



Notes on Interviews

Diane Flynn, Chair New York Regional Committee

“Congratulations, you have been invited to interview for a Marshall Scholarship.” These are, perhaps, some of the most desired yet dreaded words an applicant can read in an email. You only have between 20-30 minutes to convince a selection committee that you should be a Marshall Scholar. It seems an impossible task until you consider that General George C. Marshall delivered his 1947 commencement address at Harvard outlining the Marshall Plan in about 12 minutes.

My challenge as Chair of the NY region Marshall Scholarship selection committee is to ensure the committee learns how every candidate we interview measures up to the Marshall Scholarship selection criteria - headlined by Academic Merit, Leadership Potential, and Ambassadorial Potential - in the short time that we spend with you. Please trust me when I say that we are not expecting you to be the next General Marshall. Selection committees invite you to interview because you are a close fit to our criteria and we think we can learn more by speaking with you in person. We find your application interesting and promising, and we hope that the unique qualities presented on paper come to life when we meet you.

To help remove some of the dread, please allow me to explain what you can expect if you are selected to interview in NY. While you may find some minor variations to the interview process across different regions, all of our committees assess you against the same selection criteria.

Immediately after deciding you have been selected for interview, the selection committee, which is comprised of up to six people from a broad range of academic institutions and professional fields, identifies the committee member who has an academic/professional background closest to yours. That person becomes your lead interviewer and they prepare a significant proportion of the questions you are asked in your interview. Along with reading your application multiple times, they may read papers or work you have published. They also research your field, in the US and the UK, to better understand why your work is relevant and what potential there might be for your career to have long-term ties to the UK.

The remaining committee members also prepare questions, identifying where there are gaps in your application versus the Marshall Scholarship criteria so that we can investigate these missing pieces of information when we meet. As Chair, I petition everyone involved in short-listing you for interview to see if they have queries linked to our criteria that they would like the selection committee to explore. We sometimes also receive questions about your proposed program of study from our colleagues in the UK, who know these programs inside-out. As you can imagine, we enter your interview with far more than 20 minutes' worth of questions, all tailored to you and our criteria. No two interviews are alike, especially as we do not have time to ask you standard questions about points that may be evident already in your application.

The structure of the interview, however, is uniform. As Chair, I greet you, instruct you on where to sit and whether to shake hands with the committee, provide you with water, introduce you to the committee, and give a brief overview of how our interview session works. From there, you are asked an introductory question to get our conversation started. While this question is meant to be something you can answer without getting flustered, we also hope you will tell us something new about yourself in your answer. After that, the lead interviewer takes over, asking in-depth, detailed questions. We hope your answers to the lead interviewer's questions are robust and that you can capture the interest of the committee members who do not work in your field. Be specific in your answers, but not overly technical.

When the lead interviewer signals to the Chair that they are done, the Chair opens the floor to questions from the broader committee. It is a dynamic session, leaping from one topic to another. In the midst of this, the Chair ensures that the committee explores all aspects of your fit to our criteria so that every candidate receives a fair assessment. Please do not worry if we do not ask you something you expected - it is likely you provided sufficient information in your application and the committee does not need it repeated. Toward the end of the interview, the Chair gives a "one last question" request to the committee. After your answer, we thank you and escort you from the room.

What do the best candidates do in their interviews?

This first point sounds very basic, but there is a lot to be said for candidates who can relax and be themselves in the interview. I know this is easier to say than do, but try to think about it from the perspective of the selection committee. We are excited to meet you and hope that you might become a Marshall Scholar. We volunteer our time to learn more about the incredible things that you have done. We also all have been the subjects of tough interviews and can empathize with the nerves you might feel. We would much rather that you share our excitement and fascinate us with your achievements than that you be too scared to effectively make your case.

That said, there is a difference between confident and over-prepared. My mind goes to a candidate who "took a pause" after every question, breathed deeply, and then projected every pre-rehearsed answer to the back of the room, complete with regularly timed twists to make eye contact with every committee member. I wracked my brain during that uncomfortable interview to find a relevant question the candidate had never been asked, specifically to hear an unrehearsed answer. We frustratingly only saw a small glimpse of the authentic candidate in that single response. They did not win a scholarship. As a Marshall Scholar in the UK, you will not get to practice every answer to every difficult question – there often will be no "perfect" or even "correct" answers and you may have to explain positions with which you disagree. This is one of the reasons why "interpersonal skills" is part of our criteria for Ambassadorial Potential and something we assess in the interview.

If you can relax and be in the moment during your interview, you can directly and succinctly answer questions as they are posed. The committee has a lot of questions to ask on a variety of topics and we will let you know if we want more information about something you say. If you ramble, make us repeat unanswered questions, or make us invent questions you have never practiced, it gives us less time to learn more about you.

The second point may seem as obvious as the first but is easier for you to control. The best candidates understand and can articulate the mission of the Marshall Scholarship. Candidates should be able to describe why they will have a long-term, purposeful connection to the UK – in their proposed studies and future careers – beyond the generic, “I will build useful networks”. If asked, explain to the committee why it is critical for you to undertake your proposed program of study in the UK, what trends there are in your field that are not yet happening in the US and why they are important, or what specific opportunities there might be for future collaboration between you and the networks you establish as a Marshall Scholar. If you say a sentence in your interview (or write one in your application) that makes as much sense when we substitute another country’s name for the UK then you have not made a sufficient argument.

Connected to this point is that you should also understand our selection criteria and be able to describe how experiences in your past link to what we look for in Marshall Scholars. There is nothing more disheartening in an interview than when a candidate starts to answer a question about Leadership Potential with the phrase “How I define leadership is...” and continues to answer the question in a way that does not address the criteria that are publically available on the Marshall Scholarship website. Selection committees cannot assess candidates on what you think our criteria should be - we can only assess candidates against what our criteria actually are. Very few candidates perfectly fit the Marshall Scholarship criteria. It is a better use of time to admit where you might not be a perfect fit (or where you cannot answer a question) and move on. Believe me, we will have something else to ask you.

The third and final point is that the best candidates communicate to the selection committee things we could not know despite the time we spend reading your application. I mentioned earlier that, in preparing for your interview, the selection committee looks for the things that are missing in your application. You should prepare for this, too. Give us the examples, processes, and statistics you could not include in your essays because of the limits on word count. Share your passion and knowledge with us. Help us understand what motivates and inspires you. The interview is your chance to add to, rather than rehash, the material in your application and to demonstrate, in person, the criteria that we seek.

At the end of our interviews, the selection committee has difficult and sometimes heart-rending decisions to make about the exceptional people we meet. Depending on the size of the region, each of our eight selection committees interviews between 18-25 candidates over a period of two days. The sad fact is that the majority of these candidates will be notified by email that they will not become Marshall Scholars. As extraordinary as we find one candidate, there is another who has achieved more and who is an even better fit with our criteria. The one piece of feedback that we often wish we could tell unsuccessful candidates is that we hope you

will reapply. We are keen to see what you will do and learn in the next year or two and if that experience will make you an even stronger candidate.

Successful candidates receive a phone call, often filled with disbelief, excitement, and joy. "Congratulations, you have been selected as a Marshall Scholar."