Best Practices for Writing Letters of Recommendation

Writing letters on behalf of our undergraduates’ candidacy for scholarships, internships, and graduate programs is a significant responsibility and intellectual challenge, as well as a valuable service to the university and its mission. As one Senate faculty member put it, “It’s not part of our instructional responsibility, but it is definitely part of our duty of care to our students.” The great effort that faculty put forth to recommend students and to continually grow the reputation of our campus in academic and professional fields should be recognized and lauded. The following list of best-practices has been compiled by veteran recommenders and fellowship advisors to assist faculty with this process:

1. **Establish a deadline and clear policies under which students should submit letter requests to you.** Provide yourself ample time to work on letters during busy application seasons for your discipline and ensure that you receive copies of your students’ materials in time to support your writing process. If you feel comfortable doing so, include your letter request policies in your syllabi or website(s).

2. **Select your letter writing commitments carefully.** If you have not known the student for long, do not remember the student well, do not have sufficient time to write, cannot be emphatically positive in your support, and/or cannot write sufficient detail about the student and his/her work, please consider declining the student’s invitation to write for him/her. Agreeing to write for a student whom you cannot strongly support benefits neither you nor the student.

3. **Require students to write out all submission instructions and deadlines for you.** Ask students to include information about how to submit the finished letters, including when you can expect to receive upload links (for electronic submissions) or properly addressed and stamped envelopes (for hard copy submissions).

4. **Provide a list of support materials that you would like to receive.** For example, the following items may assist you in writing accurate and purposeful letters:
   a. A link to a detailed description of the scholarship or program, including selection criteria.
   b. A copy of the student’s application essays, or a summary of career and educational goals.
   c. A CV, resumé, or other list of activities (sports, organizations, leadership and volunteer positions, etc.).
   d. A detailed description of pertinent work or research experiences.
   e. A copy of transcript(s) from all colleges/universities that the student has attended.
   f. If several quarters have passed, a copy of the student’s paper(s) or class project(s) from your course.

5. **While it may be tempting to delegate the task of writing letters of recommendation to undergraduates, who know their own records and experiences well, we would not recommend doing so.**
   a. Assisting a student with writing letters that will be represented as authored by another person is not in the spirit of our own values and [policies on Academic Integrity](#), for which we are all asked to provide vigorous support as a condition of our own employment. Specifically, this practice requires students to weigh the rules of ethical conduct they are asked to uphold against a request made by a faculty representative of the institution, as well as a respected figure of intellectual and moral authority.
   b. While faculty are afforded opportunities to serve on selection committees and develop a strong sense of what selectors will want to know about candidates, it is unlikely that undergraduates will develop comparable awareness of genre and audience overnight by attempting to imagine and write from your perspective, or possess the skill to differentiate the voice, tone, and content of multiple letters of recommendation, should other faculty supporters make the same request of them.

6. **If you would like to gain greater proficiency and comfort in writing letters of recommendation, seek advice from colleagues or expert resources.** For example, you might enjoy this “Writing a Letter of Recommendation” [electronic addendum](#) to Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty. Any faculty member may benefit from occasional professional development on trends in writing letters of recommendation, such as this recent [handout on avoiding gender bias](#).