Preceptor Forum: Letters of Recommendation

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Auburn University
Harrison School of Pharmacy
Jeffrey A. Kyle reports no relevant financial relationships.

E. Kelly Hester reports no relevant financial relationships.
A Question For You...
Pharmacist Objectives:

- Describe how to involve students in the letter writing process
- List important applicant characteristics in PHORCAS for residency programs
- Discuss residency program expectations of reference writers
- Compare and contrast strong and weak letters of recommendation
Program Objectives

Technician Objectives:

• Discuss important information to gather from the applicant about the position

• Discuss employer expectations of reference writers

• Compare and contrast strong and weak letters of recommendation
How Important are Letters of Recommendation?

  - What is used to determine who to invite for an onsite interview?
  - A 19-question survey sent to 105 academic institutions with ASHP-accredited pharmacy residency programs
  - Results
    - 73 (69.5%) responses
      - 57 (78%) report using a scoring rubric
      - "Most important" factor on the scoring rubric
    - CVs
    - Letters of Recommendation
How Important are Letters of Recommendation?

- What characteristics of PGY1 candidates are important?
- Two surveys distributed to PGY1 RPDs and faculty members
- Ranked the perceived importance of the interview selection criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Leadership experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work Experience</td>
<td>Familiarity with program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of APPEs</td>
<td>Another degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publications</td>
<td>Typos or grammatical errors in app.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research experience</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit</td>
<td>Letter of recommendation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How Important are Letters of Recommendation?

Results

- Survey sent to 921 PGY1 RPDs and 3642 faculty members
  - 232 RPDs (28.9%) and 526 (21.5%) responded

1. Letters of recommendation (97% and 95%)
2. GPA
3. Leadership
4. Previous work experience
5. Fit
Before Saying Yes...

➢ Are you the right person?

➢ Do you have a conflict of interest?

➢ Can you write a positive letter?

➢ Do you have the time?
PhORCAS Available to Applicants
November

Applications & PhORCAS/LORs Due
December

Phase I and Phase II Matching Ranking and Results
January

March

April
Involving the Applicant

Request the applicant’s:

- Curriculum vitae
- Personal statement or career goal(s)
- Purpose in pursuing the residency or position
- Strengthens or assets they will bring to the position
- Weaknesses or areas they need to further develop

Any didactic/experiential areas you need to be made aware of
Involving the Applicant

Other questions that may help you:

- What are they looking for in a residency program or job?
  - Type of environment
  - Rotations of interest
  - Professional development, mentoring, or certificate programs
  - Research opportunities
- How do they believe you can contribute to their letter?
Involving the Applicant

For each program they are applying, request:

- LOR due date
- Program contact information (e.g. DOP, RPD)
- Any program specific instructions/requirements
- Why they are interested in that particular program/position?
Reference Writers:

PhORCAS

Tips and Recommendations
Referer (your name):

(Candidate name) is applying to pharmacy residency programs through the Pharmacy Online Centralized Application Service (PHORCAS) and has requested that you serve as a reference for them by completing the reference form. To complete the online reference form, click the link below:

https://portal.phorcas.org/evaluator18/index.cgi

Login to your PhORCAS reference account:

- Username: (your email)
- Password: (your password)

Please remember you must comment on at least 3 of the 13 attributes listed in the reference portal for the reference to be considered complete.

A personal message from (candidate):

Nashville, TN

Due: Jan 1
For the recommender to complete.

I have known the candidate for approximately ___ (months).
The relative hours per week of our interaction during that time ___ (hours).

My relationship to the candidate was (or is) in the following capacity:

- [ ] Faculty
- [ ] Preceptor
- [ ] Employer
- [ ] Professional Organization

If Other, please specify relationship:

___
Please rate this applicant for each of the following characteristics.

**Exceeds** = the candidate exceeds what is expected to enter a residency program

**Appropriate** = the candidate performs appropriately for what is expected to enter a residency program

**Fails to Meet** = the candidate fails to meet the level expected to enter a residency program

**N/A** = not applicable or not observed
### Personal & Professional Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics Evaluated</th>
<th>Exceeds</th>
<th>Appropriate</th>
<th>Fails to Meet</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Comments (Please address at least 3 fields below)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills (clinical, email, and assigned writings)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/mentoring skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to organize and manage time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work with peers and communicate effectively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Character count: 0/500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Personal & Professional Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Character count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Problem Solving Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective patient interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td>0/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence and resourcefulness</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to accept constructive criticism</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional stability and maturity</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism (professional attire and professional demeanor)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2/500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
20% of residency program directors indicated that letters of recommendation were the most important application criteria in offering residency interviews.

