

Rec Letters

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SPEAKERS

Jianan Liang, Tyler Rodgers, Bryan Dinh, Kirsten Kung

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Kirsten Kung 00:00

Welcome Tritons to Triton Tools and Tidbits. We are your hosts Kirsten Kung

Tyler Rodgers 00:06

and Tyler Rodgers.

Kirsten Kung 00:08

And this week our episode is about letters of recommendation. We will be featuring two undergraduate students, Jianan and Bryan. We're excited to have you here to experience our podcast. Let's dive in. Jianan, can I please have you introduce yourself?

Jianan Liang 00:24

Sure. I'm Jianan Liang, a participant of UC Scholars Program in 2020. I'm a senior, and a double major in cognitive science and management science.

Kirsten Kung 00:36

Thank you. And Bryan, could we have you introduce yourself?

Bryan Dinh 00:40

Hi, my name is Bryan Dinh. I'm a third year molecular and cell bio major. I've been part of the Genentech Scholars Program, the TRELs quarterly award program, and the faculty mentor program. I'm also an officer of the Biological Sciences Student Association.

Tyler Rodgers 00:54

We're so excited to have all of us here today to talk more about letters of recommendation. So, we're just going to say a little bit about what it is that our office does in Academic Enrichment Programs, and why we're here today. So again, my colleague, Kirsten Kung, and I are here with our students from Academic Enrichment Programs. We are an office on campus that supports undergraduate research opportunities. So, we provide lots of different programs and funding opportunities for students to get connected with doing faculty-mentored research, and today we're going to be talking about the process

of requesting letters of recommendation. And this is coming particularly from an acknowledgment that there are unique challenges post-pandemic in our current remote learning environment. But there's also lots of opportunities to continue building flourishing relationships with mentors. And certainly, asking for letters of recommendation is part of that process. So, our goal today is for our conversation to allay some of your fears, and empower your information about how to navigate this process more effectively. So, I'm going to turn it back over to Kirsten to say a little bit more about what letters of recommendation are and how to think about them in this positive framework.

Kirsten Kung 02:09

Great, thank you very much, Tyler. So, most students at some point will need to get letters of recommendation. They can be a requirement for different opportunities, whether it's research opportunities, or employment opportunities, things like graduate school or professional school. So, most people listening to this at some point will need to get some sort of letter of recommendation. These letters are usually written by teachers or mentors or employees. And they're really an opportunity for somebody who knows you well to provide some information about your skills and your fit for a particular opportunity. We recognize that sometimes these letters can feel a little intimidating, it can feel like it's difficult to ask for a letter of recommendation, and especially if it's your first time doing so.

Kirsten Kung 02:57

But we also want you to know that the letters are really just one part of any given application process, they're not the be all and end all. And also, your recommenders likely want to support you and will be very enthusiastic and assist in supporting your success. So, try not to think about asking for letters of recommendation as this burdensome thing, or a big hurdle to overcome. It's not something where it is a huge burden for your recommenders. In fact, most recommenders are really excited to support their students, and they want to see you succeed. So, they're committed to you, they want—they're eager for your success, they want to do what they can to support you. By providing your recommenders with lots of advance notice and maintaining clear and professional communication with them, you can really make this a process that's kind of fun for both you and the letter writer. And that gives you your best chance to shine for the opportunities to which you're applying.

Tyler Rodgers 03:56

That's absolutely right. And it's also a really nice way of continuing to build a relationship with a mentor. So, part of it is certainly what we're talking about today, specifically with letters of recommendation. But if we think more broadly, it's also part of this other conversation about the process of reaching out, especially to faculty on campus and building those relationships. So, in some cases, you might be asking for a letter of recommendation from a mentor that you have a long-standing relationship with, you might have already been in that process of building that connection for many years, many quarters, whatever the case may be. In some cases, you might be reaching out to for the first time or very early in a mentoring relationship and requesting a letter and so those are slightly different scenarios. But I actually—I want to turn it over to you Bryan to get your—just about how you go about developing that mentoring relationship in the first place. Thinking about faculty as potential letter writers, and also talk about how this might look different during the pandemic and remote learning specifically.

