

# AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS: ADVICE

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Awards at this level are seeking impressive and energetic students who are self-motivated, and civically minded. Here are some tips on how to develop into an award-winning scholar-leader:

## CHOOSING AND TAKING COURSES

- **Be intellectually broad:** When your schedule allows try courses outside of your major and even out of your comfort zone. This will deepen your thinking and your ability to write and converse on a wider range of subjects.
- **Familiarize yourself with your professors:** Go to office hours, speak up in class, ask for advice after class, look for on-campus networking opportunities – these are all chances to learn from experts. Take them! These people will be writing letters for you in the future and you want to establish a rapport.
- **Know how to communicate:** Challenge yourself in the humanities, particularly if you are majoring in the sciences. Knowing how to communicate verbally and on paper will be a huge boost when it comes to filling out applications and dealing with the pressure of interviews.
- **Don't limit yourself:** It's never too early to start formulating your goals and ambitions and to begin talking them out with advisors and Professors. The Office of Distinguished Scholarships is always open to provide direction to what can often seem like a hectic and overwhelming process.

## RESEARCH AND INTERNSHIPS

- **Pursue research:** UNC is a first-class research institution with many funding opportunities that can help undergraduates develop and implement a project of their own. Be sure to investigate, SURF, Burch Fellowships, Senior Honors Thesis courses, grants, and more.
- **Be creative and take initiative:** Look into internships, independent studies, an Honors Thesis, or a job in your major. This kind of initiative shows that you are truly invested in your major and will make full use of any award you receive.

## VOLUNTEERING AND LEADERSHIP

- **Donate your time:** Volunteering your time looks great on a resume and will feel great too! There are many service-oriented clubs on the UNC campus or you can choose to serve the larger Chapel Hill community – it's easy to find a non-profit organization nearby that means something to you and they will be grateful for your time.

- **Become a leader:** Many high-profile awards are seeking applicants who have demonstrated leadership on campus. Find a sincere way to participate and show your commitment to a campus organization.

## GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

- **Keep up with current events:** Read leading newspapers and magazines, such as *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and *Science* or *Nature*. Read any top publication related to your field as well. And difficult as it may be, try reading a newspaper from a political perspective that differs from your own.

## APPLY FOR OPPORTUNITIES

- **Study abroad:** UNC offers over 300 programs in 70 different countries. This is a perfect opportunity to gain or improve language skills, learn about a different culture, and explore your own interests and abilities. There are also ongoing cultural events on campus, so keep your eye on the events calendar!
- **See what UNC can offer:** Apply for UNC-specific scholarships before pursuing a major national or international competition. Even if you don't win, the experience preparing for the competition will be helpful for the next time. And if you do win – winning one award helps you win additional awards.
- **APPLY!:** So many students feel like these awards are for someone else – that they could never win. It's simply not true, if you have the desire and the drive, GO FOR IT! It won't be easy, but we're here to help.

## STARTING THE APPLICATION

- Meet with the Office of Distinguished Scholarships for advice and assistance.
- Read the *New York Times* every day, paying particular attention to news in your field.
- Meet with a career advisor to help refine your resume, establish goals, and help you identify known and unknown interests.

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

Perhaps the most critical part of your application for nationally competitive awards is the personal statement. Your success hinges on it for scholarships like the Marshall, Rhodes, and Gates Cambridge. Typically around 1000 words, your personal statement should connect past and present experiences with your future goals.

Your personal statement must present a clear, logically developed, well-illustrated set of points. This statement must be a unified whole, rather than a string of observations. Tailor your statement to its audience (faculty members, business people, and experts in the area defined by the scholarship).

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## WRITE. WRITE. WRITE.

Allow yourself time to free-write. Don't think you'll get everything down in one sitting – let yourself wander, editing can come later. Try to set aside time to work on your statement and/or essays several times a week – don't expect miracles and be kind to yourself. Start getting feedback once you have a solid first draft written.

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## USE THE FIRST PERSON

Most scholarship essays expect you to talk about personal experience, so use the first-person ("I"). Tell your story and convey your character, personality, values, and experiences. Strong scholarship essays are both critically astute and deeply personal. Your personal statement is not an academic paper, you may need to eliminate some of the distance you might be used to infusing in your writing – but keep in mind it is also not a diary.

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## CHOOSE CONTENT BASED ON YOUR ACADEMIC AND CAREER GOALS

What drives you? What unique and interesting experiences have influenced you as a student and thinker? Make sure the connections between your statement and academic goals are apparent and justifiable.

