



# prologue.

## When OU's academic all-stars compete, they have every expectation of winning.

A considerable boost to institutional bragging rights occurs when a football player brings home the Heisman Trophy. Five times at the University of Oklahoma, the news flash brought on campus jubilation and in due time caused statues to be erected across from the stadium. Reaction to the announcement of the Heisman's academic equivalent is somewhat more muted—but in this arena, Sooners have had even more practice.

In November, Sarah Swenson, a zoology and biomedical sciences senior from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, became the 28th OU-nominated student to be named a Rhodes Scholar. Swenson will put on hold for two years her Mayo Medical School education while pursuing a master's in philosophy in the history of science, medicine and technology at Oxford University in England. That is big time.

Rhodes is the gold standard among the distinguished national and international scholarships, but many other opportunities exist for post-graduates and some undergraduates where OU students have been spectacularly successful. Fulbright, Gates Cambridge, Goldwater, Hollings, Luce, Marshall, Rotary, Truman, Udall. Each has its own focus; requirements; application, nomination and selection process. Preparation is arduous, sometimes daunting. It might not be impossible for a student to come in cold and go it alone into the competitions—but it would be very, very difficult. Fortunately, that is not necessary at OU.

The centralized office for most of these scholarships, where students can find the applications, learn the rules and obtain ongoing mentoring, is located in the Honors College. There the point person since 1995 has been Melanie Wright. The major exceptions are the Fulbright, where anthropology's Karl Rambo is the

liaison, the Hollings for meteorologists guided by Keli Tarp at NOAA, and the Astronaut Scholarships in engineering, supervised by Dean Tom Landers.

The office is the result of a broad-based Honors Program, established in 1986 by now Senior Vice President and Provost Nancy Mergler. Even then Mergler saw the new effort as the forerunner of the current Joe C. and Carol Kerr McClendon Honors College. In the beginning, however, she concentrated on creating a program that could attract students capable of the intense, rigorous education that would qualify them for scholarships such as the Rhodes.

Early identification of promising scholars eager and willing to push themselves is key to OU's success rate. "These students are incredibly bright, and they have a passion to change the world," Mergler says. "They need to aspire to as big and as important a goal as they can imagine, and they have to learn how to articulate their ideas. Our job is to help them figure out how to get where they want to go."

When President David Boren tapped Mergler for the Provost's Office, Wright was her hand-picked successor. Wright has not adopted the select-and-groom approach favored by some institutions. Rather she uses the Honors College data base to circulate the pertinent information, and not surprisingly, most of those electing to pursue the scholarships are Honors students. Still others manage to get the word and find their way to her office.

"I advise them on what they might do to enhance their chances, but I also tell them, 'Do what you have time for, do what interests you, do what makes you happy.' And I stress to them that no matter how interested they may be in service, they aren't going to win a scholarship unless they keep their grades up."

Wright also employs a sixth sense in

determining which students might be interesting to a particular selection committee and steers them in that direction. Inevitably, the successful recipients point to at least a half dozen faculty members who inspired and mentored them along the way. "Everyone who has worked with them takes personal pride in their success," Mergler says, "It's fun; you feel like it's a whole-community enterprise."

When these candidates win the competition for the Rhodes or Goldwater or Truman, for instance, there is no doubt that it makes the University look good, but both Wright and Mergler are quick to insist that the real payoff is for the students themselves. "Whatever the outcome, these are smart, motivated students who will go on and do wonderful things," Wright says.

Boren, himself a Rhodes Scholar, sees a national benefit in the program that sent him to Oxford in the mid-1960s. "The opportunity to study at Oxford University is often a transforming experience. Rhodes Scholars are able to look at their own country with new eyes and to see the United States as those in other countries see us. They become translators to others of the real meaning of America. They also come home better equipped to help build bridges between America and the rest of the world."

Sarah Swenson realizes that she carries the expectations of many with her to Oxford—and that winning the Rhodes is not her ultimate goal, but rather it is what she does with the knowledge and experiences she gains there. When the medical scholar returns to become a physician, she hopes to better understand "the nuances of life, suffering and death in a way that makes me better at focusing care on individuals."

There will be no statue to Sarah and her colleagues at the stadium—but maybe someday there should be. —CJB