

# Fellowship Interviews

Finalists for prestigious fellowships face a panel of experts from a variety of fields. Interviewers may ask questions related to your field of study, pose dilemmas that invite philosophical speculation or reflective thinking, or ask about current events. Interview panels ask challenging questions that impel you to think "on your feet." If you are lucky enough to become a finalist, you should prepare for a broad-ranging interview, and expect to be asked questions to which you do not know the answers.

Interviews often begin with a "softball" question that arises from your personal statement. Such an approach enables you to talk about an area that you know well and become comfortable. This doesn't come naturally to everyone, however. Sometimes even a vague question -- "Tell us about yourself." -- might throw an otherwise prepared candidate off-balance.

WPI's nominees for prestigious fellowships will be given experience in these interviews on campus as part of the selection process or as preparation for the formal interviews in the national competitions. The interviewers soon ratchet up the level of difficulty and may include off-the-wall or random lines of questioning. The point is less to get at your knowledge than to see how you think. Some candidates are surprised that the interview may feel more like an oral exam than a genteel conversation, or that selection committee members might play good cop/bad cop routines.

Some comments based on Rhodes and Marshall interviews:

- There will be several interviewers on the committee (5-7 or more for the Rhodes and Marshall), but for others there will only be two or three.
- Be yourself. This advice sounds like a cliché, but it is true. The interview is formal, but remember to keep a sense of humor. Channel your nervous energy into enthusiasm.
- Most interviews are formal so you should dress accordingly. For men, it is standard to wear a jacket or suit and a tie, though they need not be too formal. For women, a dress, suit, or nice skirt and blouse is best.
- Body language contributes to making a good impression. Maintain a firm posture and make eye contact. Direct your answers to the entire panel, not just the person who asked the question.
- Preparation is essential. Think about what you will say in advance to standard, open-ended questions that interviewers typically ask, such as: What is your most significant achievement? What has shaped you? What is

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the most controversial thing that you have ever done? What was your worst failure and what did you learn from it? What will you do next year if you don't get the fellowship? What do you like about WPI? What do you do for fun? What do you like about your major?

- Before you go into the interview, re-read your application. Be prepared to talk about anything you say in the application, because all of it, especially the personal statement, is fair game. You will be questioned about your proposed course of study, graduate school choices, and research plans, so make sure you know what you want to do and where you want to do it.
- Know something about what is going on in the U.S. or the rest of the world. Part of the interview may deal with current events. Read newspapers that report on international news as well as national news. This is especially important for those people seeking fellowships in a foreign country. Know the current events of your desired destination. The *New York Times* and *The Economist* are often suggested as good sources. Also find out what is going on in your home state through local newspapers there. Have an opinion. You should be prepared to answer questions dealing with what you feel is the biggest problem in the U.S. (or world) today and how you would overcome that problem.
- Have in mind a book that is important to you and someone who has influenced you a lot. These are standard questions in the interviews.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know" in reply to some questions. Some interviewers may push a particular line of questioning *intending* to find the point when you have to say, "I don't know."
- Give short answers to the questions. Interviews usually last between 20-30 minutes, so time your responses accordingly. You don't want to spend too much time on any one question. If they want to hear more, the committee will ask for more.

Although most interviews follow these conventions in format, they are unpredictable because each panel of interviewers will pursue very different lines of inquiry.

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## Related Resources

- Interviewing for External Fellowships, Yale
- Rhodes and Marshall Interview Preparation, Reed, dated but useful