

# **GIVING ADVICE TO STUDENTS ON SOLICITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATIONS**

*Sheldon R. Smith, Woodbury School of Business, Utah Valley University, 800 W. University Parkway, Orem, UT 84058, 801-863-6153, smithsh@uvu.edu*

## **ABSTRACT**

Accounting faculty members are often asked to provide letters of recommendation to support graduate school applications for their current and former students. Students may need coaching on how and when to ask for letters, what information to provide, and how to follow up on their requests. This paper provides advice that can be given to students to help them understand the process to facilitate getting better letters, thus improving their chances of being admitted to the desired program.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Accounting faculty members are often asked to provide letters of recommendation to support graduate school applications for their current and former students. Accounting faculty members who teach undergraduates may most likely be asked to support an application for a MAcc program or an MBA program. However, it is not uncommon for accounting students to pursue a law degree. Various other graduate programs may also be pursued by accounting undergraduates, as an accounting degree can be a good background for multiple careers, including those not specifically in business.

As writing recommendations is an important part of the admission process, faculty know that this is a serious part of their job. However, it is often a time-consuming process for faculty to provide helpful recommendations. The stress for faculty may be compounded if the students have unrealistic expectations or if they do not give appropriate notice. Therefore, students may need coaching on how and when to ask for letters, what information to provide, and how to follow up on their requests. The remainder of the paper is advice that can be given to students to help them understand the process to facilitate getting better letters, thus improving their chances of being admitted to the desired program.

This advice could be given to all accounting majors as part of the program curriculum. Alternatively, any single faculty member could choose to give this advice to students in any particular class he/she teaches. While it is possible that this information could also be given to students as they request letters of recommendation, some of the advice may be relevant earlier in the process than when the student has actually asked for a recommendation. Of course, this advice could be modified by those faculty who prefer to advise the students a little differently. As you use it with your students, it should reflect your preferences with respect to how students seek your help with appropriate letters of recommendation.

## **HOW TO GET GOOD LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL**

Many students and former students need letters of recommendation from faculty members to accompany their applications to graduate school. Perhaps it would be helpful for you to understand the perspective of a faculty member so you can get the best recommendations possible.

Many graduate school recommendations are now provided through online systems. However, some are still completed in hard-copy format, either through a specific form provided by the institution or simply through a request for a letter from the recommender addressing specific issues about the applicant. Both the online forms and the institutional forms usually ask for the evaluator to rate the applicant in several different areas. In addition, the evaluator usually has the option or expectation of providing a written evaluation that will help the admissions committee distinguish you from other applicants.

Faculty members recognize the importance of good evaluations and letters, especially those that accompany applications from students who will potentially be seen as marginally meeting the formal admission criteria. A good letter can help distinguish you from other applicants who may also be on the margin. Even for students with the best academic records, grades, and graduate admission exam scores, letters of recommendation can be useful in helping you qualify for a better financial aid package.

### **Make Yourself the Best Candidate Possible**

Making yourself a good candidate is something that needs to be done over a long period of time, not just in the few months before you apply to graduate school. Make it easy for the recommender to say specific, positive things about you.

Be a good student. Get good grades. Be eager to learn, not just for the sake of earning a good grade, but also because you are curious and inquisitive. Be well prepared for each class period. Read the chapter material in advance and be prepared to ask clarifying questions, integrate your personal perspectives, and add comments or ask questions about related current events. Demonstrate leadership in team projects, group work, and study groups.

Get a good GMAT score. Although graduate admission exams are not designed such that you can learn the content in a short period of time, you can likely improve your score by doing some practice exams so you are familiar with the types of questions and the specific instructions for each section of the exam.

Be honest, dependable, and motivated. Extremely bright students who are unethical or undependable will not get good recommendations.

Be a good citizen. Be involved in service, extracurricular activities, and leadership positions. Be in the habit of building a good resume, not for the sake of the resume, but because you are involved in things that build and demonstrate good character and positive characteristics.

Get to know faculty members outside of the classroom. Find opportunities to go to office hours to discuss questions from class, related questions beyond the scope of the class discussion, your career goals, or your related interests. Demonstrate an interest in the accounting profession and get advice from faculty members.

Talk to them about how to prepare for professional exams. Be involved in an accounting club or Beta Alpha Psi chapter where possible. If you have an opportunity, see if you can do some research with one or more faculty members.

### **Choose Carefully Who You Ask for Recommendations**

For graduate school applications, including most MAcc programs, academic references are usually the most relevant. If you are applying to an MBA program for which work experience is required or desirable, you might also include one strong professional recommendation from someone who has been your supervisor. Do not choose a neighbor, family friend, or relative to write letters for you. Do not choose someone simply because of his/her title. Do not ask the dean or department chair (or university president) unless this person is in a good position to know your academic abilities and other strengths specifically.

Ask for a recommendation from someone who knows you well. Depending on the size of your institution, you may not have had any teacher more than once, but if you have, consider choosing one of those professors, at least if that person can provide a positive recommendation. Ask someone who knows your strengths (and weaknesses) and who can make specific, positive comments that will distinguish you from others. General comments about you as a good student or a good person are much less persuasive to an admissions committee than are specific comments that show that the recommender actually knows you well.

You also want to choose someone who will be thoughtful in the evaluation process and who can write well. If recommendations are full of typographical or grammatical errors, these may reflect negatively on you as the applicant as well as the person writing the recommendations. Ask someone to provide recommendations who you are confident will meet the deadlines. In most cases, meeting the application deadlines is critical. Since you probably do not know whether the schools you have chosen to apply to have strict deadlines, assume they do and make sure the recommendations will be submitted on time.

