

Faculty Guidance: Writing Recommendations for Colleagues and Students

(Employment, Graduate/Professional School, Immigration/Visa, Promotion & Tenure, and Other Academic Letters)

Purpose and Intended Use of This Guide

Faculty are frequently asked to write letters of recommendation for students, postdocs, visiting scholars, and colleagues. These requests may come from Purdue-affiliated individuals or from people outside the University. They may be for employment, graduate school, fellowships, immigration petitions, and promotion and tenure processes. Most faculty want to be supportive and helpful, but many have expressed uncertainty about what should (or should not) be included in these letters, particularly when the request involves sensitive research or individuals connected to foreign institutions or foreign adversary nations as defined by the U.S. government.

The goal of this guide is to reduce ambiguity, protect faculty and Purdue, and ensure consistency and best practices in how academic recommendations are written.

Faculty do not always realize that certain statements in letters, especially those related to immigration, visa sponsorship, or involvement in restricted or export-controlled research, may be interpreted as institutional commitments or may inadvertently disclose sensitive information. Additionally, some faculty feel pressure to write recommendations even when they do not know the individual well or are not comfortable doing so.

This document provides:

- Clear guidance on when it is appropriate to write a letter and when it is acceptable to decline.
- Best practices for writing strong and factual recommendations based on personal knowledge and direct observation.
- Advisory notes for requests involving students or scholars associated with foreign adversary nations in alignment with federal research security expectations.

How Faculty Should Use This Guide

Faculty may use the guide in two primary ways:

1. *Determine whether to write the letter.*
The general principles help you assess whether you have enough personal knowledge and whether the request is appropriate within your role. If you cannot write a strong, evidence-based endorsement, the guide provides diplomatic language to decline.
2. *Ensure compliance and protect sensitive information.*

The section addressing foreign adversary nations and export-controlled research outlines how to avoid disclosing sensitive or restricted content and when to consult the Research Security and Export Controls team.

Ultimately questions about specific types of letters and such can be directed to the following offices:

- Student immigration recommendations
 - Purdue International Student Services
- Student job recommendations
 - Purdue Center for Career Opportunities
- Faculty immigration (internal or external to Purdue):
 - Purdue International Scholars Services
 - OLC/Monica Bloom
- Faculty P&T or other recommendations:
 - Office of Provost/Faculty Affairs

General Principles (Applies to All Types of Recommendations)

1. Only write recommendations when you have direct, personal knowledge. You should have firsthand experience supervising, teaching, mentoring, or collaborating with the individual. Decline the request if you cannot provide strong endorsement or do not know the individual well enough.
2. You are not obligated to write a recommendation. It is appropriate to decline when the request falls outside your expertise or role. Declining allows the person time to find someone else better positioned.
3. Know the audience and purpose. Tailor tone and content for employment, graduate school, immigration, P&T, or awards. Use factual, evidence-based statements.
4. Support claims with examples (publications, grants, outcomes, metrics). Respect confidentiality and legal requirements. Do not disclose student educational records without prior written consent (FERPA). Do not include personal or protected information. If you have questions about what might be considered protected, reach out to the appropriate office for advice or recommendation.

Requests From Individuals Connected to Foreign Adversary Nations

Individuals who are affiliated with or funded by organizations in nations designated by the U.S. government as “foreign adversaries” require additional consideration. This is not because of their nationality or personal background, but because certain research areas, technologies, and/or collaborations may be subject to export controls, disclosure restrictions, or other federal research security requirements. Honoraria or other forms of compensation should not be accepted in exchange for writing a letter. Recommendation letters that inadvertently include restricted research details, proprietary information, or implied institutional commitments can create compliance risks for both the faculty member and the University. Therefore, if writing letters for individuals connected to foreign

adversary nations, faculty should limit the content to observable academic performance, avoid describing sensitive research activities, and consult the University's Research Security and Export Controls team if they are unsure whether specific information can be shared.

- Ensure you know the individual well and can speak from direct experience.
- Evaluate academic or professional qualifications, not nationality or immigration status.
- Contact the university Research Security and Export Controls (RSEC) office if:
 - Research involves controlled technology
 - You are unsure whether the content is export-controlled
 - You would be recommending someone for participation in a foreign talent recruitment program
- Avoid revealing sensitive research details.
- Decline any offers of compensation, including honoraria, in exchange for writing letters.

Recommendations for Students (Employment, Graduate/Professional School, Fellowships, Scholarships)

When writing recommendations for students, the goal is to provide an evidence-based evaluation of their academic performance and skills, which should be based on your direct experience working with them. Strong letters focus on specific examples that demonstrate the student's abilities, such as research accomplishments, problem-solving, initiative, communication skills, and reliability. It is suggested that you avoid generic praise, personal information, or speculation. Instead, highlight measurable contributions or outcomes that show why the student is a strong candidate for the position or opportunity. Ultimately, the recommendation should reflect what you have witnessed firsthand and explain why the student would add value.

Focus on:

- Demonstrated skills tied to the opportunity
- Evidence of performance and contributions
- Professional behaviors such as communication, teamwork, and reliability
- Avoid speculation and personal details.

Suggested Structure:

1. Context and duration of your relationship
2. Evidence-based examples of strengths

3. Clear endorsement

Immigration / Visa / Permanent Residency Letters

Recommendations for immigration, visa, or permanent residency should focus on factual, documentable evidence of the individual's scholarly contributions and professional accomplishments. These letters are often reviewed by attorneys, therefore specificity and accuracy are critical. Describe the person's expertise, achievements, impact on the field, and any measurable outcomes such as publications, citations, patents, or invited presentations. Avoid statements about immigration eligibility, future employment guarantees, or national security judgments, as those determinations are outside your role. The goal of the letter is to offer an expert evaluation of the individual's academic merit and research significance based on direct experience and verifiable accomplishments.

- Provide factual evaluation
- Highlight documented achievements such as citations, grants, or patents
- Do not promise future employment unless formally authorized
- Avoid statements about eligibility or national security determinations

Promotion and Tenure (P&T) Letters

Letters for promotion and tenure speak to a faculty member's scholarly impact, teaching effectiveness, and contributions to the profession. The purpose is an assessment based on your expertise and the discipline's norms. Strong letters reference concrete evidence such as the quality and influence of publications, success in obtaining competitive funding, meaningful contributions to teaching and mentoring, and engagement in service or leadership roles. Rather than focusing on quantity, the letter should address trajectory, reputation, and whether the record meets expectations for advancement at institutions with similar standards. The goal is to provide an informed and objective evaluation grounded in academic merit and demonstrated impact.

- Evaluate scholarly impact and reputation
- Compare the candidate record to disciplinary norms
- Avoid personal or political circumstances

Other Types of Faculty Recommendation Letters

Faculty are often asked to write recommendation letters beyond student, immigration, or promotion and tenure contexts. These may include letters for fellowships, awards, leadership appointments, committee nominations, or the like. In these cases, focus on demonstrated leadership, professionalism, collaborations, impact, and alignment with the purpose of the opportunity. Highlight specific examples of how the individual has contributed to a project, team, department, or community, and emphasize outcomes that show influence or benefit beyond routine expectations. As with all letters, avoid personal or

confidential information. Rely on direct experience and keep the evaluation factual and grounded in observable accomplishments. The goal is to provide an informed assessment of the individual's readiness, potential, and fit for the opportunity based on your firsthand experience.

Examples:

- Fellowships – focus on academic promise and alignment
- Industry partnerships – focus on practical impact (patents, adoption)
- Leadership nominations – focus on judgment, collaboration, influence