- Important for discriminating between candidates with similar qualifications using screening criteria
- Assists the review committee in understanding the applicant’s abilities and qualifications to meet the position or residency requirements
- Emphasizes characteristics difficult to ascertain from CV or university transcripts

Guidelines for Letter Writing

- Limit to 1-2 pages in length (typically 3 paragraphs)
- Do NOT write a generic letter

1st paragraph: describes your affiliation to the candidate

- Address the letter to the appropriate person (RPD, director of pharmacy)
- Explain how you know the applicant and your relationship
  - Why you are writing the letter (How your working relationship may inform the review committee of desired characteristics)
2nd paragraph: highlight strengths and qualities that make the person the ideal candidate for the position

- Address the applicant’s ability to meet the desired characteristics of the position
  - Provide specific examples and constructive comments of these qualities or skills based on your personal observations
  - Address all information requested by the program
  - Consider ranking the applicant against others you have worked with of similar experience
Guidelines for Letter Writing

- Provide assessment of:
  - the candidate’s strengths from direct observation
  - how the candidate will perform as a resident
  - identified weaknesses (in all letters) and provide examples of observed improvements
  - distinguishing factors from other applicants

- Tailor each letter to the individual program (*based on information provided by the applicant regarding their training interests)
  - Discuss why the candidate would be a successful resident
  - Select attributes that align with position responsibilities
3rd paragraph: summarize your recommendation

- Specifically state your overall recommendation: “highly recommend” or “recommend”
- Why this candidate would be a “good fit” for this position and why
- Provide your contact information for follow-up questions and additional information

Other recommendations:

- Be honest (do not overstate abilities)
- Avoid personal information typically excluded in an application
- Proofread prior to submission (name of applicant, accurate applicant/program)
Candidate Letters Predictive of interview invitation

Midwestern University, Chicago College of Pharmacy (2013-2014) residency applications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Invitation Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standout words</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(excellent, superb, outstanding, exceptional, extraordinary, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching references</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PhORCAS Category</strong> - Leadership skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall PhORCAS recommendation score</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Successful Pharmacy Resident Characteristics

Survey of U.S. PGY1 and PGY2 Residency Programs (n=473):

Most Critically Important Candidate Characteristics (> 50% responses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Positive Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation/ initiative</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical knowledge/skills</td>
<td>Time management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Team player</td>
</tr>
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Reference Writers: Examples…. The good and the bad
Example 1 - Lack of detail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Fails to Meet</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication skills</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Leadership/mentoring skills</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<td>✔️</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 1 - Lack of detail

Leadership/mentoring skills -- Exceeds
This is a strong attribute of [blank]. Much of this, I believe, comes from her experience prior to pharmacy school.

Please describe the nature of your interaction with the candidate. Under a period of normal workload or abnormal? What frequency or number of directly observed clinical activities of the candidate? The degree of independence the candidate was given? Was that independence reduced or increased over the duration of a rotation? How did the candidate’s skills compare with (in order of preference) concurrent residents, peer students or students from other colleges?

I precepted [blank] during her general clinical rotation. Rotation activities remained constant. However, the workload varied based upon daily census/acute. Redmond is a 230 bed, mid size facility. Census during her rotation varied from the 130s to 230.

Please feel free to address any other characteristics or observations of the candidate not mentioned previously.

I feel [blank] is a standout candidate who would excel in any residency program.
Example 2 - Lack thereof

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication skills -- Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with peers and communicate effectively -- Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate approach to the others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept constructive criticism -- Appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive criticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please provide 2 strengths of this candidate and how you believe these strengths will be beneficial to his/her success in a residency program.

