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How to Write a *Good and Honest* Letter of Recommendation

Katie Berlacher, MD MS, FACC

University of Pittsburgh Medical Center

@kberlacher

NEW
ORLEANS
MARCH 16 - 18
2019

“Fantasy Land” – R.Friedman, 1983

TONIGHT I traveled to a wondrous place, a fantasy land of sugarplums and fairy tales. Since some of you may never have the opportunity to visit this glorious place, let me tell you about it. It is a land where everyone "will make a fine physician," where people have "excellent interpersonal skills" and "good rapport with their peers." In this land about a tenth of the inhabitants are "among the finest I have ever worked with," a full quarter are "outstanding," and almost all are "in the upper quarter." Everyone is "a pleasure to work with," has "excellent initiative," is . . .



The NEW ENGLAND
JOURNAL of MEDICINE

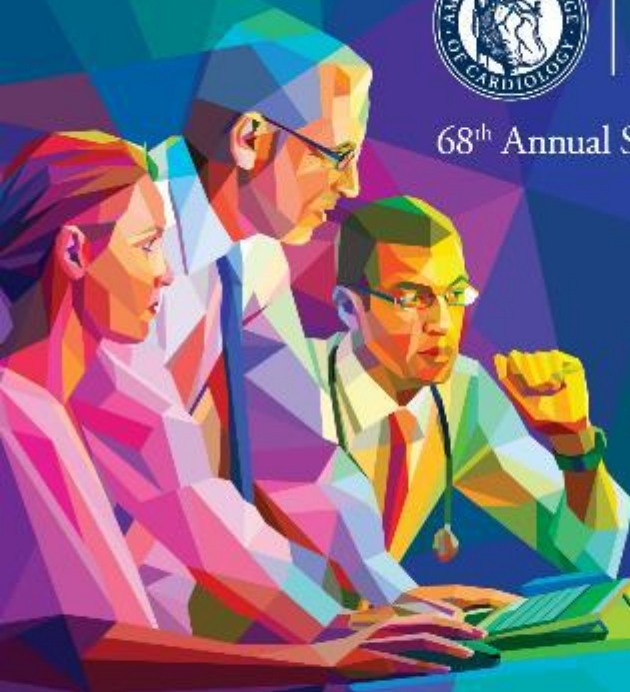


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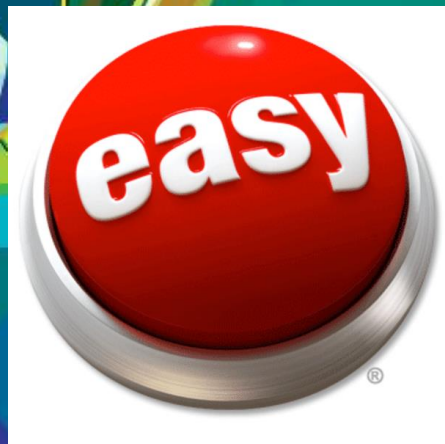


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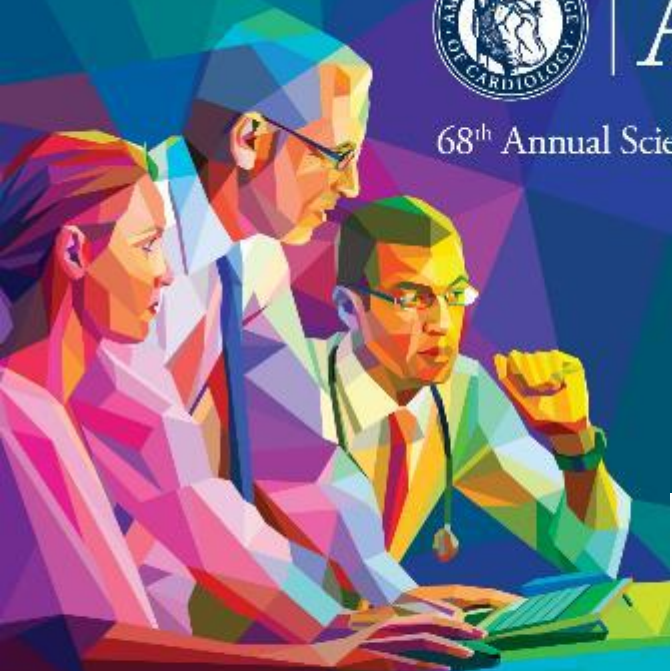
How to Write a *Good and Honest* Letter of Recommendation For Your BEST Fellow

