BETTER LETTERS:

EQUITABLE PRACTICES

FOR WRITING, READING, AND SOLICITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION: HOW TO WRITE, READ, AND SOLICIT LETTERS FOR EQUITY

When graduate admissions committees meet to review applicant files, letters of recommendation are one component of the holistic review process that provides information about the applicant's previous work, personality, and potential for success as a doctoral student. In order to ensure that letters of recommendation are effective tools for enhancing equity, we must critically assess how we write, read, and solicit letters of recommendation. This is especially important because numerous studies have demonstrated the presence of implicit biases in letters of recommendation (Dutt et al, 2016; Madera et al., 2019; Trix & Psenka, 2003). The presence of these biases in letters of recommendation can influence how prospective students are evaluated by admission committees and therefore may produce and reproduce racial and gender inequality in doctoral education.

FOR PEOPLE WRITING LETTERS

Before you start to write, consider the following three ways you can contribute to more equitable outcomes as a letter writer:

- Review previous letters of recommendation you have written or received and assess their strengths and weaknesses.
- Commit yourself to crafting a letter that is unlikely to trigger a readers' implicit biases.
- Plan for how you will contextualize the applicant's background and trajectory, including any red flags in it, to enable a reader to clearly appreciate their potential and abilities.

MECHANICS OF GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation are a vital component of the review process for many selection processes in academia. Although letters of recommendation have been used for over a century, there is very little training and guidance about what should go into them. As part of an equity-oriented holistic review process, letters of recommendation can provide an opportunity to obtain a more comprehensive view of an applicant's strengths and abilities.

As we enter the first admissions cycle after COVID-19, letters of recommendation will be critical for contextualizing an applicant's performance. This year, knowing that context will be even more important than it has been in years past we would like to share some tips about how letters of recommendation can be used to advance equity-- in admissions, hiring, fellowships, and other selection processes across the academy. Although there will be variation for different fields and the contexts in which we use letters of recommendation, the following guidelines generally apply.

PURPOSE

- *Letters of recommendation are part of an application strategy; therefore, consider how you might share unique insights that might not come across in the other materials that are part of the applicant's file*
- *Letters of recommendation should highlight achievements that will allow a reader to see a person's potential*

STRUCTURE

- Letters of recommendation that are able to cover applicants' characteristics in detail are often at least 1.5 pages in length
- Pay attention to the flow of ideas, because the effectiveness of your recommendation will be influenced by the narrative you create
- Ensure that your letter is on official department/university letterhead and addressed to the appropriate department, fellowship, or hiring committee
- Close your letter with your signature as well as your full title or titles.

***Note:** This is general guidance for most disciplines. Each department or scholarly community may have different norms. If you are unsure of norms for a different field of study, please consult a trusted colleague for guidance and counsel.*

MECHANICS OF GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

CONSIDERATIONS/STRATEGY

- Review the call for letters of recommendation to gather information about the primary purpose/function of the letter.
- It's fine to ask students for a short list of talking points they would like you to note, but it's never acceptable to ask a student to write their own letter of recommendation.
- Be thoughtful about how you choose to share any personal information (family circumstances, financial hardships, etc.). Obtain the student's permission before sharing any details, keeping in mind that some readers may read personal barriers as a sign of risk rather than resilience. This information should only be used to provide insight into the student's performance and should only strengthen the letter.
- Be aware of how you are using the limited space of a letter. If you want to communicate a strength of a student that may be viewed as consistent with a stereotype, it becomes especially important to balance this with descriptions of qualities that are more consistent with field-level values.
- Beware offering faint praise and doubt raising language which is often described as phrases or statements that raise questions about an applicant's ability to be successful
  - Faint praise ie. Robert will only "need minimum help" to be successful
  - Doubt raiser ie. Sarah "might be a good" researcher in the future
- Remember that it is likely the letter will be read by someone who is not aware of the context of your relationship with the student or with insight about your academic program. Explain the capacities in which you know the applicant and for how long.

CONTENT

- Describe how long you have known the student and in what capacity
- Describe why the student is an ideal candidate for this specific program of study, fellowship, postdoc, or professional opportunity
- Provide an assessment/evaluation of the student's academic performance/coursework, highlighting any unique strengths or abilities
- Share comments about potential contributions to research if you are privy, with a focus on specific intellectual contributions to the student's interest/area of study. Put the student on a pedestal, at least for a moment.

