

# Office of Distinguished Scholarships

## Tips and Advice

The Office of Distinguished Scholarships (ODS) provides a central location for information about distinguished awards and assists all Carolina students and alumni in putting their best foot forward when applying for these awards. In addition, ODS assists in the endorsement process for prestigious scholarship and fellowships, including the Rhodes, Marshall, and Truman Scholarships and the Luce Scholars Program.

ODS is available to advise applicants on their applications, suggest interviewing strategies, and connect applicants with faculty members who can assist with writing project proposals. Our staff is located in the James M. Johnston Center for Undergraduate Excellence in Graham Memorial.

**There are two types of scholarships listed by ODS at [www.distinguishedscholarships.unc.edu](http://www.distinguishedscholarships.unc.edu):**

- \*Those that require UNC-CH endorsement (12)
- \*Those that do not require UNC-CH endorsement (~70)

To obtain an endorsement, you must apply by the UNC-CH endorsement application deadline. The application process mirrors that of the national competition and is administered by ODS. Applicants who receive endorsement will then have additional time to consult with ODS and utilize ODS resources to ensure their application is as competitive as possible before the final submission. All application materials should be delivered to ODS **as listed in the scholarship/fellowship/award's instructions.**

### **Traditional materials required for most award applications:**

- \*Application form
- \*Transcripts from the UNC-CH registrar (transcripts can be delivered for free to the ODS Campus Box)  
*-Order transcripts two weeks in advance of endorsement application deadline*
- \*CV/Resume/List of principle activities
- \*Personal statement/Essays
- \*Letters of Recommendation (see advice on website)

The ODS website describes major national competitive awards available for graduate study. In addition, many graduate schools offer their own scholarships to students admitted to their program. The tips and advice in this document are intended to assist you in identifying scholarships for which you may be qualified. There is no easy way to win a scholarship, but there are ways to make the application process less daunting and to increase your chances of winning. . You can improve your chances for success by taking the application process seriously, spending time on background research, writing a good application, and preparing for interviews.

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## Common Eligibility Criteria

If you have a GPA of 3.600 or higher, you may be eligible for one or more distinguished scholarships that require UNC-CH endorsement. Awards that do not require endorsement usually require a minimum GPA of 3.000 or higher, and competitive applicants typically possess a GPA far above the minimum.

In addition to an outstanding academic record, distinguished scholarship applicants should have made their mark in other ways during their undergraduate careers. Substantial intellectual or creative projects, evidence of leadership or public service, and, strong, detailed letters of recommendation are essential to compete for these prestigious awards.

## The Application Process

The application is designed to provide the selection committee with a comprehensive picture of your plans and qualifications. Your letters of recommendation, your written statements, and your academic record should all work together to create a strong composite picture of your strengths. Your application may be compared to hundreds of others and will likely be read by several groups of people during the selection process.

Endorsement and Finalist selection committees generally ask for:

- Transcripts
- Three or more letters of recommendation
- A personal statement

Some scholarships may also require:

- A project proposal or plan of study
- An interview
- GRE scores

An application is always strongest when drafted early and reviewed and revised thoroughly. Most of the big-name scholarship deadlines come early in September of your fourth year. Endorsement application deadlines at UNC-CH may be weeks earlier than the scholarships' final deadlines. Start early and take the time to prepare well.

Begin early, and consider the complete picture you want to create for the selection committee as you work on each part of the application. Give thoughtful consideration to your ideas and do all the necessary research and exploration to prepare your application materials carefully.

Ultimately, it is your responsibility to ensure that you have completed all parts of the application and met the endorsement and final deadlines.

Contact Professor Mary Floyd-Wilson, Director and Ms. Alsace Gallop, Program Assistant for assistance with nationally competitive awards: [ods@unc.edu](mailto:ods@unc.edu) and 919-843-7757.

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## The Project Proposal

Applications for these awards most often ask for a proposal for a program of study or for a specific research project. An applicant may be asked to include the proposal as one part of a personal statement or to present the proposal separately. It is very important that your proposed program fits your current academic preparation.

