Notes on the James Madison Memorial Fellowship
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Introduction
NAFAns who attended the Denver conference in summer 2003 may remember my impassioned testimonial from the audience following Admiral Yost’s presentation on the James Madison Memorial Fellowship. When I had finished, the Admiral looked down at me from his podium, surprise registering across his face, and laughed, “Do you want to be a reader next year?”

What the Admiral may have intended as a joke has turned into my serving as one of ten readers for the Madison for the last two years. As someone whose graduate education was almost fully funded by the Madison Fellowship, it has been my pleasure to give back to the Foundation in this way, and I have truly enjoyed and learned from the experience. I hope that, through this document, I might help my fellow NAFAs members to encourage more of your own students to apply, to submit a strong application, and to gain from the process of applying no matter the outcome.

The James Madison Memorial Fellowship
The Madison is a truly fantastic opportunity for future or current teachers of US government or history at the secondary level. The Fellowship carries a $24,000 award for graduate studies leading towards an MA in History or Political Science, or an MAT, MEd, or MSE with a concentration in American history or American government. Fellows must take at least 12 semester credits of US Constitutional history. No Fellow can receive more than $12,000 per academic year.

Fellows also take part in the Madison Foundation’s exceptional month-long Summer Institute, held at Georgetown University, which carries six of the required 12 US Constitutional history credits. While the coursework forms the core of the Institute, Fellows also travel in the DC and Virginia areas, get special tours of Congress and the Supreme Court, and meet with lawmakers and judges. During my own participation in the Institute, I felt like I had a key to the nation’s capital: we met with Senators Kennedy and Hatch, Justice Thomas talked with us for an hour, and we attended one of President Clinton’s speeches and met with him afterwards. Since the Fellows all live in residence at Georgetown, it is also a valuable opportunity to get to know and trade ideas with some of the best teachers from across the nation. It’s hard to imagine a better experience for “US History junkies,” as Fellows tend to be.

The Madison also carries a post-graduate school obligation of one year of teaching for each year of study under the Fellowship.

Junior and Senior Fellows
The Madison offers both Junior and Senior Fellowships. Junior Fellows, typically graduating seniors who have not yet started teaching, attend graduate school full-time,
and have two years to complete their degree. Senior Fellows, usually full-time teachers who want to continue teaching while attending graduate school part-time, must finish their degree within five years. While approximately two-thirds of fellowships are awarded to Senior applicants, this ratio reflects the approximate makeup of the applicant pool and is not a bias on the part of the Foundation; there is no preference for or against Junior or Senior Fellowship applicants.

Junior and Senior applicants each have a different challenge to overcome. Because of the high attrition rate of new teachers, Junior applicants must convince the readers that they have been thoughtful in their career choice, have enough experience to make an informed decision, and are truly committed to a career in teaching beyond the obligations of the Fellowship (even a hint of a potential future career not in the classroom can doom an application). Senior Fellows must argue that this fellowship is going to make a real difference in their teaching; they must show why, if they have made it this far as an outstanding teacher without a Master’s degree, they need one now. If they already have a Master’s degree, they must show why they need another one and how this will make a real difference in their career.

Why NAFAus Should Focus on the Madison
I’d make three arguments as to why NAFA members should focus more energy on recruiting for the Madison:

1) **Ease of recruiting.** The Madison is looking for a very specific kind of person – someone who is or is interested in teaching US History or Government at the secondary level. Your Alumni Relations office may be able to provide you with a ready-made list of your alumni who fit this profile, and your education department should be able to tell you who is seeking certification in this area. But I’d also encourage you to talk with History and Political Science majors, and let them know of this opportunity; some may be inspired to pursue teaching as a career if they know that such funding for graduate school is available.

2) **The benefits to the individual.** For people interested in US history and government, particularly Constitutional history, it doesn’t get much better than this. The Madison foundation offers recognition, honor, and opportunity that are rarely available to teachers, and the Madison continues to serve as a mark of distinction for some of the best secondary social studies teachers in the nation.

3) **Our country’s good.** Our nation benefits from having well-educated, thoughtful teachers of US history and government. Recruiting for this opportunity offers us a chance for us to make good teachers even better, to entice potentially great teachers into our schools, and to encourage our best teachers to stay in the classroom.