Bryan Dinh 05:01

Thanks, so much Tyler. So obviously with a pandemic, personal meetups or physical meetups are really hard now. So, personally, what I did during the past six months or so to develop a relationship with my letter writer was I purposely looked up the professors prior to enrolling for the classes, and I'm interested in biological research. So, I picked a professor whose research was really interesting to me. And then I took their class. And then the other class, I would participate and ask questions over the quarter. But I would also arrange meetings outside of class times, like just a Zoom meeting, to ask about their research and their career paths. And this way, even during a pandemic, I was able to connect with, with my professor on a more personal level. And then she was willing to write me a letter commenting on my personal attributes, because I spent time cultivating both like the professional Student-Professor relationship, like in her class, I would make sure to do well on all the tests and score really highly so she could comment on me being good student, but also, I would share my personal motivation and personal ambitions during these kind of like extra Office Hours type of meetings. That's just—sorry

Kirsten Kung 06:25

I think that's great, Bryan, and I think you mentioned kind of setting up one on one meetings, you can also start by just going to the regular office hours, even though again, we're in the pandemic, and you're not seeing the faculty in person, going to the regular office hours gives you a chance to get to know the, the faculty members. And then as you said, kind of following up and scheduling additional meetings where you get to talk not only about the course content, but also about your own interests, and perhaps your future goals.

Bryan Dinh 06:57

You're totally right, completely forgot about the first step, my bad. But in addition to just your lecturing professors, you could also, if you're fortunate enough to find a lab during these trying times, you could schedule more one on ones, if you're PI, maybe ask for more involvement, or on certain projects. And then that will lend greatly to the mentorship relationship, that would lead to getting a letter of rec.

Kirsten Kung 07:24

That's great. Those are some great insights. And I think, again, it's nice to hear that even during the pandemic, it's possible to get to know faculty members in a way that gives them the opportunity to really know you and write a strong letter for you. Jianan, could you tell us a little bit about how you went about asking for letters of recommendation?

Jianan Liang 07:44

So yeah, so actually, my, my experience was a little bit similar to Bryan's, because I also got the letters during the quarantine. So, it's like, my main communication with my faculty members were through email, and also through, like, zoom scheduling meetings. So, so one thing I found really helpful was to schedule like maybe 15-minute meetings, so they are short. And also, sometimes professors can like—because it's short, so it's very flexible. So, professors can really choose their good time to discuss with us. And when—and during these 15-minute meetings, it's not just to talk about the recommendation letter that they, like—or about ourselves, but also to really ask the professors or faculty members about their insights, because they are in their fields for years. And they really have the expertise, and also like precious insights about recommendation letters. So sometimes their deals are like, are higher, and then

you can really widen our eyesight. And then one thing I found particularly helpful was some professors actually refer me to other professors. So, it's like they will understand Oh, like in this field that you're applying to what might be helpful and what faculty members might be someone you will, like you will need to reach out to. And I think all those suggestions I received from those meetings were super helpful.

Tyler Rodgers 09:20

I think that's such a great point. Yeah. And especially in terms of not thinking about letters as being something that's separate beyond the other dimensions of those relationships, but really as being part of other ongoing conversations, you're having about a field of study about future career plans about how their interests might connect up and align with yours. So that's one point. And as a sort of follow up to that, I was wondering if either both of you wanted to speak about when you ask for those letters of recommendation, what are some additional supplemental materials that you want to share with your letter writers to make sure that they're reading you as strong of a letter as possible.

Jianan Liang 09:58

So, for me actually, I contacted with a professor that I've worked with him two years ago. So, it was a little bit distant between my experience and in the time that I asked him for the letter, so he actually suggested that I provide some highlights for my work with him. So, in this way, it's like I need to just really reflect upon my experience and think about what I learned from it. And then I could provide a list of bullet points that might serve as a refreshment for him to write the letter.

Tyler Rodgers 10:35

That's great. Thank you. Do you have anything to add? Bryan?

Bryan Dinh 10:39

Oh, yeah, for sure. So, my, my letter writer, Cecily wanted my resume just detailing all aspects of what I've done, since she's only known me in this like very specific instances of specific role. And she also wanted my, my personal statement for the programs I was applying for, so she would know what I've been writing about and what points she could highlight in her letter.

