

Recommendation for John Black for a Rhodes Scholarship

John Black is one of the most distinguished members of the senior class at Williams College. Elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the end of junior year, John earned his exceptionally high average while taking a diverse array of ambitious and demanding courses. And he is, simply put, one of the finest English majors I have taught in my eighteen years at Williams.

I have known John well for two years, having taught him in two courses, advised him on academic matters, and worked closely with him in my capacity as chair of his major department. I first met John in the spring of his sophomore year, when he talked his way into my course on "Samuel Johnson and the Literary Tradition." Since this course is pitched to highly experienced senior majors, I was initially unsure that a sophomore could handle the work. But I needn't have worried: it quickly became clear that, even in this group of thirty excellent students, John was the most impressive--the one with the most acute critical insights, the most daring and precise intellect, and the strongest analytical and imaginative powers.

These talents were first evident in class discussions. John's contributions were splendid: precise and eloquent, well-timed, challenging, and lucid. He would invariably advance the conversation to a higher level of argument. I was impressed, too, by his thoughtfulness in responding to other students, and by the skill with which he integrated their views into his remarks. His written work in the course was dazzling--especially his long final paper on the pattern of imagery that shapes Johnson's criticism. It illuminated that subject at the level of complexity and detail that surpassed many published articles on this subject, and was one of the most original and compelling essays I've ever received from a student.

I am teaching John again this term in a course on the novels of Nabokov and Pynchon. It is already clear to me that John's skills as a reader and critic have grown exponentially since sophomore year. His remarks in class about these two difficult and slippery writers are at a level of critical sophistication one might expect from an advanced graduate student. This could, of course, present a problem in an undergraduate course; but John articulates his rich and complicated responses to the novels with enormous clarity and rhetorical alertness, and thus keeps all of us with him as his mind races along.

In all of his academic work, then, John has shown himself to be an enormously rigorous, ambitious, and subtle thinker, with a refined aesthetic sensibility and a talent for making complex discriminations. He is intellectually courageous--always willing to take on hard questions and demanding issues. I admire his independence of mind: he has the initiative and skill to **find** his way through difficult material on his own, and he is unafraid to challenge--though always in a respectful way--received opinion and accepted wisdom. And something more: John thinks, talks, and writes about literature with an easy, natural grace, and with unpretentious exuberance.

John is also a gifted poet. His talents have grown in remarkable ways over the past few years, and he is now writing a collection of poems as his senior honors thesis. I leave it to his advisor, Louise Green, to comment on his poetic talents; but I would note that it says a great deal about John's abilities that Glick, our Pulitzer Prize winning poet, selected John as her thesis student this year.

The distinction of John's work in **the** English Department earned him appointment this year to our Class of 1960 Scholars Program--a small group of our best senior majors who meet for special seminars with visiting critics and writers.

John's intellectual and creative talents equip him superbly for the graduate work in literature he now proposes to undertake. He has demonstrated such a high degree of intellectual initiative and independence that he is sure to flourish in the educational system at Oxford. And I should note, too, that his course work at Williams will have prepared him exceptionally well for advanced studies: by graduation, he will have taken thirteen courses in English, covering all major periods and genres of English and American literature (as well as related courses in Classics, Art, and other fields).

John has been an outstanding student leader in our department and College. His judgment and integrity are deeply valued by his fellow students and teachers, who have repeatedly entrusted him with sensitive duties. He was selected by his fellow students, for example, to serve as a "Senior Advisor" in our peer academic advising program. In the English Department, our faculty has twice appointed John (in junior and senior years) to serve on our Majors Committee--a small group of students who work closely with the faculty on various issues, including interviewing and appointing new faculty. This year John has also been appointed to our Curriculum Committee, which is responsible for planning next year's courses. In all these important roles, John's work has been outstanding. I am greatly impressed by his thoughtfulness and discernment, by the steadiness of his judgment, and by his tactful ability to find and shape a consensus in difficult situations. -

John is an exceptionally appealing and admirable person. He is unfailingly considerate of the needs of others; works easily and well with people of all ages and backgrounds; and is scrupulously honest. He has an exuberant sense of humor and a gracious sense of personal modesty. His company is sought and cherished by a wide circle of loyal friends.

I recommend John with the greatest possible confidence and enthusiasm. A Rhodes Scholarship would provide a splendid opportunity for John to enhance his critical and creative skills, and would add lustre to what already promises to be a distinguished career.

Thank you for considering this letter.

Sincerely yours,