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The School Counselor and Letters of Recommendation (Adopted 2020, 2026 draft)

ASCA Position

School counselors draw on research in college admissions that demonstrates the importance of letters of recommendation within holistic review processes and the need for equitable, ethical and informed practices when developing them. To guide their work, school counselors rely on the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which is a federal statute protecting students’ rights regarding educational records.

The Rationale

In their role as student advocates, school counselors use best practices to help each and every student achieve their aspirations. They recognize that letters of recommendation play a significant role in holistic admissions decisions, as they are currently required by more than 250 selective colleges (Common App, 2024). Letters of recommendation offer deeper insight into students’ personal qualities, providing context about their opportunities and backgrounds. In addition, it has been found that often “the letters are used not only to determine admissibility but also to determine eligibility for scholarships and honors invitations” (Akos and Kretchmar, 2016, p. 102). School counselors help students and their families understand the value of letters of recommendation.

School counselors are familiar with inequities in college admissions processes. Higher education research indicates that students from lower-income backgrounds are not only less likely to receive letters of recommendation but also receive letters of lower quality than those written for their more affluent peers (Nicola, 2023). Practices such as declining to write letters due to missed deadlines, failing to explicitly teach students how to request letters or providing unequal support to first-generation students and other historically marginalized populations can unintentionally reinforce systemic inequities (Nicola, 2023). School counselors work to mitigate the impact of injustice and inequity and support each and every student in achieving their goals beyond high school.

40 **The School Counselor's Role**

41 School counselors' letters of recommendation are especially valuable
42 because school counselors compare students across the entire school and
43 offer a broader perspective than teachers (Kim et al., 2025). These letters
44 offer deeper insight into students' personal qualities, providing context about
45 their opportunities and backgrounds. When students request letters of
46 recommendation, school counselors must balance their support for students
47 by using a strengths-based approach (beneficence) while maintaining
48 honest, conscientious communication without harm to students
49 (nonmaleficence). As school leaders and advocates, school counselors help
50 staff, students and their families understand the legal and ethical practices
51 with an impact on letters of recommendation, as well as the role these
52 letters play in admission processes and future employment opportunities.
53 School counselors also understand the benefits of collaborating with
54 admissions professionals (Savitz, et al., 2026) when writing letters of
55 recommendation.

56

57 School counselors understand that offering to provide letters of
58 recommendation cannot be made conditional on waiving one's rights under
59 FERPA (Family Policy Compliance Office [FPCO], 2005). They also
60 understand that an educational agency or institution may not require
61 parents/guardians or students to waive the protections and rights afforded
62 to them under FERPA (U.S. Department of Education, 2023) as a condition
63 of acceptance into an institution or for the receipt of educational services.

64

65 In regard to letters of recommendation, school counselors:

- 66 • seek out resources to educate themselves on how to write an
67 ethical/unbiased letter
- 68 • maintain familiarity with federal and state laws and local school board
69 policies concerning personal identifiable information
- 70 • include personal identifiable information only with dated, written
71 consent of the student and/or parents/guardians
- 72 • educate students and their families on the impact of waiving FERPA
73 rights
- 74 • provide teachers and administrators with training, orientation and
75 consultation regarding writing letters of recommendation (National
76 Association for College Admission Counseling, 2024)
- 77 • work to gather ample information before writing a letter of
78 recommendation about a student they do not know well, given that
79 generic letters of recommendation are less effective
- 80 • do not sign letters of recommendation they have not written
- 81 • provide the substantive content, evaluation and endorsement
82 expressed in the letter, only using artificial intelligence tools to assist
83 with minor editing for clarity or grammar if necessary (Dickstein-

84 Fischer, et al., 2025), as AI-generated letters that do not accurately
85 represent the recommender's firsthand knowledge undermine the
86 purpose of the recommendation process and are strongly discouraged
87

88 **Summary**

89 There are many legal and ethical implications associated with writing letters
90 of recommendation for students. School counselors are aware of these
91 implications and apply them in their practice. Additionally, school counselors
92 communicate these best practices to students, their families and educators
93 to best support students as they seek employment and postsecondary
94 opportunities.
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