**The Selection Process**
The Madison Foundation receives approximately 300-325 applications each year, with a slight majority, approximately 55%, coming from men. This year, the Foundation had 58 Fellowships to award. Since this is a federal grant, the legislation that created it requires that there be one Fellow per state (plus one from DC and one from the combined territories), but the Foundation has raised enough funds to offer two Fellowships in the
states of CA, MD, NJ, TX, and NM. Each state also has one alternate named; at the end of the reading, all ten readers decide on the top alternate, who is given the “Fellows’ Fellowship” funded by donations by past Madison Fellows.

Working in teams of two, readers read one state at a time. Both team members read the entire state, using a rating sheet for each applicant. When all files for a state have been read, the two team members discuss the candidates and reach consensus on who the Fellow and alternate for that state should be. Each reader can declare a file that is disastrously unqualified or horribly prepared to be “noncompetitive;” typically, the other reader looks over the file to make sure that there is no disagreement (this treatment is reserved for the small number of the most obviously noncompetitive files, so there is very rarely any disagreement), and that file is put to the side.

Because files are read and fellowships are awarded state-by-state, the level of competition can vary greatly. Several states had only one or two applicants; in these cases, Fellowships are not automatically awarded, but applicants must be judged to be of sufficient quality to merit the award of a Fellowship. Two states (NH and ME) did not have any applicants this last year; other states had more than 20 applications.

Files are graded on a 100-point scale, with points given for the candidate’s undergraduate program; work experience; long-term career plans; outside activities; honors and awards; course of study; strengths of character; the Constitutional essay; and the letters of reference. I found that about 20% of candidates scored fewer than 50 points; half scored in the 50-65 range; another 20% were in the 65-75 point range, 5% had 75-85 points, and the very top 5% had 85+ points. Though the level of competition varies by state, the large majority of candidates who were selected as Fellows scored at least 70 points on both my and my partner’s rating sheets.

**What I Learned From Reading for the Madison**
Here’s the advice I’ll take back to Grinnell College as I advise future applicants, both for the Madison and for other scholarship and fellowship opportunities. Though the examples listed here are from the Madison, these lessons can be applied widely.

- **Be specific and give examples.** The Madison Foundation asks that applicants talk about the teaching techniques that they think are most effective. The best answers to this question went beyond the theory to talk about actual lessons or classes that the applicant had taught or would like to teach. These answers allowed me to imagine the applicant in front of the classroom.

- **Answer the question, answer the whole question, answer the question in the context of the fellowship, and answer the question behind the question.** Madison’s question 8 asks candidates to “[d]escribe a book that you have read in the last year that has contributed to your intellectual development.” The best answers I read a) chose a book related to history or teaching, b) briefly described the book, c) and responded to the book in an intellectual way. The phrase “contributed to your intellectual development” indicates that candidates should do more than just describe the book, but should relate it to their own lives. Since this is a teaching Fellowship, a reader
can gain special insight into the applicant if the book described contributes to that person’s development as a teacher.

- **Small stuff may not keep you from winning, but it sets the tone.** The applicant’s writing style, grammar, usage, typos, and presentation make a difference. Readers note and are impacted by obvious mistakes. I can’t tell you how many times I thought, “This is a $24,000 grant – would it kill you to spell check your application?” Don’t write your answers on a separate page, then physically cut and glue them onto the application. If the application has been downloaded from the Internet and completed on your computer, print it on white paper.

- **Don’t just go for the easy answer.** The Madison’s essay question (“Why, in your view, study of the Constitution is important and should form a basic part of secondary school education.”) invites candidates to reflect on the very purpose of this Fellowship. The overwhelming majority of answers to this question don’t say anything unique or thought-provoking. The most interesting answers, and the ones that I scored the highest, took some sort of different twist, such as commenting on the recently-passed legislation that requires all schools to teach about the Constitution on the 17th of September each year (and noting that this act itself may be interpreted as unconstitutional), or argued that the Constitution is difficult to teach because of its flaws. Anyone can write the obvious answer, and most people do.

