

# The Poverty of Letters

## The Crushing Case against Outside Letters for Promotion

Deirdre  
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In recent years the use of "outside letters" for promotion has mushroomed. Deans and committees see the letters as blessedly objective and have written them into university statutes. Yet the case against them is crushing.

The issue is not whether outside opinion should be considered. Of course it should, if the outsiders know something that insiders do not. The issue is whether solicited letters of opinion should have any place. The issue is whether it would not be better to rely on more serious evidence: publications, book contracts, book reviews, successful grant proposals, offers of jobs from other universities.

In contrast with this other evidence, nothing is at stake in solicited letters. They are empty. Consider:

- Outside letters have a gross and irremediable selection bias. If the writer already knows the work of the candidate, the letter arrives and is favorable. If he or she does not know the candidate or is ill-disposed towards the candidate, the letter does not arrive. The statistical character of the letters is decidedly worse than that of the other evidence of reputation.

Letters are not additional information, in any sense of "information." A biased sample does not reduce the variance of an estimate. Letters that are never surprising have no information content.

- Letters of recommendation are typically not candid. Seldom does an outsider have such an interest in a

university that he or she will provide it with free and candid advice.

The rare candid letter is a disaster. Since the rhetoric of the letters is bland approval or conventional enthusiasm—unlike that of referee reports, proposal evaluations, book reviews, or job offers, where incentives to be critical prevail—a candid assessment of Professor X's position in the history of scholarship is devastating. The field for malice is open. That truth-telling should be so mischievous contradicts the morality of academic life.

- The audience for these letters is unclear, and therefore the role of the writer is unclear. Numerous deans, colleagues, and committees read them. Is the audience the dean (in which case the writer would be protecting his field against the dean)? Or is the audience the colleagues in the field (in which case the writer would be protecting the field against incompetence)? The two roles are mixed, which is one reason for the lack of candor. A dean would do better to write or call confidentially a trusted friend with some knowledge of the matter.

Some universities give the candidate the letters (with signatures removed, but not attitudes and points of style identifiable to a skilled reader). A university may be forced to hand them over in a legal case anyway, and making them available to the candidate can be a protection against the poison pen. Unhappily, these factors weigh also against the candid pen.

- Control over the use of outside letters within the university is commonly loose to the point of irresponsibility, another discouragement to candor. That the letters are collected at the level least interested in them—by the department—is one problem. Fraud at various levels

is encouraged by the inconsequentiality of the letters. For instance, an unscrupulous administrator can dispose of undesirable ones.

- The procedures in requesting the letters betray the lack of seriousness. The procedures recently have become slovenly. In the worst case, and the most common one, the materials are deposited on the doorstep of a referee late in the fall with a demand to prepare a report in a fortnight: "University statutes require that we seek outside letters," as though the referee were an employee of the university in question. The solicitations will usually acknowledge that the task is burdensome, offering the "sincere" gratitude of the university. It is rare to be offered university funds, or press books, or even the coin of serious consideration: The honest workman is worthy of his hire, but not in recommendation.

The ideal procedure would be to ask a referee politely whether he or she will do it, offering a payment commensurate with the effort entailed, following up with explanations of the precise uses to which the letters will be put (including the names of committee members who will see them), and ending after the decision with a letter announcing the decision and explaining why the advice of the referee was not followed, all in good time.

- In a large department, with five people up for promotion in a year and with five letters required per person (and considering the low rate of response to requests in fields overburdened with them), the telephone calls and letters and replies run into the hundreds. Many days of administrative time are spent producing documents containing no surprises and therefore

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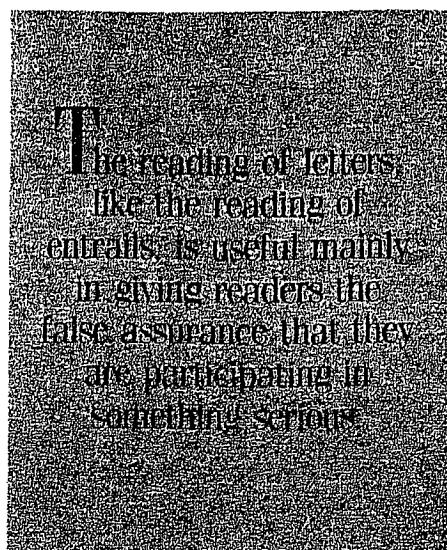
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no information. In fields like history, where the writing of letters to please deans has just begun, the courtesies of the ideal procedure are often followed, at a heavy expense to the chairs and secretaries involved. In fields like economics, where the writing of letters is a long-standing custom and the attitude towards them correspondingly cynical, peremptory requests to a dozen recommenders have become typical.

