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Writing Letters of Recommendation



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Writing letters of recommendation (LoR) may qualify as one of the most time-consuming and critical tasks performed by faculty, yet faculty rarely receive training or guidance as to how to craft a successful LoR (Range et al., 1991). The scholarship concerning LoR deals mostly with how letters are perceived and evaluated, and indirectly addresses writing LoR.

General Concerns

Many letters are so positive about the student that they provide little discriminatory power. Moreover, there appears to be greater reliability between two letters written by the same letter-writer for two different students compared to two separate letters written for the same student (Aamodt, Bryan, & Whitcomb, 1993). The letters may say more about the letter-writer than the applicant! Keep these concerns in mind as you prepare letters of recommendation for your students.

Confidentiality

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA, or the Buckley Amendment) permits students access to their educational records (Binder & Gotkin, 2001). When students opt for an open file (i.e., open to the student), under certain circumstances they would have access to the LoR. However, the Buckley Amendment also allows students to waive their right to access to the LoR (called a closed file – unavailable to the applicant); many graduate schools provide this option. Ault (1993) found that students who selected the open-file option believed they could see their letter

of recommendation if they are not accepted (only enrolled students can have access to their application files). When the letter-writer knows that the applicant might see the letter (e.g., open file), the letter-writer tends to say nicer things (Aamodt et al., 1993). Faculty need to be aware of this potential bias when writing LoRs.

Liability and Legal Issues

Truthfulness is essential when writing a LoR – it is important to provide details that justify your conclusions, whether they are positive or negative (Swenson & Keith-Spiegel, 1991). Writing an unfavorable letter may place you at risk for defamation without the supporting factual basis for your claims. How can you defend yourself from such a claim? Generally, if the statement is factual, truthful, and made in good faith, it is not actionable as libel (Binder & Gotkin, 2001). Faculty should also keep the written request for an LoR from the student (Council of Undergraduate Research [CUR], 2002). Bell (1984) suggested the use of phrases such as “providing the information that was requested” or “providing information to be used for professional purposes only” in the opening paragraph of your LoRs. Inclusion of such phrases may help to imply that the information was not intended to hurt or damage anyone’s reputation.

A potential letter-writer has three choices: refuse to write, write a truthful letter, or write a “no comment” letter that supplies objective, non-evaluative details (Sendor, 1997). Faculty are not required to write LoRs (Swenson & Keith-Spiegel, 1991); if the letter can only be negative, it may be best to avoid writing a letter altogether. Swenson and Keith-Spiegel (1991) suggested that if you decline to write a letter for a student, inform the student privately to protect yourself from allegations of slander.

Information to Request from Students

The arduousness of writing a truthful letter can be reduced by having students provide you with the specific information. What type of information might you request from your students? I compiled the following lists from various sources (Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Landrum, 1996; Lloyd & Dewey, 1997; Meyer, 2002; Range et al., 1991; University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, 1999; Zimbardo, 1976). Faculty members should customize these informational requirements for their particular needs.

Information Provided on a Student’s Résumé/Curriculum Vitae

Whether LoRs are for a job or graduate school, you may want the student to provide you with a résumé or curriculum vitae (CV). Below are items that would normally be included in these documents:

- Complete name (maiden name, if applicable), including nicknames
- Current contact information: mailing address, telephone numbers, email address
- All higher education institutions attended, locations and dates, including degree status: completed (month, date) or anticipated completion (month, date)
- Major(s), and minor(s) (if any)
- Grade-point average, overall and in the major
- A statement of career interests and professional goals, perhaps with emphasis on strengths and interests as they relate to these goals
- A brief listing of work experience
- A listing of any conference presentations and publications
- Honors and awards received, membership in honor societies, departmental assistantships, independent research, specialized computer skills, foreign language skills
- A listing of references/referees, with accurate contact information.

Encourage your students to customize these materials to fit each situation – a résumé for a job application may contain different information and be formatted differently compared to a CV for a graduate school application.

Information Requested from a Student Applying for a Job

Requesting the following additional information from students should facilitate writing LoRs for students applying for a job:

- A résumé, focusing on work experiences and preparation
- A list of relevant, completed courses
- Unofficial copy of transcripts with any courses from the faculty member writing the letter highlighted
- Information from any class assignments on which the student did well
- A summary of the types of contacts (i.e., interactions) with the student, with dates
- A copy of the job advertisement.

