Writing a Letter of Recommendation for a Student Fulbright Research Grant

Thank you for agreeing to write a letter of recommendation for a Fulbright applicant. You will receive an automated message from Fulbright using their “Embark” system with instructions on how to upload your letter online when the applicant enters your contact information. No hardcopies are needed.

Overview: One year of study or research in any one of 140 countries. Applicants design their own projects, in any discipline, typically to work with advisors or attend courses at foreign institutions.

Timeline: Applicants wishing to study or conduct research abroad in 2017-18 are encouraged to submit a priority application, including reference letters, online by July 1. Over the summer, Illinois faculty will review submissions and provide feedback to candidates and recommenders. Then, a revised Fulbright application, including any updated references, must be submitted online by September 1, 2016, when our campus officially rates all applications before submitting them to the national competition. The official campus rating committee also may ask you to clarify or correct any errors in your reference. In that case, you will be provided direction on how to retrieve and resubmit your final letter prior to October 6, 2016 when the application will be sent out first for national review, and hopefully then to an in-country panel.

Guidance: Fulbright committees rate candidates on an array of specific criteria. Below is a list of related content suggestions for your letter of recommendation. These tips are based on the University of Illinois experience as one of the nation’s leading producers of student Fulbright grants.

1. Discuss the quality and feasibility of the student’s project. Does the student have the academic or professional skills necessary to complete the project in one year?
2. Will the candidate and the project help to advance the Fulbright aim of promoting mutual understanding through engagement in the host community, among other activities? Does the student demonstrate interest in the potential host country?
3. Discuss the student’s academic or professional record. What are your impressions of the student’s ability to work independently?
4. If applicable, please assess the student’s proficiency in the appropriate foreign language.
5. Address the student’s personal qualifications. Is the student mature? Hardworking? Collegial? Please include information that shows that the student is capable of living in a foreign country and able to work productively with a diverse range of people. The Fulbright is not only an educational exchange program; it is a cultural exchange program.
6. What impression will the candidate make as a citizen representing the U.S.?
7. How does the Fulbright experience fit into the student’s overall academic and career goals?
8. Keep the focus on the applicant, rather than your credentials, class, or department, except as those factors provide important background and context for the letter.
9. Telling stories has more value than a litany of superlatives (“Chris is smart, hard-working, and personable”). Bring the student to life with specific examples that relate to Fulbright’s goals.