

Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellowships

The Dean's office has received requests for a description of how Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellowships are awarded. This summary of procedures and recent practices is presented in an attempt to address frequently asked questions. Please share this general information about the Fellowship scheme with your graduate faculty and graduate students.

Selection Process

1. Departmental Nominations for Andrew W. Mellon Fellowships

All candidates for these Fellowships must be nominated by their department. Each department can nominate two more candidates than the highest number of Mellon Fellowships it received in any of the past 5 years. Departments are required to rank their candidates, provide a summary statement of each candidate's strengths, and explain the basis of their ranking to the Dean's-level selection committee. Departments' internal procedures for determining their nominees vary.

Departments determine the appropriate year in which to nominate candidates in accordance with their programmatic needs. Departments may choose to nominate students holding a Mellon Fellowship for one further year. In the case of such nominations, the selection committee looks specifically for professional accomplishments and scholarly productivity during the student's first year of Mellon support above and beyond making normal academic progress towards the degree. In recent years, selection committees have tended to seek to distribute Mellon Fellowships among as many deserving students as possible.

In cases where students receive a Mellon Fellowship during their first year of graduate study, the department may nominate them for a second Fellowship year sometime later in their degree program.

2. Composition of the Dietrich School Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship Selection Committee

Chaired by the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and Research, this committee comprises in addition the Assistant Dean for Graduate Studies and one faculty member from each of the school's three divisions. Departments delegating members rotate within each division. All members have one vote.

3. Committee Procedures

Each committee member reviews all applications and evaluates every candidate on a scale from 1-10 on the basis of summary statements provided by departments, candidates' academic record within their graduate program (grades in graduate coursework, milestones, progress towards degree, etc.), the quality of the candidate's research statement, publications and presentations at professional meetings (or other types of professional validation) *outside* the department and especially the university, and letters of reference. The committee also considers overall progress to the degree in relation to years of prior funding including especially fellowship support.

Most departments nominate students at the dissertation stage of their graduate work. Given the competitiveness of the Mellon Fellowships, such candidates should have demonstrated professional achievement beyond work within their department and the university in terms of publications, presentations at professional meetings, performances, etc.

Where candidates are nominated at earlier stages, the committee strives to compare professional records relative to career stage.

The committee is asked to consider the following criteria in rating candidates:

Category 1 (Most highly weighted)

- originality and potential impact of the proposed and/or ongoing research
- depth, clarity, and accessibility, especially to non-specialist readers, of the student statement
- for incoming students only: performance in undergraduate programs (types of courses, grades, honors, etc.).

Category 2 (Other important considerations)

- progress and productivity of the student in the field and degree program
- aspects of the student's background, skill set, or initiative that make the student an especially compelling candidate
- likely benefit to the student of the Mellon Fellowship
- in cases where the student has previously held a competitive fellowship, an evaluation of how well the resource was used.

A rank order of all nominees is produced by aggregating the scores assigned by the five Committee members, acting independently. This rank ordered, aggregated list provides the starting point for an intensive discussion among all committee members regarding their individual evaluations. Through this process, the committee fine-tunes the order of candidates near the cut off point for awarding fellowships and determines a list of ranked alternates.

Departmental rankings of nominees are taken very seriously by the Committee but the committee is not bound by them, as they evaluate the entirety of materials submitted in the dossiers. The number of Fellowships awarded to students in a given program is a function of a school-wide and cross-division competition among individual applicants; it is not driven by a program's prior success with Mellon Fellowship nominations.

4. Guidance to Graduate Students, Faculty, and DGSs

In recent years there have been between 100 and 120 nominations for a total of ca. 50 Fellowships. Given that Departments nominate only their top students, virtually every applicant might be said to be worthy of support, yet at most half of them will win a Fellowship. What, then, makes the best case for an award, given a fairly high base-line of achievement?

Student Applications

A strong research statement, some part of which is addressed to an informed and engaged but non-specialist reader, describes the project's importance within the discipline. Notes special skills or

experiences student brings to the project; describes relevance of previous research and/or publications to current project.

Letters of Reference

Should be of reasonable length, no more than two single-spaced pages and preferably shorter. Assess the originality and potential impact of student's project, and feasibility of completion within the Fellowship period if final year in the program.

NB: long letters, apart from being less likely to be read as carefully, can make it seem as if the recommender is more invested and knowing about the project than the student whose statement is limited to three double-spaced pages.

Departmental Ranking Memos (advisory but not binding to the committee)

Selection committees see a wide range of more or less effective ranking memos. To maximally support their student applicants, Departments should carefully yet concisely outline the strategic function that Andrew W. Mellon Fellowships fulfil within their Department. DGSs should explain the rank-order of nominees in relation to the strategic functions of fellowship: why this student at this stage of their graduate career? Effective memos also address any unusual features of a graduate record (e.g., time to degree, low grades, etc.).

Many Departments nominate candidates who are beginning to write their dissertations. In some fields, it makes sense instead to use the Fellowship year earlier in the student's progress toward degree, especially to conduct research that might enable them to win external support in a subsequent year. A few departments nominate strong incoming applicants for the Mellon Fellowship. There are other viable alternatives, but they each need to be explained and then followed consistently by the Department.

The ranking memo's first section (explains strategy the Department follows in determining in which year to nominate candidates and the rationale and specific criteria by which it selects and ranks candidates) should be followed by a brief paragraph on each applicant, addressing the following points:

- summarize the nature of applicant's research, why the topic and /or approach are particularly innovative and potentially impactful in the field, and how their research will benefit from the fellowship (3-5 sentences)
- applicant's greatest strengths (2 sentences)
- applicant's progress in degree program relative to program expectations and cohort (2-3 sentences)
- feel free to highlight aspects of the candidate's personal journey or contributions to the department, peers, or field that the committee should consider in evaluating the dossier (2-3 sentences)

NB: Tied ranks will not be accepted.

Please direct any questions to the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies.