

Supporting Graduate Students in Fellowship Applications

A practical guide for faculty mentors

Why faculty support matters

A strong fellowship application reflects the student’s ideas and voice—but timely, strategic faculty mentorship can help the student identify the right opportunity, articulate a compelling case, and submit a polished, compliant application.

The faculty role at a glance

COACH	CONNECT	ADVOCATE
Help the student interpret the opportunity, clarify goals, strengthen the narrative, and manage the process.	Direct the student to fellowship resources, successful models, collaborators, and institutional support.	Write a specific, evidence-rich recommendation and reinforce the student’s readiness and potential.

Core principles

- Preserve student ownership. Advise, question, and provide feedback; do not write the application for the student.
- Start early. Competitive applications typically require multiple rounds of reflection, drafting, and revision.
- Tailor support to the fellowship. Review the sponsor’s purpose, eligibility rules, review criteria, and required components.
- Prioritize substance before polish. First strengthen the ideas, evidence, fit, and organization; then refine language and presentation.
- Offer candid, developmental feedback. Be specific about what is unclear and explain why it matters to a reviewer.
- Support equitable access. Make expectations and unwritten norms explicit, particularly for students new to fellowship culture.

Recommended timeline

WHEN	FACULTY FOCUS	KEY OUTCOME
10+ weeks	Assess fit and readiness	A realistic decision to apply and a shared work plan
6–10 weeks	Shape the strategy	Clear themes, evidence, and application outline
3–6 weeks	Review drafts	Stronger content, coherence, and alignment with criteria
2–3 weeks	Finalize materials	Polished statements, coordinated letters, complete package

1. Before the student begins

Assess the opportunity and the student's fit

- Read the fellowship announcement and current sponsor guidance—not only a summary or prior-year application.
- Confirm eligibility, allowable fields or activities, required institutional nominations, and submission responsibilities.
- Discuss how the fellowship's mission and selection criteria align with the student's preparation, goals, research, leadership, service, or broader impacts.
- Be honest about readiness while distinguishing between a developmental stretch opportunity and a poor fit.

Establish expectations and a work plan

- Agree on roles: what the student will draft, what you will review, who will verify compliance, and who submits each component.
- Set internal deadlines well before the sponsor deadline. Account for institutional review, signatures, transcripts, budgets, and letters.
- Decide how many draft rounds you can reasonably review and when feedback will be returned.
- Ask the student to provide the full application instructions, review criteria, CV, draft materials, and a list of specific questions with each review request.

A useful opening conversation

Ask: Why this fellowship? Why you? Why this project or path? Why now? What should a reviewer remember about you after reading the application?

2. Help the student build a compelling case

Encourage reviewer-centered writing

- Respond directly to the prompt and make alignment with the review criteria visible.
- State the central purpose early; do not make reviewers infer the project, goal, or significance.
- Use a clear narrative thread connecting past preparation, present work, and future direction.
- Translate specialized concepts for an intelligent reader outside the student's narrow subfield.
- Support claims with concrete evidence—outcomes, examples, roles, products, growth, or impact.
- Explain significance at multiple levels: the field, communities or stakeholders, and the student's development.
- Demonstrate feasibility through an appropriate scope, method, timeline, mentorship, environment, and contingency awareness.

Strengthen the application without replacing the student's voice

Use questions that prompt the student to make the intellectual choices:

- What is the main claim of this section?
- What evidence would make this statement credible to a reviewer?
- What is distinctive about your preparation or approach?

- Why does this work matter, and to whom?
- What might a reviewer misunderstand or question?
- Which selection criterion is this paragraph helping you meet?

3. Give feedback that leads to stronger revision

FEEDBACK LEVEL	WHAT TO ADDRESS
1. Strategy	Fit with the fellowship, responsiveness to criteria, central message, differentiation, and reviewer takeaway.
2. Content	Accuracy, significance, evidence, feasibility, intellectual contribution, professional goals, and broader impacts.
3. Organization	Logical sequence, transitions, balance across sections, paragraph purpose, and effective use of limited space.
4. Expression	Clarity, concision, active voice, accessible language, tone, grammar, and formatting.

Make comments actionable

- Name the issue and its effect: “The significance appears late, so a reviewer may not understand the stakes at the outset.”
- Prioritize feedback. Identify the two or three revisions that will most improve competitiveness.
- Separate required corrections from optional preferences.
- Use margin comments for local issues and a brief summary for higher-order patterns.
- When suggesting wording, explain the principle so the student can apply it elsewhere. Encourage the student to understand why the edit was recommended rather than “accepting all the changes”.
- Avoid overwhelming line edits on a draft that still needs conceptual restructuring.

4. Write an effective recommendation letter

A recommendation should add credible evidence and informed judgment—not merely repeat the student’s application.

Before agreeing

- Confirm that you can write a strong, specific letter by the deadline.
- Ask for the fellowship description, selection criteria, submission instructions, CV, drafts, transcript if relevant, and a short list of accomplishments or examples you have directly observed.
- Clarify confidentiality and the submission method.

In the letter

- State your relationship to the student, how long and in what capacity you have known them, and the basis for your assessment.
- Make an unambiguous recommendation and calibrate it with meaningful comparisons when you can do so credibly.
- Provide two or three specific examples that demonstrate qualities relevant to the fellowship.
- Explain the student’s intellectual contribution, not only the project topic or the mentor’s work.
- Address the sponsor’s criteria explicitly while maintaining a coherent narrative.

- Describe growth, initiative, resilience, leadership, collaboration, communication, or impact with evidence rather than adjectives alone.
- If appropriate, contextualize opportunities, obstacles, nontraditional pathways, or achievements without disclosing sensitive information the student has not authorized.
- Close by reinforcing the student's potential and likely benefit from—and contribution to—the fellowship community.

Avoid generic praise

Replace “outstanding student” with a brief example that shows what the student did, how they approached it, and what resulted. Specific evidence makes enthusiasm credible.

5. Support an accurate, ethical, and compliant submission

- Verify that research descriptions, preliminary findings, citations, roles, and accomplishments are accurate.
- Ensure the student understands sponsor rules concerning generative AI, authorship, confidentiality, human subjects, export controls, research security, and other relevant requirements.
- Do not recycle another student's prose or share confidential application materials without permission.
- Confirm consistency across the application, CV, transcripts, project plan, budget, and recommendation letters where coordination is allowed.
- Refer budget, cost-sharing, institutional commitment, and sponsored-project questions to the appropriate university office.
- Plan for technical submission before the deadline; do not rely on a last-minute upload.

6. Promote equitable and developmental mentorship

- Share fellowship opportunities broadly and use transparent criteria when encouraging or nominating students.
- Explain hidden conventions, such as how reviewers read, what “broader impacts” may mean, and why concrete evidence matters.
- Avoid assuming prior knowledge of fellowship language, academic norms, or institutional processes.
- Connect students to additional readers and resources while avoiding an advantage based solely on access to informal networks.
- Recognize that students may need different kinds of support; ask what would be most useful.
- Treat the process as professional development regardless of the funding outcome.

Faculty checklist

Use this checklist to guide a mentoring conversation or final review.

Opportunity and planning

- ☐ The fellowship is a strong fit for the student's goals, preparation, and proposed work.
- ☐ Eligibility, criteria, required components, institutional processes, and submission roles are confirmed.
- ☐ The student and faculty mentor have agreed on internal deadlines and feedback expectations.

Application strategy

- ☐ The application answers the prompts and clearly addresses the review criteria.
- ☐ A reviewer can quickly identify the student's central purpose, preparation, distinctiveness, and future direction.
- ☐ Claims are supported by specific evidence, and the project or plan is significant and feasible.
- ☐ The writing is accessible to the intended review audience and retains the student's authentic voice.

Recommendation

- ☐ The letter states the relationship and basis for evaluation.
- ☐ The endorsement is clear, specific, and aligned with the fellowship criteria.
- ☐ Examples demonstrate the student's contributions, qualities, growth, and potential.
- ☐ The letter is submitted through the correct channel by the internal deadline.

Final review

- ☐ All components are accurate, consistent, complete, and within required page limits.
- ☐ Formatting, file names, citations, signatures, and attachments comply with current instructions.
- ☐ Ethical, disclosure, research, and generative-AI requirements have been addressed.
- ☐ The student has time to conduct a final proofread and submit before the sponsor deadline.

After the decision

- Celebrate the student's work and the skills developed through the process.
- If selected, help the student plan for award conditions, reporting, professional opportunities, and responsible stewardship.
- If not selected, normalize the competitiveness of fellowships and debrief constructively.
- When reviewer feedback is available, distinguish actionable lessons from reviewer preference or factors outside the student's control.
- Encourage revision and resubmission as a professional development opportunity irrespective of whether the proposal will be resubmitted. When appropriate preserve a timeline of improvements for the next opportunity.

Suggested debrief question

What did you learn about your goals, your work, and how you communicate your value—and what will you carry into your next application?

Campus resources to customize

Before distributing this guide, add current links and contacts for:

- Graduate College [Office of Fellowships](#) and [Grad Funding newsletter](#)
- Graduate College [Graduate Writing Lab](#)
- [Sponsored Projects](#), research compliance, and budget assistance
- Graduate College core [Professional Development Competencies](#)

Note: Fellowship requirements vary. Always follow the current sponsor instructions and applicable university policies.

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