

Waiving or Retaining Access to Letters of Recommendation

As part of applying for graduate or professional schools or for a job, it is likely you will be asked to submit letters of recommendation. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) of 1974 (Buckley Amendment) requires that students be advised of their rights concerning educational records, such as letters of recommendation.

FERPA gives important rights, including:

1. the right of students to inspect their student records,
2. the right to challenge incorrect information in those records, and
3. the right to keep student records private.

Because FERPA gives students these rights, neither Cornell University nor other institutions or organizations can require you to waive these rights. (University policy on access and release of student records is stated in *Courses of Study*.)

When you establish a file for letters of recommendation (whether through a letter service or the Health Careers Evaluation Committee for medical/dental school application) you will need to decide if you want to waive or retain access to the letter(s). It is, of course, not possible to know how each individual receiving the letters may react to the fact that a student exercised or did not exercise the Right to Know, but the following are factors you may want to consider in making that decision.

Factors to Consider in Deciding to Retain Access

- A potential recommender may choose not to write a letter for you if you retain your right of access.
- If you retain access, you need to be prepared to explain your reasons for your choice during interview(s).
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee at a graduate or professional school receiving the letter might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be less candid as the writer knew that the student would see it. As a result, less weight may be assigned to such letters.
 - The student is determining that the recipient is receiving full information.
 - The student wanted to discuss the letter with the recommender/evaluator before it was put in final draft.
 - The student feels a moral obligation to exercise his/her civil rights.
- You will have an idea of the information schools/employers have and therefore can prepare for interviews accordingly.
- It may relieve stress and anxiety to know exactly what has been said.
- Factual mistakes in the letter can be corrected, if the writer chooses to make those corrections.
- If you conclude that the letter is unfavorable, you can choose not to use the letter. **The HCEC is an exception. You may not withdraw a letter submitted to HCEC.** (See HCEC section below.)
By reading an evaluation, you have a chance of learning from criticism.

Factors to Consider in Deciding to Waive Access

- If your recommender knows you well and has said he/she can write a letter in support of your candidacy, the chances are slight that inaccuracies or unfair statements will be presented in the letter.
- An employer or a member of an admissions committee might tentatively draw one or more of the following conclusions:
 - The evaluation may be more candid if the writer knew that the student would not see it. As a result, more weight may be assigned to such letters.
 - The student has nothing to conceal.
 - The student did not feel it was necessary to view the letter before it was sent.
 - The student does not wish to exercise his/her civil rights in this way.

For Applicants to Medical School Using the HCEC (Health Careers Evaluation Committee)

- Recipients of the letters will know for each letter whether you have waived or retained access. The HCEC letter of evaluation states that a student has **waived** or **retained** access to the letter, and the HCEC forms for letters of recommendation have a waiver statement, which accompanies each letter.

- You may waive or retain the right of access to your Cornell Health Careers Evaluation Committee composite letter of evaluation and/or the letter(s) of recommendation in your file in any combination you choose: all, none, some.
- If you retain access to a letter and disagree with the subjective opinion expressed or believe the information is inaccurate you can place a rebuttal in the HCEC file and it will be sent with the letters to the medical schools.
- The letter of evaluation process includes substantial review and oversight. It's not likely that an inaccuracy will be stated in the letter.

Resource

- Audiotape "To Waive or Not to Waive" (#7) available in Career Library, 103 Barnes Hall.

Updating or Reactivating an Existing File: Senior Undergraduates, Graduate Students or Alumni

Overview

If you have previously registered with the Health Careers Evaluation Committee (HCEC) and would like to apply or reapply to health professional schools, you have two options. You can simply reactivate your file and have HCEC forward your existing letters to schools upon your request. Or, if more than one year has passed since you first registered with HCEC, you may update your HCEC file by submitting new letter(s) of recommendation and having an addendum written in addition to your previous letter of evaluation. The HCEC will then send these new materials along with the original packet of letters to schools upon your request.

A minimum of one month is required normally to produce the updated letter of evaluation after the HCEC has received all required materials. A letter of evaluation that will not reach the medical schools until the fall months may create a lateness issue, especially at schools with rolling admissions, and this could hurt your chances of acceptance. Registration after October 31 is by permission of the HCEC Chair only.

Registering for the Reactivate or Update Process

Registration Form and payment should be submitted as soon as you are sure that you plan to use your existing HCEC file to apply to a health career school. Registration officially re-opens your file, and allows you to designate yourself as reactivating or updating. The Update fee is \$75 and the Reactivate fee is \$25. The fee includes up to 25 distributions. If you are reactivating, only, this form is needed before making distribution requests.

Updating an Existing HCEC File

Letters of recommendation. If it has been one year since you completed or last updated your file, submit one new letter; if it has been two or more years, two letters will be accepted. You may not substitute a new letter for an old one. All letters will be sent. Each recommender should get a copy of the waiver form and cover memo. The cover memo offers some guidelines for the content of the letter. A recommender should be someone who can give insight into your accomplishments after the original letter of evaluation was written.

Transcript(s). HCEC will obtain your Cornell transcript. In addition, you must submit an official transcript from all other colleges and universities attended.

HCEC Retention Form. Complete this form indicating that you understand our retention policy.

