

National Fellowship Interviews*

Preparing for the Interview

- Begin your fellowship interview preparation process by spending some time with the binders of Student Reports in OFP's library. These binders relay the fellowship interview experiences of other students. The student feedback is often quite detailed, listing the names and interests of past committee members and the questions they asked, and also describing the general tone of the interview, which often varies by state, region, or district. Other student reports are available at: <http://www.reed.edu/~brashiek/Rhodes-Marshall/interview.html>
<http://www.reed.edu/~brashiek/Rhodes-Marshall/past.html>
- Make sure that you are very familiar with, and confident about, your application essay(s) since most likely you will be asked a number of probing questions related to what you wrote. Develop 10-12 likely questions.
- Be ready to defend your proposed course of study or research as well as your choice of school or location. This involves more than a passing familiarity with the school and/or country in which you wish to study or research. Be able to clearly express why you need to study at a particular place or school. Beware of listing names whose work you do not know.
- Catch up on current events – local and national and international – so that you will have an informed opinion if questioned by your interviewers. Many students have commented on the importance of stressing your ability to perform an ambassadorial role. (Also think about what you read for pleasure.)

Making a Good Impression:

- Formal dress is appropriate: Suits and ties for men and the equivalent for women.
- Maintain eye contact. Engage the whole panel, not just the person asking you a question.
- Try to appear at ease. Greet each person on entering and thank each person on leaving.
- Handshakes are customary before and after most interviews.
- Your posture should be upright but not wooden. It should indicate engagement, confidence, and composure.
- Beware of nervous habits: fixing hair, constant smiling, fumbling with fingers or jewelry, mumbling or raising your voice.

Responding to Questions:

- Listen carefully to each question. Consider what it invites you to say. (Don't answer what you hoped the question would be.) Pitch your response at what seems like the most interesting or insightful level. Beware of the glib, ill-considered response.
- It is better to pause to think before you answer than to launch into a response hoping to get to a clear answer. Beware of using "That's a good question" as a way to gain time to think; avoid praising the question.
- Be honest. If you do not know the answer to a particular question, admit that you do not know.

* By the Office of Fellowship Programs at Yale University

- If you would like to hear a question rephrased or if you would like clarification, ask. But beware of seeming to use questions to avoid responding.
- Well-thought out answers are key. Let your panel see how you think, how you connect and come to your ideas; often how you get to an answer is as important as the answer itself. However, avoid rambling.
- Provide specific examples or instances to illustrate your points. But be prepared to be interrupted or cut off. Interviewers may want to shift topics, especially when you feel you are doing particularly well. This is fine.
- Be clear, concise and confident in your answers. When you are sure, stick to your guns; don't allow yourself to be rattled.
- Make clear connections to your larger goals and the goals of the fellowship in your answers.
- Prepare a response for an open-ended closing question such as, "Is there anything else you would like to tell the panel?" This may be as simple as a thank you, but avoid talking about how much the scholarship means to you. Something brief, honest, and substantive is best.

How to Practice:

- Engage faculty members or other experienced adults in conversations in which you are challenged to present and support your plans, your academic interests, and your sense of the major issues behind these interests. Get their feedback. Observe how you make those talking with you and yourself comfortable and engaged, even when the conversation is challenging.
- Participate in practice interviews arranged by your college. Contact your Dean and Master as soon as you are endorsed to see whether they can set up a practice interview even before you have been notified whether you have an interview.

Advice About Rhodes Interviews:

A faculty member who has been both a state and district selector for the Rhodes competition offers the following characterizations of the Rhodes interviews and advice:

The interview is the heart of the process. Not that other things don't count, but that at this level they are not always enough to distinguish one strong candidate from another. To be sure, you will be done in by a transcript that is missing too much (a breadth, say, or achieved excellence in the major), or by a recommendation couched with too many caveats, or by a personal statement that is formulaic or self-congratulatory. Try to seal off those potential flaws ahead of time.

