REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Most faculty members in Geology feel that it is important to support students in their academic, personal, and professional development. Often this assistance is in the form of letters of recommendation for jobs, for local Fellowships, for scholarships, for off-campus-study programs, or for admission to graduate or professional schools. The letter of recommendation can be no better than the knowledge that the faculty member has of you; therefore, the more information available to the recommender, the better will be the letter of support for you. Generally the faculty member needs to know more than your academic record in his/her class and that you are a “nice guy”, or the letter will be very brief! Thus, you should prepare a packet of information (either digital or hard copy) for each recommender so that he/she can write you the best letter possible. Usually THREE letters are required by most industry or university employers, whereas local programs (see p. 2) often need only one.

Materials needed in the packet will vary slightly depending on your history with the recommender. If a faculty member knows you from a course or two, that person should received a full packet of information. If the faculty member has been your academic adviser, a research mentor or a thesis adviser, it is probable that less information is needed. It is suggested, however, that you provide all recommenders with a full battery of information! In that case, there is no room for worry about completeness; your bases are covered so to speak.

First, have a face-to-face meeting with each of your intended recommenders. Very briefly explain what your plans are and ask if they feel they can write a recommendation for you. Listen carefully to their response. If it is something like, “Are you sure you want me to be a recommender?” it would be wise to explore that idea further, perhaps asking if they could write a favorable letter for you. Most will be honest with you and will tell you to ask elsewhere if they are uncomfortable. If the response is more on the order of, “I think I can do that,” or “I would be glad to do that for you,” then you can probably rest easy knowing that they will write a positive letter.

NEXT: Provide each recommender with a packet of materials including ALL of the following:

- include a copy of your cover letter, application statement, or statement of intent for the school, job or program. This does not need to be your final draft, but it is important because it tells why you are interested in the position or program.
- print out your unofficial transcript and include in each packet. It will have the geology courses listed, and it will give GPA information.
- include an updated copy of your résumé. If you do not have a résumé, this is an ideal time to create one. Career Services offers excellent assistance in developing a résumé and it is recommended that you make an appointment if you do not yet have one. All who went to SLUGAC should have a résumé already; keep it updated.
- add any other information that would be useful to the recommender, e.g., other relevant experiences or abilities, travel abroad, fellowships or awards received, explanations of extenuating circumstances that might explain a low GPA during one year.
- notify the recommender if the graduate school will be sending a digital form for on-line completion, or if he/she must send a written letter. In the latter case, include a stamped and addressed envelope for each school/job/program to which you are applying. Pick up Geology Department letterhead envelopes from the secretary for this purpose.
- AND IMPORTANTLY include a SCHEDULE or LIST stating when each recommendation is due.
Two notes: If asked on the recommendation form, you should check the box withdrawing your right to see the recommendation and sign the form. *A confidentially written recommendation usually will carry more weight.* Also be CERTAIN that you have filled out *all information on the recommender’s form for which you are responsible.* Do not expect the recommender to fill in your name, program of interest or any other personal info. That is your job. Some people will rightly not complete a recommendation that is not properly filled out in advance by you! *This gets very tricky where on-line information is required so be attentive and plan ahead.*

LOCAL PROGRAMS: St. Lawrence has been requiring an increasing number of recommendations to locally sponsored programs. Some of these include abroad-programs, Tanner and Sullivan Fellowships, Adirondack Semester and on-campus internships to name just a few. While these may be local, their successful completion will still have a significant impact on your academic life and faculty take them seriously. You should as well. Make no assumptions about time needed for these because it takes a recommender the same amount of time to compose a letter to the Adirondack Program as it takes to write to Harvard graduate admissions! All of the protocols mentioned above should apply to local forms, too. Very important is providing the recommender with a copy of your transcript and your statement of purpose for the program you are seeking to enter. Without this, the recommender is “shooting in the dark”, or guessing, at why this program is important to you and to your academic program. Supply your resume, transcript, statement and the required form properly filled out so that the recommender may proceed without complication and in plenty of time for the deadline. Remember he/she may have a dozen of these to write for the same deadline! If it is not clear to the recommender what you wish to accomplish and why it is academically appropriate for you, it will not be clear from the letter he/she writes to the committee either. Help your recommenders as much as possible.

Finally, when you learn the results of your application, report them to all your recommenders regardless of the outcome. We know that students don’t get accepted at every school or in every program to which they apply, but recommenders want to know which is which for future reference and advice to students.

BEST OF LUCK!

This UFI *[Useful Flyer of Information]* was developed by Mark A. Davis at Macalester College for the benefit of students. It has been highly modified by J. M. Erickson and the 2010 Geotechnical Writing class at St. Lawrence University. (rev 3-8-12)