Letters of recommendation remain entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion)

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

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 reafirms 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 have become an integral part of a holistic admissions review process for a decade at various major research universities, and having served who often score lower on the problematic GRE.

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 have become an integral part of a holistic admissions review process 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 remain entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion)
Letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. For avoiding bias in letter writing, such efforts are laudable, but as recently featured in many letters, gender disparity continues to be evident in the content and consumption of letters of recommendation. Indeed, the gender disparity in letters is a well-known problem. Recommendations can even use gender bias to ratify their male colleagues. That makes it much less likely for women who vie for postdoc positions to receive an excellent rating than their male counterparts. Indeed, a number of institutions have guidelines to assess the bias of letters written about women. In addition, a number of institutions have gender bias calculators to assess the bias of letters written about women. Such efforts are laudable, but as recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased. As recently as 2017, studies have shown letters of recommendation are still demonstrably gender biased.
Letters of recommendation reinforce entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion). 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 [14]. Indeed, one must read between the lines given how much letters of recommendation rely on superlatives to describe applicants’ noncognitive qualities. The commonality of extreme enthusiasm, hyperbole, or exaggeration 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. 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 [20], “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 [21], which found white admissions counselors in historically predominantly white universities are more likely to include “character” phrases such as diligent or hardworking in letters of recommendation, while black admissions counselors are less likely to do so. Indeed, one must read between the lines given how much most letters of recommendation rely on superlatives to describe applicants’ noncognitive qualities. The commonality of extreme enthusiasm, hyperbole, or exaggeration on the part of the recommender devalues more temperate praise and an 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. When faced with hundreds of applicants, admission committees will often skim the letters out of necessity while...
Letters of recommendation reinforce entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion)

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. Prospective students from marginalized backgrounds may be just as skilled as more traditional graduate school applicants, but because of extracurricular activities that warrant a hyperbolic letter of recommendation, prospective students from underrepresented students should be viewed with the same critical eye as GRE scores when considering the diversity of experiences of less privileged students. The letters of recommendation should be viewed with the same critical eye as GRE scores, and let applicants tell us who they are and what qualities they can bring to the table. This approach is perhaps admission committee members to put the letters of recommendation aside, along with the illusion of meritocracy, rather than rely on biased letters of recommendation that have been used as a tool of exclusion.

Michelle Lwen is assistant director for graduate programs in the College of Continuing and Professional Studies at the University of Minnesota.
Letters of recommendation reaffirm entrenched systems of bias and exclusion (opinion)


Links
[8] https://www.nature.com/articles/ngeo2819
[9] https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/
[14] https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/676910
[20] https://twitter.com/jerichobrown/status/1016305024706609152
[22] https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/06/30/no/