Kirsten Kung 11:01

I think those are really helpful things. And from talking with faculty members and others who have written letters, having some supplemental material like that makes a big difference. Really, your job as the student asking for a letter is that you want to make it as easy as possible for the letter writer to write a really strong letter for you. So, you want it to be something that's detailed and offers some concrete examples of your strengths. One thing I know that's often helpful is sending a letter writer, a spreadsheet that talks about the different programs to which you're applying, so that the letter writer has a list of all of the different programs, it's fine to ask them to write multiple letters, but giving them a list helps them keep track of it. And then along with that, if there's something specific about one of the programs like oh, this program has a real multidisciplinary focus, and that's a great fit for me. And here's why—that provides the letter writer with some additional input and information that they can then tailor for that specific opportunity.

Kirsten Kung 12:02

I think the other thing and you both alluded to this, is the fact that different letter writers will know you in different contexts. So, you might have one letter writer who really knows you in a research setting and another letter writer who knows you in an academic setting, or a classroom setting, or somebody who knows you more in terms of your leadership roles and style. And so, you can let your letter writers know if you feel that there's some things that they really have particular insights to that it would be helpful for them to focus on that in their letter. You can even provide them with some specific examples of, you know, in your course, this is how I demonstrated my leadership skills or something along those lines, it's helpful for them to get a reminder of some real specific concrete examples of the strengths that you showed and the ways that they have a unique perspective on the strengths that you'll bring to a particular position.

Jianan Liang 13:01

And also, I want to, just to add Christine's point. So actually, I really agree with this idea that different professors really have different perspectives and observations. And I feel that's something we can keep in mind. So, like during those meetings, when we discuss the letter with the other writers, we can think about whether our strengths happen to look within their focuses, like some focus on academic intelligence, or on research skills, and some more on professional communication. So, we can really think about whether our strengths match with their focuses. And also, we can think about, like, we asked different letter writers to write a set of letters, whether this that is covered our different strengths, and show us show who we are as a whole person.

Bryan Dinh 13:55

To add some examples to that Kirsten brought up here. For example, in my lab, I work closely with my lab manager, and we troubleshoot and do a lot of research because it's a lab of course. But I need to ask my PI for letter of rec, even though I've not worked very closely with him. So then when I asked for a letter of rec, I was asked to provide him concrete examples of stuff, which I've done in his lab, but he may not have necessarily seen firsthand. Like I contributed extra hours over the weekend to troubleshoot an experiment, I came up with a good idea to solve a certain question, that kind of thing. Just keep in mind that your letter writer may not necessarily not necessarily know you as like the full person.

Tyler Rodgers 14:43

I really think just to emphasize this is a really important point about many opportunities do require multiple letters. And it's great to think about the complementarity of multiple letter writers speaking to multiple aspects of you, your qualifications and skills, and also your more long-term goal. So that's a really well taken point. And I think we also want to emphasize just the importance of with any opportunity, paying close attention to what the opportunity is asking for in terms of who is writing that letter of recommendation. So, in some cases, it might be very specific that they want a faculty member, so a professor of some sort to be writing that letter. In some cases, you might find that you have a much stronger relationship with a TA or some other research scientist affiliated with that professor. It's okay, in certain circumstances to ask whether potentially, let's say that you have an opportunity that does require a letter from a professor, but that TA knows you much better, it's okay to approach both the TA and the professor and ask them in that scenario, whether perhaps they would be comfortable

co-authoring and co-signing a letter together. So, keeping that it might be because that's something that comes up frequently as well.

Tyler Rodgers 15:57

So, we also want to talk a little bit about the process of following up, right. So, it's one thing that you've asked for these letters, people have very generously agreed to work with you and support you in this way. And then sometimes it happens, you know, everybody's busy, things get, you know, you have a to do list that you're keeping track of and deadlines approach very quickly. So, I wanted to ask both of you as well, about the process of following up with letter writers as the deadline is approaching. Sort of just in general, do you have advice about how to follow up with letter writers or anything along those lines?

Bryan Dinh 16:33

For my approach, I think of it as writing letters is part of a faculty position, it's part of the job description. So, I don't feel too bad when I just emailed them saying, Hello, it's been a few weeks, and I was just checking in to see if you received my request for a letter recommendation. So instead of asking them straight up, like, Hey, can you please read my letter? Do it more, tactfully, be like, Hey, are there any issues with submitting the letter? as a way to kind of check on them in a straightforward way, but not in like a rude way.

