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Want a Good Reference Letter? Do Something to Deserve It

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Want a Good Reference Letter? Do Something to Deserve It

By Linda Walters
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, August 8, 2012

Each August, the entire UCF community anticipates the start of the fall semester. As we all laze through the final days of summer, we reminisce about the highs and lows of previous school years and strategize how we can avoid those same lows this fall.

For some faculty, the low is student cheating. (Thank you, UCF, for creating “Z grades” in cases of academic dishonesty.) For others, it is those students that are glued to their phones, oblivious and excluding all direct human contact.

And for me, the low each year is requests for reference letters from students I don’t actually know. I pride myself in crafting really personal, original letters to help students reach their career goals, and it pains me when I have to write a mediocre letter that won’t help anyone get anywhere. Here is an example of the type of request that stresses me out.

Dear Dr. Walters,

I had you in Biology 1 three years ago and received an A. You probably don’t remember me because it was a large class. But you were one of the teachers I most connected with (even though I never talked to you in person) and I was hoping you would be willing to write a letter of support for me for my application to medical school. Thank you in advance, Joan Smith

Sometimes I decline to write letters for such requests, explaining to the student that my letter would not help them and possibly may hurt their application. Other times the students plead, and I yield. Unfortunately, the letters that I write in response are really impersonal and read something like this:

Dear Medical School Admissions Board,

I am writing a letter of support for Ms. Joan Smith. Ms. Smith was a student in my introductory biology course in 2009 and received an A in the class. During this semester, 17% of the students received A grades. In looking at her transcript, she has done well in her courses, currently holding a 3.8 GPA. I'm sure she will be asset in your program. Thank you, Dr. Walters

It is easy to see why this can make a faculty member depressed.

This is especially true because UCF has so many amazing opportunities for undergraduates to become engaged within the university community, many of which include interactions with faculty and staff who often write letters of support.

If you are a student reading this and sending out letters like the one above, please, please do something while you are at UCF that makes you stand out in a positive way. UCF faculty have sought out our positions because we like helping students reach their potentials, and when you shine, we shine!

Some of the student-engagement options at UCF are obvious: athletics at the varsity and intramural levels (everyone admires a scholar-athlete); fraternity/sorority life sometimes can be hazardous to your grades, but these groups definitely interact on a regular basis with faculty/staff and provide excellent opportunities for philanthropy; and clubs, where there is everything from Knights for Marine Conservation, to Swing Knights (swing dancing), to Reel Knights (fishing), to Engineers Without Borders.

Another extremely important avenue for engagement is undergraduate research. UCF has one of the most comprehensive undergraduate-research programs in the country.

For those planning careers in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), hands-on research experience is essential, and competitive stipends for the most dedicated are available. The Office of Undergraduate Research provides opportunities each semester to compete for money for research supplies and travel. And once the data starts coming in, there is additional money available to present at research conferences around the globe, as well as on campus at the annual Showcase for Undergraduate Research Excellence.

Another student-engagement opportunity is tutoring, if you find your course material easy. (Check out the Student Academic Resource Center.)

Study abroad is amazing, if you can swing the cost. I just returned from my fifth Tropical Marine Biology class in Roatan, Honduras, last week and it was my fifth time having “the best class ever” with a dozen UCF students.

More engagement experiences can be found through Volunteer UCF, the Arboretum, Student Government, and Knights Helping Knights Pantry, just to name a few.

So, my challenge to all of you incoming students is: Please get involved! It will pay off enormously in your sense of self and your sense of UCF community...and will make for much better reference letters.

Here is how we faculty like to start our letters of support:

Dear Medical School Admissions Board,

It is such a pleasure for me to write this letter of support for Ms. Joan Smith (who goes by Joanie). I have had Joanie in two classes, including a study-abroad class in Roatan, Honduras, and she has volunteered to assist my graduate students in the field under really arduous conditions. Without hesitation, I can say that Joanie is exactly the kind of student you really must have in your program. In addition to having high “A” grades in both classes and a 3.8 GPA, I can tell you that Joanie is tenacious, constantly seeks experiences outside of her comfort zone, and is a gifted artist. Allow me now to provide you with specific examples of why I use these adjectives to describe Joanie...[and expect this letter to go on for at least two pages]...

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