed as the faculty representative for the particular scholarship and have sole stewardship of the materials and process. Each committee develops particular expertise for its scholarship, and has a sense of ownership and investment.

As well coordinated centralized effort, however, can utilize the best of the committee system, but at the same time, have one official faculty representative or scholarship advisor for all the major awards, ensuring a consistent, identifiable "first stop" for information, student inquiries, and outreach.

Committee chairs under either program might:

- hold recruitment meetings in the spring before the year of application, which could involve inviting official representatives of scholarship programs to speak with students about the application process;
- write and send letters to relevant students about the scholarship program in their care (using Honors, Registrar, or Dean's Office resources for the nuts and bolts of mailing);
- design and distribute pre-application forms and arrange for campus screening interviews with the relevant scholarship committee;
- guide the committee in their selection of students to proceed in the application process and determine, with the committee (and scholarship advisor) the following Autumn, which students should earn university endorsement;
- assign faculty mentors from the committee to work closely on application refinement with officially endorsed student nominees;
- check draft recommendation letters for errors or imprecise levels of support;
- coordinate mock interviews for finalists; and
- help arrange celebration parties or lunches for winners and other participants.

Regardless of how the scholarship effort is organized, the key to success is faculty engagement. If you identify and recruit active, caring mentors, your students will have a remarkable experience of learning and personal growth. Faculty volunteers often say they love working on scholarship committees because they find it so rewarding to have intellectual relationships with motivated and accomplished students--often, students they did not know before the process started. Plus, volunteers themselves form little communities of their own and look forward to the annual cycle surrounding the scholarship in their care.

The scholarship process affects positively all those who commit to it. Students develop skills, identify talents and passions, and prepare in earnest for life after college. Faculty invest in and are rewarded by relationships with remarkable students. The institution enhances its service to students and demonstrates its commitment to educational excellence. We understand the nature of the competition (and the odds). More importantly, we recognize the fundamental, educational value of the process.