

National Association of Fellowships Advisors 2006 Journal article.

LETTERS OF ENDORSEMENT

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The letter of institutional endorsement is often the first item that committees will read beyond the applicant's particulars (e.g., resume and basic information). As such, it "opens the door" for the applicant by making the complete, most persuasive case for the candidate. But unlike letters of recommendation, which are intended to offer valuable, individualized and detailed perspectives of the candidate, the letter of endorsement is intended to offer committees a more comprehensive overview of the candidate.

The endorsement letter "packages" and contextualizes the candidate, enticing the committee to "read on" and to "look favorably upon" the candidate, warts and all. The letter is the PR, the blurbs on the "dust jacket" that announce and guide the way to the hidden gems (not the costume jewelry) within. As such, the letter of institutional endorsement plays a very important role in the scholarship selection committee's deliberations.

The endorsement should highlight various aspects that may be overlooked or otherwise deemed insignificant by committee readers when not explained and/or placed within the context of the candidate and/or institution.

At a small liberal arts institution where the student body is "indifferently" engaged in outside concerns and questions of civil society, a student's ability to mobilize a tiny fraction of the student body or raise a small sum of money for a cause may be a significant accomplishment.

Inform the committee that although the candidate is planning on pursuing a career in East Asian development studies, and he is teaching himself Mandarin Chinese because the college does not offer instruction in any of the East Asian languages.

Similarly, as committees scrutinize the depth and breadth of the courses on the student's transcript, it is important to let the committee know if students at your institution are limited to the number of courses (hours/credits) they may take each term. This is particularly important where the college considers a full course load to be four courses/semester and the student was able to successfully petition to take a course overload while engaged in varsity athletics or working part-time.

The endorsement letter should also address anomalies in the candidate's record.

Explain the candidate's lone "C" (or worse yet, "D") in an otherwise unblemished transcript—a grade that also had the misfortune of being assigned to an upper division course in the candidate's major—because the student slept through her midterm exam at 8am and, rather than get a dean's excuse by claiming to be ill, she showed up for and wrote the exam with only 15 minutes left in the period. (Believe me, it does happen! Moreover, the student's honesty and sense of responsibility can speak volumes on her behalf. (By the way, students at Cambridge and Oxford don't get make-up exams; they take exams at the same time as everybody else, even if they are in the infirmary.)

It should pay attention to the scholarship's criteria and priorities. If the ideal scholar is a leader, change agent, or consummate scholar, than the letter should highlight, demonstrate, or otherwise explain why and how the candidate fits the program's ideal without reiterating what is already evident in the application packet.

Tell the scholarship committee how, as editor of, or columnist for, the campus newspaper, the candidate is able to provoke serious, informed debate about important issues on or off campus or why the candidate was selected to serve on a faculty governance committee or to make a presentation to the board of trustees on an issue that is vital to the future of the college or university. Although such information may show up in the candidate's application résumé or be mentioned in passing in a letter of recommendation, it will lack the necessary detail and punch if the endorsement letter fails to comment upon the honor and high regard in which the institution as a whole regards the candidate.

It should tell the scholarship committee about the candidate's strengths, extraordinary circumstances, and weaknesses, and why, despite those weaknesses, he/she should be awarded that particular scholarship.

Additionally, the endorsement letter should, when necessary, mention the strengths or weaknesses of those writing the letters of recommendation, informing the committee how to read those letters, particularly in those cases where the referee is not amenable to elaborating upon or modifying the content of his/her letter².

If a professor at your institution is notorious for writing very terse letters that on the surface say very little UNLESS you know that the professor typically will not write a letter for a student he does not feel very positively about, it is important to mention this fact. Likewise, if a professor says the student is one of the best she has taught but does not provide a framework for evaluating this claim, do so in your endorsement. Let the committee know that the professor in question has been teaching at some of the nation's most reputable institutions for 20 odd years, and that her students have gone on to illustrious professional careers or are currently enrolled in graduate programs of the highest caliber. Without this context, the professor's praise is virtually meaningless.

