

Group on Student Affairs (GSA) COMMITTEE ON ADMISSIONS (COA)

January 31, 2012

BULLETIN

Maintaining the Confidentiality of Letters of Evaluation

Background: Letters of evaluation (often recommendations) are an important part of each medical school application. Admissions officers and staff, admissions committee members, and pre-medical advisors have a mutual responsibility in keeping the information conveyed in letters confidential, unless explicitly indicated otherwise by the letter's writer. A confidential letter signals to the reader the letter's writer expectation that his/her comments will be shared only with the audience for whom they are intended and not shared with the applicant or anyone else for whom the information is not intended.

Rationale: To ensure that all information in an applicant's file remains confidential, admissions officers need to remind their staff, interviewers and admissions committee members about the need to maintain confidentiality throughout the application process. The release of confidential information in an evaluation letter to an applicant, no matter how inadvertent, can negatively impact the applicant's relationship with both the letter writer and the medical school to which he/she is applying and undermine the candor with which letter writers are likely to convey information in the future. Hence, the COA makes the following recommendations:

1. Admissions officers are urged to annually remind their staff, interviewers and admissions committee members about the importance of confidentiality at the start of each application cycle.
2. Anyone (a pre-medical advisor, letter writer, or applicant) who believes that confidentiality has been breached should concurrently report the incident to the medical school's admissions officer and Geoffrey H. Young, Ph.D. Senior Director, Student Affairs and Student Programs, AAMC at gyoung@aamc.org. Reports should include:
 - Name of the applicant
 - Date of the incident
 - Name and/or position of the source of the breach and circumstance (e.g. Dr. Smith during the morning interview, etc.).

Process: This issue was initially raised during COA's November 4, 2011 meeting at which the NAAHP Representative expressed concern about breaches that had been communicated to him. COA discussed the issue at its January 17, 2012 meeting and agreed that a reminder regarding the importance of maintaining confidentiality and the process by which incidents should be reported was warranted.

Status: This project is complete.

Project Leadership:

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Geoffrey H. Young, Ph.D., AMMC Senior Director, Student Affairs and Student Programs
Review/Approving Entity(s): COA

Contact: For additional information or answers to questions pertaining to this issue, please contact: Steven T. Case, Ph.D., COA chair, at stcase@umc.edu.