

# 4

## Enough About Me—What do You Think About Me? Surviving the Truman Interview

TARA YGLESIAS

---

*Tara Yglesias has served as the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Truman Foundation for the past eight years and has been involved in the selection of Truman Scholars since 2001. During this time, she had the opportunity to study the trends and characteristics of each incoming class of Scholars. She used this knowledge to assist in the development of new Foundation programs and initiatives as well as the design of a new Foundation website and on-line application system. An attorney by training, she began her career by spending six years in the Office of the Public Defender in Fulton County, Georgia. She specialized in trial work and serious felonies but also assisted with the training of new attorneys. A former Truman Scholar from Pennsylvania, she also served as a Senior Scholar at Truman Scholars Leadership Week and the Foundation's Public Service Law Conference prior to joining the Foundation's staff.*

---

Few things can derail an accomplished candidate or an otherwise reasonable faculty advisor quite like an interview experience that turns out to be unsuccessful. This disappointment is acute and often lasting. For candidates, the experience can sour everything they learned

during the process. For advisors, an unsuccessful interview, particularly for a favored candidate, can lead to a full-blown existential crisis. The Truman Foundation often deals with the fallout from these experiences - most often in the form of faculty advisors who call us to find out what they might have done differently.

In most cases, the answer is the always unfulfilling: nothing. The difference between a Truman Finalist and a Truman Scholar is often one of tiny margins wholly outside the control of the advisor and, in some cases, the candidate. Understanding the uncontrollable nature of the interview process is vital to understanding both how best to prepare candidates for the experience and how to deal with the outcome.

This essay will discuss the nature of interviews, provide suggestions for candidate preparation, and offer advice for dealing with the aftermath. While much of this material is generic to many interview situations, the lessons learned are drawn mainly from the Truman interview process.

*The Interview: Fickle Food on a Shifting Plate*

If a school is able to produce Finalists with some regularity, the institutional Truman program is both identifying the right candidates and presenting the students in the best possible light. The Truman Foundation considers having Finalists, not Scholars, to be a true marker of the success of an individual institution. We realize universities may feel differently.

We make this distinction because once advisors have (repeatedly) hit the submit button on a student's application, their part in the process - the part which is controlled, monitored and knowable - is over. Advisors can work with students to craft prose of heartbreaking quality. Recommendation letters can provide compelling and vibrant details. The Truman Faculty Representative can write the single best letter of nomination ever, moving the committee to rapturous tears. Advisors can even channel Lydia Grant during mock interviews ("You want the Truman? Well, the Truman costs. And right here is where you start paying - in sweat."), but advisors are only controlling the preparation of the candidate. Preparation will only go so far and does not guarantee results.

Even the best prepared Finalist is at the whims of the inherently subjective interview process. Yes, I used the s-word. While we provide our panelists<sup>1</sup> with explicit instructions about our criteria, do our best to guard against interviewer bias, and endeavor to give each Finalist the same consideration, there are necessarily elements of subjectivity in the process.

Understanding the nature of the Truman interview begins with a thorough, and likely somewhat dull, explanation of the interview process. Our panelists receive the applications about two weeks prior to the interview date. Along with the applications, we send guidance from the Foundation, a list of suggested questions,<sup>2</sup> and a copy of our Bulletin of Information.<sup>3</sup> We provide a schedule and a blank form to allow the panelists to write comments or, if they wish, score the materials.

The guidance given to the panelists begins by reminding the panelists that they are the Foundation's "investment

---

1 Throughout this document, the term "panelist" describes a member of the Truman Regional Review Panel. The Regional Review Panels meet at locations throughout the country to interview Finalists and select Truman Scholars. "Reader" describes a member of the Truman Finalist Selection Committee. The Finalist Selection Committee meets prior to the Regional Review Panels and selects Finalists based on the written application.

2 Available on our website at <http://truman.gov//for-faculty-reps/from-the-foundation/practice-questions-for-truman-interviews>.