- If the college or the central administration, as distinct from the department, wishes, for its own reasons, to have letters of recommendation, they should solicit them and pay for them. Economically speaking, an unpaid referee is overused. As it is, the department is put in the position of demanding unpaid and useless service from scholars in the field, presumably more often distinguished scholars than not. The responsibility for managing the flow of paper and the taking of the responsibility in the eyes of the referee should not fall on a department. It has an interest not in the letters, but in preserving its relations with distinguished scholars.

- Standards of letter writing vary radically from field to field. In many of the sciences the obtaining of grants provides a continuous check on scientific reputation. Letters, therefore, are pointless. The candid cruelties evoked by grant proposals do the job. In mathematics the rankings are clear, down to the fifteenth-best scholar in a tiny subfield. Therefore in mathematics the letters might capture useful information in the form of an ordinal number. Yet the other biases are just as powerful there as elsewhere. In most fields of the humanities such rankings would be bizarre, and the letters are therefore either tortured or casual and, in any case, useless.

No one in fields in which letter writing has become common takes it seriously. The faculty have seen the varied standards for letters, and they have come to discount their testimony. For instance, according to other mathematical economists, a mathematical economist is seldom less than God's gift to economics; according to economic historians, on the other hand,



an economic historian has many faults.

- There is no reason to suppose that anyone is competent to read and compare letters from different fields. Different fields have different stylistic conventions. It would be easier to compare the work directly, as difficult (and necessary) as that is.

The reading of letters, like the reading of entrails, is useful mainly in giving readers the false assurance that they are participating in something serious. It is not in fact serious. But that does not attenuate its emotional effect. The emotional effect, however, is not worth the considerable cost in time and in procedural seriousness. A small and obviously biased sample of opinion in a field the reader does not understand, written by a referee with no reason to be candid, will produce an assurance of good judgment without its substance.

- Universities should make their own decisions about tenure and promotions, using gingerly the information that the outside world contains. Since little or no information is conveyed by letters, the effect is to invite a stranger with no natural interest in the department to have a partial vote on tenure. A department that cannot decide without such advice is not taking the job seriously: it is not reading and discussing the candidate's work with care.

A department that cannot itself come to a decision about promotion without letters from the outside is ad-

mitting a more serious problem than lack of information. It is admitting that it is not a coherent intellectual unit. Preserving excellence by mutual scrutiny is the justification for having departments in the first place. If specialists elsewhere are to be given heavy weight in the decision, there is no point in continuing to have departments.

- Letters that are serious attempts to assess the work of a scholar, to act as a check on favor and party and mediocrity, are expensive to prepare. If they are for some reason thought necessary in a special case, they should be paid for, as onerous impositions on senior scholars. A 5-inch stack of material cannot be seriously evaluated by an expert in the field in less than the time she would devote, say, to examining a major book manuscript for a publisher. The time runs to days. We should not impose on the goodwill of colleagues at other universities to do our work at such a level.

Letters that are not serious attempts to assess the work of a scholar are not worth having. They will be little more than prejudice and gossip, which it is the purpose of academic life and serious peer review to overcome.

- The frivolous and the serious letters cannot easily be distinguished. There is no reason to believe that a dean or chair or committee member can do so. That people think they can is no evidence. Some writers of letters will reflect hard and well for ten days about a case and write half a page. Others will write four pages in half an hour on the basis of reputation around the bar at the professional meeting.

The authority of the letter depends crucially on the character of the author, which cannot be established without great familiarity with the field. The letters are usually readable by some members of the department involved but, in any case (for the reasons given), the department is not usually the source of demand for the letters. The comforting indices do not work. It is not true that professors at World Renowned U are reliably better judges of other scholarship than professors at Regular U.

