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Of Groomers and Tour Guides: The Role of Writing in the Fellowships Office

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When Lia Rushton asserts that "it takes a village to raise a fellowship recipient," she accurately describes the culture of mentoring and undergraduate research at Winthrop University, where often faculty not only refer students to my office but also email or call me to make sure I plan to seek them out. In one such recent referral, a colleague used a term I've heard and winced at many times, suggesting I "groom" a certain student for a particular award. Coming as it did on the heels of my first reading of Rushton's "First, Do No Harm," this call made me wonder what "grooming" entails and in what position it puts a student relative to the Fellowships Office. It also made me wonder how thinking of myself as a "groomer' might possibly do harm to the students I seek to help. This grooming suggestion is applied most often to our honors students. I speak at numerous honors functions and go into each Academy 101 honors section twice each fall semester, so clearly I am on board with making the services of my office known to students early in their college careers. Being on the English department faculty, I have a certain sensitivity to language and perhaps an overdeveloped sense of its power

to influence our thinking and thereby our relationships. I look, therefore, for ways to avoid "grooming" students and seek to engage them in self-discovery instead. To battle the grooming mentality and to add to Rushton's emphasis on the value of drawing out students verbally, I champion the importance of writing to their process of self-discovery.

We fellowships advisors have all felt it: that tension between seeing and treating a student as a brilliant applicant for a particular award in contrast to seeing and treating a student as a three-dimensional human being with needs, a complicated past and personality, and individual goals. It would be wrong to say there is no value in jumping back and forth between these two poles in our dealings with students. Recently, I saw a student's eyes light up when, upon hearing he was a veteran transfer student who was the first in his family to go to college, I said, "The Gilman is going to love you!" Aside from his military service, his attributes are not ones that necessarily make him feel more valued on a college campus. To find out that I was excited about his past and that readers on a national panel would be looking to reward his background was eye-opening to him. This example evokes Rushton's assertion that "the best advisors are mirrors, reflecting back what they see and hear, neither aggrandizing strengths nor minimizing gaps in preparation but rather showing students as genuine a view of themselves as possible." Though I may have aggrandized a bit, in this case I was just excited to be able to tell him that ordinary facts that might have put him behind his younger, non-transfer, student peers would hold value with readers who might offer him a scholarship to study abroad. None of the facts about him were new; he just got to see them in a new and exciting context: the kind of mirror holding I love to do.

"Grooming," on the other hand, sounds more like holding up a mirror to a pooch in a dog show, making sure the fur is pruned and coiffed just right. There is a world of difference between helping students to meet their potential or achieve their goals and primping them as if they are getting ready for prom. Clearly Rushton, with her emphasis on interviews and conversations with students, is an advocate of the former, and in my five years of membership in the National Association of Fellowships Advisors, I have seen time and time again that fellowships advisors across the country truly enjoy advocating for their students as individuals, not as statistics or dogs in a show. Administration, with its attention to numbers of winners and publicity, may sometimes interfere, but that is a different essay. What goes on in our offices or over lunches or coffee with students, in our interviews and work with them on applications, is, I suspect, what keeps fellowships advisors, many undersupported and underappreciated by their respective universities, in this

position: witnessing what a student learns on the journey of self-exploration that is the application process is exhilarating. Their writing is often the vehicle by which we can guide students on that journey.

My most important and most satisfying role as fellowships advisor is as a tour guide of sorts, helping students orchestrate their own journey of self-discovery, often through dialogue but even more through the writing process. I'm an eighteen-year veteran of teaching writing: in all my classes, writing is central to both the production and articulation of new student knowledge. As an undergraduate and graduate student, I kept the obligatory English major notebook of favorite quotations, a favorite being E.L. Doctorow's "how do you know what you know until you've written it?" So often it is in the process of writing and revising essays that students begin the real work of self-discovery. Not all students take to writing or prioritize its importance to their understanding of themselves, but if we can get them writing on a deeper level about their own experiences, if we can convince them that what a committee of readers for any nationally competitive award wants to read is neither fluff nor BS but their story, told as sincerely and with as much concrete detail and specificity as possible, then we at least have them on the bus, ready to set out on that journey.

