



THE HARRY S. TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

712 JACKSON PLACE, N.W. WASHINGTON, D.C. 20006
202-395-4831 FAX: 202-395-6995
E-MAIL: OFFICE@TRUMAN.GOV
WWW.TRUMAN.GOV

May 31, 2024

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Chairman Aderholt, and Chairman Owens:

Thank you for your letter of May 20, 2024, expressing interest in the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, the nation's living memorial to our 33rd president. On behalf of the 3,564 Americans selected as Truman Scholars since the Truman Foundation's founding in 1975 – serving today as elected officials, commanders of storied military units, diplomats, judges, clergy, and more – we appreciate your continued investment in our nation's next generation of leaders. Truman Scholars represent the very best of America.

You know Truman Scholars elected by their constituents to serve alongside you in the U.S. House of Representatives: Congressmen Gabe Amo (D-RI 1st Congressional District, 2009 Rhode Island Truman Scholar), Dusty Johnson (R-SD At-Large, SD 1998), Andy Kim (D-NJ 3rd, NJ 2003), and Greg Stanton (D-AZ 4th, AZ 1990). We are grateful that Representative Johnson enters the names of new Truman Scholar classes into the Congressional Record each spring, an honor that is meaningful for both new Truman Scholars and their proud families across the country.

The Truman Foundation's rigorous annual competition requires nominations from undergraduate institutions, with all accredited domestic institutions eligible to submit nominations. From those nominees, we select students who demonstrate a commitment to public service, leadership potential, and academic excellence. The Truman Scholars selected are reflective of the pool of candidates before us. If students are not nominated or do not apply, we cannot select them.

The recent AEI report, which underpins your letter, is severely misleading. The report draws conclusions regarding our selection process that are incorrect and are offered without inquiry into the wider population of eligible students. During the application and interview process, we have no knowledge of applicants' ideological orientations, unless they explicitly share them. Aside from relying on questionable sample material, the coding of the responses in the AEI report was specious, verging on arbitrary. One of the hallmarks of good scholarship is the ability for others to replicate results. There could be any number of interpretations of which issues are conservative, progressive, or neutral. Even within issues, there is no allowance made for students who wish to take a conservative approach to a topic already deemed "progressive." Other issues, like public health, are missing entirely from the analysis.

Similarly, the report ignores that most applicants are neither obviously progressive nor obviously conservative. Applicants can champion a conservative approach to one issue but not others. They might intern for an elected official because of shared beliefs, to gain substantive professional experience, or for a host of other reasons. Some may be unsure of their political beliefs or only just beginning to consider how their values, ideas, and societal concerns map on to today's hyper-partisan landscape. We do not and would not ask applicants to choose a side. Rather, we are focused on candidates looking for practical solutions to improve their communities, our nation, and our world. It is a needlessly divisive interpretation of incomplete data to suggest that students should sort themselves to one side or another ideologically and then remain there forever.

AEI's report sidesteps the potential that applicants might work in specifically apolitical ways. We receive – and regularly select – students every year who attend service academies. These students are required to avoid partisan politics. But a Naval Academy midshipman interested in studying the environmental impacts of the nuclear fleet would be characterized as progressive for the purposes of AEI's report. In reality, such an applicant's personal politics are unknown and would likely stay that way while in uniformed service. As a former West Point economics professor and a proud member of a military family, I am familiar with the Department of Defense's directive 1344.10 outlining policies on political activities of members of the Armed Forces on active duty. I trust AEI researchers would be, too.

In response to your questions, I will take each in turn:

1. *What measures are you taking to ensure the Truman Scholarship truly “supports scholars from a wide range of perspectives?”*

In our call for applications, we are clear and consistent to encourage any aspiring public service leader to learn about the opportunity. We provide a great deal of information about the scholarship and how to competitively apply on our website. We also offer online webinars. This material is accessible to everyone. We are explicit that we do not prioritize any particular discipline, skill set, or policy issue. We engage in periodic barrier analysis to ensure that issues which might prevent students from applying are dealt with quickly. Since our award requires nomination by the student's undergraduate institution, we also share information with designated campus advisors.