3 Also available at <http://truman.gov//for-faculty-reps/2013-competition/2013-bulletin-of-information>.

committee." The choice of words is deliberate. By naming a student as a Truman Scholar, the panelists will require the investment of a good deal of Foundation resources. It may come as a surprise to those outside the process, but our panelists are not evil dream crushers. If we permitted it, our panelists would give every Finalist a scholarship of some sort. We must remind them of their role and the sobering reality that they only have a few scholarships to give.

We also provide the following guidance. Each Truman Scholar must reveal:

- ***Likelihood of becoming a "change agent."*** The Finalist should work well with others to affect public policy or to exert leadership so that others follow his or her lead.
- ***Commitment to a career in the public service.*** The Finalist has the values, ambitions, and desires that seem likely to lead to a career in public service. The Foundation defines public service as employment in government at any level, uniformed services, public-

interest organizations, nongovernmental research and/or educational organizations, public and private schools, and public service-oriented nonprofit organizations such as those whose primary purposes are to help needy or disadvantaged persons or to protect the environment.

- ***Ability to hold his/her own at the proposed graduate or professional school.*** A recommender could write an enthusiastic recommendation to the dean of this school. The person need not become an academic star at the institution.
- ***Heart and compassion.*** The primary concern of the candidate is with the welfare of others and neither with personal ego nor self-aggrandizement." These criteria are the same as those listed on the website and drilled into our collective consciousness during any of countless NAFA appearances. The order of the criteria is significant as well; the leadership and service components are paramount.

In terms of interview guidance, panelists are asked to

spend no more than 5 to 7 minutes on the candidate's application and policy proposal. We encourage the panelists to instead ask provocative questions in the candidate's general field. Panelists are repeatedly instructed to give the students a challenging interview. Our panelists take these instructions very seriously.

We do not send along any information from our readers, the Finalist Selection Committee. The applications are transmitted to our panelists without comments or scores. Panelists are explicitly instructed to come to their own conclusion about the written materials. We also do not require that panelists score the materials - although nearly all of our panelists arrive with the applications ranked or scored in some fashion.

Prior to the 2012 cycle, panelists were notified if our Finalist Selection Committee judged an application to be outstanding. The outstanding rating was rarely given - of the 600 applications a year; fewer than ten would receive this designation. Based on panelist feedback, we have decided to eliminate this practice. Panelists felt that

this designation put too much pressure on the performance of the applicant.

By the day of the interview, most panelists will have spent quite a bit of time pouring over the applications. They generally arrive with lists of questions and extensive notes. All are genuinely enthusiastic to meet the Finalists and hand out as many Truman Scholarships as possible. The Foundation's greatest challenge is to try and keep the panelists from handing out too many scholarships.

We begin the day with an orientation, both for the panelists and for the Finalists. The panelist orientation is usually quite short with a member of the Foundation staff going over the marching orders for the day. Many of our panelists are veterans to the process, either as panelists or as Truman Scholars. Much of the panel's orientation time is spent catching up on old friends rather than actively planning on how to make a Finalist's life miserable.



The orientation with the Finalists is a bit longer<sup>4</sup>. The panelists introduce themselves and we go over the schedule for the day. As a person who is constantly focused on process, I review the entire day in what can only be described as a comic level of detail. Sharing specific and extensive information about the interview process with all Finalists is another attempt to level the playing field. We do not want to have a student who comes from a school without a robust Truman program to spend his morning fretting over whether he would receive water or not while the student from a school with an established Truman program is comfortably reading affirming text messages from her Faculty advisor. We accept that there will always be inequalities, but access to information about our process should not be one of them.

After whipping the Finalists into a frenzy of anticipation, the panelists adjourn to begin the interviews. Prior to a candidate's interview, we may discuss his or her application generally. We usually

---

4 A question we often receive is whether this portion of the day “counts” as part of the interview process. This session is so short, and the interactions so perfunctory, it would be nearly impossible for a Finalist to make a lasting impression – either positive or negative. Finalists should not worry about this portion of the day. If they meet the panelists, fine. If not, they will have ample time during the interview.

settle on a first question - or at least a person who is tasked with the first question. From there, the interview is entirely unscripted. We do not settle on an order of questions. We do not discuss who is going to ask questions about which topics. We just see where the interview takes us.

