

Students

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Ambitious Colleges End the Ivy Lock on Prestigious Fellowships

Sophisticated programs bring awards to more colleges, thrilling presidents and donors, but are all the efforts ethical?

By ANDREW BROWNSTEIN

Stillwater, Okla.

For Blaine Greteman, the road to Oxford began on old Route 66, the shoulderless, two-lane highway of Woody Guthrie folk songs and Tom Joad's travels.

The ribbon of road passed Mr. Greteman's house in Hydro, a town of 970 dominated by an abandoned, Depression-era filling station. He walked the route to school, where he was valedictorian of a class of 17.

Mr. Greteman told his story in the essay that won him a Rhodes scholarship in 1998 to study at the University of Oxford. By all accounts, the selection committee ate it up. So, too, did his alma mater, Oklahoma State University, which began touting its first Rhodes scholar in recruitment brochures and viewbooks.

Like Joad, Mr. Greteman became a metaphor.

"It's the psychology of it," explains Ed Miller, associate dean of the university's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. "Like the four-minute mile, everyone thought it couldn't be done. Then one person breaks it, and now everybody's doing it."

Oklahoma State's success didn't end there. In the last eight years, its fellowship program produced its first British Marshall scholar and seven

Harry S. Truman scholars. (Marshall winners can study at any university in Britain, and a Truman prize provides for three years of study at any American university.)

Colleges are quickly learning that successful fellowship programs lure top students and big donors. Stories like Mr. Greteman's have also helped puncture the perception that big-time scholarships are the exclusive domain of the Ivy League.

That view is at least partly based in fact. An analysis of the Rhodes shows that from 1947 to 1996, students from the eight Ivy colleges made up 36 percent of the winners. The past five years have seen a leveling of the field. Since 1997, Ivy students have won only 21 percent of the scholarships. Harvard and Yale still dominate, to be sure, but their share of the overall pie has dwindled as institutions like Pennsylvania State University and Wheaton College in Massachusetts became first-time winners.

With the idea of bringing home more awards, the University of Louisville, Pomona College, and Villanova University are among more than a dozen institutions to create fellowship offices in the last two years. In the same period, membership in the nascent National Association of Fellowship Advisers grew from 21 to 66.

Some colleges are recruiting potential scholars as early as high school. Many more are sharing information on everything from handling rejection to the care and feeding of faculty mentors.

It is easy, perhaps, to be cynical about what one professor likens to playing *Pygmalion*. "This process clearly produces results. I'm not disputing that," says Hew Joiner, director of the Bell Honors Program at Georgia Southern University and president of the National Collegiate Honors Council, a coalition of honors-program directors at more than 800 colleges. "But I think it's artificial, and not necessarily honest."

He admits his views are in the minority among members of the organization, many of whom call him "naive" about the workings of academe today. Nonetheless, Mr. Joiner objects to stories he has heard from advisers who have coached students to "correct" regional accents or to get involved in

community service to pad their portfolios. "They could say, 'If you really want to impress people, why don't you organize and set up a shelter for battered women?' Well, that might be nice, but it didn't occur to the student unaided."

The fellowship-advising association was created largely in response to such concerns. Many of its members, aware of the horse-race mentality that dominates college admissions, are determined to keep their focus on helping students. They talk candidly about the pressures they face to produce winners, and the often fine line they tread between coaching and packaging. At the association's conference in Tulsa, Okla., this summer, an entire panel was devoted to ethics.

"The purpose of NAFA was to get the best possible information about scholarships out there and to keep things from spinning out of control," says Robert Graalman, director of scholar development at Oklahoma State and the association's first president.

Prepping for a major award can be a life-altering business. Even students who have been rejected say they were forever changed by the process.

Steve Wainscott, director of the Calhoun Honors College at Clemson University, keeps a framed note on the wall of his office from a student who could be uncharitably described as a three-time loser. The student failed in bids for the Truman, Marshall, and Rhodes. Nonetheless, he told Mr. Wainscott that going for those prizes "were three of the most fulfilling experiences of my life."

