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## First, Do No Harm

Lia Rushton

University of Alabama at Birmingham, liarushton@me.com

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## First, Do No Harm

LIA RUSHTON

Formerly of the University of Alabama at Birmingham

When I was appointed fellowships advisor at UAB back in the late 1990s and before the formation of the National Association of Fellowships Advisors, as a first order of business I spoke with the university's few former winners and finalists about their experiences applying for nationally competitive scholarships. One such former applicant, now an accomplished professor who had graduated from our honors program a number of years prior, was evidently still haunted by his Rhodes interview as he told me about the questions he had been asked by and the answers he had given to his interviewers, answers that did not win him the scholarship. I met another former student and applicant who looked off into the distance—think Ajax's thousand-yard stare—when remembering the one interview question that stymied him so completely he knew he had begun to circle the drain. After those two conversations, I resolved that, regardless of whatever else I might accomplish in my role as advisor, I intended to make sure that no student would be scarred by the process. My mantra for the six years I held the position was “Do no harm.” It's a pretty good oath for fellowships advisors, I feel, to this day.

Competing for a major award is difficult even for stellar students. Done well, the process is edifying and extraordinarily helpful not only for those

who win but also for those who don't. Students who apply for prestigious national scholarships have, at minimum, a significant jumpstart on their graduate school plans and applications; more importantly, they have learned, through rigorous self-examination, about themselves and their values, interests, and career goals. Ample arguments and evidence for the positive and lasting value of competing for these major awards can be found in Suzanne McCray's edited compilations *Beyond Winning: National Scholarship Competitions and the Student Experience* and *Nationally Competitive Scholarships: Serving Students and the Public Good*.

The two former students with whom I spoke had not had the benefit of a fellowships advisor. I suspect if they had, they would have been able to metabolize their experiences more productively. We want to do right by our students always, but especially when we invite them to do hard things. What follows is an extended discussion of some ways we might be at risk of falling short of that goal, of how we—or our home university—might inadvertently do harm. Consider this essay an attempt to keep the lights on, to remain fully conscious, as we endeavor to prepare remarkable students for the rewarding pursuit of long odds.

David Foster Wallace opened his Kenyon College commencement address with a story:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

The story was his way of introducing an impressively packed discourse on automatic or unconscious ways of thinking, and it has relevance to many honors students at large public universities and small colleges, who are not typically endowed with inordinate advantage, e.g., standardized test prep, prestigious prep schools, paid summer enrichment experiences, influential social networks, and the like. A significant number are first-generation college students or children of immigrants or kids from small towns who haven't had the opportunity to travel much if at all before attending university. Once enrolled in college, they hold down part-time jobs while also making top grades, conducting research, participating in extracurricular activities, and contributing to the wider community. It's their normal, and they tend not to see all that they do as particularly distinctive. Virtually none of the ones I

worked with saw themselves as exceptional—not even the truly exceptional ones. While their humility is refreshing in an increasingly self-promoting world, it can place them at a notable disadvantage in the highly competitive process of applying for national scholarships.

One vital task of a fellowships advisor for these unassuming students is to tell them what water is. It's to adopt the role, *pace* Wallace, of the “wise old fish” who helps them see that certain features of their background, their experiences, and/or their achievements, which they may regard as commonplace, are not at all common. I recall how a full forty-five minutes went by in my first conversation with a student who ultimately won a Rhodes before he revealed the kind of jaw-dropping information about himself that he considered incidental or even irrelevant to his academic achievements but that in fact showed him to be one of those truly remarkable human beings. I had to ask him a number of pointed questions, moreover, to arrive at that revelatory forty-five-minute mark. His numerous scientific publications were certainly impressive, but they took on added significance in the context of what turned out to be his weighty responsibilities off campus; not only his demonstrable intelligence but also his outstanding character were now clearly evident. Honors students—such, at least, was my experience at UAB—are uncannily adept at burying the lede. Among all the students I worked with, I needed to correct only one for overstating his accomplishments.

A fellowships advising structure that begins to identify and counsel potential applicants early in their college careers is far better for honors students than one beginning the process much later—say, a mere few months prior to the scheduled meeting of the nominating committee. Committee members run the risk of making a flawed nomination if they base their decisions on the résumés, personal statements, and interviews of students who don't necessarily know what to showcase or even mention about themselves. I'm not suggesting we attempt to package our students, although even the most unjaded applicants may feel by the end of the process that they now, unavoidably, have *shtick*. I'm talking about something as basic yet life-altering as helping students discover if their enthusiasms and values dovetail with their intended courses of study. For instance, one honors student who won a Truman came to UAB with the intention of becoming a nurse—as noble a profession as exists. Nursing made good sense to a good student from a small town (population 1,400) in northeastern Alabama. Yet Linda Frost, then Associate Director of the University Honors Program and Truman faculty representative (now Dean of the Honors College at UT Chattanooga),

recognized an activist when she saw one and spoke often about career goals with this student, who during his freshman year had come out as gay and began working tirelessly for LGBT rights both on campus and beyond. Prompted by Linda's careful observation of him over time, he changed his major to political science, graduated from the Berkeley Law School, and now is working to effect positive change for the very communities for which he began advocating as a first-year undergraduate. Without those early conversations of the soul-searching sort, he would have missed his calling, and the Truman Scholarship Foundation would have missed him.

