

EP 25: Writing Letters of Recommendation
May 2014

It is a responsibility and a privilege to write a letter of recommendation for a student who wants to transfer or apply for a job. Sometimes, however, writing a letter presents ethical dilemmas and other conflicts. These may include:

- Last minute requests—giving the instructor less than a week
- Requests that come from students from long ago, and whom the instructor may not remember
- Students who want to have control over the letter content
- Requests from low-performing students
- Requests from online students, whom the instructor may have never met
- Fairness and accuracy issues
- Legal issues about letters of recommendation from the College's perspective
- The difficulty in saying "no" to students
- Students who offer gifts or compensation for recommendation letters written.

These issues complicate what is also a time-consuming task.

Individual faculty members have different levels of comfort and personal boundaries about all of these dilemmas. Therefore, using the syllabus to communicate one's own personal boundaries might be a good way to avoid problems. Some items that faculty might want to include are:

- Grade requirements (if any) that the student must meet in order to request a letter of recommendation
- Amount of advance notice required to write a recommendation.
- A link to the [FERPA](#) release if the faculty member will be mentioning student's grades or class rank.
- A link to a form prepared by the faculty member that includes the student's name, ID number (if applicable) for the application, addresses of letter recipients, due date of the recommendation and a list of biographical or resume-like questions that the instructor might use to write a more complete and accurate letter.
- Business etiquette guidelines for asking for letters and appropriate follow up.
- Situations in which a letter would never be written—for example, if the instructor had never met an online student face-to-face.
- Clarity that the "no-gift" policy applies to letters of recommendation as well.

In the actual process of writing the letters, there are a few tricky situations that may arise. One involves the confidentiality of the letter. Students may want to see the letter before it is sent to the transfer school or potential employer. In some instances, this might be OK—if the faculty member is comfortable with sharing it. However, if the student waives his or her right to see the letter, the recipient might assume the letter to be more candid than if the right to see the letter were retained.

Therefore, if the right to see the letter is waived, it would not be appropriate to share the letter with the student.

Because students have reported feeling very uncomfortable when a faculty member or administrator has asked them to write their own letter of recommendation, it is probably best to avoid this scenario as well.

In all situations where the faculty member will be mentioning student grades, a signed document waiving confidentiality under [FERPA](#) rules is required, and must be retained for three years.

Some faculty members spend 40-100 hours per year writing letters of recommendation; too often it is a thankless task. Nevertheless, writing letters of recommendation is an important part of our jobs, and can make a huge difference in the lives our students.