

Thoughts about Truman Scholarship Application Process:

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The following are my thoughts about the Truman Scholarship application process. The scholarship is definitely worth applying for because it can pay for a significant portion of graduate school. Filling out the application also helps to clarify your future career and academic goals.

The application:

As Dean Bader will explain, you need to write many drafts of your application. My final application had little resemblance to my initial drafts. With the Truman Scholarship, you have extremely limited space so each sentence carries a lot of weight.

The Truman application consists of a series of short essays. The questions are basically split between your academic/career goals and your leadership experience. I think the most important part of the application is to have a unifying theme. I did not discuss my involvement in some activities because they did not fit the overall theme of my application and would probably be considered off-topic by the selection committee. However, if you have more than one activity that can fit under your general theme, use it. I don't think the selection committee wants more than one essay about a single activity or experience.

You should also be as specific as possible. I found this a little scary because the application basically asks you to plan the next ten years of your life and explain them in detail. I had a general idea of my future career goals so I researched potential organizations that I would like to work for then wrote about them specifically in my application. I would like to attend law school so I researched three law schools and discussed their programs and why they fit my specific needs (geographic location, academic programs, opportunity for employment, etc ...). I tried to avoid just listing the best schools I could think of. I assumed they wanted to see diversity in the applications so I found schools that fit my interests but were not Harvard or Yale.

When the application says "you may want to provide statistics," you definitely should. Not only will this allow you to gain a more comprehensive idea of your subject matter, but you will also be better prepared to answer questions during the interview. Also, without data or sources, it may seem as if your statements are without factual basis.

The last question of the application is "would you like to share anything else." This is also not really an option but is an essential part of the application. Most examples that I saw used this section creatively to tell a story, explain a life situation, or give a well-structured argument. This part of the essay can be – and probably should be – outside of your overall theme. For instance, my general theme was racial inequality in the criminal justice system but I wrote my final essay on playing tennis and why it is an important part of my life.

The most interesting part of the application for me was the policy proposal. It was also the most time consuming. I wrote my policy proposal on ex-felon voting disenfranchisement. I think this was a good topic because it was specific and manageable in the less-than-500-word limit. Each sentence of my policy proposal was supported by a citation. I crammed all the information I possibly could into those 500 words. I also tried to make my proposed solution simple and realistic. I did not call for an overhaul of the justice system but a simple change in litigation policy for the Voting Rights Section of the Civil Rights Division of the DOJ. (I don't know if you necessarily should keep this proposal as realistic as I did – one person who won the scholarship wrote his proposal about prison reconstruction in Iraq which I thought was an extremely complex subject). Regardless of your topic, I suggest you research your policy proposal thoroughly so that it is comprehensive and you are fully prepared for any questions. All this research paid off for me because I am now writing my senior thesis on the same topic as my Truman Scholarship policy proposal.

On all parts of my application, I wrote many drafts and gave them to friends, family, teachers, professionals, and Dean Bader to proofread. I would say that having a wide variety of people proofread your application is essential because each person will have unique and useful criticism. Dean Bader is a great resource because he has read many applications and knows what works and what does not. I would try to meet with him as many times as he is willing if you feel that you have substantial questions about your application.

After I was selected as a finalist:

NOTE: Before your application is submitted to the Truman foundation, you must be nominated by JHU.

Because there is a time lapse between when the application is submitted and when finalists are announced, I lost familiarity with the application. As soon as I found out that I was a finalist, I re-read my application and my research to begin preparation for the interview.

I also increased my reading of newspapers and journals. I read at least two newspapers per day and tried to find as many journals as possible that dealt with my topic. Although the Truman Scholarship website suggests that you read a biography of Harry Truman, I don't think this is very important. I did read a short biography but was never asked any questions about President Truman. In fact, no one at my interview site was asked about President Truman. So, while it is worth being knowledgeable about Truman, I don't think it is as necessary as keeping up with current events.

The best preparation for the interview is reading newspapers and journals. You never know what questions the selection panel will ask so it is impossible to be fully prepared. However, you can still have a good grasp of most topics that might be asked. The Truman Scholarship website also provides practice interview questions. It is definitely worth

practicing your answers to these questions even though few, if any, of them will be asked in the interview (in my case none of the practice questions were asked).

Dean Bader also convenes a panel of professors/deans to “mock” interview the finalists. This is a tremendous opportunity to practice your interview skills and see how well you know your application. In retrospect, I performed better in the mock interview than the actual interview. I think this was largely attributed to the fact that the mock interview questions were more closely related to my application than the actual interview questions. However, I’m sure the more mock interviews you can create (with friends, etc), the better.

