

Obtaining Faculty Letters of Recommendation for Graduate Programs

As a member of the faculty who teaches in the undergraduate public health program, students frequently ask me to write them letters of recommendation. Here are the things I suggest to them and require of them for me to write strong letters on their behalf.

Timeline:

Writing a strong recommendation letter takes time and is work that faculty do above and beyond their usual responsibilities. It is easier for faculty to write such letters when they have time. You should aim to give faculty 4-6 weeks' notice before the deadline for your first letter. With that said, sometimes this is not possible. In such cases, you can still approach faculty to request a letter, but we recommend acknowledging, and apologizing for, the short turnaround time.

Members of admissions committees to graduate programs in public health look for following things from applicants:

- Academic achievement. This may be a high GPA or good GRE scores but may also include evidence of progress over the course of study. If you had a rough semester or two that does not necessarily keep you from being accepted to a graduate program. Admissions committee members want assurance that you can handle graduate-level work and have the discipline to complete the program with less direct guidance than you may have had in your undergraduate studies. A rising GPA especially as you advance through your studies can show this.
- Intellectual curiosity and initiative. Evidence of this might include study abroad, courses outside your major, internships, independent study courses, research projects, e.g., presenting a project at RaCAS or obtaining UROP grant, or work with a faculty member on one of their projects. It may also include volunteer or paid work that relates to your course of study either directly, for example, if you are applying for an MPH, working with a mental health agency or health policy group, or if you are applying for an MBA, working with a healthcare agency on finance or marketing. For any graduate program you can discuss the skills you have gained through work managing people or processes.
- Fit for the program. In your applications essays you show how this graduate program advances your personal and career goals and how you will contribute to the program. What skills and knowledge do you want to obtain, and which do you want to build on, deepen, and extend?
- Leadership, responsibility, and integrity. Leadership comes in many forms; not everyone can be a recognized leader in an official position. You can show leadership by active participation in classroom and other activities, in your family and community, by example of dedication to a cause or goal. Faculty in graduate programs, especially in public health, also look for applicants who can work well on teams. Even if team-based work is not your preference, if you can show you can do this effectively, it is a strength.

Faculty members can write a strong letter of recommendation if they can speak to each of these criteria about you with detailed examples. To do this, here is what we need from you.

Here is the information and materials I ask students to send me:

First, if you have not done this already, get to know the faculty member you are asking to write a letter. It is hard to write a detailed letter if all they have is a name, a major, and a transcript. Schedule a meeting with the faculty member by phone, Zoom, or in person to remind them who you are, what program you are applying to and why it's a good fit for you. We meet hundreds of students every year and if we haven't seen you in a semester or two we may need a jog to our memory.

1. When the letter(s) is due and what program(s) you are applying to. Most public health programs, including the MPH program at the Colorado School of Public Health (CSPH), use a common application through SOPHAS (Schools of Public Health Application System). If you are applying to more than one program and not all use SOPHAS for submitting letters, provide the faculty member with a table that lists the university you are applying to, the name of the program and degree, the link to the program's online description, when the letter is due, and how the faculty member should submit it. Here is an example.

Due Date	Name of Institution	Degree and Name of Program with a link to the program's online description	How to Submit Letter of Recommendation
January 15, 2020	Colorado School of Public Health	MPH in epidemiology	SOPHAS link
December 1, 2020	University of Colorado Denver, School of Public Affairs	Masters of Public Administration	Program sends a link for electronic submission

2. How long the faculty member has known you: month and year you first met is all we need. This is always required in letters and believe it or not, faculty members may remember you, but not when they first met you! And it takes time for them to look up your transcript, which is time better spent writing their letter.
3. What courses you have taken with the faculty member?
4. Which area in the public health program you are applying to, e.g., environmental health, health policy, epidemiology, global health, maternal child, social and behavioral health. If you are applying to a different graduate program, what specific program you are applying to. For example, if you are applying to an MBA program are you concentrating on healthcare management or finance?
5. A copy of your resume or CV.
6. Your student ID number for classes so the faculty member can access your transcript. Or you can provide an electronic copy of your unofficial transcript.
7. A draft of your admission essay(s) stating why you want to attend this program. This can be a draft. We are not looking for perfect grammar or spelling but for content. The more specific we can be in our letters about how the program will benefit you, how it fits with your goals, and how you will contribute to the program, the stronger our letters will be.

This may seem like a lot of work, but keep in mind that members of admissions committees rely on your essays and recommendation letters to get a sense of who you are. They are very important to a successful application.

Questions?

If you have further questions, please contact PBHLAdvisors@ucdenver.edu or connect with the faculty member you are interested in asking for a letter of recommendation from.