There are two keys to the interview itself. The first is to answer the question put, not the one you want to hear, or are best prepared for, or have been advised by your Yale coaches to expect. It may be a question in more than one part, with the sequent question(s) at least partly hidden. Make sure you hear the whole question, and answer it all.

Second: once you've grasped and briefly pondered the question(s), don't tell the committee what you surmise they are looking to be told. If you are an economist, and there's a professor of economics at the table, you can surely count on his or her expertise, to which you should defer without kowtowing. But committees are harder to read than you might imagine: members may have

knowledge of subjects, and views on them, that would surprise you. Don't assume that every northeastern selector, for example, has predictably liberal views on military tribunals or the death penalty.

What matters is that you answer in your own voice, not that of your Yale coaches, or the one you attribute to your interlocutor(s). Answer clearly, thoughtfully, reasonably, concisely yet in enough detail to overcome vagueness and build an argument, and you will be persuasive. And it never hurts to smile.

Meandering Into Mediocrity: When Interviews Take a Wrong Turn[†]:

As I began to reflect on the topic of interviews, it occurred to me that the unsuccessful interview might initially be considered through the lens of its opposite: the vivacious, delightful or natural interview. And in making these considerations, I have discovered that interviews reverse Tolstoy's famous dictum on families: unhappy interviews are more or less all alike, but happy interviews are each happy in their own ways.

Good interviews "take off," become memorable and distinctive in styles too numerous to recount. Their end results yield an indelible and dynamic sense of a candidate, so much so that I and others like me – seasoned veterans of scholarship interview committees - can still recall particular candidates and our conversations with them years after the event. I remember, for example, one candidate who had the misfortune to be in the middle of a thoughtful response to a complex question when a grandfather clock looming just behind him began to chime the hour in intrusively loud tones. The candidate stopped what he was saying, turned to look at the clock, and then exclaimed, "At least it's not noon!" He won the heart of the committee, and almost certainly the award, through the spontaneity of his good-natured resilience.

Indeed, my memory remains littered with fragments of stellar moments from interviews like this one. Without becoming reductive about what makes a successful interview – remember, they are each happy in their own ways! - it seems that many of the strong ones feel conversational, and have committee members scampering for the next question. At times such interviews turn performative: the candidate holds a committee in thrall, in silence, as he or she expounds a topic (or, literally, gives a performance) about which he or she knows a great deal. Committees of which I have been a part have enjoyed candidate presentations of operatic arias, dramatic monologues, traditional English folk music and original poetry. In some cases we might be stunned into silence by a candidate's dignified, unfettered revelation of her own abuse as a child and its role as a catalyst in her choice of life path, or in others moved to tears by a candidate's unrehearsed sorrow during discussion of a recently deceased parent. And of course, there are always the candidates whose own passion for their subject area bubbles over into the whole room. After such interviews, the entire committee feels compelled to rush out and learn whatever we can about nineteenth-century Lutheran hymnals, Maori ceremonials, making jam out of ginger and apricots or betting wisely in the Trifecta. In these cases the interview

[†] *The following article is written by Cheryl Foster, University of Rhode Island, for the National Association of Fellowship Advisers Newsletter: November 2002.*

functions as a kind of marriage between a candidate's interior life, as revealed on paper, and his or her exterior presence, as manifested through interaction with others.

So what happens when the marriage does not occur, or goes sour, or never lives up to its promise? Again, consider that both successful and unsuccessful interviews begin with the strong paper application. Strong applications make the committee want to meet a candidate in person. Most unsuccessful interviews thus share an element of *disappointment* regarding the fit between an application and a candidate's conversation, especially in light of the scholarship's mission. Disappointments with respect to high expectations, despite similarity of character, often occur along a spectrum of possibility with extremes at either pole.