- **Make your case, don’t plead it.** There was not much that turned me off more than candidates who used question 9 (“Indicate any other information about yourself that you wish to bring to the attention of the selection committee.”) to argue that they should win this because of their financial need. That response frames the argument in terms of what the Foundation can do for the candidate, not vice versa. Don’t argue for a merit-based scholarship on financial grounds.

- **Answer all of the questions.** Even if your answer is weak, you’ll probably get a point or two just for trying. Even seemingly optional questions like #9 are not optional and should be answered. If a third letter of recommendation is optional, as it is with the Madison, it almost never hurts to have one more voice speaking on your behalf.

- **List your accomplishments once and only once.** Applicants lost points with me if they listed the same experience twice, such as under both their activities (question 5) and their honors and awards (question 6). Doing so makes it appear that you don’t have enough in your life to talk about, and you’re desperate to list anything.

- **Aim high, but be realistic.** Question 7 of the Madison application asks candidates to describe their proposed graduate program. Because the Madison application is due before candidates are notified of graduate school admittance, this answer is speculative. I gave applicants points for proposing to go to the best school they could reasonably expect to attend. Candidates lost points, though, if they claimed they would go to a top graduate school after graduating, for example, from a non-top-tier school with a GPA in the 2.5 range.

- **Letters of recommendation matter a great deal.** Scholarship candidates really have to choose their letter-writers very carefully, talk with them at length about the opportunity at hand, and work with them to get the best letter possible. The Madison asks for three different letters of recommendation; one academic, one teaching, and one optional other. Candidates lost points if their letters were insufficiently enthusiastic, if the letter-writers did not know what they were writing for (one I read
thought that this was a graduate school admissions letter for James Madison University), or if the letters did not address the stated criteria. Junior and Senior candidates may each face a different challenge in this regard; Junior Fellow candidates must find someone who can speak, perhaps speculatively, about their ability to teach, and Senior Fellow candidates must find someone who can speak of their academic abilities, even if they have not been a student in decades.

Subjectivity and Luck
The last lesson that I learned, and that will really help me as I advise students in other scholarship competitions in the future, was the role of subjectivity and luck in who wins the award. As much as the Madison and all scholarships try to take subjectivity and luck out of the equation, they’re nearly impossible to eliminate. Here are three brief examples of how subjectivity and luck play a role in this process:

1) Subjectivity between readers on a team. This was the second year in a row that I had a chance to be the reading partner of fellow NAFAW Camille Stillwell of the University of Maryland. Camille and I have probably read over 100 Madison files together at this point, and we have become impressively close in our ability to grade applications within about a 5-point range. But there were still some files that we were 15 or more points apart on, and those took a lot of talking, cajoling, and compromise.

2) Subjectivity among all readers based on experience. I was a Madison Junior Fellow; one of the other readers was a Madison Senior Fellow. I tended to favor younger candidates who I thought we could impact for many years to come over older candidates who, in my estimation, might only have a few years left in the classroom. My colleague thought that younger teachers would be more likely to leave the profession (and as she pointed to me as a perfect example of this demographic, I had to admit she had a point). In the end, though, some top candidates in competitive states were selected or not selected based on the experience and biases of the people who happened to be assigned their file.

3) How strong is the pool? Luck plays a significant role in competitions that are divided geographically and are not selected from one giant pool. You can predict that some states will be tremendously competitive (CA, NY, TX), but others surprise you (Alabama had six applicants this year, all of whom were fantastic). By contrast, Camille and I read one state that had only three applicants; we agreed on the best file, but didn’t recommend that he be named as a Fellow, since his application was not as good as the candidates we selected from other states for this honor. Had any of the non-selected Alabama applicants happened to live in this non-competitive state, they certainly would have been named as a Madison Fellow.

An applicant, by working hard on their application, having a clean presentation, and answering the questions to the best of their ability, still can control only to a certain extent whether or not their file is selected as The Winner. Whether or not someone wins a scholarship or fellowship depends to a large amount on factors outside of the applicant’s control. Therefore, we as scholarship advisors really can’t measure our success through looking at the number of scholarships won. Instead, we must encourage
our applicants to focus on what they can completely control – the ability to focus on, take meaning from, and gain in the very process of applying.