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# Writing the Counselor Letter of Recommendation

— Beth Arey, College & Career Coordinator —

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# From the Admissions Office: The Why & The How

## Things admission offices want to learn:

- How a student interacts with faculty
- How a student works with peers
- How student engages in the community
- How student overcomes difficulties
- How student compares to peers and compares in your career

## How letters are used:

- Admission decisions
- Scholarship decisions
- Honors Programs
- To go beyond the #s

# From the Counselor....

- Show which niche this student fits
- Promote the student -- don't just certify them
- Discuss attributes that transfer to college
- Mention areas of growth
- Address course selection and scheduling
- Highlight contributions to the community
- Illuminate obstacles overcome
- Speak to strengths and goals for the future
- Provide examples of intellectual and personal qualities

# Writing Letters of Recommendation

## DO:

- Have students prepare a written request that solicits additional information / interview
- Keep letter concise: one page is better than two
- Keep letters specific

## DON'T:

- Create a simple list of student information the college already has (extracurricular activities, test scores, gpa)
- Use generalizations
- Provide adjectives without examples to support them

# Introducing the Student With Purpose

Student is bright, inquisitive, mature, self-motivated and responsible. He makes decisions weighing the pros and cons of each situation. The way in which Student approached this school year is a great example of his maturity. Student balances a lot, between his academic courses, his extracurricular activities and part-time employment. This school year he decided to make some tough choices in how he would spend his time in an effort to achieve a manageable balance within his life. Student decided to give up his position on the varsity Boys Basketball team and focus on his academic responsibilities and his employment responsibilities; a very mature decision for a young man thinking and planning for life after high school.

# Introduction of Strength

[Adjectives] .....What impresses me most about Student are both the intellectual skills with which he entered high school and the growth that he has made to become a disciplined and effective student in the college preparatory course schedule in which he is enrolled. He is a good problem solver who thinks creatively and often outside of the box.

# Introduction of Strength

Student displays a tremendous amount of creativity when approaching a problem and is one to take initiative and responsibility for getting things done. Every meeting, no matter how informal, offers Student an opportunity to make a note on a post-it to be deliberately placed in her planner or be written as an addition to a running list of to-dos. I have been impressed and a little envious of Student's organizational skills. Currently, Student is coordinating all aspects of a tutoring initiative for freshman in earned honors biology to help ensure they earn honors credit and can move into sophomore year at the honors level prepared for their academic futures including college. Both students and staff find her very approachable and look to her for her experience and insight.

# Academic Growth

I think he is a bit of a late bloomer, and did not fully appreciate his own intellectual gifts until this year, but has certainly made up for lost time.

.....Because he made the leap to advanced classes later in his academic career, there are some deficiencies, but he has amply demonstrated that he has the meta-cognitive skills and motivation to overcome these: he understands that if he works hard and focuses, he can catch up, and he's made significant progress over this year.

# Repeating Other Application Details

Currently, Student maintains a 3.54 GPA at our school which offers a richly competitive academic experience for each of its students. Here, individual achievement as reflected in each student's grade point average is a more accurate depiction of ability to succeed than rank in class. Presently, the highest GPA amongst this year's graduating class is 4.60.

# Highlighting Student Involvement - “the list”

Student has been an Honor Roll student for the past three years and a member of the National Honor Society. Outside of the classroom, he loves to get involved. He was a member of the Boys Basketball team for three years, a member of the Track & Field team during his freshman year and a member of Photo Club. Additionally, Student has volunteered multiple hours with school related community service programs while also maintaining a part-time job for the past two school years.

# Highlighting Student Involvement - beyond “the list”

His achievements in school, camp and helping with local events like the Northwestern University Dance Marathon are all prime examples of Student's hard work and dedication to the pursuit of excellence.

# Making the Negative to a Positive

Unfortunately, her high school experience had not adequately prepared her for competing at the NCAA Division I level. Student often found herself on her own in workouts - a time when it is so easy for a distance runner to give up - yet her strength in focus and determination always kept her going. We spent time working one-on-one to analyze her training and prepare for races. She was receptive to changes in technique and tactics and welcomed the challenge to take risks. Each year student met and exceeded goals, overcame setbacks and remained a quiet driving force on the team. Senior year, Student's effort paid off as her collegiate cross country career culminated in making the Big Ten Conference Championship team!

# Using Junior Description Form Quotes

Focuses on academics and classroom relationships

Use sparingly

Intertwine with your own anecdotes

Combine with student's other interests and activities

# Relying Too Much On Teacher Quotes

Student distinguishes herself by being natural, independent, determined, ambitious and hard-working in the classroom. Student's teachers see her as someone who rises to the challenge. student's AP Biology teacher has said, "Student was one of my strongest, most dedicated, insightful, thoughtful and bright students. In fact, she was one of the strongest students I have encountered in my time teaching. In class, she made understanding AP Biology look really easy; she participated, processed information quickly, asked thoughtful questions, and her work was of the highest quality. student is an incredible student—and truly a wonderful human being. I was constantly impressed by her." Student enjoys pushing and challenging herself and she has consistently made High Honor Roll/Honor Roll each semester, and for the past three years she has been a member of the Freshman and Sophomore Honor Societies. Teachers admired how hard-working, thorough and engaged Student was in class. Her work was always done with care, demonstrating how committed she is to doing and giving her best. In her Honors U.S. History course, Student was seen as an "academic rock star. She was such a sincere, hardworking student – what a pleasure it was to have her in our class. Given any assignment, she would do her very best on it." According to her AP AB Calculus teacher, "Student stood out among her classmates as a team player. student not only shared her ideas with her team willingly, but she also had the maturity to ask good questions of her team members, and together, they worked towards a better solution. I came to know a young woman who valued hard work and excellence. I am confident that she will do her very best to achieve her goals."

# Highlighting Academics

As a student, Student faces challenges head on; she doesn't avoid things that are difficult nor does she put them off. Student's Geoscience teacher emphasized that Student is very capable of struggling through new, difficult material. She shines in the classroom through her skills in debate and discussion, and her ability to work through problems. Student is willing to work harder than most if that's what is necessary in order to achieve her goals.

# Alternative Format

Avoid the “traditional 5 paragraph essay”; reconsider the short intro and conclusion

Sum up what the teachers have shared in your own words

Consider a resume style report of the student’s qualities / contributions

Consider incorporating student reflection/quote

# Writing Letters of Recommendation

Questions?

Pair and share your letter(s)