What makes an ideal Watson Fellow?

An ideal candidate for the Watson Fellowship will stand out on campus due to their unique interest, strong campus leadership and what we commonly refer to as “unusual promise”. In evaluating a candidate, we look in the record for both explicit and implicit indicators of “unusual promise. Likewise, we look for indicators in the project, which reflect on the passion and strengths of the candidate, and which point to a good fit between topic and person.

Our Selection Criteria

We cannot stress too strongly that there is no magic formula for winning the Watson. Each application is evaluated holistically on its own terms. Something which indicates a healthy level of challenge for one candidate may make a project unfeasible for another. Activities that point to exceptional achievement in one candidate may appear safe and unadventurous in another, all depending on the unique dimensions of the person under consideration. We reserve the right to apply different bars of measurement for different candidates. For example, a candidate with extensive international travel experience (or extensive background in a project topic) will need to demonstrate a higher level of “stretch” than a candidate who has barely traveled out of his own state (or who is more of a novitiate in the project topic). We can be inspired by strong applicants at both ends of this spectrum.

When the committee is interviewing nominees it is looking for specific qualities to evaluate. They are as follows:

**Passion** - A Watson year is seldom easy. Fellows, as they make their own way through new cultures, often confront stretches of self-doubt, loneliness, and cultural alienation. A true core passion for the exploration is what sustains most Fellows through difficult times. Passion is what keeps the Fellow trying, no matter what—after crucial contacts fall through, after a computer full of notes and data is stolen, after arranged housing proves to be vermin infested, after the project has run into one dead end after the next.

**Vision** - The project doesn’t need to break new ground (in fact, there is considerable duplication of topics across the years, and sometimes even in the same year!) but it should be significant and “visionary” in the applicant’s own eyes. Just because another Fellow has pursued the same passion, the vision that each new applicant brings to a topic is unique. Will a year devoted to this project inspire the Fellow to see the world through new lenses? Can this topic, explored with the fresh perspective of a new individual, find new and added significance?

**Intention** - The Watson is not designed to serve as a stepping stone in the Fellow’s career. If anything, it is a step back from years and years of organized educational momentum. The Fellow must show commitment to the exploration for its own sake, rather than simply to get training, prepare for graduate school, string together volunteer opportunities, or otherwise to build one’s résumé.
Independence - As a “solo experience, to be lived independently but shared broadly with humanity,” the Watson demands a unique type of person: someone who “knows himself,” who is comfortable with solitude, but who can also engage with people. A Watson year balances personal independence with interpersonal engagement.

Resourcefulness and Courage - Watson Fellows have moxie. They are unafraid (or able to overcome their reticence) to knock on doors, cold-call possible contacts, and ask for help on the street. When one door closes, they open another. When a language barrier exists, they find a work-around. When given a lemon, they make lemonade. Watsons live by this well-used quotation by Thomas J. Watson Sr.: “Would you like me to give you a formula for... success? It’s quite simple, really. Double your rate of failure. You’re thinking of failure as the enemy of success. But it isn’t at all... you can be discouraged by failure -- or you can learn from it. So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because, remember that’s where you’ll find success. On the far side.”

Feasibility - The proposal must show that the candidate has what it takes for such “purposeful exploration.” One must demonstrate initiative, planning skills, and the ability to make useful contacts. (Well-established contacts in the field are often helpful in demonstrating feasibility.) Obviously, a core foundation in the topic of exploration is essential, as are specific language skills when nuanced communication is essential to the project, but Fellows are not expected to be experts in their fields. Passionate fascination in a topic (Fellows, for example, who pursue a childhood fantasy or revive a dormant hobby) often compensates for a lack of formal background and experience. The project must also be financially feasible, given the limitations of the Watson stipend.

Sustainability - Some topics might make interesting short-term projects, but can they sustain the Fellow’s interest over the 12-month Fellowship period? Is there adequate depth, complexity, and richness in the project?

Stretch - Will the student be challenged in transformative ways? The Watson mission “to enhance their capacity for resourcefulness, imagination, openness, and leadership” is largely achieved through the challenges we know our Fellows constantly confront in the field. Our selection process looks for a careful balance between a candidate’s preparation (which makes the project feasible) and stretch (which makes the project challenging).

