

Leadership Essay Webinar Script – The Office of Nationally Competitive Awards

Please be sure to view the PowerPoint as a Slide Show

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In this webinar, we will explore strategies for writing an effective leadership essay. **[NEXT]**

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Throughout, we will:

- consider what leadership means in the context of nationally competitive awards
- discuss the kinds of activities that lend themselves well to leadership narratives (as well as ones that don't)
- identify the core moves made within strong leadership essays
- review practical tips that you can use when discussing your leadership as well as potential pitfalls to avoid
- and examine sample leadership essays.

The goal is to help you think critically about yourself as a leader and provide you with the tools you need to present your leadership in a way that will resonate with readers.

Before we proceed, I want to pause here and return to the first bullet point. Note that this presentation is geared toward explaining what *prestigious scholarships* mean by leadership. As we go along, you could find that the parameters we're defining for what constitutes a leadership experience might be a bit narrower than what you are accustomed to. So why is that?

The reason is simple: As always, any writing you produce or arguments that you make must take the audience into consideration—in this case, the audience is a scholarship foundation. Therefore, the advice in this presentation is based on NCA's understanding of what these foundations tend to look for in a leader and the traits that past successful leadership essays have shared. And while NCA's advice for how to present your leadership story will translate well into a wide variety of situations, you may also discover that in other contexts (such as a job interview), you may have a bit more flexibility when it comes to the specific leadership examples that you can discuss. Just something to keep in mind as we proceed. **[NEXT]**

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A number of nationally competitive awards explicitly identify leadership as one of their core selection criteria. *Not every award does* (for example, Fulbright doesn't place an emphasis on leadership per se), but most of the awards that provide a substantial amount of funding for graduate study are looking for significant leadership. The five awards featured on this slide fall into that category.

Whether they call it "leadership potential," "instincts to lead," or "purposeful leadership," it's clear that leadership matters. Some applications—such as Marshall and Truman—require candidates to write a leadership essay.

Others, like Rhodes and Knight-Hennessy, do not have a leadership-specific essay—BUT remember: they've told you that they're still assessing you as a leader, so you want to keep that in mind when you draft the materials they *do* require. This will allow you to present yourself in a way that demonstrates how you fulfill their leadership criterion.

And of course, if you're completing UC's campus nomination application for Marshall, Mitchell, or Rhodes, we ask for a leadership essay. [NEXT]

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So what should go into a leadership essay?

A good way into that question is to begin by considering what the leadership essay should *not* be—which is a statement of leadership philosophy. [CLICK]

A leadership philosophy would be you standing back and reflecting broadly on the character of your leadership. It tends to offer one's personal definition of leadership, explain one's leadership style, and/or name one's personal qualities that make them a good leader.

Unless you are explicitly asked for a leadership philosophy statement, this is not the direction you want to take. [CLICK] [CLICK] Instead, you want to focus on your leadership *experience*. Embrace a show, rather than tell approach to your essay. Instead of defining how you see leadership or describing your leadership style, display those things through the story you tell about your leadership in action.

For example, describing how you built an effective coalition in order to accomplish a larger goal will make a much stronger impression on the reader than simply stating that your gift for coalition building makes you an effective leader and moving on.

That being said, opting to prioritize concrete leadership experience over more abstract statements of leadership philosophy does not mean that there's no place for leadership philosophy in this process. [CLICK]

- 1) It could play an important role in the brainstorming process. Pausing at the outset to ask yourself what you think it takes to be a good leader can be a crucial first step in the drafting process. Identifying effective leadership qualities and practices can, in turn, help you select the examples you want to showcase from your own leadership experience.
- 2) If you do include in your essay any material that goes into the leadership philosophy terrain, you want to limit it. A sentence or two of philosophy is very different than a paragraph. In a similar vein, subtly **weaving it into** your reflection on, or analysis of, a concrete leadership experience is different than overtly organizing your entire essay around your philosophy and pulling in concrete examples as support. It's a matter of what's being foregrounded.

Now that we understand that a leadership essay should focus on experience over philosophy, let's start to shift gears and think about how you tell the story of that leadership experience

If you are someone who has more than one leadership experience, you might be tempted to try to write about many, or all, of them. **[CLICK]**. But you should resist that temptation. You will be better served by focusing on one substantial leadership experience and unpacking the details of it. If you try to bring in too many different experiences, your essay will become more of a narrative resume, which you want to avoid.