Such reactions may help explain the passion felt by many fellowship advisers toward their students. "Can you imagine a better job than this?" asks Mr. Graalman. "I'm working with the best, most inquisitive students at this university, trying to enrich their lives, and it's all voluntary."

Oklahoma State, long thought of as a "cow college" in the shadow of the University of Oklahoma, beefed up its scholarship programs more than a decade ago. The efforts have the enthusiastic backing of its president, James Halligan, who likes to say that "failure teaches."

"Most of these students have always gotten a 3.9 or a 4.0 and have never

failed at anything in their lives," says Mr. Halligan. "They've never had to stretch themselves."

The catalyst was Mr. Graalman. A droll Oklahoman who studied to be an English professor, he is known for his informality in the classroom and the dreaded black pen he uses to dissect student essays. They call him "Dr. Bob."

Scholarship prospects typically begin with Mr. Graalman's one-credit course called "Windows to the World," where he holds forth as a devil's advocate on topics from the value of the ACT to cultural relativism. Students are encouraged to read the Living Arts section of *The New York Times* and a host of opinion magazines, from *National Review* to *The Nation*. There are no lectures, no tests. The mode is Socratic, the goal intellectual combat of a sort that is common at Oxford but rare at most American universities.

"It's like *Politically Incorrect* without that annoying Bill Maher guy," says Douglas Haynes, a sophomore.

Mr. Graalman wants students to think on their feet and question their assumptions. In each class, a designated "anchor" is asked to study a hot topic in the news and stake out a position. The student must answer to his classmates and, of course, Dr. Bob.

In one class, a student extols the virtues of the Western canon, only to be cut off when Mr. Graalman asks about the place of "Chilean epics." As the debate turns against Shakespeare and Aristotle, he switches gears and pointedly asks: "Don't you think we need white European males to keep things rigorous?"

"We have to think in that class rather than take notes," says Caroline Foust, an aviation and engineering major. "Our peers are extremely high-caliber students who are also extremely good thinkers. It forces you to know yourself."

Ms. Foust entered the course with hopes of winning a scholarship, but now plans to use her experience to get into graduate school. In fact, most students in "Windows to the World" do not apply for awards, a fact that bolsters claims that scholarship preparation is more about the journey than the destination.

Kyla Morgan, a quiet industrial-engineering major whom professors describe as a top student, freely admits that before taking "Windows," her worldview consisted of "the Bible and television." "I sometimes feel like the most uninformed person on this campus," she says. "This connects me to the outside world."

Of course, the prep program would not exist were it not for a handful willing to take the plunge.

For some, it's more about resume-building than soul-searching. "If I get a Truman scholarship, I can get into any law school I want," declares Lacey Goodger, a double major in political science and history.

But more often than not, students come to Mr. Graalman seeking a challenge. Until "Windows to the World," they have largely been able to coast on their ability. They've never had to spar with their equals, never had their writing refined, never been seriously *pushed*. For many, the experience proves humbling.

"The hardest thing he says is rewrite," says Mario White, a senior mathematics whiz who won a Barry Goldwater Scholarship last year for math- and science-related research and is seeking several prestigious awards this fall. The scholarship work led him to add a history major and Russian minor to his math concentration. "I'll rewrite again and again. After the fourth time, maybe, I'll finally get to corrections."

Oklahoma State has not been quiet about its success. Visitors driving into town are greeted by a giant billboard recognizing its designation as a 2000 Truman Honors Institution, one of five colleges noted for its success with the award. The sales pitch is clear: Stillwater runs deep.

Other colleges are learning that winning awards brings a certain cachet.

Last year, James F. Barker, president of Clemson, made winning two Rhodes scholarships part of his 10-year plan to make the university one of the nation's top 20 public institutions. That same year, Robert E. Cook, a computer magnate who donated \$4-million to form the honors college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, made an unusual bet with the university's

president -- \$1-million against a box of Cuban cigars if the university landed a Rhodes scholar within the year. (The Rhodes hasn't come. Neither, apparently, have the cigars. A spokesman says Mr. Cook extended the bet when the university placed well in other awards.)

After all, building successful scholars takes time. Often, it begins as early as high school. Each year, Mr. Wainscott of Clemson goes on the "sausage circuit." That's his name for the regular breakfast meetings he has with guidance counselors to identify recruits.

Such methods may seem extreme, but in many ways, they're part of a giant game of catch-up. One reason for the Ivies' historical dominance, aside from enrolling and nurturing top students, is their elaborate prepping mechanisms that accord students everything from mock interviews to instruction in table manners.

One Ivy League university sequestered scholarship finalists at the mansion of a wealthy alumnus for what one former admissions director described as a "silver-spoon boot camp."

The difference now is that the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville has one too. The impetus came from a Rhodes finalist in 1999 who was caught off-guard by one of the selection committee's famously abrupt interviewers. During a cocktail party the night before the official interview, the committee member took aim at the student's choice of major, international relations.

"What kind of major is that, anyway?" he asked over drinks. "Isn't that a hodgepodge of nothing, really?"

Last year, finalists at Arkansas engaged in its first mock cocktail party, in which guests peppered them with high-minded chitchat and impromptu repartee.

"For some people, carrying a drink and engaging in small talk can be very difficult," explains Suzanne McCray, director of Arkansas's office of postgraduate fellowships. "You go in there expecting to have mindless conversation, and then you're hit with questions that can only be described as very tough."

The attention to detail paid off. Last year, when Harvard was shut out of the Rhodes and Yale was passed over for the Marshall, Arkansas won one of each.

Are the Ivies worried? For most, last year was a fluke. But some believe the losses were inevitable given the many new players on the field. Paul A. Bohlmann, director of fellowships at Harvard, says the university has no plans to respond to the competition. It already has one of the most intricate scholarship networks in the world, consisting of three full-time staff members and graduate advisers at each of its 13 student halls. "I don't think we're going to lose our edge," says Mr. Bohlmann. "But the days of Harvard getting four, five, six Rhodes scholarships a year are clearly over. In reality, winning just one is amazing."

The scholarship foundations, for their part, welcome the change. The proliferation of advising programs mean more students are applying, guaranteeing a more-diverse applicant pool. Mary Tolar, deputy executive secretary of the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, says that a decade ago the scholarship was dominated by large, land-grant universities and the Ivy League. In the past five years, however, the pool has widened to include first-time winners like Morehouse College and Temple University.

Ms. Tolar is something of a triple threat in advising circles. In addition to her current post, she won both a Rhodes and a Truman while a student at Kansas State University in the 1980s, and served as an adviser at two colleges. "There are always risks," she says of recent trends. "But we think anything that generates a wider knowledge of these scholarships is a good thing. Many good people who should be applying aren't."

With the job encompassing everything from Socratic questioner to party host, advisers frequently find themselves wondering "How much is too much?" The issue looms large given the relatively quick emergence of fellowship advising as a distinct profession, with salary and benefits often tied to producing winners.

Villanova, currently seeking its first full-time scholarship administrator, rejected two candidates earlier this year before concluding that it would have

to pay a salary equivalent to that of a tenure-track faculty member in order to land someone with a successful track record, according to Edwin L. Goff, associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. But in an e-mail message, Mr. Goff insists that the pressure to win awards -- of which the continuing search is one facet -- is not incompatible with doing right by students.

"I have consistently and emphatically maintained that the strong interest of our administration, trustees, and alumni in the 'trophies and badges' represented by the nationally competitive programs merely provides the leverage with which we can ensure the highest level of access to the largest number of outstanding students to resources that will be invaluable to their maturation, regardless of the outcome," he says.

Despite the inspiration that pervaded the recent Tulsa conference, there were whispers about the profession's dark side. The worst tale, by far, came from a former official of a small, private university in the Midwest who told of a faculty adviser who insisted on nearly complete control of students' applications.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of concern for colleagues who remain at the university, said the professor had declared he possessed a "secret formula" for winning scholarships like the Marshall, Truman, and Goldwater. Indeed, the institution had amassed an impressive record with his help. In his hands, student applications became more lucid, contextualizing often abstract concepts. The professor, who had the backing of the university's president, often told students what to write in their essays and essentially scripted their interviews. When they objected, he accused them of being "uncooperative."

