



# Symposium on Educational Excellence 2023

## Writing & evaluating letters of recommendation for PEER applicants (Persons Excluded based on Ethnicity or Race)

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### Active Learning Connection

As well as using an open ended Q and A method of gleaning where attendees are in their Participants will engage in think-pair-share type exercises for reflection on values and motivations, as well as small group discussions in analyzing samples of letter of recommendations and brainstorming strategies for eliminating bias while writing and evaluating references.

### Abstract

Letters of recommendations (LORs) are an integral part of the academic system, being required at virtually every stage of academic training. As academia was founded and evolved as an exclusionary system, letters of recommendations served as a tool to perpetuate systemic inequities. Even as efforts to close accessibility and retention gaps for minoritized individuals have increased, conscious and unconscious biases continue to seep into letters of recommendations, to the detriment of candidates. While gender bias in LORs has been the subject of several studies and interventions (Dutt et al, 2018; Madera et al, 2019), race and ethnicity as factors have received relatively little consideration (Akos et al, 2016; Houser and Lemmons 2018).

In this workshop, we address LORs for persons excluded based on ethnicity or race (PEER). We start by considering the practice of LOR use, reviewing the research on how they differ from LORs written for non-PEER applicants, and continue with focusing on strategies for writing and evaluating LORs for PEER applicants. Participants will be able to reflect on their own values and motivations when writing and evaluating LORs and how they may manifest in the letter content. Moreover, participants will have the opportunity to practice identifying occurrences of coded language or bias in LORs and brainstorm strategies of how they may evaluate such letters without penalizing PEER candidates. Finally, participants will reflect upon their own frameworks for writing LORs and identify strategies and best practices for minimizing unconscious biases that may come through during the writing process. By engaging the workshop attendees with active learning techniques, we hope to build a culture where individuals engage in the reference writing and evaluation process with intentionality and keeping in mind the systems of oppression at play for PEER applicants.

## Learning Objectives

1. Articulate the goals of letters of recommendations in academia, including their own motivations and goals when writing and evaluating LORs
2. Articulate their own values and biases at play when writing and evaluating LORs
3. Develop a strategy for reducing bias and coded language when writing LORs for PEER applicants
4. Identify biased language in LORs and employ strategies for counteracting the biases

## References

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