

Dear College: How to Write Compelling Letters of Recommendation

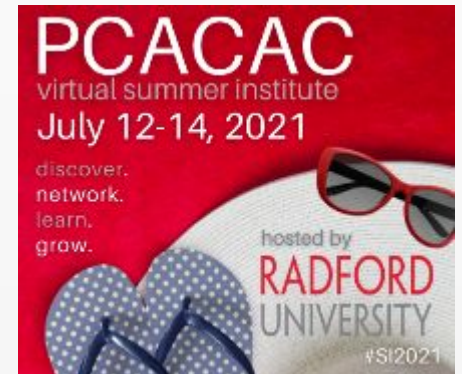
Welcome to PCACAC's
Virtual 18th Annual
Summer Institute



Session B4

Tuesday, July 13

Meet Your Presenters



David 'Butch' Hamilton

St. Mary's Ryken High
School (MD)

dhamilton@smrhs.org

Alice Whitener Robertson

Chantilly High School (VA)

alrobertson@fcps.edu

Tammi Wolfson

St. Mary's College of
Maryland

tfwolfson@smcm.edu

Learning Objectives



1

- Examine what college admission professionals view as the essential aspects of LORs.

2

- Develop a system/approach for writing LORs to ensure you include what is necessary and maximize time.

3

- Consider the impact of COVID-19 on LORs for the upcoming year and beyond.

Who's in the Room?

What is your role?

How many years of experience do you have in your role?

Let's use the knowledge in the room!

<https://padlet.com/allielrobertson/17mkyc4xs05b72t>



NACAC State of College Admission Report

Factor	N	Considerable Importance	Moderate Importance	Limited Importance	No Importance
Grades in All Courses	220	74.5	15.0	5.5	5.0
Grades in College Prep Courses	220	73.2	16.8	5.9	4.1
Strength of Curriculum	219	62.1	21.9	8.7	7.3
Admission Test Scores (SAT, ACT)	221	45.7	37.1	12.2	5.0
Essay or Writing Sample	220	23.2	33.2	24.1	19.5
Student's Demonstrated Interest	218	16.1	23.9	28.0	32.1
Counselor Recommendation	218	15.1	40.4	26.6	17.9
Teacher Recommendation	219	14.2	40.2	26.5	19.2
Class Rank	220	9.1	29.1	34.1	27.7
Extracurricular Activities	219	6.4	42.9	32.0	18.7
Portfolio	219	6.4	11.9	26.9	54.8
Subject Test Scores (AP, IB)	219	5.5	18.3	35.2	41.1
Interview	219	5.5	16.4	28.3	49.8
Work	217	4.1	28.6	36.9	30.4
State Graduation Exam Scores	218	2.3	8.7	18.8	70.2
SAT II Scores	216	1.9	5.6	14.8	77.8

SOURCE: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018–19.

<https://www.nacacnet.org/news--publications/publications/state-of-college-admission/>

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.

“Holistic” 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/resilience
- Sense of social responsibility
- Willingness to take risks
- Additional factors

Your Job isn't to get the student admitted. It's about supporting the student's admission process.

Managing the Process



Logistics

- Solicit information from the student and family, if possible.
- Create timelines.

Remember what colleges are looking for
AND consider the style/structure of your
letter.

The 'Brag' Sheet/ Rec Packet



What is a 'Brag' Sheet?

No matter how much (or little) you know about a student...these can help steer your writing!

Talk this up early and often!

Use our menu as a guide. Questions include information about:

- Family & Home
- Academics
- Extracurriculars
- Something fun or quirky

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZUeeiOlrJ2v_VfZb5pdgP4y2lh_hVsCKJfudEL2qpHHE/edit?usp=sharing

Let's Talk Logistics...



The Process at SMR

February 2022 - At a junior class assembly, students will be asked to submit up to four names of teachers from whom they would like to receive a recommendation. All preference lists collected at this time.

Early March 2022 - College advisor will compile a list of student names and forward those to each teacher. Teachers then pick their preferences and respond back to college advisor by mid-March.

Let's Talk Logistics...



Late March 2022 - Once teacher preferences have been determined, college advisor will make a match for one letter of recommendation between the student and teacher.

Early April 2022 - Teachers given their list of students they are responsible for in terms of writing recommendation letters.

Early April 2022 - Students will receive their confirmation regarding the recommendation assignment. Students will also need to complete an Academic Information Sheet in their Naviance account as well as their resume.