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When choosing a leadership experience for your essay, you want to choose something that will lend itself well to the narrative arc that most good leadership essays follow.

A leadership essay is, in essence, a story that tells how you:

- Identified an issue or problem that needed to be addressed
- Developed a solution to that problem
- Implemented that solution
- Assessed the impact of that solution

These are the tasks that a leadership essay should try to take on. The order in which I've listed them does reflect a typical chronology for a leadership activity as it unfolds and develops. However, as you will see when we look at examples, you can opt for a non-chronological order to your narrative. We'll get to that later.

For now, let's briefly take a closer look at each of these core moves **[NEXT SLIDE]**

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Identifying an Issue or Problem

- Your essay needs to establish why your leadership was needed to begin with.
- What problem or need did you notice? How did you notice it? What brought it to your attention?
- And what community or communities were affected by this need/issue problem? **[NEXT SLIDE]**

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Not only do you need to explain the problem or need, but you also need to explain the solution you came up with

Usually, the solution falls into one of two categories:

- The first is a *new* solution that filled a void. In this case, there was no appropriate tool, policy, initiative, organization or system to address the problem you noticed
- So you came up with an idea to create something new to fill that gap or void

- On the other hand, sometimes there is something already in place—but the existing tool, policy, organization or system was not functioning well, or was underutilized, or was outdated
 - And you came up with the idea to reinvent or revitalize or reorganize the thing that already existed so that it could better address the need or problem it was meant to address [NEXT SLIDE]

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You also need to explain how you implemented the solution—how did you put your idea into action? This is where you’re really “showing your work” as a leader.

You might highlight things like:

- How you shared your vision and got others on board
- The partnerships you developed (also: are you able to work with folks outside your peer group to bring about change?)
- What obstacles did you encounter, and how did you overcome them?
- In general, can you share details that exhibit your creativity, resilience, and strength of purpose as a leader? [NEXT SLIDE]

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And finally, it is important that you address the positive impact of your leadership. Consider the following:

- What evidence can you give of positive impact?
- Who all benefited and in what ways?
- Has it been sustainable?
- Are there next steps?
- Overall, can you answer the “so what?” question—why did all of this matter? [NEXT SLIDE]

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There’s a wide range of leadership experiences that would provide excellent material for a strong leadership essay. HOWEVER, there are a few kinds of activities that students sometimes want to write about for their leadership essay but, in my experience, do not lend themselves well to the leadership narrative arc that we just discussed.

Things like:

- Tour guide leading—just because the word “lead” or “leader” is in the title, that doesn’t mean it’s the kind of activity that scholarship foundations have in mind for leadership.
- Mentoring/tutoring—too individualized, too focused on one-on-one interactions; scholarship foundations are looking for broader-scale work or impact

- Same goes for ambassador roles
- and, even though it might be harder to see this, the same goes for teaching assistantships as well. This one, in particular, often *feels* like a leadership experience to students who have been TAs—after all, you’re leading a group of students through a lesson or assignment, it’s a lot of work—but again, even in a group situation like a classroom, it’s individual interaction rather than systemic action **[CLICK]**

I think that distinction is a helpful one to keep in mind as you pick the topic of your leadership essay—scholarship foundations are looking for leadership experience that has some larger structural or systemic component to it.

Now let’s say you founded an important mentorship program or you completely reinvented a tutoring program so that it’s more effective and has a broader impact on the community it serves—those could certainly be candidates for a leadership essay. But just the act of tutoring or mentoring in itself is not.

It’s important to emphasize that this does NOT diminish the value of these endeavors—they are worthwhile and meaningful activities. They are wonderful ways to serve a community or develop important skills. It is also very likely that, to do them well, you might be using qualities that good leaders have.

And this brings us to a useful lesson or takeaway point that can help you discern which of your experiences are good candidates for a leadership essay: The qualities that make one a good leader are qualities that, arguably, one could exhibit in MANY roles or activities. This does not mean that every activity or role is automatically a leadership experience.

Before we move into the final segment of this presentation, where we will look at a few sample leadership essays so that you can see the narrative arc in action, I want to say a few words regarding student government roles and activities that were assigned to you. I’ve labeled these as “proceed with caution” activities. These are things that could work very well for a leadership essay—or things that just as easily could not.