2. *How do you ensure that Truman Finalist Selection Committee members and Regional Review Committee members do not discriminate against conservative students?*

Members of Foundation staff are present for the entire Finalist Selection Committee, as well as all Regional Review Panels. If we witnessed discrimination, we would put an immediate stop to it, regardless of whether it was viewpoint based or otherwise. Individuals involved in the annual competition are representative of our country and the wide array of public service careers Truman Scholars pursue. This includes participation by distinguished public servants, some of whom are Republicans or Democrats, while others are explicitly nonpartisan. For example, our 1987 Colorado Truman Scholar, Supreme Court Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch, chaired the Denver selection panel for many years. Today, this role is held by 1985 Virginia Truman Scholar, former Colorado Secretary of State Wayne Williams. Both are respected conservatives. Additionally, the Deputy Executive Secretary conducts a review of non-selected applications to see if there is a pattern of bias from readers or areas where our instructions to applicants could be strengthened.

3. *In a recent news article, you were quoted as saying that “the Truman Scholars selected are reflective of the pool of candidates before us. If students are not nominated or do not apply, we cannot select them.” Between 2021 and 2023, what percentage of your applicant pool advocated primarily for conservative causes.*

Since our inaugural class of 1977, we have never asked for students to identify by political party or ideology, nor will we because it is not material to the selection process. Many of the applications we receive come from students whose personal ideologies are unknown to us, and it is difficult to draw conclusions based on their approach to one issue. While we reject AEI's categorization as a gold standard for issues that may be of interest to conservatives, even using their categorization does not bolster AEI's position. We do not routinely see applications on the issues identified as conservative by AEI – and certainly not in large “10 to 1” numbers. The report's authors narrow their casting of the conservative issues and frame progressive issues in a manner that is almost comically broad.


While that characterization may help AEI draw a sensational conclusion, it cannot address the fundamental problem of drawing a conclusion about our application process without a full picture of the applicant pool, which starts with campus-level competitions and nominations. Concluding that we select progressive students at a rate of 10 to 1 requires an applicant pool to be evenly matched at the outset. As an independent agency, our role is to raise awareness of public service as an honorable calling, encourage eligible undergraduates to apply, and run a fair competition.

4. What steps are you taking to recruit a more ideologically diverse pool of nominees?

The Truman Foundation's primary method of recruitment is working directly with college and university fellowship representatives and underscoring the broad range of students we seek. Truman Scholars can come from anywhere on campus – any major, area of interest, service path, or graduate plan. We further encourage advisors to look for applicants in a variety of campus organizations as well as among transfer and returning students. In terms of recruitment focus, the inherent structure of our annual competition requires geographical diversity. As the Truman Scholarship is awarded by state of residence, we are often challenged to find applicants in less populous regions. Accordingly, much of our targeted efforts go into regional recruitment. We also routinely review our information to ensure that all students feel included and welcome to apply. However, there are certain required elements of our process that we cannot overlook. First, many undergraduates do not even consider our award because they are wary of graduate school and its associated cost. Other students may not be interested in a scholarship that encourages federal service as a method of making change. Students who are interested in the private sector will likely be dissuaded from our program because of our public service requirement post graduate school.

We are a small agency and welcome your assistance: please encourage the college and university leaders in your districts to nominate; every school is allowed to nominate up to four candidates per year. I am confident that within your constituencies you have promising candidates, and we look forward to meeting them when nominated by their college or university. My staff and I are open to assisting new schools in our annual process. We believe our efforts yield concrete results: nearly every year, a Truman Scholar is discovered at a school for the first time. In 2024, there were three new institutions, and in 2023, there were six. There is always more work possible to identify the next generation of Americans to lead our nation into the future. As dedicated public servants yourselves, I trust you will agree that there has never been a more important time to invest in public service and public servants.

Yours in service,

DocuSigned by:

CC38D9CAEE91490...

Dr. Terry Babcock-Lumish, Executive Secretary

cc: Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation Board of Trustees
The Honorable Gabe Amo
The Honorable Dusty Johnson
The Honorable Andy Kim
The Honorable Greg Stanton