



Office of Graduate Fellowships

Tips and Advice:

BOREN FELLOWSHIPS

Choice of Language and Country

- You may only submit one application per competition cycle. In some cases the language will determine the country (e.g., Thai, Korean), while in other cases you may have a choice of destinations (Arabic, Portuguese.) Whenever possible you should choose from among Boren's preferred languages and countries, which are listed on their web site. If your desired language / country is not on the preferred list, however, it may still be supported. Contact a Boren team member to verify that the language/country you are interested in will be supported in the upcoming competition cycle.
- Boren is looking for evidence of a **serious, enduring commitment** to your chosen language and/or region, including relevance to your longer-term academic and career goals. If you are applying to study a language that is taught at Mason (or for which you could reasonably be expected to find opportunities to study locally outside Mason), the selection panel will naturally expect to see that you have availed yourself of these opportunities. If there is a good reason why you have not done so, you should address it in your essays, and be prepared to offer other evidence of your interest in that language and/or region, such as past language study or study abroad, courses focusing on the region, or training/experience with issues relevant to the region. If you've only recently decided to seriously pursue the language in question and are just getting started, that's OK too, but demonstrate that you've chosen this language for a reason and given some thought to how you will follow through – not just as a Boren Fellow, but beyond that as well. If the language or country you choose seems to have been plucked from the air with no connection to either your past or future endeavors, you face an uphill battle in convincing your reader that this is a serious commitment.
- The Boren Fellowship does not limit the number of awards for any language or country. Therefore you gain no advantage by applying to an "obscure" language on the supposition that it will be "less competitive." That said, be aware that if you apply for a "popular" language like Arabic or Chinese, your application will be read alongside those of people who have made a serious commitment to and investment in that language, and demonstrated a talent for it. Yes, they take applications from beginners, but just "throwing your hat in the ring" is a long shot.
- Proposals to study Spanish or French will be accepted only from students already at an advanced level of proficiency – that is, sufficient to attend university lectures in the target language – but who also really need immersion training to move them from merely "advanced" to a professional level of educated fluency, or to master a local dialect. Awards will NOT be made to study in Western Europe. Most such awards go to Latin America (Spanish) or sub-Saharan Africa (French). French can now also be studied via the African Languages Initiative (ALI).

- Heritage speakers are accepted and can be good candidates under certain circumstances. First, the applicant should actually require training in the language – literate, fully bilingual candidates or individuals who can already function as educated native speakers will not be funded. Second, the language study goals must tie in with the applicant’s academic and career goals. A simple desire to master a heritage language unconnected to career goals is not sufficient.

Your Project Proposal: Language Training and Beyond

One of the key features – and biggest challenges – of the Boren Fellowship is that it requires the applicant to design his or her own program from scratch. Since language study is the central aspect of the program, it makes first to work out this component first, then fit in other activities around it.

- Language study and/or mastery **MUST** be the core of your Boren application. If your program of language study is very intensive, it may be the only thing you do as a Boren Fellow. Language-only proposals are acceptable to Boren, and do get funded so long as they are sufficiently rigorous and can successfully argue that this is the best approach for you at this time. Language-only proposals will generally consist of some combination of formal instruction, tutoring, and less-structured opportunities to engage in conversation practice (such as a home stay or immersion activities offered through the language school.)
- Many applications also incorporate other activities that help to reinforce language learning while contributing the applicant’s longer-term career goals. These activities may include independent research or study, coursework, community involvement, an internship (unpaid – remember, you’ll be supported by Boren), or fieldwork.
- Research may be toward a master’s thesis, doctoral dissertation, term paper, or other academic assignment, or may be an independent project intended for publication. It is also common for Boren fellows to do “pilot” research with the goal of “laying the groundwork” for future thesis or dissertation research. If you propose to conduct independent research, make sure you are well prepared and will have the necessary language skills and academic background to carry out the work you propose. Boren will not support projects that depend on the use of translators or guides.
- If you propose coursework, decide at the outset whether you will take classes in English or in the target language. The coursework should relate to your career goals and support your interest in U.S. national security. If you hope to obtain academic or degree credit for coursework, it is up to your degree program at home to approve that. Ask your graduate program director about procedures for this, and don’t forget to budget for registration costs at home as well as in the host country.
- If you propose an internship, volunteer work, or service-learning project, do some research about the organizations you might want to work with. Reach out to them to ask if they would be willing to host you should you be awarded the Boren Fellowship. (Make sure they understand that you would not need to be paid.) While it is not necessary to have these plans finalized at the time of application, it will greatly strengthen the application if you can demonstrate that you have lined up some possibilities and started to lay the groundwork. As with research and coursework, make sure you will have the necessary language skills to realistically engage in the kind of work you propose.

