MERE BOOKWORMS?:
A Literature Review of Scholarship and Fellowship Advising

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The first graduate of the United States Military Academy to win a Rhodes Scholarship was Francis Rarick Johnson, Class of 1923, who studied at Oxford for two years from 1925 to 1927 (Association of Graduates 2013). After early retirement from the Army for an illness, he continued his studies in English at Johns Hopkins and had a full career in academia as a full professor at Stanford (1960). In the years since, Academy graduates have earned a total 92 Rhodes Scholarships, ranked fourth in the nation, perhaps owing much to the congruence of Cecil Rhodes will that Rhodes Scholars not be “mere bookworms” and the holistic education afforded to West Point cadets across academic, military leadership, and physical domains.

While in the earlier years the process of applying was largely an independent one, under then Majors Mike George and Jennie Koch, a formal course for nationally-competitive scholarship applicants was added to the curriculum in the autumn of 2000 for the Class of 2001. Several years after its creation, the course was designated as XH497 Critical Thought, a course still on the books today (under the course direction of the author). At the time of its creation, such a program was on the cutting edge of what is now a burgeoning profession best embodied by the National Association of Fellowship Advisers, with its 321 member institutions, biennial conferences, smaller regional events, and study tours to locations in which the students under these advisors aspire to pursue their graduate degrees. NAFA’s mission “is to guide advisors in promoting the full potential of fellowship candidates through the application process, and to foster the continued growth and professionalization of fellowship advising in higher education” (http://www.nafadvisors.org/).

History, Growth, and Importance of University Scholarship Advising

Prior to the founding of NAFA in 2000, scholarship advising was largely an ad hoc endeavor in higher education. One of the somewhat surprising aspects of the ethos of NAFA is the intensely collaborative nature of its members, as evidenced by the active and free-flowing exchange of information on their list-serve and the way in which the websites of individual universities direct their students to resources of other schools that make the information available to anyone on the Internet, rather than hidden behind a firewall (see, for example, Villanova’s website: http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/arts/undergrad/curf/links.html). While the community of scholarship advisors themselves are very collaborative, for institutions that chose to define success as on the basis of the number of scholarships won, the landscape is getting ever more competitive. While two part-time, rotating uniformed faculty was exceptional at the Academy program’s creation in 2000, it is merely marginal in an era when many universities are devoting multiple full-time staff and faculty to scholarship programs. According to the latest NAFA “Survey of the Profession,” over one third of respondents were full-time fellowships
advisors, two fifths were at institutions where the advising office was six years old or younger, and over one third of schools of a similar size to West Point had two or more full-time staff advising their candidates (National Association of Fellowships Advisors 2012). Even a few short years after NAFA’s creation, the encroachment of smaller schools with little track record of success in these competitions against the Ivy League made national media (Winerip 2003), and there were earlier pieces before the formal creation of NAFA (Arenson 1997).

Evaluation of Scholarship Programs

There are tensions within the scholarship community about the correct measure of success for a scholarship advising program. The simplest metric, and one often preferred by university administrators, is the number of scholarship winners, whether measured absolutely or in terms of comparison with “peer” institutions, for example against Navy and Air Force, in West Point’s case. In some cases, schools go to such lengths as putting the target number of Rhodes Scholars in their 10-year strategic plans (Brownstein 2001). While there is little survey data to measure administrators’ actual preferences, the perception among fellowship advisors, according to a 2006 survey, is that 56% of advisors believe their institution values the number of scholarships won, while 52% of advisors themselves value student development, first and foremost (Eckhardt 2007). While administrators’ inclination to rely on such a metric is understandable (donor cultivation, national rankings, admissions, etc.), Franklin suggests that this metric is “one of the least important aspects of assessing a scholarship enhancement or application assistance program,” instead emphasizing the need to situation the objectives of a scholarship program office within the wider goals of an institution (2007).

Recommendations

There are several important recommendations for the West Point Scholarship Program in light of this initial literature review.

1. Ensure the Scholarship Program remains firmly rooted in the Academy’s wider mission to “educate, train and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army” (www.westpoint.edu).

2. Evaluate the success of the Scholarship Program against metrics other than the number of scholarships won. Eckhardt suggests measuring the percentage of scholarship program participants who find themselves in graduate school (2007). While less relevant to the cadets at West Point commissioning into the Army, a longer-term study to compare the eventual attendance rates at graduate school (in uniform or as civilians) against the wider population of graduates would be one possible metric. Another quantitative metric closer to the perceived institutional preferences of many universities would be the scholarship finalist selection ratio. While ultimate success or failure in a given scholarship process comes down to the somewhat arbitrary outcome of a single 20-30 minute interview, selection as a finalist is comparatively objective. And, rather than focusing on total numbers, it would be better to focus on the relative rate of finalist selection to applications submitted,
which would also measure the Academy’s own internal ability to accurately screen and nominate candidates.

3. Celebrate process, not outcomes. While cadets who win scholarships ought to find their faces on the Pointer View, there should be a greater command emphasis on the success of each cadet in the scholarship program regardless of success or failure in a particular competition. An example of this would publicizing all finalists, regardless of whether they win. Likewise, use the recently created scholarship program lunches to recognize every cadet in XH497 in front of their peers and the underclass cadets to inspire a culture of excellence.

**Annotated Readings**


This internal West Point document offers a fascinating history of the Academy’s mission statement as a tool to justify the Academy’s existence to its critics. For ensuring a scholarship program fits within the mission of a wider institution, the historical context of the current mission statement is essential reading.


A useful volume offering insights into how scholarship granting bodies assess their own selection criteria and developing a framework for understanding criteria when applying, WICS: Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity, Synthesized. This also includes one of the few systematic assessments of past scholarship winners, exploring the career trajectories of several generations of Rhodes Scholars.


This journal annual offers a range of short articles around the theme of assessment, including views on how to evaluate the success of scholarship advising offices and the precursor to the later 2012 Survey of the Profession discussed above in the literature review.


This edited volume gives insights into the scholarship process from the perspective of scholarship granting bodies, such as the Rhodes Trust, Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, and Truman Foundation. This was an early effort on the part of such bodies to increase transparency in the selection processes, which was partly designed to level the playing field that had for so long been dominated by the Ivies (and service academies).

The third edited volume of NAFA conference proceedings continues to explore issues of relevance to scholarship program advisors, such as the timing of identifying scholarship applicants and the preparation of candidates for both the written application and finalist interviews.


This edited volume builds on the essays of the 2005 volume, expanding the scope to include materials on how fellowships advisors can build capacity across an institution outside their own office, such as with advising faculty on letter of recommendation writing. There are also essays on useful topics like reframing “loss” in competitions with exceedingly long odds of success.


This article offers an academic analysis of the difference between the justification of scholarships as tools of state and the likely actual reasons for their initial creation. While many current scholarships funded by the British government are justified as a tool of public diplomacy, archival research suggests a much more complicated origin to the programs that have been explained in diplomatic terms after the fact.


This is a useful history of the origins of the “grandfather” of merit scholarships, the Rhodes. It provides insights into the motivations of Rhodes for the creation of a global elite that might avert war through the power of their social contacts from time shared together in Oxford.

**References**


