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How to Write an Effective Student Letter of Recommendation

Amy Pick, PharmD, BCOP

At some time during our careers most of us will be asked by a student to write a letter of recommendation. These letters may be written for a scholarship, residency, job or a special award. Many perceive this as a daunting task, especially when faced with additional time constraints and numerous letters to write. Keep in mind that writing letters of recommendation are part of the mentoring process and our duty as faculty members.

There is much debate on the utility of recommendation letters. Students tend to choose faculty who they have established a favorable relationship with. Thus, one may argue that the overwhelming majority of letters are positive and letters of recommendation do not separate the strong and weak applicants. Faculty sometimes struggle to provide honest opinions without jeopardizing the student's opportunity. Regardless, letters of recommendation continue to be a routine requirement when securing positions. Preparation and understanding of the appropriate format is crucial for an effective letter of recommendation.

There is limited literature that addresses the components of a letter of recommendation that is useful to a selection committee. Generally the letter should be approximately one page and at least three paragraphs in length. The first paragraph should be written to establish the relationship between the writer and the requestor. The writer should be very specific in identifying the relationship, noting for how long and also describing their qualifications for writing the letter. The reader is interested in knowing why you can accurately assess this individual as well as why your opinion should be highly regarded.

The second paragraph should focus on the exceptional qualities, skills and characteristics of the applicant. Dezee et al (2009) suggest that a numeric comparison of the individual is the most important factor when writing a letter. For instance, "Jill's well-thought out therapeutic plans and

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ease of patient counseling puts her in the top 10% of students that I have had during clerkships.” It is within this paragraph that you want to show the competence of the individual. If the student had an outstanding project or case, you might want to single it out and describe it. Try to avoid generalized praise during this paragraph. Instead give examples to support the applicant’s qualities and skills. Careful selection of adjectives must be considered. A “very good” student could be perceived as a weak applicant because “outstanding” and “excellent” have better cogitations. A student who improved over the clerkship may also be a red flag for reviewers. It may imply that the student does not have strong clinical skills. Each writer has his/her own interpretation of these descriptions thus the wording or phrasing is critical.

The third paragraph should end with a strong summary statement. This statement should be positive while avoiding overwhelming praise. Interestingly, one may choose to avoid the comments “recommend without reservations” or “call if you have questions.” The first statement implies that there is a hierarchy in recommending. When you recommend, don’t you recommend without reservations anyway? The comment about calling the writer may be perceived that there is another hidden message that the writer did not want placed on paper but instead discussed “off the record.”

The final process involves proofreading. One study found that most letters of recommendation for internal medicine residencies are not clearly written or easy to read. A poorly written letter reflects negatively on you and the applicant. The letter should be placed on institutional letterhead. In most cases, the applicant should not handle the letter of recommendation. Instead the letter should be sent directly to the program to insure integrity of the document. This is proving to be a challenge for the writer when some places require that the application be sent as a completed packet. Caution should be raised whenever students have access to the letters. In this case, the confidentiality of the letter is potentially negated. Students may ask others to write a letter if they see negative comments written about them for the position and the privacy of the author has been jeopardized.

There are ethical challenges when writing a letter of recommendation. Most individuals assume that a letter of recommendation is positive. This is not necessarily the case. A good rule of thumb is if you are not able to write a positive letter, you should respectfully decline the offer. When writing a letter, faculty are establishing one’s credibility. You want the reader to regard you and your institution favorably, thus you want the letter to truly

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reflect that individual. Last thing you need is a favorable letter written for a low caliber student.

Some helpful tips for faculty members include:

- New faculty should not turn down an offer to write a letter of recommendation based on their academic rank or years of service. The relationship between you and the applicant is more important than your academic rank.
- When given the option of standardized form or free-form letters, literature suggests the standardized form reduces inter-rater variability between writers.
- Ask for the student's curriculum vitae and letters of intent to help write your letter.
- Meet with the individual to discuss the application and what your focus should be.
- Be timely. Applications have deadlines. Don't assume that if the letter is a week late, the applicant will still be considered. If you cannot meet the deadline, please tell the student in advance.
- Be honest, authentic, explicit, balanced, detailed and confidential.

Being selected to write a student a letter of recommendation is an honor. Although it is time consuming, it may directly impact the future direction of the student. To help ease the process, faculty should establish a meaningful relationship with students so that the abilities of the student are apparent. As long as letters of recommendation are required for positions, the subjective opinion will be of value.

