Extra Info on Truman interview: 2013
(provided by Tara at the Truman Foundation)

Our interview is very straightforward in style: there is no lead questioner, no one is assigned a particular role. The panelists decide who will ask the first question and then everyone just jumps in from there. Phoenix tends to be a more formal panel (the panelists are a bit older than our average) and they can be very combative when asking questions. My best advice is to have the candidate practice being gracious in the face of aggressive questioning. The best interviews are one where the student is able to respond in kind but doesn't lose their cool or fold under pressure.

The student can certainly take a moment or two to respond to a question but should keep in mind that time is limited. Often there will be follow up questions or outright topic switches so it is really best to be prepared to answer briefly (if not quickly) and move on. I also tend to discourage students from bringing materials into the interview room (other than their own water if they prefer). Notepads and pens tend to more hinder than help.

The student should also be prepared to jump into the interview without preamble (the first question is generally substantive) - and be ready for the "Closing Minute" that is provided at the end. Even though we explain that minute is coming, it always seems to throw people.

I would also suggest underscoring to the student that they will likely not be able to tell how the interview is going - either during or after. I see a lot of students lose themselves in trying to guess how things are going - and that tends to bring down the energy of the interview. The student will have no way of knowing how well they are doing (or how well others have done), so they should really just focus on giving themselves in to that moment and trying to have the best interview possible.

Practice interviews do tend to be the best prep. If possible, include some 'non-academic' types on the panel (lawyers, government folks, alumni). Faculty tend to ask specific types of questions (and use specific sentence structure), so it helps to mix things up a bit. Our panelists tend to the folksy and colloquial.

--Tara Yglesias, Deputy Executive Secretary, Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation

What are the most common mistakes made during the interview?

- Failing to answer the question that was asked;
- Not being succinct in the responses and taking too long to answer the question;
- Trying to guess what the panel wants to hear rather than providing an honest answer; and,
- Being either too staid or too nervous and not permitting the panel to see the personality behind the accomplishments.

Successful Truman Scholarship Finalists generally possess the following characteristics

Comfort/Level of Ease in the interview setting: While they may be nervous at the start, they quickly settle in, enjoy the give and take of the interview, do not get put off by challenging questions nor the
lack of encouraging words or smiles from panelists. Perhaps the best sign of success is when the candidate turns the interview into a conversation with the panelists.

**Sophistication on the issues:** The candidate realizes that there are few clear-cut answers and solutions, that there are problems and obstacles, that our political system rarely moves ahead full-speed ... and for good reasons. Just saying that something should be this way or that way is rarely enough.

The best ways to become sophisticated are probably through regularly reading the NY Times [especially the editorials] and through small-group or seminar discussions of issues.

**Exciting in one or more dimensions:** This can be through an unusual career/education program that makes sense, outstanding accomplishments, extraordinary devotion, personal appeal, energy, humor, occasionally sheer intellectual horsepower targeted toward public service.

**Breadth of interest and knowledge beyond the intended career field:** Single issue folks rarely appeal to selection panels. A frequent question to persons who appear to be single issue is: “What would you do if the problem you want to address suddenly went away?”

**Ability to analyze “on the fly”:** Often panelists ask questions to see how well candidates can grapple with issues and concepts that they have not connected previously. Examples of questions are: “What are the most meaningful books you have read that the President should read?” “What are the biggest issues facing American society?” Successful candidates feel somewhat comfortable in grappling with such far-out questions, maybe even having fun.

**Consistency with the written material:** Successful Finalists talk the way they write, thoroughly understand their policy recommendations, and display some of the characteristics mentioned in Item 14 and in the Faculty Nomination letter.

**Responsiveness to the questions:** They address head-on the questions raised and try to respond to what the interviewers have asked, not what the candidates necessarily want to address. Not getting bogged down, especially on questions to which they are not doing well. Few successful candidates answer all of the questions well. It is far better to keep answers short, cut losses, and let panelists pose lots of questions.

**Keeping the interview and the outcome in perspective:** Candidates who come in with the attitude that they “have to win” or are “destined to win” do poorly. This is not a life and death situation. Most Finalists will get to graduate school.

**Criteria for Selection**

A good candidate for the Truman Scholarship:

- has an extensive record of public and community service;
- has outstanding leadership potential and communication skills; and
- is committed to a career in government or elsewhere in public service
- is a “change agent” – has potential as a policy-maker and policy-improver
Finalists are selected on the basis of:

- extent and quality of community service and government involvement;
- leadership record;
- academic performance, writing and analytical skills; and
- suitability of the nominee's proposed program of study for a career in public service.

Regional selection panels select Truman Scholars largely on the basis of:

- leadership potential and communication skills;
- intellectual strength and analytical ability; and
- likelihood of 'making a difference' in public service.

**Practice Questions for Truman Interviews**

- How has your favorite book affected your life?
- Why will your policy proposal actually make a difference?
- If you could take part in any social movement of the 20th century what would it be?
- Name a public figure that you admire or who inspires you?
- What makes you tick and what ticks you off?
- Who is your favorite scholar in your discipline? Least favorite?
- How can you support this policy given the experiences and beliefs you share in the rest of the application?
- If you could be a dictator for one day, what policies would you pass?
- How did you respond to a recent failure?
- What do you think is the most pressing problem facing America today?
- How would you repair the electoral process?
- What would be your alternate "life plan" if the one you are charted for does not work?
- What is most important to you: civic duty or personal liberty? Why?
- Argue a political position you feel strongly; now argue the other side.
- How would Truman respond to your policy?

FYI -- Arizona Truman Review Panel Interviewers can be found on the Truman website under Regional Panels. Look them up: research who they are, their professions, accomplishments, etc.

2015: For the past several years, the Truman Scholars Association (an organization of Truman Scholar alumni) has hosted pre-interview dinners in the interview cities the night prior to the finalist interviews. The dinners are informal, fun, optional events for the finalists and a few Truman alumni hosts (interview panelists do not attend). The dinner locations are chosen at relatively inexpensive restaurants close to the venue where the students will be interviewed, and each person attending the dinner covers his or her own meal and transportation expenses. All finalists will be contacted by their interview city’s Truman host shortly after the official finalist announcement; if you wish to attend the dinner, please plan to be available for dinner around 7 p.m. in your interview city the evening before your interview.

More information on the interview at [http://www.truman.gov](http://www.truman.gov)