Katie Berlacher, MD MS, FACC
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
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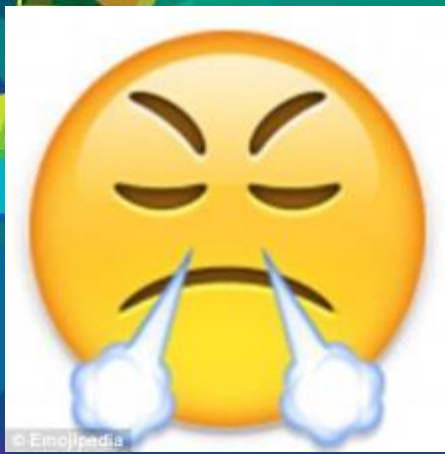
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How to Write a *Good and Honest* Letter of Recommendation For Your WORST Fellow



Katie Berlacher, MD MS, FACC
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
[@kberlacher](#)

Objective

- Name 3 things that are *perceived to be important* in LOR
- List 1 phrases that are often *interpreted negatively*

Disclaimer: I really don't like writing LORs.

Disclaimer: I only find ~20% of the LORs that I read to be helpful



During Recruitment Season...



University of Pittsburgh

School of Medicine
Department of Medicine

121B Scaife
3500 Tierce
Pittsburgh, PA
412-648-9900
Fax: 412-648-9900

April 18, 2018

RE: Agnes Koczo, MD

I am pleased to provide a recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD, a resident in cardiology at the University of Pittsburgh. Agnes has waived her right to privacy under the Virginia Commonwealth University's Freedom of Information Act and her BA from Wesleyan University.

Agnes received many nominations for the American Society of Cardiology and was unanimously selected as a well-deserved honor. We anticipate that she will continue to excel in her chief year and beyond in cardiology residency.

In our program, Agnes has received excellent evaluations consistently in cardiology.

Representative comments from faculty with her follow:



University of Pittsburgh

Stephen Y. Chan, M.D., Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Medicine
University of Pittsburgh
School of Medicine

Director, Center for
Pittsburgh Heart, Lung
Division of Cardiology
University of Pittsburgh

May 1, 2018

Applicant Name: Agnes Koczo, MD (General Cardiology)

Dear Cardiology Fellowship Committee Members:

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter of recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD, in your consideration as a general cardiology fellow in your program. Agnes is of the highest esteem both as a clinician and an advancing researcher. Agnes will become one of our top leaders in cardiovascular research and an upcoming generation of cardiologists.

To introduce myself, I am the Director of the Center for Cardiovascular Medicine and an Associate Professor of Medicine in the School of Medicine. My research in my laboratory (www.sychanlab.pitt.edu) focuses on the mechanisms by which various genetic and environmental factors influence the pathogenesis of cardiovascular disease.

UPMC Heart and Vascular
Institute

HVI - Cardiology

Prem Soman, MD, PhD
FRCP (UK), FACC
Associate Professor
of Medicine (Cardiology)

Associate Professor
of Clinical & Translational
Science
Director, Nuclear Cardiology
Director, Advanced Cardiac
Imaging Fellowship

UPMC Presbyterian
200 Lothrop Street
Suite A-429
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F 412-647-3873

somanp@upmc.edu

UPMC LIFE CHANGING MEDICINE

June 29, 2018

To,
The Selection Committee
Cardiology Fellowship Program

RE: Agnes Koczo

I am delighted to provide this letter of recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD, on your behalf. Agnes is a superb clinician who demonstrates exceptional leadership skills. In addition, her CV research, and her productivity at the University of Pittsburgh, in combination, she would be an asset to your program. As a past President of the American Society of Cardiology and a past Leadership Development Program leader, Agnes has held leadership positions in the ACC and the Society of Nuclear Medicine.

UPMC LIFE CHANGING MEDICINE

June 27, 2018

UPMC Heart and Vascular
Institute

HVI - Cardiology
at UPMC Presbyterian

Dennis M. McNamara, MD
Director

Center for Heart Failure
Research

Professor of Medicine
University of Pittsburgh
School of Medicine

Scaife Hall, Suite 566
200 Lothrop Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
T 412-648-6598
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Appointments: 412-647-6000
UPMC Referrals: 800-533-8762
monamaram@upmc.edu

Re: Recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD
ERAS letter ID number: 75V86WSSDD

Fellowship Selection Committee:

I would like to express my most enthusiastic recommendation for Agnes Koczo, MD. I have had an opportunity to work with Agnes on rotations both on our CCU team and on the heart failure team. Agnes performed extremely well in both the clinical and research settings. She is a superb candidate for cardiology fellowship.

