

Writing a letter in support of an NSF GRFP applicant: For faculty

DEADLINE: 5pm Pacific Time, November 27, 2012

Please read all the information below carefully before you begin, and please call or email Lori Greene (legreene@uci.edu), Assistant Director of Research Development for the Physical Sciences, if you run into any problems or need assistance with content. The NSF requires your letter be ON LETTERHEAD and TWO PAGES MAXIMUM. Your letter should include your name and title, department, and institution or organization.

- 1) Faculty will first receive an email from the NSF indicating that an applicant has selected them to write a reference. Second, after you receive that email, you will need to follow the instructions therein to REGISTER for a special NSF ID in order to submit a letter on behalf of a student applicant. You must do so before the deadline of **5pm Pacific Time, November 27**. (But you can't do it until the student submits their application). Even if you already have an NSF ID and Fastlane password, you still need to complete this step, as the NSF GRFP uses a different registration system. If you did it last year for another GRFP applicant, you will need to register again. Go here: <https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov/grfp/Login.do>, click on Submit Reference Letter, and follow the instructions, with reference to the email you should have received from the NSF -- if you think you are writing for a specific student and did not receive an email asking you to submit a reference, call the student immediately and call the NSF GRFP program at 1-866-673-GRFP (4737) (office hours: Monday-Friday, 8:30 am - 5:30 pm EST) or email: info@nsfgrfp.org. An exact e-mail address match to what the applicant enters into the FastLane GRFP Application Module is crucial.
- 2) **The content of your letter:** The NSF GRFP is looking to support a promising individual, not just a research project. So, discussing the student's past experiences, present plans and potential for contributions to science and broader impacts for society is important. Specifics help more than generalities. Short, perfunctory letters are not helpful and you should take advantage of the two pages. Please provide details explaining the nature of your relationship to the applicant, comments on the applicant's potential for contributing to a globally-engaged United States science and engineering workforce, statements about the applicant's academic potential and prior research experiences, statements about the applicant's proposed research, and any other information to enable review panels to evaluate Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts. It is also helpful to provide specific information on mentoring available, and special programs in your department and the School (e.g., grant-writing workshops, the School's Science Scholar Pathways (SSP) program for grad students, other research infrastructure and mentoring that will assist in preparing your student for a research career).

Fully half of the scoring is for Broader Impacts. The NSF asks that reference writers address broader impacts in the letter of reference. This includes the student's prior work (community service, etc.), future plans, individual experiences, leadership potential, etc. There are two categories of broader impacts and the student must demonstrate both: stuff they did in the past; and stuff they are proposing to do now, as part of their training. The student needs to construct a narrative: "I did this as an undergrad, now here's what I am going to do as a grad student and beyond..." Tutoring is a good example, diversity and outreach experience (however defined); clubs; leadership roles in clubs; and the student must discuss what they did in that position rather than just mentioning/listing it. If students are having a hard time coming up with future broader impacts, suggest

programs that are ongoing in your lab/department or have them contact Lori Greene (legreene@uci.edu) for some ideas. Former panelists state that the primary reason applicants fail to rise to the top is lack of attention to Broader Impacts. Of course, do not neglect Intellectual Merit. The applicant should provide you with a CV and their essays that cover both Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts. If they have not, please ask them for these documents.

Mentoring/Departmental Support. Mention any relevant research infrastructure in proposals/letters of reference. Discuss mentoring plans -- if your department has a regular mentoring framework, or workshops or methods trainings, student-directed or run activities; etc., mention them as part of a mentoring plan. Mention UCI-wide "responsible conduct of research" trainings, Graduate Division (GRC), teaching training, and other institutional commitment to graduate students.

Additional letter-writing tips are available on the NSF website --

https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov/NSFHelp/flashhelp/fastlane/FastLane_Help/grfp_faqs_reference_writers.htm

This document was originally created by Prof. Bill Maurer, Associate Dean, School of Social Sciences