Jianan Liang 17:09

And something I tried was to ask if they have preferences on certain dates that they want reminders, because in this case, this is like, maybe different professors really have different preferences. And then we can do different styles of reminders based on their preferences.

Kirsten Kung 17:26

I love that idea Jianan, and just kind of asking them and letting them know that you'd like to remind them because I think it does—it's a little nerve-wracking when the deadline is coming up, and you check your application, and you see that the letters aren't there, and you want to remind them without being too pushy. So, I think it's fine to just send them a reminder and talking to them ahead of time to find out what kind of reminders will be, be best makes a lot of sense. How about after the fact do you all do anything in terms of sending them a thank you to let them know what happened to your application.

Jianan Liang 18:04

So actually, for this, originally, I was hoping that the quarantine will end soon, and I could go to the office to send them in person. However, due to the situation, I guess, maybe I will wait a little bit until I get the result, which is very soon. And then I could prepare like more—how to say—sophisticated thank you letter and really express my gratitude.

Bryan Dinh 18:31

So as Jianan said, I would prepare a, a detailed email or, not even a detailed email, just like a really grateful email be like thank you so much for, for writing my letter of rec, I got in the program, and I'm going to become a doctor or physician, scientist or engineer, whatever have you.

Tyler Rodgers 18:49

I would also say it's really great to think about, you know, expressing gratitude in the ways that you both outlined and, and also knowing that it's not necessary to wait until you have a result positive or otherwise, to share those updates and to, to offer gratitude, you know, and in some cases, that can also be a great way of sending the reminder in a polite and professional way of leading with that gratitude and saying in a quick message, Thank you again, so much for agreeing to support me in this way. Just a friendly reminder that the deadline is coming up, please let me know if you need any additional information, you know, to Bryan's point about how to follow up and, and you know if they if they need anything to submit that letter in a timely fashion. So, I think all that is really wonderful advice. Does anybody else have any other points that they wanted to offer before we start to wrap up?

Bryan Dinh 19:45

Yeah, just one thing I felt that was alluded to and not really touched on explicitly is that probably the most important thing to keep in mind when asking you for a letter is time. Give them like more than a few weeks' notice is really helpful because a letter tends to be a page or two of just, text, and it's all personal about you. So, you want to make sure that they aren't feeling rushed or forced to put up something generic for you.

Tyler Rodgers 20:10

That's an excellent point. And, to that note, we are working even more on developing more resources about this topic on our website, which is aep.ucsd.edu. So again, we're here as a community supporting undergraduate research and academic enrichment programs. And we have resources about this topic of letters of rec—of letters of recommendation, and many other related topics posted on our AEP web site. It's a really wonderful wealth of resources that outline all these questions about how to ask, the timeline for thinking about this, following up, lots of best practices outlined there. So please do visit our aep.ucsd.edu to continue to learn more and to keep in touch with our community.

Kirsten Kung 20:58

One thing I'd like to mention about our website is that there's a link there to sign up for our weekly e-newsletter. And that newsletter contains lots of information about upcoming opportunities, both things like research programs that are available through our office, but also opportunities available throughout campus and even nationwide. So, if you sign up for our newsletter, you'll receive all sorts of information about activities and resources that would be helpful to you.

Bryan Dinh 21:28

Just to add on, I'm not paid for by AEP anyway, but AEP does amazing work, and I highly recommend y'all go check out what they do.

Kirsten Kung 21:38

Thank you for that endorsement, Bryan. Well, I'd like to thank both of our students, again, Jianan and Bryan, for taking your time to come and share your insights and your experiences with letters of recommendation. As we said at the beginning, we know that it's an important thing that many students will have to navigate and it can be a little bit nerve wracking, but we hope that this session has provided you with some insights. And we also hope that you'll check out our website as Tyler said, we'll have some resources up there specifically related to letters of recommendation, as well as other things like

finding a mentor. So, we hope that you'll check it out. Thank you for experiencing our podcasts on letters of recommendation. I am Kirsten Kung.

Tyler Rodgers 22:21

And I'm Tyler Rodgers.

Kirsten Kung 22:23

And we hope you all have a great week. We'll see you next week on Triton Tools and Tidbits.