

## BACKGROUND

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# Ideological Biases in the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Both the rhetoric and the structure of the Truman Scholarship Program exhibit ideological biases favoring “social change” progressives.

The program’s selection criteria should be aligned with the Secretary of Education’s determination of the national need in graduate education.

Reforming the program by removing its biases would also provide much-needed balance to better honor President Truman’s legacy.

The Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program provides up to \$30,000 each for college students who plan to attend graduate school and then engage in public service. The program, which is publicly funded and is operated within the executive branch by the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, generally selects one student from each state and territory per year.

The foundation’s board is about equally balanced between Republicans and Democrats by law. Two Senators (one from each political party), two Members of the House of Representatives (one from each party), and eight presidential appointees (no more than four from one political party) join the Secretary of Education on the board.

Yet both the rhetoric and the structure of the program exhibit ideological biases favoring “social change” progressives. Recent critics have noted that very few

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conservative students apply successfully.<sup>1</sup> This is likely due to the biases in the program. This *Background* describes these biases and offers a solution: align the program's selection criteria with the Secretary of Education's periodic, consultative determination of the national need in graduate education.

## The Truman Program Steers Applications to the Left

The Truman Foundation's definition of *public service* and its "change agent" rhetoric steer applicants to the ideological left. The clearest evidence of this rhetoric occurs on the program's website, which is the primary locus of communication among the program, potential applicants, and the institutions of higher education that nominate applicants.<sup>2</sup>

**Sample Application Responses.** The program's website provides many sample responses to application questions along with a brief analysis of the strengths or weaknesses of each response. This is where applicants are most clearly steered to the left. While some of the examples appear ideologically neutral, no example of a successful response is right-coded, while many are clearly left-coded.

Here are examples of left-coded responses:

- "I introduced students...to my studies in environmental racism."
- "The Sustainable Society...involved weekly lectures on the social, political, and economic factors of our food system."
- "The world currently faces the most unacceptable health disparities of the century."
- "A decline in the value of the minimum wage, a weaker and smaller unionized workforce, and fewer high-paying manufacturing jobs; and growth in low-wage, service sector, temporary and part-time work all contribute to widening income inequality in the U.S."
- "I would pursue a sociology minor, focusing on courses in metropolitan growth and development, urban ecology, social inequality, collective behavior and movements, and studies of organizational and political structures."
- "I have met several activists who found that they were unable to have the kind of impact on issues that affect the homeless and marginally housed.... I have been inspired to pursue a degree in law so that I will have the experience to organize homeless people and low-income tenants."

- “Classes like ‘Social stratification and education,’ ‘Gender and inequality: The role of the school,’ and ‘School improvement in the inner city: A sociological view’ would provide a vast sociological understanding of education.”<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, several of the examples of substandard responses are right-coded:

- “Any such opportunity to gain experience in areas of public policy that interest me, such as improving government efficiency and streamlining the bureaucratic structure, will no doubt prove invaluable.... I am currently pursuing a Bachelor of Science in both Military History and Systems Engineering.”
- “Going on active duty in the Marines is something I look forward to.... My Father is a pastor who has instilled in me Christian principles, these guide my life and decisions. From him I learned that a relationship with Christ is something that happens on the days between church services.”
- “I am learning in my travels to love my country more. As my mother remarked, ‘I never realized how much I like living in the United States until I wasn’t living there anymore.’ Generations ago, my ancestors immigrated to America.... I will not forget my Home.”<sup>4</sup>

**Privileging “Change Agents.”** The Truman program website directs applicant advisors to focus on “change agents,”<sup>5</sup> which is a term used commonly on the progressive left due to its aim of radically changing American institutions. Similarly, the program privileges those who plan to engage in “advocacy” over other kinds of public service. Serving the public as, for example, a teacher or researcher is not enough—the applicant must be able to affect “policy or advocacy”:

Applicants should also take care to distinguish between those occupations which are eligible (direct service occupations such as teachers, doctors and attorneys) and those which are competitive (policy, advocacy or leadership roles such as administrators, public health officials and lead advocates). Those students proposing careers in research should also take care to explain how they plan to translate their research into policy or advocacy.<sup>6</sup>

But the term *change agents* is seldom used on the right. Conservatives speak more of reform that restores core American traditions and values. Right-leaning applicants who seek positive change often speak of such efforts and principles as deregulation, unleashing market forces, spending cuts, patriotism, and supporting families. Right-leaning students tend to recognize that conservatives (or classical liberals or libertarians) often work to preserve and support what is good in the current order against efforts to change it for the worse—that positive change often comes from getting government out of the way of entrepreneurs, who are generally the nation’s most effective agents of change and prosperity.

