



ECHOES BY
ASRAR CHOWDHURY

A Professor Writes About Letters of Recommendation

I
A letter of recommendation, or LOR, is an important component in the application process for studies abroad.

First, it will be one of the last documents an admission committee will screen. If the committee is happy, you may get admission and *then* qualify for financial aid. Second, the LOR is probably the only component in the application process over which you do not have much control.

Let us play a strategic game. The main protagonist is your professor. Since what your professor writes is what the committee will see, it is important to know what to keep in mind.

II
Your professor will be a person under whose tutelage you have done at least one course. (S)he can also be a guide under whom you have done guided research. The professor should be able to reflect on your academic credentials, and go a step forward by writing how well they have observed you — academically, personally and emotionally. Academic grades alone do not reflect the potential of a candidate. This is why a good LOR is important.

Therefore, find a professor with whom you have been close, and who would be willing to “invest” time in writing an LOR for you.

Your professor will send the LOR directly to the university, from their official email. You are not supposed to see it. It is ethically advisable to avoid a professor who asks you to send them a draft. If a committee can spot this, it might affect your admission.



Finally, you want your professor to write a “favourable” LOR, one that’s consistent with your academic results. You do not want a generic letter. Committees usually tend to be good at spotting these two types of LORs.

III
If you are working somewhere, and your professor connects your experience at university with your development in life, that would be a brownie. That will give the

LOR a personal touch.

Outside academic credentials, a good LOR includes two components. First: extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that determine your ability to work in groups and your leadership quality. Second: if you have the emotional strength to handle pressures of studies abroad, especially in the absence of your family.

IV
When one of your professors agrees to write an LOR, give them time. Also give them enough relevant information. It helps if you do not ask one professor to write LORs to many universities. Remember, they are human.

If your chosen professor has written many LORs, see how many of the candidates got enrolled into a program, and where. Universities sometimes have pools where the emails of the professor are stored. Committees can access this information if the competition becomes too high.

V
If all goes well with your strategic planning and luck, then do thank your professor for two reasons if you get admitted into your desired program. First: you may need another LOR later. Second: the professor could find out from social media you are celebrating your achievement, but forgot in your excitement to thank.

Asrar Chowdhury teaches Economics in classrooms. Outside, he watches Test cricket, plays the flute and listens to music and radio podcasts. Email: asrarul@juniv.edu or asrarul@gmail.com

Financial Aid: Winning the Battle but Losing the War

ASIF MUZTABA HASSAN

I have a bone to pick with the person who said financial aid is the Holy Grail of studying abroad. It is an inextricable part of our overseas plan. Money should never be taken for granted. But in the maxim of deciding the right school, we must stop to consider the bigger prerequisites.

“What do I want to study?”

This question has two purposes. First, the answer helps you figure out what knowledge (if any) will give you a new direction, and purpose.

Here’s a better framing: You will be asking whether you’ll enjoy wasting your years staring at a long list of readings, compromising sleep, energy, and social life, to inevitably feel an acute sense of accomplishment when you stare down at a notarised piece of paper with your name on it.

Second, and more importantly, the answer will help you understand where you want to go. I wanted to study warfare and strategy (odd for a Bangladeshi with 68,879 BBA graduate friends). If I only ran behind financial aid, I would’ve needlessly studied for GRE to hopelessly look at North American universities that offered courses on strategy, most of them rather new programs, whilst all the good schools in Europe only required an IELTS.

Someone told me that I better pursue a John Hopkins digital marketing program that was just a year old. They believed the heaps of available scholarships,

and the popular name was much more important than some “Asian” university. Needless to say, that’s a mistake. For the work you will have to put in, you must honour your desires first.

