Tips for Letters of Recommendation

In order for a college to understand how a student is likely to perform academically, it relies on that student’s high school teachers to provide recommendations on academic performance and potential. A strong teacher recommendation can bring a student’s application to life for the admission committee and may be the decisive factor for some students.

EFFECTIVE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Provide context. The beginning of the letter explains how the person knows the student and is an opportunity for teachers to provide information on the courses taken with them.

Are specific and storied. The use of adjectives to describe the student should be accompanied with anecdotal detail.

“David is an extremely kind and sensitive boy. He frequently works with other students who are falling behind and tutors students during his off-campus period.”

Cite examples of academic performance. Sharing descriptions of a student’s piece of work strengthens statements about a student’s academic abilities.

“Although not a requirement for my class, Mary entered the science fair and her project demonstrated a high level of understanding of multiple complex varieties of plant and animal life. Her clear and succinct explanation impressed the judges.”

Highlight other noteworthy characteristics. Examples of a student’s personal qualities will provide insight about her or his additional attributes that will lead to success in college.

“David always takes the initiative to look for answers before asking for help,” and “Susan processes constructive criticism well; she is always willing to go the extra mile in order to take her work to the highest level of formal and conceptual refinement.”

Note unusual situations or circumstances. The letter can help explain a student’s personal situation that contributed to class performance.

“Chris provides emotional support to his mother through her battle with cancer without allowing the situation to undermine his own stability and accomplishments.”

HELPFUL PREPARATION

Requesting information: Ask the student to provide a résumé or “brag sheet,” reflections on the class, specific class accomplishments, and details of all deadlines for the forms.

Talking to the student: A conversation about the student’s class experiences, colleges of interest, future plans, etc., can help frame the letter more clearly.