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## FIND YOUR VOICE

Write in a clear, engaging style, and avoid jargon and convoluted prose. Be honest, positive, and upbeat. Don't be afraid to just start writing honestly and personally about yourself and significant moments in your life. Understand that you will write multiple drafts, and give yourself permission to write very badly. Chances are the first, second, and even third drafts will be just awful, and that's OK.

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## GRAB THE READER'S ATTENTION

A well-considered opening line is important. Be sure that each topic sentence makes a point or lays out an idea that is developed and illustrated by the paragraph that follows. Allow a reader to follow your argument by reading only those first sentences.

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## GIVE YOUR ESSAY MOMENTUM – GROWING IN INTEREST AND IMPORTANCE

Create a thread that connects different parts of the essay -- an idea or image that unites the essay as a whole.

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## PULL IDEAS TOGETHER WITH YOUR FINAL PARAGRAPH

Your final sentence should be specific and visionary, rather than just a summary.

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## SEEK FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT

**Revise frequently** and bring your statement to ODS, Career Services, the Writing Center, and others frequently for review. Keep your eye out for any ODS workshops.

## APPLICATION ESSAYS

Many prestigious scholarship applications, such as the Truman, Udall, and Goldwater, ask the applicant to address a series of shorter responses ranging from 400 to 2000 characters. The following questions are taken from the respective scholarship applications.

*Truman - Describe a particularly satisfying public service activity. 1700 character limit.*

*Udall - Describe your most significant public service, community, or campus activities associated with your interests in the environment or tribal public policy. 2200 character limit with spaces.*

*Goldwater - Describe an activity or experience that has been important in clarifying or strengthening your motivation for a career in science, mathematics, or engineering.*

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### ADDRESS THE PROMPT, ANSWERING ALL OF ITS IMPLIED QUESTIONS

Offer specific, detailed examples to illustrate each of the points made in your essay, using numbers and sources when necessary.

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### SHOW YOURSELF IN ACTION

Your answers to essay prompts should not be your résumé in prose. Avoid listing, but instead make a central point with examples.

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### CLEAN UP ANY POINTS THAT REMAIN VAGUE, GENERAL, OR INCOMPLETELY ILLUSTRATED

Eliminate unnecessary words and intensifiers like "unique," "entire," "overwhelming," "completely," "actually," "absolutely," "clearly," "obviously," and "definitely." The plain sentence that results usually has more power and punch. Avoid sentences that begin with "thus," "therefore," or "however."

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### BE AWARE OF THE CHARACTER LIMIT

Be sure that your essay stays within the word and character limits.

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### BLOW YOUR OWN HORN

Although down-playing your own achievements is admirable, it does not make for a persuasive leadership essay. Use your examples to demonstrate your leadership, not the contributions of others.

## REQUESTING A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

- Give your recommenders **at least** 3-4 weeks' notice. These letters are important and take great deal of thought and preparation. It is okay to send a reminder one week before the due date.

- Keep papers and teacher comments from your courses. When asking a teacher to write for you, provide that information, including the course you took and semester, titles and grades of special projects, and attach papers if you have them.
- Whenever possible make appointments to discuss your scholarship application plans in person (or by phone, if necessary) with your prospective recommenders. If you cannot meet or speak write a clear, informative e-mail. Provide links to recommendation assistance pages such as this award-specific advice from Penn State: <http://bit.ly/2fk2Obs>
- Write a paragraph or two for your recommenders describing the nature of the scholarship you are applying for. This should include information about the nature of the award (e.g., study abroad, graduate study, summer internships, etc.) and the broader goals of the scholarship program.
- Write a brief statement to give to each recommender summarizing (a) why you are applying for the particular scholarship, (b) what you hope to accomplish during the scholarship and (c) how winning the scholarship would assist you in achieving your educational, service or professional goals. If your application requires a specific project proposal, you should briefly describe your intended project as well.
- Give each recommender an updated resume listing your most recent activities and accomplishments. Consider calling their attention to the experiences that you believe make you a well-qualified candidate for the particular scholarship you are applying for. If you are applying for a science-related award, highlight your research activities or plans, or talk about how you plan to pursue science in the future. Consider what each recommender can attest to and make suggestions.
- Provide them with accurate information about deadlines and submission procedures. If there are forms they should fill out, provide them with those forms, as well as addressed and stamped envelopes. Let them know if the recommendations are to be submitted on-line.
- Don't neglect follow-up! Your recommenders will invest considerable time and thought in preparing your letters, so write them thank you notes and be sure to let them know the outcome of your application. Paper thank-you notes or cards are always appreciated.

## THE INTERVIEW

CONGRATULATIONS! Making it to the interview stage is a huge accomplishment!

