Marshall Letters of Recommendation

Thank you for agreeing to write a Marshall Scholarship letter of recommendation. This is a time-consuming task and we greatly appreciate your efforts. This document provides some tips for writing an effective letter based on the U-M nominating committee's collective experience reviewing potential nominees. Please contact the Office of National Scholarships and Fellowships at onsf.info@umich.edu with any questions or concerns about this process, we are happy to help.

Overview of the Marshall Nomination Process

Each year, approximately 20-30 students apply for U-M nomination to the Marshall Scholarship, which supports graduate study at any university in the UK. Students may not apply for these scholarships without U-M endorsement. The U-M nominating committee will review Marshall applications, select 8-10 of the most promising candidates for campus interviews, and nominate approximately 5-7 candidates for the national competition. Top applicants are often nominated for both the Marshall and Rhodes scholarships (to Oxford specifically). *The deadline for U-M applications and letters of recommendation is the fourth Monday of August.*

The Importance of Recommendations

Applications for the Marshall application include a personal statement, academic proposal, leadership and ambassadorial potential statements along with three letters of recommendation, and a nomination letter by the Provost. Candidates are selected based on three criteria:
- Academic excellence and fit with their UK graduate programs
- Demonstrated leadership potential
- Demonstrated potential to serve as an ambassador between the UK and US, both during their time as a Marshall Scholar and in their future career.

The Marshall application must include:
- Two of the letters of recommendation from faculty who have taught or supervised the candidate in research. The letter should address their qualifications for admission and potential to thrive in the UK graduate programs in the student's academic proposal.
- One letter that discusses the applicant's demonstrated potential to be a leader in their future field and ambassador between the UK and US.

When asking for a Marshall letter, the candidate should specify your role in their overall application strategy, although it is helpful if each letter can touch on all three Marshall criteria to the degree they are able.

Highly compelling recommendations are essential to successful applications. Roughly 1,000 Americans are nominated by their institutions each year for approximately 40 Marshalls. Most nominees will have exemplary academic records and strong extracurricular activities. *What sets finalists and winners apart from the rest, in our experience, is the depth and quality of their characters and their potential for future leadership as reported by the letter writers.* It is of vital importance, therefore, that your letter be clear, detailed, and well-written. The Marshall Scholarship online application has a strict 1,000-word limit.

Establish Context, Personal Knowledge, and Sincerity

"Unsubstantiated hyperbole often undermines the credibility of an otherwise positive recommendation" (Marshall Commission). State the context in which you know the student and establish that you have specific, personal knowledge of the student's performance and career aspirations. Whenever possible, you should include concrete stories about your academic or professional interactions with the student. These are the most effective means of conveying sincerity in your recommendation and can be very powerful with readers. ***Use these past/current examples as evidence for your prediction about their future flourishing and leadership, both in their chosen UK graduate programs and in their future careers.***

When asking for a letter, the candidate should provide you with a copy of their transcript, resume, selected UK graduate program(s), and specific ideas about how your letter will contribute to their overall application strategy. Please do not take offense if the candidate is unusually frank about this; we have helped them select specific letter writers that will collectively represent each of the high points of their applications. If you are unable to give specific examples of a candidate's personal or academic qualifications for the scholarship, we recommend that you make this clear to the candidate and, if necessary, decline to write a letter of recommendation. If you have questions about your qualifications as a recommender, please reach out to ONSF's director, Dr. Henry Dyson, at hdyson@umich.edu.

Make the Case for Excellence and Avoid Implicit Bias

Marshall Scholarship candidates typically have a 3.8 or better GPA, have made significant contributions to research, are considered the very best in their departments or cohorts, and will be successful candidates for top graduate schools in their field. If you are an academic letter writer, you should attest to the applicant's high level of achievement at U-M, their admissions qualifications and the likelihood of flourishing in their selected UK graduate programs, and potential to be a thought-leader in their future field. Academic letters for the Marshall will also be for graduate admissions to the programs listed in the candidate's application.

If you've assigned the student an A+ in your course, you may want to say something about what that distinction means (e.g. top score in the class). Regarding research projects or term papers, be specific about the qualities that impressed you (intelligence, understanding, insightfulness, speed, commitment, ability to work independently, technical skills, communication skills, teamwork, and personality, etc.). Minimize general praise of the candidate's generic qualities (e.g. "the candidate is highly motivated and hardworking") in favor of qualities that make the applicant truly exceptional even among other highly motivated and hard-working peers. If you're writing on behalf of an applicant from an underrepresented group (including women) pay close attention to the language that you use and avoid terms associated with implicit bias, even in statements intended as praise.

Future Leadership and Ambassadorial Potential

Leadership letters should state the likelihood that this candidate will make significant contributions to their chosen field and help the committee understand the candidate's driving motivations. ***Tell stories that emphasize the candidate's initiative, creativity and insight, problem-solving, ability to create a shared vision, management of workflow and deadlines, management of team members, self-awareness and promotion of diversity, resilience, emotional intelligence and ability to deliver results.*** As you do so, again be careful to avoid

implicit bias in your statements. Talk about the candidate's motivations, especially as these relate to service to others or the public good. Is the candidate driven by a particular cause, problem, or commitment to work with those who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised? Once you've established that the candidate possesses these traits based on past experience, project them into the future: where does the candidate's trajectory lead in 5, 10, and 20 years? How will the candidate be an ambassador for the US while studying in the UK and for the UK in their future career?

Explicit Comparisons

One effective way of supporting these claims is by comparing the student favorably to other students, interns, employees, or peers who have also gone on to make significant contributions in the same field. ***Because letters of recommendation are inherently evaluative, at some point - typically in the first or final paragraphs - you should be explicit about the scale against which you are comparing the applicant.*** You will want to select the best scale against which you can favorably compare the applicant with integrity. Examples might include: "The best undergraduate in our department," "One of the best students I've encountered in 20 years of teaching at U-M [and other peer institutions]," "Compares favorably with previous Rhodes/Marshall [or comparable scholarships] winners for whom I've written."

FERPA and Submission Instructions

For the U-M nomination process, the candidate is responsible for providing you with instructions for electronic letter submission. U-M applicants must complete an online FERPA waiver before their recommenders can submit a letter to ONSF. The candidate should provide a copy of this FERPA waiver with you indicating whether or not they have waived their access to the letter (i.e. whether or not it will be confidential). Letters of recommendation will be treated as confidential and will not be released to the student without your permission unless the student's FERPA waiver indicates otherwise. If you have questions about ONSF's FERPA policy, please see this page or contact us directly.

Marshall letters will be submitted by uploading them to the candidate's Marshall application in Embark via an email link provided directly by the candidate. Please ignore the instructions on our FERPA waiver for submitting your letter of recommendation to ONSF via U-M Qualtrics and use the Marshall Scholarship's Embark system instead. ONSF may reach out to you if there are questions or concerns regarding your letter of recommendation or if a deadline has passed and your letter has not been received. The Embark system also gives us the ability to "unsubmit" a letter and return it to you for editing, if needed.

Note: If you have been asked to provide a letter of recommendation for a student applying to both the Marshall Scholarship and the Rhodes Scholarship, please review both advice documents if you have been asked

Again, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact ONSF directly at onsf.info@umich.edu.