

Reference Letters and Conflict of Interest: A Professor's Dilemma

ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

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Résumé

Cette étude de cas examine certains des défis, notamment les conflits d'intérêts, auxquels font face les professeurs en écrivant des lettres de recommandation pour leurs étudiants.

Mots clés

conflit d'intérêts, l'université, lettres de référence, étudiants, professeurs

Summary

This case study examines some of the challenges, and in particular conflicts of interest, that professors face in writing letters of reference for their students.

Keywords

conflict of interest, university, letters of reference, students, professors

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Conflit d'intérêts

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Conflicts of Interest

Bryn Williams-Jones is the Editor-in-chief of the Journal and PhD supervisor of Maude Laliberté.

Background

University professors are regularly solicited to write reference letters for their students, whether for admission into academic programs, for scholarship applications or for jobs. Reference letters are a time-consuming but essential responsibility for professors; and such letters can play a very important role in a student's success. Writing a first letter of reference for a student may take between 30 and 90 minutes, depending on the intended purpose, and whether the professor has sufficient knowledge about the student's capacities and academic track record (e.g., through experience in class, supervision, an up-to-date *curriculum vitae* (CV)). Subsequent letters for the same individual often take much less time, but nonetheless require updating as the student progresses in their academic career.

Letter writing can lead to a variety of potentially problematic conflicts of interest (COI) for professors. First, professors have an interest in the success of their own students, because it reflects well on the professor's own career progress (e.g., contract renewal or tenure). But professors are also busy with other academic responsibilities, and so might be tempted to "cut corners" in order to save time; it is not uncommon to hear of professors asking their graduate students to write "drafts" of the letters, which the professor then revises and signs. In North America, many have noted a veritable arms race in the writing of effusive, multipage reference letters that tout the excellence of every student; it is at the point now that extravagant letters have become the norm [1]. This is in stark contrast to the style of letters written at many European universities that may constitute little more than a cold and descriptive paragraph. The result is that North American reviewers (e.g., for scholarships) may look at a *lack* of effusive language as a sign that candidates are less strong than they might otherwise appear. In an attempt to mitigate the inherent favourable bias in letters of reference, some institutions (departments or funding agencies) have moved towards requesting numerical or grade-based evaluations instead of written letters of reference. However, these are arguably no less subjective than the traditional written letters [2], and will likely vary widely depending on departmental or institutional cultural. In summary, the writing of reference letters can lead to a variety of COI that can raise concerns about professors' abilities to meet their professional responsibilities towards their students and colleagues.

The Case

Professor Dubois is known in her Department for being an excellent mentor to her undergraduate and graduate students. She often spends significant time with each student over the course of their academic programmes, helping them identify and capitalise upon opportunities, and encouraging them to challenge their own limits in order to excel in their chosen areas of research and scholarship. Professor Dubois prides herself on her honesty and candour in her relations with her students, so while she encourages all her students, she also makes it clear when she perceives limits or weaknesses in their work, effort or capacities. Over the last few years, Professor Dubois has supervised more than a dozen graduate students as well as some undergraduate projects, and has been happy to see a good number of these students succeed in scholarship competitions. She has found this both personally gratifying and, indirectly, also financially interesting. That is, for those students who succeed at obtaining major scholarships, she is no longer under pressure to provide salary support through her own research grants. Also, students with scholarships tend to graduate more quickly, and this reflects positively on Professor Dubois' own CV and tenure evaluation.

Writing reference letters, often considered an onerous task by her colleagues, is actually something that Professor Dubois enjoys because it enables her to share her enthusiasm for and translate her knowledge about her students; over the years, she has learned to write excellent and convincing letters of reference, something that she has had confirmed both by successful students and by colleagues who have read her letters during competitions. Nonetheless, Professor Dubois also recognises the problematic nature of reference letters. While her students are competing for scholarships (sometimes from the same funding organization), Professor Dubois is competing with other colleagues who are also promoting their students, with the result that there may be a non-negligible interest for professors to overemphasise or even exaggerate the strengths of their own students. Striving to be fair and honest, she nonetheless writes the strongest possible letters for her students, even when she is not fully confident of the student's capabilities, or when she does not know the student very well (usually for undergraduate students). Professor Dubois feels that all students deserve a chance to compete for scholarships because "they can't win if they don't try" and one never knows what the competition is like. But this philosophy has also led to some uncomfortable situations that have made Professor Dubois question the appropriateness of her stance on writing letters of reference.

Competing Professional Interests

Alex, a graduate student who had taken one of Professor Dubois' courses, has asked for a letter of reference, because he needs a second letter alongside one already obtained from his supervisor, Professor Brennan. Though normally this would not have posed a problem, Professor Brennan is a colleague with whom Professor Dubois' team is in direct competition for grants and first publication of discoveries, a situation that has created some tension in their professional relationship. Professor Dubois thus decided to refuse to write Alex a letter on the grounds that she could not be fully impartial and write a strong letter of reference.

Equality or Merit?

Letter writing has proven particularly challenging for Professor Dubois when she has multiple students in the same competition for which there are only very few scholarships. In such cases, it can be very hard to write each student who asks a strong letter, and so Professor Dubois is unsure how to fairly manage this situation. She has considered restricting her letter writing to only her own students, although this would clearly have negative implications for other undergraduate or graduate students in her department who do not (yet) have supervisors, and who also need letters in order to apply for scholarships.

Objectivity

Even more challenging for Professor Dubois is the situation where she is on the jury for internal (e.g., Departmental or research centre) scholarship competitions, and is forced to rank her own students objectively against those of her colleagues. In these cases, she has tried to be both equitable and transparent, but is nonetheless concerned about her ability to be impartial in her evaluations of her own and her colleagues' students.

Questions to consider

1. Professor Dubois' attention to mentoring her students, and her real interest in seeing them succeed, has led her to question how objective she can really be in the letters that she writes.
 - Will her tendency to write very strong letters for all students undermine her credibility with external reviewers (either in her university or in national competitions)?
 - And does this tendency mean that Professor Dubois is being unfair towards more promising students, who are in a sense brought down to the level of less competitive students, because all receive glowing letters of reference?
2. Her students' success in obtaining scholarships and career advancement also reflects well on Professor Dubois' own academic reputation.
 - Does this create a problematic COI with regards to favouring her own students over those of her colleagues?
 - What about the financial interest of not having to support those students who are working on her research projects because they succeeded in obtaining scholarships?
3. Professor Dubois clearly recognises the challenge of writing letters for multiple students for the same competition.
 - Should she accept to write all letters, making each as strong as possible, or only write a letter for the "first student through the door"?
 - Should she limit her support to her own graduate students, for whom she has direct responsibility?
 - Should she write letters for only those students who, in her judgment, are most likely to succeed in the competition?

4. Significant time and effort is involved in writing letters of reference for students.
 - Should Professor Dubois only write letters for those who she thinks are the best and for whom she can write excellent letters?
 - Or should she “be nice” and not discourage students, and so accept to write letters even for students who she does not think are sufficiently competitive?
5. In the case of Professor Brennan’s student, Professor Dubois was in a challenging COI because she was being asked to help the student of a competitor. By refusing to write the letter of reference, Professor Dubois avoided being biased in her letter. But this also meant that the student would have to find another referee to write a strong letter, which could be difficult.
 - Could Professor Dubois’ refusal to write the letter be perceived as a COI, i.e., intentionally not supporting the student of a colleague/competitor?
 - Should she still have tried to write a strong letter of reference? After all, it is not the student’s fault that Professors’ Dubois and Brennan are in competition.
 - What other options could Professor Dubois have deployed to manage the COI?

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Suggested Readings

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