Source: *The content in this guide was adapted from resources developed by MIT Comparative Media Studies, Inside Higher Ed's Conditionally Accepted, and the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning*

MECHANICS OF GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

CONTENT (CONTINUED)

- Share specific stories, anecdotes, or information that support your assessment of the student. For example:
  - positive comments from teaching evaluations from their service as a TA
  - positive experiences with the student in the lab and/or on research project teams

BEFORE SENDING, REVIEW YOUR DRAFT WITH THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN MIND

- Does my letter communicate the applicant's trajectory to this point, including how I know them and concrete details about their strengths?
- Does my letter highlight contributions the applicant will likely make to their academic program, department, or fellowship?
- Does my letter of recommendation provide context or information about our university's response to COVID-19 (ie. grading policies, impact on student's performance, etc.)?
- When writing someone letters for multiple institutions, have I customized (at minimum) the name of the institution and the person to whom the letter is addressed?
  - Have I checked for institution or fellowship specific details that are requested in letters?
- Does my recommendation meet field/discipline-specific norms and expectations?

Click here to check your letter for bias
using the gender bias calculator.

Race Conscious

Letters of recommendation are not race neutral. In your review or writing of letters of recommendation, it is critical to check and assess letters for biases, stereotypes, and understandings of minoritized students.

Systemically Aware

Letters of recommendation reflect opportunities available to students. As a writer or reviewer of letters of recommendation it is important to recognize how public policies and practices disproportionately impact minoritized groups.

Asset Based

Letters of recommendation are helpful tools to highlight student strengths and contributions to the field. As reviewers and writers of letters, remember to look for opportunities to highlight student strengths and research potential.

Attributes of Equity-Mindedness in Letters of Recommendation

Institutional Responsibility

Look for opportunities to create classroom mentoring and research experiences that will strengthen letters of recommendation that you may write for minoritized students. As a reviewer, remember to ask critical questions about information contained in letters of recommendation.

Data Driven

In your review of letters of recommendation, it is important to look for patterns in student letters of recommendation and ask questions about why these patterns exist and what they mean for student success in your application process.

Equity Advancing

Letters of recommendation should be part of equity-oriented holistic review to provide helpful context about students as whole people. Letters of recommendation are one additional data point to triangulate with other parts of the applicant's file.

SUMMARY: EQUITY CHECKPOINTS IN MANAGING LETTERS

WRITING

- Check your draft for language about student experiences and personal attributes that may be interpreted as gendered, racialized, or classed stereotypes
- Note whether content may be construed as "faint praise" (ie, indirect criticism masked as half-hearted praise).
- Check for "hedges" and other "doubt raisers." Avoid doubt unless necessary!
- Focus on topics that are most compelling to readers (e.g., Research, Accomplishments, Skills) avoiding undue attention to effort & personal matters.
- Avoid mention of personal life except in very rare situations.
- Use formal titles and surnames for everyone & write letters of similar length for all.

READING

- Be aware of what dazzles you and turns you off. Consider how both types of things may be associated with race, gender, class, and/or other social identities.
- Contextualize accomplishments by "distance traveled" (ie, how much opportunity and privilege a person has had)
- Develop means of bringing examples of biased language in letters to other reviewers' attention.
- Account for the role of mentors in translating knowledge about what it takes to be successful as a potential graduate student.
- Note when you find yourself more compelled by letters from people you know, remembering closed networks tend to perpetuate inequities.
- Do not punish students for inappropriate comments from letter writers.

SOLICITING

- To help demystify the process for prospective students, make clear whom you would like to see letters from, remembering that talented students who have not had deep research experience, or who come to graduate school after years working, may not have had access to three faculty members.
- Utilize your request for letters of recommendation as an opportunity to raise awareness about non-cognitive attributes as a component of merit in graduate education.
- In the prompt for letters, consider noting common forms of bias that emerge in letters and provide a link to resources that delineate these.

FOR MORE RESOURCES ON EQUITY IN GRADUATE EDUCATION VISIT US ON THE WEB:
bit.ly/EquityGradEd

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The Inclusive Graduate Education Network (IGEN) is a collaborative network comprised of the following partner organizations: