

Information to Faculty about Letters of Evaluation for Students Applying to Professional Health Schools

Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of evaluation for an applicant who is applying to a professional school in the field of health. Letters are an essential piece of an application, and professional schools are placing more and more emphasis on them. Our goal here is to make this task easier for you.

Schools have been moving toward a competency-based, multidimensional review process. For you as a letter writer, it means that schools are going to want a broader assessment of the applicants.

In the past, students submitted letters of evaluation with their secondary applications (specific to each school), and the letters were due sometime in the fall. With the switch to electronic submission through centralized application systems (CAS), evaluators must now submit their letters earlier in the process.

You will receive an email from the CAS with instructions and links once the student has submitted your name and contact information into their primary application. You will then follow those instructions to submit your letter for the student directly to the CAS.

ALL LETTERS MUST BE SIGNED AND MUST BE ON LETTERHEAD! Many schools will reject them otherwise. This will, of course, mean that you should print the letter, sign it, and then scan it into a pdf document that can be submitted electronically.

We ask our students to:

1. Solicit letters in March and April of their application year
2. Make an appointment with prospective letter writers
3. Provide a packet of relevant information including a resume, statement of goals, and perhaps some examples of work in your class
4. Give you accurate information for their particular submission deadlines and any specific instructions about submission

In return, we ask that you:

1. Discuss openly and honestly the kind of letter you can write for the student.
2. Understand that it is okay to decline to write a letter if you do not know the student well enough, if you cannot get it done within the time frame, or if you are uncomfortable writing a letter for any other reason. Please refrain from promising to write a letter and then failing to follow through. You would be surprised how often this happens. It is unacceptable to do this to an applicant, so be up front if you realistically cannot complete and submit the letter in the time allotted.
3. Submit your letter within the student's requested timeframe, but typically no later than mid-summer. A student's application will not be considered complete until all letters have been submitted, so a student can be removed from consideration due to a single missing letter.

[read more on the next page]

What is useful in a letter of evaluation?

- A thoughtful and thorough evaluation of a student's competencies (see the document linked below) and their strengths and weaknesses, both academic and personal
- Any special comments or notes about a student
- Specific, concrete, and/or useful information that will help the committee make a good decision
- Specific numeric comparisons (in the top 5% of students I have taught, in the bottom 25% of students I have had in my lab)

What is not useful in a letter of evaluation?

- Boilerplate letters (pre-created form letters)
- Focusing on the letter writer's expertise or the competitiveness of the class rather than on the student
- Grades and or test scores (exceptions apply)
- Including statements that direct the committee to make a particular admission decision

Guidelines for letter writers (useful for all professional schools, not just medical school) can be found at: <https://www.aamc.org/download/349990/data/lettersguidelinesbrochure.pdf>

We would strongly recommend following these guidelines. If your letter does not address the criteria that a committee needs to see, then your efforts are wasted, which is a disservice to both you and your student. This document will help you to avoid the blank-screen syndrome and to guide your thinking in ways that will help schools to gain a better understanding of the candidate. We do not expect that you will be able to address all of the competencies listed on the second page, but do speak to the specific competencies that you have observed in the student.

Questions?

We would love to answer them or to help you find the answers. We are regularly astonished by the rumor mill that circulates among health care providers, faculty, and students.

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