The first one might come as a bit of a shock since a student government role probably seems like the ultimate leadership experience, but the key there is being able to answer this question: what did you accomplish with your role that the people who held that role before you did not accomplish—and why does it matter? That applies not just to student government roles but really any leadership position or title—what matters is what you *did* with the role. That brings us right back to impact.

And then there are activities that were assigned to you. In general, I would say those don’t work well. Scholarship foundations are looking for leaders who have vision, who are self-directed, who are intrinsically motivated. If you were assigned the problem or task, it’s harder to present yourself in those ways. HOWEVER, if something began as an assignment, but you really took it and ran with it and accomplished something far beyond what would typically be expected for an assignment, that could certainly work—it’s something we could discuss in an advising meeting.

As promised, we are shifting gears now to look at a few sample essays. It’s one thing to know the basic moves a leadership essay should make, but it’s another to be able to implement them. I think it’s helpful

to see examples, and the ones we'll be looking at focus on *very* different kinds of activities—but they still manage to make those same core moves. [NEXT SLIDE]

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I want to emphasize a couple of important points before we look at the samples:

- First, these are all final drafts submitted for the national deadline, which means they are the product of SEVERAL rounds of revision. They are highly polished, they accomplish a lot in a small space, and that's all possible through revision. I can assure you that they did *not* start in these final forms.
- Second, you'll see that I've highlighted sections to help us discuss them in relation to the four core moves we have identified—to make it easier for you to see them in action. One of the things you'll notice throughout is that it's not always easy to draw clear boundaries among these four moves—nor does it need to be. One can feed into another—for instance, the identification of the need or problem can flow right into the development of the solution. Or I might label a sentence as implementation, whereas you would argue that it's an impact statement. In practice, I think sometimes the same piece of text can do double duty. Finally, you may also notice that an essay may give more or less space to one of the core moves than the others. Overall, the important thing to keep in mind is that, even though we are trying to identify the component parts of successful essays, the essays are read holistically.

So let's start with a sample leadership essay from a recent Marshall finalist from UC. Marshall allows 500 words for the Leadership essay.

Let's read the first paragraph together:

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As a first-year student at the University of Cincinnati, I spent Wednesday afternoons of my fall semester volunteering with a local nonprofit organization that focuses on literacy and provides a creative community space for elementary school students. In addition to my time spent reading and writing with the students, I became interested in the operations of the organization. Through conversations with the nonprofit's founder, I learned that she wished they could engage students from additional schools in their programs but did not have the employees or time to dedicate to marketing, transportation logistics, and funding. I learned that this organization had a need, as did many others, for time spent problem-solving--a need that could potentially be filled by university students working on the project over a series of weeks.

In this first paragraph, we see the writer setting up the “problem”—she's telling the story of how she came to identify a need, in this case, overworked nonprofits that need support for big-picture planning and projects. I've highlighted this in green, except for the very end, where mid-sentence, we switch to red. This is where I see the author pivoting from the context—from the

identification of a need or problem—to the introduction of the idea she developed to respond to that need. The development of the solution, highlighted in red, continues into the next paragraph:

This experience spurred my thinking about the role that a university should play in relation to its community, and how we, as students, could fill a need while also gaining essential experience. At this point, two of my peers and I learned of Students Consulting for Nonprofit Organizations (SCNO), a national organization with chapters at several universities, and we dedicated ourselves to the task of founding a chapter at UC in Spring 2019. We recruited students and contacted local nonprofits to ask if they had a need we could fill. I met with the organizations and learned about their missions, introduced them to our organizational setup, and worked with them to determine project scope. We then led the student consultants through semester-long projects with the nonprofits, culminating in final presentations where the consultants delivered their results.

Once again, we have a mid-paragraph color code switch to mark the shift from the articulation of the idea to discussion of its implementation. We see the author showing her work—explaining the early stages of launching this organization. The implementation portion continues in the next paragraph:

During my tenure as Vice President, we worked with more than a dozen different organizations, ranging from the YMCA to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. We helped a local diaper bank to optimize space by beginning to implement a barcoding system, assisted the YMCA in a marketing project after a remodel, and created a volunteer education video for Ronald McDonald House. During these semesters, I facilitated weekly meetings, oversaw project progress, helped teams with analytics tasks, organized final presentations, and communicated with the nonprofits on a regular basis, and in 2017, we received our university's Student Organization of the Year award for our innovative approach to connecting UC with the community. Throughout this process, UC's SCNO was able to form strong reciprocal relationships with our nonprofit partners.

In this paragraph, the author does a great job of providing a lot of information in a compressed space. There may not be room for many details about each project, but the reader gets a sense of the range of non-profits and projects, as well an idea of the different roles the author played. In fact, I would say that this author handles the implementation move of the essay in such a way that it also highlights the impact of the work. As I read, I'm also getting a sense of the scope and weight of the work that this organization does.

Then, as she switches into markers of impact, she highlights the recognition this organization received. And the final paragraph provides additional details, including her attention to the sustainability of the organization (which ensures its enduring impact):

For me, a significant piece of this leadership experience was cultivating the next generation of leaders to create a sustainable organization. I began this process by appointing team leads, consultants who wanted to take on additional responsibility by facilitating their groups' communication and progress. We successfully transitioned leadership to a new executive board, with the organization continuing to serve the community and facilitate student growth. This past spring, forty undergraduate consultants partnered with six nonprofit organizations to problem-solve, with SCNO's expansion being a testament to the unique opportunity it offers to apply academic and professional experience and strengthen relationships with community leaders.

And that's a great note to end on. Not only do we get a sense of how big the organization now is, but the author incorporates her own analysis of this numbers, explaining what they tell us about the organization's success and impact. [NEXT SLIDE]

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This first sample followed a chronological order (going from need to idea to implementation to impact). The next sample demonstrates a point made earlier: you don't have to follow a chronological order. Here is another sample Marshall leadership essay from a Finalist

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Here, we see the essay opening by introducing the reader to an organization the author co-founded, but she makes that introduction by leading off with the scope of the organization's impact:

This fall, every new student at Anonymous University will spend an hour discussing LGBTQ+ identities and experiences as part of orientation. This module is new and will be led by SPEAK, a peer education group I helped to establish nearly three years ago. As a founding member, I have watched as SPEAK more than doubled its membership, training each of its peer educators to facilitate workshops on topics from allyship to bisexuality 101. We meet with residence halls, student clubs, student athletes, and Greek organizations to educate students about gender and sexual orientation and discuss how to create a more inclusive campus community. We have seen encouraging signs of progress such as wider adoption of gender inclusive language, respect of proper pronouns, and clubs drafting plans for how they can be welcoming spaces for everyone.

Returning to the idea that a segment of an essay can do double duty, I think we could definitely argue that we're getting some implementation info here—there's some “show your work” happening in this section—but it's really framed by impact. From here, the author steps back and reflects on how she came to recognize the need for this organization:

As a gay student, I knew just how much Anonymous University needed SPEAK. I heard stories of gay students getting turned away from parties, witnessed people using anti-gay slurs, and generally noticed a hesitance to talk about sexuality or gender. I found that most Anonymous U. students are not overtly antagonistic toward LGBTQ+ people but lack education on gender and sexuality issues, often seeing non-straight, non-cisgender identities as taboo. As someone who only personally knew one out queer person before coming to Anonymous U, I also understood how a lack of information and resources could make it difficult for someone who is questioning their own identity or wants to be a better ally. I saw SPEAK as the most effective path to solving both issues--creating a more welcoming campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and faculty, and providing space for students to have better informed, open conversations about things with which they may not be familiar.

Like the first essay, we see how the recognition of the need segues seamlessly into the solution—together, they constitute the origin story of the leadership activity. The author then shifts to implementation:

To bring this much needed change to Anonymous’s campus, I became a founding member of SPEAK and served as its Education Coordinator. I was responsible for training our new group members and the continuing education of existing members, ensuring that they were prepared to deliver our workshops across campus. I developed curriculum for new member training that made use of valuable club and campus resources. I wanted all new members to become comfortable with the content they would eventually teach and to gain facilitation skills. The education committee, comprised of four other members of SPEAK, brainstormed activities and potential guest speakers that could help us achieve these goals, and I led the committee in selecting the best options. I also suggested that we intentionally model good facilitation strategies when presenting new content to the trainees, and then have them discuss what they had observed in us and how they could apply it. **By training 30 people to share their knowledge and engage with others, we were ultimately able to spread “equality, awareness, and knowledge” to the larger campus community. Playing a central role in the development of this group that truly changes people’s university experience for the better is a legacy I am proud to have left at Anonymous University.**

Again, we see a lot of information about what the author did. Note also that this author is not the only leader in or founder of this organization. The same was true for the previous example. It is fine to have collaborators—and if you did, it is important to acknowledge that. Good leaders are good collaborators. But it is also really important that you be able to look at what you and your peers did and identify the elements for which you specifically were responsible. If an essay were written entirely in “we,” it would be very hard to discern what your specific role was or how much you actually contributed.

