

Destination Success: Producing Nationally Recognized Scholars

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Abstract

Oklahoma State University was named a Truman Honor School for its consistent record in producing Truman Scholars. Of the five recent winners, four were from the Agricultural Economics Department. The system used in the department, college, and university for identifying and nurturing students through the scholarship process is described.

Key Words

Prestigious scholarships, Marshall Scholarships, Truman Scholarships, scholars, nurturing students, agricultural economics students.

Destination Success: Producing Nationally Recognized Scholars

Administrators, at all levels, are asking and encouraging their faculty to produce winners in national competition as a by-product of developing broad-based educational opportunities for top students. Success provides a measure of pride and the larger public recognizes a 'top quality program.'

In December, 2000, Oklahoma State University (OSU) was named a Truman Honor School for its consistent record in producing Truman Scholars. Recognitions such as this allow the institution to be considered a 'spire of excellence' among peer institutions for undergraduate student programs and faculty accomplishments. But its primary benefit is what it does to cultivate exceptional experiences for many ambitious students.

OSU received this honor due, in part, to the number of national prestigious scholarship winners it has produced recently. The Truman Scholarship is the most famous U.S. sponsored scholarship and provides \$30,000 for undergraduate and graduate study. No more than 80 scholarships are awarded annually. Since the Truman Scholarship program's inception in 1978, eleven OSU students have become Truman Scholars. Seven OSU Truman Scholars have been recognized in the last eight years. Of the five recent winners, three were Agricultural Economics majors, and the fourth was an Environmental Science major with a policy option and advised in the Agricultural Economics Department. The Agricultural Economics Department assumes leadership in advising Environmental Science majors who have a policy option. One of the Agricultural Economics Truman Scholars was also recognized as a Marshall Scholar which provides an opportunity to study at any college in the United Kingdom. A second Agricultural Economics Truman Scholar received a Phi Kappa Phi

National Fellowship of which there are 50 such Fellowships for up to \$7,000 annually. The Fellowships are for the first year of graduate or professional school study. Such success is rare in these days of heightened competition, even more so when such a remarkably high percentage comes from one small department not normally associated with these awards.

The objective of this paper is to describe the system used at OSU, at the University, College, and Department levels to identify and nurture students through the scholarship process so that they might be recognized as national scholars and enhance their education whether or not they even apply for the prestigious scholarships. The system is a collaborative effort that involves students, faculty, and staff. The efforts helped develop a winning culture for the University, the College, and the Department and at the same time promote pride and educational rigor for all involved.

Success in producing national scholars is a function of: a.) recruiting, b.) identifying, and c.) nurturing scholars and through this experience. The first step in developing these programs is to recruit top quality students. Departmental recruiting efforts are complemented by College and University recruiting and scholarship programs. The Department sends information on academic programs, scholarships, and career opportunities to potential students who express interest in Agricultural Economics, Agribusiness or Environmental Science. The same material is sent to potential students who are 'undecided' on a major. Included in the recruiting material is a brochure that contains images of 450 Agricultural Economics alumni business cards, plus information on the Department's scholarship program and work opportunities for undergraduate students. The business card collection provides potential students an opportunity to view a wide range of career opportunities.

Additional personal correspondence and telephone calls from faculty are directed to high school

students who have demonstrated excellence in academics, leadership, and community service activities. These individuals are identified through scholarship applications at the College or University levels and/or referrals. These efforts are complemented by specialized materials and individual contacts directed at all top recruits.

The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) has a very aggressive recruiting program. CASNR's primary recruiting efforts focus on high school seniors; however, it is not uncommon to initiate contact with junior high students. Three of our recent Truman scholars decided early in life that they were going to OSU and major in an agricultural related discipline. The three visited the campus frequently while participating in FFA and 4-H activities. One of the Truman Scholars knew he wanted to major in Agricultural Economics prior to his senior year in high school. Two of the Truman recipients were undecided on a specific major in agriculture until contacted by an Agricultural Economics faculty member during the student's senior year in high school. The fourth recipient was raised in a military family, graduated from high school in Heidelberg, Germany, and decided to attend OSU because of family friends living in Lawton, Oklahoma.

Scholarships are important in attracting, recognizing, and encouraging top students to excel and are specifically crucial in attracting freshman. Even small scholarships influence enrollment decisions concerning university, college, and major. Scholarships provide not only financial assistance but also recognition for a job well done. In many cases the recognition is more important to the student and their family than the financial assistance. The scholarship affords the recipient "bragging rights."

CASNR has an excellent scholarship program. College awarded scholarships increased from \$100,000 in 1992 to \$299,000 in 2001. These scholarship are awarded to incoming freshman and

transfer students, but are primarily focused on continuing students. Departmentally awarded scholarships increased from \$26,000 to \$95,000 during the same time period (Figure 1). The Department awarded scholarships to 52 and 114 students in 1992 and 2001 respectively. The number of donors/donor groups/donor firms increased from 38 to 107 during the ten year period. The number of nondollar recognitions increased from 7 to 40 students during the period. The scholarship programs help develop 'a winning culture' relative to student success, recognition, and enthusiasm. Scholarship recognition helps motivate students to achieve even higher recognitions. Donor enthusiasm for student success has increased. Donors become stakeholders in the program. It is not uncommon for donors to provide potential student referrals to the department and help students identify internship and career opportunities.

