From 2:45-4:00; 1.25 Hrs Total
How to Get & Write The Best Recommendation Letters

Mike Westrate, PhD
Director
Center for Research & Fellowships
Villanova University
Who am I?

Mike Westrate

Director of Nova’s Center for Research & Fellowships
Started at Villanova in August 2016
3 yrs. as Director of ND Office of Grants & Fellowships
PhD (History, ND); Fulbrighter; NSF Panelist

My best qualification: I have assisted hundreds of winners of national fellowships, including NSF GRF, Fulbright, NASA, DoD, DoE, and dozens of others. I volunteer my time with LSAMP, McNair, and other programs.
Why do I care?

St. Augustine of Hippo:

“God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us.”

“Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”
Thank You!

Dr. Ansley Abraham
Director, SREB
Our Host

Cherryl Arnold
Special Assistant, SREB
Institute Organizer

Dr. Paige Smith
Program Director
Directorate for Engineering (ENG)
Engineering Education and Centers (EEC)

Dr. Erick Jones
UT Arlington
Amazing Advocate
We are piloting a new SREB evaluation system.
Getting to Know You, Q&A

1. Where do you consider *home*?
   (shout ‘em out!)

2. What universities do you work or study at?
   (shout ‘em out!)

3. How many of you are Staff/Administrators?

4. How many of you are Faculty members?

5. How many of you are PhD students?

6. How many of you are master’s students?

7. How many of you are undergrads?

8. Others? Who are you?

Great! This session is for ALL of you…
GETTING GREAT RECOMMENDATION LETTERS
How to Control the ‘Controllables’

KEEP CALM
AND
CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES

MIKE WESTRATE, PhD
Director
Center for Research & Fellowships
Presidential Scholars Program
What’s the big deal?

Don’t all professors write great letters?
- NOPE

My prof. knows me as well as I know her, doesn’t she?
- NOPE

This is really important to my career; he’ll remember, right?
- NOPE

One lackluster letter won’t kill my application, will it?
- YEP

OK, OK, I get it… so what do I do about it?
Control the ‘Controllables’

Control your *choice of writers*

• Pick the *best* people for the job, not the *most convenient* people!

Control their *information*

• Make sure that *they know* everything that *you want* them to write!

Control the *process*

• Minimize the *pain* of having to do this for *you*!
Control the Choice of Writers

Think **INside** the box (your **advisor/PI**)

- It will look **weird** if this person is not one of your letter-writers

Think **OUTside** the box (opportunity-**specific**)

- Of the hundreds of people in your life, who are the people who can **best** attest to the themes and major points in your application to **this particular** opportunity (or type of opp.)?

- This could be an undergraduate prof., a past or present employer, a leader at a place where you volunteer, etc.
Control the Choice of Writers

Which is better?

Type A: They are a ‘Big Name’

• Choose professors (or others) with powerful personal brands
• But this can be tricky—a very well-known person in your field might have no name-recognition outside of it

Type B: They know you

• Choose people who like you
• Choose people who can confirm, evaluate, and contextualize your specific achievements
Control the Choice of Writers

The Initial ‘Ask’: Word it Carefully!

• I am writing to ask you a quick question: I am applying to *** this year (deadline ***), and I would like to ask you for a letter of recommendation. Would you be willing and able to write me a strong letter of support for this opportunity?
Control their Information

The initial ‘Ask’

- 2+ months in advance

The actual request (best face-to-face, w/follow-up email)

- 3-4 weeks in advance
- Provide relevant information about the opportunity, with links.
- Provide drafts of materials, CV, & list of relevant coursework/transcripts
- The quality of any recommendation will rest on the long-term track record of a student, as well as the short-term quality of materials presented with the request
Why rely on memory?

• Provide your CV & list of relevant coursework/transcripts
• Provide an outline of what they (should) know
• Provide a list of general things to highlight
Make sure that they know the **SPECIFIC** audience

- Provide a *brief strategic analysis* of what, specifically, the selectors will be looking for
- Provide *guidance* for letter writers (from the opportunity website)
- Provide a list of things to **highlight** that is **specific** to this opportunity
Control the Process

Provide clear instructions

• Online or paper, pdf or copy-paste to a field?
• Who, exactly, is the audience (Strategic Audience Analysis)?

Provide extra ease

• Provide copy-paste-able address blocks for the letter; send this along as a MS Word file, and let them know why you are sending it.
Control the Process

Track their submission to the END!
- Almost all systems allow this
- ‘Gentle Reminders’ are appropriate!

Write a Thank You!
- If you want them to remember you and think that you are classy and extra-special, make it hand-written!

Update them at each step
- Just a quick note
- They do care!
• Get **at least four** reference letter writers

• Give them **ample time** to prepare their letters

• They should know you as a researcher **and** personally

• **Share your application materials and your Strategic Audience Analysis** (good letters address each opportunity individually)

• **Track letter submission! You must have all required letters for a complete application!**
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE:
WRITING EFFECTIVE RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Mike Westrate, PhD
Director
Center for Research & Fellowships
Villanova University
The Request: Saying “Yes” or “No”

- Recognize your professional duty to support your students in their pursuits
- Remember that successful students prove the careers of successful professors (list on CV)
- The letter of recommendation is *an endorsement*, not a performance evaluation
- Be prepared to say “No” kindly.

