

B15: Recs That Change Lives

CE ✓

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NACAC
**National
Conference**
Boston | 2017

Session Goals

- learn what college admissions professionals view the purpose and essential aspects of the counselor & teacher letters are
- review and discuss sample counselor and teacher letters of recommendation
- see testimonials from college admission professionals from various levels of selectivity
- takeaway data, information, and samples that you can adapt, share, and implement at your school



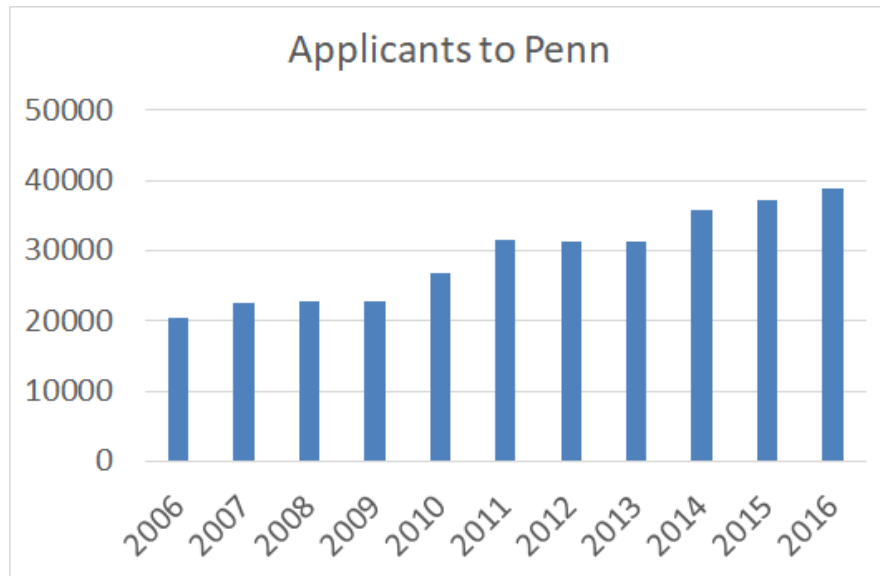
Admissions Landscape

National Admissions Trends

- Demographic Shifts
- More Applications per Applicant

Penn Admissions Trends

- 2006: 20,000; 2016: 39,000
- ~100% increase in 10 years
- ~25% increase in 5 years



Admissions Challenges & Innovations

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce Efficiencies• Maintain Holistic Ideals | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Technology/UI• Committee-Based Evaluation |
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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Trevor's Experience

11 years university admissions, 10 years independent school college counseling, and 2+ years of international school college counseling

- Draft 35-40 rec letters, help review/edit another 35-40
- Head of School review
- High expectations on the quality of the letters
- additional edits or new information
- Additional responsibilities
- letters were taking significant time outside of work



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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Trevor's Experience

Long story long...I needed a change!

Step 1: Content of Letters

- Essential Components of Counselor Recommendation Letters?
 - Overview of Transcript, Difficulty of course selection, Quality of Mind, Teacher Quotes, Special Circumstances, Anecdotes, Overview of Activities, Quality of Character, and Future Plans



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Who Responded to the survey?

