1. Why should I consider applying for a scholarship?

The opportunities provided by these scholarships and fellowships are varied and diverse, but each of them is a gateway to new experiences and a way to open doors in the both the private and public sectors as well as in academia.

Even if one is not ultimately successful in obtaining one of these lucrative awards, simply preparing for the application process pays off handsome dividends, by making you a much more desirable candidate, either for graduate or professional school, or for post-collegiate employment.
2. Why should I start preparing now if I don't plan to apply in the immediate future?

Many students fall into the trap of waiting until the last minute. Most of the successful scholarship winners, however, had been laying the groundwork for their applications semesters in advance of the actual deadline.

The first thing you should do is to know what opportunities are available to you. Baylor has prepared a comprehensive description of all the leading scholarships. It is available on-line at http://www.baylor.edu/~Honors/scholarships/description.htm.

While each scholarship has specific requirements and qualifications, there are some things which apply to all of them. Even a freshman, who may not make an application until the junior or senior year, can begin to prepare in order to become a viable and competitive candidate.

Nearly all scholarship and fellowship applications require the same three elements: 1) an academic transcript; 2) letters of recommendation; and 3) written proposals. [Since graduate school applications and employers may also request one or more of these from you as well, this is why scholarship application preparation can pay off even if one ends up not applying for any particular fellowship].

THE TRANSCRIPT

A transcript is more than just a grade point average. Keep in mind that minimum graduation requirements are just that: the minimum. The transcript is your academic road-map. It should be carefully constructed to show where you plan to go in terms of your studies. By the time that you are a senior, one would hope that your transcript shows a logical progression which culminates in your degree, rather than a collection of random electives.

Some points of advice:

1. Concentrate on finishing requirements first. If you entered Baylor with significant amounts of AP credit, use the "free spaces" that have opened up in your schedule to complete other required classes first. What this does is, especially in your junior and senior years, is to allow you to focus on your chosen course of study and take higher-level courses without being 'distracted' by requirements left unfinished in your earlier years.
2. Don't "waste" electives. Use your electives to bolster your major and minor courses of study. Don't limit yourself to the minimum requirements of your degree program. Specialization (through a minor or certificate program) or interdisciplinary studies are an excellent way to bolster your course of study.
3. Realize that not all college years are "equal." In other words, chose well when you plan to take courses. If you really have an interest in basket-weaving, but you are an international finance major, you might want to delay the basket-weaving elective until the second semester of your senior year, after the deadlines for scholarship and graduate school applications.
4. By your junior year, consider taking upper-level courses that will produce a concrete piece of scholarship--research paper, thesis, or project. This begins to provide you both with a "paper trail"
for scholarship, especially if you can get work published, and gives you a springboard from which to make research or grant proposals.

5. Do not confuse minimum graduation requirements with requirements for scholarship. Fulbright scholarships, for example, require you to "be proficient in a language of the host country to communicate with the people and carry out the proposed study." Generally, that means, unless you are a native speaker, that you should have four solid years of college language training. The same principle applies to the sciences, or any other specialized course of study which requires mastery in specific skills.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation are absolutely essential. One, however, wants to avoid the pro forma, one paragraph, generic letters. One also wants to avoid having a dearth of recommenders so that one must submit letters which are lukewarm or uninspired.

The groundwork for letters should be laid down far in advance of any deadline. Moreover, recommenders should know what it is they are expected to highlight in a given letter. Marshall applications, for example, should stress one's academic potential; Rhodes, on the other hand, want to get, in addition to one's academic potential, a sense of the candidate's leadership qualities, community service, or athletic prowess.

Some guidelines:

1. Do NOT wait until the semester of the application to solicit letters. Letters should be solicited in the semester prior to when the application is to be submitted--this does not mean that the letter should necessarily be written at that time, but the promise and guarantee of a letter, as well as what the letter should stress and specify, should all be settled at that time.

2. If possible, solicit more recommendations than are required, and request that letters be sent to the scholarship coordinator. This allow someone sympathetic to your application to screen letters and choose which are most favorable. Even if a letter is not used, it can be cited by someone else or used as part of the institutional endorsement.

3. Make the job of your recommender as easy as possible by telling them what you need the letter for and what you would like them to stress.

FINDING RECOMMENDATIONS

It is all well and good to say that you should solicit a number of letters, but where to find such individuals? Here are some pieces of advice:

1. Do NOT lose touch with your high school mentor. Keep your high school mentor informed of your continuing progress. Particularly for freshmen and sophomores, who may not have yet developed strong ties to professors, a high school mentor can continue to be an invaluable recommender if that person is kept up to date with your activities.

2. Make arrangements for a letter of recommendation before completing any job, internship, or short-term academic program. For example, if you intern on Capitol Hill, several weeks before your internship expires, sit down with your supervisor and ask for a letter to be drawn up. Ideally, the Congressman or Senator should sign the letter, but if that is not possible, than have the letter be sent by your supervisor. Such a letter should detail your duties and accomplishments. Ask that the letter be kept on file in the office and request several copies addressed to "whom it may concern" to hold as backups. You don't want to go back two years later and ask for a letter because what
you will most likely get is the generic one paragraph useless recommendation. The same rules should apply to any study abroad program or anything that you do where you do not plan to have continuing contact with a professor, mentor, or supervisor.

3. Don't be an unknown in your classes. In the larger, core classes that you take in your freshman and sophomore years, ensure that the professor has an idea of who you are. This does not mean that you should be obsequious or that you should constantly visit or pester the professor, but he or she should have some idea of who are you and the quality of your work. This is especially important in those core classes which are gateways to your major field of study (e.g. history if you plan to be a history major, etc.)

4. Seek mentors. As you move into the upper division, and as your coursework becomes more specialized, you should find mentors--professors from whom you are taking more advanced classes and who are monitoring your progress. Again, this is why you want to concentrate on getting rid of your requirements as soon as possible because in the upper division as you specialize it is likely that you will begin taking more than one course from a particular professor. You will also want to become better acquainted with advisors or those who help in planning your course of study--directors of specific programs, activities, etc.

5. Do not neglect your ties to the larger community. Ministers, pastors, priests, rabbis, employment supervisors, volunteer coordinators, and coaches are all excellent sources of recommendations.

WRITTEN PROPOSALS

The written proposal(s) may differ from program to program, but there are usually common elements in all of them. These are the types of questions you should be pondering well in advance of deadlines:

1. Why have I chosen to study what I have studied? What have been the formative intellectual experiences--travel, books read, classes taken, family background?
2. What are the key experiences that have shaped me as an individual?
3. Why do I want this scholarship and for what purpose? This requires you to know something about the scholarship, about where you might want to study, and about possible degree programs--their requirements, length of time, relevance, etc.
4. What are some of my core ideas and beliefs?
5. Why am I a good investment for this scholarship? How can I provide a benefit to the larger community by being given this money?