

Waiving or Retaining Access to Letters of Recommendation

As part of applying for graduate or professional schools or for a job, it is likely you will be asked to submit letters of recommendation. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 (Buckley Amendment) requires that students be advised of their rights concerning educational records, such as letters of recommendation.

FERPA gives important rights, including:

1. the right of students to inspect their student records,
2. the right to challenge incorrect information in those records, and
3. the right to keep student records private.

Because FERPA gives students these rights, neither Cornell University nor other institutions or organizations can require you to waive these rights. (University policy on access and release of student records is stated in *Courses of Study*.)

When you establish a file for letters of recommendation (whether through a letter service or the Health Careers Evaluation Committee for medical/dental school application) you will need to decide if you want to waive or retain access to the letter(s). It is, of course, not possible to know how each individual receiving the letters may react to the fact that a student exercised or did not exercise the Right to Know, but the following are factors you may want to consider in making that decision.

Factors to Consider in Deciding to Retain Access

- A potential recommender may choose not to write a letter for you if you retain your right of access.
- If you retain access, you need to be prepared to explain your reasons for your choice during interview(s).
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee at a graduate or professional school receiving the letter might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be less candid as the writer knew that the student would see it. As a result, less weight may be assigned to such letters.
 - The student is determining that the recipient is receiving full information.
 - The student wanted to discuss the letter with the recommender/evaluator before it was put in final draft.
 - The student feels a moral obligation to exercise his/her civil rights.
- You will have an idea of the information schools/employers have and therefore can prepare for interviews accordingly.
- It may relieve stress and anxiety to know exactly what has been said.
- Factual mistakes in the letter can be corrected, if the writer chooses to make those corrections.
- If you conclude that the letter is unfavorable, you can choose not to use the letter. **The HCEC is an exception. You may not withdraw a letter submitted to HCEC.**
- By reading an evaluation, you have a chance of learning from criticism.

Factors to Consider in Deciding to Waive Access

- If your recommender knows you well and has said he/she can write a letter in support of your candidacy, the chances are slight that inaccuracies or unfair statements will be presented in the letter.
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be more candid if the writer knew that the student would not see it. As a result, more weight may be assigned to such letters.
 - The student has nothing to conceal.
 - The student is not determining that the recipients are receiving full information or is using other methods to make this determination.
 - The student did not feel it was necessary to review the letter before it was sent.
 - The student does not feel a moral obligation to exercise his/her civil rights in this way.

For Applicants to Medical School Using the Health Careers Evaluation Committee (HCEC)

- Recipients of the letters will know for each letter whether you have waived or retained access. The HCEC letter of evaluation states that a student has **waived** or **retained** access to the letter, and the HCEC forms for letters of recommendation have a waiver statement, which accompanies each letter.
- You may waive or retain the right of access to your Cornell Health Careers Evaluation Committee composite letter of evaluation and/or the letter(s) of recommendation in your file in any combination you choose: all, none, some.
- If you retain access to a letter and disagree with the subjective opinion expressed or believe the information is inaccurate you can place a rebuttal in the HCEC file and it will be sent with the letters to the medical schools.
- Because the letter of evaluation sent by the HCEC is a composite (based on three recommendations, the interview, and the Chairperson's review), the chances are slight that inaccuracies or unfair statements will be presented in it.

Resource

- Audiotape "To Waive or Not to Waive" (#7) available in Career Library, 103 Barnes Hall.