- 17 representatives responded from our top 25 colleges



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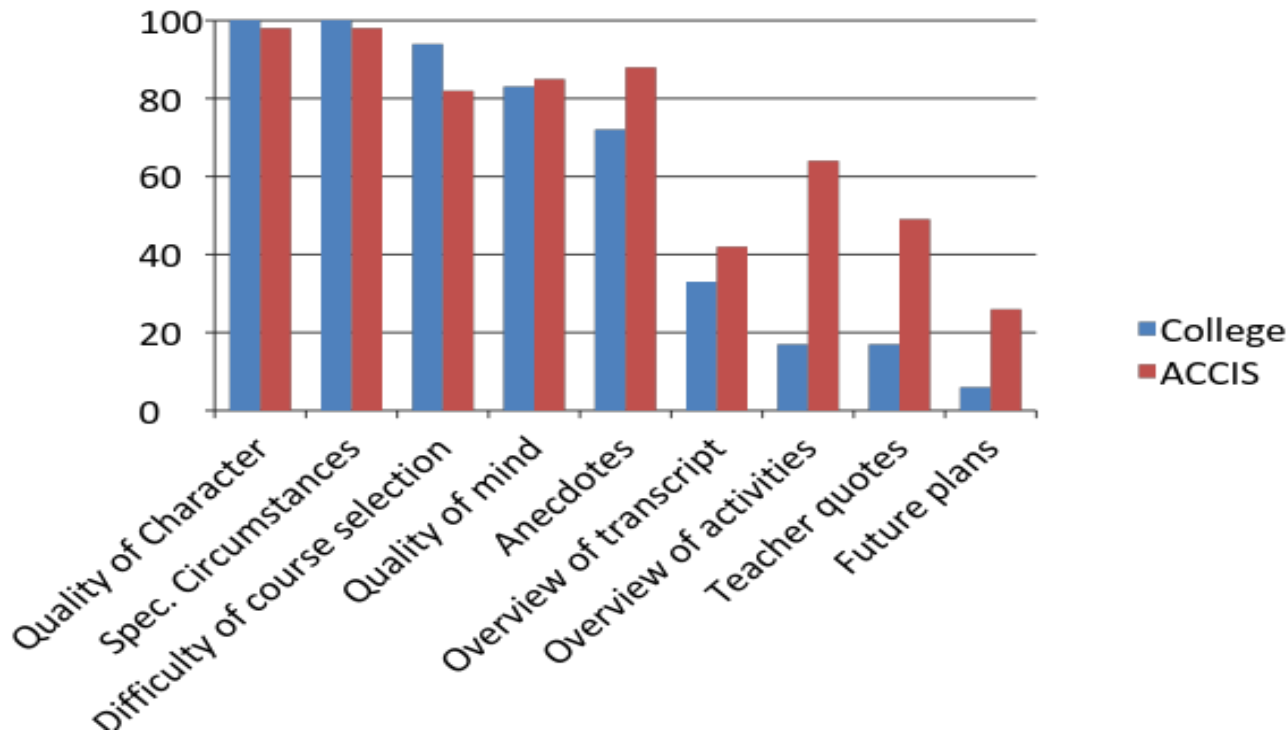
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Who Responded to the survey?

- 247 members of ACCIS responded!!!



Percentage of College admission reps and ACCIS members that believed the following items are essential in counselor recommendation letters:



Who, what, when, and how?

- Faculty, coaches, club advisors, homeroom teachers, peers, parents, & students
- Do I really need a 20 question Grade 11 parent questionnaire?
- Mid-point of junior year, end of junior year, and beginning of senior year
- We use: google docs for faculty/staff, naviance and/or email for students, parents, or peers
- The fewer the questions, the higher the response rate



Examples: Faculty/Staff and Peer

We ask faculty/staff at the end of Grade 11 and peers at the beginning of Grade 12

Please share an anecdote for a student in Grade X that the college counselors might be able to share with a college (positive stories only and it must be true). We are looking for true stories of your classmates that reflect strength of character, compassion, sportsmanship, maturity, wisdom, and/or leadership, etc.

Example, a student from the Class of 2017 wrote this about his classmate: *“Jane is one of my best friends that I have known from 7th grade. She is a very comfortable and considerate friend, who listens to my every word when I experience hardship. I usually don't try to reveal my concerns to my peers, and I try to endure and resolve by myself. However, I feel comfortable sharing my concerns with Jane, and she always supports my decision. She is also a great student, who strives for academic excellence, and she is a great cross-country captain. I am sure that Jane will spread positive energy to the campus that she will join next year.”*



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Example: Parent Questionnaire

Three required questions:

1. Looking back, can you share a story from your child's elementary or middle-school years that best reflects the young person he/she is today?
2. Please provide an anecdote (or anecdotes) from your child's high-school years that best reflect your child's character, integrity, compassion for others, and/or maturity.
3. Does your child have interests, talents, or hobbies you might see at home or in the community that may not have surfaced at school?

Three optional questions (special circumstances that may have affected academics, applying for financial aid or scholarships, is there anything else you would like us to know)



Step 2: Style of Letter

- Introduction to the Organized Narrative letter
- Buy In from my Head of School and Head of Upper School
- Once again, I surveyed our “top 25 colleges”. Of those, 20 responded, 16 preferred the organized narrative, 3 had no preference, and 1 preferred the traditional letter.



Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Chris's Experience

Small suburban public school

- Completely trusted Michelle and her research
- Immediate impression - made so much sense!
- No buy-in from anyone - complete autonomy
- Not all students need letters
- Just dove in
- Still working on each section



Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec

Changes in my office

- MORE information in less space
- Still allows for narrative / anecdote
- Busy counseling office - allows for stop and start
- Positive feedback from local college representatives
- Positive feedback from students





COUNSELOR RECOMMENDATION FOR XXXX (DOB: XX/XX/XXXX)

DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES

Narrative

ACADEMIC HISTORY

-
-
-

AREAS OF IMPACT

-
-
-

STUDENT SELF-REFLECTION

Narrative

Name|Title|PH: |Email



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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Chris Sample

Distinctive Qualities

I first met Gillian as a sophomore after her PSAT scores came in. As a new counselor to Beechwood, I had to meet this kid who had already a high enough score to become a semi-finalist. She was not what I expected. I have been around students who are *that* smart, and although pleasant, they sometimes lack personality or adequate social skills. In that first conversation, I knew I had met someone special. Funny, personable and genuine, Gillian is simply real. We have been talking about life, college admissions and future for the past two years, and I come away from every conversation liking her more and more. Yes, she has the numbers and yes, she has the accolades, but more importantly, she is a good listener, she has a good sense of humor, and she is real.

She has mastered the art of taking school seriously, but herself lightly. More of us should work toward that end!



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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Chris Sample

Academic History

Lauren has taken AP classes every year in high school. As a freshman, she signed up for AP World History. Only one other student in her grade has done this.

Lauren will have taken ten AP classes at the end of this year. No one has taken more and only a small handful will have taken that many.

Demonstrating her keen interest in science, Lauren chose to take all three AP science classes we offer, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Again this feat has only been accomplished by one or two students. What makes her different is that she did not get A's in these classes, but rather she pushed herself beyond measure to acquire this content to make her successful in college. Our sciences classes are the toughest in the school.

In Lauren's junior year, she missed 29 days of school due to pneumonia and chicken pox, and the grades in her hardest classes suffered as a result.

After a quarter of work this year, she is taking three AP classes and one dual credit class, and she has all A's.



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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Chris Sample

Activities, Interests & Areas of Impact

Roop is one of the top debaters in the state. In fact, last year as a junior she and her partner won state and qualified for nationals.

Every month Roop joins a handful of other Kentucky students in Frankfort for the Next Generation Student Council, where she takes a big picture look at issues in public education in the state. Her work is well beyond other high school students as she researches, discusses and presents her finding to the Commissioner.

Roop stays in touch with her Hindu heritage at the Greater Cincinnati Hindu Temple. She enjoys the dancing and performances as she communes with fellow Hindus.

Roop's most interesting activity may be spending time in Campbell County's Teen Court, which is not a mock environment. She is given cases for a minor who has offended and must rule on his or her punishment. This court of peers is not part of the permanent record, but the offender has to follow what was assigned. She is a researcher and an analytical thinker who takes her responsibilities seriously. She believes in ethics and makes rationale, fair decisions.



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Innovative Counselor Letter of Rec - Chris Sample

Student Self-Reflection

The College Counseling Office asks students to choose adjectives or phrases that describe them well. Jacob chose hard-working, social, philosophical and having a sense of humor. Every example and every piece of evidence I have already provided shows that he is correct. I have seen each of those traits consistently for the past year. I am truly enjoyed getting to know Jacob, and I strongly support his candidacy.

Chris Reeves
School Counselor



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Impressions of the Counselor Letter of Recommendation

What Doesn't Work

- Form Letters
- Repetition
- Faint Praise/Platitudes

What Does Work

- Context is Key
 - Issues Impacting Performance
 - Recognition of Case Loads
- Corroborate Student's Materials
- Answer the How (w/ Evidence)
 - How has the student....?
 - Best Student Ever? Prove it.

