

Recommendation for John Black

It is my pleasure to recommend **John M. Black** for a Rhodes Scholarship. I have known John since the middle of his first year here, and think very highly of him.

As I mention in my formal endorsement for John (I am the Dean of Fellowships here), he is the most honored and decorated member of the class of 1997. Last spring he won a Beinecke Foundation Fellowship, in a tough national competition with many other worthy candidates. He has also been appointed as a Ruchman Fellow here at Williams. The College only awards two such fellowships, choosing the two seniors most outstanding for their scholarly potential to hold them. Fellows are given space at our Oakley Center for the Humanities, where they carry on research among faculty who have been awarded parallel grants. Finally, John is a Senior Tutor in The Writing Workshop, a program I direct. In this capacity, John is charged with training neophyte tutors. The welfare of the entire program depends upon the success of this training.

John came by these honors partially because of his superb academic record here. That alone, however, could not have been sufficient, since other students here have grades as high, and a few have grades even higher. The awards came to John because of the way his teachers think and write about him. They find him brilliant, tireless, variously creative, mature, and a leader. In fact, John is that great rarity: a student who actually educates his teachers in substantial ways.

Again, the knowledge that he has spread among faculty and administrators here is not all that special. Several of our brightest students have understandings of electronic media that dwarf those even of professionals in the field here. The generational difference makes them comfortable and intuitive with methods and systems that adults have to learn. What distinguishes John from this group of young wizards is his ability to communicate, his special ability to teach.

For several summers, John, an adept mountaineer who has climbed several 14,000-foot peaks, guided and taught children at a summer camp, teaching them to climb, and endowing them with the will and the endurance to master some of the high peaks. Once when he and I were discussing his adventures, I asked him how he might get a child like my daughter, Sophia, who is not particularly kinetic or fond of pain, up a 12,000-foot peak. He explained that if she faltered, he would simply persuade her to take one more step, and then another. This technique, he admitted, didn't always work, but it did at times.

This is the patience of the teacher. John could have jogged up the slopes that his charges found so daunting, but he took baby steps with them, never making any child feel inadequate. Similarly, it is John (and not some his contemporaries, who might as well be speaking Greek when they try to explain computers to adults) who has had the patience to guide faculty and staff here, and to keep us within shouting distance of the cutting edge in the use of modern and ever changing electronic media. He has certainly made a mark, revolutionizing the way the Art Department stores images and bringing light to many a benighted faculty member or administrator.

I know him well on a personal level. He strikes me as extremely modest, even a little shy. He is very morally serious, Goodness and justice matter to him a great deal. At the same time, he is not a puritan, and there is no self righteousness either in his manner or in his sensibility. Beneath the shyness, and completely unmarbled with conceit, there is real confidence, the confidence that comes from substantial and copious accomplishment.

He is a very generous soul, and consistently volunteers for difficult duties when he is needed. For this and for other reasons he is highly respected **by** his peers.

Finally, with all this variousness of accomplishment and talent, he remains various even within his chosen academic fields. John is a fine Art Historian. John is also a fine Literary Critic. Although it is Art he plans to study if he goes to Oxford, I believe that he will always maintain both disciplines. Perhaps he will get a terminal degree in and teach just one of them, but his mind is a highly eclectic mind and his teaching and his scholarship will always be, I think, interdisciplinary.

I see John as becoming a prominent academic, but one who leads his department, his colleagues, and his field into new areas. What the culture needs desperately are leaders easily at home with all the dizzying technological proliferation of our age and also firmly educated in the Humanities. These will be the leaders who make sure that our wonderful technical creations remain our servants and never become our masters. John is clearly a fine young exemplar of this kind of leader.

Sincerely,