May 1, 2014

Memo and Agreement

To: Princeton University undergraduates and alumni seeking Princeton’s campus endorsement for the Rhodes Scholarship

From: Valerie A. Smith, Dean of the College
       Deirdre Moloney, Director of Fellowships Advising

Re: Rhodes Scholarship: The Personal Statement

As outlined in their March 2014 memo (attached), the Rhodes Trust now requires that all Rhodes Scholarship applicants attest that they have not received any feedback on their Rhodes personal statement, either in draft form or in final copy. It further requires that all institutions endorsing Rhodes Scholarship candidates attest that they have not provided feedback on their candidates’ Rhodes personal statements, either in draft form or in the final copy. Each applicant is responsible for communicating this policy to each of his/her letter writers, and to others who offer any other kind of assistance in the application process. Those include: his/her faculty mentors, Writing Center tutors, administrators, family members, Rhodes Scholars, and peers or friends.

We require that those in the Princeton University community abide by this policy. To violate it would harm other candidates, future applicants, as well as the university’s reputation. If an applicant were to violate the policy, the University’s Rhodes endorsement committee would be unable to provide the required endorsement for that person, thus preventing her or him from being considered by the Rhodes district committee for a scholarship.

This new Rhodes Trust’s policy is designed so that applicants can demonstrate their “actual writing style, personal story, [and] educational objectives.” (See paragraph two on page one of the attached Rhodes memo.)

In advising meetings and in conversations about the Rhodes application, we will discuss your broader intellectual objectives, experiences, leadership roles, and future goals as part of the advising process, but will not review the text of your application statement. Given that the Rhodes Scholarship is distinct from the Marshall, Gates, Fulbright UK, and other fellowships, you should craft a “separate and distinct personal statement for the Rhodes Scholarships” (please refer to the answer to question 3 on page 2 of the Rhodes Trust memo and to the memo as a whole), writing independently without reference to, or cutting and pasting from any personal statement that you may write for another scholarship. In any personal statement you should be sure to address the specific selection criteria and concerns of each scholarship to which you apply.

We will continue to make past personal statements available for applicants’ perusal as we do for many fellowships. But we again emphasize that those personal statements should be used as a guide to the genre and not as a template for your own statement. You will note that successful Rhodes Scholars
statements reflect a variety of styles and approaches. If you have any questions about this policy, please contact Dr. Deirdre Moloney at moloney@princeton.edu or (609) 258-2658.

PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN THIS PAGE

I have read carefully the four page Rhodes Trust memo of March 2014 on the personal statement policy, understand it, and will abide by it. I have also carefully reviewed Princeton’s guidelines as communicated in the May 1, 2014 memo above and will abide by them.

Name (please print): ____________________________________________

Signed: ____________________________________________ Date: ____________________________

PLEASE NOTE: This form must be submitted with your ORIGINAL SIGNATURE to the OIP Office by August 30, 2014 at 5 p.m. An electronic signature is not sufficient. If mailed, please send to Dr. Deirdre Moloney, Director of Fellowships, 36 University Place, Suite 350, Princeton, NJ 08544.
The Rhodes Trust
Guidelines for Fellowship Advisors Regarding the Personal Statement Requirement for the Rhodes Scholarship Application

Effective with the 2014 competition, the Rhodes Trust has strengthened the existing attestation associated with the personal statement, as follows:

1) All applicants must add the following statement at the conclusion of their personal statement and before their signature:
   “I attest that this personal statement is my own work and is wholly truthful. Neither it nor any earlier draft has been edited by anyone other than me, nor has anyone else reviewed it to provide me with suggestions to improve it. I understand that any such editing or review would disqualify my application.”

2) All institutional endorsements must include something explicitly to this effect:
   "I am knowledgeable regarding the institutional practices of [name of institution] in connection with applications for the Rhodes Scholarship. To the best of my knowledge and belief, [name of institution] has provided no editorial review of the applicant’s [or applicant’s name] personal statement."

We understand that this requirement, which strengthens current policy, has caused concerns in some fellowship advisory offices, and we have been asked for clarification and for guidelines for fellowship advisors.

The reason for the requirement is simple. We have concluded that, in many cases, the personal statements have become highly edited and formulaic productions that do not accurately reflect the applicant’s actual writing style, personal story, or educational objectives. Fundamentally, they are no longer the work of the applicant. Our selection committees and Trustees have asked us to restore the original intent of the personal statement requirement.

The focus of the change is solely on the personal statement, not other elements of fellowship advising. We ask simply that the written text of the personal statement be un-reviewed and unedited by institutional representatives, advisors, professors, or anyone else. An earlier post to the National Association of Fellowship Advisors (NAFA) website from the Warden of Rhodes House suggested that it is acceptable for fellowship advisors to tell applicants when their personal statement “is not good enough” or provide similar general feedback. Subsequent discussions with fellowship advisors, Rhodes selection committee members and Rhodes Scholars have indicated that any kind of advice on the written personal statement leaves open too many questions of nuance. Therefore, applicants should be the sole editors of their written work from draft to final form.

Q&A
1. Q: Is it okay for applicants to consult the institution’s library of past winning essays?

   A: In the absence of editing by fellowship advisors, some applicants may be tempted to rely on these or online versions as a template. We hope you will strongly discourage them from doing so.
2. Q: Can applicants ask for advice from past successful scholarship winners?
   
   A: They may ask for general advice but they may not receive editing help. Nor may the written personal statement be reviewed by past successful winners (or anyone else).