At one end lies cohesion with respect to the whole candidacy. When a candidate's presence does not have a consistent "tone" with the paper application, especially with the essay, the disjunction between interior and exterior voice confounds a committee's attempt to understand the candidate. A committee member, for example, might inquire about something of interest on paper, like an activity or a club or a particular course, but the candidate does not or cannot reveal any intimate or true knowledge of it. The place of the activity or club or course in the application does not "ring true." Perhaps the candidate has not been selective in presenting only the most meaningful material and thus has forgotten the import of an activity or club. Maybe he or she has not thought sufficiently about the place of an activity or club or course in the candidacy and thus cannot say much of interest when questioned. In this vein, insufficient reflection about what appears on paper remains an obstacle for most candidates.

Sometimes candidates become habituated to viewing themselves through the veil of their most obvious accomplishments, with the result that they do not anticipate what might seem distinctive to an interviewer familiar with high achievers in conventional fields. At other times, a mock interview process has skewed the candidate's attention to a specific set of application answers rather than directing his or her attention to *everything* on paper as potential material for questioning. Imagine two cases that illustrate these points. In one instance, a candidate with a superb academic record but a rather diffuse array of extracurricular activities is questioned about being President of her dormitory "blues club." After follow-up inquiries to an initially vague response, it becomes apparent that the "blues club" consists of two or three friends on a hall who sometimes get together to listen to records...and even this lasted for just six months. A committee's follow-up questions to vague responses will often act as a series of small punctures to an application full of hot air and hyperbole, and once the effect of the punctures is apparent, an interview can rarely recover from the residual feeling of minor deceit.

A second case of disappointment involves not hyperbole but humility: a candidate does not seize an opportunity to reveal a genuine accomplishment that he had neglected to think about prior to the interview. In this situation, an interview that might have started in a generic fashion gains momentum, but time is drawing to a close. One committee member asks about an unusual advanced mathematics course - number theory - on the candidate's mostly humanistic transcript. Instead of demonstrating his mastery of higher maths and linking that to logic (part of his major field in philosophy), the candidate replies, "Oh, I am taking that just for fun!" While the purity of motivation expressed in such an answer might well be admirable, it adds nothing of substance to the conversation and thus holds the candidate

back from winning a scholarship. He misses a chance to augment his accomplishment in philosophy with a capacity to think comparatively among different disciplines – a capacity he actually possesses but does not actualize in an unexpected moment, having only thought about the more obvious aspects of his candidacy like writing prizes and arts criticism. One can never tell what a committee will take up, so candidates must review the paper application with "naked eyes" and try to see it as a stranger might – as fresh material for discussion and revelation.

While cohesion between the paper application and the candidate's conversational presence remains important, this can sometimes ossify to the point of stasis, which kills an interview through conversational inflexibility. Here we have the other pole on the spectrum of disappointment: a candidate appears as "packaged" or unwilling to take risks with questions beyond what was committed on paper. In such situations, an interviewer might sense that a candidate has taken too literally the notion that his or her candidacy has a theme, or a message, or a central strength to which everything else must point or defer. For example, when asked about a specific course or activity, a candidate will jump on the question directly because he or she has rehearsed everything from every angle. In addition, the candidate will often direct the response back to something not particularly relevant to the question at hand.

In a case like this, a candidate could be questioned about the influence of a volunteer activity on her thinking about economic policy. Instead of responding to the actual question, the candidate says something resembling this: "I have found voluntarism to be tremendously useful in cultivating my leadership skills. These show up most strongly in my role of Captain of the rowing team, a position to which I was elected." The attempt by the candidate to control the contours of the interview becomes exposed, calling attention to the artifice with which she has crafted the candidacy. Paradoxically, there is some degree of mental agility involved in efforts at redirection in the face of an unexpected or offbeat question, but normally not enough creative agility to cover one's own tracks. As with art, too labored an affect in an interview usually distracts one's audience from the substance of a response, to the means by which it was achieved. A candidate might even reveal a level of guilelessness that has its own charm but nevertheless seals his fate. Picture a brilliant but shy and socially awkward candidate who is asked a question designed to put him at ease. The candidate jerks his head up suddenly, looks at the committee directly for the first time, and gasps, "They didn't prepare me for that question!" An endearing remark of naïve honesty, but one unlikely to win a scholarship.

