Writing the Counselor recommendation

Beth Pili
Horace Mann School
Carolyn Middleton
Berkeley Carroll School
“Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it, and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.”

-Joseph Pulitzer
What do you hope to learn from this session?
THE BASICS

FLOODLIGHT VS. SPOTLIGHT

GIVE CONTEXT

USE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

HIGHLIGHT REEL

TELL A COMPREHENSIVE STORY
Teacher letter Vs. Counselor letter

- **Narrow Focus: Classroom**
  - How the student enhances the learning process
  - How the student compares to others in the classroom
  - Impact/Leadership in the classroom
  - Special project or activity
  - How would the class be different w/o the student?

- **Broad Focus: Over several years in school and community context**
  - Academic strengths and challenges, including blips and anomalies
  - Relative rigor of program
  - Personal strengths and challenges
  - Depth of Passions or interests
  - Leadership and/or Character
  - Obstacles or risks taken
Gathering resources

Are there creative ways you gather your information about Students?
How has the reading landscape changed the purpose/function/role of the Counselor rec?
“Traditional” narrative

What’s your Approach?

Introduction
Academic strengths
Academic Growth
Extracurriculars
Conclusion
Bullet point format
Bullets and the New reality

Admissions Realities:

• Time spent/file = 6-15 minutes
• Online reading - more restricted (briefer) note taking
• 50 - 70 files/day
• Growing # of apps - burnout
• Many admissions staff are young and not used to reading expansive narratives
• Less time to cover more ground

College Counselor Realities:

• 2 hours of prep and writing time
• At times wrestling with the prose/flow/transition, especially for weaker students
• Format allows for different writing strategy--work on multiple letters at a time b/c not worried about prose/transition/flow
What do (Don’t) colleges want to read?
**Do’s and don’ts?**

**Do**
- Connect the dots
- Provide evidence to support your argument
- Be both honest and supportive
- Draw conclusions
- Tell a story: a word picture
- Explain extenuating circumstances (with permission)
- Be brief if possible

**Don’t**
- Repeat your school profile
- Rewrite the resume and transcript in prose
- Overquote teachers, parents, the student
- Assume the colleges will get what’s obvious to you
- Use the boilerplate approach
- Worry too much about general checkboxes
How would you describe your kids: from the one note Johnny to the most Dynamic Daria?
Questions and best practice?