How to line up great medical school letters of recommendation

SEP 17, 2019

Brendan Murphy
News Writer

When you apply to medical school, you’re going to write a personal statement that speaks to your abilities. Your medical school letters of recommendation, another key element to your application, will confirm and expand on those abilities.

Medical schools require somewhere between two and five letters of recommendation. Persuading the right people to say the most helpful things can go a long way toward a prospective medical student’s getting accepted into medical school.

Benjamin R. Chan, MD, is associate dean of admissions at the University of Utah School of Medicine, one of the 37 member schools of AMA’s Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium. As a frequent reader of letters of recommendation, he offered these tips to medical school applicants.

Cultivate mentor-type relationships

This step is done well in advance of your medical school application.

“The advice that I give all applicants out there is that they really need to cultivate relationships with people who will write good letters,” Dr. Chan said. “Have relationships with supervisors, mentors, professors, teaching assistants or individuals in the community that might oversee community service, research or other projects. At the end of the day, these are the people who are going to have to testify on your behalf.”

Don’t be shy about your ambitions

If you have plans for the future, it makes sense to share them with your future letter writers.
“Get to know them, do things like visit during office hours,” Dr. Chan said. “If you don't engage them, they'll never really get to know you, your story, or your hopes or dreams. When you talk to them and you get to know them, they are going to be invested in your success. So when that day comes when you ask them to write you a letter, they are going to write you an awesome letter.”

Look for a detail-oriented letter writer

You want to request a letter from someone who knows you, and someone you trust to execute an impressive letter.

Dr. Chan recommends that letters of recommendation:

- Be written on official letterhead.
- Run a page in length.
- Have a signature and their title at the bottom.

A letter of recommendation that is obviously from a template isn't going to help your case with admissions officers, he said.

“The dirty secret is that a lot of letter writers, a lot of professors, a lot of project supervisors, they use templates,” Dr. Chan said. “You don't necessarily want your letter writers to use a template on the computer. That's when mistakes happen.

“All the time we see in our admissions office problems with names. The letter writer will start off ‘Dear admissions committee, I'm writing about Susan today,’ so that first paragraph will be about Susan. Then the next paragraph talks about Taylor and the last paragraph talks about Chris.”

Pick someone who can cite specifics

If you've conducted research, who was your faculty advisor? If you've volunteered, who within that organization was your point person? These are the types of questions you should be asking when you're looking for a letter writer who has seen and been impressed by your abilities.

“You want your letter writer to sit down at the computer and write an excellent letter from the heart,” Dr. Chan said. “They can come up with anecdotes about why you're going to a great doctor or physician, and throw any templates out the window.”