Most of the finalists at my interview site seemed to have a very good understanding of the subjects addressed in their application but none seemed to have studied relentlessly. One person brought all sorts of study materials with him and read throughout the entire interview process. He was one of the scholarship recipients so maybe cramming worked for him but he was definitely the exception in terms of day-of studying.

The interview:

I am from Chicago, obviously one of the larger U.S. cities, so there were many finalists from Illinois. The Illinois finalists were interviewed with the finalists from Michigan (each interview panel is regional and includes more than one state). Some people were out of the country at the time of the interview and were interviewed in Oxford instead of at home.

The used to pick scholarship recipients is confusing. Interview panels such as Illinois or New York are given extra “at-large” scholarship slots due to their many finalists. Each regional interview panel selects one scholar per state as well as a certain number of “at-large” scholars from the region. In my case, the panel selected five scholars – two from Illinois and three from Michigan. Apparently, the larger regions have a certain number of at-large slots which they can use or save for the following year. As far as I know, the Illinois panel could have selected only two scholars total (one from IL and one from MI) but they chose to use their at-large slots as well.

I am not positive, but I don’t think it helped to be from Chicago. For instance, Maine only had one finalist so that person was basically ensured the scholarship (unless he/she gave a horrible interview). Therefore, if possible (and I’m not sure it is), apply from Maryland or, if your family has more than one residence, apply from the state which you think will have the least finalists.

In terms of the actual interview, the panel focused very little on specific from my application. This was not the case for other people at my interview site. Some people spent most of their interview explaining their policy proposal while some people were asked “what else are you interested in.” I think the focus of their questions depended on the thoroughness of the application. For instance, my policy proposal was fairly

comprehensive and understandable so I was asked only a couple of brief questions about the proposal.

The actual interview is twenty minutes. The panel, which consists of judges, lawyers, graduate school deans, public servants, former scholarship recipients, and one non-voting member from the Scholarship Foundation, asks questions for nineteen minutes and then you are given one minute for a closing statement. I did not know until the day of about the closing statement so I simply thanked the panel. This may have hurt me. Others had fully prepared closing statements ranging from quotes to personal stories. The interviews started at 9AM and last throughout the day. They do not provide much food and do not give you money for lunch so be prepared. Before the interviews begin, you are introduced to the interviewers and are given a few minutes to chat with them. I doubt anything you do during this opening period can help your chances of winning the scholarship but it is nevertheless interesting to speak with the interviewers in a less formal setting.

I was the first of about fifteen people to be interviewed. I don't know if this was good or bad but you have no control over when you are interviewed (it is not alphabetical by last name). Going first, you do not have the opportunity to hear from all the other finalists about the interview. Although they never ask the same question twice, I think some people's nerves were calmed when other told them about the interview.

None of the questions which I prepared answers for were asked during the interview. This shows that it is virtually impossible to anticipate even some of the questions. I was not asked any really random questions such as my three favorite books. However, some people were asked this type of question in various forms. I think I was able to answer the questions in the interview fairly well however I failed to relate the questions to examples from my past experiences and maybe to my application in general. I feel that it is key to back up your answers with experiences and relate them to what you wrote in the application.

The questions I was asked related to my overall theme of civil rights/liberties. I was asked my opinion about: police installing cameras in light posts to prevent drug dealing, internet privacy rights, the death penalty, decriminalization of drugs, and (the one question that directly related to my policy proposal) why people should not be able to serve as jurors if they have committed felonies. Aside from the assistant secretary for the Truman foundation, the interviewers were not overly aggressive; sometimes they fed off of each other's questions and other times they did not. A student from Northwestern said that he was told that two of the panelists read each proposal carefully played good-cop/bad-cop. One asks you leading questions and the other attempts to trip you up. I don't know if this is true or not but it may be something to anticipate.

Lastly, you will not know how you did in your interview. Some people thought they did horribly but received the scholarship, while others thought their interview was "excellent" or "great" but did not receive the scholarship. It is really impossible to tell how you did during the interview just by your post-interview feeling. Once your

interview ends, you should relax because there is nothing more that you can do to improve your chances.

A note about recommendations:

You may only send three recommendations to the Truman Foundation. Dean Bader also writes a recommendation that goes along with your file. One recommendation must come from a professor. If the professor can speak to your leadership ability as well as your academic ability, I assume this adds to your application. Although some people say to simply get recommendations from high profile people, I don't think this really helps. One of my recommendations was from a person who I worked with very closely on a couple projects and could discuss my leadership ability and work ethic in detail. My last recommendation was from a high profile person but she knew me well and could discuss specifics. I would not ask a high profile person if he/she can only give generalities. In all the recommendations, discussion of leadership ability and commitment to public service is key.

I hope this summary of the application process is helpful. If you have any questions about the scholarship feel free to give me a call at 410-303-7376 or email me at morgangmac@hotmail.com.