In order to identify potential applicants early, fellowships advisors would do well to create both a formal network of department heads and honors program directors and an informal network of faculty whom they know to be highly attentive to students. It takes a village to raise a fellowship recipient. The student does the lion's share of the work, of course, but an important supporting cast includes the research mentors, professors, coaches, advisors, parents, and community members who nurture these students. The most competitive candidates are like heat-seeking missiles: they detect and go after opportunities and learning experiences, and they discover and connect with interesting people. They make a richly stimulating world for themselves. Fellowships advisors need to talk to the people who are talking to these students.

A number of my former students said that what had helped them the most were the many questions I had asked them about themselves, their choices, and their beliefs: "You made me think about every decision I had made in my life." I would ask them about their families and their roles in their families; about their siblings, their hometowns, their cultural backgrounds; the significance of their names; their academic interests and favorite teachers; their jobs; why they took up one extracurricular activity and dropped another; their favorite books; why they played a certain sport over another; what made them happy and angry; their take on politics and their view of national and international events. Channel your inner Terry Gross to help applicants and potential applicants think more illuminatingly about themselves and their world. If I hadn't gotten to know them fairly well, I wouldn't have been able to tell if their personal statements portrayed them accurately. I used to say, only half-jokingly, "You keep writing drafts, and I'll let you know when your essay starts to sound like you." The best advisors are mirrors, reflecting back what they see and hear, neither aggrandizing strengths nor minimizing gaps in preparation but rather showing students as genuine a view of themselves as possible. We are all subject to distortions in our understanding of ourselves.

Those conversations, moreover, would best be had from some perch other than behind a desk. When I was an undergraduate, my department head made a point of coming out from behind her desk to speak with students; she sat on a divan while motioning the student toward a comfortable chair. This generous gesture conveyed collegiality and availability, facilitating an exchange that often ranged beyond the topic at hand. Following her example, I made sure that the only piece of furniture between a student and me would have food on it, typically at a nearby coffee shop or lunch place. The conversations were different when we were off campus; the students were more at ease.

Not every student a fellowships advisor engages early in his or her undergraduate career goes on to pursue a fellowship, and that's as it should be. The terms of the scholarship(s) might not align with the student's career goals, temperament, or schedule. On the other hand, capable students who want to apply for a scholarship but don't have an above average chance at winning a major award can still apply meaningfully for a less competitive one. Nancy Twiss of Kansas State University, both the godmother of and exemplar for all fellowships advisors, kept a long list of smaller scholarships at the ready so that she never had to turn away an eager student. She herself, not an assistant, worked with such students; they were as important to her as those vying for major scholarships. Simply suggesting that a student think about throwing a hat into the ring by applying for a scholarship changes that student's sense of self. Also, awards beget awards. As initially unsuccessful applicants become more seasoned (if not battle-hardened) by the process, they often become more successful. The finalist for a Truman can become the winner of a Rhodes.

Still other benefits accrue to students who are identified early in the application process. For example, a student with a verbal tic ("like," "you know," "I mean") needs time to break that bad habit. Even if our conversations were halting for a while, I would insist that the student not use a crutch word or phrase in my company and ultimately not at all. With a longer lead time, fellowships advisors can develop with their students an individualized reading list and habituate them to the regular reading of newspapers and periodicals so that a student scientist can talk about political factions in Syria and a budding Joyce expert about cancer immunotherapy. They can send their advisees articles pertinent to their intended areas of study and send them just damn good articles about anything. They will be better able to press against the cultural norms that may disadvantage first-generation American students in an interview, such as excessive deference or modesty. On the other hand, and

this next statement in no way contradicts the one that precedes it, fellowships advisors must guard each student's right to be him- or herself. After one of our applicants had been told by several of his mock interviewers to smile more, I quickly interjected that he was a truly serious kid; a smile on him would have looked about as natural as it does on Nick Saban. He won a Marshall—I'm quite sure without smiling.