One student, who won a Truman scholarship with the professor's aid, had something of an "early-life crisis" as a result that wrecked his academic ambitions, said the official, now happily employed as an adviser at another institution.

"He did what the professor said, but he feels like an impostor. He feels like he misled the foundation."

Ms. McCray of Arkansas, one of a handful of advisers familiar with the story, calls it the most extreme example she knows of what can happen when a university loses its compass in the competition for winners. At a panel discussion in Tulsa, she received appreciative nods from colleagues when she firmly mapped out the ethical Rubicon: "If we listen to their dreams, and reshape them to fit a scholarship, we are helping too much."

The adviser's tale may give the lie to those who believe that prestigious fellowships gauge the uniqueness of individuals and, as such, cannot be faked. Nonetheless, the task would seem formidable for anyone who would dare try. The Rhodes, for example, requires not only an essay but two lengthy interviews by committees composed almost entirely of former winners. Todd Breyfogle, the fellowship adviser at the University of Denver and a 1988 Rhodes winner at Colorado College, has served on several state selection committees for the past eight years.

He says he has noticed an increased polish to the essays, but steadfastly maintains that students who are superficially packaged will be outed in the interview. "In high-pressure situations, you tend to see people as they are," says Mr. Breyfogle. "For example, we occasionally find candidates who list volunteer experiences, but can't talk about them with any detail or passion, or innocently admit that they'd never read a book that wasn't assigned."

If anything, Oklahoma State's experience with the Rhodes serves as a reminder that individuality can be its own reward.

Aside from his WASPy first name, which his hippie mother pulled from a baby book, there's nothing stereotypically Rhodes about Blaine Greteman. True, he was a top student who came to Oklahoma State entirely on grants. But he also hailed from a nowhere town one professor called a "crossroads with two gas stations." He had spiky hair, spoke with a slight drawl, and played lead guitar in an alternative country band called the Delicious Militia. A liberal in a conservative state, he railed in the student paper against "the abominable policies" of Oklahoma's Republican governor. "He was a little rough around the edges and bothered people here at times," says Edward Jones, a Milton scholar who became Mr. Greteman's mentor. "I thought to myself, The Oklahoma accent is a little rough. I don't know if this is Rhodes-scholar material."

But Mr. Greteman proved to be his own toughest critic. When he watched a videotape of his first mock interview, he was appalled by his contorted posture, the uh's in his speech, and the wishy-washiness of his answers. A week later, the hesitation was gone. His delivery was pointed and confident.

The essay portion got Mr. Greteman thinking about the themes of his own life. He wrote about his emerging social conscience, drawing on the literature and culture of Oklahoma -- of characters who seemed "both timeless and familiar as they recall my ancestors, who, like myself, traveled to school down old Highway 66."

When it came time for the interview, his sister worried: Would he cut his notoriously unruly hair? To Mr. Greteman, that smacked of a sellout -- *nobody* touched the hair. "I did try my best to stay on really good behavior," he quips. "But it didn't work. At the end of the interview, one of the committee members said, 'Whatever you do, stay eccentric.' I was a bit disappointed that my attempt at being non-eccentric failed."

Last fall, Mr. Greteman taught a course on Shakespeare in film to a class of Oxford undergraduates. He finished his master's thesis on hermeticism in the 17th-century poetry of Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne. And he got his diploma -- recently autographed by Willie Nelson.

"You can't buy stuff like this," says Mr. Jones, who volunteered countless hours to help his young prospect. "Here we are beating the odds, and sending some kid from Hydro, Okla., to Oxford. It's amazing."

For those cynical hearts immune to such pleasures, there's always schadenfreude.

Last year brought troubling news to the scholarship's Old Guard. "Harvard Shut Out of Rhodes for the First Time in 70 Years," blared the *Harvard Crimson*, the student newspaper.

As symbolism goes, it's not bad.

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