While most of this final paragraph of this essay is implementation, it does shift back to impact at the end, which is a nice note to end on. **[NEXT SLIDE]**

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And this brings us to what will be our final sample leadership essay. This time, we are shifting to a Truman example. The Truman leadership essay is limited to 2000 characters with spaces, which is around 300 words, give or take. This is significantly shorter than the Marshall leadership essay, so you should expect to see the same core moves, but they will be more compressed. **[NEXT SLIDE]**

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Since it’s just one paragraph, analyze it as we go:

In my first year as a residential advisor, I observed an epidemic of substance abuse among residents in my hall, with consequences ranging from poor grades to serious health issues.

Right away, the author sets the stage with a swift, pithy statement of the problem. It's only one sentence, but it's effective. He then shifts immediately into the development of a solution or a means of responding to this problem:

As Chief of GenRX Ambassadors, an organization that teaches addiction prevention on campus, I decided to spearhead a campaign in the residence halls to educate students about addiction.

And this goes immediately into implementation:

While sparking interest was difficult at first, I led our team to develop an engaging curriculum focused on discussion-based learning and harm reduction techniques. To maximize our audience, I mobilized our team to knock on hundreds of doors in each hall, making our message known. I secured grant funding that allowed us to purchase and distribute items like t-shirts in our sessions, substantially increasing turnout.

We quickly get a sense of the range of activities that were involve—creating curriculum, mobilizing a team to build an audience, securing grant funding, and so on—and this leads us to his assessment of impact or effect:

Within 6 months, the project reached over 500 students through 17 in-person sessions, and participant surveys showed a high level of satisfaction with our program. Thanks to this initial success, our program gained wider recognition across the university. The University Wellness Center decided to adopt our GenRX curriculum into the way they promote preventative care for addiction. Working with the Residential Education & Development office, I designed and taught an addiction stigma training course to over 200 residential staff members.

I highlighted this last sentence with purple because, to me, it was both implementation and impact, but most of this section involves the author detailing various markers of success. From here, the essay takes an interesting turn as the author reflects on a new phase of the project:

Elated by our success, I envisioned a bolder idea: integrating our curriculum into the Learning Community, a 1 credit hour class required for all first-year students.

Here, we're back to idea text. This is a great move in this leadership essay because it showcase's the author's ability to scale up a project, which is a good leadership trait. This, of course, calls for another implementation section:

Citing a lack of time and resources, however, the office of First Year Experience declined our proposal several times and refused to meet for many months. Yet, I refused to lose faith in my idea. With steadfast patience, I arranged meetings with a diverse network of university officials, navigated the complex gridlock within the office, and eventually gained the support of key stakeholders. This past fall, the first iteration of our curriculum was taught to over 7000 first-year students on campus.

With this second implementation section, the author highlights his ability to persevere through challenges—it shows that strength of purpose we discussed at the start of the webinar—as well as his ability to identify and work with other partners and stakeholders on campus, including ones outside his peer group. I think we can clearly see that this author has the traits of good leaders in mind as he writes, but rather than simply naming those traits and claiming that he has them, he shows us through examples and anecdotes.

Then, he ends with a quick return to scope of impact, ending with an impressive number.

Whether you're writing a 500-word Marshall essay or a 300-word Truman essay, I'm sure you'll find that there's a lot more you would like to say than can be squeezed into this limited space. But I hope these examples showcase just how much can be accomplished in these short essays with some patience and a willingness to revise (and revise some more).

We do have a few other excellent leadership essay examples on file—another Marshall essay, a couple more Truman samples, and a Schwarzman leadership essay, which is actually longer than these. You are certainly welcome to review those examples, which are all available thanks to the generosity of your peers who went through the application process before you and agreed to share their writing with you. **[NEXT SLIDE]**

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I hope this webinar has demystified the leadership essay and helped you start to see how you could write about your own experiences in a way that will showcase them to their greatest effect. If you have questions about anything mentioned in this webinar—or anything related to nationally competitive awards more generally—feel free to reach out.