

## **GUIDE TO DEVELOPING A STRONG SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION**

### **Now That You've Decided to Apply**

The aim of this handout is to help you prepare your application for a scholarship now that you have decided to apply. Much of this information is general to all the scholarships we advise on however please also look at the information on the scholarship(s) you will be applying to in case we have specific recommendations.

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### **NOW THAT YOU'VE DECIDED TO APPLY**

We cannot overemphasize that you should start your application as far in advance of the deadline as possible. Preparing a competitive application takes a great deal of time and effort. But you are not alone! Stanford is rich in resources of staff, faculty, students and alums who are here to help you prepare the strongest possible application.

Applicants have also told us that the time spent thinking and writing about their future plans -- whether they wound up being awarded a scholarship or not -- was well worth the effort. If you plan to apply to graduate schools or interview with prospective employers, the application process for these awards can provide you with a head start on written application materials and interview experience. Most importantly, when you write these essays, you will have to consider and then reconsider your future plans and goals. In this way, applying for these awards can help you to define both your academic and career goals, whether you are awarded a scholarship or not.

A strong application is made up of some or all of the following: essays, references, transcripts, CV/resume, and interviews. All of these aspects are important. Most applicants are concerned about one area of their application (the quarter where the grades were not as good as they could have been, the uncertainty over what a reference might say). We find this to be quite normal. Our advice is to discuss this concern with us but in the context of what strengths you possess. No one expects you to be fully formed yet—you are developing and the awards are to enable you to continue this development.

### **RESEARCHING YOUR OPTIONS**

If you are applying for an award for graduate academic work, keep in mind that these awards are academic awards, no matter what the image of these scholarships might be. You must be ready to be a student in the country to which you are applying, and be prepared for, and enthusiastic about, your proposed academic work.

The ORC Library has a collection of university catalogs and a number of books that can help you put together the strongest possible application. Don't miss the following helpful publications:

- \* *The Lucky Few and the Worthy Many: Scholarship Competitions and the World's Future Leaders*
- \* *Beyond Winning: National Scholarship Competitions and the Student Experience*
- \* *Writing Personal Statements and Scholarship Application Essays: A Student Handbook*

### **Field of Interest and Appropriate Institutions**

It is important that you research the types of courses offered in your field of interest at various universities. It is important to survey all viable programs and to have detailed knowledge of programs and courses offered at particular institutions. You should also be able to discuss the reasons that you want to attend a particular institution and follow a particular course of study. Do not select a university simply because they are the most renowned, you need to have coherent reasons for choosing a school.

### **Course of Study/Degree**

If the scholarship you are applying for includes choosing a specific course of study or degree, you must choose one for which you are academically prepared. If your goal is to study for a doctorate prior to searching for an academic career in the U.S., we recommend that you discuss this option with faculty advisors. Some faculty will counsel you to obtain your doctorate in the USA, if you intend to be an academic. We recommend you take your advisor's advice seriously.

Be aware of how your proposed study relates to your future goals and aspirations, both personal and academic. It is often difficult for graduating seniors to identify such goals and plans, especially for those who have not definitely decided to continue their studies in a graduate program. As graduating seniors or recent graduates, you will not be required to continue in the exact fields in which you are to receive or have received your bachelor's degree, but it is essential that you have thought through how you see your proposed studies connecting to the course of your life.

## **THE ESSAYS**

When you write your essays, think carefully about the approach you should take to each scholarship. No two awards are the same, and you should not submit identical essays for two different scholarships.

Writing essays can be a frustrating, interesting, and revealing experience. Your final essays should produce a picture of you as a person, a student, a potential scholarship winner, and (looking into the future) a former scholarship recipient. Needless to say, this is difficult to do well in one or two pages, and it would be impossible and inappropriate to give you instructions entitled, "How to Write a Thoughtful and Introspective Essay." It is possible, however, to provide some advice on elements which, when combined with your research, thoughts, and personality, may produce a compelling scholarship essay. It is also possible to warn you away from some of the mistakes students have made in writing essays.

For some scholarships, the ORC has on file a small selection of essays from Stanford students who were successful in their applications for these awards. These sample essays should provide you with a sense of the variety of approaches to writing your statement; you should not copy style or format. These essays can only be looked at in the ORC; they cannot be copied or borrowed.

