



## **Office of Graduate Fellowships**

**For Faculty:**

## **Writing Strong Letters of Recommendation**

### **Introduction**

George Mason University provides support to faculty advisors, mentors, and instructors of graduate students applying to nationally competitive fellowships through the Office of Graduate Fellowships.

One of the goals of the Office of Graduate Fellowships is to help both faculty and graduate students navigate the sometimes delicate matter of letters of recommendation by offering pointers to students on the etiquette of requesting letters, as well as on what information they should be prepared to furnish when a faculty member agrees to write a letter for them. The goal of this guidance is threefold: First, to minimize the burden of letter requests on faculty, thus enabling faculty to be more supportive of such requests; second, to teach graduate students an important professional skill; and third, to ensure that the resulting letters are as strong and as relevant as possible.

### **When a student requests a letter of recommendation, you have a right to...**

1. A reasonable amount of time to write the letter. Students will be advised to allow letter writers at least 3 weeks' (and preferably 4-6 weeks') notice before the deadline. Late requests are granted at the letter writer's discretion. Your response to such requests will depend upon how well you know the student, their reasons for making a late request, and whether they are prepared to provide you with the information you need to write a letter in a short span of time.
2. Information about the award and the applicant. If the student does not offer, ask for copies of their draft proposals, CV, and for information about the specific award program. Even if you know the student well, this material can be helpful in crafting a more effective letter for the award in question.
3. Say no without feeling the need to provide elaborate justification.

### **Some Additional Pointers for Making the Job Easier and the Letter Stronger:**

- When agreeing to write a letter or provide a reference, ask the student for a copy of their fellowship proposal(s) or statement(s) and an up-to-date CV.
- If the award is one you are not familiar with, ask the student to provide a link to the web site and/or a bullet point fact sheet about the award. The strongest letters are those that resonate with the goals and priorities of the funding organization.
- Most application systems now ask recommenders to submit letters electronically. If you receive an email granting access an online application system, always look at what you are being asked to provide before starting – the “reference” may involve specific questions rather than a traditional letter. Save frequently when composing in an online interface to avoid losing your work. You may choose to compose text in a word processor or text editor and paste material into the recommendation form. You may also have the option (or requirement) to upload an electronic version of a traditional letter.

### **General Pointers, continued...**

- If a traditional letter is required (either in hard copy or scanned) write it on university letterhead.
- If you're not sure where to start with the letter, ask the student to provide a bullet-point list of what they would like you to emphasize. This list can serve as a menu or a template from which to begin crafting your letter. However, it's best to resist the temptation to ask the student to draft a letter. Aside from being ethically questionable, such letters are usually very weak. If you don't have the time to write a letter or don't know the student well enough, it's better to politely decline.
- Strong letters provide specific examples of a student's performance. This might relate to the student's performance in your class (such as an assignment or class presentation executed with distinction), research you supervised, time spent with the student on a study abroad or off-campus program, or specific moments in which you observed the student excelling at something.
- It's OK to use a letter you have on file for the student, but it will be stronger if you customize it a bit. At the very least, make sure the name of the award and the student are correct throughout the letter – these are common bloopers when recycling letters. If possible, look over the information about the award and consider inserting a sentence or two that speak to the student's suitability for that specific award.
- Consider the audience that will read the letter. Is the award specific to your discipline or area of specialty? Or must your letter appeal to a more diverse and general audience?
- Want confidential feedback or proofreading (for example, for non-native English speakers or those new to the U.S. system) on a letter draft? The Office of Graduate Fellowships can provide this service. Mason's Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence (CTFE – <http://ctfe.gmu.edu>) is another excellent resource for this kind of support.

### **When (and How) to Say "No"**

If you cannot write a letter that is emphatically positive in its support of the student, it may be best to decline. Other situations in which you might decline are when you don't feel you know the student well enough; you feel the student is a poor fit with the award; the student provides inadequate time or information; or when circumstances in your own life make it unlikely that you will be able to complete the task. Simply say, "I don't think I'm the best person to write for you. Perhaps you should consider asking someone else."

Keep in mind that if you are the applicant's doctoral dissertation advisor/committee chair, most competitions will expect to see your letter of support, and its absence will be very damaging to the application. This is a situation that indicates you need to sit down with your advisee and have a frank discussion before he or she goes any further with the application process.

### **A Few Useful Links**

- George Mason University Center for Teaching and Faculty Excellence <http://ctfe.gmu.edu>
- Yale's Advice for professors – very helpful tips!  
<http://www.yale.edu/yalecollege/international/funding/fellowships/writingrecommendations.html>
- Penn State publishes a faculty handbook geared specifically toward writing online letters of recommendation: <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationletteronline/node/121>