

HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND PRELAW CENTER

Indiana University Bloomington ■ University Division ■ Maxwell Hall 010 ■ 750 E. Kirkwood Ave.
Bloomington IN 47405 ■ 812-855-1873 ■ Fax 812-856-2770 ■ recserve@indiana.edu
www.hpplc.indiana.edu

A DEAN'S SUGGESTIONS TO FACULTY FOR REFERENCE LETTERS

The following statement was written by Richard Badger, Assistant Dean of the University of Chicago Law School.

Each year we read between 8,000 and 10,000 recommendation letters in conjunction with the applications submitted to Chicago. Admittedly, this task is less onerous than writing those recommendations. Unlike a number of other law schools, Chicago puts considerable weight on recommendation letters and we find that helpful letters and the evaluative interviews which we conduct often provide the best guidance in making the final decisions among a group of applicants who appear to be equally promising on the basis of other information. I am occasionally asked what distinguishes the helpful letters from the unhelpful ones. I have pulled together below some thoughts on that question with the hope that they may assist people writing on behalf of applicants to Chicago. While I cannot state that I speak for other law schools, I do have some reason to believe that my views are generally shared by other institutions and certainly by other members of our Admissions Committee.

Richard Badger, Assistant Dean

I read each recommendation with three questions in mind: 1) How well does the writer know the applicant and the applicant's academic record? 2) What does the writer have to say about the applicant's abilities and characteristics which are important for success in law school and the profession? 3) In the final analysis, how enthusiastic is the writer's support for the candidate's admission to this particular law school? The answers to these questions are obviously interrelated but for the purposes of this memorandum it may be helpful to deal with them individually.

Most letters of recommendation will partially describe how well the writer knows the applicant. They usually contain brief descriptions of the size and number of courses in which the writer has worked with the student. Often absent, however, is a description of the kinds of formats in which the writer has seen the student perform. For example, did the student write a short answer examination at the end of the course or were there a number of papers to complete? Did the writer see the student respond in class on a regular basis? How much informal contact was there with the student outside of class? I will generally assume that the larger the class and the larger the institution, the less familiar a reference will be with the applicant. This assumption is frequently incorrect but I will not realize it unless that is made clear. Writers will often say, "Mary's academic record speaks for itself." This, unfortunately, is not true unless I am familiar with the particular academic program. In short, all applicants with 3.8 grade point averages are not judged as being equal. Some students will have taken more challenging courses than others. Some faculty are more demanding than others. Our Admissions Committee may not be aware of which courses are graduate level courses or which are part of an honors program. All applicants to Chicago are asked to supply academic references with copies of their full transcript so that those who write may comment, to the extent they can, on the quality of the overall academic record.

There may be little to distinguish between the abilities and characteristics which law schools look for in comparison with those characteristics which other graduate academic programs seek. Legal education and the legal profession, however, do emphasize some skills over others and the following comments may help writers who are not familiar with these distinction.

Language is the lawyer's working tool and the best law students are those who have the ability to write and speak with precision, fluency, and economy. Not only must the student be able to communicate his or her own thoughts clearly, but he or she must have the ability to read and listen carefully with an eye and ear for fine points and subtle distinctions.

Legal education demands well developed analytical skills and the ability to juggle multiple variables. Legal reasoning at one time or another involves deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, and reasoning by analogy. The best students can think independently, have the ability to cut through to the essentials and can distinguish the relevant from the extraneous. Contrary to what many believe about the law, there are few clear and distinct legal rules. A tolerance for this ambiguity and the ability to recognize exceptions and qualifications which may modify general rules are characteristics of successful law students. In short, a reference should consider whether an applicant is likely to be stimulated or frustrated by questions where there are not "correct" answers.

The nature of legal education -- large classes, competitive pressure, and substantial amounts of material to be mastered -- may make some personality traits more important in law school than in other academic programs. Students will often learn as much from their classmates as from the faculty. Thus, interaction among students is an important feature of legal education and those who enjoy engaging in discussion in and outside of class are more likely to flourish in this atmosphere. The student who is intellectually alive and curious is more likely to sustain academic progress where there is little reinforcement between examinations. A student must be diligent and well organized to handle large quantities of material. A well developed sense of humor and a mature attitude are particularly helpful in adjusting to the pressures which many students will experience in law school.

Perhaps the most difficult task in reading a recommendation is interpreting the significance of such statements as "excellent," "outstanding," "highest recommendation," and "recommend without qualification." Such terms may indicate meaningful distinctions among applicants supported by the same writer but we may not be familiar with the way in which a particular reference ranks applicants. This uncertainty can be compounded where we receive a standard letter which is submitted to a number of different law schools. Is the degree of support directed to the most selective or the least selective of the schools to which the applicant has applied? Occasionally we will know the faculty member writing a recommendation. In those situations it is generally easier to evaluate the degree of enthusiasm for a particular applicant. It is far more often the case, however, that our most significant contact with an institution will be familiarity with its graduates who have attended the Law School in recent years. Thus, a comparison of an applicant with other graduates we know from the same institution may provide us with a more accurate assessment of the applicant's potential for success at Chicago than the objective factors of the Law School Admission Test score and the undergraduate grade point average. In weighing the overall assessment made by a reference it is also helpful to know how confident the writer is of his or her own judgment about a particular applicant.

As we are occasionally reminded by those who submit recommendations, the task of ultimately selecting the most promising students for this law school is ours and not theirs. Helpful letters, however, can make this task easier.

You may email HPPLC at recserve@indiana.edu to ask questions, communication with advisors, and check your recommendation file.

NOTE: This document has been prepared for Indiana University - Bloomington students by the Health Professions and Prelaw Center. Please note that specific requirements and policies can change at any time without notice. Students are responsible for obtaining the most current information directly from the application services, schools, and programs in which they have an interest.

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