

Rhodes & Marshall Application Summary

Dear Rhodes and Marshall Scholarship applicants:

My name is Wen Shi and I'm a Biology major, class of 2004. I applied to both scholarships in 2003, eventually winning the Rhodes. In the application process, I benefited from the generous help and useful advice from numerous people, chief among whom was Dean Bader. Dean Bader gave me a document of helpful tips from Babak Nazer, who applied in 2002. My summary, modeled after Babak's, will hopefully give you some inside scoop about the application process, as I have gone through it for both scholarships. My experience will be particularly relevant to applicants who are science majors, but may be helpful to non-science majors as well.

The Scholarships

While there are many similarities between the two scholarships, I'd like to point out some important differences. Rhodes only funds studies at Oxford, which does not have strong programs in all subjects. For example, it is not strong in engineering, nor does it have a music program. Therefore, if you are interested in programs offered by other UK universities and not Oxford, you can only apply to the Marshall. (You can apply to the Gates and/or Churchill if you're interested in Cambridge, but that's beyond the scope of this summary.)

If you're interested in attending Oxford University, both scholarships can fund the program, and I would strongly recommend that you apply to both. The Rhodes application requires more work than the Marshall (e.g. eight letters of recommendation versus four, two rounds of interviews versus one). Another difference is that for Rhodes you can directly apply for a three-year doctorate (called DPhil at Oxford, not PhD), but Marshall only accepts applications for two-year programs, and you have to apply for a third-year extension to get a DPhil after you matriculate.

Finally, the Rhodes Scholarship is better known by the news media and the public. Among all candidates offered both scholarships, only one accepted Marshall over Rhodes.

The Application

The first tip I can offer you is to believe you can win. Eliot Gerson, the American Secretary of the Rhodes Trust, said, "The only guarantee [in the application process] is that if you don't apply, you can't win." I can't agree with him more. When I first read the accomplishments of past winners, I thought these people must have been demigods! However, my family and advisors encouraged me and gave me confidence. The trick here is to sell your uniqueness, your strongest points, both in the essays and during the interview. The selection process for both scholarships is decentralized, and you never know exactly what the committee members are looking for, and what specific activity or experience will strike their fancy. So just believe in yourself and do your best, don't worry about the results.

Almost as important is to start early. I started reading the application material in January of the year I was applying and set up an appointment with Dean Bader after finals in May, which gave me barely enough time to finish the application on the day it was due in early October. I did most

of the work during the summer, in addition to working two jobs and studying for the MCAT. Once school started, there was even less time to focus on the application and the essay.

Here are some specific tips:

1. Make an appointment with Dean Bader early and use him as resource. A Fulbright Scholar, he has advised years and years of applicants, and he knows the process inside out.
2. Carefully read the prospectuses of the universities you're interested in. Usually available on the university websites, they are your best tools in finding the program you want to apply for. It's important to note that British graduate degrees can be either "taught" or "research." The taught masters consist of coursework; however, research masters and DPhil (PhD) consist of pure research and no coursework. Students interested in research degrees need to be accepted by specific supervisors at the University. There are no rotations during the first year for students to find their laboratories of interest; instead, once you get there, you plunge into research. In my case, I am interested in cancer research. After browsing the Oxford and Cambridge prospectuses and websites, in late July I contacted one professor from each school, whose research was interesting to me. In my email, I indicated my interest in working in their labs, my intention to apply for the Rhodes and Marshall to fund my course, and attached my CV. Professor Adrian Harris of Oxford replied and asked for three letters of reference from my professors and research mentor. (These letters are entirely separate from the Rhodes and Marshall recommendation letters.) After getting all the letters, Prof Harris in late August agreed to accept me into his laboratory and gave me a project proposal for the second Marshall essay. Please note that while this timeline is not at all early for the scholarship application, it is much earlier than most professors at UK universities are used to. They may not be able to give you a solid offer during the summer for positions starting the next fall, which explains why the Cambridge professor I contacted was much less enthusiastic.
3. As I mentioned before, the most important thing about the essay is to emphasize your unique strengths and relate them to what the committees are seeking. While my research and extracurricular activities may not be as spectacular as the accomplishments of those demigods, I have three strong points:
 - 1) My quick adaptation to American education and culture after immigrating here four and a half years ago
 - 2) My effort using my international background to promote cross-cultural understanding (promoting world peace and understanding is among the goals of both Rhodes and Marshall)
 - 3) My extensive involvement in community service (helping others and benefiting the world are important criteria for Rhodes, and strong pluses for Marshall)Therefore, I wrote my essay based on the theme of my new life in America: how I appreciate American freedom (using a specific example) and excel at school during the short time I've been here. More importantly, I emphasized that I could not have achieved so much without the generous help of others and that I have repaid their kindness by doing service and promoting diversity. My drive to serve others also helped me decide on a medical research career to find cancer cures, which was a nice tie-in to my proposed program at Oxford.
4. The Rhodes requires one 1000-word essay, which I think is harder than the two Marshall essays combined. You have to summarize your most important accomplishments,

experiences, interests, as well as future goals, reasons for you to attend Oxford and reasons for them to give you the scholarship. Your essay needs to be unified, unique and interesting. This is a daunting task, and I must have gone through 20 drafts. Some people who helped me correct my essay were Dean Bader, the Writing Center, my father, my father's lawyer, my friend in Texas, my high school English teachers and one of my recommenders at Hopkins.