The terms of some scholarships, such as the Rhodes or Churchill, fund study or research at a specific institution; some scholarships, such as the Beinecke or Marshall, allow you to select the institution or place for your study or research. Regardless of these terms, a proposal for a program of study or research project gains credibility if planned for a specific institution or place. The more detailed your knowledge of the institution at which you propose to work, the stronger your application. It is helpful if you are familiar with the names and special strengths of faculty or other experts, especially for a research project. The best approach is to establish a liaison with an institution or specialist before you apply and to include in your application some welcoming communication from a university or faculty member at the place you propose to study. Consult with faculty in your major department for further assistance.

The project proposal often includes:

- A concrete plan of study or research, sometimes including a budget and/ and or timetable
- An academic proposal describing your goals
- A description of how the facilities/experts at the particular program or place you have chosen would provide you with the means for achieving those goals
- An elaboration of how qualified you are to pursue those goals
- A statement which clearly links your academic plan of study with your personal and professional future

## Shaping Your Project

If at all possible, speak to:

- People who have actually studied in the programs' countries that interest you
- Professors in the field of interest you have chosen
- People who have pursued a similar project or program of study
- Previous award winners

Make sure your plans are well researched and demonstrate knowledge of current activity in the field. Confirm that your plans make sense for the program or institution you have targeted.

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## Personal Statement

The personal essay is the key to the application process. Personal statements provide an opportunity for applicants to speak about themselves. Do not make the essay into a list of awards or try to create a new world view. Present yourself according to the overarching themes of your life. Why have you made the choices you have made? What are your goals? What path will you take to achieve your goals?

The essay should be a compelling statement about you. You should demonstrate that you are able to think logically and express yourself clearly and with economy and elegance. Consider carefully what two or, at most, three points you wish to impress upon the selection committee. Committees are comprised of people who are intelligent, well educated, and vastly experienced in this work. Don't simply describe yourself with a litany of adjectives but create a rounded picture of yourself with concrete examples.

The personal statement should tell a story about you and make the reader want to get to know you. It should bear the imprint of your individuality. The organization of your statement will reflect the organization of your thinking. Each paragraph should deal with one major idea; each sentence should lead to the next. Decide which aspects of yourself or your proposed activity you wish to present and then stick to those few points. Unless feedback is prohibited by a scholarship's rule or attestation clause, be sure to have your essay reviewed by faculty members who have a background in your field.

Please note that if you are applying for the Rhodes or Mitchell Scholarships in the 2014-2015 academic year and forward, you cannot receive any editorial or revision feedback from anyone on your personal statement. The only way you can use the same personal statement for the Rhodes/Mitchell Scholarships and another scholarship such as the Marshall is if you do not receive any personal statement feedback at all. If you are applying for the Marshall and the Rhodes and/or Mitchell and want feedback on your Marshall personal statement, you cannot use that Marshall statement as your Rhodes and Mitchell personal statement. Instead, you will have to write an entirely different personal statement for the Rhodes and Mitchell Scholarships.

The personal statement should:

- Make sense logically, grammatically, and thematically
- Interest the readers
- Make the readers want to meet you in person

The focus of personal statement should center on:

- An issue or experience that you feel strongly about, or that has shaped your life
- A significant accomplishment or contribution you have made to your field or community
- Why this scholarship is right for you and how it fits in with your future goals

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Personal statements should avoid:

- Melodramatic or self-congratulatory statements
- Vague, abstract ideals
- Laundry lists of achievements
- Jargon and specialized vocabulary
- Misspelled words
- Convoluted syntax

You can get started writing a personal statement by:

- Writing down two or three experiences you feel have shaped who you are
- Writing down one or two problems you have faced and how you solved them
- Looking for patterns: What values keep popping up? What interests? What strengths and skills?
- Looking at your transcript: How does your coursework express your interests and talents? How has it developed them?

During the personal statement writing process:

- Try several different approaches until you find one that feels right and then revise, revise, revise!
- Unless feedback is prohibited by a scholarship's rule or attestation clause, show your essay to people who know you well and ask if it accurately expresses who you are.

