Revision based on information provided by the Commonwealth Honors College at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst

Recommendation Letters - Guide for Faculty

Do's and Don’ts

Below is a list of suggestions for faculty to use as guides in the recommendation writing process.

We know that other colleges and universities are providing extensive support for their students, and we want our students to be competitive with candidates from these institutions.

We hope you will read this list and take from it whatever points you might find helpful. We have also appended a weak sample letter and a strong sample letter.

1. Length counts. Brevity is not a strength in letters of recommendation. We have found that successful applicants have long and detailed letters, in some cases as long as four pages. Committees will be scrutinizing your letter for any reason to toss a student out of consideration. A short letter is a definite cue to cut the student from the competition. Use only the front sides of the paper, as material written on the reverse may fail to be copied.

2. Be as specific as possible. Listing a set of adjectives that attest to how "bright, motivated, diligent, and considerate" the student is will not be as effective as telling a story about the student that shows how he or she exemplifies these traits. This could be a story based on a classroom experience or an informal interaction that you had with the student. Think of a memorable incident with the student that clearly points to the student's strengths (such as saying "the student worked late into the night during a holiday weekend to finish a joint project" rather than saying "the student is responsible.") Distinctive examples stick in the mind of someone reading hundreds of applications.

3. Avoid "damning with faint praise." Qualifications or bland statements are read as negatives by committee members. Phrases like "good student" and "hard worker" that are not backed up with examples will hurt the student's chances.

4. Don't feel you have to be negative to balance off the positive. Some letter writers feel it is crucial to list a student's weaknesses or to make the letter seem more "honest." We have not found this to be the case. Successful letters are entirely positive, and in fact, the more the superlatives the better. If a judge sees a negative phrase in your letter, he or she may not look past that to see what positive qualities balance that off.

5. Address the student’s potential as well as past achievements. Committees evaluate not only what the student has done already but also what he or she has the ability to accomplish in the future. Try to connect the student's past accomplishments in college with the achievements that he or she is likely to complete at the next level.

6. Direct the letter to the concerns of the program or scholarship. Please be sure that you are familiar with criteria that will be used by the selection committee. Read over the application materials that the student will provide you. Furthermore, if the student is applying for a scholarship that will take him or her to another country (such as Fulbright, Rhodes, or Marshall), please comment on (a) the student's ability to adapt to another country's culture; and (b) the student's ability to represent the U.S. in a way that will have a positive impact.

7. Keep in mind what the student is saying in his or her essay. Your letter will be used as backup for what the student has said. If you can reinforce points made by the student this will be viewed positively by the committee. Furthermore, feel free to brag about the student.

8. Consider saying "no" to the request. This student is applying for an important, prestigious national scholarship. In the best of all possible worlds, the student is one you know well and about whom you will have no trouble writing a glowing letter. However, if you have mixed feelings, then perhaps you should help the student find a recommendation that will be unequivocal.

Example of a Weak Letter

A weak letter is short, vague, full of generalities, and "damns with faint praise." In the worst case, it doesn't talk about the specific scholarship or even mentions the wrong one. Here is one such example:

Jane Doe is a double major honors student in X and Y, with a cumulative average of 3.45. I am the Chief Undergraduate Advisor in X. Jane is focusing her X major on issues of minorities in urban settings. Jane has been able to meet the demands of both her majors, as well as spend a semester doing an internship and study program abroad. Here at UMass she has been involved in both the Golden Key Honor Society and the Annual Fund. In the Spring semester she was very involved in raising awareness and funds for disaster relief in Albania.

Example of a Strong Letter

A strong letter is specific, contains one or two memorable examples, and compares the student to others. It should be long, but not too long, and should express enthusiasm. It should also be tailored to the particular scholarship.

It is with great pleasure that I am writing this letter in support of Jane Doe's application for the USA Today All College Academic Team. I have known Jane since the fall of 1996 when she was enrolled in my XXX seminar. Jane distinguished herself immediately as the student who was most filled with passion, enthusiasm, and excitement about the course material. My initial impression of her did not abate as the semester progressed. Jane earned an A for her work in this course, revising her papers and being critically open-minded about expanding the parameters of her thinking. She was always an active and engaged class participant, and her final project in the course (investigating the elections process in newly formed Russian democracies) was extremely well researched and well presented.

In addition to producing excellent academic work, Jane has involved herself in numerous campus and volunteer organizations. She has worked for the past two years as a supervisor for the Annual Fund, and currently serves as a member of the University Affirmative Action Committee. She has succeeded in helping this Committee establish a clear mission statement and guidelines. She is motivated and motivates others with her dedication and accountability. In addition, Jane is Secretary of Golden Key, and has been an undergraduate representative to the department's executive committee. Since 1995, she has served as a student senator to the Student Government Association. In all of these activities, Jane has been instrumental in designing and implementing policy, as well as serving as a liaison between students and the administration. She has given students and their cause a fair voice. Jane is interested in social justice and follows her beliefs in her daily life inside and outside of the classroom. She has also been actively engaged in community activities, in which she has been involved in outreach and organizing. These activities have allowed her to demonstrate and refine skills that will benefit the community in which she decides to settle.

I am equally impressed with Jane's record of volunteer service throughout her busy career in college. Her volunteer activities include working at soup kitchens in Amherst, Northampton, and Hartford, gathering relief money to be sent to Albania for the relief effort, and serving as a translator in the International Volunteer Program at the Everywoman's Center. She also holds a second paying job to make ends meet. In addition, during her semester abroad in Romania, Jane worked with two women's collectives dedicated to feminist and community empowerment through the acquisition of construction skills, as well as through legal advocacy and educational programs.

Jane is also a guitarist and singer who just recorded her first CD. Her many talents and interests are astounding. Their common thread is her belief in cooperating with others and helping them to achieve their goals. She believes that each one of us has to contribute to a better world by our own actions.

Jane is an optimistic person who finds solutions in times of crisis. Her fellow students look to her for advice, but she is also fun to be around. Work gets done but at the same time new avenues of thinking are opened. Jane is a leader who is humble. She pursues the goals of her groups with passion without letting her own needs or interests get in the way.

I will be saddened when Jane graduates in May. There is no other student I can think of from my fifteen years of teaching at UMass who has had such a varied and productive career-- both in and out of the classroom-- as Jane. She is an exceptional student and person who has earned university recognition for her academic achievements, her commitment to others, and her service to several communities. Her cooperative spirit, her compassion for the well-being of all, and her flexible leadership style make her an outstanding leader who is destined for significant accomplishments in graduate work and beyond.