5. The Marshall requires two essays: one 1000-word on your "academic and other interests and pursuits," one 500-word on your proposed program of study, including research outline if applicable. The first essay can be adapted from the Rhodes essay. The second essay needs to include why you choose the particular university, degree program and laboratory. They want both general reasons and specific plans (coursework or research), written to an audience of both experts and laymen. The annoying part is that you also have to justify your second choice in this essay. I never quite understand the purpose for the second choice of university, since all winners will be admitted to their first choice. For me, it just created more work, as I had to go through the entire process of finding a lab, submitting letters and getting accepted. I also had to squeeze in a paragraph in my proposed program about this second choice in which I was not interested at all.
6. A final tip about the application itself is that all forms come in pdf format. Make sure you get Adobe Acrobat full version that can change the font size and insert text as needed. Otherwise, it would be a nightmare to handwrite, type or use the Acrobat Reader.
7. Rhodes requires five to eight letters, and they have to be mailed directly to the State committee. I recommend that you get as many strong letters as you can, up to eight. If you are one or two short, that's not the end of the world so long as your other letters are strong. Marshall requires four letters that can be either mailed directly or submitted through Dean Bader. He prefers everything go through him.
8. For both Rhodes and Marshall, you can apply in either Maryland or your home state (Michigan for me). If you're not from one of the Mid-Atlantic States, Dean Bader usually suggests that you apply in your home state. The advantages are 1) you're not competing with other Hopkins students who're from MD/DC 2) your stories are more unique somewhere other than the East Coast. However, I had concern about the fatigue and hassle involved in flying to Chicago and Michigan for the three interviews (2 Rhodes, 1 Marshall) and the classes I would miss. After some back and forth, I went along with Dean Bader, a decision that would significantly affect my interview experience.

The Interviews

I started preparing for the interviews before I mailed out the applications. I reviewed and re-reviewed my current (Hopkins) and proposed (Oxford) research, making sure I knew every detail. I also paid attention to current events by reading New York Times articles, especially those related to science, healthcare, Michigan, UK, and China (where I was originally from). I also spent a lot of time learning about English politics, economics and culture, which turned out to be a misguided effort, as not a single question was asked about the UK during all three of my interviews.

By early November, I had been notified by email that I would interview for both scholarships. Dear Bader arranged mock interviews for both Rhodes and Marshall candidates. The mock interviewers, who were deans and professors from different departments, did a superb job

simulating the stress-interview atmosphere, notorious for the Rhodes. Afterwards, they told me that I needed to have a more convincing reason for studying biomedical science at Oxford, considering the strength of American universities in this area. In addition, I needed to beef up on scientific and healthcare policy, as the non-biologists on the committee would likely ask me these questions. These two tips proved to be tremendously helpful during the real interview.

I did the Marshall interview on November 14 at the UK Consulate General in Chicago, the Michigan State Rhodes interview on November 18-19 on the campus of University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the District Rhodes interview on November 21-22 in the office of one of the interviewers in downtown Chicago. Talk about a hectic week.

For the Marshall, 23 candidates were selected for interview from a pool of 215 applicants in the Midwest Region. Interviews took place on Thursday November 13 and Friday November 14, and my slot was Friday 11-11:30am. Since the British Consulate paid for the plane ticket and “unavoidable lodging,” they persuaded me to fly in that morning and not cost them an overnight stay. This turns out to be a big mistake. I had been cramming for the interviews that whole week. On Friday morning, I got up at 5am to catch the flight, dragged a suitcase through those annoying revolving doors in Chicago, and hastily put on a tie and leather shoes in the bathroom in the Consulate. By the time the interview started, my brain was just not functioning correctly due to sleep deprivation and anxiety.

