Recognizing your Excellence: How to Obtain Letters of Recommendation by Kika Friend

The importance of letters of recommendation in the graduate application process cannot be overemphasized. Although promoting yourself may not come easily, self-confidence is a crucial part of obtaining letters of recommendation and applying to graduate school. During my years as Program Director at University of California, Irvine, I have found that students are very reticent to talk about themselves. I am continually amazed at students who, while writing their Personal Statement, condense four years of research experience into a single sentence: “I conducted research with Professor X.” Rarely is there any mention of the knowledge gained, the honing of skills, the personal development, and subsequent growth cultivated during their time in a laboratory. This reticence also translates to asking faculty and key administrators for the all-important letters of recommendation. The key—don’t be shy! Be proud of your accomplishments! Recognize your own excellence by insuring you get good quality letters of recommendation.

First Steps—Take the time to research the different institutions and departments you will be applying to. Don’t forget that both the school and the individual department will evaluate you as a candidate.
- Apply and apply on time! Don’t let the application process deter you from your goal.
- Ask for few waivers. If you have been a TRIO/McNair or MBRS/MARC Scholar in your institution, chances are you qualify for few waivers at most institutions.
- Take the time to cultivate relationships with the faculty you will be asking to write letters of recommendation for you. Introduce yourself to your professor. Become an active class participant! Show up for office hours. Make it easy for faculty to identify you as an interested student.

Important guidelines—Don’t wait until the last minute! Request that your letter of recommendation be completed two weeks before it is due. This way, if your recom-
mendee forget to write your letter, you still have a grace period.
- Be honest and forthright. Ask your recom-
mendee if they can write a strong let-
ter of recommendation. Have them honestly assess your strengths: positive qualities, readiness for graduate school, character, ability to critically analyze problems, and communication skills.
- Provide your recommender with all pertinent information: name, e-mail, phone number and best hours to contact you.
- If you conducted independent research, provide your recommender with a copy of your abstract that lists: title, faculty you conducted research with, duration of research experience, conference names and locations of where you presented the research, and any accolades received (First Place Poster, Best Oral, etc.).
- If you are applying to graduate or medical school programs, include a final Statement of Purpose and a copy of your resume, list-
ing activities or membership in organizations, on and/or off-campus.
- Include a copy of your transcript. If you are a transfer student, list pertinent com-
munity college experiences, scholarships received or offices held while at the commu-
nity college.
- Include a stamped envelope addressed to the program you are applying to.
- Don’t forget that most graduate schools prefer that students waive their right to see their letters. They actually give more weight to confidential letters of recommendation.
- For those applying to multiple schools, provide a chart listing what schools and program you are applying to, complete address, contact person, external deadline and indicate whether the letter needs to be mailed or you will pick it up from the facul-
ty or administrator.

Finally, take the time to send a written Thank You card. No, an e-mail card will not suffice!
- Once you have accepted, let your recommender know where you have decided to attend school.
- Remember, you have worked hard to get to this point; your goal is in sight! Good luck!

Ms. Kika Friend and Dr. Juan Francisco Lara, Assistant Vice Chancellor at University of California, Irvine, meet up at the 2002 SACNAS National Conference.

The Practice of Balance by Candita Woodis-Rucker

I am from the Haab’tshini (mud people) clan, born for the Naasht’eží Diné (Navajo). I believe being in tune with the Diné practice of balance has given me an edge on dealing with the complexities of my life. As a full time stu-
dent of Environmental Science and Tribal Law at Phoenix College, wife, and mother of a three-year-old daughter, and wife, it is very stressful to manage all of my respon-
sibilities. My life requires a lot of balance-

ing of domestic responsibilities, homework, and study time. Diné philoso-

phists state that if there is no balance in one’s life they become spiritually, emotion-
ally, mentally, socially, and physically unat-
able. This sense of stability I seek is similar to the way a nutritionist would speak about a healthy diet and exercise. If a person does not eat properly or exercise s/he will not have vitality and general good health.

I keep harmony in my life by practicing Keh, also known as Hozho (live in beau-
ty). The meaning of Hozho in Diné philos-
ophy is holism, peace, interconnectedness, and harmony: To achieve balance I have learned to organize my life according to these four cardinal areas of Navajo knowl-
edge. Understanding and practicing these essential principles immunes us from many of the adversities of life and gives us a strong foundation to make wise deci-
sions for families, communities, and our-
selves.

Although there are times that I have felt like “throwing in the towel,” I have utilized the traditional teachings of Hozho to maintain a sense of wholeness in my busy life by combining Diné philosophy with the concept of the western world’s time management skills. It is certainly difficult some days, but not impossible and I have learned a number of tactics. For example, I go to the library a lot to help separate home from school because being at home can provide endless distrac-
tion. When I do study at home, often times my daughter would like me to read her a story. One idea I had was to read her the book I am studying by saying, “let’s read mommie’s book!” I read in a voice full of excitement and explanation and while my daughter has a great time, I get to do my required reading. Providing space for family is a

The goal of Navajo philosophy of Hozho is to develop a basis from which we will be able to think seriously and responsibly about our lives.

Providing space for family is a crucial part of creating a harmonious life. In order to maintain quality time with my family and maintain my GPA of 3.5-4.0, I have learned to never procrastinate. I do my homework right after class and I start my research projects at the beginning of the semester. I also know that to be present with my family I have to nurture myself as an individual, and so I take the time to exercise every-
day which helps me to relieve stress and provides me with much needed quiet time.

The goal of Navajo philosophy of Hozho is to develop a basis from which we will be able to think seriously and responsibly about our lives. By maintaining balance and harmony in my own life by prioritiz-
ing family, school, and personal well being, I am hoping to lay a foundation by which I will learn the tools to continually seek wis-
dom throughout my entire life. Though my studies, I hope to deepen my appreciation and respect for the intelligence that has been passed down from the ancient people, so that I may in turn pass the Diné philos-

ophy of Hozho on to my children.

Ms. Elvira Garcia has transferred from Allan Hancock Community College to University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Ms. Jesus Garcia-Martinez was promoted to Associate Professor with tenure of Physiolog-
us and Biophysics at the University of Illinois, Chicago.
- Mr. Mario Godoy-Gonzalez received a $10,000 Toyota TAPSTRY grant to teach “Ethnobotany Across Curriculum” to ELL/migrant students in Royal City, Washington.
- Ms. Angelita Gutierrez entered the Ph. D. pro-
gram in the biology department at the University of Texas, Houston.
- Ms. Rachel Howard began her first year in the Ph. D. program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at University of California, San Diego.
- Ms. Adrian Jacobs won the AISES A.T. Anderson Memorial Scholarship for Fall 2002-
Spring 2003.
- Graduate students in mathematics at the University of Iowa, Mr. Alberto Marrero and Victor Vega were both recipients of Sloan awards from a grant from the Sloan Foundation made to the department to provide dissertation support for minority students. Mr. Marrero is now an exchange student in the lab of Dr. Iain Raeburn at the University of Newcastle, Australia.
- In the fall of 2002, the lab of Dr. Neo Martinez published two papers in Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences. Dr. Martinez is a visiting professor of nonlinear dynamics at the Center for Applied Mathematics at Cornell University for 2002-2003.
- Mr. Carl Pierce (Mohawk) received the EPA Tribal Lands Scholarship administered by AISES for the 2002-2003 academic year.
- In the fall of 2002, Ms. Racheal Howard began her first year in the Ph. D. program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at University of California, San Diego.
- Ms. Racheal Howard began her first year in the Ph. D. program at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at University of California, San Diego.