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Claiming Your Right to Say No

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Image: *The Soup Nazi / Seinfeld (aired November 1995)*

When approached for a letter in the bleak midwinter of recommendation-writing season, many of us wish for responsible ways to say, like Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, "I prefer not to." Yet in weak or guilty moments, we may accede to a student's plea and then spend hours racking our brains for something to say.

It's hard for a scrupulous teacher to resist the fear that, in declining to write a recommendation, you may be torpedoing someone's professional life. Ultimately, though, a student's application materials will speak for themselves and the professional world will make its own judgment, fairly or not. Disappointment, even heartbreak, is a reality from which even the deserving can't always be shielded. And you aren't obligated to make a case for a student whom you can't, in good conscience, support.

Articulating a policy on recommendation letters can save you (and your students) frustration and time. It can also improve your teaching and advising by helping students make decisions about their own professional preparation throughout their college careers.

It starts with a simple statement about your recommendation policy on the syllabus of every course you teach. While my syllabi are long — seven to eight pages in my first-year course, including clearly labeled sections on “Your Rights,” “Your Responsibilities,” “The Rules” (absences, late-paper policies), “Grading Standards,” and “Good Advice” (notes about writing process, procrastination, technology use, professional behavior, and making appointments with me or with writing tutors) — students also say they like having all my expectations spelled out in one place. (First-generation college students, navigating the unarticulated assumptions that govern academia, particularly appreciate a detailed syllabus.)

What may look like hand-holding has the opposite effect: I can enforce policies clearly and fairly by pointing to the syllabus, and students can work successfully and independently, with a clearer eye on their futures.

On the syllabus for a freshman course I teach, here is the statement I include about recommendation letters:

“As you begin your college career, which might eventually involve asking professors to recommend you for graduate programs, jobs, or internships, please be aware that professors are not obligated to write references for any student who asks us. I don't write a reference for a student unless I can write a very positive and specific one. Therefore, your job as a college student is to become the kind of student professors can rave about in recommendations — hardworking, collegial, and intellectually inquisitive and honest. Consider maintaining relationships over time with professors, so that they know you well enough to write for you. Many juniors and seniors tell me they wish they had thought about this during their first year.”

Students are surprised but pleased to read that passage — especially since many admit they'd never thought about the issue before. Gently, the statement guides them away from grade anxiety and toward good study habits that are within everyone's grasp. The policy reminds them that those behaviors can have long-term rewards. As faculty, we're always teaching life skills —

directly and indirectly — alongside our subject matter. Being reminded of what's at stake beyond just a grade for the course helps students take responsibility for learning these things themselves.

Of course, declining a student's request for a recommendation can bring pushback. Consumerist complaints — “I paid \$X for tuition, therefore I am owed a letter” — can be answered, “Yes, you paid \$X for tuition, so why haven't you invested enough in yourself to become a student I can recommend?” Pressure from administrators with their eyes on postgraduate placement rates might be countered by faculty discussion of how a fair recommendation policy can improve advising and uphold the value of your institution's degree, which benefits all concerned. (I should note that I only teach undergraduates. Graduate-school recommendation issues may be different. Neither am I blind to the fact that assistant professors or adjunct faculty may get more, and more unfair, pushback than I do.)

I have had to say to students, “I'm sorry, I can't recommend you, and here's why.” But in each case, once I explained the professional realities at stake, the student has accepted my decision. Such moments are few and far between. Since I started sharing my policy with students about seven years ago, I've seldom had to decline a recommendation request, and none have ever complained.

My policy may seem tough, but when it comes to recommendations, our students aren't the only ones whose welfare is at stake. So is the welfare of whoever will be on the receiving end of their professional training. So is your institution's reputation, as well as your own. That's your signature at the bottom of the letter.

Some faculty might protest that we aren't gatekeepers, that our job is just to pass students on to wherever they want to go. But then why do we assign grades, which are also markers of readiness and success? And why, in professional-ethics terms, would we burden admissions-committee colleagues with lukewarm recommendations for candidates in whose potential we don't really believe?

Of course, every case is different, just as every student is. I've written fervent letters for B-ish students whose grit and spirit made me want to open doors for them, just as I've written for A-level overachievers who spent summers working in free medical clinics. But for my letters to mean something, I have to claim my right to say no.



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