Resources for Writing a Letter of Recommendation

DeZee, K., Thomas, M., Mintz, M., & Durning, S. (2009). Letters of recommendation: rating, writing, and reading by clerkship directors of internal medicine. *Teach Learn Med*, 21 (2), 153-158.

Fawcett, S. (2005). *Instant recommendation letter kit – how to write winning letters of recommendation*. Montreal QC, Canada: Final Draft Publications.

Nolan, N. L. (2006). *Ivy league reference letters: How to write (and get) persuasive recommendations for law school, medical school and business school*. Palm Bay, FL: Magnificent Milestones, Inc.

Whalley, S. (2000). *How to write powerful letters of recommendation*. Spotsylvania, VA: Educational Media Corporation.



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Exam Wrappers

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Do you ever wonder why students do not perform to your expectations on exams? To gather more information to improve teaching and ultimately learning, you might consider implementing an **exam wrap**. Students often focus solely on the exam they receive and do not reflect on such issues as:

- their own strengths and weakness to study further,
- the adequacy of their preparation in terms of time and strategy, and
- characterizing the nature of their errors to identify patterns that need attention.

To encourage students to process their exams more deeply, instructors can implement **exam wrappers**, which are short handouts that students complete when an exam is returned to the student. The wrapper directs students to review and analyze their performance with the intention of improvement for future learning.

Exam wrappers make students think about *why* they earned the score by analyzing the kinds of errors made and how this might be related to their study approach. Once students complete the wrapper, they should be collected for review by the instructor(s). The instructor skims the responses to determine whether or not there are patterns in how students analyzed their strengths, weakness, and preparation. Instructors can offer advice to the students to perform better on the next exam.

Prior to the next exam, the exam wrappers are returned to the students and they are asked to re-read their exam wrapper responses to reflect on how they might try a better approach for exam preparation. Students can be encouraged to share their wrapper with Academic Success Specialists, who can further assist the student in more effective. study strategies.

The following is a sample from a physics course (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 253-254).

Physics Post-Exam Reflection

Name: _____

This activity is designed to give you a chance to reflect on your exam performance and, more important, on the effectiveness of your exam preparation. Please answer the questions sincerely. Your responses will be collected to inform the instructional team regarding students' experiences surrounding this exam and how we can best support your learning. We will

Exam Wrappers Continued

hand back your completed sheet in advance of the next exam to inform and guide your preparation for that exam.

1. Approximately how much time did you spend preparing for this exam?
2. What percentage of your test-preparation time was spent in each of these activities?
 - a. Reading textbook sections for the first time _____
 - b. Rereading textbook sections _____
 - c. Reviewing homework solutions _____
 - d. Solving problems for practice _____
 - e. Reviewing your own notes _____
 - f. Reviewing materials from course website _____
(What materials did you review? _____)
 - g. Other _____
(Please specify: _____)
3. Now that you have looked over your graded exam, estimate the percentage of points you lost due to each of the following (make sure the percentages add up to 100):
 - a. Trouble with vectors and vector notation _____
 - b. Algebra or arithmetic errors _____
 - c. Lack of understanding of the concept _____
 - d. Not knowing how to approach the problem _____
 - e. Careless mistakes _____
 - f. Other _____
(Please specify _____)
4. Based on your responses to the questions above, name at least three things you plan to do differently in preparing for the next exam. For instance, will you just spend more time studying, change a specific study habit or try a new one (if so, name it), make math more automatic so it does not get in the way of physics, try to sharpen some other skill (if so, name it), solve more practice problems, or something else?
5. What can we do to help support your learning and your preparation for the next exam?

Reference:

Ambrose, S.A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C., & Norman, M.K. (2010). *How learning works*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Faculty Awards

The School of Pharmacy and Health Professions recognizes faculty achievement with the presentation of three awards: The Scholarly Achievement Award, the faculty Service Award and the Excellence in Teaching Award.

Eligibility

All faculty who are full time members of SPAHP are eligible except for the Dean, Assistant/Associate Deans, or faculty who have received one of the awards in the last 3 years.

Submission Process Guidelines

[Scholarly Achievement Award](#)

[Service Award](#)

[Teaching Excellence Award](#)

For additional information please visit the faculty development website.