Advancing such principles in policy or advocacy does not easily fit the Truman program’s focus on “change agents.” As a result, few of America’s future right-leaning professionals can see themselves as successful applicants to the Truman program. It is likely that many such students simply choose not to apply.

**Left-Coded Definition of *Public Service*.** Truman applicants should not be evaluated through a definition of *public service* that stresses “policy and advocacy” work. But the program’s regulatory definition of *public service*—which is not in the statute<sup>7</sup>—is also somewhat left-coded:

*Public service* means employment in: government at any level, the uniformed services, public interest organizations, non-governmental research and/or educational organizations, public and private schools, and public service oriented non-profit organizations such as those whose primary purposes are to help needy or disadvantaged persons or to protect the environment.<sup>8</sup>

The examples in this definition are left-coded. The term *disadvantaged* suggests that “disadvantaged” persons are victims of oppressors or an oppressive system—a category separate from those who merely are needy. While this language is just part of the examples, it reveals the program’s ideological bias.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, this definition calls for protection of the environment (left-coded) but not, for example, unborn children (right-coded).

If the program instead gave examples of constitutionalists, champions of merit and equal treatment under the law, promoters of strong families and federalism, or patriots serving the country’s national needs, conservative students and their advisors might see hope for successful applications to the Truman program.

**Excluding MBAs and Corporate Work.** More broadly, the program website explicitly states that pursuing a master of business administration (MBA) degree is not merely unwelcome but excluded. Under “Eligibility,” the program states, “Candidates can be...interested in any graduate degree other than the MBA.”<sup>10</sup> Only elsewhere on the website—if they get that

far—do potential candidates learn that this exclusion is not absolute and that the Truman Foundation requires additional justification from candidates who plan to pursue MBAs:

We rarely support MBAs as these degrees are usually not likely to lead to careers in public service....<sup>11</sup>

Scholars who are proposing study in an MBA program must include the following information in order to be considered for the full amount of their graduate stipend: Whether their program has a formal track specifically targeted toward employment in government or the non-profit sector.<sup>12</sup>

The program's structural bias against for-profit employment all but excludes potential applicants who plan to serve the public outside of policy work and direct advocacy—excluding them simply because of the incorporation status of their future employers. In addition to the overwhelmingly positive public effects of for-profit corporations in America's market economy, many for-profit corporations today devote substantial resources to efforts that should be recognized as public service. Such efforts include scholarships, donations, sponsorships, community programs, international development, and even policy advocacy. But no successful Truman applicant may plan to pursue employment at such corporations, and no Truman Scholar may receive public service credit for the years worked at such corporations.<sup>13</sup>

Neither the applicable statute nor the applicable regulations exclude particular graduate degrees from eligibility. The MBA is the only degree singled out for this negative treatment and additional requirements, although in one place the doctor of medicine degree is also deprioritized on the program's website.<sup>14</sup>

The program's structural, regulatory, and rhetorical biases, taken together, strongly encourage left-leaning liberal and progressive applicants and strongly discourage classical liberals and conservatives. Conservative-leaning institutions of higher education likely see little use in sending any applicants into the scholarship process. Pepperdine University, Liberty University, and Grand Canyon University have had zero Truman Scholars across the history of the program. Hillsdale College has had just one.<sup>15</sup>

## The Truman Program's Applicant Pool Skews Deeply Left

Understanding why conservative students are so poorly represented in the Truman program goes beyond the program's particular biases. In addition, universities and non-STEM departments are themselves biased left in America today.

First, successful applicants are more likely to come from elite colleges. Applicants from elite colleges are more likely to be strong Truman applicants because of the institutions' academic reputations. But these institutions commonly prioritize qualities beyond academic achievement in their admissions policies and select undergraduates deemed good fits with the institutions and their values and cultures. Such institutions, whose cultures and values are widely known as ideologically running from the center-left to the extreme left, reproduce their ideologies in their student bodies.<sup>16</sup> As a result, conservative students constitute a much smaller pool of potentially successful Truman applicants.

Second, undergraduate and graduate programs outside the hard sciences also skew deeply left. Brooklyn College professor Mitchell Langbert found extremely lopsided Democrat-to-Republican ratios by discipline among elite liberal arts colleges. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields had the lowest such ratios—but still very unbalanced ones. The facts get much starker in the humanities and social sciences, with a ratio of 56 Democrats to zero Republicans in the field of communications.<sup>17</sup>

While the Truman program discourages or excludes MBA-seeking applicants, it privileges MPA/MPP (public policy), JD (law), MEd (education), MIA (international affairs), MSW (social work), and MPH (public health) degrees by name.<sup>18</sup> Such programs tend to be ideologically quite biased and hostile to conservative views. For example, accredited social work programs must meet the Council on Social Work Education's Competency 2 and Competency 3 standards excerpted here:

Competency 2: Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice

Social workers...are knowledgeable about the global intersecting and ongoing injustices throughout history that result in oppression and racism, including social work's role and response. Social workers critically evaluate the distribution of power and privilege in society in order to promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice.

