

Some Personal Reflections of a Churchill Scholar Alumni from Illinois

Having served several times on the Selection Committee for the Churchill Foundation scholarship program, I can confidently say that not only is the quality of the applications we review extremely high, but the selection process itself is a very careful, balanced, thoughtful, and vigorous one. Both private study of applications and communal review is involved. The end result has been one upon which committee members, somewhat amazingly to me, have reached general consensus after extensive discussion. I believe the result is thus as fair as humanly possible. That being said, we all ended up regretting that so many highly qualified applicants could not be awarded a Churchill Scholarship, but we at least were satisfied to know that these individuals would still excel regardless.

The different backgrounds and expertise of the committee mean that we all learn something about other fields during our discussions. While there are numerical quantitative factors in the selection (e.g. GPA), defining the qualitative aspects is the part of the selection process that makes it so interesting and challenging. These qualitative aspects include the reference letters (very important for putting the high academic achievements of applicants in some personal context), the selection of courses chosen by a candidate, their involvement in research projects, their individual personal interests and their broader societal involvement. But of all these, I would point to the personal essay as one singularly important factor in helping the committee gain an understanding of the individual's goals or aspirations as well as accomplishments. The latitude offered by these essays is a key factor in their usefulness: there is no "correct" apportionment of content any more than there is in a poem. What I have responded to most favorably has been well-written prose that conveys an honest sense of the applicant's background and their motivation for pursuing study at Churchill College or Cambridge in general. Essays that succeed in conveying the author's personality while doing so are persuasive, and so the styles can be quite varied and yet still achieve their aims. What I always looked for in an essay is not what the applicant might imagine the committee wants to hear, or a simple restatement of their resume, but rather a straightforward account in their own words of their experience, intellectual development and aspirations.

Obtaining that personal sense of so many outstanding candidates has been one of my rewards for serving on the selection committee.

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