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## The Academic Pyramid Club

By JAMES M. LANG

### FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

As an undergraduate, I did not visit much with my professors outside of the classroom. As a result, getting those three necessary letters of recommendation proved to be my most difficult challenge when I decided to apply to graduate school. I couldn't see why any of my professors would be willing to write a letter for someone whom they hardly knew outside of my papers and my comments in class.

But I screwed up my courage nonetheless -- this was back in the days before e-mail, so I had to beg for this favor in person -- and requested letters from my three favorite professors. Of course they all said yes, and I was relieved and delighted.

What kind men, I thought, to do such a favor for me.

Little did I know that, as they closed their office doors behind me, they were rubbing their hands together and cackling maniacally, gleeful at the recruitment of yet another unsuspecting rube to the ultimate pyramid scheme: the getting and giving of academic letters of recommendation.

Pyramid schemes come in many forms, but the most basic pyramid scheme looks like this: A friend asks eight people, including me, to give him a dollar to join the Pyramid Club. In turn, I then recruit eight new members for the Pyramid Club, each of whom pays me a dollar. Those eight new members each then recruit eight new members, who pay their dollars to their recruiter, and so on.

Joining the Pyramid Club has cost me \$1, and earned me \$8 for doing nothing. In theory, the Pyramid Club will pay off for its members for as long as stupid and unsuspecting people like myself are walking around in the world looking for easy money -- in other words, forever.

Unhappily, the Academic Pyramid Club that I have joined seems to work in reverse. Our club's currency is letters of recommendation. For the three letters I received as an undergraduate, and the handful of others that I received when I went on the academic job

market, I have had to write many dozens more myself.

The current ratio seems to require me to write about six letters for every one written on my behalf. But I am only in my fourth year on the tenure track, and am hoping for a long and prosperous academic career, so I imagine that the ratio might one day top 100 letters for each one I have received.

It will rise by at least another point over the next month, since I have a stack of letters to write over this winter break for law- and graduate-school deadlines that are quickly approaching, all for undergraduates at my liberal-arts college. I plan on getting to them as soon as I am done revising my book manuscript, planning my courses for next semester, reorganizing my office, and scheduling some unnecessary dental work.

The letters I write these days are exclusively for undergraduates applying for teaching jobs or for admission to graduate schools. But during the three years I spent in an administrative post, I worked with graduate students to develop their teaching skills and wrote many letters for job seekers on the academic market.

I have also, of course, requested letters from both my former professors and my current colleagues, for my own time on the job market and for grant applications. And in serving on several search committees, I have read dozens of letters of recommendation for applicants we were considering.

This variety of experience has allowed me to formulate some principles about the getting and giving of letters of recommendation, especially for graduate students who are seeking letters for the academic job market.

So, for both the recruiters and the recruits of the Academic Pyramid Club, I offer a few guidelines that I wish those who request letters from me would follow:

- When you request a letter of recommendation, offer to provide a written statement of your goals and accomplishments. The recommender can use this material in his or her letter for you. A couple of years back, I badly needed a letter of recommendation from someone whom I knew was buried in a book project. I offered to provide a "template" for his letter, outlining what would be most useful to mention in each paragraph. He jumped on my offer, turned around the letter for me immediately, and I got the grant.
- To avoid having all of your letters say the same thing, tailor your written statements to each recommender. One faculty member might have observed your teaching; another might know you only from your dissertation. Suggest gently to them the areas on which they should concentrate their letter, and make sure you cover all of the areas that seem important for the jobs for which you are applying.

I can envision the remote possibility that someone might take offense at being told what to write in a reference letter, but of course they are free to ignore your suggestion -- and you wouldn't want anyone who would take offense at such a

helpful suggestion writing your letter anyway. I am *always* grateful when I am told what to emphasize in a letter.

- Help your recommenders stay on task. Give them plenty of advance notice -- at least a full month. Make sure that they have everything they need to write a letter for you, and that you identify the deadline clearly. When you make the initial request, explain that you will send them a reminder a week or two before the deadline. That way, your reminder notice won't seem like a rebuke for not having written the letter already.
- Show your gratitude. If you are poor, as most graduate students are, at least send a thank-you card. If you are very poor, send a thank-you e-mail. If you are a wealthy graduate student, whiling away your spare time on critical theory while your spouse buys and sells people like me every day ... well, someone like me doesn't like people like you, but I would probably enjoy a free dinner for two at a fancy seafood restaurant.
- When your turn comes, do unto others as you would have had them do for you. Unless you really have nothing positive to say, oblige those who request letters from you. Don't lie for people, of course. But most students will do at least one thing right, one time, in your classroom. They might write one eye-opening paper, or even just make a smart comment in class. Praise what you can. Be silent about what you can't.

If someone really doesn't deserve what they are applying for, the silences in the letters they receive should convey their lack of qualifications clearly enough. Most people can read between the lines when they receive three letters that can't emphasize enough how punctual the applicant is.

But, of course, the real reason you should always oblige such requests is that the Academic Pyramid Club -- like any pyramid scheme -- will gradually break down and dissipate if just one person decides not to participate. We are always recruiting new members.

And when break is coming to a close, and you still haven't finished all of those letters, and you can't think of anything to write that you haven't written a dozen times already in other letters, and you still have to write two letters that will require eloquent disquisitions on the students' extremely legible handwriting, console yourself with this thought:

If your letter helps that bright-eyed young undergraduate get into graduate school, or that world-weary graduate student catch the job of their dreams, a whole new generation of hopeful recruits to the Pyramid Club will ensure that, over a long and prosperous academic career, your students are repaid in full for their request.

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