Once students enroll at the University it becomes necessary to identify potential applicants who are encouraged to join the scholar program. Following are seven qualities useful when identifying applicants for the prestigious potential scholars:

- a.) Good grades; at least a 3.7 GPA (4.0 system) in a rigorous program is recommended,
- b.) Impressive speaking and writing skills,
- c.) Leadership roles in campus, community, and perhaps state/national organizations,
- d.) Academic interests beyond the major, preferably a double major or multiple minors, e.) Interest in and conversant about the Humanities,
- f.) Extensive personal reading habits beyond course work, and
- g.) Passion for public service and intellectual discourse.

The author believes that because of the rigor of the Agricultural Economics program and most

candidates' experiences in 4-H or FFA, speaking and leadership roles, and service projects, many, Agricultural Economics students can compete favorably with applicants from other disciplines. Agricultural Economics students have a large dose of courses in Social, Physical, and Biological Sciences. These courses, along with those in Humanities and other diverse subjects, complement the applicant's transcript and knowledge base. Because of the global nature of agriculture, many Agricultural Economics students appreciate and understand the global economy, international politics, and the impacts of changes in agricultural production and/or policies impacting trade around the world. Therefore, it is not unusual to advise them into foreign language, history, and political science sections to broaden their views even more. Additionally, several candidates have also improved their prospects by joining OSU's nationally recognized Honors Program. In addition to the increased knowledge base and challenging academic opportunities, the Honors Program offers numerous other benefits attractive to our top students. These include improved computer labs, study areas, and priority enrollment times.

One can hypothesize several reasons for the success of Agricultural Economics students in national scholarship competition. The quality of students attracted to OSU, CASNR, and the Department is very high. Most of our best students, many of them valedictorians of their high schools, arrive on campus with an excellent blend of documented scholarship, leadership, and public service accomplishments. These students generally possess excellent work habits, good study skills, and self discipline. The consistent quality of Agricultural Economics students is documented in Table 1. Perhaps the most important single factor of these students' "success equation" is the nurturing process that develops while students are mentored by dedicated and outstanding faculty. The mentoring process is likely to be initiated in classroom or laboratory/research settings or even through academic advising

sessions. This faculty involvement in the mentoring process receives overt support through Department, College, and University administration. If a student shows interest in any area beyond the normal classroom experience, OSU has a faculty member willing to direct the student in some form of related research or advanced study. The student will very likely become an expert in the field. These students generally become excited about their work, study, or discipline areas and excel beyond the levels of their peers. It is these students that make a strong and positive impression on those interviewing finalists for prestigious scholarships.

We attempt to recruit the best students seeking admission to OSU and CASNR if there is any indication of interest in Agricultural Economics or Agribusiness disciplines. We recruit the best but make them even better through the nurturing process. This process is accomplished, supported, and encouraged at numerous levels. The Graduate College provides financial support as an incentive to students interested in the nurturing process via the Freshman Research Scholars Program. This program provides \$200 per semester to freshman who conduct research, a few hours per week, supervised by faculty in a one-on-one relationship. Faculty eagerly volunteer to be involved in the Freshman Research Scholars Program, as it is a direct effort to excite and stimulate beginning students about research. Each of the Agricultural Economics Department's Truman, Marshall, and Phi Kappa Phi Scholars participated in the Freshman Research Scholars Program. Beyond the Freshman Research Scholars program, some departments/colleges fund their own Research Scholars Program if funds are limited at the Graduate College. Some faculty utilize grant money to employ undergraduate students and provide them an opportunity to get excited about research and be a productive member of a research team. This research environment is prevalent in the Agricultural Economics Department. Providing small

financial support is adequate to expose several students to a stimulating research experience. This is important as national scholars need to have an appreciation for the importance of research and a demonstrated desire to learn. More expansive research opportunities are provided for sophomore, junior, or senior students who may apply for one of 50 Lew Wentz research scholarships awarded annually. The recipients receive \$4,000 to work in tandem with a faculty researcher for one academic year. Three of the Truman Scholars participated in one or more Lew Wentz research programs, and an Agricultural Economics Truman finalist at the national level in 2001 received a Lew Wentz scholarship for the 2001/2002 school year.

