

## HCEC Letters of Recommendation (LoRs)

### Whom to ask and how: The purpose of letters of recommendation

The Health Careers Evaluation Committee (HCEC) depends upon your LoRs to provide information and insight on your personal qualities in the context of your professionalism and your academic record. The HCEC needs to know this to prepare a comprehensive letter of evaluation for you.

#### **Issues to consider: strength and balance**

The two issues to consider in deciding who should write letters of recommendation are:

*Who can write a **strong** letter?* Letters that comment on the attributes indicative of your potential to become a good health care provider usually are written by people who are:

- well-acquainted with you from school, health-related activity, laboratory performance, employment, and volunteer work;
- knowledgeable and experienced in assessing pre-health professions students;
- knowledgeable about you beyond your grade in a course;
- able to compare you with other Cornellians;
- and able to write well.

*Who can help you build a **balanced** profile of your various endeavors in the college years?* One person may not be able to discuss all your qualities. Taken together, your three letters can cover many aspects. Good sources of letters generally include:

- a faculty member, either science or non-science discipline;
- your faculty advisor for more than a semester;
- a professor for whom you've worked;
- an employer, club advisor, supervisor of voluntary activity or research experience, camp director, chaplain, coach, or other mentor.

In general, admissions officers and the HCEC prefer that some of your letters are written by your Cornell teachers. This demonstrates that you have their support. A letter from a teaching or laboratory assistant may be appropriate if he or she knows you well. The letter can be ratified and cosigned by the faculty member in charge of the course or lab. If a professor does not know you well, you may ask a TA to submit notes to the professor on which he or she can base the letter of recommendation to the HCEC.

If in doubt about whom to ask to be recommenders, attend or listen to the audio of the briefing *HCEC Letters of Recommendation: Whom to Ask and How*. If you still have questions, you may consult the health careers advisor in Barnes Hall, the health careers advisor in your college, or your academic advisor.

## Protocol

In general, ask for recommendations in a live conversation, in person or, if necessary, by telephone. Email is not the most effective method from a strategic perspective. Here are four questions to pose to potential recommenders:

“Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?”

“Do you feel it can be a strong, supportive letter?”

If the answer to these questions is not an enthusiastic “yes”, be patient and hear the person out, even if it feels awkward. You will learn if the lack of enthusiasm relates to the writer’s own scarcity of time, or reflects their estimation of your candidacy. Both perspectives provide important information. At some point, you may indicate that you want to do further thinking before proceeding; or you may simply say, “No thank you. I’ll try to find another recommender.”

“May I make an appointment to come talk with you and review my qualifications?”

“I’d like you to mention (fill in the blank) in my letter. Do you feel you could do that?” (The decision rests with the writer.)

Make sure the recommender knows the HCEC deadline for the letter and will be able to meet it. The HCEC understands that LoRs may be late and does not penalize our applicants for this. Nevertheless, a late letter could delay your application in the summer.

Discuss your decision to retain or waive FERPA on the letter and make sure you have reached an understanding on this with the writer.

## Material to provide for recommenders

The Letter of Recommendation Guidelines & 2012 FERPA Waiver Form, available for download from the HCEC website, guides letter writers on what information health careers schools seek in letters of recommendation. It also provides directions on submitting their letter to us and supplies the Letter of recommendation FERPA Intent Form. Sign the waiver, indicating your FERPA decision, and give it to the writer, who must also sign and return it to the HCEC.

## A background profile

Provide written materials that trace the development of your interest in a health profession and state your goals. You may opt to provide materials you prepared for HCEC registration, but do not give your letter writer a package that will take more than half an hour to review. If you are undecided between two health professions or planning to apply to more than one, ask the recommender to mention only your suitability for a “health career” in the LoR, not medicine, dentistry or another specific profession.

## How many?

No more than three letters of recommendation will be used in the HCEC evaluation. Letters arriving after the first three will be held in the file, but will not be reviewed, used or distributed by the HCEC.

To submit additional, supplemental letters independently, ask letter writers to store these letters at an internet-based credentials storage service (like Interfolio) for you to send to schools at relevant times.

We recommend that you have three letters in your file before your HCEC interview. However, you are eligible for an interview once your file has two letters.

Unless you waive the right to access a letter in your file, you may read that letter of recommendation/evaluation, but you may not withdraw a letter after reading it and/or substitute a new letter.

## Applicant responsibilities for letters of recommendation

1. Check your HCEC online file to see that your letters of recommendation have arrived. Remind letter writers, if necessary. The frequency of such reminders should be carefully considered to avoid annoying the writer.
2. Make an informed decision about FERPA.  
<http://courses.cornell.edu/content.php?catoid=12&navoid=2162>

FERPA guarantees important rights, including:

- the right to inspect one's education records,
- the right to challenge incorrect information in those records, and
- the right to disclose or not disclose one's education records.

Because FERPA guarantees these rights, neither Cornell University nor other institutions or organizations can require one to waive these rights. University policy on access and release of student records is stated at the CU policy website.

When you establish a file for letters of recommendation (whether through an online credentials storage service or the Health Careers Evaluation Committee), consider your FERPA right to access each letter. If you decide to waive access, inform the letter writer (including the HCEC) in writing that you have chosen to do so. You must discuss this choice with those writing your letters of recommendation. The HCEC is obligated under FERPA to foster the FERPA Waive/Retain conversation between writer and receiver. If you do not provide documentation from the writer to the contrary, by default you have retained this right.

