

## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation are an important part of the application process to a professional school program. The letters are often viewed as supplemental materials in your application and provide the professional school with an assessment of your strengths, weaknesses, and potential to succeed in a professional program. It is important to remember that your letter writers should be people who know you well and who can comment in detail about your academic aptitude, abilities, and performance, and compare these abilities with those of other students. Perceptive evaluations require personal knowledge of your talents and approach to learning.

Professors are oftentimes the best sources for letters of recommendation. In fact, some professional programs require that a specified number of your letters of recommendation come from professors. Some health programs further specify that letters of recommendation be from a professor in the science field. Other sources of letter writers could be employers, advisers, or volunteer supervisors. Family and friends are generally not considered to be acceptable letter writers.

It is important that you carefully review the letter of recommendation guidelines provided by the schools to which you are applying. Some Pre-Health Programs require a letter of recommendation from a Pre-Health Advisory Committee. A Pre-Health Advisory Committee is generally composed of faculty members and advisors who utilize individual letters of recommendation from your professors, as well as information obtained through student records and an interview process, to construct a single composite letter to be sent to the programs to which you are applying. At this time, UNL does not have a Pre-Health Advisory Committee. If one of the schools to which you are applying requests such a letter, you must contact the school to notify them that UNL does not have a Pre-Health Advisory Committee and ask from whom you can submit letters as an alternative to the committee letter. Schools often request individual letters from faculty members in place of a Pre-Health Advisory Committee letter. If the school requests verification that UNL does not have a Pre-Health Advisory Committee, the Pre-Professional Advisers in the Arts & Sciences Advising Center can assist you in providing such verification.

It is essential that you begin getting to know your professors now so that when the time comes to request letters of recommendation, you are prepared. In large classroom settings, it can be challenging to get to know your professors well enough for them to write you a letter of recommendation. Therefore, you must take responsibility for getting to know your professors. You cannot expect faculty members to be able to write a strong, detailed letter if they have not had the opportunity to know you outside the classroom. Some ways in which you might get to know professors are listed below.

- **Obtain a research or lab position with a faculty member.** Begin working on this early! Many pre-professional students are looking for these positions, so assume that you may not be able to obtain one the first semester you inquire. If you are not sure whom to approach about research, contact the Chief Adviser within departments of interest (Biology, Chemistry, Psychology or Biochemistry for example). These advisers will likely know what research is taking place within their department and will be able to get you in touch with the appropriate people. Paid positions may be difficult to come by, so consider volunteering your time. It could turn into a paid position later!
- **Enroll in some small sized classes.** A small upper level class in which you have demonstrated exemplary work may be ideal in terms of a recommendation request. If you are unable to fit a small, seminar style course into your schedule, try to take more than one course from the same professor. Do more than the minimum required for the course – this can be an excellent way to demonstrate your ability and character.
- **Visit with your instructors during their posted office hours.** Be sure to come prepared to these meetings with a definite purpose and relevant questions. Instructors can then answer your questions, clarify course material, and discuss advanced study or research possibilities. This should improve your performance in the course as well as improve your relationship with the faculty member.
- **Participate in summer research programs.** Some of these take place on the UNL campus, but many are found in other parts of the state and country. These will add to your knowledge and experience base and will also allow you to better know professors.
- **Find volunteer, internship, or shadowing opportunities.** These experiences will give you the opportunity to see what your field of interest is really like and help you to get to know a practicing professional. Many students are able to obtain academic credit for internships if they have a faculty member who will supervise the internship, which will again help you get to know a faculty member better.
- **Obtain a Teaching Assistant (TA) position with a faculty member.** A TA position will provide you with the opportunity to interact with the supervisory professor and to demonstrate your knowledge of the material.

## ASKING FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

1. Make appointments to request if the writers you have chosen will write a letter on your behalf. Do not assume that they will write the letter.
2. Give the writer as much information about yourself as possible. One way in which to do this is to provide the writer with a cover letter and/or personal statement and a resume. In addition, it will refresh their memories since they sometimes do not draft the recommendation until days or weeks after talking with you.

### Cover Letter Components:

- Begin by reminding the faculty member of your identity. For example, explain that you have been a student in two of the professor's classes. Mention the name of the course, the semester in which it was taken, and the grade you received. Once you have identified yourself, state your purpose in writing, i.e., to request a recommendation for professional school. Include your address and telephone number in case there are questions.
- It is often helpful to describe your academic, career, and professional goals. Try to make this section personal, particularly so that you will stand out from the many other students who may be asking for recommendations. You might also state your reasons for wishing to attend a particular kind of professional school and why you feel you can be successful.
- Any special circumstances that may have affected your academic progress or success. It is often very helpful to have a faculty member comment upon a deviation in your academic record in the recommendation if they understand the circumstances well.

### Resume Components:

- Major and grade point average
  - Academic honors, prizes, awards, or accomplishments
  - Volunteer work, internships, and foreign study experience. If entrance to such programs was competitive, you should mention that fact.
  - The nature of any employment you have maintained during the school year. Mention the amount of responsibility you had and the number of hours you worked. If such employment helped to finance your education, estimate the percentage of your educational expenses that you have financed personally.
  - Extracurricular activities: emphasize leadership roles you have filled and contributions you have made. Schools are more interested in why you participated or what you gained from an experience than a list of activities.
3. The request letter should not only inform, it should also impress an evaluator with your writing skills. Thus, while you need not spend several hours drafting such a document, you must give it careful consideration and have it neatly typed. The enthusiasm you demonstrate to a writer is often reflected in the letter itself.
  4. When you speak with the professor bring along other helpful supporting documents, such as a transcript, a recent writing sample, or *copies* of research papers, essay exams or other quality projects. The writer can be more specific in describing your ability if he/she does not have to rely on memory alone.
  5. Provide the writer with pre-addressed and stamped envelopes. Include a typed list of each school you would like the letter sent to, including any specific information needed. For example, some schools require the applicant's social security number appear on each letter of recommendation.
  6. Send your letter writers a Thank You for taking time to support your goal of entering a professional school. As a courtesy, let them know when you hear good news. They will appreciate knowing their letter helped.

For more information on requesting letters of recommendation for your application, please contact a Pre-Professional Adviser, 127 Love Library South, 472-3605.