

Tips (from an expert!) for writing effective college recommendations

Ann Velenchik, Wellesley College Dean of Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Economics, offers advice from the perspective of a Board of Admission reader on how to make your letter of recommendation a more useful contribution to your students' application dossiers.

She says: "We want to admit students who are going to succeed and thrive here at Wellesley. We're trying to find evidence in a student's background that she has the academic preparation, character skills, study habits, and whole package of things that make somebody able to come to a reasonably high pressure environment, succeed, thrive, and be happy here."

According to Professor Velenchik, each student's application contains two types of information: (1) objective (test scores, transcripts, school activities, lists of activities) and (2) narrative (counselor report/letter, teacher letters, and the student's essay and other written elements of the Common App). She anticipates that she'll get an objective data-driven view of each student and then go into the narrative to understand more of the data by virtue of the narrative's context, richness, and perspective. We hope you'll find the following tips to be useful:

- **Provide context.**

Counselor letters provide context to a student's list of activities, make it more robust, and help admission readers understand where the student really leads and shines, as well as where she has invested herself. For example, when other people at the school talk about a student, what things are associated with her? If you have a student who's a fencer and that's what everybody says, and it's one of 10 things on her list, the counselor letter makes me find out what her priorities and passions really are, what she's really engaged in, and how she is as a person.

- **Add something new.**

That's really important. Frequently letters from counselors and teachers say the same thing. They all list the students' activities, so now I don't know anything that I didn't know before. I understand you cannot control the teachers, but if we can help them to understand that if what they bring to the party is different, we can get a broader perspective. The best situation is where every piece draws on the writer's specific expertise and experience with the student.

- **Encourage teachers to provide academic examples and insights.**

Teacher letters can provide broader and deeper understanding of academic performance than grades alone. Concrete examples and anecdotes are more helpful than quantitative measures, adjectives, or generalizations. Tell me about a term paper, an exam, or a presentation in which a student excelled. When she participates in class, what is that participation like? Is she the kid who asks the question that

everybody else is thinking about but nobody else has dared to ask? Is she the one who turns the conversation in different ways? Does she always have something to say? Highlight areas of particular strength and explain gaps or weak spots in her record. We're less interested in the narrative of what her grades are than in how much she challenged herself.

- **Discuss intellectual attributes and personal qualities.**

I want that very specific context of "this is how I know her." What is her mind like? What is she passionate about intellectually? How does she think? How is she creative? Is she articulate? Is she a leader? Show us evidence of why she will thrive here. Give us examples of what her peers think about her. We want to hear about intellectual attributes. Is she an incisive thinker or solid writer? Does she have a dynamic personality? Academic strengths and skills are more telling than lengthy descriptors of her work ethic. All Wellesley students are conscientious and diligent; that's assumed, so it's not terribly useful information.

- **Avoid gender bias in language and content.**

Frequently letters to Wellesley refer to a student as "polite." "Polite" is a minimum requirement of college success, but tells us nothing about intellectual power or force of personality. While female students are often described as "polite," "helpful," "cheerful," or "cooperative," male students almost never are. My son is at an all-boys' school and his college counselor tells me they never describe a student as polite. Take a moment to think about such adjectives and whether they offer anything beyond the bare minimum.

- **Don't tell us what we already know.** For example, "Susie expects to graduate in June," an explanation of what precalculus is, information we can find in the school report, or a duplication of the lengthy list of a student's activities that she has already provided isn't helpful. However, substantive information on her participation or perspectives from coaches, faculty, or peers is. If she has a particular strength or had a lousy 10th grade, an explanation would be helpful.

- **Share, but not unnecessarily or overly.**

If a student has overcome obstacles or dealt with family turmoil, that's enough information for now. She may talk about it in her essay or elsewhere in her application. If she has confided in you that she had a brief depressive episode, but it didn't affect her academic record, it's not essential to share. And it may also be inappropriate if the student doesn't know you're divulging such information.

- **Remember that letter length is not related to letter quality.**

Don't feel your recommendation needs to be a tome. We're looking for vivid language, specific examples, insights, and context; nonetheless, it can be brief.



