APPLICATION TIPS: RHODES, MARSHALL, CHURCHILL AND MITCHELL SCHOLARSHIPS

These application tips were designed for Rhodes, Marshall, Churchill and Mitchell scholarship applicants. However, students applying for other scholarships or graduate school admission can benefit from the information.

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OVERVIEW: APPLYING FOR THE RHODES, MARSHALL, CHURCHILL AND MITCHELL SCHOLARSHIPS

The Rhodes, Marshall and Mitchell scholarships are among the most prestigious, sought-after awards for U.S. students. In addition to receiving lifelong recognition for these achievements, scholars study at world-renowned institutions, become immersed in another culture, enjoy international travel, become friends with fellow scholars, and join the networks of the scholarships' distinguished alumni. Although the odds of winning one of these scholarships are slim: only 32 Rhodes, 40 Marshall, 12 Churchill, and 12 Mitchell Scholarships are awarded to U.S. students, but someone will win. Applying for these awards is probably unlike any other application process you've encountered (see applications for details). Candidates should be prepared to spend dozens of hours preparing an application. Fortunately, even if you do not win a scholarship, the application process will prove a valuable experience, as you will learn more about yourself, improve your writing and interviewing skills, define and articulate your academic and career goals, and develop relationships with mentors. In fact, it is excellent preparation for applying to graduate school; and the Rhodes, Marshall, Churchill or Mitchell application may very well serve as a template which can easily be transformed into an application for graduate school.

There is no formula for making a successful application, as the selection processes for these awards are largely subjective. But these tips, taken from scholars, selectors, advisors, and the scholarships’ websites, will put you on the right track.

The Rhodes funds 2-3 years of study at University of Oxford; the Marshall funds 2-3 years study at any U.K. institution; the Churchill funds one year of study at Churchill College at Cambridge University; and the Mitchell funds study at any institution in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland. Students may choose to pursue a second bachelor’s or higher degree. Obtaining a bachelor’s degree in the U.K. involves far greater specialization than earning bachelor’s degrees in the United States. Candidates are expected to be academically prepared for their proposed program of study. For further information and degree descriptions, visit the scholarship and institution websites found on the Fellowships/Scholarships section of the NIFS website.

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PROPOSED PROGRAM OF STUDY

The proposed program of study is a separate essay for the Marshall application; it should be incorporated into the personal statement for the Rhodes and Mitchell.

A well-written proposal should:
- Discuss in detail the topic of study and/or research methods.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the proposed university, its curriculum and faculty, and specifically indicate why you selected this particular program.
- Show that the study or research is consistent with your qualifications, academic preparation, and long-range educational or career goals. If you plan to study a topic different from your undergraduate major, provide an explanation.
• Indicate the feasibility of the proposed study or research. Is it realistic? (Make sure, for example, that the archives in which you plan to do your research will be open to visiting scholars; or that you will have the cooperation of those needed to assist you in your program.)

Researching a proposed program
• Speak with MSU professors who teach or research in your field of interest. They may know university programs best suited to your needs, and may be able to help you identify possible contacts.
• Read scholar biographies on the Rhodes, Marshall, Churchill and Mitchell websites; see what others have done.
• Research U.K. institutions to find existing programs and scholars in particular fields.
• Communicate with faculty in your proposed program at the proposed institution, and refer to any positive correspondence in your application.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Strong letters of recommendation are extremely important; choose your recommenders carefully. The Marshall requires four letters (at least two of which are academic). The Rhodes and Mitchell each require 5-8 letters (at least four of which are academic). Six letters may be enough; two additional letters, if merely indifferent, will hurt your application.

Getting to know your professors
Make a point of establishing relationships with your professors as early as possible in your academic career. Attend office hours and engage in discussions outside of class. Participate in your major’s department faculty/student organization; get involved on-campus.

The ideal letter of recommendation
General letters of recommendation, e.g. “To Whom It May Concern,” are not sufficient for the Rhodes, Marshall, and Mitchell scholarships. Effective letters of recommendation are detailed and specific, contextualizing your achievements. It is helpful if the recommender can attest to the appropriateness of your proposed program.

Letters should come from professors who are familiar not only with your academic abilities, but also with your personal interests and background, and how those relate to your potential success in your proposed program of study. Although recommenders should consider what each scholarship is looking for, they should not feel compelled to address every aspect of the scholarship profile. For example, a Rhodes recommender may write a letter strongly praising your academic talents, but weaken the overall impact of the letter by including a lukewarm comment on your athleticism. Recommenders should address only those elements of your application on which they can comment confidently.