This may cause some Finalists and their advisors to recoil in horror - because this part is where things get fuzzy. The flow of the interview depends on both the mood of the panel and the response of the person being interviewed. This statement seems obvious, but understanding and accepting this point is critical to understanding the interview process and preparing students to effectively present themselves.

We only have 20 minutes with each Finalist - so when the student gets into the room, we go right to work. Although some panels, and certain panelists, will lob a "How are you?" at a Finalist, we usually get started immediately with substantive questions. The type of

question varies greatly with different panels and individual panelists - but there are a few constants:

- We spend very little time rehashing materials in the application (e.g. "Can you describe exactly how you cured malaria?"). If we do ask these types of questions, they are likely needed to clarify something in the application and should be dealt with quickly.
- There are no trick questions. We want to hear the Finalist's answer, not what they think we want to hear. Panelists will often play devil's advocate (and occasionally *devil's* devil's advocate). There is no way to guess how a panelist might personally feel about an issue - and the next panelist might feel another way entirely. Truman interviews are about understanding the passion of the Finalist, not about exploring the views of the panelists. Finalists should just answer the question.
- There are no wrong answers, even if the answer is actually wrong. Many successful Truman finalists have answered questions inarticulately, incompletely, or incorrectly. The Truman interview is not a dissertation defense. We do not expect a Finalist to

know everything about an issue. Answering "I don't know" is appropriate (indeed, preferred) when the Finalist finds herself on thin intellectual ice.

- We do not (usually) mind when Finalists change the subject. Panels will sometimes get on to a topic and not let it go. It is appropriate to respond to a question and then use the response as a way to redirect the conversation. If panelists are not finished with a topic, they are quick to let students know.
- Questions cannot be interpreted as anything other than questions. Some Finalists spend a lot of time rehashing the interview and trying to draw conclusions from the questions asked ("They only asked one question about my policy proposal. They hate me!"). The type and variety of questions means nothing.

At the 18-minute mark (a bit earlier if a Finalist tends to have long answers, a bit later if the answers were shorter), a panelist will announce that it is the last question. After Finalists respond to the last question, they will be permitted to close the interview on their own terms.

Although the Finalists know this portion of the interview is coming, it still seems to throw several of them into a panic. A few things about the closing statement:

- A good/bad/indifferent closing isn't going to change the outcome. Finalists have delivered dreadful, lengthy, quote-filled soliloquies - and still won. Others have moved me to the point where I actually thought about being moved to tears - and did not prevail. Most Finalists, win or lose, offer just fine closing statements. The only thing the closing statement can do is make the student feel good (or not) about the experience.
- It probably shouldn't be a Statement. Brief and in keeping with the tone of the interview is the best policy. The student may be relieved that she could make it through Rime of the Ancient Mariner by memory, but we probably didn't radiate good vibes on her way out.
- It can really just be "Thanks! This was fun!" Some of the most successful statements are those where a Finalist takes the time to just be honest: thank the panel, say it was/was not as bad as they expected and

reflect on that moment.

- Questions or suggestions are probably best saved for later. Some students have turned around and asked the panel a question. This tactic never goes well as the thunderous confused silence seems to chase the Finalist right out of the room. Others have used the time to suggest ways for the process to be improved. Since many of the panelists have only limited exposure to the inner workings of the application process, well-meaning suggestions are also often met with brow-furrowing and panicked glances. Again, asking questions is not the best way to close an interview.<sup>5</sup>
- Finalists shouldn't cry-not because it has an impact on a Finalist's application in any way, it just makes everyone deeply uncomfortable.

After the candidate leaves, we will talk very briefly about him while he is still fresh in our memory. This talk often is not very long; we usually mention a few strengths or things to consider. After this brief chat, we continue on with the next Finalist. It is impossible to tell how a

---

<sup>5</sup> But again, this is not fatal. One recent Truman Scholar closed his interview with a screed against the Truman process on his campus. According to him, several wonderful Truman candidates were turned away because his campus relied too heavily on GPA. Several of the panelists were upset that he would use this forum to air his grievances, but they voted to select him anyway.