Letters of endorsement should also be up front and frank regarding how a candidate might perform during a committee interview. Let the scholarship committee know that the candidate may become excessively nervous, may come across as too self-assured, or may be mistakenly perceived as being aggressive or strident when passionately defending her position. Likewise, inform them about the candidate's speech or language impediment, his need for special accommodation (e.g., is hearing impaired), or if he has a disturbing tic or lazy eye. Sharing this information will not (or should not) damage the individual's candidacy in any way; but it will allow the interviewing committee to take the appropriate extra steps to make the candidate feel more at ease during his/her interview.

As you can see, the letter of endorsement's impact is significantly enhanced when the letter indicates genuine, personal familiarity with the candidate. Letters that contain concrete examples of unique or interesting aspects of the candidate's personality, or that display initiative and true leadership are much more helpful than general laudatory prose. This type of information is especially important when the candidate is either shy about or unable, due to space constraints, to share such information in his/her application. Use the endorsement letter to tell the committee that as well as being a top-flight physicist, Sally is also the lead guitarist in an all-girl band that has recently released an album, or that Robert had started up a very successful used text book business, selling to other students.

So, what should you do if you do not know the candidate well enough to write such an endorsement letter?

1. Ask the candidate to provide additional information and talking points not covered in his/her application.
2. Talk with those individuals who wrote letters of recommendation.
3. Talk with other faculty, with students and/or other relevant constituents (e.g., members of community service organizations and their target populations).
4. Go with what you know. Review early drafts of the application and decide what is impressive to you.
5. Be honest about the depth (or lack thereof) of the relationship with the student. Don't dwell on it, but a simple "Becky just identified this interest in Sub-Saharan Africa" is much softer than the student getting surprised with a question about Sub-Saharan Africa during an interview that is well beyond her nascent, albeit burgeoning, level of knowledge.
6. Write about what you learn about the candidate. But use quotes sparingly.

In the final analysis, however, it is vitally important that you do not oversell (or undersell) the candidate. According to Gerson (Rhodes), the propensity to oversell candidates "is more serious than grade inflation." When you oversell a candidate, you are doing a disservice to both the candidate and your institution. The candidate may be embarrassed and/or fail to live up to expectations. In the latter case, the institution loses credibility. National and regional scholarship selection committees have long memories!

A Word of Caution: Although many scholarship programs do not limit the number of candidates an institution may endorse, foundations do caution against putting applicants forward who meet the minimum qualifications but who are not realistically competitive. Putting forward non-viable candidates neither benefits the candidate nor the institution. According to Pendergrast (Mitchell), "It becomes very obvious that the [campus] process is deficient when endorsements are made for weak, uncompetitive candidates." Cracraft (Marshall, Chicago Region) heartily concurs, adding that, these competitions are "for the shooting stars, which is why is it better to send in a superlative candidate once every five years than five good, but not stellar, candidates every year."

So what should you do if you are "obligated" to endorse candidates who are not particularly strong or viable? Signal that ambivalence in your endorsement. This is where the boilerplate, perfunctory endorsement letter comes into play.

In Summary: Use the letter of institutional endorsement as an opportunity to give scholarship committees a deeper insight into the candidate's qualities and potential. Provide perspective—placing the candidate, the letters of recommendation, and the application in context. Let the committee know how the candidate performed throughout the college or university selection process, and why the institution chose to endorse that candidate. Such information is essential for scholarship committees to determine why and how the candidate best fits the criteria sought.

The endorsement letter should NOT repeat what is covered elsewhere in the application and letters of recommendation. Scholarship committees do read the application! What they want is for the endorsement letter to tell them what they cannot know from the application, the résumé, and recommendation letters.

In the final analysis, the letter of endorsement should resonate with, and complement, the entire application packet. When taken as a whole, the application becomes a seamless, coherent argument for why and how the candidate should be taken seriously.

In general, those institutions with the most success have been those that took the endorsement letter seriously and submitted well-crafted, comprehensive statements of institutional support.