Let's Talk Logistics...



May 2022 - A professional development day/writing workshop will be held for faculty to write recommendation letters. Teachers will have access to any student's Academic Information Sheet and Resume in Naviance.

June 2022 - As part of check out for teachers, their recommendation letters need to be uploaded into Naviance and emailed to the Registrar.

Lessons Learned...

Benefits

- Accountability
- Managed
- No last minute asking
- No one overwhelmed

Drawbacks

- Additional work
- Student without a match?
- What if a college requires a second letter?
- Teachers moving on.

Three Questions that I Love:

1. What do you want to learn more about? Possible areas of study in college? (i.e., major)
2. List the books you have read in the last 12 months (not books assigned in school).
3. What problems do you want to solve?

Let's Talk Logistics...



STUDENT INFORMATION

PLEASE TYPE EVERYTHING

Full Name:

Date of Birth:

E-mail Address that you will continue to check regularly:

Cell Phone:

Part A: **College Information.** Feel free to combine all this information into one answer.

1. Which schools are you thinking about applying to?
2. Why, **specifically**, have you decided to apply to these schools? *What do they offer that makes them attractive to you?*

Part B: **Self-Assessment.**

1. Look at yourself from the outside. How would your friends/family characterize you? **Please provide examples, anecdotes, etc. as to why they would think that.**
2. Does any specific attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from others? How did you develop this attribute?
3. What have been the most satisfying courses you've taken and why?
4. What do you choose to learn/do in your free time? *Nothing, except maybe sleep (which is implied), is silly.*
5. Tell me about a time when you struggled with something and failed. How did you respond?
6. Describe an incident in which you demonstrated strong character (loyalty, integrity, self-discipline, kindness, commitment to high ideals, caring for others, etc.) *Think outside the box – "not cheating" is not the only answer!!*
7. Share something about yourself that I don't already know about you; something that would help in writing your recommendations.
8. Where do you see yourself in ten years? What do you hope to study in college? It's okay to say "undecided". *Don't worry; I won't hold you to anything.*
9. Which single activity has been the most important to you and why? You may choose a school-affiliated program or independent one. Do you plan to continue it in some way in college?
10. Who have you approached (or do you plan to approach) for teacher recs? Who else would have nice things to say about you?
11. What are you passionate about? (This can be intellectually or personally.)

Large, Public High School
~2900 students, 11 Gen Ed counselors

Most report desire to apply to
four-year college, most apply EA
(80%+) ~20% first generation

Packet due June 1 of Junior Year

- Student Information
- Parent/Guardian Information
- Student Resume

****Personal Preference** - Use time in summer to draft letters, identify 'gaps' of information, touch base via email in summer or during graduation planning meeting in late September

<https://sites.google.com/view/chsclass2022/home>

Lessons Learned...



- Share example responses
- Interview students
- Encourage another perspective
- Use this as an opportunity to teach!
- Review annually with your team

Three Questions that I Love:

1. What are you passionate about?
2. Name your favorites (book, song, YouTube video, expression, joke, etc.)
3. What three points would you like me to highlight in your letter?

Supporting Teachers



Provide Professional Development for Teachers at Beginning of Year

- College Admission 'Lesson'
- Counselor Letter v. Teacher Letter
- Sample Questions

Encourage students to consider what's required and what's allowed for colleges on their list

Student makes initial 'Ask' in the Spring of Junior Year

Sample Teacher Rec Memo for Students (back up)

College Perspective

Do

- Tell a Story, Give Anecdotal Support
- Be Honest
- Provide Context and Be Specific
- Update your School Profile

Don't

- Throw a kid under the bus if you don't have much to say
- List the GPA
- Be afraid to address the elephant in the room

Let's Talk Format...

Counselor Recommendation: STUDENT NAME

DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES

ACADEMIC HISTORY

-

ACTIVITIES, INTERESTS & AREAS OF IMPACT

-

STUDENT SELF-REFLECTION

Teacher Recommendation

- Student's Experience with Curriculum
- Academic and Intellectual Growth
- Personal Qualities
- Recommendation

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.

Questions?

Use the Resources posted to the Padlet:

<https://padlet.com/allielrobertson/17mkyc4xs05b72t>



YOUR FEEDBACK MATTERS!

Please complete a session evaluation
at www.pcacac.org/summer-institute.

Thank you!

