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# THE **INSIDE SCOOP** ON COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

When it comes to letters of recommendation, take the 'show, don't tell' approach

BY ASHLEY PALLIE AND CALVIN WISE

Two things can be true. With more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, the American higher education system is among the best in the world simply because there is a pathway to a degree for everyone. At the same time, given so many higher education opportunities, the lack of a singular admissions process can cause a lot of confusion and anxiety for thousands of people each year. When speaking with counselors, parents, and students, the first question an admissions officer often hears is: What does it take to get admitted to your institution? While many families often believe that admission is a decision based solely or primarily on numbers (namely GPA and test scores), in highly selective admissions, the qualitative aspect of an application is incredibly important.

At Pomona College in Claremont, CA, we assessed our applicant pool this past year to see what percentage of students was academically viable, meaning we believed they could succeed at Pomona. That number was well over 50 percent. If more than 5,000 applicants are deemed “academically qualified” to attend, and we admit fewer than 800, quantitative credentials are not the primary criteria of our review process. Instead, we engage in a process called holistic admissions. Yes, we know that phrase garners many eyerolls and heavy sighs, but it is still true that decisions have to take into account much more than numbers. If you’re thinking about a similar approach, consider *Understanding Holistic Review in Higher Education* as a guide. In the executive summary, the authors highlight three common characteristics of holistic admissions:

- Mission alignment, which is focused on advancing the institution’s core educational goals through the admissions process.
- A two-part inquiry regarding applicants—attention to how likely they are to succeed and thrive at a given institution, and attention to their ability to enhance the educational experiences of their peers in and out of the classroom.

Through transcripts, school profiles, testing, and letters of recommendation, admissions officers start to piece together how a student would approach the educational experience at our schools.

- Consideration of multiple, often intersecting, factors—academic, nonacademic, and contextual—that, in combination, uniquely define and reflect accomplishments and potential contributions of each applicant in light of their background and circumstances.

The holistic admissions process allows colleges to look beyond quantitative numbers and leverage essays, letters of recommendation, resumes, and other benchmarks to assess a student’s potential contribution to a college’s campus community. The holistic admissions process can be subjective and institution-specific, leaving admissions officers to default to “it depends” when asked questions about admissibility at college fairs. This response often leaves families with more questions than answers and a lack of clarity about their next steps.

As we discuss the role of letters of recommendation in the selective evaluation process with families, we try our best to generalize how the process works but also be specific about where letters of recommendation come into play. We state up front that letters of recommendation are not important for every student in the evaluation process at every college. However, you never know when they are going to come into play, and when they do, they are essential.

To understand how letters of recommendation factor into the admissions process, it’s important to understand the pillars of holistic admissions. Ultimately, our goal is to identify students who will succeed academically and contribute to our campus community. Through those lenses, we look at each application individually and evaluate how a student’s interests and goals will help them thrive at our respective college or university. At Johns Hopkins University, we center our evaluation on three areas: academic character, impact and initiative, and overall personal contributions.

## ACADEMIC CHARACTER

From personal experience, there is a fundamental misunderstanding about how selective universities evaluate a student’s academic record. We are frequently asked: Is my weighted or unweighted GPA more important? What is your minimum SAT score? How important is class rank? Our review is less about the number, focusing more on what that

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number represents. We are trying to figure out how a student has navigated the academic opportunities available to them. Through transcripts, school profiles, testing, and letters of recommendation, admissions officers start to piece together how a student would approach the educational experience at our schools.

Letters of recommendation are integral in helping colleges understand a student's academic character. A few things to be mindful of:

- Try creating a survey for students to complete before you write a letter of recommendation for them. Ask students to reflect on topics that piqued their interests, favorite discussions, challenging assignments, and moments of growth. This will give you some examples, and their responses might surprise you.
- When writing a letter of recommendation, provide a brief introduction to the class or curriculum, but make sure it ties back to the student's experience. Maybe you taught the student as a junior in a class of all seniors? Maybe the student loves engineering but really thrived in your English class? Maybe the student took an unpopular opinion to further the classroom discussion?
- Given the flexibility and variety of curricular options in college, admissions officers are looking for students who are willing to take appropriate academic risks and step outside their comfort zones. Have you seen the student do this? Tell us about it!
- We are looking for students to connect the dots across academic areas, especially at schools with an interdisciplinary curriculum. How have they demonstrated this in your class?

### IMPACT AND INITIATIVE

College campuses are dynamic, so admissions representatives are looking for students interested in making an impact. This is where we usually lean more on essays and resumes. However, there are instances where we find evidence of this in a letter of recommendation. A few examples of this:

- Students taking the initiative to organize study groups and support others struggling in the class.
- Students pursuing enrichment or independent inquiry to further their interests.
- Individuals proactively seeking support (coming in after school, before school, during lunch).