Another applicant, alarmed—even panicked—by the suggestion two of his mock interviewers made that he express a desire to return to Alabama after graduate school, pulled me aside to say that he in no way wanted to come back to his home state, to which I replied, "Then don't say that. Say what you mean. Win because of you or lose because of you. Just make sure that whatever the outcome, it's because of who you really are." This student graciously held his ground on a different but far more important matter during his actual interview, which, if I had to guess, is what won him the day. In my experience, mock interviews, while important, never remotely resemble the actual interviews. On the upside, students learn how to think on their feet as they practice fielding unanticipated questions. The long-winded ones learn to tighten up their responses, and the laconic ones learn to flesh out their answers. They become accustomed to speaking to a panel of people who sometimes talk over each other or at cross-purposes. Applicants receive all sorts of advice after these practice interviews, but then the fellowships advisor's job is to sort through the odd bits, reinforcing insightful and neutralizing potentially detrimental comments.

I regularly began my meetings with applicants by asking not *what* they were doing but *how* they were doing since over time I had started to notice that these exceptionally capable students were sometimes taken for granted, presumed to be all but immune to fatigue, doubt, hurt feelings, or any other of the vulnerabilities we all share. They were so competent that we ran the risk of forgetting they were also young and human. I wasn't entirely surprised to learn from a recent Rhodes Scholar that he thought a fairly high number of his cohorts suffered from Imposter Syndrome. I also felt that part of my job was to keep these students company through what is often a lonely process. I met one-on-one with students because that dynamic worked well for me (I'm an introvert) and came to believe such an arrangement worked best for the students, too. Granted, it's a time-intensive approach, but students simply won't reveal themselves in a group setting in the same way they will when it's just the two of you. I didn't expect to see—yet nonetheless saw—the eyes of an assertive twenty-two-year-old well up with tears after his first mock



interview because he imagined his responses had disappointed the professors he most admired (they hadn't) or a young woman become tearful because she thought she didn't have the chops to apply for a scholarship (she did). I'm not suggesting that these students were fragile—they wouldn't have gotten where they were without grit—but let's at least be aware that when we invite students to apply for prestigious awards, we are inviting them to discover how they stack up against some of the brightest collegians in the country. It takes courage to go for broke.

Certain exchanges with students must absolutely take place on an individual basis. Debriefing winners and non-winners together seems as thoughtless as inviting a new fiancé and a recent divorcé to a small dinner party. Such an arrangement is inhibiting and awkward for the winner and terribly insensitive to the non-winner. Better to celebrate with the one and on a separate occasion help the other manage the disappointment.

The university administration has its own set of concerns regarding nationally competitive scholarships, and they are not always well aligned with those of the fellowships advisor. We all wish to do right by our students, but I have seen administrators nonetheless fuss about having to host celebrations for scholarship winners while readily touting the winners at fundraising or public relations events. I have observed a college president arrange a small gathering to break the good news to a Truman winner without inviting either the student's faculty mentor or her fellowships advisor to the announcement.

No one in the upper administration much noticed what I did with my part-time job until our students started to win a few large scholarships, and then came the impulse to manage. I was asked to relocate my office to an administrative area where it would be less comfortable or accessible to students. Applicants were required to report to Media Relations to have their photos taken before they knew if they had won anything. A program evaluator of some sort asked me for a nonexistent definitive list of scholarships from which she could fashion an evaluation rubric. The same evaluator asked, after a student won a Marshall, how many Marshalls we should expect in five or ten years—as if Halley's Comet might orbit the sun more frequently if subjected to a performance review. After some back and forth, mostly negotiated by Ada Long, who was at that time the Director of the University Honors Program and the person to whom I reported, my office remained where it was, and that ill-conceived approach to a job review died a quiet death, but students did, alas, still have to get their photos taken at a time when they were already anxious about their prospects.



Mostly, the fallout of these various actions didn't adversely affect the students themselves; they were more of an irritant for those of us who worked with them. Still, it is worth noting that students, not universities, win fellowships and that wins are rare.

According to McCray, "There is approximately a five to six percent chance of winning and a ninety-four to ninety-five percent chance of losing" (*Nationally* 50). Although universities and colleges facilitate the application process, educate and offer opportunities for these students, and deservedly partake in the reflected glory of scholarship success, the primary credit should go to the students themselves and then to the unsung faculty members who generously mentor them—sometimes for years—for no additional compensation or often even thanks. In order to feel that I was doing right by those I advised, I sometimes had to ignore the university that issued my paycheck.

Perhaps fellowships advisors can't always know whether they're doing no harm, but here are a few clues that they're getting it right: a former advisee gets married in their home; they still hear from their former students and what those graduates are doing makes them exceedingly proud; they have a broader sense of what's possible in education than they did before. Fellowships advising is a plum job, so whatever hassles attach to the office ought to be kept in perspective. Those six years for me at UAB were special. I don't know if there's an academic or advisory equivalent of "marrying up," but, if there is, I did so when I was given the honor of working with our university's best and brightest.

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The author may be contacted at

[liarushton@me.com](mailto:liarushton@me.com).