

# Prestigious Scholarships: An Overview

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While all scholarships are wonderful to receive, not all, to paraphrase George Orwell, are as prestigious as others. By prestigious scholarships we mean here, those that constitute competition on a national level and are high in prestige as well as remuneration. These are intensely competitive scholarships and are very difficult to win. Students compete at the very highest level against other students from the best academic institutions in America. Therefore, to be genuinely competitive, you must be excellent in virtually all respects. We will see what this means as we go through our overview.

Of those we will look at, the ones most commonly considered prestigious national scholarships for undergraduate students: The Gates Cambridge, The Goldwater, The British Marshall, The Andrew Mellon, The George Mitchell, The Rhodes, The Truman Foundation, and The Morris K. Udall. Each scholarship is given for work in a particular field, which we will address in point two of what follows.

Perhaps the most logical way to approach prestigious scholarship applications is to divide the process into two parts, the preparation, and then the application itself. Each part is equally important, though the preparation takes a great deal longer to successfully complete.

While each application is different in length, requirements, number of essays, time line, etc., they all have several factors in common. Here I will note some of them based on ten years of experience as a faculty representative for most of these scholarships. All of these scholarships require what I would call a single-minded devotion. You are expected to demonstrate that you have an idea, a plan, and a passion which you are following and that you fully intend to fulfill or accomplish. This endeavor of yours must be reflected in the whole of the application, or to say it slightly differently, in the unity of the application. So, how is this to be accomplished?

The majority of these awards are give to students who are, for lack of a better word, "activists." While some scholarships like The Mellon are given to students who will go on for a Ph. D in the Humanities, or as is the case with The Goldwater, in math or science, the majority of these national awards are give to students who are going to change the world through their engagement with it. In short, the awards are given to students who can demonstrate their active leadership roles in the larger world, whether in politics, environment, health issues, etc. What I mean by preparation then, is that you are able to accumulate enough experience to fill in those blank spots on the applications that ask you to address the value and impact of your internships, your leadership in projects and organizations, your research projects, your campus and public activities, and where and with whom you volunteered and what you accomplished.

A word more about this. It has been my experience over the years that you must start as soon as possible to engage yourself in the above listed possibilities of preparation. In fact, starting as a freshman is really not too soon. Some of our winners, like Tristan Brown, our Gates Cambridge Scholar of 2006, had started doing environmental projects when he was a freshman in high school! But it is not just a matter of starting early. Another factor, which is vital, is the quality of your experiences and their potential impact. For example, a local internship on the Truman application would look good, but one on the state, or even national level, would be outstanding and make you far more competitive---not to mention the experience itself and your future, whether you win the scholarship or not. The same is true of research experiences. I have noticed that the students who have national research experience, and not just WMU research experience, have a far greater chance to win the award.

So, aim for the highest possibilities. One word of advice for you here! This is often difficult to accomplish on our own. Therefore search out possibilities through the university, but more importantly, get to know your department and its faculty. These are the people who can help you the most. They know the field, they have the contacts and

they can provide great recommendations for you. Almost without exception, they will find it exciting to work with you and you will discover and enjoy a vital element of your education that most other students tend to miss.

Given what I have so far said, I do not mean to minimize academics here. You should be very competitive and have accumulated an excellent GPA over the years. It is also important to have a very good ACT or SAT score. In some cases like the Mellon, an outstanding GRE score. But these, as the philosophers and theologians might say, are the necessary reasons, but not sufficient. Your grades and scholarships are important, to be sure, but you will never win a national prestigious scholarship with these alone. For example, suppose you have a 4.0 GPA and a 30 ACT. That is excellent, of course, but you will be competing against students who have similar achievements. Here, in the academic sense, what would give you the edge is to spend a semester with excellent grades at Trinity College, Dublin, or The London School of Economics, or a summer session in Berlin or at Berkley. In short, where you are able, boost your academic credentials by studying at a prestigious institution.

Here is a brief reflection at the end of part one. Since these are such competitive scholarships, it is very difficult to win one. Our finalists in The British Marshall and The Rhodes and The George Mitchell, for example, have all said that every one in the interview room deserved to win. All of these people are genuinely outstanding, and winning is important! But it is not everything. In fact, when I talked to directors of these foundations over the years they made an obvious point: they do not expect everyone to win. It is an impossibility. But as I've said, there is prestige and honor in simply being competitive at the national level. I would also add that there are genuine advantages in the preparation itself. Think of the great volunteer, or research, or internships you will have. They will make your future in many ways. This is a situation in which you can only win. So do your best. It is your life you are creating.

The second part, as promised, is some information about the application itself.

Each of the prestigious scholarships mentioned above is different in its own particulars, but does have at least three elements in common. The first, in a general sense, is that an application must have shape, coherence and direction. The second is that they all require basic biographical material, and a third that they require written answers to questions that must be of an exceedingly hi

We normally do not think of an application having shape, though we do expect it to have coherence and direction. However, even terms like coherence and direction are usually understood in a technical sense rather than coherence and direction in the way I speak of it here. What I am alluding to is the fact that shape, coherence and direction all refer to your life as it is presented through the application. As I have indicated in the first pages, the readers of these applications do not expect to see simply a formal, technical shape, coherence, direction to your essay: for example in topic sentences, coherence paragraphs, conclusions and other formal requirements. They expect you to present yourself in such a way that the answers to the biographical material and the essay questions show not only the acuity of your intellect, your commitment to a field of activity, but an indication that all of this is being directed toward a future, which is the logical culmination of what you have been preparing for in your undergraduate and even high school years.

