

## **The School Counselor and Letters of Recommendation**

(Adopted 2020)

### **American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position**

School counselors work ethically when writing letters of recommendation for students. To guide their work, school counselors rely on the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) and the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; 1974), which is a federal statute protecting parents' and students' rights regarding educational records (Stone, 2014).

### **The Rationale**

In their role as student advocates, school counselors use best practices to help all students achieve their aspirations. They recognize that letters of recommendation play a significant role in admissions decisions; notably, they are the third most-used predictor of college success following the GPA and test scores (Kuncel, Kochevar & Ones, 2014). 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 and the positive impact these letters can provide all students in the postsecondary planning process. School counselors are familiar with inequities in higher education such as wealthier families enrolling their students in college at higher rates than lower-income families, particularly in highly selective institutions (Harris, 2019). Also noted by the National Center for Education Statistics, “The percentage of the lowest SES students who were neither enrolled [in postsecondary education] nor employed was roughly five times as large as the corresponding percentage for the highest SES students” (NCES, 2019, para. 5). In recognition of the disparities that exist in admission to postsecondary institutions and employment opportunities by race, ethnicity and geography (Brainerd, 2017), school counselors work to mitigate the impact of injustice and inequity and support all students in achieving their goals beyond high school.

### **The School Counselor's Role**

When requested by students to write letters of recommendation, school counselors must balance their support for students by using a strengths-based approach (beneficence) while maintaining honest, conscientious communication without harm to students (nonmaleficence). Additionally, as school leaders and advocates, school counselors help school staff, students, and their families understand the legal and ethical practices having an impact on letters of recommendation as well as the role these letters play in admission processes and future employment opportunities.

School counselors understand that offering to provide letters of recommendation cannot be made conditional on waiving ones' rights afforded them under FERPA (Family Policy Compliance Office [FPCO], 2005). They also understand that an educational agency or institution may not require parents or students to waive the protections and rights afforded them under FERPA (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) as a condition for acceptance into an institution or receipt of educational services.

In regard to letters of recommendation, school counselors:

- Maintain familiarity of federal and state laws and local school board policies concerning personal identifiable information
- Include personal identifiable information only with dated, written consent of student and/or parents/guardians
- Educate students and their families on the impact of waiving rights to view recommendations sent to potential postsecondary institutions and/or employers
- Advise students on appropriate content for admissions applications
- Provide teachers and administrators with training, orientation and consultation about considerations in writing letters of recommendation (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2012)
- Promote ethical administration of standardized exams and reporting of test scores and other records
- Consider implications of releasing disciplinary records as a part of a final transcript
- Work to gather ample information before writing a letter of recommendation about a student they do not know well
- Do not sign letters of recommendation they have not written

## Summary

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

## References

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## Resources

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