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## Letters of recommendation reaffirm entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion)

Submitted by Michelle Iwen on April 10, 2019 - 3:00am

Letters of recommendation have become an integral part of a holistic admissions review process for graduate school. They provide admission committees with information about the noncognitive qualities of each candidate that can speak to larger adaptable skills for use in graduate school. An assessment of such noncognitive skills -- persistence, adaptability, creativity, research potential, innovation, collegiality and so on -- can give a more accurate picture of prospective students' academic potential, especially those from marginalized backgrounds who often score lower on the [problematic GRE](#) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Yet having worked in graduate education for a decade at various major research universities, and having served on dozens of graduate admissions committees over the years, I've concluded that this practice reaffirms entrenched systems of inequity and bias. As important as assessing noncognitive qualities is, the history of the letter of recommendation as a tool of exclusion should give us pause as to its continued use.

Letters of recommendation or reference began to be a required [2] part of the application process in the early part of the 20th century at Harvard, Princeton and Yale Universities expressly to limit admission to marginalized groups, including African Americans, Catholics and especially Jews. As sociologist Jerome Karabel wrote in *The Chosen* [3], this new application process allowed “the rejection of scholastically brilliant boys considered ‘undesirable,’ and it granted the director of admissions broad latitude to admit boys of good background with weak academic records” -- namely white and wealthy Protestants. This assessment of a prospective student’s “character” via noncognitive qualities allowed for an illusion of meritocracy [4] while maintaining a selection process that was inherently classist and racist.

The problematic nature of letters of recommendation continues to be apparent in their content and consumption. They are fraught with implicit bias in the form of gendered language. Numerous [5] studies [6] have shown [7] the distinct linguistic characteristics of letters written about men, which typically have featured analytical language and demonstrate ambition and research potential. Letters written about women, in contrast, often highlight less desirable descriptors such as “teaching,” “communality” and “nurturing.” In addition, many letters show a gender disparity in tone [8] that makes it much less likely for women who vie for postdoc positions to receive an excellent rating than their male colleagues.

Indeed, the gender disparity in letters is a well-known problem. Recommenders can even use gender bias calculators [9] to assess the bias of their own language in describing applicants. Additionally, a number of [10] institutions [11] have [12] guidelines [13] for avoiding bias in letter writing. Such efforts are laudable, but as recently as 2017 [5], studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased.

When faced with hundreds of applicants, admission committees will often skim the letters out of necessity while also “reading between the lines” as participants in a study by Julie R. Posselt, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Michigan, noted<sup>[14]</sup>. Indeed, one must read between the lines given how much most letters of recommendations rely on superlatives to describe applicants’ noncognitive qualities. The commonality of extreme enthusiasm<sup>[15]</sup>, hyperbole<sup>[16]</sup> or inflation<sup>[17]</sup> on the part of the recommender devalues more temperate praise and a measured assessment of an applicant’s abilities, pushing admission committees to read letters as much for what skills are *not* listed as for those that are. Jim Jump states<sup>[18]</sup> that recommendation letters are “read negatively,” in that if a recommender elects not to include a quality or skill, the student must lack it entirely. For instance, Robert Darnton notes<sup>[19]</sup> that “phrases such as ‘diligent’ or ‘hardworking’ tend to mean ‘mediocre’ or ‘pedestrian’” in the hidden language of letters of recommendation, creating a wholly inaccurate depiction of the student’s skills.

The tendency to read for what isn’t there rather than for what is proves to be especially problematic for first-generation students, those of color and those from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds, who may be unfairly penalized for not evoking in recommenders the necessary academic capital keywords when admission committees read between the lines. As Emory professor and writer Jericho Brown stated plainly in a recent tweet<sup>[20]</sup>, “Recommendation letters are in and of themselves racist and classist” in response to the question “What’s something that should be obvious, but your profession seems to misunderstand?”

Just as early-20th-century Yale, Harvard and Princeton used an application process based on “character” to discriminate against marginalized students, so too do some current admission counselors. This type of gatekeeping is noted in Ted Thornhill’s recent study<sup>[21]</sup>, which found white admissions counselors in historically

white institutions were more responsive to black prospective students who presented as apolitical than those who shared their social justice and/or antiracist activism.

This form of conduct policing is also apparent in the noncognitive qualities that are most desirable in letters of recommendation. Many students who are first generation, students of color, of low socioeconomic status, nontraditionally aged or parents do not have the capacity to attend office hours to have an individual dialogue with their professors, to volunteer time in a research lab, to work on honors projects or to engage in other extracurricular activities that warrant a hyperbolic letter of recommendation. Prospective students from marginalized backgrounds may be just as skilled as more traditional graduate school applicants, but because of their background, and the lack of time and opportunity to attain the unspoken cultural capital of expected student behavior, they may be unfairly assessed as less prepared or less qualified.

Rather than rely on biased letters of recommendation that have been used as a tool of exclusion, I urge my fellow admission committee members to put the letters of recommendation aside, along with the illusion of meritocracy, and let applicants tell us who they are and what qualities they can bring to the table. This approach is perhaps less practical for highly competitive doctoral programs. But at minimum, letters of recommendation should be viewed with the same critical eye as GRE scores when considering the diversity of experiences of underrepresented students. We admission committee members should follow British-Australian writer Sara Ahmed's declaration of no <sup>[22]</sup> in doing diversity work. We can say no to letters of recommendation in order to avoid reproducing the inheritance of exclusion in higher education.

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#### Links

- [1] <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/the-problem-with-the-gre/471633/>
- [2] <https://www.amazon.com/Chosen-History-Admission-Exclusion-Princeton/dp/0618773355X>
- [3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2005/10/13/chosen-few>
- [4] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Tyranny-of-Meritocracy/150983>
- [5] <https://www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0957926503014002277>
- [6] <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0957926503014002277>
- [7] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19916666>
- [8] <https://www.nature.com/articles/ng02819>
- [9] <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>
- [10] <https://wff.yale.edu/news/resources-avoiding-gender-bias-reference-letters>
- [11] [https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding\\_gender\\_bias\\_in\\_letter\\_of\\_reference\\_writing.pdf](https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf)
- [12] <https://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/resources/avoidingunintendedgenderbiaslettersrecommendation.pdf>
- [13] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Write-a-Good/45944>
- [14] <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/676910>
- [15] <https://whatswrongcvsp.com/2017/1/01/2/whats-wrong-with-soliciting-letters-of-recommendation/>
- [16] [https://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6273/630?utm\\_campaign=email-sci-toc&et rid=17158575&et cid=256481](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/351/6273/630?utm_campaign=email-sci-toc&et rid=17158575&et cid=256481)
- [17] <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/jan/28/application-university-job-reference>
- [18] <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/views/2018/04/23/it-may-be-time-rethink-admissions-letters-recommendation-opinion>
- [19] <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2007/problems-and-practices>
- [20] <https://twitter.com/erichobrown/status/1016305024706609152>
- [21] <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332649218792579>
- [22] <https://feministkijloys.com/2017/06/30/no/>