While the interviewers were friendly, their questions were not:

1. I saw in your application that you intend to do translational research. Can you give us some examples, outside of your own research, of some successful translational studies in medicine? (I think this was supposed to be an easy question, but I somehow froze and had to fumble for an answer. I think this misstep set the tone for the rest of the interview.)
2. Your experience teaching sex ed to juvenile delinquents is interesting. Can you tell us more about it? What have you learned from this experience? (It's very important to review your application before the interview. I did that on the plane there.)
3. You propose to study angiogenesis. I recently read that drug xxxx (some anti-angiogenic drug that I had never heard of) is effective in mice but not in humans. Why do you suppose is that? (I think I made something up for this one.)
4. Some gene therapy currently in clinical trials actually causes cancer. Why is it difficult to design effective gene therapy? How would you tackle this as a research problem? (Thank God that I took Advanced Molecular Biology!)
5. Can you explain to the non-scientists here what exactly is the siRNA technique you propose to use in your research? (I nailed this one thanks to careful review of my proposal.)
6. What do you think are the roles of publicly and privately funded pharmaceutical research? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? (I was able to use an article I'd read in NYT for this one, and I think the interviewers were impressed. One of them asked me about a detail in that article, which I remembered. Apparently, it's a myth that Marshall is only interested in academics and not in public policy/current events.)
7. I see you've done a lot of community service. Which service project are you most proud of and why?
8. What do you think is the big thing happening in China in the next ten years?

9. You've only been in the U.S. for four years. Why did you get citizenship so quickly? Why didn't you come earlier since your dad has been here since 1985?
10. What's the most recent book you read for fun? What kind of music do you listen to? (You should prepare for these standard interview questions.)

I left the Consulate immediately after my interview to catch a train for home in Detroit, Mich. The committee deliberated on Friday afternoon and evening. On Saturday morning, they gave me a call saying they had offered five people the scholarship and placed me on the reserve list.

Frankly, I was pretty upset by the result because I had always thought I had a much better chance for the Marshall due to the different focuses of the two scholarships: Marshall for scholars and researchers, Rhodes for well-rounded leaders. Nevertheless, I learned two important lessons:

1. Getting enough sleep is crucial for interview performance. If I had applied in the Mid-Atlantic Region, I would have interviewed in Washington, DC, without the need to get up early and take a flight. On the other hand, interviewing in Chicago would not have been so bad had I insisted on staying over the night before. My recommendation to you would be to get enough sleep and stay overnight for an interview in another part of the country, even if you have to pay for the hotel out of your own pocket.
2. As I mentioned, it's a myth that Marshall only cares about academic preparation and research proposal. While they asked some detailed questions in my field, they also asked scientific policy and current event questions. Apparently, they do not want bookworms either.

After some recuperation and preparation at home, I was ready the following Tuesday for the Rhodes State interview. All Rhodes interviews start with a reception, and the one I attended took place in the Michigan League on the UMich campus. There were 13 interviewees: six from Michigan public universities, one from Alma College (a Mich. liberal arts college), and one each from Brown, UPenn Medical School, Notre Dame, Air Force Academy, University of Maryland, and Hopkins (me).

During the reception, we spent about an hour drinking non-alcoholic beverages and mingling with the interviewers and other interviewees. The conversation topics ranged from current events, social issues (such as healthcare, affirmative action, higher education funding cuts), school news, hobbies and points in our applications. The atmosphere of the evening was generally relaxed, and it was a pleasant experience to meet such a talented group of individuals.

The main purpose of the reception is for the interviewers to get to know you and observe how you handle yourself in a social setting. It is no less important than the interview itself and you should seize on the opportunity to outshine your competitors. Be sure to talk to all interviewers and be prepared with details of your application, since they will ask you about them. Also, don't be afraid to chip in during discussions, but don't monopolize the conversations either. Additionally, you should talk to other interviewees as well, showing interest in their experiences and ideas.

Toward the end of the reception, we each said our name, hometown and university. After hearing some announcements about the interviews the following day, we drew our time slots. My slot was 2pm.

After getting a good night's sleep, I got to UMich at 1:20 pm and got myself psyched up for the interview. When my time came, I walked in and found a rectangular table in the middle of the room. The interviewers were sitting along three sides of the table, leaving one short side for me. The Chair of the Committee only asked me one question, while the other four, all Rhodes Scholars, ask most of the questions:

1. A colleague of mine is doing research on a chemical adjuvant that increases the effectiveness of conventional chemotherapy when used in combination with it. My question has three parts: 1) Can you suggest two possible mechanisms for the effect of the adjuvant? 2) There was significant difference in the results when the experiments were done *in vivo* versus *in vitro*. Why is that? 3) It was suggested to the researcher that the experiments first be done in mouse pancreatic cancer cell lines. Why is that? (The answer he was looking for was that since there's currently no therapy for pancreatic cancer, the research might get more funding if it focused on this cancer type.) How do you think research money should be allocated? (This was the hardest question and was designed to knock me off-balance. Quick recovery after one bad answer is looked highly upon by the committee.)
2. Can you tell us more about the sexual education program you helped start at Hopkins? How do you measure the success of your program? Based on your experience, if you were to come up with two policy recommendations to the Governor of Maryland, what would they be?
3. Do you think federal money should be spent on finding a gene for homosexuality? What do you think would be the implications if such a gene were found?
4. Following up on your answer to the last question, do you think a woman with BRCA1 mutation should have the right to keep this information confidential from her employers? (This was the single question from the Chair of the Committee. After I told him that the woman should have the right, he said, "The State of Michigan agrees with you.")
5. Explain to the non-scientists here what a chiral compound is. Why is it important to the pharmaceutical industry? (I still remembered that stuff from the MCAT.)

