FACULTY GUIDANCE FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Introduction

In October of 2018, a qualified University of Michigan student was denied a letter of recommendation because the faculty member chose to use the student's request as a platform for political speech. One week later, a graduate student instructor employed a similar tactic. These instructors pledged to boycott study abroad programs in Israel, but the affected parties were American students seeking the same expanded academic opportunities others seek on study abroad. We express our concern because this time it affected Jewish students but ultimately this could happen to any student about any politically divisive issue.

Professional Responsibilities

Colleges and universities often define faculty professional responsibilities. If higher education professionals have teaching duties, promoting student success is part of these professional responsibilities. Institutions require that faculty teach courses that fit with university course descriptions, distribute syllabi in their courses stating student requirements, hold regular office hours, grade fairly, and return work in a reasonable timeframe. It is also customary and expected that faculty will be asked, and be expected to write, letters of recommendation as part of these duties. Curiously, though, colleges and universities have offered little to date in the way of guidance in this area.

Letters of Recommendation

Our belief is that colleges and universities should state clear expectations in their respective faculty handbooks regarding writing or refusing requests for letters of recommendation. Colleges and universities should indicate that considerations of academic merit, knowledge, preparation, and achievement are the appropriate metrics that should guide faculty in making decisions to write and in preparing such letters.

Model Language on Letters of Recommendation for Faculty Handbooks

Faculty with teaching duties are often asked to write letters of recommendation. Such faculty are free to write or refuse to write letters of recommendation based on a range of considerations, including the number of requests, time to fulfill them, familiarity with the requesting student, and an assessment of the student's work. When faculty are asked to write letters of recommendation, their primary considerations ought to be academic merit and the student's qualifications. At times, faculty may also wish to consider institutional accreditation and quality of the program. But the decision to express or withhold support for students in the form of recommendation letters should not be influenced by political considerations. Considerations of academic merit, knowledge, preparation, and achievement are the appropriate metrics that should guide faculty in making decisions to write and in preparing such letters.