

## What You Need To Know About the Udall Scholarship

In March 2002 I departed the damp and chill Northwest for sunny Tucson, to serve on the selection committee for the Morris K. Udall Scholarship. Honored by the invitation, I looked forward to hours of reading and evaluating hundreds of applications; gleaning useful bits of information to squirrel away and take back to campus and colleagues, and not least for this transplanted Okie, a few glorious days of southwest sunshine.

All my expectations were amply met. I learned a great deal about how Udall Scholars are selected. No longer do I wonder that some of my candidates didn't win a scholarship; rather, I marvel that any won at all. I read scores of applications from the most inspiring individuals who had started recycling programs on their campus, participated in international environmental conferences, and volunteered at Ground Zero. I also gained insight into the nuts and bolts of the selection process. These observations I share with you.

### *How the Applications Are Read*

Applications are read by state, grouped by region (which is often geographical, but not always). On average, readers award three scholarships per region.

Readers work in pairs. Our backgrounds varied, from professors of environmental policy and science, EPA officials, directors of scholarships and Honors programs, to representatives of Native American interests. (The Native American health care and tribal policy applications are read separately.) I was paired with an environmental sciences professor. Each application is read twice, and in some instances three times.

We had two and a half days to read approximately 450 applications, a grueling schedule (which the Foundation assuaged somewhat by keeping us well supplied with chocolate, chips, and more substantial snacks). We were urged to read and evaluate each application—including letters of recommendation—in 10 to 15 minutes, which, for the first few hours, I was unable to do. Soon, however, I acquired a sense of the “typical” Udall application, and a feel for just how competitive the scholarship could be.

### *How the Applications Are Rated*

Readers use a rating sheet with four principal categories:

- 1) commitment to improving or preserving the environment, or to health care or tribal public policy;
- 2) academic achievement;
- 3) the essay;
- 4) personal characteristics—the criteria include activism, volunteerism, evidence of well-roundedness, and references.

A fifth category is for discretionary points, which may be awarded for overcoming adversity, balancing family and/or work responsibilities, or extraordinary achievement. I found that I was rarely inclined to award discretionary points, and only in truly exceptional circumstances.

Applications are rated from 1 (below average) to 5 (outstanding) for a possible total of 23 (including 3 discretionary points). I soon realized that a substantial number of applicants were either “good” or “excellent.” The best applicants will be very strong in three areas: demonstrated commitment, academics, and personal characteristics, or truly outstanding in two of the three. Because the essay has a category to itself, it is weighted far more heavily than I had previously realized, accounting for one fourth of the total score. Essays are read for content; quality of writing; critical analysis; and relevance to the applicant's career or educational goals. Most applicants scored only a 2 or 3 on the essay out of a possible 5.

## *What I Learned*

a) Activities matter. Looking over the Udall application, I find five separate opportunities to list and describe the variety of ways students can “demonstrate commitment” to preserving or restoring the environment. Commitment emerges in an applicant’s willingness to search out opportunities for volunteerism, activism in support of environmental causes, and assumption of leadership roles with groups and organizations. Advisors should make sure the student’s commitment to the environment, health care or tribal public policy shines through in every answer on the application.

Beyond such commitment, readers also look for a breadth of interests and activities (“well-rounded” is a criterion). Morris K. Udall—athlete, pilot, lawyer, activist and public servant—really does serve as a role model.

b) The essay is a critical component of the application. Students should address both aspects of the topic thoroughly. The Foundation suggests a two-part structure; in the first section, analyze a significant speech or legislative act of Congressman Udall. In the second, integrate that into a discussion of its impact on the student’s interests, studies and career goals. Its relevance—the link to the student’s interests and projected career—is essential, and is where most essays fall short.

Readers also appreciate (and reward) some freshness of perspective and originality of voice, so applicants should be encouraged to spend some time familiarizing themselves with Udall’s significant speeches and legislative acts. The Udall Foundation’s website ([www.udall.gov](http://www.udall.gov)) has many helpful links, particularly to The University of Arizona archives.

c) Answer Question #7 (additional personal information). Take advantage of the invitation to address an interest, activity, research project, or anything else that hasn’t been expanded upon elsewhere in the application. Making a plea for the scholarship based on financial need or hardship is a wasted opportunity.

d) Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff. As a former writing instructor, I tend to obsess—and require that my students do as well—over every word and punctuation mark. Readers don’t parse the application—we don’t have time. As long as it’s accurate, concise, and grammatical, from now on I won’t worry (or harass my students).

However, neatness, legibility, and presentation do count. It’s worth the candidate’s effort to submit a clean copy of the application, in which the information is carefully and judiciously organized (presented, for example in paragraphs and not one run-on sentence), and where a little white space relieves the eyes.

The experience was enlightening, exhausting, and intensely rewarding—and I’d jump at the chance to do it again.

*Jane Curlin  
Willamette University*