



An insider shares tips on the college admissions process.

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**T**he fast-growing number of applicants to colleges and universities has led to an increasingly competitive admissions environment. This growth has also allowed colleges great latitude in crafting their freshman class. This generally means that colleges have the luxury of so many terrific applicants that they can choose those students whose collective skills and interests will create an entering class that reflects the academic, social, and cultural mix they want to see on campus.

This is frustrating news for most students because it complicates admissions decision making. But it's great news for student leaders. Most colleges and universities want students who will come to campus excited to (and know how to) lead cultural clubs, academic societies, sororities and fraternities, service organizations, and more. But what colleges don't want are students so full of themselves and their accomplishments that they bring a "my way is the only way" mentality rather than a team approach.

The challenge for student leaders is to demonstrate what they have accomplished without bragging and show what they'll add to a campus. Fortunately, the essay application allows students to demonstrate who they are. And just as important, NHS, student council, or other activity advisers can use the reference or recommendation form as an opportunity to sing a student's praises.

### Letters of Recommendation

- Write recommendations for your student leaders. You have unique relationships with your student leaders and can tell their stories and highlight their accomplishments in a way no one else at your school can. If your school has a policy that only the counselor may write such references, provide the counselor with information but explore writing a supplemental letter that can also be sent directly to the university.
- Convey information about the skills, abilities, and unique talents of the student, rather than simply list the events the student was involved in. Remember colleges are asking: What will this student bring to our campus?
- Come up with one great example of when a student demonstrated an ability to bring about success. Did the student bring together competing forces to unite the school in a spirit event? How? Did the student revitalize a tutoring program that had become moribund? What skills did he or she use to make it so? Did the student overcome shyness, a family crisis, or an apathetic student body to achieve schoolwide and personal success? Use your comments to make the student a real, interesting, three-dimensional person who comes alive on the page and possesses special and unique talents.
- Ask students what they believe their greatest successes were as student leaders and what they learned through their efforts. A powerful letter of recommendation shares something about the student's emotional and intellectual journey through increasingly challenging opportunities.
- Be generous with your time, but only agree to write a letter of recommendation when you feel a student has earned it and if you feel comfortable writing one. If not, suggest that the student approach another faculty member or club adviser.

### Advice for Student Leaders

Some students think that only their counselors, teachers, or school administrators should be writing recommendations, or that a higher up—a principal or a superintendent—will carry more weight. Nine times out of 10, the person who is most suited to write the recommendation is the one in the school

who knows the student best. I know from my own student council days as well as my time as student activities dean that this person is most often the NHS or student council adviser.

- Approach your adviser well in advance. You can request a recommendation as early as junior year or earlier if either you or your teacher is leaving the school. But remember that your adviser is busy, so give lots of lead time.
- Give your adviser a list of your activities and the projects you worked on, and share information about what you've discovered about yourself, your fellow students, and your school through your involvement in activities. This will help your adviser write a comprehensive letter of your activities.
- Show colleges what you've done in high school, but remember that they are even more interested in how you will use your knowledge, training, and experience to make their colleges a better place. Look for opportunities in your essay and interview to discuss where you hope to be involved on campus.
- Demonstrate a deep and passionate involvement in a few things. Colleges are unimpressed by students who dabble in 15 activities. Rather, they are thrilled with teens who discover what they love to do, get deeply involved, and accept more and more responsibility as the years go by. Demonstrate how that genuine passion has shaped you as a person and a student leader, and you'll make admissions hearts flutter.
- Bear in mind that different types of schools view their candidates differently. Small liberal arts colleges see it as their mission to view applicants holistically, and they spend serious time reviewing essays, letters of recommendation, and talking with students, as well as considering transcripts and scores. Big state universities have less time and are often driven by data, but students with a genuine story can stand out and convince an overwhelmed admissions counselor to stop and take notice.

Student leaders are wanted on every campus. Students who dedicate themselves fully to a few activities (and maintain their GPAs) help build a connection to their faculty advisers, demonstrate a high degree of commitment and maturity, and accept and thrive in leadership roles. Give admissions officers a clear sense of who those students are and what they'll bring to campus. Letters of recommendation are key to getting that information into the hands of the admissions committee. ■

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