Impressions of Organized Narrative

- Clear Structure
 - Overview
 - Engagement with the Community
 - Academic Qualities
 - Personal Qualities
- Bulletpoints Demand Evidence
- Judicious **Bold** or *Italics* for Emphasis
- Easy to Read, Analyze, and Revisit



Additional Admissions Feedback

- **Colorado State University:** “This format works really really well. It tells us the key bits of information we need to know about a student and allows us to gain some context about their experience. Also, from an admissions office leadership level perspective and from someone who looks at hundreds of borderline cases each year, there are days where I might need to sort through 75-100 files in a day, so having clear headings and gaining information quickly about why we should move forward with this student, once again, would be very helpful.”
- **NYU:** “This format is reader friendly and effectively communicates the key information that I am looking for. The headings, bolded areas and bullet points make it easy to find key points and reference during committee.”
- **U. of So. California:** “I love your new recommendation format. It makes it so easy to get the information quickly. Thanks for changing the format! The bullets allow for me to quickly glance at what the recommender thinks are the most important aspects of the student. I generally read letters quickly so this makes it so that I don’t feel like I’m overlooking important information.”
- **U. of San Diego:** “This is a great format! I wish everyone was using it. If I ever switch sides of the desk, I will call you to ask for permission to use the format. It is very reader friendly. I could easily go to the section I needed and find the information I was looking for. The themes/headers are exactly what I’d want writers to use.”
- **Vanderbilt:** “I really like the format, as it allows me to focus on a certain section. The categories that you’ve chosen are helpful and things that we would look for in our process.”



Innovative Teacher LOR at Rowland Hall

- Organized narrative format for Teacher LOR was the next logical step
- Process at Rowland Hall for implementing a new Teacher LOR format
 - Created a draft sample
 - Surveyed high traffic Reps
 - Incorporated feedback into draft format
 - Shared with my leadership and faculty writers
- [View sample letters](#)



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Impressions of Teacher Letters of Recommendation

What Doesn't Work

- Form Letters
- Repetition
- Faint Praise/Platitudes

What Does Work

- Answer the How (w/ Evidence)
 - Best Student Ever? Prove it.
- How has the Student:
 - Impacted your Classroom?
 - Interacted with Peers?
 - Faced Setbacks?

Impressions of Organized Narrative LOR

- Standardization of Format
 - Easier to Find Information
 - Consistency within Schools
 - Assists Weaker Writers
- Less Prose; More Evidence
 - Structure Eliminates Need for Transitions
 - More Space to Support Claims
 - Bolsters Less Compelling Applicants



Additional Admissions Feedback

- **Bowdoin:** I really like the format, especially starting with the narrative at the top of the letter, it offers context for the rest of the letter. I like bullet points. I'm very visual that way, given reading 20 apps/day, the less work my brain has to do in a day, the better for me.
- **Notre Dame:** The format is great--it actually helps guide the reader. Even if it goes on to 2 pages, it doesn't feel like a 2 page letter. The format is nice.
- **Providence College:** The bullet points are very helpful. The writer gets right to the point and is focused on the heading. When reading so many applications, I would prefer this format over the narrative letters.
- **U Richmond:** Really likes it! A huge fan of organization that centralizes thoughts and minimizes rambling.
- **Washington University in St Louis:** It is easy to find what I am looking for. We look for personal qualities and the format is ideal for providing this information in a reader friendly way. The format highlights a student's contributions in class, the hallway etc.



Teacher LOR After a Year

Rowland Hall Teacher Survey:

- 12 out of 20 (60%) teachers were early adopters
 - This coming year: 4 new teachers and all will adopt
- 90% of them exclusively used the new format
- 100% reported that the format saved them time
- 80% believed they were better able to advocate for the student writing in the new format



Rowland Hall Teacher Feedback

- What did Teachers like:
 - “Headings gave me a structure to focus on”
 - “I don’t get bogged down on transitions and flow”
 - “Less daunting. Format helped me focus my message”
 - “It’s easier to work on the letter and come back to it later without losing focus or flow. And, it’s easier to incorporate info from colleagues and the student.”
- What did Teachers dislike?
 - “Nothing”
 - “Can’t remember”



Questions?

Thank you for attending
Happy Writing and Reading!