Competency 3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice

Social workers understand how racism and oppression shape human experiences and how these two constructs influence practice at the individual, family, group, organizational, and community levels and in policy and research. Social

workers understand the pervasive impact of White supremacy and privilege and use their knowledge, awareness, and skills to engage in anti-racist practice. Social workers understand how diversity and intersectionality shape human experiences and identity development and affect equity and inclusion.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, when faculty members nominate students, they likely reproduce the biases and ideologies in their disciplines as they determine which applicants are the kind of “change agents” who can win Truman Scholarships.

## Policy Recommendations

The factors above show how the Truman program is structured and advertised to steer applicants to the left and to select scholarship winners accordingly. One solution is to end the program altogether. Or, to remedy these biases:

- The Truman Foundation should **scrub the program’s regulations and website of their explicit and implicit biases.**

This work includes revisiting the foundation’s definition of *public service* and its hostility to public service accomplished through for-profit enterprises. It also includes removing biases across the program website, namely its advice for advisors and applicants, its “change agent” rhetoric, and the biases in its sample responses.

- Congress should **harmonize the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program with the U.S. Department of Education’s Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program.**

Each GAANN program grant cycle, the Secretary of Education determines and announces the areas of national need with respect to graduate programs. Making this determination includes consultation with other federal agencies including the National Science Foundation, Department of War, Department of Homeland Security, National Academy of Sciences, and Bureau of Labor Statistics as well as “appropriate Federal and nonprofit agencies and organizations.”<sup>20</sup> The Secretary designates areas of national need on the basis of the following:

1. the extent to which the interest in the area is compelling;

2. the extent to which other Federal programs support postbaccalaureate study in the area concerned;
3. an assessment of how the program may achieve the most significant impact with available resources; and
4. an assessment of current (as of the time of the designation) and future professional workforce needs of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

When performed well, this process results in priorities for graduate study that genuinely serve the nation. A definition of *public service* based on serving the public's needs is far better than the Truman program's current wide-ranging, undifferentiated, left-coded, anti-MBA definition, which includes all possible "public service oriented non-profit organizations" and much else, as quoted above.

Therefore, the most recent list of GAANN program disciplines should become the maximum range of disciplines from which the Truman program selects applicants from year to year. The Truman legislation, or at least its pertinent regulations, should redefine public service accordingly—in terms of the studies that would, after careful consultation, be determined to actually serve the public.

Harmonizing the Truman and GAANN programs would enable national needs to be better met from both an academic perspective and a public service perspective. Furthermore, because the greatest national needs tend to exist in STEM fields, which are less ideologically biased, the Truman program would probably become more ideologically balanced.<sup>22</sup>

For example, under a Democratic Administration in 2024, the Secretary of Education identified the following disciplines (including various subdisciplines) as national needs under the GAANN program:

- Computer and Information Sciences,
- Education,
- Engineering,
- Biological Sciences/Life Sciences,
- Mathematics,



- Physical Sciences, and
- Psychology.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, under a Republican Administration in January 2021, the GAANN program identified the following disciplines deserving national support in furtherance of national needs:

- Cybersecurity,
- Secure Computer Programming,
- Artificial Intelligence,
- Engineering,
- Biological Sciences/Life Sciences,
- Psychology, and
- Nursing.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

All public service is not the same. The Truman program should produce subject-matter experts who are able to provide public service in well-defined areas of America's needs as those needs change over time. Defining America's priorities in public service and reforming the program by removing its biases would also provide much-needed balance to better honor President Truman's legacy.