While letters of recommendation from counselors tend to focus on the broad impact and experience a student has had in the community, the focus of a letter of recommendation from a teacher should be the classroom experience; however, it's OK to add information about students' broader engagement. Especially in larger school districts, you may know the student better than their counselor. Just make sure you are not simply repeating their resume!

### PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND COLLEGE FIT

A student's personal contributions and how they might "fit" into the college environment are more college-specific and harder to directly address in a letter of recommendation. Keep in mind, colleges are building a learning community that will engage students inside and outside of the classroom. We need students who come from a diversity of backgrounds, possess a variety of skills sets, and embrace different perspectives. For instance, at Johns Hopkins, we value a collaborative learning environment. Colleges get really excited when students appreciate viewpoints different from their own. We also talk a lot about the "glue kid." This student may not be the loudest in class but really thrives in the small group setting. They make sure everyone's opinions are taken into consideration and incorporated in a group project.

### DIFFERENCE IN LETTERS

Letters of recommendation comment on a student's unique qualities, and colleges use this information to gauge a student's fit for campus. We require two types of recommendation letters in support of a student's application: teacher letters (typically from a student's junior or senior year) and the counselor letter. As mentioned earlier, the difference between these letters is important—a counselor letter gives a big-picture view of the student, while teacher letters focus more intently on the intellectual achievements a student has attained. Both answer the basic question, "What will we miss the most about this

student when they graduate?" but they approach the topic from different perspectives.

### Counselor Letter

From the counselor letter, we are looking to learn more about the student's life at high school.

What is the student's story? How did you first meet the student, when did they stand out to you, when were you first impressed by them? What role(s) do they fulfill in the student body or in their graduating class? Help college admissions reps make connections that they may not see and fill in the blanks of a student's time in high school. As an adviser, you may have seen the student over many years and can comment on the general growth of the student. If a student also has a connection to a community-based organization, that is also helpful to include in the counselor letter.

### Teacher Letter

From the teacher letter, college admissions officers are really hoping to find specifics on who the student has been in the classroom. Is

there a story of the student lighting up in class when they learned about a topic? How has the student matured and grown in the time they have been your student? Admissions officers also look very specifically for intellectual curiosity. We want the student who is at the edge of their seat with excitement about learning or a student who goes down a rabbit hole when they discover a topic that they just have to know more about.

Of course, the quantitative aspects of the college application process and hard skills in the job market are important. However, the students and employees that truly thrive in our society are those that focus on developing the soft skills as well. LinkedIn recently analyzed hundreds of thousands of job postings in order to determine which skills companies need most in 2019. Time management, adaptability, collaboration, persuasion, and creativity all topped the list. These are invaluable attributes in navigating the college experience, too. Students do not usually see these attributes in themselves, so college admissions officers turn to letters of recommendation to identify these noncognitive capabilities in prospective students. •

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## GENERAL ADVICE

Once you understand the pillars of the review process and how letters of recommendation factor in, take the time to absorb some general advice:

- **Be specific and provide examples.** This is challenging (especially if you have a large class load), but keep in mind that the college admissions process is evidence-based. To use the courtroom analogy, you are a character witness for the applicant. Don't just tell us the student possesses strong intellectual curiosity. We need tangible examples to substantiate your claim. (English teachers will recognize this as "show, don't tell.")
- **Stay away from common generalizations.** A student may be respected by peers and faculty, have a thirst for knowledge, or be a quiet leader, but without supporting evidence, these descriptors do not hold much weight in our process.
- **Use a single page, if possible.** Be succinct. Make sure the format is reader-friendly (no large block paragraphs, small font, tight margins, etc.).
- **Avoid form letters.** The use of a boilerplate recommendation can frequently lead to mistakes (e.g., the wrong name or pronouns) and the letter will carry little weight.
- **Highlight a student's grit and resilience.** If a student is comfortable having you share some of the challenging realities of their lived experiences, please share that with us.
- **Be aware of school group readings.** Sometimes admissions offices read all the applications from a particular school at one time; we call these school groups. This method gives admissions officers a better understanding of curricular offerings, academic limitations, special programs, etc. We are not necessarily pitting students against each other. (Sidenote: We also typically receive a school profile that gives us a sense of the school community and environment.) On a given day, we could read five to 10 letters of recommendation from one teacher. Try to distinguish students from each other as much as possible. If you dropped a student's letter of recommendation in the hallway without a name, would someone else know who it was written about?