

Henry Dyson, Director

## ***Rhodes and Marshall Letters of Recommendation***

Thank you for agreeing to write a Rhodes/Marshall letter for our student. This is a time-consuming task and we greatly appreciate your efforts. This document provides some tips to writing an effective letter based on the U-M nominating committee's collective experience reviewing potential nominees. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Henry Dyson, Director of the Office of National Scholarships and Fellowships, at [hdyson@umich.edu](mailto:hdyson@umich.edu).

### **Overview of the Rhodes and Marshall Nomination Process**

Approximately 20-30 students each year apply for U-M nomination to the Rhodes and Marshall Scholarships. Students may not apply for these scholarships directly without U-M endorsement. The U-M nominating committee will review these applications, select 8-10 of the most promising candidates for campus interviews, and nominate approximately 2-5 candidates for each scholarship. Top applicants are often nominated for both scholarships. The deadline for U-M applications and letters of recommendation is the ***fourth Monday of August***. Applications and letters for selected nominees must be uploaded to the Rhodes/Marshall websites by October 1st.

### **The Importance of Recommendations**

Applications for the Rhodes comprise a 1,000-word personal statement; curriculum vitae and official transcript(s); a nominating letter from the U-M Provost; and 4-8 letters of recommendation. The Marshall application comprises a series of shorter essays (personal statement, academic proposal, leadership and ambassadorial statements) along with four letters of recommendation, one of which must explicitly address the applicant's leadership potential, and a nomination letter by the Provost.

Highly compelling recommendations are essential to successful applications. Roughly 1,000 Americans are nominated by their institutions each year for 32 Rhodes scholarships and approximately 40 Marshalls. Most nominees will have exemplary academic records and strong extracurricular activities. What really sets finalists and winners apart from the rest, in our experience, is the depth and quality of their characters and their potential for future leadership as reported by the letter writers. It is of vital importance, therefore, that your letter be clear, detailed, well-written, and of a reasonable length, usually two pages. (The Marshall Scholarship online application has a strict 1,000-word limit.) Generic letters attesting to the candidate's suitability for a job or internship are not suitable for these competitions.

### **Establish Context, Personal Knowledge, and Sincerity**

State the context in which you know the student and establish that you have specific, personal knowledge of the student's performance and career aspirations. As the Marshall guidelines put it, "Unsubstantiated hyperbole often undermines the credibility of a positive recommendation." Whenever possible, therefore, you should include concrete stories about your academic or professional interactions with the student. These are the most effective means of conveying a sense of personal relationship and sincerity in your recommendation and can be very powerful with readers. In asking for a letter, the candidate should provide you with a copy of her/his transcript, resume, selected UK graduate program(s), and some idea of the role your letter will play in her/his overall application package. Please do not take affront if the candidate is unusually frank about this; we have helped them select specific letter writers that will collectively



represent each of the high points of their applications. If you are unable to give specific examples of a candidate's personal or academic qualifications for the scholarship, we recommend that you make this clear to the candidate and, if necessary, decline to write a letter of recommendation.

### **Make the Case for Academic Excellence**

Rhodes and Marshall candidates typically have a 3.8 or better GPA, have made significant contributions to research, are considered the very best in their departments or cohorts, and will be successful candidates for top graduate schools in their field. If you are an academic letter writer, the purpose of your letter is to explain how the candidate fits this profile. If you've assigned the student an A+ in your course, you may want to say something about what that distinction means (e.g. top score in the class). Regarding research projects or term papers, be specific about the qualities that impressed you (intelligence, understanding, insightfulness, speed, commitment, ability to work independently, technical skills, communication skills, teamwork and personality, etc.). Minimize general praise of the candidate's generic qualities (e.g. "the candidate is a highly motivated and hardworking") in favor of qualities that make the applicant truly exceptional even among other highly motivated and hard-working peers. Explain why the candidate will excel in her/his selected UK graduate program. If you have specific knowledge of this field, explain why the UK program is a particularly good choice for this candidate.

### **Future Leadership Potential and Commitment to the Good of Others**

State the likelihood that this candidate will make significant contributions to her/his chosen field. Tell stories that emphasize the candidate's initiative, creativity and insight, problem-solving, ability to create shared vision, management of workflow and deadlines, management of team members, self-awareness and promotion of diversity, resilience, and ability to deliver results. Talk about the candidate's motivations, especially as these relate to service to others or the public good. Is the candidate driven by a particular cause, problem, or commitment to work with those who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised? What specific examples have you observed of these motivations in your interactions with the candidate? Once you've established based on past experience that the candidate possesses these traits, project them into the future. Where does the candidate's trajectory lead in 5, 10, and 20 years?

### **Explicit Comparisons**

One effective way of supporting these claims is by comparing the student favorably to other students, interns, employees, or peers who have also gone on to make significant contributions in the same field. Because letters of recommendation are inherently evaluative, at some point - typically in the first or final paragraphs - you should be explicit about the scale against which you are comparing the applicant. Obviously you will want to select the best scale against which you can favorably compare the applicant with integrity. Examples might include: "The best undergraduate in our department," "One of the best students I've encountered in 20 years of teaching at U-M [and other peer institutions]," "Compares favorably with previous Rhodes/Marshall [or comparable scholarships] winners for whom I've written."

### **Submission Instructions**

For the U-M nomination process, please send an electronic attachment of your letter to [onsf.applications@umich.edu](mailto:onsf.applications@umich.edu) no later than *the fourth Monday of August*. The letter will be treated as confidential and will not be released to the student without your permission. If the student is applying for both the Rhodes and Marshall Scholarships, please send two copies of your letter, one for each scholarship and corresponding UK graduate program. We apologize for the inconvenience, but this will greatly reduce stress in the final submission process if the applicant is nominated for either or both scholarships. If you know that you will be unavailable to upload the final draft of the letter in September, please let Henry Dyson ([hdyson@umich.edu](mailto:hdyson@umich.edu)) know so that he can make plans in advance.