

Rhodes & Marshall Application Synopsis

To all Rhodes and/or Marshall applicants, this is a synopsis of my experience applying to both scholarships. My goal is to offer advice and retrospective changes I would have made to what I did, to maximize your chance of getting either or both scholarships. In the Marshall process, I was not granted an interview (for a very stupid reason on my part) and in the Rhodes process I made it to the state interview stage (State of Washington). Read on to see what the process is like up until that point, and what I would have done differently.

The Awards

As you probably already know, the Rhodes and Marshall are for two (sometimes three) years of study in the UK. Rhodes is specifically for Oxford University, while Marshall is for any UK institution. For the most part, you can use the same essay for both, but keep in mind a few differences between the two awards.

- The Marshall, while tenable at Oxford, is easier to get if you apply to a different school, simply due to the large number of students who will use the Marshall as a back-up Rhodes and will list Oxford as their first choice (you also list a second option). Make sure to look online (try www.studyintheuk.org) and ask around to see what other British schools have strong programs in what you want to study. Some may even be better than Oxford. I listed Oxford as my first choice, simply because I was hoping to work in a specific lab there, and listed Manchester (which has a strong Neuroscience program) as second.
- Oxford gives almost automatic third-year extensions, so you are free to apply to a three-year DPhil, or any of several two-year degrees (MPhil, MSc, MSt, etc.) for the Rhodes. You can also do a second bachelor's degree in two years. I applied for the DPhil in Human Anatomy and Genetics. The Marshall gives extensions, but they are more rare so you're best off applying for two years of study. I made a mistake here and only applied for a one-year MSc in Neuroscience, whereas I should have either switched to a two-year course or added a second one-year MSc.
- The Rhodes Committees are very interested in well-rounded, socially conscious people who will "fight the world's fight" (you will see this recurring theme throughout the rest of the synopsis). Although you should have a good reason for and a good background in what you want to study, it is more important to show how your views and plans for your degree and career will benefit the WORLD. Don't be intimidated by this, but make sure your essay and how you respond at your interview show that you have a consideration for the world's needs within your field of study and beyond. I did a good job of this in my essay, but not so much in my interview. As for the Marshall, they are more concerned with what you've done in the field you're proposing to study in the UK. You need to have a very strong background and to excel in that field. I didn't get an interview for the Marshall (due to the shorter degree I proposed, and possibly because I had done BME research and was proposing to do neuroscience research at Oxford), but I learned a good deal about its process through the other Rhodes interviewees I met.

The Application & Essay

You should get started on the applications for these two scholarships no later than the start of the summer (the applications are due in October). Some people I met started as early as February. The Rhodes and Marshall applications are slightly different, here is how:

- The Rhodes application requires 5-8 recommendations. It's supposedly much safer to get eight, but don't stretch yourself too much by asking for a recommendation which might not be meaningful and/or sincere. The Marshall requires four, which you have to rank. Make sure to ask for recommendations early, so the writers have ample time to write an excellent letter. Dean Bader makes it very convenient for you by collecting the letters and forwarding them to the two committees.
- The Rhodes only requires one essay of up to 1,000 words. The prompt is very general, allowing you to go into whatever you think will complement your application. You should take the chance to give your reasons for wanting to pursue your selected degree, expand on your relevant background experiences, talk about your career goals, and demonstrate (subtly) your social conscience and how giving you the opportunity to study at Oxford will help you make a global difference. This essay is easily adapted to the Marshall's 1000 word statement on "academic and other interests and pursuits", but if you haven't already expressed what background experiences (your major, research, internships, etc) make you a good candidate to study your field in the UK, try to stress that. The Marshall also has a box on the application for "brief statement of career aims" and a second essay (500 words) in which you are asked to delineate "both your reasons for wishing to undertake the course of study proposed and for preferring the chosen British university." This essay is just as important as the 1000 word one, so give it just as much thought and effort.
- It might sound obvious, but have many people edit your essay. Dean Bader gives excellent feedback, and the more people you get to give you their take on it, the better. I had the opportunity of recycling my medical school personal statement for half of the 1000 word essay, but I still went through many revisions.

The Interview

I only have experience as far as the Rhodes interview is concerned. There is only one Marshall interview, while there are two rounds of Rhodes interviews: a state and a regional round. I didn't move passed the state round, but from what I've heard, the regional round is like the state, only with stiffer competition. Here is my take on how the process goes:

- 981 applicants were nominated by their schools for 32 spots.
- Of these nominees, about one-fourth move on to the state interview round, which took place December 3rd and 4th this year. Washington had 11 interviewees.
- Of the state interviewees, up to three will move onto the regional round. A large state like California will send three, while a small state like Alaska will only send one. Washington sent two.
- Those who move on will then interview the second time at the regional headquarters (San Francisco for the west coast region) within 48 hours of the first interview. About 10-15 interviewees will be present and four Rhodes Scholars will be selected from this pool.