Each essay should make a statement about your academic life and plans, as well as your personal goals and beliefs. This statement, regardless of how you combine the following components, should grab the interest of the reader (whether at the Stanford level or later on in the competition) and make him or her want to meet you

for an interview. Your essay will provide the interviewers with their first impression of you, and may be the aspect of your application that wins you an interview. Show them who you are and make your first impression an excellent one!

One of our valued campus panel members has this to say about approaching these essays:

*First and foremost, the personal statement is a narrative written by a human being (which doesn't mean weird fonts, nor does it get submitted in the no-margin style imposed by some computers in attachment mode). It wouldn't hurt to look up the word essay in the dictionary--linked with effort, "to try". It is, therefore, a narrative, written by a human being containing a "strong personal core", creating an energy that pulls the reader thru its entire word length. This is very different from a list, or, for that matter, a c.v. It will allude to, and elaborate on, the forces which have shaped you. That said, the essay also must give clear evidence of a mind at work, and a passionately engaged intellect.*

### **General Components:**

- Read the essay question very carefully
- Maintain some sort of theme or connecting concept throughout
- Present your ideas in a way that encourages the questions you can best answer
- Don't use slang, abbreviations, or casual tones
- How do your qualifications fit with the purpose of the scholarship and how does the award fit in with your goals?
- Some issues that can be addressed in the essays include: an issue or cause about which you feel strongly or has helped make you who you are, or an achievement or contribution that you feel tells the reader something significant about you.
- Even with draft essays check how much time you have given to various aspects of your life: often the really important aspects of your life are not given enough space in the essay
- Be prepared to edit, revise, listen, change and re-write. In the end, however, it is your essay and yours alone so you need to be comfortable with what it says about you

### **Academic Component**

When you discuss academic and intellectual interests in these essays, you should always assume two things:

- The people reading your application know everything about your field
- The people reading your application know nothing about your field

Do not be afraid to use technical or academic terms in your writing, but do not preach or become condescending. For all of the applications, you are attempting to get across that you have gone further in your academic studies at Stanford than just fulfilling requirements for a degree.

You should find ways to discuss your academic interests in the context of other things that matter to you. The committee first wants to know how you acquired that interest and why and how that interest matters to you. They will next want to know what you plan to do with that interest. Explore connections between your academic life and the rest of your life. Connect what you do in school to your beliefs, your passions and the rest of the world.

As you read drafts of your essay, be critical of the ways in which you have discussed your academic and intellectual interests. Ask: "What matters to me?" "Why does it matter to me?" "Who cares?", "If they don't care, why do they need to care?" and "does what I care about academically have any broader social relevance that committees might pursue in interviews."

### **Personal Growth and Development**

- Incorporate your personality into your essays!
- Be honest about your personal growth
- What factors or experiences influenced your personal growth?
- What has made you who you are?
- Try to show your strengths and weaknesses (nothing glaring, but areas which show that you are human)

### **Mistakes Often Made by Applicants**

- Turning the essay into an extended (or an exaggerated) version of CV. Applicants often ask how they should incorporate activities into their essay when they have already listed them separately on the CV. The most effective solution is to incorporate only those activities or interests that are extremely important to you into your essay. Leave less important things to the CV. In your essay, talk only about what has real significance for you. For example, if you swam on the varsity team at Stanford and practiced five hours a day, it would be logical to incorporate this into the essay as one of your major achievements, contributions, or passions. However, if you participated in intramural field hockey on a less than regular basis, then this, perhaps, could be left to the list of activities. Be sure to show how those activities you do include tie into the "big picture" of yourself.
- Exaggerating their histories and situations. Do not believe that all applicants expand on the truth and that if they can do it, you may as well expand too. Experienced and wily interviewers often uncover exaggeration during interviews. This can be embarrassing and disastrous for an applicant.
- Being overly clever in writing the essays. Interviewers have read quite literally hundreds of essays and they find overly clever essays annoying. This reaction can do nothing but harm the future of your application. Be honest with your comments in your essays. Be amusingly clever and witty if this is characteristic of your style of writing, but do not try to pull the wool over your reader's eyes. REMEMBER: It is substance, not style, that is most important.
- Suggesting a future with no evidence of preparation. If you write that you wish to be a journalist but you have never been involved with any newspaper, or if you write that you are concerned about the environment but have taken no science courses, committees will not be impressed. Whatever future plans you write about, try to make sure that you have had some experience with the issues involved at an academic, extracurricular, or personal level.
- Do not waste words writing how great a university or program is and how thrilled you are to be applying for a particular scholarship. Let your essay make this point for you!