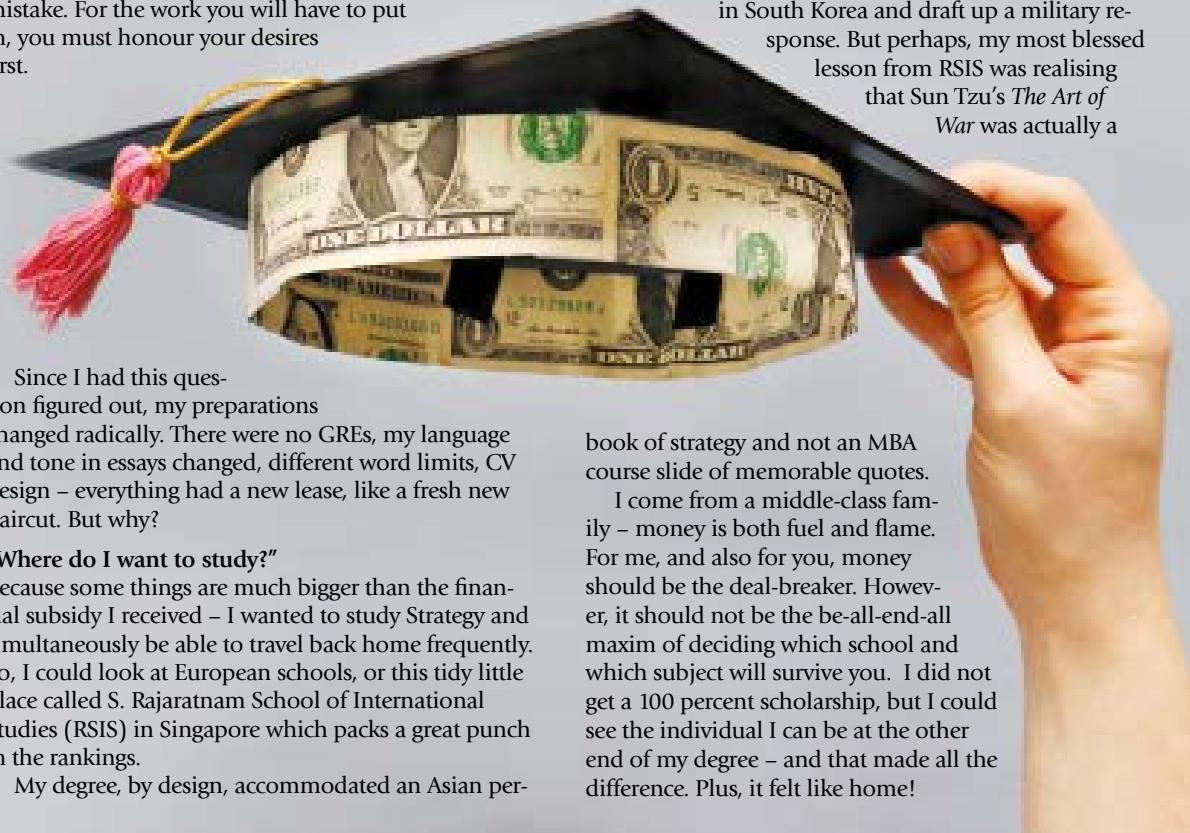
Since I had this question figured out, my preparations changed radically. There were no GREs, my language and tone in essays changed, different word limits, CV design – everything had a new lease, like a fresh new haircut. But why?

“Where do I want to study?”

Because some things are much bigger than the financial subsidy I received – I wanted to study Strategy and simultaneously be able to travel back home frequently. So, I could look at European schools, or this tidy little place called S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore which packs a great punch in the rankings.

My degree, by design, accommodated an Asian per-

spective to war and strategy. My Defense Policy class, for instance, had us envision the Blue House Raid in South Korea and draft up a military response. But perhaps, my most blessed lesson from RSIS was realising that Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* was actually a



book of strategy and not an MBA course slide of memorable quotes.

I come from a middle-class family – money is both fuel and flame. For me, and also for you, money should be the deal-breaker. However, it should not be the be-all-end-all maxim of deciding which school and which subject will survive you. I did not get a 100 percent scholarship, but I could see the individual I can be at the other end of my degree – and that made all the difference. Plus, it felt like home!