Thank you for writing on behalf of an applicant for the Winston S. Churchill Scholarship. The four recommendation letters submitted by each applicant are perhaps the most important determinants of whether a candidate is nominated by Princeton and how they fare in the national competition.

The candidate should provide you with a signed copy of this Churchill Scholarship Recommendation form, waiving their right to read your recommendation. The second page provides clear guidance on what the Foundation seeks to know about this applicant. Please clearly address the four questions posed in the Recommendation instructions. Note that letters for this highly prestigious and competitive scholarship are typically a page and a half to two pages in length. If you feel you cannot provide much detail about the candidate’s qualifications, kindly decline to write the letter. The candidate should provide you with their Proposed Program essay, their Personal Statement, and their resume before you write.

The best Churchill Scholarship letters provide concrete evidence of the student’s abilities and demonstrate a strong intellectual relationship between the student and the letter writer. The strongest letters also emphasize the student’s dedication to his or her field of study and highlight the student’s communication skills.

Letters of recommendation for the Churchill Scholarship must come from faculty members, researchers, or investigators in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines relevant to the applicant’s interests. Letters from senators, clergy, instructors of humanities and social science courses, even university presidents who have not advised or taught the applicant in a STEM context are not relevant to the Churchill competition. If you have not been part of the applicant’s academic and research biography in STEM, you should decline to write in support of their Churchill Scholarship application (whereas for other postgraduate fellowships, your testimony may be entirely relevant.)

If you supervised the applicant in research, please cite specific examples of their contributions and their interactions with other members of your group. In particular, examples of independent thinking and contributions that went beyond their original expectations are especially compelling. If the work that the student has done will lead to conference presentations or publications, please do not forget to mention these.

If you taught the applicant in a course, please focus on specific examples of the student’s insight, motivation, application of knowledge, and personal interactions both inside and outside the classroom.

Item 3 on the Churchill Recommendation instruction page asks you to rank the student against a reference population. A statement such as “best student I’ve taught/advised since the dawn of the 21st century”, if it can be supported, can be very compelling, but in our experience, unless you can say that the student is superlative, weak relative metrics such as “top 10% in my class” are NOT helpful.
If you are familiar with the applicant’s proposed laboratory placement at Cambridge and the principal investigator with whom they will be working, it is entirely appropriate to comment positively on your knowledge of the laboratory and the appropriateness of this placement.

A word about hyperbole and superlatives. We have a natural tendency to avoid hyperbole since we have known so many outstanding students and we fear that extreme superlatives will not be credible. The world knows that over the years we probably have already met remarkable students of comparable quality to the applicant. That is true. On the other hand, the Churchill Scholarship competition is a national competition among the best nominees from the best schools in the United States. There is no need to hold back on praise, so long as it is supported by specific evidence from the applicant’s work in your course or their research experience in your lab. Try to avoid waffling. If an applicant’s work is ground-breaking, it’s OK to say so, rather than writing “potentially ground-breaking”.

Examples of unhelpful letters:

- A generic short letter that does not indicate significant familiarity with the applicant;
- Letters that summarize or recapitulate, without further explanation, information that the applicant has provided in the application or statement itself;
- General praise of the applicant without citing specific examples that justify such praise;
- Focus on work done in the distant past when there is more recent interaction you have had with the applicant;
- Letters that paint the applicant as only average;
- A letter written by someone who lacks knowledge of the applicant’s accomplishments and goals.

If you feel that you can only write a letter that matches the above characteristics, please decline and ask the applicant to seek a testimonial from someone else.

A note on e-mail letters: convincing letters of recommendation are written on institutional letterhead and sent either on paper or as e-mail attachments. Please use your private institutional e-mail address (.edu if you work for a university, .com if you work for a company, .org if you work for a non-profit, etc.) We have recently learned that some units at Cambridge do not accept letters sent from public sign-up e-mail systems like Hotmail and Gmail.

In general, the more you can say how you know the applicant and cite specific positive examples of their motivation, intellect, and promise based on your personal knowledge, the stronger the letter and the better the chances that the applicant will be one of the two Princeton nominees and a contender in the national competition.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Thanks again!

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