<http://spahp2.creighton.edu/offices/officoffacultydevelopment/Awards.aspx>

Congratulations to the 2012 Award Winners



Scholarly Achievement Award

Chris Destache, PharmD
Professor of Pharmacy Practice



Service Award

Teresa Cochran, PT, DPT, GCS, MA
Associate Professor of Physical Therapy



Teaching Excellence Award

Julie Hoffman, PT, DPT, CCS
Assistant Professor of Physical Therapy

University Assessment Committee (UAC) Updates

- University approved a policy on Annual Assessments. The policy is in the Academic Concerns section, number 4.2.5. You can read the policy on the President's webpage at: <http://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/president/docs/Guide.pdf>
- The University signed a three-year contract with TaskStream, effective April 9th. Plans are being made for its implementation at Creighton. Once the plans are unveiled, we will learn more about the implications to SPAHP assessment. An implementation group is being established and there will be at least one SPAHP faculty member appointed to represent SPAHP. To learn more about TaskStream, visit <https://www.taskstream.com/pub/HigherEd.asp>. TaskStream is a commercial product that assists with assessment of student performance based on established outcomes and standards.
- Each program submitted its curriculum map to OFDA, who sent them to the Office of Academic Excellence and Assessment (AEA) by June 1, 2012. The collection of curriculum maps is an effort to meet Higher Learning Commission standards related to Criterion 3 – Student Learning and Teaching Effectiveness.
- Workshops were sponsored by UAC that addressed assessment of co-curriculum and academic programs.
- Faculty who serve as reviewers for the Higher Learning Commission will be attending the HLC Conference in Chicago in April. Reviewers from Creighton include Drs. Gail Jensen (Dean-Graduate School), Mary Kunes-Connell (Nursing), Mary Ann Danielson (AEA), Ellie Howell (Nursing) and Brenda Coppard (SPAHP). Jess Graner and Tracy Chapman also attended the conference as prospective, interested reviewers.

For additional information please visit UAC's website at: <http://www.creighton.edu/aea/assessmentofstudentlearning/index.php>

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Upcoming Faculty Development Sessions

The following faculty development sessions are being offered for Summer :

June 5, 2012

12:00-12:50 p.m.

BICR G09

Promotion from Assistant to Associate Professor

Panel Discussion by SPAHP Rank and Tenure Committee

June 11, 2012

11:00-1:30 p.m.

CHSC L57

Addressing Today's Classroom Challenges: Teaching Large Classes
Webinar

June 25, 2012

11:00-1:30 p.m.

HLSB G04

Techniques for Engaging Learners: Promoting Deep Learning Through
Problem-Based Writing Assignments or Small Group Tasks
Webinar

Additional information be at found at: <http://spahp2.creighton.edu/offices/officeoffacultydevelopment/OFD%20Programs.aspx>

If you have suggestions for faculty development sessions or would like to offer a session, please contact OFDA via email, spahpofda@creighton.edu.

Date Warehouse Update

A new time line was established for the data warehouse. With the addition of data from other programs, the system has gone through a minor redesign and is currently being tested with data from Banner. Testing of the data marts and reporting began at the end of May. We will begin looking at importing data not available in Banner. Training for faculty about how to request data form the warehouse will be held later this summer. The data warehouse should be fully functional this fall.

Click Below for

Development
Sessions

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OFDA Services & Resources

Development Sessions

Development sessions are lecture recorded and archived on the OFDA website. View past sessions at: <http://spahp2.creighton.edu/offices/officeoffacultydevelopment/OFD%20Programs.aspx>

Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID)

The SGID uses small group discussion among students to provide feedback to an instructor to improve teaching, provide suggestions for improving the course, and increase communication. Request an SGID at: www.blueq-surveys.creighton.edu/se.ashx?s=46BEEE7F7A95CA4A

OFDA Library

We have resources on teaching, assessment, pedagogy, research. Faculty are welcome to request resources related to a topic or come see our collection of books. Request a book at: <http://www.blueq-surveys.creighton.edu/se.ashx?s=46BEEE7F7A95CA4A>

Statistical Help Desk

Statistical Help Desk assistance is available on Tuesdays from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM and Thursdays from 8:30 AM to 11:30 AM or by appointment. Contact Yongyue at 280-3352 or yongyueqi@creighton.edu.

Faculty Development and Assessment Conferences

July 16-19, 2012
2012 Campus Technology
Boston, MA
Campustechnology.com/summer12

October 24-28, 2012
2012 POD Conference
Seattle, WA
<http://www.podnetwork.org/conferences/2012/index.htm>

October 28-30, 2012
The 2012 Assessment Institute
Indianapolis, IN
www.planning.iupui.edu/institute