Tufts Career Center FAQ of the Week

Who (and how) should I ask for a reference if a job application needs one?

References are something you'll often need for internship or job applications, as well as graduate/professional school applications. *First, a few definitions:*

Job reference = the name/job title/phone number/email of someone who can speak to your skills and experiences in a particular capacity (usually provided in an online application)
Letter of recommendation = a typed letter sent by someone who can speak to your skills and experiences in a particular capacity (usually submitted -- either electronically or in physical form -- as part of a grad/professional school application)

As you think about WHO to ask for a reference, do the following:

- **Consider who knows you best AND can speak enthusiastically about your skills/competencies.** You may be tempted to pick a "big name" recommender, but if the person doesn't know you well and/or might give a lukewarm reference, that isn't very helpful.
- **Select people who know you in different ways.** Three people raving about your research skills is less effective than three individuals who can highlight three different skills like research, leadership and writing.

As you think about HOW to ask for a reference, do the following:

- **Get permission.** Don't list a person's name unless you've asked, "Would you be comfortable providing a reference for me?" If you're approaching someone who knows you well and can speak enthusiastically about your skills (see above!), most likely the answer will be yes, but you always want to ask first.
- **Ask well in advance.** Whether you're listing the person's name on an application or asking for a recommendation letter, you'll want to give plenty of notice (at least a month for a letter!).
- **Provide everything the recommender needs to give a strong reference.** Schedule time with your recommenders to give them a sense of the position(s) you are applying for and what you think they could emphasize, e.g., "Because you supervised my work in the lab, I'm hoping you'll be able to speak to my technical skills as well as the way that my writing has developed over time."

Finally, always follow up to thank references and keep them posted on the outcome of your efforts.

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