

## Writing a Prehealth Letter of Evaluation

### General Primer and Instructions for Faculty Recommendations

Thank you for your willingness to write pre-health letters of evaluation for our students. We know that it takes a great deal of time and effort to write a good letter, and your students and the Health Professions Advising Center greatly appreciate your generosity. Letters of evaluation play a critical role in the selection process in health professions programs!

Before you agree to write a letter of evaluation, ask yourself if you know the student's personal qualities well enough to provide an accurate letter. Just because a student asks you to write a letter does not mean that you are obligated to do so, and if you do not feel you can be helpful to the work, ask for some samples. It is very helpful to schedule some time to talk with the student to learn more about his/her goals and aspirations.

**Some technical reminders:** please type your letter on letterhead stationary, include your full name and professional title, and sign your letter. Students are asked to sign a waiver statement concerning their right to examine your letter, but such a waiver should not be a condition of writing. However, professional schools do prefer letters that are confidential. Please be aware and respectful of deadlines. If you do not have the time to write a letter of evaluation reasonable within a deadline, please explain this to your student. A late letter can delay the review of an application and put an applicant at a disadvantage.

How can you make your letter of evaluation useful to professional schools? Here are some suggestions for format and content:

- **Opening:** Explain your relationship to the student and why you are writing this letter. How long have you known the student and in what context? What experiences have you shared? Has the student been assigned special responsibilities?
- **Body:** Here is where you will share specific information about the student. In general, try to make your information factual, unique, and supported by specific examples. Keep in mind that omission of relevant information may be interpreted by admissions committees as implicitly negative. Try to touch on the following topics if you are able to do so:
  1. **Course work:** Describe briefly what you teach, and your expectations of the class. Comment on the nature of the course, difficulty, grades, and notable work assignments. (If you cut and paste this paragraph into other letters, please keep an eye on pronouns and other variables.)

2. **Intellectual ability:** How did the student perform? Like graduate schools, health professions schools prefer more than a simple report of performance. Some areas you can focus on include: oral and written communication skills, listening and observational abilities, attention to detail, diligence, organizational skills, originality, resourcefulness, capacity for critical thinking, ability to understand, analyze and synthesize information, work ethic, problem-solving skills, curiosity, and/or research potential. Comments such as these can make a great difference in how the application is viewed by a selection committee.
  3. **Interpersonal skills:** Does your student show the ability to collaborate, interact well with peers, respond appropriately to criticism, and/or show leadership qualities?
  4. **Personal qualities:** If you can, try to comment on maturity, compassion, empathy, integrity, honesty, responsibility, self-awareness, poise, patience, judgment, initiative, personal growth, self-confidence, flexibility, and/or ability to handle conflict. Does this person have experience in and a commitment to a career in the health professions? Do you think this applicant would make a good health professional?
  5. **Strengths and weaknesses:** Is there a particular characteristic, passion or activity that really stands out? Does the student have any weaknesses? Admissions committees don't expect applicants to be perfect, and will appreciate your balanced, objective appraisal. Try to use detailed examples for both positive and negative comments.
  6. **Comparisons:** If possible, compare this student to others you have known in a similar capacity. If you can, stress the potential of the individual and why he/she is qualified for admission.
- **Closing:** Briefly summarize your previous points and clearly state your level of recommendation for the position the student is seeking. Offer to answer any questions member of the admissions committee may have, and make sure that your contact information is included in the letter.

*Here are some pitfalls that admissions committees respectfully request that you avoid:*

- Don't restate information that the admissions committee already has such as lists of activities and a full transcript. Your letter should focus on the manner in which you know the student.
- Don't exaggerate or inflate. The student should stand out to the degree he/she deserves.
- Avoid unsubstantiated superlatives and vague generalities.
- Don't comment on gender, race, religion, national origin, age, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, marital status, political

affirmation, appearance, family background, or other personal circumstances unless these factors are relevant and compelling.

Once again, we thank you for the time and effort your letters require. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the Health Professions Advisor.

*(adapted from E.Chuck; GMU)*