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Are Your References Too Fawning?

Praise in a letter of recommendation has more impact when it is honest, detailed, balanced, and on point

By [DAVID D. PERLMUTTER](#)

In my first year on the tenure track, I applied for a grant and asked a senior professor for a recommendation. He politely declined, saying, in effect, "I don't know you well enough to make you sound like a genius." He felt that the letters of support for grants regularly laid on the praise so thick that to compete, his had to reach heights of queasiness.

[Last month's column](#) was about lackluster or even malicious references. This month let's talk about the overly laudatory recommendation.

Reference hypertrophy is pandemic in academe and affects all aspects of promotion and tenure. In hiring new Ph.D.'s, I accept that most are intelligent, conscientious, and hard working. But isn't it a bit early to call them "superstars"? And do a professor's other advisees know that he thinks this one is "the single brightest doctoral candidate" he has ever advised?

Likewise, in the letters of support submitted with applications for doctoral programs, postdocs, fellowships, grants, awards, and prizes, the superlatives fly fast and thick. Reference letters for jobs are often so over the top that anything short of "grab her before she wins her MacArthur fellowship" makes lesser praise tepid in comparison. When those overpraised candidates arrive in person for an interview, they can't help but disappoint. Even in tenure cases, letters from outside evaluators (the focus of next month's column) can seem less than sober and dispassionate.

The difficulty with the volume and extent of praise in these letters is that it undermines the reference system itself. When sorting through job applications, how do we distinguish among all the "outstanding" candidates? In promotion and tenure cases, "outstanding" sets up a

ludicrously high and semantically improbable bar: Does the candidate's teaching literally "stand out" from that of every other faculty member in a department?

Overpraise also smells bad: As Samuel Johnson, George Orwell, and other critics of cant and puffery have pointed out, when we use too many exaggerated descriptions, the scale of meaning is lost. If so many people are "terrific," does that mean someone who is deemed a "good" teacher is actually a "poor" one? Like a drug, reference hypertrophy is losing its effect through repeated application and seems to require ever higher dosages.

Finally, and most important for those seeking tenure, an overly flattering recommendation comes off as perfunctory. When I read a letter of support that is just a string of accolades without details, I think, "Is this a generic letter that the writer pulls out for everybody?" The more praise that arrives via form letter, the less it helps its subject.

All of us, whatever our rank, would be helped by a return to levelheadedness and restraint in recommendations. Here's how you can help bring the system of references back into balance in academe, and do some good for your own career, too.

Seek out references who are credentialed enough to make their praise count. The more status academics have in a field, because of their affiliations and accomplishments, the more weight is given to their words. In reviewing grant proposals on a committee, I once read a letter of support that was no more than 100 words, but the sender had received multiple million-dollar grants himself. That letter writer's clear statement — this person should get a grant for the following reasons — was the decisive factor in our decision.

Alternately, I have seen job applications by new Ph.D.'s in which all of their recommendation letters were written by adjuncts. I wondered: Couldn't you get anyone tenured to speak well of you?

Pick people who have time to write a real letter. There is nothing wrong with brevity in a reference letter, but the line between brief and cursory is thin indeed. When your recommender does not care enough to write a substantive letter, why should those of us reading it?

Pick people who know you, not people who only know of you. References are almost always asked to "describe your relation or connections" to the candidate or applicant. The answer can negate or augment the value of the reference. It is always a red flag when references seem uncertain why they were asked to write a letter, as in "I learned about Dr. Jones's work when he asked me to support for his candidacy" Letters that get facts wrong about you or omit obvious points are also quickly discounted. One letter I saw misspelled the candidate's name and failed to mention a prize she had won for teaching, although the letter spoke in vague terms of her being a "great teacher."

Encourage your references to include details, not just abstractions. Words of praise alone have little currency because of their overuse; much better to back up praise with convincing detail. Provide your references with brief talking points that describe your qualifications. The rules of vivid, persuasive writing apply here: Show, don't just tell.

Make sure your reference letters are not identical. Providing talking points has one drawback: When all of your recommenders repeat the same details, they start to sound too much like, well, talking points. Seek out a balanced mix of supporters who can paint a full picture of your strengths (teaching, research, service), not just harp on one. Or, encourage your recommenders to promote different facets of your main strength. Suppose, for example, you are nominated for a teaching award. Why not find one reference to talk about your lecturing and seminar skills, another to focus on your mentoring abilities, and a third to talk about your passion for pedagogy.

Don't be afraid to ask references to deal with your faults. A sure sign of reference hypertrophy is a description that makes a candidate sound like a marble statue. Few academics are "great" at everything. If the fault or problem is important enough to affect your candidacy or application, then it is much better to have your references deal with it upfront than just pray the judges, evaluators, or hiring committees won't notice. Your references can help you out by mentioning the dents in your armor — but, you hope, with a narrative and details that point out some positives.

For example, I once wrote a letter of reference for an assistant professor on the job market who had relatively low student evaluations of his teaching. I talked about those numbers but pointed out how: (a) He had taught a series of very tough skills courses that students traditionally disliked taking; (b) He worked hard at improving his pedagogy in campus teacher-training seminars; (c) His ratings improved from year to year; and (d) Peer evaluations of his teaching were much higher.

Many of us are hooked on reference hypertrophy. I admit that, on occasion, I have used words like "terrific" and "great" to describe a candidate in a phone reference or a letter of support. The key point for all of us is that praise has more impact when it is honest, detailed, and balanced than when it is vague, formulaic, or exaggerated.

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