

Resource Guide

Deciding Whether to Write a Recommendation Letter for a Student

In our work as faculty and graduate instructors, we're often asked to write recommendation letters for students, as they pursue internships, apply for graduate school, or seek leadership positions on campus or in the community. It can be tempting to automatically agree to write letters for a student, even when you feel conflicted about doing so. Before agreeing, consider the following tips to ensure that you are the best person to speak on a student's behalf. A half-hearted letter is worse than no letter at all.

- **Before you agree:** Weigh your *total* experience with the student, including the quality of her/his work, work ethic, personal attributes, etc. Get a clear picture of the context for your letter, and determine whether your experience with the student is suited to that context. If you don't have enough information, ask the student to provide more detail. It also can be helpful to know what s/he would most like you to emphasize.
- **Saying "no":** It's best not to write for a student about whom you feel ambivalent or if you feel that what you have to say would actually harm the student's chances for acceptance / hiring. Additionally, if you feel you don't have enough enthusiasm and/or remember enough detail about the student's performance to write a persuasive letter, you probably don't. Finally, it's important to consider two other questions when deciding whether or not to write for a student:
 - Will the student reflect well on your program / university? Remember that you represent an organization larger than yourself, and your recommendation of a student reflects on the organization, not just on you. And
 - Is your status appropriate to the student's needs? If you're a graduate student, it may be a good idea to encourage the student to consult her/his academic advisor, just to be sure that your status as a graduate student won't affect the perceived value of your recommendation.
- **Declining to write a letter:** If you determine that it's better not to write on a student's behalf, be kind but firm; don't send mixed signals. Consider framing the negative with a positive comment; for example, "While I appreciate all the hard work you did in my class, I do not feel that I am the best person to speak on your behalf...." Finally, encourage the student to seek other recommenders who would be better-suited to write (e.g., a professor in her major, a work-study supervisor, etc.).

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your work, contact the Reinert Center at cttl@slu.edu.