Finalist fared from the length of the break after the interview. Some Truman winners have left the panel speechless. Some Finalists who were not successful have also left the panel speechless, albeit in a different way. Some times we are running late or are subject to external pressures (lunch delivery time, early flights).

Once we have interviewed every Finalist from a state (the goal is to have a Scholar from each state), we usually have a bit more time to discuss the Finalists. This discussion may take place at the end of the day or during lunch, depending on the schedule. The discussion is sometimes over quickly, but more often it is wide-ranging, long and bloody.

Oddly, the actual decision about the Truman is usually the easy part. More often than not, a clear Truman emerges from the fray. When there is no clear winner, we are usually making decisions among two or three front-runners. The discussion can focus on many things: the student's performance in the interview, written record, and the likelihood they will go into public service. Any item in the application or in the interview is fair game for discussion and consideration.

The discussion does not, however, focus on the institution the student attends. Panelists do not consider the performance or reputation of the school. The panelists do not know whether a school has other Finalists in contention. The decision must be made based on the record of the Finalist, not the reputation of the school. The only time the school is discussed is in the context of what opportunities were available to the student.

In rare cases, we may request a second interview. The second interviews happen at the end of the day and are very short, usually only a few questions. Second interviews are sometimes used when the panel cannot resolve conflict without the input of the Finalist; when the panel cannot determine which of two candidates should be selected as the Scholar; or when a Finalist freezes or breaks down during the interview. Finalists should not worry about the second interviews; they are so rare it makes little sense to worry about them.

In order for a Scholar to be named, the entire panel must agree. We do not permit 3-to-2 votes on Scholars. If the panel cannot come to an agreement, it is possible



that a state will not have a Scholar in a given year. Once a decision is made on each state, we go through the same process to determine whether there is an at-large recommendation to be made. The at-large Scholar can come from any of the states interviewed that day. Under normal circumstances, only especially large regions are guaranteed at-large Scholars, but we do have the flexibility to award at-large scholarships in any region should a strong case be made. Scholars will never know if they are selected at-large and the distinction between the Scholar and the at-large Scholar vanishes as soon as the selection cycle is complete.

But what makes the difference between a Truman Finalist and a Truman Scholar? In the vast majority of interviews, it is not that a Finalist did/said something wrong - it is that someone else did something right. Someone will have a day where their hair is perfect, the train is on time, the coffee shop gives them a discount for no reason - and there is a forgotten \$20 in their pocket. Someone else will have a day where their shoelace rips, they arrive at the stop to watch the bus pull away, they drops everything they touch, including their coffee - and

there is a forgotten leaky pen in their pocket. A million little things may impact a student's performance - and these are entirely outside of anyone's control.

Even if a Finalist attempts to control for luck - shaves their head, sleeps at the interview site, forgoes coffee and only keeps pens in little plastic baggies - they must now face the whims of the panelists. The panelists must negotiate their own interests and biases during the process. There is a reason why the Truman Foundation tends to gravitate toward lawyers and judges as panelists - they have practice putting aside their feelings. While the panelists do an excellent job putting aside their own ideological, political or personal beliefs, panelists are still people who are ultimately making decisions based on who and what they like. And one panelist's charming may be another person's smarmy; one panelist's delightfully restrained may be another panelist's offputtingly aloof.

Although advisors cannot control the panel's perception of their candidates, they can control the information that we consider. It is imperative that advisors add context into the letter of nomination that may help the panel to have the best possible interview with the student. If a

Finalist is slow to warm up, advisors should tell us. If a student speaks slowly, let us know. We moderate our approach given what information is implicit in the application, but explicit information would help even more. At the very least, advisors should not oversell a Finalist's personality in the letter of nomination. Quiet and thoughtful is fine - and is often a Truman - but not if we were told to expect a firecracker.

*Preparation: Fight the Battle Before it Begins*

Much ink, bandwidth, and advisor brainpower has been spilled over how best to prepare students for an interview. There are countless different methods and levels of preparation. Panicked advisors contact the Foundation all the time, convinced they are not doing enough or are doing too much. After reviewing the variety of preparation by different institutions, it seems that the best that you can do is to prepare the students enough but no more.