Fit - Has the candidate identified their true passion? (Surprisingly, a probing Watson interview often reveals other passions that a candidate may have ruled out or have been discouraged from pursuing.) Many candidates fail in the Watson process by trying to be “correct”—proposing a project that might grow out of formal research methodologies they’ve learned, or that might conform to a perceived notion of successful Watson projects—instead of following their heart. A good fit means that the person and project are “one.”
Case by case the “bar” is relative. All things being equal, an application of added personal depth and complexity inspires us to look at the candidate’s potential with special care. All applicants find some way to make a personal connection between their lives/interests and their proposed project, but many of these connections will be tenuous and banal. Some applicants, however, are able to share compelling personal “stories” that grow from struggle, tragedy, disability, or other unusual life circumstances. As we evaluate “unusual promise,” we carefully consider the “potential for transformation” that a Watson could hold for each candidate. We are always delighted to have candidates in our national pool who present their unique and unusual backgrounds for our consideration.

**Person vs. Project**

The most common mistake made in campus selection is the reversal of these two priorities. Unlike most academic fellowships, the Watson selection process looks first and foremost at the unique individual promise of each applicant. Only after being convinced by the “person” do we begin to look seriously at the other side of the equation, the project. As we look at the project, it will enhance or diminish the impression we have gathered of the applicant.

The project neither makes nor breaks an application. We do fund “just-average” projects, if we are convincingly “wowed” by the person. We do not fund “average” persons, just because their proposed project happens to be groundbreaking, innovative, or otherwise compelling. We are more interested in the “traveler” herself (the “person”) than in the “suitcase” (the “project”) that she proposes to pack for the journey. As a member of our Board once said, “We’re not looking for a polio vaccine; we’re looking for the next Jonas Salk.”

*We invest in people, not projects.*

**Characteristics of a Watson Fellow**

“Unusual promise” can be evident in any of several areas—leadership, service, academics, talent, or creativity, to name a few. The key qualities we consider are listed below. Fellows won’t necessarily display these qualities in the same way, and not every Fellow will possess all of the qualities.

- **Leadership** - The capacity to command a following for what one thinks, does, or creates
  The marker: The individual has, with others, brought a significant action to sustainment.
  More than managing processes, she sees opportunities in challenges and motivates solutions.
• **Resourcefulness** - Able to deal promptly and effectively with problems, using what is available
  The marker: They do a lot with a little and achieve more than could be expected.

• **Imagination or Vision** - The power of framing new and striking conceptions
  The marker: Their ideas are unexpected but relevant. They often integrate forward-thinking, seemingly unrelated ideas.

• **Independence** - Self-reliance; freedom from the influence, guidance, or control of others
  The marker: They have the confidence, knowledge and skills to believe in and test their ideas.

• **Integrity** - Strong ethical character and trustworthiness
  The marker: In work and play, they show no evidence or hint of a lesser standard.

• **Responsibility** - Following through on work or plans without guidance or superior authority
  The marker: They do what they say and say what they do, modeling the way. They often seem wiser than their years.

• **Emotional Maturity** - Inner stability, a grounded individual
  The marker: When faced with difficult or painful situations, they respond in a way that is not destructive. They relate well to others, understand limitations and are honest with themselves.

• **Courage** - They show a boldness of spirit, openness to new and challenging circumstances, and perseverance in pursuit of a purpose or goal
  The marker: They can endure moral, emotional and physical hardship and confront escalating risk in proportion to the situation. They are unafraid to support the underdog or unpopular.

It is incumbent on the candidate that these characteristics “come alive” in the application. These qualities are commonly most evident in the list of activities, the personal statement, the nomination letter, and the letters of recommendation (especially when specific examples and anecdotes are shared).

We seek the widest possible array of promising students.

- We encourage students of all academic disciplines to apply for the Fellowship. If you are uncertain of how a particular discipline could work as a Watson proposal, we’ll be delighted to give you great examples. (Scientists and science, for example, are often needlessly underrepresented in the pool)
- We encourage racial, ethnic, cultural, and philosophical diversity in our applicant pool.