*If you do not have the time and/or the energy, do them a favor and say “No.”*
Pre-Writing: Context

• Think *rhetorically* about the letter:
  – *Audience*
  – *Purpose*
  – *Context*

• **Student’s** responsibility to provide this information
• BUT you can do it in 20 minutes online.

• **Your** responsibility to understand it *fully*
  – Read material carefully
  – Re-read student’s papers, assignments
  – Meet with the student
Writing the Letter: Content

• Introduction (1 paragraph)
  – Student’s name, opportunity sought
  – Your name, position
  – Relationship with student
  – Recommendation: a kind of thesis. MUST BE **GLOWING**

• Body (2-3 paragraphs)
  – Provide **detail**, examples
  – Explain how these characteristics are relevant to the opportunity

• Conclusion (1 paragraph)
  – Final, unequivocal endorsement. MUST BE **EFFUSIVE**
  – Invitation for further discussion
Other Considerations

• **Recommendation Forms and Checklists**
  - Educate the student about the need for candid ranking
  - Give an honest (but POSITIVE) assessment that is **consistent** with the letter

• **Using Templates / Re-using Language**
  - Original letters will be strongest
  - Obviously recycled/formulaic material is **FATAL**

• **Your Reputation and Credibility**
  - The academy is a **very** small world
  - This is a piece of your writing
FROM NSF SOLICITATION: When evaluating NSF proposals, reviewers will be asked to consider what the proposers want to do, why they want to do it, how they plan to do it, how they will know if they succeed, and what benefits could accrue if the project is successful. These issues apply both to the technical aspects of the proposal and the way in which the project may make broader contributions. To that end, reviewers will be asked to evaluate all proposals against two criteria:

**Intellectual Merit:**
- The Intellectual Merit criterion encompasses the potential to advance knowledge

**Broader Impacts:**
- The Broader Impacts criterion encompasses the potential to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes.
INTELLECTUAL MERIT & BROADER IMPACTS

vs.

VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY
The Graduate School
NSF REVIEW CRITERIA (good to follow for all opps.):

Remember that a fellowship at this level of education is not a grant. At this stage, agencies are funding the researcher even more than the research. The selection panel is directed—as with all NSF proposals—to evaluate applications based upon the NSF’s two criteria. Thus, reference letters MUST discuss both the student’s potential and the project’s potential…

- Intellectual Merit: to advance knowledge; and

- Broader Impacts: to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes.
Her/his/their knowledge of the field, communication skills, adaptability, etc.

- Background and preparedness to do scholarly work in the chosen area research
  (strength of academic record, strength of previous research)
- Imagination and likelihood of performing creative research
- Ability to work independently
- Ability to work as part of a team
- Motivation to succeed
- Ability to communicate complex ideas clearly both in written and spoken English
Intellectual Merit: Project

Significance to field, quality of research design, etc.

- Innovative, creative, transformational nature of project
- Feasibility of project and timeline
- Contribution of student to broader project aims
Broader Impacts: Student

Leadership potential, commitment to your discipline, public engagement

- Quality of leadership experiences and demonstration of potential
- Ability and interest to advance science and technology in a broader sense
- Ability to foster the integration of research and education
- Contributions to the community (social and scholarly)
- Promotion of the advancement of diversity in science
Potential outcomes, possible benefits to society

- Interdisciplinary nature
- Collaborative efforts
- "Built in" outreach/engagement/teaching opportunities
- Far-reaching outcomes (national, global; education, infrastructure, policy, etc.)
Other Considerations

• Any other **experiences** that set this student **apart**
  – Overcoming obstacles
  – Did something unusual, esp. related to STEM

• Any other **qualities** that set this student **apart**
  – Strength of character
  – Bilingualism, intercultural competence
  – Warmth of personality; charisma

• Potential Pitfalls
  – Consider **mitigating** any possible **red flags**, like:
    lack of publications/presentations,
    unusual change in research agenda, etc. (but not low GPA)
SPECIFICS

• **SHOW**, don’t TELL!

• Use **Specific** Examples

• You must sound like you **love** this student, and you must give specific **evidence** as to why they should, too!!

• Always use **letterhead**—the more impressive looking, the better (don’t scan it if you can get an electronic copy and create a nice electronic signature)
Be **GUSHINGLY POSITIVE** (or say “No”)

Be **SPECIFIC** (add some for each student)

The **BEST** letters will discuss:

- The student’s intellectual merit, broader impacts, and strength of character
- The significance of the project/experience within the student’s field and beyond
- The student’s preparedness to undertake the project/experience
- The feasibility of the project/experience
QUESTIONS?
Thank You!

I will also be speaking:

• **(For faculty)** Saturday from 11:45-1:00
• **(For undergrads)** Sunday from 8:15-9:30
• And feel free to come to our special workshop sessions this week—see the detailed conference agenda
• And/or **meet with my team 1-1**
Please provide your feedback on this session!