### Factors to consider in deciding to retain access

You will have an idea of the information schools/employers have and, therefore, can prepare accordingly.

By reading a letter, you have a chance of learning from any feedback it provides.

Factual mistakes in the letter may be corrected.

If you conclude that a letter is unfavorable, you can choose not to use the letter. (see the exception for the HCEC Letter below.)

### Factors to consider in deciding to waive access

You are confident that the LoR will be accurate.

A potential recommender can choose not to write a letter for you unless you waive FERPA.

### Factors for HCEC registrants to consider

Because each LoR is part of the HCEC Letter, the packet as a whole (in FERPA terms) comprises an education record.

You may decide at any point before the HCEC releases the HCEC Letter not to disclose it. You may not disclose only a part of the HCEC Letter. Further, the HCEC does not permit the withdrawal of an LoR submitted to HCEC or substitution with a different LoR.

In the same way, you may not refuse to disclose an individual grade on a transcript, but you can choose not to disclose the entire transcript.

Waiving or not waiving is different from disclosing or not disclosing. You may waive or not waive the right of access to your Cornell Health Careers Evaluation Committee letter of evaluation and/or the letter(s) of recommendation in your file in any combination you choose: all, none, or some.

If you view a letter and disagree with the subjective opinion expressed or believe the information is inaccurate, you may place a rebuttal in the HCEC file; it will be sent with the HCEC Letter to the professional schools.

### The HCEC Letter and (LoRs)

All HCEC registrants must sign the Registration Agreement Form (RAF), indicating their understanding of, among other things, how the HCEC uses LoRs. These LoRs serve one purpose only: to support your application to five types of professional schools of human medicine. The LoRs that we receive are bundled into your HCEC Letter and will not be separated.

We urge you to open your complimentary Interfolio account immediately although it is not required to complete the registration. If you open the account now, you may use it now for non-HCEC purposes. When you have established an Interfolio account, your

letter writers can send to Interfolio an additional copy of their LoRs. That way, you may use each letter for other purposes, such as research and clinical internships or other job searches. You have the option of storing additional, supplemental letters at Interfolio, as well as transcripts and other information.

For more information, review the HCEC Process section in Chapter Two.

You are responsible for understanding several important aspects of the LoRs you request:

- Do not just download and transmit the form: Letter of Recommendation Guidelines & 2012 FERPA Waiver Form. You must review it thoroughly before you send this form to your letter writer.
- Once you are fairly certain that a letter writer has agreed to write your letter, you must let the HCEC know to expect it. Enter the name, phone number, and email address of your letter writers in the **Letters of Recommendation** section of your HCEC online file.
- Explain how the electronic Cornell DropBox works to your letter writer so that s/he can transmit the LoR electronically to the HCEC.
- You are required to reach a mutual understanding with the writer about FERPA. To waive your FERPA right, the Optional FERPA Waiver form needs to be signed by both you and the letter writer. If we do not receive the form directly from the letter writer, you have not waived FERPA.
- Please do not contact the HCEC office asking if we received a letter until five business days have passed since you have verified with certainty that the writer sent the letter electronically or by postal mail.
- You are responsible to check your online file regularly to see if a particular letter has arrived. Click on the View HCEC File Content link. If your letter is not posted when you expect it to be, as is frequently the case, we can only help you if you tell us when it was sent, how it was sent (electronically by DropBox, email, other method, or hard copy by US mail, campus mail, or other method) and what address it came from.

## LoR FAQs

### Q. Can I choose which LoRs the HCEC uses for my HCEC Letter?

A. No. The HCEC will use the first three letters we receive.

### Q. Can I change my mind about waiving FERPA for the LoRs?

A. Yes. The FERPA waiver is an agreement between you and your letter writer. If the agreement changes, the letter writer must send us a new FERPA Waiver form signed by both of you.

### Q. I gave my letter writer my signed FERPA form, but my online file says, “retained”?

A. If the word “retained” appears in the box next to the letter writer’s name, and you intended to waive access to this letter, contact the letter writer and instruct him or her to resend the form to us. If this not possible, ask him or her to send a one sentence email to [hcec@cornell.edu](mailto:hcec@cornell.edu) with this text:

*"It is my understanding that [FirstName] [LastName] intended to waive FERPA access to the letter I wrote on his/her behalf."*

The person will need to write his or her full name as well. We will then know to change “retained” to “waived”. The email must come from the same email address used to transmit the LoR through the Cornell DropBox. Do not contact us unless ten business days have passed since this request was made.

### Q. One of my LoRs does not show up as received in my file. What can I do?

A. If you are SURE we should have received a letter of recommendation for you that is not entered in your online file, *and it has been at least **five business days** since the date it should have been **received***, follow the instructions below precisely:

- Write to [hcec@cornell.edu](mailto:hcec@cornell.edu) ONLY.
- Use the subject heading: *LoR Verification*
- Tell us WHEN the letter was sent.
- Tell us WHO sent the letter and the name the writer used for you, first and last. This might sound weird, but, for example, some of you register with us using your formal name, yet your letter writer knows you by a completely different nickname, and does not use your last name in the letter. This can be quite puzzling!
- Tell us HOW the letter was sent: electronically or on paper.
- If electronically, was it sent through the Cornell DropBox AND from what email address?
- If on paper, was it mailed to us at 203 Barnes Hall or was it hand-delivered?