Life, like writing, is messy: there may not be one solution to a problem. In my experience, honors students are usually the most terrified of the bunch when I invite them to wallow in their ideas, to get messy with their writing instead of just anticipating what the reader or teacher wants them to say. People's lives are complicated; students need to be empowered to get messy in their writing and express more than they need at first. Most students, when looking at the list of questions generated by the Fulbright Commission or the NSF for the Statement of Grant Purpose or Personal Statement, think they can just answer each question in the bulleted list and move on to the next until they are done. We fellowships advisors know otherwise: each of the questions in such a list is an opportunity to peel back the layers and get to the heart of what makes a student unique, so the first thing I counsel students to do is to prewrite in whatever way works for them and especially to overwrite. I use an analogy I stole from an excellent teacher and mentor: when we're going to build something out of Legos, we don't simply pull them, piece by piece, out of the bin, trusting that they will come in the order we need to create the shape we desire. Instead, we dump all the Legos on the floor, make a great mess with them, and begin to sort them to see what we have.

Honors students are often the most resistant to this approach, but they are also often the ones who benefit by it most. The population of honors

students I serve is described with uncanny accuracy by Rushton's reflection on the "automatic or unconscious ways of thinking" in which students engage. Like her former students at UAB, Winthrop's honors students

> are not typically endowed with inordinate advantage, e.g., standardized test prep, prestigious prep schools, paid summer enrichment experiences, influential social networks, and the like. A significant number are first-generation college students or children of immigrants or kids from small towns who haven't had the opportunity to travel much if at all before attending university. Once enrolled in college, they hold down part-time jobs while also making top grades, conducting research, participating in extracurricular activities, and contributing to the wider community.

About 40% of our student population is at Winthrop on Pell grants, and a high percentage hail from small, rural towns in South Carolina. They are working part- or full-time jobs or are engaged in work-study, and honors students in particular can accredit their academic success in great part to their ability to keep organized; time management and organizing priorities are key tools to survival for these busy, unassuming students. So when I invite them to wallow, sometimes I get distasteful stares. But wallowing in writing is often how we get past the superficial facts to the deeper details that tell readers who the students truly are.

If students don't get on board with the first step of the writing process—if they are hesitant about dumping their Legos—the second step will usually help them because the second step will inevitably take them back to the first. Another truism about writing is that the writing process is recursive. The end product may flow in a forward motion from one thought to the next with direction and purpose, but the process that ends in that product almost never moves in one direction only. So the answer to the Fulbright's #1 question on the Tips page for Statement of Grant Purpose might overlap with #s 6 and 7. To students who are frustrated by the overlap, I reiterate: don't be afraid of the mess. At the prewriting/thinking stage and even afterward, mess is a sign that students are starting to see the complexity involved in the questions themselves. Applicants should answer the questions in as many ways and for as many tries as it takes to get those Legos out. This attention to the recursive nature of writing also helps students deal with the frustration that comes once they are shaping that mess into an essay and deciding which Legos they need to keep. We have to revisit the website and my file on their particular award

time and again to consider the purpose of the award, the mission of the group offering it, and the priorities of the readers.

Students who don't at first get into the groove of freewriting/prewriting/Lego-dumping can benefit from talking through and even tape-recording their ideas. As a writing instructor, I realize that many students are scared to death of writing. Recursive thinking and writing are dangerous: we never know what we might find out about ourselves. As Rushton acknowledges, we fellowships advisors are inviting applicants to do hard things. Talking with them about their writing humanizes the process, so the interviews I conduct are not really over until the application is submitted. Many times, I'll tell a student to turn on the recording function of their cell phone as they speak, often while I'm typing furiously to get down as many of their phrases as I can in writing. Understanding the intensity of the work they're expected to do on application essays usually opens students up to spilling their Legos at least verbally even if they're simultaneously frightened of the writing process itself. So tape-recording and transcribing their words can help them to see how easily they can get their verbal expression into writing if they can just capture it.

Making writing less scary for students and focusing on the messy, recursive nature of writing helps students use the writing process to bring forth the thoughts that might otherwise not find their way into essays. Students who revisit their writing also revisit their thinking and are empowered to cultivate and articulate that thinking in clearer and clearer terms. Messy prewriting and overwriting for applications essays can help unassuming, hard-working honors students articulate facets of themselves they had never thought were exceptional. Leading them through the process can help fellowships advisors avoid the "groomer" mentality and instead guide students on a journey of self-discovery that has value regardless of the application's outcome.

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