It is for the above reasons that preparing an application usually takes quite a lot of time and usually some guidance. It is not uncommon to have to rewrite the application several times. For example, The Truman Scholarship administrators suggest that an applicant work on the application for 40 to 80 hours. And our Goldwater winner, Marc Humphrey, told me that he had thought about the major essay for several months before writing it. As the risk of sounding too tedious, I cannot emphasize sufficiently the importance of this element of the application, particularly the major essay. Most applications indicate that the essay is the major factor in determining who will win the scholarship. So, hone, perfect your writing skill!

In terms of the particulars of the various applications it is not possible to address all of the variations here. It is important to consult the specific foundation or institutional applications directly. This is easily done on the Internet. I will include addresses below.

On the other hand, generally speaking, however, you are most often asked to state a goal on all the applications. Will you go to law school and then go into a political life, for example. This seems simple, but must be thought out. Your goals must reflect the goals of the foundation giving the scholarship, as well as reflect your years of preparation to achieve that goal. Secondly, you are asked to list your courses, grades, scholarships, awards, internships, publications, activities, and sometimes, your job experience. Obviously, the more “credentials” you have, the fewer the white spaces on the application. Here is a case where white space does not look good—unless of course, you have just won the Nobel Prize in some field.

This is not entirely facetious. The thing, among others about the Nobel Prize, is the quality of the award! That should also be the case on your application. If you need five activities, it is, without question, better to have only four that are outstanding, than to have 20 that are mediocre, or to put it bluntly, simply “filler.” Quality, of course, is the byword for the whole application and is essential as a factor in your years of preparation for a scholarship.

Now some applications, in addition to basic biography, have a series of short essays. The nature of these essays varies with each application, but the general idea in each of them is similar in many ways. The topics, say in the Truman or Udall, are created to see how thoughtful you are about what you have accomplished so far in your college career and why you think that your activities have made a significant contribution to others. Therefore, rather concisely, you must explain what you did, how it influenced you, and why it was important. This gives the reader some insights into your ability to think, evaluate yourself and express yourself convincingly. The Truman is an excellent example here. It asks you to describe three questions of major importance to the Truman foundation: an important leadership experience, a public service activity and a problem you wish to solve when you enter public service. These answers are read very carefully and must be convincing, and stylistically, polished to perfection.

“Polish” takes us to the final element: the major essay. Virtually every award application, of which I am aware, requires the applicant to write an essay which normally varies in length from about 500 words to 1,000 words. The British Marshall, however, requires you to write two essays of these lengths, one (500 words) on the university and program you wish to enter, and one (1000 words) personal statement which describes “distinction of intellect and character.” Conversely, The Truman and The Udall both allow you only one essay of 800 words. In all cases, the essays are heavily weighted by the readers and you have only one chance to “make your case” for the scholarship.

The content, of which the quote from the British Marshall may be the best guideline, must reveal, in an absorbing way, the power of your mind in both its narrow focus, i.e., your expertise, and in its ability to see the broader range of issues and problems, i.e., your synthetic ability. Not only must it represent what you intend to do or have already done, but must be presented in such a way that the reader will want to read it. Remember, the more interested you can make the reader in your work the better the chance you have to make it through the selection process. In some cases, like The Goldwater and The Truman, the required content is more complex than some of the others and requires more research before you write. Here you must explain, in the most interesting way possible, a problem that interests you and how you hope to solve that problem once you have received a law degree or Ph. D. in your field.

It may be important to note here that even if you are a good writer it is not uncommon to have to revise your essay several times. In some cases it must be completely rewritten. Since so much value is given to the essay questions you must be sure that you are entirely focused on your thesis, that you explain the thesis precisely and that you support it with material, illustrations, and arguments that make the best case for you. Often, as I’ve said before, as with The Truman or The Goldwater, you will have to do research and footnote/endnote your sources. Needless to say, the essay must be grammatically correct. And, the more familiar you are with rhetorical devices the better your chances will be of getting an enthusiastic reading.

I leave the essay section with this note: your essay must be a powerful, imaginative presentation of your intellectual ability, your knowledge, the extent and depth of your leadership experiences, and show your passion to succeed in your chosen endeavor.

A final practical word: I mentioned above the need for recommendations. In almost every case you need three or more. In some cases, like The Rhodes, you need six to eight. Normally, each recommendation must address a particular dimension of your experience. One, for example will require the recommender to write about your intellectual ability; another will ask the recommender to evaluate your chances of achieving your stated goals. Some of your recommendations may come from internship supervisors or program organizers. You must start the process of thinking about and “cultivating” recommenders early. It is therefore important to develop ties with faculty and others who may later write an excellent recommendation for you. It is usually disastrous to hold off until your Junior or Senior year to start thinking about who might write a recommendation for you. The better the recommender knows you the better the recommendation will be.

Sounds like a lot of work? It is! The rewards, however, far surpass the time and energy you will put into the application. To win one of these awards gives you money for your education, and virtually guarantees you admission to a great graduate program or law school.

- \* The Gates Cambridge; apply as a senior
- \* The Goldwater: apply as a junior
- \* The British Marshall: apply as a senior
- \* The Andrew Mellon: apply as a senior
- \* The George Mitchell: apply as a senior: [Hartman@us-irelandalliance.org](mailto:Hartman@us-irelandalliance.org)
- \* The Rhodes: apply as a senior
- \* The Truman Foundation: apply as a junior (applying as a sophomore is not generally advised unless you have spectacular credentials.)
- \* The Morris K. Udall: apply as a junior

(Junior means one full year of courses yet to be completed.)

Please email Dr. Martell with your questions: [john.martell\\_jr@wmich.edu](mailto:john.martell_jr@wmich.edu)