Fellowships & Scholarships





GETTING GOOD RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Every student will eventually need letters of recommendations for either graduate programs or fellowships/scholarships, but only the well-prepared student will get the best possible recommendations. This process requires planning and some work on your part:

1. Gather Information

- (a) Make up a sufficiently detailed resume/vita.
- (b) Write up a brief description of the job, scholarship, or school to which you are asking to be recommended. List qualities or skills they are looking for.
- (c) Make copies of all applications you have filled out, including personal statements and writing samples.
- (d) Ascertain how many letters of reference are required or allowed.
- (e) *Do the paper work*. Address envelopes to the institution or person receiving the recommendations and fill in the student portion of any reference.

2. Make some decisions

- (a) Who should you ask to write your letters? Only people who know you VERY WELL and can say specific, concrete things about you. Unless you have cultivated relationships with faculty, this will be a problem. Recommendations often ask for comments on everything from your social poise and leadership skills to your emotional maturity and career motivation. If all the recommender knows is that you wrote an "A" term paper and usually talked in class, you cannot expect an insightful, specific letter. A letter from a dean or even the President of Geneseo is equally worthless if that writer cannot talk about you knowledgeably.
- (b) *Don't just leave a note in the mailbox or send an email!* Make a personal appointment to talk with faculty you hope to have write a letter of recommendation. Always ask faculty members if they feel they could write you a positive letter rather than if they will write a letter.
- Give your recommenders all of the information and/or paper work you have put together. A negative or even a positive but hastily written letter can hurt you immensely. For example, the chairperson of the Northeast Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee mentioned that insufficiently specific overly glowing faculty recommendations have been the deciding factor against many student Rhodes applicants. If a faculty member is hesitant to write for you, do not push. That hesitation might signal a letter you can live without.
- (c) *Follow up on the letter*. Give the writer the deadline. A few days before the deadline, politely ask if the letter has been sent. Immediately after the deadline, write or call whoever is supposed to receive your letters and find out if all of your materials/letters have arrived. An incomplete file or late file can ruin an opportunity for you.

(d) Your recommendation letters are as important, in some cases MORE important, than your GPA or test scores. It takes a faculty member a minimum of two hours to write a letter for a student. Some faculty members write over 150 recommendation letters each year. They take these letters very seriously, and you should, too. Give the information needed to a faculty member and allow adequate time to do a good job. When you get good news, share it with your letter writer and thank him/her.