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## Endnotes

1. Frederick M. Hess and Joe Pitts, "Do the Rhodes and Truman Scholarships Have Any Room for the Right?," American Enterprise Institute, May 6, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/do-the-rhodes-and-truman-scholarships-have-any-room-for-the-right> (accessed October 7, 2025); Frederick M. Hess, "The Truman Foundation Must Embrace Civic Seriousness," James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, May 16, 2025, <https://jamesgmartin.center/2025/05/the-truman-foundation-must-embrace-civic-seriousness> (accessed October 7, 2025); Benjamin Rothove, "80% of Federally Funded Truman Scholars Involved in Liberal Causes Within a Decade of Winning," College Fix, August 13, 2025, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/80-of-federally-funded-truman-scholars-involved-in-liberal-causes-within-a-decade-of-winning> (accessed October 7, 2025).
2. Contrary to Title 45, Section 1801.16 of the Code of Federal Regulations, the foundation apparently has not posted a competition notice in the *Federal Register* since 2005. The foundation uses less official sources, such as its website, to communicate application guidance.
3. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Example Responses," <https://www.truman.gov/apply/advice-guidance/example-responses> (accessed November 15, 2025).
4. Ibid.
5. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Notes for Advisors," <https://www.truman.gov/apply/advisors/notes-advisors> (accessed October 9, 2025).
6. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Frequent Reasons for Not Advancing," <https://www.truman.gov/apply/advice-guidance/frequent-reasons-not-advancing> (accessed October 9, 2025).
7. 20 U.S.C. § 2001–2012.
8. 45 Code of Federal Regulations § 1801.4.
9. For right-coded examples, see Adam Kissel, "Action Civics for Conservatives," *Townhall*, December 3, 2019, <https://townhall.com/columnists/adamkissel/2019/12/03/action-civics-for-conservatives-n2557413> (accessed October 9, 2025).
10. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Eligibility," <https://www.truman.gov/apply/applying/eligibility> (accessed October 9, 2025).
11. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Frequently Asked Questions for Applicants," <https://www.truman.gov/apply/advice-guidance/frequently-asked-questions-applicants> (accessed October 9, 2025).
12. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Scholar Reporting," <https://www.truman.gov/scholar-reporting> (accessed October 9, 2025).
13. "A Scholar...must be employed in public service for three of the seven years following completion of his or her Foundation funded graduate education." 34 Code of Federal Regulations § 1801.63.
14. "The Foundation does not give priority to candidates seeking MBAs or MDs unless they can demonstrate a strong public policy or public health interest." Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Notes for Advisors."
15. Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation, "Scholar Listing," 2025, <https://www.truman.gov/meet-our-scholars/scholar-listing> (accessed October 9, 2025).
16. See, for example, the annual campus climate surveys of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) at FIRE, "The 2026 College Free Speech Rankings," <https://rankings.thefire.org> (accessed October 9, 2025).
17. Mitchell Langbert, "Author Correction: Homogenous: The Political Affiliations of Elite Liberal Arts College Faculty," *Academic Questions*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 2018), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325471509\\_Author\\_Correction\\_Homogenous\\_The\\_Political\\_Affiliations\\_of\\_Elite\\_Liberal\\_Arts\\_College\\_Faculty](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325471509_Author_Correction_Homogenous_The_Political_Affiliations_of_Elite_Liberal_Arts_College_Faculty) (accessed December 12, 2025). Langbert and Stevens also found a Democrat-to-Republican faculty ratio of 8.5 to 1 at "flagship colleges." Mitchell Langbert and Sean Stevens, "Partisan Registration of Faculty in Flagship Colleges," *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (2022), pp. 1750–1760, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1957815> (accessed October 9, 2025).
18. Truman Foundation, "Notes for Advisors."
19. Council on Social Work Education, "2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Bachelor's and Master's Social Work Programs," pp. 9–10, <https://www.cswe.org/accreditation/policies-process/2022epas> (accessed October 9, 2025). See also Adam Kissel and Timothy J. Rosenberger Jr., "The Politicization of Higher Education Accreditation," Texas Public Policy Foundation, August 2023, <https://www.texaspolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/2023-08-NGT-PoliticizationofHigherEducationAccreditation-KisselRosenberger.pdf> (accessed October 9, 2025).
20. 20 U.S.C. § 1135a(b).
21. Ibid.
22. Choosing disciplines and subdisciplines that tend to be more ideologically balanced is a way to avoid direct preferences that amount to "affirmative action for conservatives." See Adam Kissel, "How Trustees Can Protect Free Inquiry and Promote Intellectual Diversity," in Lindsey Burke and Preston Cooper, eds., "Fulfilling the Trust: College Trustee Leadership in a New Era," American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation, April 2025, pp. 44–51, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Fulfilling-the-Trust-College-Trustee-Leadership-in-a-New-Era.pdf> (accessed October 9, 2025).

23. U.S. Department of Education, “Applications for New Awards; Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN),” *Federal Register*, Vol. 89, No. 80 (April 4, 2024), p. 31189, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/04/24/2024-08771/applications-for-new-awards-graduate-assistance-in-areas-of-national-need-gaann> (accessed October 9, 2025).
24. U.S. Department of Education, “Applications for New Awards; Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need,” *Federal Register*, Vol. 86, No. 10 (January 15, 2021), pp. 4024–4025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/15/2021-00766/applications-for-new-awards-graduate-assistance-in-areas-of-national-need> (accessed October 9, 2025).