Please Recommend Me! Writing Recommendation Letters  
With Paula Goldsmid  
February, 25, 2014

Notes:

Paula made the point repeatedly that the letters she sees coming from Pomona faculty are very well written.  She acknowledged the burden of writing what may be 100's of letters for some faculty.

Paula recommended setting some criteria for deciding whether or not to write a letter of recommendation. She suggested some possible guidelines a faculty member might use--the student must have taken 2 or more courses with that faculty member, at least x number of days advance notice before letter must be submitted, etc.

She highly recommends a web site by Joe Schall at Penn State:  https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/

Paula showed Gizem Karalli's website on Writing Letters of Recommendation at:  http://pages.pomona.edu/~gk014747/teaching/RecommendationLetters.html

She mentioned some Rhodes Scholarship tips including cultural aspects such as letters written by Americans tend to be effusive.

She strongly advises against closing a letter of recommendation with a statement that the recipient is welcome to contact the sender for additional information, saying that some see that as code for there is more information that the writer is unwilling to put in writing.

Kerry Martin, Assistant Director of the Career Development Office and Alumni Career Services, mentioned that the CDO has a web page advising students how to request a letter of recommendation at:  http://pomona.edu/administration/career-development/students/how-to/request-references-letters-recommendation.aspx

One participant said she required students to develop a spreadsheet with descriptions of the various applications the applicant is requesting she address and all the other relevant information.

A question about privacy concerns regarding including information about a student's grades elicited the response that the letter writer should simply as the student for permission to share letter grades.

Another question about writing letters of recommendation for employees was answered with the statement that many corporations will only confirm that a particular person worked in their corporation and state the dates of their employment.
Paula Goldsmid

Paula reads very recommendation letter by faculty that comes through her office, and they are in general very good. They are thoughtful and demonstrate knowledge about students.

It is a huge burden for faculty to write the 100s of letters that they do. The question is how to manage this. Questions that often come up from faculty include:

Who do you decide to write for?
How much advance notice is acceptable?
Only write for students who have taken more than one course with you?
How to help students decide if you are an appropriate referee?
How to decline?

A great on-line resource is by Joe Schall at Penn State:
https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationletersonline/
This site outlines subjects including: ethical issues, practical details, and style/specific disciplines

It is useful to develop protocol that you can automatically send to students. See the example by Gizem Karalli:
http://pages.pomona.edu/~gk014747/teaching/RecommendationLetters.html

Once the decision is made to write a letter, how do you direct it to a specific purpose?
Paula suggests looking at the list of criteria for the specific job (ask the student to provide).
The Truman Foundation has information on best practices for letters:
https://www.truman.gov/letters-recommendation

Paula’s advice about writing a good letter includes:

Letters too often start with “I have known...” They should instead start with a stronger, important statement. Don’t hide the main point further in the letter where it might be lost. Instead open with student’s main strengths (superlatives).

Should you outline a student’s weaknesses if asked to do so? Yes, this can provide a good balance to effusiveness, but don’t highlight TOO many flaws.
Don’t go into too much detail about your course that the student took. Instead use course to highlight the student’s accomplishments.

Choose best words to represent accomplishments:
Maximize verbs that enable the reader to see the student doing something (physical, mental, emotional)
Be careful with words like: driven, tireless, zealous
However, not always possible to predict how words will be received (there are cultural considerations to this).

In the closing statement, it is not necessary to say “please feel free to contact me…” This could actually be negatively construed as code for a warning about student that recommender does not want to put in writing.

Session Group Discussion:

Be aware of varying adjectives used for men vs. women. Gender-related. Paula has not usually seen this in letters at Pomona. Joe Schall’s website includes information on this issue.

If you want to decline writing a letter, be clear to student that you write “honest” letters.

When telling students that you don’t think an opportunity is appropriate for them, be sure to highlight student’s strengths.

If someone doesn’t notify you that they are making you a reference, it is within your rights to decline.

If a student wants a lot of references, have them make a spreadsheet for you outlining them all, with deadlines, etc.

Students don’t always know appropriate etiquette for asking for a letter. We need to provide them with help to be “grown up”.

Issue of on-line forms/ranking in boxes: Some faculty have refused to do this and instead attach a letter. Have never had negative results.