- If you do opt to combine language training and other activities, don't overstuff your application with side projects – research, fieldwork, classes, sports, community service... and an internship too! After a while it starts to seem like the applicant is just throwing stuff out there to see what will stick. (Another classic example is the applicant who in one essay proposes to travel around the country conducting interviews, while in the other telling us he/she is taking 5 hours a day of language classes in the capital city... these two plans are not compatible!) Sometimes less is more.
- Be careful not to propose a research project, side project, or slate of coursework that will obviously require a higher level of language proficiency than what you have, especially at the beginning. Consider scheduling the parts of your research / study project that require greater language proficiency toward the end of your time in the country, and setting this as a language goal to work toward.
- In filling out the application forms, you will be asked to write an abstract of your project. If you are not sure what an abstract should look like, study some examples from published articles/dissertations or ask your academic advisor.

Focus on the Essays

The single most important component of the Boren application package is the essay section. Here is where you present your self-designed Boren Fellowship program and relate it to both your present qualifications and your future career goals. The Boren Fellowship requires two essays.

****PLEASE NOTE: Prior to the 2016 competition cycle, the Boren application required 3 (rather than 2) essays. Older application guidelines and advising materials may refer to 3 essays. The following information has been updated to reflect the NEW guidelines for the 2016 cycle.****

- Essay #1 asks you to address two major points: First, you must address the relevance of your proposed country, region, and language to **U.S. national security**. Second, you are asked to discuss your **career goals** (including the **federal service requirement**) as they relate to the country, language, and program of study you have proposed.
 - ✓ The key here is to address these points in terms of YOUR academic and professional interests. Don't make a generic case for why your chosen language/region is important to U.S. interests abroad; instead, make a case for that with specific, focused reference to your own academic interests and career goals. Are your interests focused on trade? Terrorism? Migration? Cultural diplomacy? Environmental issues? Global health? Human rights? Make your case with specific reference to the issues and questions driving your interest in the region.
 - ✓ Remember that broad-minded and creative approaches to the idea of national security are welcome. While traditional definitions of "national security" are welcomed, there are not necessarily preferred. Consider less direct or obvious dimensions of security such as cultural diplomacy, economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, food security, migration, global health, conflict resolution, and so on.

- **Essay #2** is where you describe the nuts and bolts of your **proposed plan** for the fellowship term, including most prominently your specific goals for language study.
 - ✓ Let the reader know where you are now with regard to your language study, and what level of proficiency you hope to attain through your Boren Fellowship program. How will you do it? Where will you engage in language study? (Give the name of the school, city, program, etc.) What courses will you take, for how many hours per week and at what level? Will you have tutors, discussion groups, or other structured opportunities to practice conversation? What kinds of extra-curricular activities will you participate in to reinforce what you learn in the classroom? Also, don't neglect to describe your plans for maintaining and building upon your language gains after returning to the U.S. What is your longer-term game plan for mastering (and ultimately using) this language?
 - ✓ If your proposed Boren Fellowship program also includes research, an internship, or coursework, describe that, too, and relate it to your language study. Who will provide your overseas affiliation? Will you have a local mentor and/or institutional contact? What courses will you take? What kind of research or internship will you do? Be as specific as possible when it comes to the who/what/when/where/why. Describe anything relevant about your living situation in the country, especially as it related to language study (will you live with a host family or local roommate, for instance?) Beware of a common pitfall: Do not simply talk about what your program "offers" – tell the reader what you personally actually plan to do.
 - ✓ The reader should finish this essay with a clear sense of what you will do with your time as a Boren Fellow day to day, week to week, month to month... and what kind of language gains you expect to make in the process.

Essay Tips and Hints:

- Consider writing essay #2 before tackling #1. Essay #1 is the "big picture" essay. It's easier to write it once you have a very clear idea of what you want to accomplish and how you are going to do it.
- NEVER make assumptions about the order in which essays will be read, and do not refer the reader back to another essay ("As discussed in Essay #1...") This antagonizes the reader by forcing them to remember or look things up. The essays should be able to stand on their own.
- Avoid repetition – the essays should reinforce each other without repeating information.
- Develop a rock solid language study plan and describe it in straightforward language.
- Don't waste precious space talking about what a wonderful and prestigious opportunity the fellowship is, or how honored you would be to receive it – that is understood. Avoid using sentences beginning with "If I receive the fellowship I will..." Instead simply say "I will" or "I plan to."

- Give as much information as possible about your career goals. As a graduate student, you will be expected to have a well-developed vision of your career and how the target language fits in. You will not be penalized if things turn out differently later on, so don't be afraid to put that vision forward.
- When discussing the service requirement, think in terms of the *type* of work you would like to do rather than in terms of specific jobs, agencies, or programs.
- If you are interested in working for a particular agency or department within the US government (either as part of your service requirement or in your career beyond), do your homework and show that you really understand that career path. Lots of essays say something like "I want to work for the State Department/Foreign Service/USAID/etc." What sets you apart? What if you could do the same kind of work but for another agency or employer.
- While you are expected to have given careful thought to the federal service requirement and demonstrate an interest in public service, you are not necessarily expected to commit to a career in the federal government. Boren knows that not all returning fellows will continue in government work beyond the service requirement, and ultimately they are interested in training a wide array of future professionals. If you envision a career in another sector or type of work beyond the end of your service requirement, don't be afraid to say so; this will not damage your application.
- When describing your plan in Essay #2, avoid talking about "possibilities" or "opportunities" – tell the reader instead what YOU – personally – WILL DO. Even if some details can only be worked out after you are there, spell out a plan of action. For example, don't say, "The XYZ Language School offers opportunities to engage in community service." Instead say, "While abroad I plan to engage in community service as a way of gaining additional conversation practice and learning more about the host society. Community service can be arranged through the XYZ Language School after I enroll. Possible placements include..."
- If you choose to use phrases like "the events of 9/11," "the rise of ISIS," or "our increasingly globalized world" in your essay, you'd better have something really new and fresh and personally relevant to say about those topics!
- If you are applying to study in a place where the culture or standard of living is very different from the United States, think about how to convey a sense of your readiness, adaptability, maturity, and personal stability. This is not a group program; you will be on your own in the field, and are required to function independently under challenging circumstances, not to mention in a language you are still learning. It is important to demonstrate that you know what you are getting into and have realistic expectations. If you think you will need a higher level of structure and support, consider choosing a language school/program that provides housing and/or on-site support.
- Don't neglect to discuss what you will do after you return to maintain your language ability. This is a common pitfall! Absence of a follow-up plan suggests you are not all that serious about the language.

Common Pitfalls

- **Applicant fails to meet multiple preference targets.** Boren has [five stated preferences](#) for fellowship applicants: (a) Country; (b) Language; (c) Field of Study; (d) Duration of 6+ months; and (e) Commitment to Federal Government Service Requirement. An applicant who fails to meet two or more preferences has a reduced chance of selection. Strive to meet at least four. Note that proposals for countries/languages that are not on the “preferred” list ARE sometimes supported. If you wish to propose study in a non-preferred country/language, contact Boren first to make sure your country and/or language are supported, even if they are not “preferred.” Proposals to western Europe will not be considered.
- **Applicant fails to adequately convey the importance of their work to national security.** Remember that “national security” can mean both traditional concepts of homeland security, defense, and protecting US interests abroad and also broader challenges to global security that impact the US – such as global environmental issues, immigration, global health, conflict, diplomacy, economic development, education, trade/commerce, soft power, and so on. Boren is open to creative and broadly conceived definitions of national security, but the applicant must make the case for it and make the link to their language study / research topic explicit.
- **Applicant fails to demonstrate serious, ongoing commitment to learning the language.** This includes failure to take advantage of resources at home in the lead-up to the fellowship and failure to include a plan to maintain and build language proficiency after the conclusion of the fellowship. Boren fellows must demonstrate that *mastery* of the language is their ultimate goal and that their commitment to that goal goes beyond the Boren Fellowship.
- **Applicant fails to adequately address the federal government service requirement.** The application essay should convey that the student is aware of the requirement, has thought about it, and has ideas about ways they might like to fulfill this requirement. Applicant should demonstrate awareness of a range of government career paths and avenues for public service (not just State Department and USAID!) that make use of their language/regional training.
- **Applicant fails to directly and clearly answer the questions posed in the essay prompts.** Do not make your reader work to find the answers to these questions! Make it obvious for the reader which part of the question you are addressing. Do not try to recycle material from other applications that doesn’t quite fit the questions. Also remember: Boren does not require a personal statement, so do not write one: stick to the prompts at hand.
- **Applicant fails to read/follow directions.** This can mean everything from formatting specifications on essays to basic data to getting letters in on time. Failing to read directions may result in your application being disqualified, and will almost certainly antagonize reviewers. The application is a test of your professionalism, attention to detail, and the quality of your work. Sloppiness and failure to follow directions, even on seemingly minor details, reflects poorly on the your ability to plan and execute a quality project in the field.