



DREXEL UNIVERSITY
Center for
Academic Excellence

Efficient, Effective & Ethical Recommendation Letters

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Motivation

This study evolved directly from our work with students, in the Fellowships Office and as faculty.

We have heard from faculty that they are not always sure how effective their letters are, or what makes an excellent letter. With no professional socialization or exposure to the genre, some feel they are operating in the dark, unsure if their letters are helping or hurting their students.

We have also seen students be very anxious when asked to write their own letters. Further, our fellowships faculty review committees often identified as weak precisely those letters that students had written entirely on their own.

We were convinced that there had to be a better way.

Methods

Our research site was Drexel University and our participants were faculty in nine of our schools and colleges. In each case, we worked individually with school administrators to secure access in a way that made sense for them and would maximize our input.

Where possible, we introduced the project and administered a survey in a full faculty meeting, following that up with an optional focus group discussion. In some cases where faculty-meeting access was not possible, we offered the survey online. Descriptive results to the right.

Discussion: The Tensions

- **TIME COST:** Faculty have strong sense of professional responsibility to write LORs for students but are constrained by severe time pressures.
- **AUTHORITY AMBIGUITY:** Where does the knowledge lie? Who best knows a student's suitability for a particular opportunity?
- **PROCESS AMBIGUITY:** What are students expected to do, and what can faculty ethically ask them to do, to help prepare a letter?
- **ROLE AMBIGUITY:** Unclear expectations of appropriate role for students and faculty in preparing letters of recommendation.

Recommendations

For Faculty

It's a *CINCH* to Write Great Recommendations

C – Create a clear process.

I – Get lots of **I**nformation

N – Say **N**o if you have to.

C – address the **C**riteria

H – **H**umanize yourself and the student

For Students

Getting Great Recommendations in a *FLASH*

F – Forge relationships ahead of time.

L – Look for the best letter writer.

A – Ask. In Advance.

S – Supply smart information.

H – Make it a **H**abit to follow up

The Moves that Matter: Getting Information, Linking to Criteria

ABOUT YOU

Name _____
Major _____ Current GPA _____ Expected Graduation _____
Are your grades reflective of your scholastic abilities? ____Yes ____No
If no, briefly explain.

Have you co-oped while at Drexel? Where?

How do we know each other? For how long? (Which classes, research projects, etc.?) Please fill in below:

Course/Activity	Term/Year/Dates	Subject of major project	Final grade (if course)

What else should I know/remember about our interactions, discussions, activities? What stands out to you?

Rate yourself on a scale of 0-10 (10 being the highest) on each of the following:

Motivation ____ Maturity ____ Perseverance ____
Writing skills ____ Verbal skills ____ Quantitative skills ____
Logic/Analysis ____ Collaboration ____ Leadership ____

WHAT YOU ARE APPLYING FOR

Applying To...	Deadline	Main criteria Get this from the position or award announcement.	How do I submit? -If electronic, give correct email/web address, or let me know that I will receive an electronic link by email. -If in paper, give me a stamped, addressed envelope in my office or mailbox.

For each opportunity that you are applying for, please explain how you think you fulfill the above selection criteria and preferences. Why are you an excellent candidate for this? The more you can tell me here the better.

Any other comments you'd like to make?

Survey Findings

\$1 million dollar annual investment at Drexel.

Survey coverage: N=239

College Name	# of Respondents	College Name	# of Respondents
CNHP	32	Law	21
COAS Exec	13	LeBow	41
COAS*	23	SPH	29
CoE*	5	School of Ed	27
DUCOM*	19	ISchool*	7
Goodwin	22		
Drexel (Total)			239

Coverage

Effort expended on writing letters of recommendation.

	# students written for per year	Hours per first letter for a student	How often say "No"	# Respondents
Drexel Average	9.17	1.84	1.02	239
Range of College Averages	[7.24 - 16.73]	[1.15 - 2.61]	[0.38 - 1.57]	[5 - 41]
Range of Individual Responses	[0-150 letters]	[10 mins-20 hours]	[Never to >5 times/year]	**

Effort

How do you feel about writing letters of recommendation?

College	1 (Can't stand it, but they're a necessary evil)	2	3 (It depends -- on my workload, the student, etc.)	4	5 (I love it. It's fun to see it all come together.)	N/A
CNHP	0.0	0.0	32.8	48.45	18.75	0.0
COAS Exec	0.0	7.7	30.8	42.35	11.55	7.7
COAS*	0.0	4.4	17.4	39.1	4.4	34.8
CoE*	0.0	0.0	20.0	60.0	20.0	0.0
DUCOM	0.0	15.8	31.6	36.9	15.8	0.0
Goodwin	0.0	0.0	54.5	36.4	9.1	0.0
Law	7.2	4.8	54.6	31.0	2.4	0.0
LeBow	0.0	3.6	65.8	28.0	0.0	2.4
SPH	0.0	3.4	44.8	37.95	13.75	0.0
School Ed	0.0	7.4	44.4	37.0	11.1	0.0
ISchool*	0.0	0.0	57.1	14.3	0.0	28.6
Drexel	0.6	4.4	44.9	36.8	8.0	6.3

Affect

What strategies do you use to help you write strong letters of recommendation?

DREXEL	
Ask for Resume/CV	85
Face-to-Face Meeting	56
Ask Student to Identify Points to Emphasize	43
Ask for Personal Statement	40
Ask for Transcript	31
Use a Template	27
Ask for Project Proposal	21
Ask Specific Questions to be Answered in Writing	14
Ask for Past Papers/Projects	12
Talk to Colleagues	10
Ask Students to Write/Draft Letter	10
Ask Junior Staff to Write/Draft Letter	2

Strategies

How much do you think your recommendation letters impact election committees?

College	"Not at all"	"Somewhat"	"Quite a bit"	N/A
COAS Exec	0	8	92	0
COAS*	0	30	57	13
CoE*	0	60	40	0
DUCOM	5	48	42	5
Goodwin	5	45	50	0
Law	0	48	48	4
LeBow	0	44	41	15
SPH	0	45	52	3
ISchool*	0	43	14	43
Drexel (Total)	1	31	37	31

Perceived Impact

Acknowledgments and Information

We would like to thank our colleagues from around the University, as well as the Academy for Human Resource Development, for their interest in this work, their time and their honest insights.

For more information, or for input on your own letter of recommendation, please contact the Fellowships Office: fellowships@drexel.edu.

Literature

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