Preparing for and requesting letters of recommendation for graduate school

Here are some suggestions you might want to keep in mind while you are in the program and at the time when you are applying for graduate admission.

A strong and convincing letter of recommendation needs to be detailed. Graduate admissions committees every spring see mountains of letters that say so-and-so is a good student, works hard, and has a great personality. Your letters are going to be piled onto those mountains of such letters. If yours are to stand out, be memorable, and be convincing, those of us who write them need to have something specifically about you to write about. It’s hard to fill even a page with a list of courses, grades, and similar information, and little likelihood it will get noticed even then.

What can make letters of recommendation compelling is the stuff that is uniquely your own, an especially strong or original paper (or brochure, or poster, etc.) for a course, a senior thesis project, a semester as a research assistant, even a chance conversation. In other words, those things that carry you outside the limits of the defined curriculum to explore some particular topic that appeals to you especially. Something that reveals both your individual enthusiasms and your abilities relevant to those enthusiasms. It is very helpful if your faculty recommender has some of your work in electronic form on his/her hard drive to consult while writing about you.

When it comes time to ask me for a recommendation, it is very helpful if you compile a dossier that I can refer to while I’m working on a letter for you. Send this to me as an email (with attachments). Listed below are some items I generally find useful:

- Transcripts from other institutions covering coursework you have taken that does not show up on your USM transcript or that may not be fully or clearly represented by your USM transcript. Also records of any academically relevant special programs you may have taken, perhaps over a summer.

- A list of the titles of any papers or projects you wrote for courses you took with me and an abstract summarizing the content. It is particularly helpful if you can include digital copies of what you consider to be the two or three best pieces of work you did in my courses.

- A listing of any academically relevant special projects you’ve done outside of courses – eg., participation in research projects, volunteer interpreting, etc.

- A current resume giving an overview of your college experience and any academic or work experience you gained prior to or concurrently with your academic work at USM, along with a general picture of your career to date, work history and your goals.

- A listing of the graduate programs you are applying to, along with a listing of specifics of the addresses, committee chairs, etc. to whom letters should be addressed. Please be sure it is very clear exactly what program at what level you are applying for. Also, supply addresses for all programs, regardless of whether the letter is to be mailed directly to the school, submitted online (as is common now) or to be handed to you. In all such cases I still usually need to put an inside address on the letter. Include any information you can provide about the specific focus and interest of the programs you are applying to and why you are especially interested in them.

- A listing of the deadlines for receipt of the letters. In particular, make it clear by what date you must have the letter from me, if you have to forward the letter to the university yourself.

Finally, consider carefully the choice you make about confidentiality as you fill out forms requesting recommendations. All graduate schools in the U.S. will now ask you to sign a section of the request form where you either waive your right to see any letters of recommendation written on your behalf, or do not waive that right. So far as I know, I personally have never altered a letter one way or another according to the choice a student made on this section. However, I do believe the choice a student makes will sometimes have an effect on the credibility of the letter from the point of view of faculty at the institution you are applying to. They must make a judgment as to whether the letter is likely to be fully representative of our view of you. Knowing that you will have access to the letter cannot do anything to increase that confidence. This matter is entirely in your control, but I believe your interest is best served by waiving your right to view the letter.

W. Cowart / 10 Jan 2012