

# KEY POINTS FOR COUNSELORS IN LEADING A WORKSHOP FOR TEACHERS ON RECOMMENDATION WRITING

**Harvey Mudd College**



# Know your Role

- There is a difference between a COUNSELOR recommendation and a TEACHER recommendation.
- The Counselor should communicate **CONTEXT:** Where the student stands in relation to the high school & community.
- The Teacher letter should describe the student as a learner, as a scholar. The teacher is often the only person who can write objectively what the student is like **IN CLASS.**

# Points of Emphasis For Counselors

- **The School:** Tell what a personal or extra-curricular accomplishment means at that school.
  - ▣ If the Band program or debate program is especially strong and/or represents a major time commitment; if the Newspaper is an award winner; if the soccer team consistently wins league or demands an unusual amount of time; if the Robotics team is completely student-led..
  - ▣ What does academic achievement mean at the school? Are some programs especially strong or innovative? The nature of grade competition?

# Points of Emphasis For Counselors

- **The Student:** What is the student best known for?  
**This should be your lead Paragraph.**
- Is the student's curriculum especially advanced?
- Is the pattern of grades the student earns changing? What does this imply?
- Point out the student's contributions to the HS community.

# Do's and Don'ts: Counselors

- **Please do not** simply recite the resume. Are there particular ways that this student has made a difference?
- How has the student gone beyond the ordinary to do well? Or into the realm of best ever?
- What kind of dorm mate might this student be?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- Finally, High School is a time of great change for most students. Tell us how this person has developed over the years.

# Points of Emphasis For Teachers

- Both the student and the counselor describe the extra-curricular involvement. We get it. Please skim over this part and move on to academic matters.
- SOME of the things we are interested in include...
- How the student reacts to a steep academic or intellectual challenge.
  - ▣ Cite the student's drive, ambition, motivation, resilience.

# Points of Emphasis For Teachers

- How often does the student lead discussions, contribute, or offer a view that clarifies?
  - ▣ This indicates the student's engagement, perspective, class leadership
- How well does the student work with others?
  - ▣ Tells us about teamwork, social confidence.
- How often do you see a high level of curiosity or intellectual drive?
  - ▣ Does the student go beyond?
- Character

# Questions for Teachers to ask Themselves:

- What is the nature of your relationship with the student?
  - ▣ Have you witnessed the student in or out-of class?
- How easy or how strict are you as grader?
  - ▣ Did the grade you gave represent what was learned?
- If you were a college professor, would you be eager to teach this student?
  - ▣ Why or why not?



# Tips for writing letters

- Feel welcome to **impose some reasonable expectations** of the student.
  - ▣ You may require of them a brag sheet or resume, or answer a short survey if you have one.
- Jot down a list of **qualities that most distinguish** the student.
  - ▣ When done reading what you have written, look over the list. Try to illustrate those qualities, not merely to describe them.

# Tips for writing letters

- ❑ Avoid using phrases or sentences taken verbatim from recommendations for other students. We **hate** that. It also undermines your credibility.
- ❑ Focus on the student's **contribution**. Be specific.
- ❑ Think of at least **one thing** in every letter that you could only say about that student.
- ❑ Show, don't tell.
- ❑ Honesty breeds credibility – for you, for your school. Don't go into hyperbole.
- ❑ Get your facts straight.

# Tips for writing letters

- You might decline to write a recommendation if you don't know the student well or feel that you might not be a good advocate.
- For a marginal student, you might want to emphasize the intellect more than you might do ordinarily.
- Don't damn them with faint praise.
- Use forceful & energetic words.
- Address strengths and weaknesses.

# THANK YOU! From HMC

- We realize that most teachers and counselors wonder if their letters are ever read, if they matter, or if they simply go into some admission void.
- Very seldom are you thanked, and even more rarely compensated for this.
- Please know that we ***thank you*** for supporting your students.
- If you have questions for us, you are welcome to reach out. We are looking for a match between the college and the student – you can help find it.