## Letters of Recommendation

Select your recommenders carefully. References from faculty who have taught you in one large class often do not convey the kind of information a selection committee requires. It is preferable to have your letters written by faculty who know you and your work. References should provide the selection committee with an in-depth evaluation of you, which is best derived from a close working relationship. It is critical that letters of recommendation be specific and relevant to the purposes of the scholarship. These letters should cover your strengths from various angles and provide concrete examples. Make certain that each major accomplishment that you claim on your application is validated by at least one of your recommenders. Selection committees look for specific examples of accomplishment that demonstrate how the candidate has made a difference or had an impact.

It helps your case to request recommendations well in advance of deadlines. Recommenders should be given several weeks lead time to write thoughtful and detailed letters. Make an appointment with each of your recommenders to get advice and discuss plans. Bring a copy of the essay you have written for the scholarship in question. If your recommenders can read and discuss it with you, their letters will be more forceful and pertinent. **Please note** that if you are applying for the Rhodes or Mitchell Scholarships, you cannot accept revisions, suggestions, or editorial help on your personal statement. Explain these scholarships' rules and attestation clauses to your recommenders. Applicants who are successful in these competitions receive very detailed references from faculty, supervisors, advisors, and other well-suited recommenders.

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When considering recommenders:

- Choose recommenders who know the things about you that you want to emphasize
- For graduate study scholarships, choose faculty who know you both academically and personally

Strong recommenders should be able to:

- Speak about your work from their personal experience.
- Give concrete examples of when you exhibited your strongest qualities

Before you talk with potential recommenders:

- Make an appointment with each recommender you are considering.
- Be prepared to describe the scholarship or fellowship and its requirements

Once you choose your recommenders:

- Provide them with your resume/CV/list of activities, your proposal, and, if the award permits feedback, a copy of your personal statement
- Read this [letter of guidance](#) and consider printing a copy to share with each recommender
- Print a copy of ODS' endorsement application instructions to share with each recommender
- Give each recommender 3-4 weeks to write your letter of recommendation
- Take responsibility for reminding recommenders of the appropriate deadlines
- Write "thank-you" notes and keep each recommender informed of your progress

## Finalist Interviews

Selection committees believe that by speaking with candidates in person they can learn more than from the applications alone. Appearance, manner, dress, diction, courtesy, ease, warmth, humor, confidence, maturity all may play a crucial role in an interview situation. Selection committees may challenge applicants on their views. They are looking for students who hold strong beliefs and are able to defend and articulate their views. Your aim should be not to please a committee but to gain its respect.

Interviews will not be designed to offer comfort. Expect to have your ideas challenged. Questions may be asked in a rapid-fire manner, answers may be interrupted, and surprises may be sprung on you to see how you react.

Have a sense of timing. Twenty- or thirty-minute interviews go by quickly. Decide beforehand some of the points you want to get across and use relevant questions to make these points. Try to convey thoughtfulness, authenticity and honest engagement. Be ready to explain what part the scholarship will play in the achievement of your career goals. Remember to breathe and speak clearly.

A mock finalist interview may be arranged for you here on campus to help prepare you for the final interview, especially if you are a finalist for an endorsed award. You may be asked to expand on some point in your essay, so if there is a topic on which you feel you can speak eloquently, make sure to

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include it in your essay. Equally, you should be prepared to discuss any activity mentioned on the application or any statements made in your personal essay.

Take your time in responding to questions. Make certain that you understand what is being asked, and do not be afraid to request clarification if needed. The best general advice for finalist interviews is to project enthusiasm!

## Additional Tips

Applicants who apply for an award often find that the application process aids in personal and professional development and understanding. In addition, it is not uncommon for award recipients to apply for additional awards. For example, if you apply for the Udall Scholarship and are studying environmental science, you may want to consider applying for the Goldwater Scholarship simultaneously and later pursue the Churchill Scholarship for graduate school. Therefore, ODS encourages high-achieving students to reach out for assistance in mapping out awards that may fit their current and future goals and interests.