The interview day is preceded by a cocktail party or a dinner the night before.

- We had a dinner at the University of Washington Faculty Club and it was a very unique experience. We spent about half an hour mingling, drinking (I had no alcohol) and having hors d'oeuvres. That part was awkward, as it was hard for all applicants to enter conversations, but the interviewers did a good job of making us feel comfortable. After about 30 minutes, we stood in a circle and did brief introductions. The students only said our name, hometown, school and major, but I learned a lot more about them that night and the next day. All in all, they were a VERY impressive group. I didn't feel out of place, but still felt privileged to get to know them all. For the most part, there wasn't much of a competitive feel among the group.

At dinner, the students were split up into three tables and the adults rotated for each of the three courses so we would get a chance to get to know all of them. There were three students and four adults at my table, and for the most part, we had very interesting discussions about everything from sports to immigration. I didn't feel like any of the students at my table tried to dominate the conversation too much, and I felt like I carried myself very well during the conversations with all three sets of interviewers. Note that the interviewers have read and remember parts of your application, so don't be surprised if they ask you to elaborate on something. This is not confrontational whatsoever, and definitely gives you something to talk about and offers a chance to sell yourself. At the end of the dinner, we were given our interview times for the following day. The first interviewer went at 8:30 AM and the last at 3:00 PM. We were asked to be available until 7:00 PM in case the deliberation took long.

My interview was scheduled for 10:00 AM, but I got there around 9:30 AM. Students were asked to wait in a conference room. I chose to stay here most of the day. I got to spend a lot of time with the candidates, we solved a NY Times crossword puzzle, discussed everything from politics to our undergraduate institutions, and had a good time. When my interview time came, the head of the committee came to get me and escorted me into the interview room. All seven members of the committee were seated on one side of the table opposite me. It seemed like one interviewer was selected to be your "primary questioner" and this person asked all of the difficult/confrontational questions. The others chimed in with follow-up and comments. Here are the things I was asked (roughly in order):

- You have done a good deal of work with inner-city school children in Baltimore. I'm sure you've noticed educational disparities between your schooling and that of the Baltimore students. This morning, the Seattle Times published a report on the need for a State Tax in Seattle (I had not read the Seattle Times that morning, but rather the NY Times). Based on your experience in Baltimore, how would you comment on the need for a state tax in Seattle?
- You are proposing to research a very rare disease at Oxford. Do you think research dollars should be allocated more heavily towards diseases that affect a greater percentage of the population?
- What are some new ways to identify cancer cells in novel therapies?
- In what ways has crew affected your life?
- The field of scientific research is often viewed as being isolated from the big picture, and as a very solitary field. How would you reconcile this in your career plans? (I was told the previous night by one of the interviewers that he had this

issue with scientific research, and I anticipated being asked this, so I had somewhat prepared an answer.)

- You're an Iranian cleric with a great deal of power in the government. What would you do to fix the problems there and why? (This had been a significant topic of discussion the previous night at my dinner table).

Keep in mind that each of these questions were followed by follow-up questions, and essentially turned into a full discussion. The first two questions were the hardest for me, and got me somewhat panicked. I did a good job of answering the rest of the questions, but I can't help but think that I could have done better had I not gotten off to a rocky start. It's easier said than done (and I was told this), but try not to let one or two weak answers get you down. I managed to recover when I got my questions about crew, Iran, and The Rhodes interview IS confrontational. Your answers need to be substantiated and if not, will be picked apart. This makes it important to be familiar with current events, and have a good general, conversational-knowledge of all fields, especially economics and politics (such as my state tax question). You should also be prepared to go into very deep discussions regarding your own field (such as my research funding allocation question). I read the Economist, New York Times, research articles on neurodegenerative diseases (my proposed area of research), articles on Iranian politics and economy, and re-read my applicants. One thing I noticed from speaking with the other applicants is that sciences majors are open game to be asked questions about politics, the economy, etc. However, humanities and social sciences majors are usually not asked anything in-depth about science (except for issues that relate to public policy).

After spending the rest of the day with the other applicants, the interviewers deliberated for about 45 minutes after the last interview and came in and announced the two who were to move on (Cyrus and Anthony). They congratulated the rest of us, and for the most part, the unsuccessful applicants took it well.

Well, best of luck in your attempt to become a Rhodes Scholar. I hope this synopsis of my experience will be of some help to you, and that you will be more successful. Feel free to contact me at bnazer@jhu.edu (ask Dean Bader for my updated phone number if necessary).

Sincerely,

Babak Nazer