Dr. Koczo is a very skilled clinician who demonstrates exceptional leadership skills and heart failure patients. She has strong clinical judgment and is relevant literature. As her attending, Agnes kept me challenged with treatment decisions she felt were not supported by the literature. She does so in a very collegial manner which demonstrates her ability to also to educate. She has a very personable manner and is a pleasure to work with her patients. Given her strong clinical skills and research background, it is a surprise that she was chosen as a chief resident for cardiology.

Given her interest in Women's health and cardiovascular research, I am pleased to recommend her for a research program addressing the cardiovascular consequences of pregnancy. Agnes and I completed an important analysis of the relationship between immunity and myocardial recovery in peripartum cardiomyopathy. This work was presented at the AHA with Dr. Koczo as the first author. The manuscript of the manuscript which will be submitted in July. Agnes is a very approach to research as she does in her clinical work. Agnes has made several presentations on the general topic of peripartum cardiomyopathy to her fellow house staff. Her presentations are always well received for medical education.

Overall Dr. Koczo is a superb clinician who has grown into a superb clinician or clinician educator. She has become an asset to our program. I am confident to convince her to stay in Pittsburgh for her fellowship. I am pleased to recommend for cardiology fellowship, as she will be a great asset to your program.

Sincerely,

leadership positions in the ACC and the Society of Nuclear Medicine

Standardized LOR for Residency PDs

SLOR have a specific:

- **Length:** Two pages
- **Content:**
 - Program Description
 - Competency Achievement with examples
 - Scholarly Work
 - Characteristics and skills beyond residency requirements
 - Performance related extensions, probation
 - Overall assessment of candidate's suitability

Narrative vs. Standardized LOR

	NLOR	SLOR
Variation in terminology	Significant	Less
Variation in length	Significant	Less
Inter-rater reliability	Low	High
Interpretation	Can be difficult	Easier
ACGME competencies	Variable	Always mentioned
Meaningful comparison of applicants	Can be difficult	Easier
Institution/program characteristics	Variable	Always mentioned

UPMC Heart and Vascular Institute

February 26, 2019

Kathryn L. Berlacher, MD, MS, FACC
Assistant Professor of Medicine

To Whom It May

Program Director
Cardiovascular Fellowship Program

I write this letter

Director
Magee Women's Heart Program

E355.7 Presbyterian Hospital
South Tower
200 Lothrop Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Office: 412-647-3429
Fax: 412-647-0481
berlacherk@upmc.edu

UPMC Heart and Vascular Institute

Kathryn L. Berlacher, MD, MS, FACC
Assistant Professor of Medicine

Program Director
Cardiovascular Fellowship Program

Coordinator
Subspecialty Education - I/OI

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200 Lothrop Street
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berlacherk@upmc.edu



Committee

Lampert, DO

I write this letter in support of Dr. Brent Lampert's
award of the American College of Cardiology. I have known
Dr. Lampert's general cardiovascular fellowship at the University of
Pittsburgh which he completed in 2012. He remained here for a
year in the Division of Cardiology, Failure and Transplantation, during which he also attained
a PhD in Medical Research. He has since joined faculty at The Ohio

Fellowship program in July of 2014 and has been a standout since. She has
a wealth of medical knowledge and is diligent in her work duties. She has outstanding
communication skills and has received rave reviews from patients and the staff for
her empathy and support. She has a keen interest in understanding the social and
potential solutions for health care disparities in cardiovascular medicine. She has
completed an MBA degree during medical school to help her understand and
approach these issues in the future. She has successfully matriculated to the
Pathway, guaranteeing her protected time to further her investigative skills
research in this area. She is the inaugural student on the cardiology T32 track,
guaranteeing at least 75% protected time for research. She is already involved in
projects looking at patient perceived barriers to advanced therapies in her