SCHOLARSHIP SPECIFIC INFORMATION

TRUMAN

- Avoid overly long letters; the letter should typically be no more than two pages in length.
- For students who are studying abroad (either during the term of selection or immediately before), you **MUST** state this in the endorsement letter. This will explain why the candidate suddenly stopped participating in particular activities or why there is a gap in the transcript.
- If you do or do not know the candidate very well, be honest about the depth of that relationship with the candidate.
- Selection committees feel that paragraphs about how competitive the Truman process is at an institution (or long discussions of who sits on the institution's selection panels) are not particularly helpful.
- Unless the institution is truly unique (like a Deep Springs), paragraphs describing the institution are not useful. Most of the Truman selection committee members are familiar with the institutions in question.
- Letters that go into a lot of detail about the Faculty Rep's (the person writing the endorsement's) background are not helpful.

BEINECKE

- If possible, include insights about the candidate from faculty at your institution who are well known or respected in the candidate's proposed field of study, particularly if they did not write letters of recommendation on behalf of the candidate.
- Avoid discussion of the candidate's financial need.
- Stories about the candidate's childhood or other character reference type issues tend to be of limited value.
- Elaborate upon the candidate's plan for graduate school and beyond, including specifics about the graduate schools and programs.
- Endorsing or recommending a candidate "without reservation" doesn't mean anything to the committee.
- Letters of endorsement should, in general, be no longer than two pages long.

MITCHELL

- Letters of endorsement can be submitted by ANY college/university official from the president to the fellowship advisor.
- Letters of endorsement should describe the on-campus review or selection process. According to Pendergrast, the Mitchell selection committee "like[s] to see and respect[s] a deliberate, careful campus review of prospective candidates, which should be highlighted in the endorsement."
- Letters of endorsement tend to be around two to three pages (sometimes longer). Avoid short, routine one-page letters as they will not have much value or impact. Such letters do not necessarily cripple a candidate's prospects, but they would certainly fail to take advantage of what can be a very effective part of the applicant's portfolio.

MARSHALL

- The letter of endorsement should come from the senior-most academic possible (but may be drafted/ghost written by someone else). This practice may vary by region. Some regions are more "relaxed" than others and will accept letters from deans or others with appropriate "senior level" authority. When in doubt, ask.
- For some regions, like the NY, the letter of endorsement should briefly describe the Marshall selection and candidate preparation process in place at your institution. The letter of endorsement and the letters from the primary and secondary referees should blend together into a coherent whole.

RHODES

- In light of the fact that the candidate must submit five to eight letters of recommendation, the letter of endorsement is less important than it might be for other scholarships. This is particularly the case if the candidate has selected referees carefully to convey a diverse and balanced perspective.
- If the candidate has only one non-academic (i.e., character) letter of recommendation, it is helpful for the endorsement letter to provide insights into the candidate's character.
- Provide insight into the interview and discussion among the campus selection committee that led to the candidate's endorsement.
- Avoid extremely long letters of endorsement. Letters of endorsement tend to vary in length. Typically they are two to three pages long.

MARSHALL, MITCHELL, RHODES

- Letters of endorsement should tell the committee *WHAT* makes the candidate outstanding and *WHY* it is so important for him/her to engage in the course of study/research at the university and department identified (as well as *HOW* he/she is excellently prepared to successfully complete the said program of study/research).
- The endorsement letter is the place to inform the committee of the candidate's need for special care while in the UK or Ireland.
- Provide a candid and credible explanation of the candidate relative to past and current candidates from your institution.

¹ This article would not have been possible without the tremendous assistance rendered by the following individuals: Gillian Cooper (Programme Officer, Marshall Scholarships, Atlanta Region); Caroline Cracraft (Vice Consul Politics Press & Public Affairs, Marshall Scholarships, Chicago Region); Elliot F. Gerson (American Secretary, Rhodes Scholarship Trust); Thomas L. Parkinson (Program Director, The Beinecke Scholarship Program); Dell F. Pendergrast (former Director, George J. Mitchell Scholarships); Ray Raymond (Selection Committee Chair, Marshall Scholarships, New York Region); and Tara Yglesias (Deputy Executive Secretary, Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation). Any errors or misrepresentations are solely those of the author.

² Scholarship foundations expect fellowship advisors to help their applicants choose their referees appropriately. The letters should not replicate each other but provide a balanced, comprehensive perspective on the applicant vis-à-vis the scholarship. These letters should be as specific and detailed as possible, replete with examples garnered from written papers, classroom discussion, and observed performance outside the classroom and the student's comfort zone.