

# Welcome to PCACAC's 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Institute



## Valued Insights: The Role of Recommendations

Session C2  
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# Presenter(s)/Panelist(s)

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## Presenter/Panelist

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# Learning Objectives

1. Examine the roles of counselor and teacher letters of recommendation (LORs).
2. Learn what college admission professionals view as the essential aspects of LORs.
3. Create a system/approach for writing LORs to ensure you include what is necessary and to save time.

# NACAC State of College Admission

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in All Courses	173	80.9	10.4	5.8	2.9
Grades in College Prep Courses	171	70.8	17.5	8.8	2.9
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	172	52.3	30.8	14.5	2.3
Strength of Curriculum	170	51.2	29.4	12.9	6.5
Essay or Writing Sample	168	16.7	36.9	20.8	25.6
Counselor Recommendation	167	10.8	46.1	28.7	14.4
Student's Demonstrated Interest	168	15.5	21.4	34.5	28.6
Teacher Recommendation	168	7.1	46.4	29.2	17.3
Class Rank	172	9.3	27.9	36.0	26.7
Extracurricular Activities	169	3.6	34.9	40.8	20.7
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	166	4.2	28.9	28.3	38.6
Portfolio	167	5.4	7.2	27.5	59.9
Interview	168	3.6	14.3	29.2	53.0
Work	169	1.8	17.8	41.4	39.1
SAT II Scores	166	6.6	3.0	19.9	70.5
State Graduation Exam Scores	168	1.8	8.3	17.9	72.0

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

# How colleges read files. . .

## **“Data-Driven” Read**

This is a focus on the more quantitative pieces of the app - # of Honors/AP/IB courses, overall GPA, core GPA, SAT/ACT/AP/IB scores.

## **“Wholistic” Read**

This includes a focus on qualitative pieces on information within the application - recommendations, essays, activities and awards AND objective indicators.



# Colleges are looking for. . .

What makes the student unique and how the student will contribute to the life of our campus?

## Academic character

- Classroom contributions, collaboration, intellectual curiosity, quality of work.

## Extracurricular activities/engagements

- Time management/balance, interests, commitment to service (breadth, depth and impact)

## Personal qualities/fit

- Leadership
- Initiative
- Grit/resiliency
- Sense of social responsibility
- Willingness to take risks
- Additional factors

# Counselor v. Teacher LORs

A counselor can focus on personal setbacks, hopes, aspirations, dreams, structural impediments that affected a student's ability to take certain courses,

A counselor describes the student within the whole community to it is an all-encompassing evaluation.

A teacher should explain how the student makes an impact in the classroom on them, on their peers and how they react to challenges within the classroom.

The teacher puts the "lens on the learner" and focus specifically on the academic component.



# Help students tell their story and make this process easier for you!

Step 1: Solicit information from the student

Step 2: Remember what colleges are looking for

Step 3: Consider the style of your letter

# Solicit relevant information

Questions from counselors to students:

- Are you the first in your family to attend college?
- What teacher(s) have you asked to write on your behalf?
- What three words best describe you and why are they good descriptors?
- What motivates you? What is your passion?

# More questions. . .

- What has been the most satisfying course you have taken? Why?
- Which single activity has been most important to you and why? (You may choose a school-affiliated program or an independent one.)
- What three things would you want your counselor to highlight in their recommendation? Give specific examples or relate a specific anecdote to explain.



## **3 favorite questions from Damian:**

What role do you play at home?

**What are you most proud of since starting high school?**

Which activity, inside or outside of school has impacted you the most?



## **3 favorite questions from Robyn:**

Talk about a time you failed. How did you respond to it and what did you learn?

**If you had a motto to live by, what would it be and why?**

Are there any unusual circumstances that may have affected your performance in school?



## 3 favorite questions from Butch:

What do you want to learn more about?  
Possible areas of study in college?  
(i.e. major).

**List the books you have read in the  
last twelve months (not books  
assigned in school).**

What problems do you want to solve?

## Questions from counselors to parents/guardians:

### Three Required Questions:

- 1) Looking back, can you share a story from your child's elementary or middle school years that best reflects the young person he/she is today?
- 2) Please provide an anecdote (or anecdotes) from your child's high school years that best reflect your child's character, integrity, compassion for others, and/or maturity.
- 3) Does your child have interests, talents, or hobbies you might see at home or in the community that may not have surfaced in school?

### Three Optional Questions:

- (1) Special Circumstances that may have affected academics,
- (2) Applying for Financial Aid/Scholarships,
- (3) Is there anything else you would like us to know?