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

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### STRATEGIES FOR THE COCKTAIL/DINNER PARTY

It's okay to have a drink – really. Just DO NOT overdo it.

Some candidates are aggressive about “working the room” while others need more time to ease into things – both are fine, do what is most comfortable for you. (If possible, attend the practice social hour that ODS hosts each November.)

Throughout the cocktail party and/or dinner be sure to focus on LISTENING more than speaking. Ask engaging questions, really listen to the responses, and ask smart follow-up questions.

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#### WHAT TO CARRY IN YOUR BRIEFCASE/SATCHEL

- Bottle of water
- Breath mints and throat lozenges
- Tissues
- Index cards full of information about the selectors
- That day's newspaper

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#### STRATEGIES FOR THE FINAL INTERVIEW

Dress professionally, but not out of your comfort zone (for example, don't wear high heels or a string of pearls if that isn't "you"). Understated dress is preferable; you don't want to be remembered for what you wore. Minimal cologne. Avoid Skyping in unless absolutely necessary, it puts you at a great disadvantage.

Speak passionately and personally. Maintain eye contact and try to keep fidgeting/hair-twirling/eyeglass-adjusting to a minimum. Eliminate "um" and "like" from your vocabulary. Be conscious of your posture: leaning into the table is appropriate, slouching is not.

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#### PRACTICE!

ODS can help you practice and schedule mock interviews. Ask your friends, PI, teachers, and mentors for practice interviews. There are even websites, like InterviewStream, that can help you with interview practice.

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#### DURING THE INTERVIEW

Listen carefully to each question posed and request clarification if necessary. Don't rush your answers. It's fine to pause a moment to gather your thoughts. It is also okay to say "I don't know": don't fake an answer you don't know or answer a question the panel hasn't asked. Don't let one question throw you off for the rest of the interview. Don't worry about correct or expected answers: engage your own intellectual curiosity.

If necessary say, "There are a few reasons to support X, the most salient of which is..." This will invite more questions about those other reasons if the committee wants/has time to pursue it, while not forcing you to spell everything out in your first, brief, answer.

Your answers should be as concise as possible, try not to veer off on tangents or over-talk. After 1-1.5 minutes answering on a topic that you care and know a lot about, mention to the committee: "As you can see, I'm excited about this topic, but I don't want to take time away from other questions." Then they can decide whether you should go on or not. Also, vary the time of your answer based on the question – more interest, more time. This will help steer the interview where you would like it to go.

It may be helpful to give a short thesis/summary of your answer first, and then make your argument. This will make it easier for the committee to follow your answer, and make you less stressed if you are cut off or need to finish your answer very quickly.

Don't worry if you are interrupted or challenged – you should be prepared to have your own opinions and to defend them. Don't be defensive: stay calm and stand by your convictions.

## POTENTIAL QUESTIONS

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### QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROGRAM ITSELF

- For a top student such as you, there are so many programs to apply for post-college. What specifically attracts you to the X program?
- What do you know about the donor and his or her legacy: Henry Luce, Truman, etc.?
- ODS has information on interviews from past applicants that we are happy to share. Know that this all subjective, but can be a helpful preparation tool.

### KNOW YOUR ESSAY(S)

- Imagine some questions the committee could ask you when you re-read your essays.
- Where are there openings for specificity or larger explanations?
- What current events might come up as a result of your essay?

### PERSONAL QUESTIONS

- Where do you see yourself in 5/10/20 years?
- What are the origins of your interest in X?
- It's clear from reading your application, your transcript, your LORs, that you've met with quite a few successes in your life. Tell us about a failure that really impacted you, and what you learned from it.
- What are you currently reading?
- Who is your role model and why?
- If you could select a book for the whole campus to read, what would it be?
- Which world leader do you most admire and why?
- What will you do if you do not win this scholarship?

### QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR FIELD

- Who is your biggest hero in your field? Why?
- Who is doing the most damage to your field? Why? How could they change?
- Tip: Be prepared to address any recent controversies in your field, breaking news stories, innovative studies, etc.

### POLITICAL QUESTIONS

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- Be up-to-date on any recent controversies on your own campus.
  - Be able to speak on any recent elections in the US and abroad.
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#### FOLLOW-UP

- Send thank-you notes to interviewers individually.

#### GENERAL ADVICE

- Focus on both the process and the goal.
  - Be yourself.
  - Do not stake your identity on the outcome of the scholarship process.
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#### AND FINALLY...

- Enjoy yourself!



Office of Distinguished Scholarships

## SCHOLARSHIP SOURCES FOR STUDENTS

[strive.unc.edu](http://strive.unc.edu)

[Click here](#) to search academic and professional opportunities for every area of interest.