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Letters of Recommendation: Asking in the Right Way, at the Right Time

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them. Some schools provide a form at the counseling office that you can fill out and give to your teacher. At other high schools you may provide this information on Naviance (your school counseling office will tell you if they use this program). I suggest that you create and maintain a student profile/resume which details important academic and extracurricular achievements including employment, volunteerism, honors and awards and so on. This profile can be used in many important ways throughout the college admissions process (to have ready at a college interview, for example).

- Generally, the student should ask at least two teachers. Occasionally, a student may wish to ask three teachers, especially if they know a recommendation from a particular teacher is most appropriate for a particular institution (e.g. an AP math instructor for a technical institute like MIT or CalTech). But usually it is sufficient to secure two definite commitments from teachers who teach academic, college-preparatory subjects such as English, foreign language, math, science, or the social sciences like history or economics.

Although there is new pressure to move even more swiftly along the path to completing college applications, be prepared if a teacher thinks it is too early to ask, and tells you to ask next fall. Thank her or him politely and do not press the issue. Also, be ready if teachers ask what school(s) you are applying to. If you know the names of some private colleges to which you are planning to send applications, certainly let them know. Many private colleges and some out of state public universities require letters. However, remember that the California public system does not take letters of recommendation. So if you ask for a recommendation when only applying to the University of California or California State Universities you will look as though you have not done your homework-definitely NOT a good idea when you are asking a teacher for a recommendation!

A related issue involves early admission programs. Unless a student has thoroughly researched colleges and prepared a final list, he or she probably does not know which colleges are good candidates for early admission applications. Also, most students will want to know their junior year standardized test scores, AP exam results and final spring semester grades before making decisions about early applications. Still, students who believe they will

As a college advisor I hold two sessions with each of my 11th grade clients to review 12 goals that should be accomplished no later than the fall of the senior year. One of the goals is to identify two teachers from the junior year to ask for letters of recommendation. In years past I suggested that students consider asking teachers before the end of the junior year to find out their willingness to perform this task. More recently my suggestion has turned into a strong recommendation, especially if that is current practice at the student's high school.

Here are my general guidelines for obtaining teacher recommendations:

- First, be aware that public school teachers are not paid to write letters of recommendation for students. To my knowledge no public school teacher's job description includes a requirement to produce letters for college-bound students. Teachers perform this service in their desire to help students along the path to college.

- Next, always be polite when you request a recommendation and be ready to supply whatever teachers need to complete your recommendations on time. It is your job to take care of logistics. For example, you should give your teachers preaddressed, stamped envelopes if the recommendations are to be sent by regular mail. On the other hand, many colleges use the Common Application and many forms, including teacher and counselor letters of recommendation can be completed and sent on-line.

- Remember that a teacher who knows you in the classroom may not know much about your extracurricular activities. Do you write for the student newspaper? Do you play an active role in a school club? Perhaps you have taken piano lessons for many years and have earned a certificate of merit that documents your accomplishments. If you want the teacher to know these things about you, you must tell

apply to one or more schools early could benefit from letting their teachers know about their intention. This is particularly true for students with special talents like athletes and performing artists.

Although these are my general guidelines I feel compelled to add that I believe this trend puts teachers, students and parents under even more pressure about college admissions. This is most unfortunate. There are many students who will wait until the fall of their senior year to ask for recommendations, and I hope and believe these students will still find teachers who will write their letters.

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