Information Requested from a Student Applying to Graduate School

The informational needs for writing an LoR for a graduate school applicant differ from those of a job applicant. These are potential sources of information are helpful when writing LoRs for students with graduate school aspirations:

- A CV focusing on the student's academic accomplishments (e.g., conference presentations, publications)
- The student's personal statement
- GRE scores (verbal, quantitative, analytical)
- An unofficial copy of the student's transcripts, with any courses taken with the faculty member writing the letter highlighted

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- Reference/Referee Forms. If the student is requesting a closed file, the student needs to sign the waiver. If there is no form, be sure that students forward to you any instructions provided by the graduate programs
- Some faculty want students to provide pre-addressed and stamped envelopes for letters sent directly to graduate schools. Others prefer to use departmental stationery and postage. Let students know your preference
- The student needs to provide each letter-writer with a master-list of schools with the following information presented for each application: (a) name and mailing address of graduate program, (b) type and level of program to which the student is applying, (c) any additional forms to fill out, (d) letter due dates, and (e) whether materials are returned to student or sent directly by the faculty member. Address letters to specific individuals if possible.

Encourage students to give you at least 3–4 weeks' notice before the first LoR due date; the more time, the better. Faculty need to teach students to ask "would you be willing to write a strong letter of recommendation?" Strong letters can be a pleasure to write; moderate or weak letters can be a struggle at best, and a liability at worst. Some students may not ask you for a LoR if they realize that you cannot write a strong LoR.

Suggestions for Writing the Letter of Recommendation

I close with some suggestions for letter writing, as well as an outline for the structure of a typical LoR (see also Bates College, 1998). I find that using an outline facilitates letter-writing. There is no evidence that this approach is superior, but for me, having a set format makes letter-writing efficient, helping with the momentum of starting and completing letters.

Opening/First Paragraph

State the student's full name, with an indication that he or she has specifically requested the LoR in support of a job application or graduate-school application. For graduate-school applicants, try to customize the letter with the name of the graduate program or department and the name of the university. For job applicants, use the specific job title and the name of the company.

Second Paragraph

Provide a brief overview of the nature of the relationship between you and the student. You might recall classes that the student has taken from you. If the student was a teaching assistant (TA) or research assistant (RA), mention that here, with dates. Close this paragraph with a statement of how well you feel you know the student.

Third (and Successive) Paragraphs

Offer details about the performance of the student in your classes, as an RA or TA, and any other interactions (e.g., research student, internship, officer of Psi Chi, etc.). This information naturally segues into an analysis and evaluation of the skills, abilities, and potential for future success. If possible, relate how the student came through at the right time and completed an important task; such details add clarity and credibility to your letter (Baxter et al., 1981; Knouse, 1983). Favorable anecdotes about the student offer a richness that helps put their accomplishments in perspective (Brown, 1999). Numerous approaches exist for describing the student applicant: the University of California-Berkeley (2003) offers some possibilities: (a) intellectual characteristics, (b) knowledge of field of study, (c) ability to communicate, (d) industry and self-discipline, (e) personal effectiveness, and (f) potential for graduate study/career.

Last Paragraph

Present a brief summary of the students' accomplishments and qualifications in the last paragraph. You might offer to provide more information if necessary, and close with a global recommendation. For my most qualified students, I usually close like this: "I support Chris Smith's application to your graduate program in psychology with my highest recommendation and without reservation."

Other Considerations

Letter-writers should strive for complete truthfulness and to provide as much detail as possible, using specific statements about student performance, enhancing the credibility of the LoR and the letter-writer (Knouse, 1983). Hence, "strong" letters tend to be longer. When writing letters, any reference to race, national origin, religion, sex, physical disability, marital status, or age may raise discrimination issues. Avoid such references, except for the appropriate use of gender pronouns (CUR, 2002). Writing a letter of recommendation does not have to be the "agony" that Zimbardo (1976) described: When students are properly prepared and faculty are aware of the relevant issues, writing a strong letter of recommendation can actually be a pleasure.

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