Without question, faculty play the critical role in student scholar development and recognition. In 1998, a Scholar Development and Recognition Office was established at OSU. The office provides University-wide leadership for students who are interested in applying for national scholarships and coordinates some of the nurturing and all of the application process. With establishment of this office, providing support for top students who want to elevate their skills become a goal for the university, and if participants wish to apply for major awards they are encouraged and supported. Prior to 1997, the Agricultural Economics Department produced several national finalists but none received the Truman Scholarship. It is through this office that a plan to develop successful National Scholars was generated on a larger scale than before.¹

The Scholar Development and Recognition Office and CASNR administration encourage

¹Truman Scholar links can be accessed at: www.Truman.gov. Marshall links can be accessed at: www.acu.ac.uk/marshall. Phi Kappa Phi links can be found at: www.phikappaphi.org. Links for Rhodes, Goldwater, and Udall Scholarships are www.rhodessscholar.org, www.act.org/goldwater, and www.udallfoundation.org respectively.

faculty to identify and contact freshmen students who they believe have outstanding capabilities. The Director of the Scholar Development and Recognition Office then contacts and invites these students to attend a reception where information is distributed on the prestigious national scholarships. In the fall of 2000, the Scholar Development and Recognition Office contacted 200 students and invited them to the reception. Interested faculty are also encouraged to attend.

During the spring semester, freshman interested in pursuing National scholarships are encouraged to enroll in a unique Honors seminar titled "Windows of the World," taught by the Scholar Development Director. The course fosters multi-year relationships between top students and faculty and encourages more and broader reading and improvement in communication skills for those enrolled. Three important objectives of the course are: a.) Improve student familiarity with current event issues by assigning each student a day to act as an 'anchor person,' who summarizes news reports and respond to questions in a manner that demonstrates quick thinking and polished interview skills. Practice in composing scholarship essays is also a course requirement. b.) The characteristics of major scholarship competitions are explained and categorized, and c.) Create a valued concept of 'community of scholars' within the class.

The intensity of the scholar development experience increases once a student indicates a willingness and desire to apply for the for a prestigious scholarship. The application process can take up to two years. The applicant works with several knowledgeable faculty from a wide range of disciplines who review the applicant's writings and conduct numerous mock interview sessions before a rigorous scholarship selection committee.

In 2001, at OSU 14, 5, and 5 students applied for Truman, Goldwater, and Udall Scholarships respectively. Two students applied for a Rhodes Scholarship and one student each for the Marshall and Gates scholarships. Two individuals represented OSU as Truman finalists. Both were from the Agricultural Economics Department. One was fortunate to win the scholarship. A second OSU student won the Goldwater Scholarship. Without reservations, all applicants agree, win or lose, they benefit greatly from the experience. Faculty involved also benefit.

In the spring of 2001 a scholars wall was established in a highly visible and high student traffic area in Student Union. The wall provides greater visibility for the Scholars Program, OSU's prestigious scholarship recipients, and faculty mentors. Pictures of successful applicants and their respective faculty mentors are displayed on the wall, and the location serves as a point of pride for the OSU family and is an effective display for prospective young students who visit the campus and imagine what they too could become by involving themselves in these programs.

Summary

The success equation for generating nationally recognized scholars is first a function of recruiting the 'best' and then making them better through the nurturing process. While no one administrative structure for nurturing scholars would be suitable everywhere, most campuses already have programs that could serve as a foundation for success. A demonstrated cooperative attitude from faculty is essential for student success. OSU fosters such a 'no barrier' environment. Faculty and students work enthusiastically as a team to nurture and produce recognized national scholars. Within the university, the college, and the department there is a team of faculty familiar with prestigious scholarship application

processes and requirements. The faculty team assists in identifying appropriate courses outside the major, supervises your writing, suggests research experience, conducts practice interviews, and follows your progress. Even though your department, college, or university may not have the same resources and or administrative structure, you very likely have interested faculty and the quality of students to produce nationally recognized scholars.

References

OSU Scholar Development. Fall 2000. Vol.2 Number 2. Office of Scholar Development and Recognition, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078-7047. 2000

Table 1. National, University, College and Department recognitions received by Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness students 1995 through 2001.

Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Prestigious National Scholarships:							
Harry S. Truman Scholars			1	1		1	1
British Marshall Scholars					1		
Phi Kappa Phi National Fellowships							1
University Level Recognitions:							
Phi Kappa Phi Membership	8	13	10	14	6	8	10
Blue Key Membership	2	na*	4	6	3	6	5
Mortar Board Membership	1	1	1		2	2	4
OSU Alumni Association Top Ten Seniors		3		1	2	1	1
OSU Top Ten Freshmen Men and Women	3	4	2	3	8	4	6
College Level Recognitions:							
CASNR Outstanding Senior	1	1	1	1	1		1
Dean Fred LeCrone Awards (Top 5 Seniors)	1	4	1	4	3	1	3
CASNR's Top Ten Seniors	4	5	2	6	3	3	4
Alpha Zeta Outstanding Freshman		1	1	1		1	1
Dean C.B. Browning Award Outstanding Freshman	1	1		1	1	1	
Alpha Zeta Membership	25	25	19	24	34	41	40
Gamma Sigma Delta Membership	10	10	11	24	6	6	na
Department Level Recognitions:							
Distinguished Scholastic Achievement (Highest GPA's)	1	2	1	5	2	1	3
Outstanding Scholastic Achievement (GPA's Above 3.5)	14	15	13	18	13	14	30

na* - Information is not available

Figure 1: Scholarships awarded by the Agricultural Economics Department from annual contributions and endowments, 1991 through 2001.