The poles of disappointment, then, might be characterized as being unformed at one end and overwrought at the other. An interview does after all have some kinship with performance. One candidate might be under-rehearsed when he has not been sufficiently reflective about himself and his whole application prior to the interview (the number theory course), but another can be over-rehearsed when she draws upon her personal set of stock responses to an interviewer's genuine question (the rowing captain). What both extremes have in common, and what draws them together under the umbrella of disappointing interviews, is a lack of sensibility about spontaneity in human dialogue. The very best interviews evolve *out of* their kinship with performance and *into* the conversational space created by solicitous, genuine exchange. And true exchange requires a refined capacity for listening, an attunement to one's conversational environment that facilitates natural adaptation without losing one's personal presence. In other words, the best interviews achieve a symbiotic giving over between

candidate and committee, where risks are taken and accepted in good faith but where listening and speaking take on a pattern of their own.

Having been on the candidate's end of a bad interview more than once, I believe that most of us can sense when an interview feels stultified or unnatural, or when it out and out dies, whether we are on the committee or in the hot seat. Years ago, in one interview where I really blew it, I was asked which activity I would choose if forced to do so, singing or acting. I countered that I would choose directing and tried to launch into my justification; I was cut off, and rightly so, as I had not attended to the question. Indeed, attention to the question and its context cannot be overemphasized.

Here's an extreme portrait of this possibility. A scholarship candidate from a university in the same state as a committee member contributes a weekly column to the major metropolitan newspaper in that state. The column covers the "College Beat" and ostensibly represents student views from a variety of institutions statewide. The candidate is asked how he goes about getting material for his columns, and replies that, essentially, he speaks to a few of his friends and occasionally calls an acquaintance at a nearby college for additional views on whatever topic is discussed. When pressed on the reliability of this method as a way of considering college student views from a variety of institutions across the state, the candidate waves his hand blithely in the air and says, with no small degree of confidence, "Oh, there aren't really many others that matter. Besides us, there's one other in the city, and, let's see, there's a state school somewhere further south that's pretty good at agricultural stuff..." The committee member from the same state then interrupts with, "Yes, I teach there." The candidate, whose hand is still waving dismissively in the air, halts and says, "Oh." Having been given a sheet with the committee's names and affiliations prior to the interview, the candidate has clearly failed to notice the relevance of the affiliation in this case. He also seems to be unaware, despite a year as an editorial columnist for the state newspaper, that his state has more than ten institutions of higher learning. Candidates can rarely recover from these kinds of gaffes, though perhaps they learn something about perceptual presumption.

To separate actual reflection from cultural or academic presumption, a committee will sometimes pose a particular question to every candidate, a question that provides a yardstick for measuring the field against a consistent standard. Picture this scenario. All candidates are thrown a genuinely difficult question, a question posed by the same person in the same tones at the same point in each interview. *If you could choose two social problems to address, and you had to spend one billion dollars on one problem and ten thousand dollars on the other, what two problems would you choose and how would you allocate the funds?*

Most candidates will show limited knowledge and limited imagination on both ends of the monetary spectrum, though occasionally a candidate might give an original answer to one of the problems and its concomitant budget (probably not both, alas!). But if the second answer is truly insensible of things like local struggles on the one hand or obstacles to massive problem-solving on the other, it can undermine the good part of the total response. So, a candidate with a strong theoretical grasp of fiscal matters might tackle the billion-dollar question nicely but then continue, in a casual manner, "Ten thousand dollars. Hm. That's such a small amount of money." A response like this would offset the good one because it betrays a lack of understanding about what constitutes a lot of money not only for

some local social problems but also for some nations whose currency cannot approach our own for value. By contrast, a clever and realistic answer to the ten-thousand dollar part of the question would be offset by a billion-dollar reply like, "I'd give it to research on AIDS in Africa," when a candidate cannot identify the African countries with the most pressing AIDS related problems.

These offset examples make an important point. Very few interviews careen off course sharply. Most meander into the merely disappointing. Disappointing interviews, while inevitably a corollary of high expectations from time to time, can nevertheless occur less frequently when the candidate seeks the subtle balance between reflective preparation on the one hand and readiness to follow an unexpected direction on the other. An unwillingness to engage with a surprising line of questioning can shut a candidate off from the committee. Suppose a particularly distinguished candidate with policy aspirations is responding eloquently to a series of scholarly inquiries about the spending habits of low-income citizens. Tired of this line of questioning, a committee member whose professional activity had bearing on policy groups and the public sector throws the candidate a curve ball. He begins by asking the candidate about where she makes her own retail purchases. The candidate, while a bit befuddled, gives an honest answer. The committee member then asks the candidate if she has ever set foot in a K-Mart. The entire committee then sees the dilemma play out on the candidate's face: should she tell the truth and say no? Or should she fudge and imply that she has been to K-Mart, as she is uncertain where the question is heading? Assume the candidate fudges, saying something like, "I believe so, maybe." The committee member leading the discussion might question the candidate's readiness to pronounce on public policy when she cannot recall visiting a place where the retail patterns of the group in question would be visible beyond academic theory. Such questions, while uncomfortable not only for the candidate but sometimes even for other committee members, can be illuminating for everyone.

A genuine case: I once asked a candidate, who was writing policy for the mayor's drug task force in his city, if he actually knew any drug addicts; if he had met a single one. Until this question, the candidate had been volleying smoothly but almost impersonally with the committee. By pausing and answering the question honestly – the answer was no – the candidate smiled in resignation and in doing so slipped back into himself. The rest of the interview went beautifully and he won the scholarship.

Precise but cheerful awareness of one's inexperience is perhaps a virtue we see too seldom in interview committees. Campus scholarship committees can assist their candidates in this regard as they attempt to balance what has been presented on paper and what cannot be anticipated in any interview discussion. Advise candidates to be selective when highlighting elements of a candidacy - to avoid exaggeration about one's accomplishments but also to embrace those modest details that truly characterize one's values and achievements. Try to prepare candidates for interviews by striking a proportional mix, for them, between justified self-confidence on the one hand and comfortable admission of uncertainty on the other. Urge them to consider and discuss what they perceive to be the "holes" in their education. Do not attempt to mold the candidate into someone he or she is not or cannot be, but instead celebrate the virtues of each candidate honestly in the nomination letter without creating false expectations for interview committees. Seek to heighten the candidate's awareness of his or her personal strengths without confining the candidacy to just a few of his or her accomplishments.

Support especially those candidates whose social background or personal situation might make them

hesitant to behave naturally; whose interviews often take on a quality of holding something back – what I call the "muted interview." I am thinking, to name just a few examples, about candidates who are gay and unsure of how this will play out with a particular committee; students whose racial and ethnic identities may or may not gel with general assumptions about their importance to this candidate; candidates who profess a politics unpopular with most faculty or scholarship committees; students from blue-collar, low income or genuinely impoverished backgrounds who could be intimidated by upscale interview settings or competitive peer behavior in such settings; shy students who nevertheless merit a great deal of consideration in meeting a scholarship program's mission; disabled, disfigured or non-traditional candidates of any sort; and candidates whose applications, for whatever reason, do not meet a program's criteria in conventional ways but nevertheless emerge as exceptional for reasons worthy of a committee's serious consideration.

Most of all encourage candidates to take the ultimate risk when going through the door to an interview: the risk of finally, despite the arduous, long preparation, of putting it out of mind and being, respectfully, in the moment, oneself.