It is time to reevaluate the importance of recommendation letters in the admissions process

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Universities abroad typically evaluate five main components of an undergraduate application: transcripts, test scores, personal essays, extracurricular activities, and letters of recommendation. Each of these elements is designed to provide admissions committees with a holistic view of the applicant's abilities, achievements, and potential. However, while transcripts and test scores primarily reflect academic capability, and essays or extracurriculars highlight personal qualities and interests, recommendation letters often serve a unique purpose.

Recommendation letters are not merely about the applicant's abilities or accomplishments, they shed light on the context in which these achievements were earned and the impressions they leave on mentors or educators. This raises an important question: should a university application, regardless of a stellar GPA or an impressive resume, depend significantly on the strength of one's recommendation letters, especially when these letters may be influenced by factors outside the applicant's control?

Interestingly, this is the one component of the application process that has less to do with how capable the student is directly and more to do with the recommender's perspective, network, and reputation. This nuance adds complexity to the weight assigned to recommendation letters in admissions decisions.

Jon Boeckenstedt, DePaul University's associate vice president for enrollment management and marketing, authored an essay published in The Washington Post in which he says, "[…] the letter has virtually nothing to do with the student's performance, and a lot to do with the teacher's ability to turn a phrase, note interesting character traits, structure a cogent series of paragraphs … In short, it's as much about the teacher as the student

… It can also be about how much time a teacher has to complete the task, and the extent to which they see it as a function of their duties."

The ability to craft compelling letters of recommendation (LORs) often depends on the training and resources accessible to a teacher which are shaped by their institution's standing in terms of academics, reputation, and funding and the frequency with which such letters are requested.

As Boeckenstedt puts it, "Who is, on average, going to write the better, more complete, and more nuanced letter? A teacher from a small college prep school where it's widely understood that giving students every advantage in the college admissions process is a part of the job? Or someone in a large, public, under-resourced school where the range of abilities in each class is wider, and the number of students to get to know greater, and the teaching load is probably higher?"

Teachers at prestigious institutions or those with well-developed support systems are likely better equipped to write detailed and effective recommendations. On the other hand, some students, particularly those from underfunded schools or less privileged backgrounds, face challenges in this regard. In many cases, applicants are left to navigate the complexities of securing strong LORs on their own. Some teachers may lack the expertise and familiarity with the admissions process to craft a persuasive letter, resulting in a situation where the student has to write the letter themselves, with the teacher simply signing it.

While letters of recommendation are generally considered less significant than top factors such as grades in preparatory courses, overall grades, curriculum strength, and standardised test scores, they are still ranked higher in importance than factors like class rank, extracurricular activities, and work experience by many universities. This paradox

underscores the critical but often unequal role LORs play in shaping admissions outcomes. Students with access to experienced recommenders who can articulate their strengths clearly and convincingly are at a significant advantage, further highlighting the disparities tied to demographic and institutional factors.

The university application processes promise a meritocratic procedure which ostensibly aims to replace hereditary privilege with a system where wealth and status are earned solely through talent and ambition. This ideal envisions a society united by the principles of hard work, skill, and deserved reward, where equal opportunities are accessible to all.

However, the reality of admissions processes reveals the cracks in this promise. Factors like the quality of recommendation letters, heavily influenced by a recommender's network, institutional reputation, and access to resources, disproportionately favour those already advantaged by their socioeconomic or geographic circumstances.

As universities aim to promote fairness in admissions, it is imperative to reevaluate how recommendation letters are used and interpreted. Without addressing the systemic biases tied to these letters, the ideal of meritocracy remains unfulfilled, reinforcing inequality under the guise of opportunity. By acknowledging and mitigating these biases, institutions can take meaningful steps toward creating a truly equitable admissions process that values potential and perseverance as much as it does prestige and privilege.

Reference:
The Washington Post (March 3, 2016). *Letters of recommendation: An unfair part of college admissions*

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