• Bureaucratic uniformity across departments is not a desirable end or means. Neatness is not a persuasive argument for placing apples in the orange bin. If some departments wish to use such fragile evidence, they will need to face up to the case against it. The departments that do not wish to use it should be allowed to offer evidence in which they have more confidence and that suits their fields better.

Solicited but free letters drive out other sorts of evidence, as bad money drives out good. The problem is that letters are a system. If a department is to avoid damage from its competition, it must go along with the system, even though it knows the system is silly. Each department collects a half-dozen vacuous testimonials for each case. The result is a draw: no department has distinguished its own, much paper has been generated at considerable cost, and no one is the wiser.

• The purpose of deans is to make decisions, and nothing is gained by reducing the decisions to spuriously uniform procedures when it is admitted that the standards in such matters cannot be made uniform merely by requiring the production of the same sorts of paper. That is the fallacy of form filling. Mathematicians think differently from English professors, and no similarity in the forms they fill out should be allowed to obscure the fact.

A good dean does not need the protection of outside letters to identify and discipline weak departments. And a bad dean cannot impose discipline anyway. A dean who thinks he or she needs to rely on letters should resign and let someone who knows how to make decisions take over.

If outside opinion is needed to overcome some scandalous inadequacy in the department's case, then the outsider should be brought in for a serious, paid consultancy. A decision to choose a colleague for life warrants no less care. The outsider's recommendation will in this way rise above gossip.

• A university that wishes to improve itself will eschew letters. Letters are chronically behindtimes, leaving Normal State U at the rank that gossip

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places it. "He's good enough for Normal." By contrast, job offers and book reviews and the reports of referees paid by publishers or persuaded by editors to be critical are believable. They do say candidly whether the candidate's work is good enough for the University of Texas, or the *Physical Review*, or the Princeton University Press.

A self-respecting department or a self-respecting university has higher standards than those of most writers of such letters. A university that wishes to set a higher standard for itself can help set it by using stringent outside standards; letters are not stringent outside standards.

• A serious letter deserves payment, and the cost should fall on the unit that wants the letter. The writer should receive the payment. This is economics: the opinion of the letter writer is the scarce resource; unless it is paid it will be misused. It is not a question of moral right but of efficiency.

But a better alternative, efficient and morally right, is to abandon the letters entirely and move to a system of a few careful outside consultations in the rare cases in which the other outside evidence does not suffice.

The better system would work because one coin of payment is taking the advice solicited seriously. In the present system the solicitations rarely mention how many letters are being requested in total. Usually the figure is embarrassing to the pretense that the

consultation is serious: the gathering of six or ten letters is not a serious consultation; it is a public opinion poll with bad statistical properties.

• The solicitation of opinion by letter assumes that serious opinion is *mere* opinion, and therefore undiscussible, like one's opinion about chocolate ice cream. The letter writer is not invited into a discussion, in which his opinions might mature. The procedure rejects the model of good academic life: that truth is arrived at by conversation in which opinions change.

The letters participate in the modern notion that ignorance of context makes for "objectivity." It is counted a virtue that the referees begin with little knowledge of the candidate or his or her work.

• That earlier generations of scholars were the "beneficiaries" of letters of recommendation does not mean the system should continue. That is the Boot Camp or the Medical Education argument: I went through it; therefore, so should you. The system has become worse in recent years. More letters are being demanded. Some generation needs to stop it.

That higher levels of administration demand the letters gives a good excuse to the lower levels, though one would hope that the lower levels would protest vigorously the imposition of irrational procedures. In that case, however, the higher levels should be made to answer the case against letters.

That everyone indulges in the practice is not relevant. There is no gain in prestige from Normal State U's begging leave of professors at other universities to promote its own. There is no gain in goodwill from harassing well-known scholars and scientists to write letters that all recognize will have no influence.

That some universities use careful procedures of internal review *is* relevant because it results in demonstrably better promotions. Letter writing does not. If Ouija boards became fashionable for deciding promotion cases, one would hope that reasonable people would resist the practice. The letter of recommendation is the Ouija board of modern academic life. □