

The Gift of a Teacher Recommendation

As the college application process becomes more and more competitive, students are increasingly searching for ways to “stand out” from the thousands of other applicants striving for the same goal. I remember being told that a high GPA wasn't good enough – that colleges wanted uniqueness, creativity, and passion. These qualities could be shown in two ways: in the personal essay, or through letters of recommendation.

In an era where a recommendation can make or break an application, it is no longer enough to submit a generic letter about how wonderful a child is. These letters must be personal, engaging, and thought-provoking. They must convince an admissions officer that *this* student is *the* student; that the achievements and classroom presence of this applicant make him or her an ideal candidate for *this specific university*. I've known teachers to spend upwards of two hours crafting a single letter, because any hint of doubt hidden between the lines can jeopardize the entire application.

Now consider this: teachers are not compensated for the time spent writing these recommendations. Along with grading and after-hours communication with parents and students, teachers write recommendations outside of the classroom. Two hours spent writing a letter is two hours working for free – something teachers have no choice but to do because almost every university in the country requires at least one teacher recommendation.

Of course, two hours without compensation here and there might seem like no big deal – and it really isn't. The problem, however, is that most teachers write more than one letter, especially because students know that some teachers are better at writing recommendations than others. For example, one of my recommendations came from a teacher who wrote 40 letters in total. Let's say he spent an hour on each recommendation; that amounts to 40 hours, or the equivalent of a full workweek beyond normal teaching hours, all without compensation.

I understand that not every teacher writes 40 recommendations in a single year, and not every teacher spends an hour on every recommendation. I understand that teachers essentially make the choice to work for free. But I also understand that if all teachers made a different choice, no student would be able to apply to college. It's no wonder so many teachers are leaving for other fields, or that the number of people becoming teachers is dwindling; what employee in any other profession would willingly work 40 hours without compensation?

After all this, I'm not suggesting teachers should stop writing recommendations. As a student, I know firsthand how crucial they are to a successful application. What I am hoping for is a deeper appreciation for teachers from students and parents, because they sacrifice a lot of time and money to support their students. Whether you have graduated college or are years from even applying, keep in mind how often teachers make the choice to work for free, and think about that the next time a public school teacher asks for a raise.