Remember that recommendation instructions may include a request for the recommender to evaluate or comment on your weaknesses or areas for possible improvement. Expect your recommender to be honest. Just as it is not helpful to respond to a job recruiter in an interview that you have no weaknesses, it is not appropriate for an evaluator to deny that you have any weaknesses. However, if the evaluator knows enough about you to show how you have turned prior weaknesses into strengths or how your current weaknesses might help you in graduate school, this part of the evaluation can end up being a positive message to the admissions committee.

### **Ask Tactfully for the Recommendations**

Although writing recommendations for graduate school applications is something faculty members expect to do, no student has the right to get a recommendation from a faculty member. You need to ask for what you want. Describe specifically what you would like from the recommender. Tell him/her which school(s) and degree program(s) you are applying to. Ask if the faculty member will be able to give you positive recommendations. Some faculty may routinely agree to provide recommendations whether or not they think they can give positive ones. If someone cannot give you a positive evaluation, you should seek out another professor who can.

Specifically ask if your deadlines can be met. If you need to ask someone else who might not provide as good of a recommendation but who will actually meet your deadlines, that may be better than asking someone who will not or cannot meet the deadlines. Give plenty of advance notice when asking—two to three weeks, more if possible. Faculty members are busy with classes, other students, committee meetings, research projects, and deadlines for other responsibilities. They may also have personal or family plans in their schedules. Respect their time and allow them advance notice so they can be flexible in meeting your deadlines. On the other hand, be honest. If you need something at the last minute, ask politely, but be understanding if the deadline cannot be met.

If you need multiple recommendations, explain up front what you will need and see if it is possible. If you decide to apply to additional institutions later and need more recommendations, ask again about availability for each letter or group of letters. Preparing good recommendation letters is time consuming and each online recommendation (or hard-copy form) is different; each recommendation can ask for different information or ask for it in a different way. If you know you may need additional letters when you first ask, you might ask if the recommender can keep electronic copies in case you need to come back for further requests.

If someone agrees to provide you with the requested recommendations, find out what information the faculty member wants to have. I usually ask for a copy of a transcript (unofficial is fine with me), a copy of a resume (something prepared for a job or for a class requirement), and an indication of the classes taken from me and when (so I can easily find scores and grades). If the recommendation requires that you provide some type of personal essay, you might consider providing a copy of that essay to your recommender. In addition, anything that will help me to better understand your qualities, accomplishments, and characteristics is helpful. If you have any unusual hobbies, talents, or experiences that will distinguish you, including in areas unrelated to your undergraduate major and your proposed graduate program, those can be helpful. The more specific the letter, the better it looks to an admissions committee.

If the recommendation is to be submitted on a preprinted institutional form, make sure you provide a copy of the form and the address that should be used to submit it. If the recommendation is provided only by a letter from the recommender, make sure to provide an appropriate address. Some faculty may appreciate pre-addressed, stamped envelopes, whereas others may prefer to use more official institutional envelopes to send in your recommendations.

Some recommenders may ask for you to sign a form allowing them to reveal specific information about your class performance (scores, performance, grades, etc.). Much of this information is technically protected by privacy laws. Although many recommenders assume that implicit permission is given when you ask for a recommendation, explicit permission is better, especially in our current society where too many individuals or institutions are burned by one crazy lawsuit.

Waive your right to see the recommendations. Give the recommender every chance to be honest about you without worry that you will see the recommendations. Allowing each recommender to be completely honest will help that recommender build trust with specific schools' admissions committees so that their future recommendations will be even more meaningful. If you do not trust the person you want to ask without waiving the right to see the recommendation, do not ask that person.

## **Follow Up as Appropriate**

Many of the online application systems allow applicants to see when letters have been submitted. If recommendations have not been submitted and the deadlines are approaching or if a hard-copy recommendation is to be submitted, it may be appropriate to follow up with those you have asked to provide recommendations. Of course, you want to be tactful if you ask if the recommendations have been completed. I try to let students know when I have submitted or mailed their recommendations, but I also tell them to contact me if the deadline is approaching and I have not responded to them. I would much rather have a student contact me and be embarrassed that I had forgotten than forget and miss a deadline that I had promised to meet.

It is appropriate to thank those who provide recommendations for you. At a minimum, an e-mail message or short phone call is appropriate. A written thank you note might be even better. No gifts are needed. In fact, if you try to give a gift, this may be difficult for the faculty members, as there may be institutional policies against accepting gifts or ethical considerations of accepting gifts, especially if you are still enrolled in a class taught by a professor who has submitted recommendations for you.

Many faculty members are interested in their students and appreciate it if you keep them apprised of your acceptances and plans. Quick e-mail messages are great to inform faculty of your successes and decisions.

## **Summary**

Getting good recommendation letters to support your applications to graduate school is an important part of the process. Good letters can make the difference between an acceptance and a rejection. They may also impact what financial aid you are offered.

Make yourself the best candidate possible. This is done over a long period of time. Choose carefully who you ask to provide your recommendations. Make sure they will be able to give positive recommendations. Ask tactfully for the recommendations. Ensure that deadlines will be met. Follow up as appropriate. Thank those who have spent time recommending you. Keep them informed of your successes.

## **CONCLUSION**

If the advice in this paper is given to students in advance of when they might request letters of recommendation for graduate school, accounting faculty members can expect that the students will be better prepared as they ask for help with these recommendations. The increased preparation on the part of students will make the important task of providing the recommendations easier for faculty members.