- Ability to pick up errors

Communication skills

Please provide 2 areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate's noted areas for improvement.
**Example 3 - Reviewer #1**

Lacking detail to support ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>Exceed</td>
<td>was able to write progress notes and worked on projects well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication skills</td>
<td>Exceed</td>
<td>Excellent communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/mentoring skills</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>Worked well with peers on service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>Confident articulating recommendations by end of rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize and manage time</td>
<td>Exceed</td>
<td>Able to multitask well. Able to complete all daily ID responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with peers and communicate effectively</td>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>Worked well with peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 3 – Reviewer #2
Greater detail for ratings

Writing skills -- Exceeds

SOAP notes were concise, clear, and professional in tone. His email correspondence has always been professional, written in a pleasant and appreciative manner. The drafts of his research protocol and summary of research findings were supported by background information and data, respectfully. His objectives were measurable and aligned with the overall research question. In general, his writing assignments required minimal edits.

Oral communication skills -- Exceeds

He is able to communicate clearly and effectively. He is articulate and maintains a professional tone. When presenting patients, he was able to determine relevant information and organize his thoughts and information in a systematic manner. His presentation during the rotation was organized, easy to understand and follow. He emphasized important points and provided appropriate support of recommendations.
Please describe the nature of your interaction with the candidate? Under a period of normal workload or abnormal?
Frequency or number of directly observed clinical activities of the candidate? The degree of independence the candidate was given? Was that independence reduced or increased over the duration of a rotation? How did the candidate’s skills compare with (in order of preference) concurrent residents, peer students or students from other colleges?

I interacted with [redacted] his preceptor at [redacted] clinic with 4 clinical pharmacists and 3 nurse practitioners specializing in anticoagulation, hypertension, congestive heart failure, dyslipidemia, tobacco cessation and diabetes, for 3 weeks during November 2016. During this period, the workload was normal. The specialty clinic sees between 50 to 80 patients per day. [redacted] worked 40 to 50 hours a week for 3 weeks. He saw an average of 10 anticoagulation and 2 specialty patients daily. During the first week, [redacted] was oriented to the clinic to include our electronic medical record system [redacted] was given full independence after his first week. Clinical pharmacists reviewed his medication and clinical recommendations daily and positive and negative feedback was provided. If treatment plans were lacking or incorrect, [redacted] was responsible for finding guidelines or primary literature to support his recommendations [redacted] contacted his patients if there were adjustments to their treatment plan. [redacted] is considered among our staff as top caliber resident. [redacted] is extremely professional, well spoken, and knowledgeable. He takes the time to get to know his patients and provide well written care plans. [redacted] is a team player. He acclimated well to our fast pace clinic and established and maintained positive professional relationships. It was a pleasure to have him at the [redacted] and him clinical knowledge and personality is missed.
Example 5 - Weaknesses in Weakness

Please provide 2 areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate's noted areas for improvement.

As noted above, organization is an area in which [redacted] has struggled in the past. She has made a concerted effort to improve and the discipline required by a residency program will provide continued motivation to excel in this area. She works well with structure and seeks to meet expected goals.

Knowledge of actually working in clinical pharmacy is another area with room for improvement. While [redacted] has had and will continue to have exposure to clinical pharmacy through school, she has much more experience with retail pharmacy. She is excited at the prospect of broadening her skill set and becoming more proficient in clinical settings.

Please provide 2 areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate's noted areas for improvement.

I'm not sure that the student is fully aware of how gifted she really is. A larger, more structured arena for utilizing her skills, will provide the opportunities needed to fully capitalize on those skills.
Example 5 - Constructive Weaknesses

Please provide 2 areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate’s noted areas for improvement.

In rotations, [redacted] has not had a lot of exposure to some different clinical areas and populations, such as pediatrics, surgery, emergency department, and others. A PGY1 residency program would give her opportunities to gain experiences with a much broader population of patients and practice settings, further increasing her overall experience and knowledge. Also, her PharmD rotations offer limited opportunities for her to serve as the actual leader of projects and programs, and the residency will give her multiple opportunities to define, start up, manage, and evaluate different initiatives.

Please provide 2 areas for improvement of this candidate and how you believe a residency program will be able to work with the candidate’s noted areas for improvement.

[redacted] is in the process of developing confidence in her knowledge. I believe residency will help develop this through a variety of learning experiences.

[redacted] is continuing to improve her efficiency. This is an area I’m confident she will exceed in through residency.
Key Points

- Before agreeing to be a reference writer, determine your role and what you can or cannot support.
- Involve the applicant - have them assist you in helping them become a successful candidate.
- Take the time to write meaningful and detailed oriented letters of recommendation.
Questions?