Rhodes and Marshall Scholarships: Preparation Tips

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September 2002

In General

The purpose of the application is to get an interview, and to set the stage for a successful interview. The purpose of the interview is to facilitate your chances of being selected for the scholarship.

The Application

The overall purpose of the application is to convince the committee member reviewing the application that you are someone they would like to meet and have a conversation with, that you are a person who is qualified to be taken seriously as a candidate for the scholarship, that you are not someone who is self-centered with a strong sense of entitlement, and that receiving the scholarship would fit well with your academic and career plans. Your application must be neat and professional in appearance, and be completely free of typographical and grammatical errors.

The Essays

The purpose of the essay(s) is to provide evidence that you are a person of depth and subtlety, that you care about ideas, that you are interested in and engaged with the world, that you wish to use the opportunity of the scholarship to serve ends that are not entirely selfish, and that you should be taken seriously as a candidate for such a prestigious scholarship.

The essay is also your best chance to set the stage for your interview and increase the likelihood that you will be interviewed on your strengths and interests, rather than the interviewers’ strengths and interests. The essay should include “hooks,” a handful of provocations likely to catch the eye of your readers, which they may seize upon as interview questions or discussion topics at the social function. The essay should not repeat information on the activities list. It should set out your planned academic program, and how that fits with your life plans.

Using an important life experience as a springboard for the essay may be helpful, but you must be careful to not create a cliché. A common mistake is to cast your plans and ambitions primarily in terms of offices and honors to which you aspire. A good framework might be an experience you had that led you to a particular field of study, you experiences there and specific valuable things you have learned, and what the next step is in furthering your development and education and how your academic proposal helps you meet those goals and your long-term aspirations. Include interesting quotations; provide rich details rather than long descriptions; avoid the impression that you consider yourself to be “self-made;” provide evidence (although not an assertion) that you love ideas and learning; let your personality shine through.

Letters of Recommendation

Each letter must do something, but each letter should not attempt to do everything. You must decide what part of the overall portrait you want each letter to paint. Then you must let your recommenders know what you need them to do. This will mean that you must give your recommenders more than a transcript, activities list and copy of your personal statement. You need to give them specific, detailed
information about what you would like them to say on your behalf. This may mean drafting the letter for them. It may mean giving them a set of bullet outline points. Celebrity recommendations are rarely helpful, unless the person of stature actually knows you well. Superlatives are the coin of the realm and are not particularly helpful. Concrete, specific, numerous details are what makes a difference. The letters are also an opportunity to set “hooks” for the interviewers. You can do this by having the recommender talk about specific details of your papers, class participation, books read, exam answers, outside conversations, accomplishments, and character. The key is detail, although this should not be confused with mere length.

The Activities List

The primary purpose of the activities list may be to help you write a more effective essay, since the weakest essay will be a rehash of the many awards and recognitions you have received. The activities list should communicate depth as well as breadth of interests. The committee will be more impressed with meaningful involvement in a few activities than superficial involvement in many activities. Long lists of minor recognitions are not particularly helpful. Recognitions from high school or earlier must be truly significant to be included without being counterproductive. Include explanation or context for items that may not be meaningful to an outsider. It is very helpful to include some detail about the half dozen or so most meaningful things you have done, once again with an eye to “hooking” the reader and setting the stage for a successful interview.

The Interview

The purpose of the interview is to convince the committee that you, rather than the other deserving and qualified candidates, should be given this opportunity. A carefully crafted application will set the stage for a good interview. Dress professionally. Be prompt.

The Social Event

At the social event, introduce yourself to each interviewer, and initiate a conversation with him or her. It is your responsibility to make sure you have met each person who will be interviewing you the next day. Don’t wait for them to take the initiative; they may be testing your social acuity. It doesn’t matter whether you have met all the other candidates; you are not there primarily to make new friends. Ask the interviewers questions; seek areas of common interest. Try not to brown nose. Don’t butt in and interrupt, although you can join conversations. Try not to spill your drink. Laugh, but not too loud.

The Interview

View this as a particular type of game or test, and try to develop the skills to play the game well. This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t be sincere, because sincerity is an important part of playing the game well. But understand that this is a particular type of test, and should be treated as such. Try to assess whether it makes sense to shake the hands of each interviewer at the beginning or end of the interview. If you have met before it probably isn’t necessary; if there is someone you have not met, you may want to make a particular point of introducing yourself.

General Tips

- Keep your answers short; end them with hooks.
- Don’t become defensive; the interviewer does not expect you to agree with him or her, but does expect you to be informed, to be balanced and fair, and to recognize the weakness and dangers of your own positions.
• Be especially prepared to talk about things you have done recently. Have friends or coaches help you identify questions you are likely to be asked, and how to respond to them.
• Don’t be afraid to ask for clarification of the question.
• If you are asked multiple questions simultaneously, try to circle back to each interviewer’s questions.
• Recognize that tough questions provide the best opportunity to hit a home run. Consider them an opportunity to shine.
• Tough interviews also often mean that you are being taken seriously as a candidate.

Demeanor

• Try to relax, but don’t slouch; hands in lap; feet flat on floor.
• Look your interviewers in the eye.
• Smile.
• Vary pace and cadence of your speech.
• Humor is ok, especially gently at your own expense.
• Recognize your bad propensities when you are under pressure and practice overcoming them.
• Try to manage your nervous ticks.
• You can pause before answering, but not too long.

Questions to be Ready to Answer

• Review your essay, activities list, and draft letters of recommendation; be prepared to talk about the poet you cite, the novel you quote, etc.
• Current events: read a good newspaper; listen to opinion discussion shows.
• Be prepared to talk in detail about your major and proposed area of study.
• I see your transcript includes a “C” in biology. What happened?
• Mission related questions: What did you learn? How can you justify “soul snatching”? Isn’t it presumptuous to intrude on other cultures?
• BYU related questions: Is it possible to have academic freedom at a religiously affiliated university? Why do so many athletes get kicked out for honor code violations? Recent events at BYU that have received regional or national attention.
• Faith related questions: Answer calmly, responsively, non-defensively; can broaden to other perspectives.
• Be prepared to speak in detail about your proposed academic program; be familiar with some of the people with whom you would like to work.
• Is there anything else you would like to tell us? Why should you be given this opportunity?