Tips and Takeaways for Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation

Philosophy of Application Review
- In reviewing applications, many admissions offices will look far beyond a student’s test scores and GPA to employ a holistic, evidence-based review.
- Below is a list of the primary pieces a review committee considers:
  - Application form (Common Application, Coalition for College Application, etc.)
  - Transcripts from all schools attended
  - Testing (SAT/ACT)*
  - Counselor letter and School Profile
  - Teacher letters of recommendation
  - Essays (Personal Statement, Supplemental Essay)
  - Interview/other components

*Many schools are test optional for the 2021 application year

About Letters of Recommendation
- Letters of Recommendation provide qualitative information that help to contextualize applicants beyond metrics such as GPA, test scores, and grades.
- The best letters provide concrete examples and evidence to help us understand who the applicant is as a student and community member.

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<th><strong>Counselor Letters</strong></th>
<th><strong>Teacher Letters</strong></th>
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<td>Complement the school profile to show school-wide context</td>
<td>Describe a student’s performance and academic journey in the classroom</td>
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<td>Show how the student engages with opportunities in the larger school setting</td>
<td>Provide classroom-based evidence for academic character, such as work habits and how they engage with peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe the student’s performance and impact over totality of high school career</td>
<td>Show qualitative examples of student work and ability, such as topics of interest and exceptional papers or projects</td>
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Effective Counselor Letters of Recommendation should...

- Provide some context for the student within their graduating class while also highlighting major strengths and impressive or distinctive personal qualities
- Discuss the student’s impact in their activities and the larger school community (i.e. more than a summary of activities, the letter should describe the impact)
- Highlight any special programs a student is involved in, either academic or extracurricular (e.g., Math and Science Academy, Leadership Institute, etc.)
- Provide context for the school and/or the student’s academic opportunities that would be helpful (e.g., leave of absence, scheduling conflicts, etc.)
- Shed light upon any relevant family or personal context that admissions offices should be aware of (e.g., death or illness in the family, a long commute time, etc.)
- Speak to a student’s future success using anecdotes from their high school career in order to envision that student’s success moving forward
- Avoid the following: Simply listing out a student’s activities and achievements; placing emphasis on quantitative data that can be found elsewhere in the application (e.g., GPA, test scores); and using ambiguous or hyperbolic language, especially across letters for different applicants from the same school

Teacher Letters of Recommendation should...

- Provide context for the student within that specific academic course
- Focus on the student and their abilities, not the teacher’s background—while context is helpful, spending more than a line or two on the qualifications of the letter writer is distracting and detracts from space that could be used to describe the student
- Give insight into the student’s personal qualities and their potential contributions to the college classroom—be specific!
- Expand upon current and past success and challenges
- Address distinguishing features or aspects of the student, including exceptional work
- Include a personal example regarding an actual event or experience that sticks out as memorable or notable from that student’s time in the course
- Avoid common generalizations that fail to distinguish a student from their peers

Both Counselor and Teacher Letters of Recommendation should provide evidence that allows the admissions committee to see firsthand how a student engages in an academic setting, with others, or in a larger community.