6. I read in your essay that America is both the land of opportunity and perpetuator of injustice. Can you elaborate on the second part? (This was a trick question as I only wrote about America being the “land of opportunity” but not “perpetuator of injustice.” When I pointed this out, the interviewers started chuckling. Still, I went along with the question to talk about some examples of injustice in America, in both domestic and international policies.)

After the last interview ended at 3:30 pm, the Committee deliberated for two hours. We all waited in a conference room, making small talks and waiting anxiously for the announcement. During this time, the Committee might call back candidates if it wished. The Secretary of the Committee actually came to the conference room to ask me about my U.S. Citizenship, even though I had included a copy of my U.S. passport in the application. Shortly after 5:30 pm, they came in to announce that two of us, Jared English and I, would move on to the district level. Jared is from Michigan State University and had already been offered a Marshall.

After another day of cramming on Thursday, I took a flight to Chicago on Friday afternoon for the District interview. The process was similar, with an evening reception followed by a day of interviews.

There were 12 candidates nominated by five states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. The students were from Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Stanford, Northwestern, West Point (2), Naval Academy, Boston College, Williams College, Michigan State, and Hopkins. Four of the 12, Tracy Carson (Northwestern), Jared English (Michigan State), Andrew Klaber (Yale) and Joseph Wells (West Point), had been offered the Marshall.

The reception took place in the 38th-floor office of Madison Dearborn Partners. The interviewees were even more exceptional at the District level. However, I was more experienced and less frightened by that time, and carried myself well. The interviewers asked me questions that I would expect during the interview, about the sex ed program, about the AIDS problem in China, and about my educational background in China. I realized that the interviewers were actually nice people, which gave me more confidence during the actual interview.

My 25-minute interview started at 12:15 pm on Saturday afternoon. Some of the questions include:

1. Tell us about your research. How does Herceptin cause cardiac toxicity? (That was an easy question about my research.)
2. Do you think everyone in America deserves healthcare? How should we provide healthcare to the poor? How specifically can we encourage private industry to participate? (Definitely public policy question. I was prepared for that.)
3. What specific methods did you use to teach sexual education?
4. You wrote in your application that you read poetry. What kind of poetry do you read? Who’s your favorite poet? (We had a nice discussion about John Donne, and Ms. Hunt suggested that I visit St Paul’s Cathedral in London once I go to Oxford, which I took as a hint that I might get the scholarship.)
5. You said you like reading classics. What is one classical novel you recently read and did not like? (I wrote about my interest in poetry and classics at the very end of my application. Questions 4 and 5 indicate the importance of knowing every detail of the application.)

6. You wrote in your essay that when you first came to the U.S., you argued against bombing Yugoslavia. Now we're occupying Iraq. I wonder if your views on this topic have changed in your years here. Please tell us why they have or have not changed. (I said that I believe the U.S., as the world's only superpower, has the obligation to promote human rights and protect world peace, by force if necessary; however, the U.S. government does a poor job making its case to the world community due to its arrogance and ignorance. This led to a discussion of the steel tariff and quota on Chinese textile imports.)
7. What do you do when you're not studying, doing research, or performing community service?
8. I see you've accomplished some amazing things in your short time in the U.S. In what areas do you think you can improve? (I was starting to talk about the fact that I had not been involved in organized sports when Mr. Hutchinson interrupted me. He said, "You fit the profile [of a Rhodes Scholar] OK." As an aside, participation in varsity sports is by no means a prerequisite for the Rhodes. I took the hint from Mr. Hutchinson and talked about trying to relax and not to be too hard on myself.)
9. Do you have anything else to add? (I talked about taking advantage of the great opportunities provided by the Rhodes, as well as my role models, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, an immigrant from Algeria and Director of the NIH, and Dr. James Hildreth, an African-American Rhodes Scholar and prominent AIDS researcher at Hopkins.)

After the last interview, the 12 of us went to a bar to watch Michigan trounce Ohio State. None of us had any alcoholic drinks due to the possibility of being called back for additional interviews. Then we went back to the office and waited for another hour before the announcement was made. The four Rhodes Scholars-elect were Jeffrey Ishizuka of Williams College, Amber Raub of West Point, Paul Taylor of Boston College and I.

Well, I just summarized my six-month effort to win the Rhodes Scholarship. I wish you the best of luck in your application. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at wen_shi@hotmail.com. I won't be leaving for UK until late September of next year.

Sincerely,

Wen Shi
December 2003