Suggestions for Writing a Letter of Recommendation

Office of Faculty Affairs
Office of Student Affairs
Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine
Initial Considerations

- Most letters of recommendation (LoR) will be medical students applying for residency
  - LoR for med students is context of these notes
    - Considerations also apply to: residents applying for fellowship; residents applying for first job; undergrads or grad students applying for med school
    - (Throughout, “he” or “she” will be used instead of “he/she”) 

- VTCSOM med students likely to request LoR for:
  - ERAS (Electronic Residency Application Service): AAMC service that processes applications to allopathic residencies
  - VSAS (Visiting Student Application Service): AAMC service that coordinates “away” fourth year clerkships
Initial Considerations (2)

• It is assumed you know the student
  – If not, and you feel you cannot write a knowledgeable letter, politely decline
• Exceptions: Chair of Department, Clerkship Director. These leaders will be asked for LoR relevant to the specialty of interest to the student

• Confirm the timeline
  – Student should give you at least 2 weeks to write a LoR
  – You should then meet the timeline
    • Allow yourself at least 1 hour to write a LoR
Initial Considerations (3)

• Meet with the student
  – Confirm residency interest, eventual goals
    • Not time/place to “advise” regarding specialty choice – presumably the student would have sought counsel earlier
      – Unless you genuinely feel student would not do well in the specialty, in which case you probably should decline to write LoR

  – Get copy of CV and personal statement
  – Confirm AMCAS number (or other identifier)
    • This will appear at the top of the letter
    • Likely included in information sheet from ERAS the student should give you; this information sheet has helpful directions for formatting the LoR as well as where to deliver the letter once written

  – Determine FERPA status (next slide)
Initial Considerations (4)

• FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act)
  – Federal law regulating use and transmission of student assessments and grades, including LoR
  – For LoR, student decides whether to waive right/privilege to see your letter

• Perception is that waiving the right ensures that LoR reflects the writer’s opinion without also trying to please the student, but...
  • Some letter writers wish to share the letter with student so there is no “surprise” question during interview

• Determine with student whether he waived the right
  • Strong recommendation of VTCSOM that student waive right
  • (Most letter writers insist that student waives his right)
• Meet with student (cont’d)
  – Confirm specifics in CV such as:
    • Advanced degree; such as MPH or PhD
    • Research; such as role in research, publications, grants
    • Other scholarly activity; such as presentations, papers, other writing, courses/sessions taught, conferences
    • Leadership roles; such as class president (even social chairman), representative to national organization
    • Volunteer/extra-curricular activities; such as free clinics, children’s camps, interest groups, civic
Writing the
Letter of Recommendation

• Suggestions:
  – Make the letter personal, clear that you really do know the student
    • Include a positive story about her from ward or clinic, or how impressed/pleased you were with a presentation, or how she overcame problems in finishing a research project
    • Anything that establishes that, to you, this student really stood out from others
  – If applying for residency or other clinical position, focus comments on clinical abilities
    • If applying for research position, focus on research abilities
Writing the LoR (2)

• Suggestions (cont’d)
  – Include comments you’d like to read in a LoR
    • “Able to integrate basic sciences into clinical realm”
    • “Personable, interacted equally well with medical team, nursing/support staff, and patient and family”

  • “Always timely, completed tasks, knowledgeable about patient and disease process” etc...

  – Always nice to use powerful terms
    • “Smart,” “hard-working,” “integrative,” “pleasant,” “fun,”
    • OK to use neutral terms about personality such as “quiet,” “self-effacing,” as long as those characteristics didn’t adversely affect performance
• Suggestions (cont’d)
  – Avoid certain comments
    • “Best student I’ve ever had!” (even if true, makes the reader wonder about your level of experience)
    • “I’d want him to care for my family!” (really?, a 4th year med student?)
    • “You’re missing the boat if you don’t accept her”
    • Terms such as “best,” “great,” “only one”
• A suggestion for organizing the letter
  – This is deliberately NOT a template. Each LoR should read as a new, independently written document and not as a fill-in-the-blank
  – That being said, you might consider an organization of thoughts to include some of the following suggestions – if appropriate
Writing the LoR (5)

- Top of letter include name, AMCAS number, and salutation ("Dear Program Director")
- Opening paragraph
  - Context: applying for residency; you supervised/mentored/observed; extent of interaction with her; knowledge of applicant
- Next paragraph (or two)
  - Discuss her clinical abilities (or research abilities)
  - Strength of student in performing these activities
    - Give examples, use personal identifying story, relate to the anticipated residency or specialty, etc
  - If there is an advanced degree or scholarly activity, how this might enhance clinical abilities
Next paragraph
- Discuss strengths/abilities in another realm
  - Research, presentations, leadership, volunteer, etc
  - How these abilities integrated with your observations on the ward or clinic
- Again, relate a personal story if relevant

Next paragraph (only if relevant)
- Include hesitations or cautions, trying to put into good light (this confirms you really do know the applicant and are not blinded by her good traits)
  - “She might have spoken up a bit more on rounds as she always had something valuable to add.”
• Concluding paragraph
  – Summary. Again, endorse the application.
    • Hard to know whether to use terms such as “recommend highly” or “recommend without reservation” since these may mean different things at different sites
    • May again include personal comments about abilities
  – Final sentence (include in paragraph or stand-alone). “Mr. Doe waived his right under FERPA to see this letter.”
Final Considerations

• Read and re-read your letter
  – It should be on letterhead paper, not just plain
    • Can use VTC letterhead or specific office/clinic/hospital letterhead
    • Be sure telephone number or e-mail address is included so program can contact you if needed
  – Use spell-check. If you know your grammar is sometimes suspect, have someone else read
    • This reflects both on you (not interested or competent enough to be correct) and on the student (“he really chose a loser to write this letter”)

• Original signature
• Make sure it gets to the right office to be scanned into the ERAS application (student will have told you this at your meeting)
Thank You

Both your VTC student and the medical school appreciate your time and effort to reflect positively on VTCSOM