Although there will be more readers recoiling in horror (and one yell of: "Just tell me how many mock interviews to do!"), the level of preparation needed depends on the student. Some need more preparation just to be

comfortable; some need less preparation so as not to appear artificial. By the time advisors (repeatedly) submit a student's materials, they should have some idea of his personality and comfort level with the interview process. Instincts about how much preparation a student needs are important to develop.

We do recommend that students have at least one mock interview. The content of the mock interview is not nearly as important as just having the experience. Most students have not had the pleasure of having five slightly frightening, very impressive people peppering them with questions. Many students have not been asked to sit still in a suit for more than five minutes. Practicing both is a good way to prepare for the Truman.

When creating the mock interview, it is helpful also to consider the tenor of the Truman interview. Interviews are rigorous - sometimes they can feel even hostile - but they do tend to be conversational. The interactions between panelist and Finalist are a bit more casual than some other interview settings. Our Panelists are sometimes intentionally funny. The best training for a Finalist is about how to read an interviewer for social clues.

Students should know that it is okay to laugh at a joke or lighthearted comment. They can relax into a conversational mode if that feels comfortable and seems appropriate. It is not a good idea for Finalists to be more casual than the panel, but it is equally unwise to be much more formal than the panel. Good preparation helps students to understand how to negotiate this conundrum.

Covering logistics is helpful too. Finalist often have anxiety over things that seem silly but loom large as the stress of the interview draws near. Some favorite topics and the answers:

- Do the dinners on the night before the interview count? These dinners don't count - but they can help a Finalist to have a better interview. The panelists and Foundation staff do not attend these dinners (they are organized and hosted by the Truman Scholars Association). We do not receive a report from the dinners. However, students who attend and meet fellow Finalists seem more at ease the next day. This level of familiarity seems to allow the student to have a better interview.
- **Do I need to bring anything to the interview?** All

students should bring an id. We do not ask for original documents or additional materials. Finalists may wish to bring a copy of their application to review prior to their interview. Finalists should also bring something to entertain and distract them while they are waiting. A deck of cards is a good choice for the more gregarious and quaintly antique Finalist; a laptop and headphones are an excellent choice for the more introverted.

- **Can I bring things into the interview room?** Finalists, for some reason, seem to want to bring things into the interview room. Generally, this practice is not recommended. Bringing additional items into the interview room seems to distract the Finalist. Conversation grinds to a halt while a student jots down notes with a pad and pen. An overfull water bottle goes horribly awry. *Things In The Interview Room* also tend to distract the panel. One Finalist insisted on bringing her overstuffed purse into the room - and several of panelists could not stop staring at its bulging contents. The Scholar ultimately won, but she had to overcome her purse.

Student should surrender to the interview experience. The root cause of many unsuccessful Truman interviews has to do with the student failing to demonstrate their personality, or any personality, during the interview. I doubt any advisor is telling students: "Go in there and be as dull as possible!" But sometimes that is what happens. Some of the lack of personality may be due to nerves, but some of it appears to be the result of a notion that being perfect is infinitely better than being interesting. We prefer Finalists with texture - and flaws.

Too many mock interviews, or too much repetition of questions, tend to create a robotic response from the Finalist. Finalists will fall madly in love with a turn of phrase and wedge it into conversation whenever possible. Varying the way questions are asked and discouraging students from relying on canned - or even partially canned - responses will help them avoid this trap.

Sharing the interview experiences of former Finalists is fine, but exercise caution. We know that certain schools keep dossiers on what questions we ask and have extensive debriefs with those who have interviewed. This practice has not proven to be especially helpful. In some cases,

students have become increasingly nervous when their information turns out to be inaccurate (“Wait. The panelists are being nice to me. I must really be doing a bad job! They hate me!”). Experiences are unique to that Finalist at that time. Avoid relying on the experience of one person.