### Advice for First- and Second-Year Students

If you are a first- or second-year student, we advise you to begin to lay the groundwork now by:

- Getting to know your professors early in your academic career
- Selecting appropriate scholarships by identifying what part a scholarship will play in the attainment of your future goals. Make sure your interests and plans match the goal and intent of the scholarships. ODS has a list of dozens of prestigious awards on its website.
- Keeping a written list of your work, volunteer, academic, and extracurricular experiences and skills. University Career Services has resources for compiling this content into resumes and CVs.
- Making an appointment with your academic advisor and faculty scholarship advisor to develop a long-range plan. Discuss your future summer experiences, internships, classes, and extracurricular activities — all of which are crucial to a winning application.
- Making an appointment with ODS staff to discuss your short- and long-range plans.

### Advice for Third- and Fourth-Year Students

If you have not already implemented to above advice, you are strongly encouraged to do so.

### Advice to Applicants Researching a Post-Undergraduate Degree Program in the United Kingdom

If you are considering applying for one or more of the distinguished scholarships for study in the United Kingdom such as the Churchill, Marshall or Rhodes, take some time to look at the available degree programs. Learning more about your options in the UK will help you choose the scholarship competition that is best suited to your goals, and it will give you a head start on the scholarship

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application process. A well-researched plan and a clear understanding of your preferred degree program will ensure that you are applying for the most appropriate fellowships, and these efforts will strengthen your application.

Applicants should be aware of several unique characteristics of the British system of higher education. In the UK undergraduate study is more focused than in the United States, as students concentrate in their major fields from the beginning. Hence, pursuing a second undergraduate degree at a British University, as some scholarships permit, may be the best choice for some American students. An applicant should decide whether to apply for a second undergraduate degree or a graduate degree after consultation with UNC-CH faculty who are familiar with the applicant's work. Also, at both levels, the style of instruction differs from that in the typical American university. At Oxford, rather than taking an array of classes, a student may meet regularly with a tutor in a particular topic for an entire semester.

A vital part of the application for the Churchill, Rhodes, or Marshall is a compelling reason for wanting to study in the United Kingdom. You should find out which areas of study specific faculty members are involved in and how their research relates to your interests. Contact with faculty abroad and knowledge of the resources available strengthen your application immeasurably. A letter of support from abroad is firm evidence of both the feasibility of your project and your own initiative. The selection committees for these prestigious fellowships weigh the thoughtfulness of your choice when considering your candidacy. The time and care you take to research and consider your degree options may make the difference between receiving an award and being overlooked.

The following resources will help you research a degree program in the United Kingdom:

- The Commonwealth Universities' Yearbook, (LB23 1 O.Y5) available in Davis Reference, names every professor, lecturer, and fellow in every university in every country of the British Commonwealth. You can make a list of people in your field and then look up their research in recent bibliographies. Other helpful books are listed in the Bibliography at the end of this handbook.
- Many British universities now provide information about their programs and research online. The websites for the various universities provide an excellent source of information. The websites for Cambridge University ([www.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cam.ac.uk)) and for Oxford University ([www.ox.ac.uk](http://www.ox.ac.uk)) each include a complete prospectus with detailed information.
- The website [www.prospects.csu.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.csu.ac.uk) is a database of postgraduate courses in the United Kingdom.

Another excellent source of information is UNC-CH faculty, graduate students and staff in your department. Many of them have studied or taught abroad and may suggest the names of other people who know the university of your choice at first-hand. Faculty in your field of interest at UNC-CH may well be familiar with relevant graduate programs and research being done at major British universities. Honors Carolina and ODS can help identify such faculty and staff.

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## Summary

There is no easy way to receive a prestigious award, but there are ways in which the process of applying can be made less daunting and your chances of winning increased. You can greatly improve your chances for success by taking the application process seriously, by spending time on background research, writing a good application, and preparing for interviews.

Please contact ODS whenever you have questions, seek advice, and plan to pursue a distinguished scholarship or other award. You may reach the ODS Director, Professor Mary Floyd-Wilson and the ODS Program Assistant, Ms. Alsace Gallop at [ods@unc.edu](mailto:ods@unc.edu) and 919-843-7757 Monday through Friday, 8AM-5PM Eastern Time.

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