

Tips for Providing References

Principles for Professional Practice Committee

From your NACE – Knowledge Center (www.naceweb.org)

The following guidelines summarize important points for career services staff, faculty, employers, and other reference givers to remember:

Career Services Staff

1. Advise students to request letters of reference from individuals who will provide honest, candid, and positive recommendations.
2. If a student has waived his or her right to inspect or gain access to a letter of reference, avoid reviewing the letter or giving opinions to the student on whether the letter is positive or negative. Explain to the student that by waiving his or her right to inspect, he or she cannot expect to obtain information about the letter from you or your staff.
3. Obtain signed written consent to disclose student credential files, resumes, transcripts, or letters of reference, before disclosing such information. Written consents are not necessary for release of "directory information" (e.g., name, address, major, activities, and awards) from the credential file.
4. Verify that the person to whom you are disclosing information has the legitimate right to receive it.
5. Establish a time period and procedure for maintaining information contained in student credential files and a systematic procedure for destroying such records. Advise students of your record-retention policy.
6. Advise employers that your office does not verify student credentials or conduct reference or background checks on students. If you agree to verify students' credentials, be sure your verification process is thorough. Only agree to verify that to which you have access—for example, grades, courses taken, major, and on-campus activities. Don't become a "guarantor of the student's behavior."
7. Notify employers, employment agencies, contract recruiters, etc., that if the reference contains information covered by FERPA, it cannot be disclosed without the student's consent.

Employers

1. Respond only to specific inquiries; do not volunteer information.
2. Designate one or two individuals to respond to all reference inquiries. Advise all employees, especially members of management who may be called upon to give a reference, to be aware that they are not authorized to give references. Advise these individuals that they must refer all reference inquiries to the designated individuals.
3. Obtain written authorization from employees before disseminating personal information about them.
4. Verify that the person to whom you are disclosing the information has the legitimate right to receive it.
5. Obtain written authorization from a student or job applicant before requesting information on the student or job applicant from a faculty member or former employer.
6. Periodically review the content of letters of reference from supervisors to ensure that information is appropriate and nondiscriminatory.
7. If there are gaps in a student's or job applicant's work and school history, ask the reference-giver to verify what occurred during these gaps.
8. Document all efforts to verify or obtain information from former employers.
9. If the reference contains information covered by FERPA, it cannot be disclosed without the student's consent.

Reference Providers (faculty, college administrative staff, and employers)

1. Prior to providing a reference, obtain consent from the person about whom the reference will be given. If you are unaware that the job applicant has named you as a reference, ask the prospective employer for verification that the individual has given consent for the reference. Such verification could include a copy of the student's signed application listing you as a reference, your name listed as a reference on the student's resume, or verbal confirmation by the student to you.
2. Discuss the type of reference that you will provide with the person who asks you to be a reference. If you cannot provide a good reference, be honest with the individual. Don't promise a "glowing reference" and then provide merely a "glimmer."
3. Follow your organization's policy regarding providing a reference. If references are handled in a centralized fashion, advise the prospective employer that even though you may be named as a reference, your organization's policy prohibits you from providing the reference. Direct the employer to the appropriate person in the organization.
4. If "to whom it may concern" reference letters are requested, document that this is the type of reference requested and that the student or job applicant takes responsibility for disseminating the letters to the proper persons.
5. Respond to the specific inquiry about the student or job applicant. Direct the response to the particular person who requested the information.
6. Relate references to the specific position for which the person applied and to the work that the applicant will perform.
7. Informal lunch discussions or "off the record" telephone conversations with prospective employers regarding a person's performance should be avoided. There is no such thing as "off the record."
8. Information given should be factual, based upon personal knowledge/ observation of the person through direct contact with the person or obtained from the person's personnel record or student record.
9. Avoid giving personal opinions or feelings. If you make subjective statements or give opinions because they are requested, clearly identify them as opinions and not as fact. If you give an opinion explain the incident or circumstances on which you base the opinion.
10. Don't guess or speculate-if someone asks you questions regarding personal characteristics about which you have no knowledge, state that you have no knowledge.
11. State in a reference letter, "This information is confidential, should be treated as such, and is provided at the request of (name of student or applicant), who has asked me to serve as a reference." Statements such as these give justification for the communication and leave no doubt that the information was not given to hurt a person's reputation.
12. Do not include information that might indicate an individual's race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, citizenship status, sex (unless by the individual's name it is obvious), or marital status. Do not base an opinion of performance on stereotypes about an individuals, for instance "for a woman, she excels in math."
13. Document all information you release.