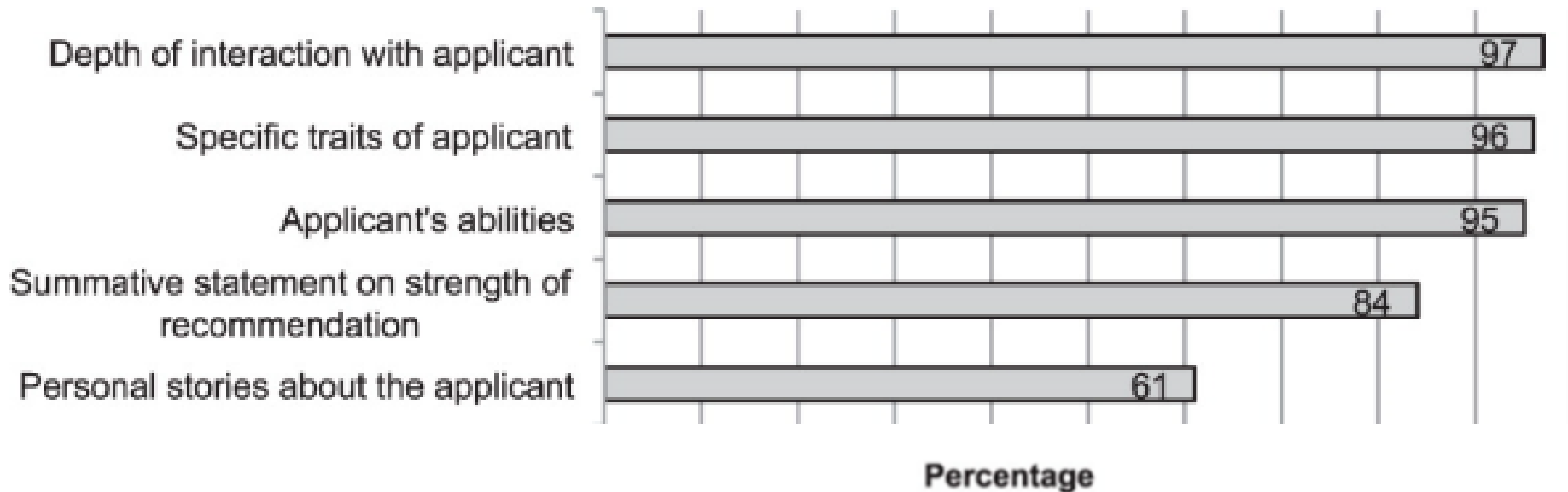
Dear Program Director: Deciphering Letters of Recommendation

Kris Saudek, MD
David Saudek, MD
Robert Treat, PhD

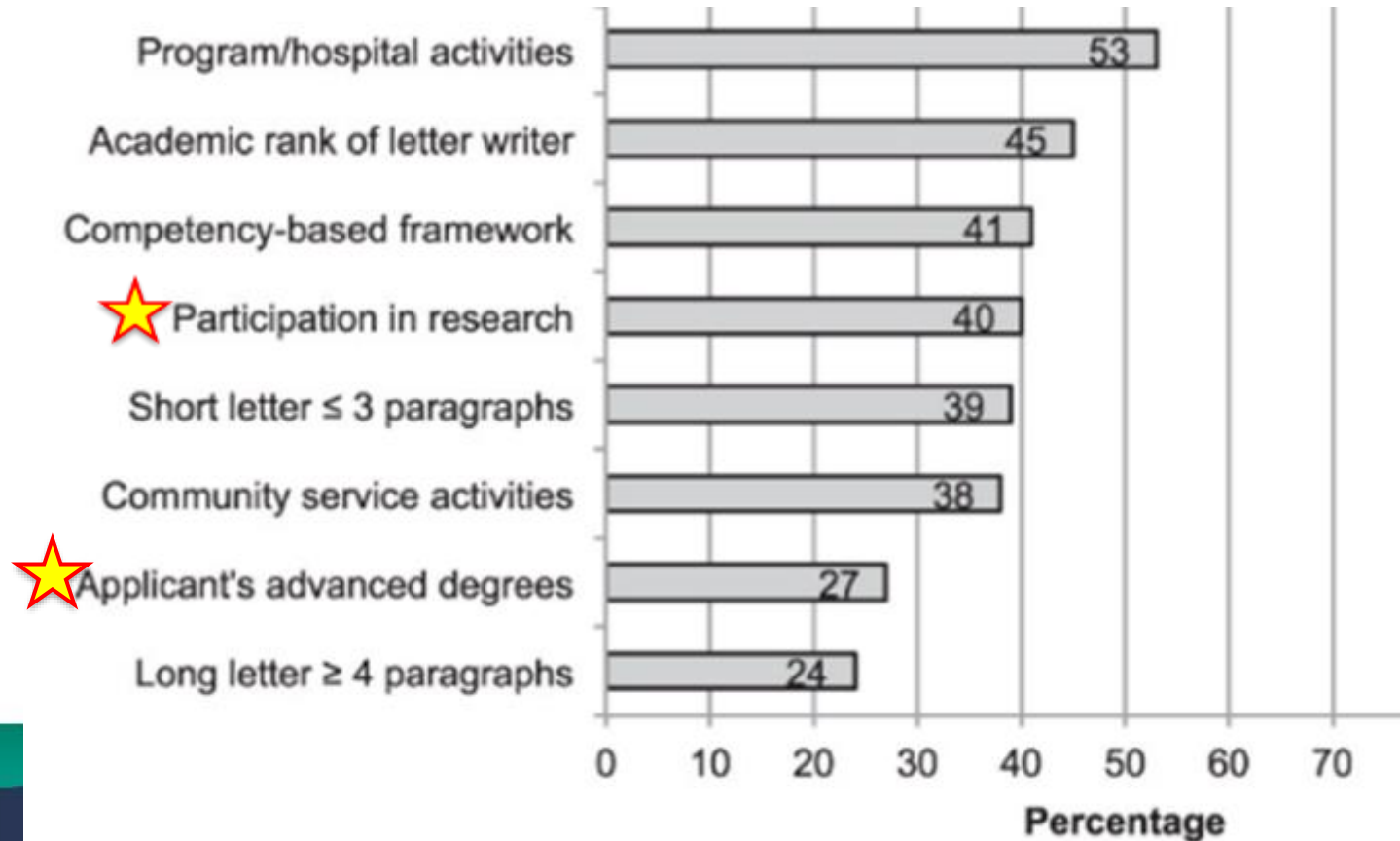
Peter Bartz, MD
Rachel Weigert, MD
Michael Weisgerber, MD, MS

