

HCEC Letters of Recommendation: Whom to Ask and How

Purpose of letters of recommendation

The Health Careers Evaluation Committee (HCEC) depends upon your letters of recommendation, all or the bulk of them written by Cornell faculty and/or professional staff, to provide information and insight on your personal characteristics, motivation, intellectual and interpersonal skills, in addition to your academic performance. 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, volunteer work, etc.,
- knowledgeable and experienced in assessing prehealth professions students,
- knowledgeable about you in more than one area, (i.e., not solely a high grade in their 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 aspects of your candidacy; but if you choose three recommenders carefully, many aspects should be covered. Generally good sources of letters include:

- a faculty member, either science or non-science discipline,
- the major, permanent faculty advisor or a professor for whom you've worked, and
- 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 letters written by your Cornell teachers, which demonstrate 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 Letter 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

Four questions asked directly of proposed recommenders (preferably in person or possibly in a personal letter or telephone call) may help them to provide a good recommendation letter:

- "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," 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.)

Also make sure the recommender knows the HCEC deadline for the letter and will be able to meet it.

Material to provide for recommenders

- The letter of recommendation cover sheet you download from the HCEC website with your FERPA choice page guides letter writers on what information health careers schools seek in letters of recommendation.
- A letter of recommendation waiver form.
Both the cover sheet and waiver form can be conveniently downloaded from the HCEC website beginning two weeks before HCEC Registration Step I. Paper copies are available in 203 Barnes.
- A resume or summary including in some detail the development of your interest in a health profession and your goals. (If you are undecided between two health professions or planning to apply to more than one listen to the audio *Dentistry and Other Options* and/or meet with a health careers advisor before asking a recommender to write a letter of recommendation for a 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 retained in the file but will not be used or distributed by the HCEC.

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. It may be a disadvantage for a registrant to have only two letters, since most HCEC registrants have three.

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.**

Deadline for letters of recommendation

In order to be included with your folder that is sent to the interviewer, letters of recommendation must be received by the stated deadline. The interviewer needs these letters for interviewing you and for writing the letter of evaluation. Therefore, you have two important responsibilities:

1. Check with the HCEC online to see that your letters of recommendation have arrived.
2. Remind letter writers, if necessary. A written note or an e-mail reminder to the letter writer is probably more effective than telephoning or seeing him/her in person. The frequency of such reminders should be carefully considered to avoid annoying the writer.

Transfer students

Transfer students should read the Transfer Guidelines on the Health Careers web page and listen to the "Junior Transfer Orientation" in the Media Programs link of that webpage. They are encouraged to speak with a health careers advisor to get advice on their letter options.