

University of Illinois Boren Undergraduate Application Tips

Priority Deadline: January 3, 2018

Required Campus Deadline: January 16, 2018

Essays (the most important part of the application)

Readers will not have access to your resume, so share all of your great experiences!

Make sure your essays clearly and in some detail answer each of the questions presented. When you are finished with your essays, go back, read each question, and see if your essay provides an ample response.

Your application needs to demonstrate maturity and the ability to be adaptable and flexible.

Language acquisition is vital to the application—discuss how much you will learn and how you will use it.

State specifically how your study abroad experience fits with your career goals. If you are an international studies major, consider playing up some aspects of a minor to differentiate you from all of the other international studies majors. Include why the country you are going to is important to national security.

Address your academic/career goals. What do you plan to be doing in 1, 2, 5, and 10 years and beyond? A reader should be able to glean this from a well-constructed essay.

Let the readers know what type of position or agency you would be interested in working for, especially if your academic area is not a 'field of emphasis,' and how government work fits with your career plans.

The scholarship is not need-based--financial need statements in your application do nothing to help you.

In essay II, share the level of support you will receive when abroad and describe the courses you hope to take.

Use the Boren rating sheet. How would you rate your own essays in each of the areas? Strengthen those areas that you think would receive a low score.

Submit the application online early—long before the campus deadlines—to the National and International Scholarships Program for feedback. Then email times you can meet (topscholars@illinois.edu). We will then re-release the application for you to edit.

Application Details (online application)

Early in the application, you are asked for your academic status. If you have a large number of AP credits, but still plan to spend four years at the University of Illinois or are a fifth year senior, explain that in your essay(s). Explain where you are in your college career as well as how much you have left as an undergraduate.

“Advanced language skills,” (required for French or Spanish) is based on a challenging ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview. See the Boren Website for further information.

Obtain detailed cost breakdowns for both preferred and alternate programs from a study abroad advisor. Order transcripts in advance with a delay to include your fall semester grades.

Other Information

Illinois info on applying for the Boren is at <http://topscholars.illinois.edu/boren-undergraduate>

Sample essays are available for review at the National and International Scholarships Program.

A University of Illinois faculty member served on a selection committee for the Boren scholarships in 2007. The faculty member generously provided the following tips with regard to what they considered strong and weak applications to help our students become more competitive.

- o The biggest problem with some applications was spelling, grammatical and syntax errors. This put an application in the "do not recommend" pile very quickly because it indicated it had been put together in a slipshod manner and hadn't been carefully reviewed. And not all problems can be taken care of with the MS spell check function, for example "loin's share" instead of "lion's share." Students might be well served to take their final essays to a writing center
- o The essay should be well balanced. Devote a few paragraphs to explaining why learning Korean (or any other language), for example, is important to U.S. national security. This should also include a brief discussion of current circumstances in the country, which helps to identify the student's level of knowledge and commitment when compared to other applicants. Most students, in fact, didn't do this, which is why those who did stood out as having a superior knowledge of the country/region.
- o The student should also make a credible argument as to how the scholarship will contribute to his/her career aspirations and how those, in turn, will contribute to broader U.S. security interests.
- o Provide an interesting discussion about the student's own background. If possible, open with an attention-getting statement (but not over the top.) Our committee reviewed 56 applications, all very thick. The student must be able to delineate his or her application from the others.
- o Offer a credible, innovative and realistic career path. Clearly 95% of the applications reviewed indicated a desire on the part of the students to join the State Department as Foreign Service Officers; it almost became meaningless. And of this percentage, only one had a realistic understanding of the actual selection process and difficulty in becoming a diplomat. Students might consider other options when compiling applications—CIA, DoD, etc. Again, in most cases it was those applications that differed from the norm that garnered additional consideration. If a student is firmly committed to a career in the DoS, then he/she should exercise due diligence in identifying a potential career path, being as specific as possible. Merely saying one wants to sit at a negotiating table representing the U.S. government is well intentioned, but unrealistic given the normal trajectory of FSO careers. In short, students must do their homework.
- o Ensure that the program of study actually does provide intensive language training, along with other courses like political science, culture, economic, or international relations courses. "Intensive" in this case seemed to fall somewhere between 90-120 hours per semester; anything much less than that was questioned. Sanctioned "out-of-class" learning experiences also helped—homestays, living with students of the target country, opportunities to join student clubs, etc.
- o If a student has the choice of enrolling in a well-established program and a lesser known one, go with the former; it makes a difference particularly toward the end of the selection process.
- o Students should be careful when selecting people to write letters of endorsement—nothing sends up a red flag more quickly than a weakly written or lackluster recommendation. Similarly, strong recommendations from language instructors are essential.
- o Students should make an honest assessment of their academic background and application and how it is likely to stack up against those of other students. For example, if a student is a junior and is majoring in music, art, business, etc. and has taken no language, history, culture or international relations courses related to the target country, the application will likely come across as weak and some reviewers might regard it as opportunistic—a free study abroad opportunity