Ideally, you will have a letter from a full professor, known in her/his field, who knows you well. Should you request letters from Lecturers? The American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust has said, "Letters from people who know you well are far more valuable than letters from well-known people who know you less well and who might write, at best, a form-like letter." Note that, whenever possible, letters written by faculty are preferable.

Generally, letters from college (rather than high school) instructors are preferable. However, the Rhodes American Secretary has said that letters from high school instructors can be appropriate if, for example, you were extremely active in sports during high school but have been unable to pursue athletics in college.

Non-academic letters should discuss your volunteer and/or leadership experience. Do not use letters from relatives or family friends.

How to request a letter of recommendation
Start early, ideally in the early part of the spring semester of the year in which you plan to apply. Discuss your plans with your recommenders as soon as possible. Let them know what you hope to study and why you want to apply. These discussions may help you clarify your plans and will help reestablish your relationships with your recommenders.
When you have the application forms (early spring semester), schedule another meeting with your recommenders. Provide them with a written description of the scholarship and copies of your personal statement, proposed academic program, transcript, and activities/honors list. Do not leave the forms in their mailboxes, and, to ensure effective letters, do not wait until the last minute. Unless you are applying from abroad, recommenders should give you the letters in sealed envelopes. You will submit the letters with the rest of your application materials to the International Scholarship Adviser before the mid-April deadline.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS

The personal statement is a critical part of the application. In the spring, the International Scholarship Adviser offers personal statement workshops and individual advising for Rhodes, Marshall and Mitchell applicants.

Read The Rhodes Scholarship: Notes for Truman Scholars and Other College Students, (www.rhodesscholar.org/truman.html) by Louis Blair, former Executive Secretary of the Truman Foundation. (The advice applies to the Marshall and Mitchell personal statements as well.)

Strunk and White’s The Elements of Style (2000 ed.) is an excellent resource for grammar rules and suggestions for effective style.

ACTIVITIES AND HONORS LIST

The Rhodes and Mitchell applications require a list of activities and honors; the Marshall requires this information on the application form itself. List activities (including dates of involvement) as you would on a resume. Use headings, such as Community Service and Academic Honors, and list entries in chronological order or order of importance. Briefly describe activities that are not self-explanatory, and (where appropriate) describe the impact you made in each role.

Your activities should represent your varied talents and passions outside the classroom. Selectors want to get a sense of who you are and what you believe in. List all significant activities and honors, but be selective. The selectors are looking for sustained commitment (rather than two hours spent on a community clean-up). Keep in mind that anything in your application is fair game in the interviews. Be completely honest. If you list that you speak fluent French, for example, you will want to be able to converse with an interviewer in French.

WEB LINKS

Rhodes Official Website (http://rhodesscholar.org/)

Marshall Official Website (http://www.marshallscholarship.org)

Mitchell Official Website (http://www.us-irelandalliance.org)

Churchill Official Website (http://winstonchurchillfoundation.org)

University of Oxford (http://ox.ac.uk/)

National Information Services and Systems
Quality assessment reports of programs at U.K. institutions; links to institution web sites.
http://www.niss.ac.uk/sites/

Universities and Colleges Admission Service
U.K. university and colleges course lists links
http://www.ucas.ac.uk/

Higher Education Career Services Unit
Guide to U.K. courses and research opportunities; information for international students studying in the U.K.
http://www.prospects.csu.ac.uk/student/pgdir/international/

British Council
Comprehensive information on study in the U.K. and links to other British education sites.
WHAT YOU SHOULD DO NOW

Freshmen and sophomores are encouraged to become familiar with the selection criteria now, so they can begin planning.

STEP 1: Carefully review the web sites for each scholarship; make sure you are eligible to apply. Read Should I Apply? A Q&A with the American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust on the Rhodes website under the FAQ section.

STEP 2: See the website or Office of National/International Fellowships and Scholarships for last year’s application. Begin thinking about applying for this award.
  • Campus applications are available in early spring.

STEP 3: Attend a spring international scholarship workshop and make an appointment with the NIFS Office via email at nifs@msu.edu.

STEP 4: Meet with your recommenders; let them know what they should expect.

STEP 5: Research your program of study.

STEP 6: Draft your personal statement and proposed program of study. Show it to your recommenders, get feedback, and then revise it.

STEP 7: Meet with recommenders again; give them the necessary materials.

STEP 8: During the fall, make another advising appointment with the NIFS Office (nifs@msu.edu) and attend scholarship workshops.

If you still have questions, please do not hesitate to contact our office at the following address:

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