## Questions to students from teachers:

- What do you think you have demonstrated in my class(es) that I should praise? (Think about your contributions/performance during critiques, class discussion/presentations and work days, how have these contributions have made the class community better?)
- How have you demonstrated independence, initiative, responsibility and maturity in my class?
- What is your experience in your intended field? (What classes/ workshops/events have you attended?)
- Was anything in my class particularly challenging for you? Eye-opening?
- What was your favorite project/unit/topic that we discussed in class?

# Essentials for a Counselor Letter

- Academic character
- Extracurricular activities/engagements
- Personal qualities/fit

## Counselor LOR

- Distinctive qualities
- Academic history
  - Special circumstances
  - Nuances of curriculum
- Activities, interests and areas of impact
- Student self-reflection

McLaughlin, J., Rasich, M., Reeves, C., & Rusert, T. (2017, October). *B15: Recs that Change Lives*. Session presented at the annual conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, Boston, MA.



# Feedback from Admission Officers

**Colorado State University:** "This format works really really well. It tells us the key bits of information we need to know about a student and allows us to gain some context about their experience. Also, from an admissions office leadership level perspective and from someone who looks at hundreds of borderline cases each year, there are days where I might need to sort through 75-100 files in a day, so having clear headings and gaining information quickly about why we should move forward with this student, once again, would be very helpful."

**NYU:** "This format is reader friendly and effectively communicates the key information that I am looking for. The headings, bolded areas and bullet points make it easy to find key points and reference during committee."

**U. of So. California:** "I love your new recommendation format. It makes it so easy to get the information quickly. Thanks for changing the format! The bullets allow for me to quickly glance at what the recommender thinks are the most important aspects of the student. I generally read letters quickly so this makes it so that I don't feel like I'm overlooking important information."

**U. of San Diego:** "This is a great format! I wish everyone was using it. If I ever switch sides of the desk, I will call you to ask for permission to use the format. It is very reader friendly. I could easily go to the section I needed and find the information I was looking for. The themes/headers are exactly what I'd want writers to use."

**Vanderbilt:** "I really like the format, as it allows me to focus on a certain section. The categories that you've chosen are helpful and things that we would look for in our process."



**Bowdoin:** I really like the format, especially starting with the narrative at the top of the letter, it offers context for the rest of the letter. I like bullet points. I'm very visual that way, given reading 20 apps/day, the less work my brain has to do in a day, the better for me.

**Notre Dame:** The format is great--it actually helps guide the reader. Even if it goes on to 2 pages, it doesn't feel like a 2 page letter. The format is nice.

**Providence College:** The bullet points are very helpful. The writer gets right to the point and is focused on the heading. When reading so many applications, I would prefer this format over the narrative letters.

**U Richmond:** Really likes it! A huge fan of organization that centralizes thoughts and minimizes rambling.

**Washington University in St Louis:** It is easy to find what I am looking for. We look for personal qualities and the format is ideal for providing this information in a reader friendly way. The format highlights a student's contributions in class, the hallway etc.

# Essentials of a Teacher Letter

- Academic character
- Extracurricular activities/engagements
- Personal qualities/fit

## Teacher LOR

- Student's experience with curriculum
- Academic and intellectual growth
- Personal qualities
- Recommendation



# Additional thoughts. . .

- Ask the student *WHY* they have asked you for a recommendation. Make them answer.
- Explain uniqueness of a class succinctly.
- Relay their involvement in class discussions and what role do they play.
- Share how the applicant stacks up in your class or in your teaching career.



# Additional thoughts. . .

- Avoid using generic/boilerplate letters.
- Do NOT repeat a resume/list of activities.
- Avoid mentioning attractiveness, religion, race, etc. without a good reason.
- Share special circumstances only with student/parent permission.

# FAQs

- Submission of LORs typically online. Transmitted via Naviance, Common App or even email.
- Can I decline a request?
- What if student asks to see their rec?
- Timing. Should have 3 to 4 weeks in advance.
- Create a policy and process that everybody is aware of and respects.



# Our role in the process. . .

- Honesty and integrity are essential.
- Ensure you are always credible.
- The goal is to help students make the right match.
- We are NOT trying to get everyone accepted.

## ***AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION TIME!***

Insights to share?

**Feedback in terms of content...**

Funniest thing you've seen in a recommendation letter?

**The rec letter you always wanted to get back and revise...**

Questions?

# Please...

Complete a session evaluation via the mobile app before you leave.

Thank you!