### **Many Readers Contribute to Good Essays**

You should always feel free to bring your essays to the ORC for a critique. However, we cannot overemphasize the importance of having a variety of people read your essays. Readers should be those whose opinions you respect. They also should be people with whom you have already discussed both the scholarship for which you are applying and the course of study you wish to pursue. If you ask people to read your statements out of the context of the award, you are asking for trouble, because the selection criteria differs for each award. Ask your advisor, faculty members, staff at the Writing Center, classmates, roommates, and friends to read your essay, but explain the essay's context first.

This process can be incredibly rewarding and terribly frustrating. Every time you show a draft to someone else, they will suggest changes and you will have to weigh their suggestions against others. It will be up to you to decide when you think the essay is ready for submission, but it is important to listen to faculty, staff, and peers as you craft your essay.

### **RESUME/CURRICULUM VITAE**

- Your resume or CV should include such items as extracurricular activities while in college; honors, prizes, scholarships; offices held; athletic record; community service; etc. The activities list provides you the opportunity to enumerate accomplishments which may or may not be described more fully in your essay.
- The CV should NOT be a narrative; rather, it should have brief entries under various categories. It is advised that the list be by category, not chronological. Also, it should not list too much high school information. Your list should be easy to read and follow, and should hold the attention of the reader.
- An good CV should give the impression of demonstrated commitment to your areas of interest.
- You need not adhere firmly to the categories mentioned above or the sample lists following; make it describe yourself and your accomplishments. Also, don't "pad" your list of activities and accomplishments. Readers may be quite familiar with the organizations you were once involved in and awards you have won. Don't exaggerate or lie about your involvement/accomplishments as it may come back to haunt you during an interview.

### **LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION**

- A letter of recommendation is most useful when it includes specific comments on the strength of your application. Recommenders should be able to comment on your ability to carry out the proposed course of study and the suitability of the university or program chosen. If you have any questions about how to select your referees, please see an ORC advisor. **You cannot use CDC file references for these scholarships.**
- Choose people who know you well – both in and out of the classroom, and personally. Honors Thesis: Any student who is writing an honors thesis should have a letter of recommendation from their thesis advisor, since the thesis advisor is often in the best position to comment on a student's academic abilities and potential.
- While for some scholarships it may be important to get academic references from experienced faculty, it is most important that your recommenders know you well. Short references from "well-known folks" don't go over too well. Academic letters from those who taught you in high school are not recommended without discussion with staff at the ORC.

- Letters that are not from academics should be stressing your leadership qualities, and your volunteer and service contributions.
- Identify your recommenders and meet with them as early in the process as possible. Brief them on the overall timeline, expectations, and opportunities with regard to the scholarship(s). If your recommenders are familiar with your plans and the application process, they will be more helpful to you when providing feedback and constructive criticism.
- Give them as much information about yourself as possible. The following is a list of helpful items to give to your selected recommenders:
  - Copy of transcript
  - Draft essay(s) and application
  - Background information on scholarships
  - Properly addressed, stamped envelopes (10x13 manila envelope suggested) along with all necessary information as to date references are due.
  - A copy of work you did for them (essays, projects, anything to help remind them of the excellent work you did)
  - Follow-up with recommenders. Keep them up to date with the progress of your application and double check that they have completed and submitted your recommendations.

### **LAST THOUGHTS.**

- Plan ahead and manage your time well. This process won't seem so daunting or tiring if you stay on top of things.
- Details! Details! Details! Whether it's completing your application or following-up on your references, pay attention to the details! You don't want to come across as sloppy or lacking in seriousness of purpose.
- We are here to help!

We close with one last piece from our file of accumulated wisdom:

"Good luck, and have a good time. If you don't go into it wanting to have a good time, it's not worth it. The application takes a good amount of your and others' time (I'd recommend spending a lot of time on the essay) so you should make sure you want to have fun. You should also have a little blind confidence tempered with a very serious consideration of whether or not you have a chance. Chances are you've got a chance."

**Best of Luck!!**