- Survey of 1079 pediatric fellowship and residency PD/APDs; 43% response rate; published June 2018
- Three topics:
 - Importance of LOR features
 - Importance of applicant abilities
 - Perceptions of commonly used phrases

Letter Features – more important



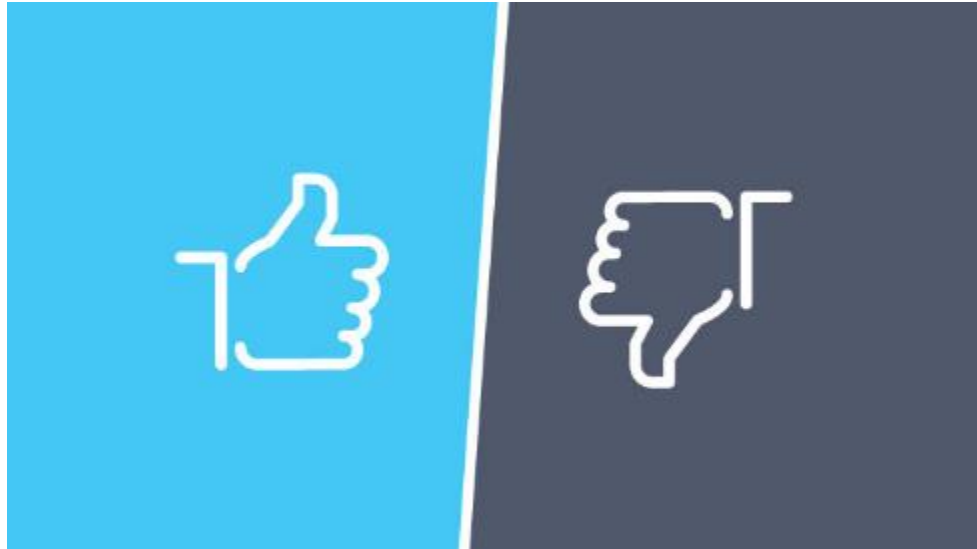
Letter Features – less important



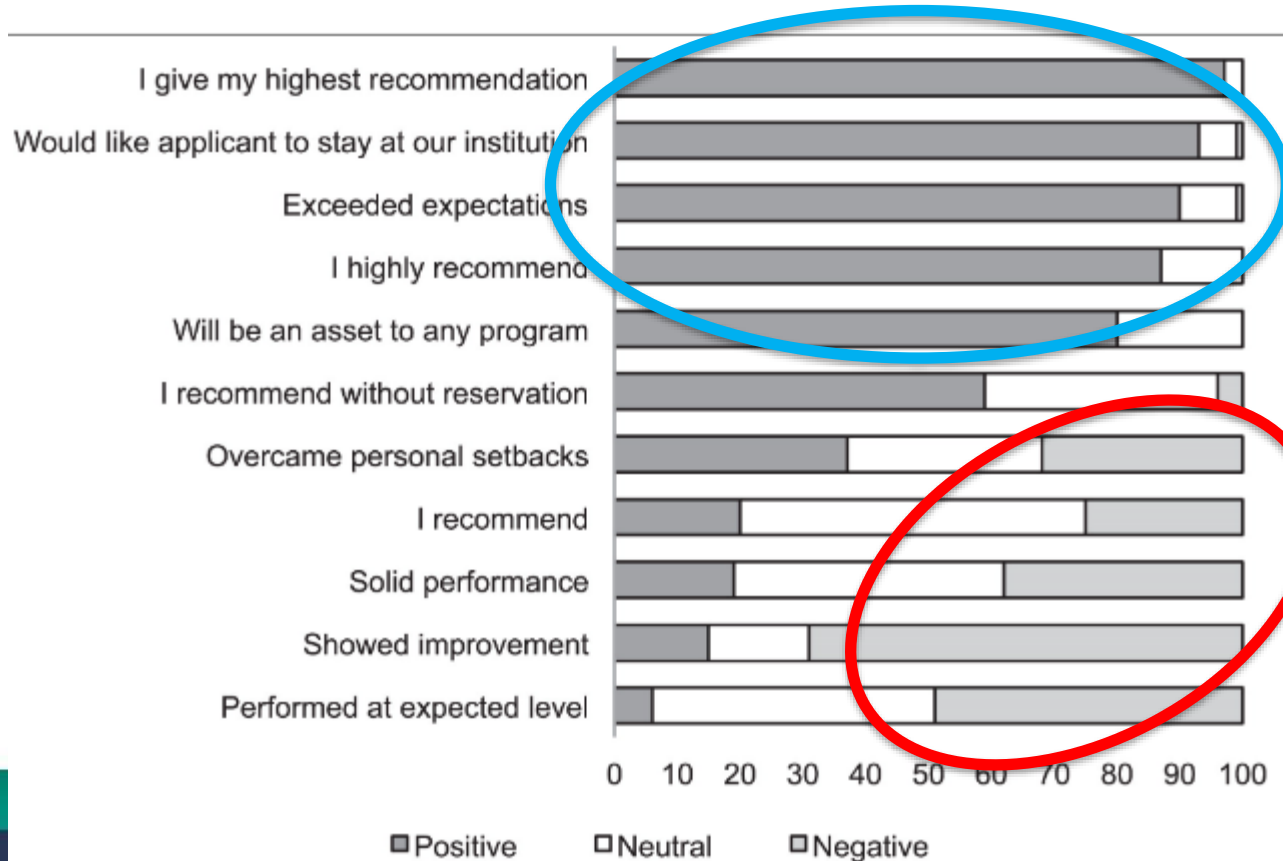
Mixed emotions on these...

- Indicating **tier** of applicant
- Commenting on **clinical reasoning abilities**
- Commenting on **communication skills**
- LOR **writer's experience** with learners
- **Rebutability** of LOR writer

Thoughts?



Perception of Phrases



How to Write a Good LOR

- Be timely and grammatically correct
- Include your interaction with applicant
- Provide examples
- Make a summary statement



How to Write an Honest LOR

- Put yourself in reader's shoes – what would you want to know?
- Be factual, not emotional
- Be specific
- Include a statement about your desire to discuss applicant over a call
- Use the negatively perceived phrases (?)



Be honest about yourself...



- Implicit bias can sneak into LORs
- Most reported is gender bias
- Likely other bias creeps in
- Check your language!!
 - Research vs Teaching
 - Accomplishment vs Compassionate
 - Use of **Doubt Raisers** – ‘it appears that...’ ‘while she has not done...’

Final Tips:

- **Most important things to include in LOR:**
 - Depth of interaction
 - Character traits and abilities
 - Summative recommendation statement
 - Personal story
- **Negatively perceived statements:**
 - ‘solid performance’ ‘showed improvement’ ‘performed adequately’
- **Honesty is best:**
 - State facts. Be specific. Offer to talk.
 - Check your biases and your language