The HCEC Letter of Evaluation Waiver Form must be signed and submitted. Determine if you want to waive or retain access to your letters of recommendation.

The HCEC Background Information Form can be used to describe your activities during the past year(s). This form is used to help the chair write the update letter of evaluation and is not sent to medical schools.

A Statement of Recent Accomplishments. (one to two pages double spaced) must be submitted describing relevant activities and accomplishments that have occurred since your file was created. Specifically explain what experiences and accomplishments have improved your preparation for medical/dental school. If these are minimal you should be aware that admissions officers state they look for substantial improvement in a reapplicant's credentials. Therefore you may want to discuss your situation with a health careers advisor to determine the optimum time to reapply before proceeding. The statement may be used to elaborate on specific activities listed on the HCEC Background Information Form, to present your current motivation for a medical career, and/or to comment on any relevant personal growth experience. The statement is for HCEC use only and will not be sent to medical schools. Information provided is critical in developing a supportive update letter. Make sure the HCEC has facts about why you are now prepared for medical school.

Distributing Updated or Reactivated HCEC Letters

The HCEC Distribution Form is used to request that HCEC send your packet of letters to the health professional school(s). Do not request that your letters be sent until the school indicates that it wants them. Registrants are advised not to apply to more than the twenty-five schools included in your fee; however, if you choose to do so, additional packets will be mailed at a cost of \$4.00 per packet. Be sure to keep a copy of your distribution requests and monitor your distributions in your on-line status check on the HCEC web page.

Additional Information

To download forms or check the content of your file or your distribution requests: Access HCEC via www.career.cornell.edu.

Questions regarding forms, procedures, distributions and your file:

Donna Smith, Records Coordinator, 203 Barnes

E-mail: hcec@cornell.edu

Phone: (607)255-0546

Non-routine HCEC procedural questions:

Janet Snoyer, Assistant Director, Health Careers & Credentials, 203 Barnes Hall

E-mail: js100@cornell.edu; phone: (607) 255-5045.

Health careers advising:

Judy Jensvold, Sr. Associate Director, Health Careers, 103 Barnes Hall

E-mail: jmj5@cornell.edu

To schedule appointments for long distance phone calls or in person: call Information Services (607) 255-5296

For brief questions: Phone 607-255-0542 (4-4:30 p.m. almost every afternoon)

Walk-in hours: 3:00-4:00 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 2:00-4:00 p.m. Fridays.

Procedure for First-Time Alumni and Alumnae Registering with the HCEC

Overview

If you are a Cornell alumnus/a, you may register with the (HCEC) Health Careers Evaluation Committee and have a letter of evaluation written on your behalf, which puts your record in context with other Cornell graduates. The letter of evaluation is written by the Chairman and is based on the materials you provide to the HCEC office. As an alum you are welcome to consult with the Health Careers Advisor to review your credentials and determine the best timing for medical school matriculation.

Applicants apply to medical schools more than one year before they plan to matriculate. The materials for application, including the letter of evaluation, should be completed during the spring or summer months. A minimum of **one month** is required normally to produce the letter of evaluation **after** the HCEC has received all required materials. A letter of evaluation that will not reach the medical schools until the fall months may create a lateness issue, especially at schools with rolling admissions, and this could hurt your chances of acceptance. It is highly recommended that all materials and letters be received by the HCEC by the end of the first week in July at the latest, if you want your letter ready for timely distribution.

Registering and Creating an HCEC File

All the materials listed below are mandatory for a complete HCEC file. **Your file must contain the first six items and at least two letters of recommendations before the HCEC chairs will review your file and prepare your letter.**

1. **Registration Form with payment**
2. **Waiver Form for HCEC Letter of Evaluation**
Determine if you want to waive or retain access to your letter.

3. The HCEC Background Information Form

It provides information the HCEC chair will use to write the letter of evaluation and is not sent to medical schools.

4. A Personal Statement

A statement (one or two double-spaced) must be submitted. It should explain your motivation for a medical career. Be sure to include information about experiences and/or activities that will be helpful in writing the letter of evaluation. Cite specific accomplishments and experiences that reflect your efforts to prepare for medical school and a medical career. The more information you provide about experience of relevance gained since graduation, the more effective the letter will be. The statement is for HCEC use only and will not be sent to schools.

5. Retention Form

Fill out this form indicating that you understand our retention policy. See policy on destroying old HCEC files (p.19).

6. Transcript(s)

HCEC will obtain your Cornell transcript. In addition, you must submit an official transcript from each additional college and university attended.

7. Letter of Recommendation with Waiver Form

Three letters of recommendation are strongly recommended. Evidence of your strong interest in a medical career and efforts to prepare for medical school should be conveyed in the letters. You are required to submit at least one letter from a Cornell faculty member. Each letter writer should be given a completed waiver form and a cover memo which offers some guidelines for the content of the letter.

Distributing HCEC Letters

The HCEC Distribution Form is used to request that HCEC send your packets of letters to the health professional school(s). The \$100 registration fee includes distribution of your letters to up to 25 institutions. Do not request that your letters be sent until a school requests them. Registrants are advised not to apply to more than twenty-five schools; however, if you choose to do so, additional packets will be mailed at a cost of \$4.00 per packet. Be sure to keep a copy of your distribution requests and monitor these on-line on the HCEC web page.

Additional Information

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