

## ADVICE FROM A COLLEGE ADMISSIONS DEAN ON THE COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATION

Remember: The purpose of your recommendation is to help the admissions staff make an accurate, fair assessment of the applicant.

### DO

- Support your points with examples and details.
- Place the student in the context of the class or the school.
- Help us understand your situation and how well you know the student—e.g., you have a very large counseling load; you are new to the school.
- Address attitude/character as well as academic ability.
- Address growth if you have known the student over a significant period of time.
- Be candid and comprehensive; include negatives if you are comfortable doing so.
- Explain any unusual circumstances that may have affected the student's performance (within your rights given confidentiality constraints).
  - If you don't know the student very well, state that fact, and explain the source of the information you used in writing your letter.
  - Keep your letters to one to two pages; a shorter, more specific letter is preferable to a long, general one.
- Feel free to write a note to a specific college on a copy of a standard letter.
- Proofread—be sure your pronouns are the same gender as the student.
- Write legibly if handwriting a letter; make clear copies if photocopying a letter.
- Attach your letter to the counselor evaluation form of the application; if your school has its own form, attach that as well.
- Realize that the college accepts at face value what you say: Don't be surprised if someone you support is admitted and someone for whom you wrote a less supportive letter is denied.
- Realize that the counselor recommendation is sometimes used as a road map to interpret the transcript—if there are blunders on the transcript, address those in the letter.

### DON'T

- Underestimate the impact a compelling letter can have at selective colleges.
- List all the student's activities or courses; that information is available elsewhere in the application.
- Assume that high grades are sufficient for selective colleges to admit a student—most of their applicants have high grades.
- Use the same paragraph or even the same sentence in more than one recommendation, unless you are doing so to provide a description of the school or the class; otherwise, the boilerplate approach hurts your credibility.
- Comment on the student's appearance.
- Use one college's name in the first paragraph and a different name in the closing paragraph.
- Be concerned if you prefer to ignore check boxes or if your school prohibits rating students in this way. Colleges will work with what they receive.

### Other points to ponder

- Students who can be most helped by a compelling recommendation include merit scholarship candidates at any college, borderline admissible candidates at any college, and competitive candidates at the most selective colleges.
- Explain why you think a student is a good match for a particular college—and especially so for Early Decision candidates and for borderline candidates.
- The more history your school has with a college, the more important your letters become. In sorting through candidates from your school, colleges rely on your candor and your assistance.
- Your recommendations will be read thoroughly by at least one person evaluating the application. It will help that person, as well as subsequent readers, if your opening sentence commands attention and your closing paragraph summarizes your evaluation.

**Source:** Terry Cowdrey, *St. Lawrence University, New York*