3. Q: Many applicants apply to more than one scholarship program. Can they use another essay or personal statement for their Rhodes personal statement?
   
   A: No. While applicants may get ideas from other essays or personal statements they have written, they must write a separate and distinct personal statement for the Rhodes Scholarships.

4. Q: Won’t the new policy disadvantage applicants from less prestigious institutions or underrepresented backgrounds?
   
   A: No. Rhodes selectors are not looking for uniformity. The winners each year vary tremendously among themselves. Selectors value applicants who demonstrate future leadership potential, risk-taking, creativity and verve. These individuals hail from varied institutions and backgrounds.

5. Q: Won’t the new policy compromise an important development experience for students who work with a fellowship advisor on their personal goals?
   
   A: Those chosen for interviews must pass muster with a smart, caring and accomplished panel of selectors. Applicants who have trouble expressing themselves in their written personal statements without help seldom fare well in this intensive interview process. We welcome advisors and students to have discussions about personal goals and Oxford ambitions before students embark on the written personal statement.

6. Q: Don’t all good academic writers get external advice on their papers or other written work? Isn’t that part of the academic process?
   
   A: The Rhodes selection process is not a pedagogical exercise, and the personal statement is not sought for this purpose. The personal statement is valuable only to the extent that it is an authentic reflection of the individual’s independent writing capacity. It is an evaluative tool more akin to an essay exam than a journal article.

7. Q: Won’t this encourage and reward cheaters?

   A: Institutions or students who submit work that isn't an honest reflection of the applicant will damage their credibility and undermine their chance (or that of their applicants) to receive a Scholarship. We disqualify applicants when we discover inaccurate or materially exaggerated claims; we will do the same if we learn of violations of our personal statement rules.
Additional Questions from the National Association of Fellowship Advisors

1. **Does the change in the Rhodes personal statement policy mean that fellowship advisors should not work with or advise applicants for the Rhodes Scholarship? Does offering advice to students violate the policy prohibiting editing or reviewing personal statements?**

Absolutely not. The Rhodes Trust values the process of advising applicants for the Rhodes Scholarship and seeks only to change the role of the personal statement in that advising process. The Trust asks that the personal statements submitted be unreviewed and unedited by anyone but the candidate. We recognize the important role fellowship advisors can play in helping students develop self-awareness about their professional and academic goals. We want fellowship advisors to encourage appropriate candidates to apply and talk with students about possible degree programs, the fit between student goals and Oxford, and about the criteria of the Rhodes Scholarship vis-à-vis the student. Fellowship advisors can assist students in preparing or collecting other required elements of the application. We also recognize that what the student learns about him- or herself in the advising conversations will influence what appears in his or her personal statement, even if the fellowship advisor does not review or edit the statement.

2. **Many Rhodes applicants are simultaneously applying for other awards, such as the Marshall or Mitchell Scholarships, which require very similar personal statements. How do you recommend advisors proceed with students who will be receiving assistance on personal statements for other awards?**

See the answer to question 3 in our guidelines above. The Rhodes Trust understands that some students will be working on multiple essays which may contain similar content. Certainly, a student’s work on one application may influence their writing of another; a phrasing of an activity in one statement may appear again in their Rhodes statement. To ask a student to forget or unlearn that which they have written elsewhere is unrealistic. However, the student may not cut and paste from one statement to another, and should put their Marshall or Fulbright essay aside when independently writing the Rhodes personal statement. These final decisions about editing the Rhodes personal statement should be left wholly to the students as they write their essays and statements independently. In the end, our concern is that no applicant be provided any assistance in the writing of the Rhodes personal statement.

3. **Does the change in policy affect what it means for a university to endorse an applicant?**

No. Universities are endorsing students for the award; they are not endorsing applications, essays, etc. Whether or not an institution stands behind the potential of an individual student is wholly unrelated to the final product of an individual application component. Indeed, endorsement letters can provide some of the most telling information in a student’s application. Institutions can help the committee understand whether a particular campus activity or leadership experience is truly
outstanding or rather commonplace for top students there. And they can help us assess transcripts with comments about the difficulty of courses taken and the relative significance of the grades attained. Given widespread grade inflation, this can be extremely helpful. When an institution reveals context for a candidate (“this is the strongest candidate we have seen in the past 15 years”) the district committees take note. We rely on the endorsement letters for a candid assessment of the applicant and how they fit within the context of the university and other students. Finally, when colleges or universities endorse more than one candidate in a district, the selection committee would be grateful for some comparative assessment of the varying strengths of the candidates against our various criteria. We know this isn’t always feasible, but when it is, it can be very helpful. The committee might reach different relative assessments of course, but they do appreciate the candor.

4. Can advisors talk with students in general terms about how to write personal statements, while still not reviewing or editing the Rhodes statement? Some people are interested in talking about things like clichéd opening paragraphs, or encouraging students to write a more distinctive personal (but not confessional) statement so that students avoid some of the worst formulaic elements you described. Is that general advice permissible?

Yes, as long as there is no review of their drafts.

5. You have asked an advisor to confirm that he or she and the institution have not edited or reviewed the personal statement. Is the fellowship advisor also responsible for affirming that the student has not received help or support outside of the assistance we provide? There is some concern that we are responsible for “investigating” the students. I had understood that you were using the student statement to assure student compliance, but some advisors are concerned about whether this oversight is also a requirement of the institutional endorsement.

No, we certainly do not expect the institution to “investigate” a student’s compliance with this policy. We do though hope the institution will help communicate our policy.

March 2014