Likewise, gathering information about the panelists is not a particularly useful either. It is a good policy for the student to know who is going to be on their panel - members will be listed on our website.<sup>6</sup> All the information that the Finalist is expected to know (name, title) can be found here. Finalists, who obsessively Google panelists in an effort to figure out how to woo them, tend to come off as slightly creepy. The only exception would be if a student were interested in an issue that falls within the purview of one of the panelists. In that case, a bit of light research may be prudent. This research should only be done to avoid the very embarrassing moment where a Finalist tries to condescendingly explain how a bill becomes a law while a professional hill staffer looks on.

---

6 This information is found on our website at: <http://www.truman.gov/for-candidates/regional-review-panels>



*The Aftermath: It's All Over But the Crying.*

I often tell the dramatic story of my own Truman interview. The story is compelling: a plucky working class girl who wins over the hostile panel by her sheer charm and determination. Problem is: it didn't happen that way. Louis Blair (the Executive Secretary of the Truman Foundation for 16 years) was on my panel, and we have discussed this many times. His recollection, which is likely correct, can do nothing to change my impression. What I remember is what really happened, truth be damned.

Finalists often return with a story. There is usually a point where it all goes wrong. A wrong answer, a suddenly hateful panelist, or conspiring fates appear from nowhere to thwart the Finalist in their quest. But much like apocryphal tale of my own interview, Truman interviews don't happen this way. Finalists do not lose a Truman over one unfortunate turn of phrase. Conversely, Finalists do not win based on one clever turn of phrase - although one Finalist came close.

This Finalist was a clear front-runner on paper: his public service commitment was outstanding; his leadership skills were exceptional; he had a compelling personal story

that cemented his future goals. The interview was unfulfilling. He seemed uncomfortable and reticent. After discussing all the Finalists, we kept returning to this Finalist. We felt he was closest to the Truman Scholar selection criteria, but the interview left us with questions. We decided to call him back for a second interview and asked him one question: "If you could change anything about today, what would it be?" He said that he would like to stand up. He did, we conducted a second interview, and he won. Even in this case, he was the front-runner. His defining moment merely cemented the Truman, but it didn't win the day.

But this story is one from thousands of interviews. The more typical, but less dramatic story is one where a student's consistency wins the panel over. Finalists sometimes say truly unfortunate things during an interview, panelists sometimes let their attention wander, fire alarms sometimes go off mid-interview, but a Finalist cannot lose the scholarship based on one dramatic turn.

Of course, there are stories of panelists slamming their notebooks shut after a Finalist answers a question carelessly, or tales where the student was doing so well,

until they revealed they were a Democrat, or a Republican, or fan of Nickleback - and then it all turned sour. My favorite, which I hear every now and again, concerns a Finalist who asked me, rather unpleasantly, to get her coffee. According to the story, she was doomed from the beginning. In truth, I thought her request was more funny than insulting, and I didn't tell any of the panelists about it. Her performance in the interview was shaky and she wasn't able to demonstrate her passion for service as compellingly as some other candidates. Her love of coffee never came up.

But the repetition of these stories is disconcerting. These stories place a lot of emphasis on details that matter little. Answering questions thoroughly is important, being polite is important, concealing your questionable taste in music is imperative, but one slip should not become the focus of the experience. Finalists should not turn the interview experience, from which students might learn something valuable, into a referendum on this one moment.

In the inevitable postmortem, students should re-frame the experience, thinking about what went well, what was

enjoyable, what they learned, keeping in mind that whatever the worst moment of the interview might have been, the panelists likely do not remember it. Sending thank you notes help diminish any lingering bad taste (like all our panelists, I may not remember who answered a question poorly, but I do recall every thank you note).

Regardless of the outcome, we hope that the Truman interview is a valuable experience. After each interview panel, we leave marveling at the number of quality applicants and lamenting at our limited number of scholarships. The value of the interview is obvious to us - we are exposed to these wonderful applicants, and they are exposed to their fellow Finalists. We know we cannot provide every deserving Finalist with a scholarship, but at least we can introduce her to others who share her values. By understanding the nature of the interview, providing good preparation, and learning to manage the aftermath of the interview, Faculty Advisors can help to make sure the interview is a valuable learning experience.