OTHER THINGS EQUAL

THE INSANITY OF LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

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Every autumn brings The Letters. Thousands of deans, mostly sane, call for The Letters to be written, receive them in bulk, pass them from hand to hand, interpret them, and pronounce them Good or Bad. "She's got Good Letters," says a member of the dean's P & T committee, meaning the department chair has begged N professors at other colleges to make N inscriptions claiming the candidate is superbly, wonderfully, perfectly, incredibly qualified for her first job or tenure or a full professorship. "But have you seen the Bad one from Smith?" "Oh, that Smith's just a curmudgeon: look at the other Letters."

I say the practice is insane. Dr. Johnson remarked that "in lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath." Nor are the inscriptions of unpaid letters of recommendation—not in a world in which the chair solicits ten or twenty for each promotion, instead of me assiduous letter writing with the understanding that it is to have real weight. Scientifically speaking The Letters are meaningless, and should be disregarded. I have refused for a long time to examine any letter of recommendation (except for a student by his teacher, and that with less than enthusiasm). When The Letters are passed around at meetings of my departments I resist a natural impulse to participate in this meaningless gossip. So should you.

The only correct procedure for assessing scholarship in hiring or promotion is for the responsible body to read the candidate's work and discuss its intellectual quality with immediate colleagues, in a context of believably disinterested assessments from the outside, such as referee reports for publishers or book reviews in journals or cash offers to move to another college—or ad hoc recommendations by an outsider paid a considerable sum to set aside her interests and passions and alternative paid work to provide a genuinely disinterested letter. Colleges should make their own decisions about tenure and promotion, doing the homework required, and using gingerly the outsider world's information—actual information, not "information" valid only in a world of saints.

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The soliciting and writing and reading of unpaid letters of recommendation is a scandalous failure of common sense. It is corrupt, dishonest, unscientif. The deans who depend on it should be ashamed of themselves. Instead of doing their job, which is to make sure that the departments are doing their job (see the italicized sentence above), they are handing the job over to a phony criterion that would make any sensible child (Harry Potter, for example) laugh out loud. You call that magic?

"Oh, that McCloskey... she's just a curmudgeon; look at how many colleagues do it." Ah, well—that's certainly a powerful argument for academics to deploy. Yes, of course: if so many people do it, many every year, then of course it must be correct, like the eating of saturated fat and the buying of sports utility vehicles. You bet.

A dozen years ago I tried in a little piece in the magazine of higher education, Change (The Poverty of Letters: The Crushing Case Against Outside Letters for Promotion, Change, Sept/Oct 1988, 7-9), to draw attention to the scandal. There was no reaction from the thousands of deans who read the magazine. I really do accept that it's always the writer's fault when her point does not carry the day, so I was not indignant that my articulation of the truth didn't work. I then tried to get at least the dean at my (then) college of liberal arts to respond to the fully 13-crushing arguments I made against the practice. No dice. He wouldn't reply. Stonewall. He was determined to go on imposing the practice, of course, his sole argument being (I am making an inference from his pattern of silence) that outside letters raise standards.

This would be funny if it were not so damaging to standards. No one is willing to make arguments in favor of what has become so obviously a clerical job, a practice, because there aren't any arguments. Yet on and on and on it goes, getting worse every autumn, imposed by provosts on deans and by deans on chairs and by chairs on faculty. It gives everyone the impression of doing something. Therefore, no one is willing to impose real standards, the standard of making the future colleagues of the candidate deliberate seriously, having read the work, and then report on their deliberations. Bad procedure has driven out good.

Come to think of it, the substitution of phony standards for real ones is pretty common in academic life—witness statistical significance in the social sciences and in medicine; or pretentious jargon in literary studies; or grant-getting fashionmongering in the bench sciences—so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. In 1982 the poet and professor of Latin, A. E. Housman, wrote an essay called "The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism," in which he recommended replacing the little formulas of his trade ("the more sincere text is the better one") with... get this... actual thinking—a shocking proposal if adopted would revolutionize most fields of the intellect, and certainly academic administration. My dream is that if standards for hiring and promotion were to become serious the other lack of seriousness would themselves dissipate. But you know what a cokedeyed optimist I am.

"Come now," I hear a dean retort, "The Letters are merely one element in our beautifully crafted steps. True, none of the stops makes sure that the colleagues have actually read the materials. We don't have time for that. I certainly don't. I have numerous meetings with other deans to attend. The quick scanning of letters by people I do not know about people I am not acquainted with in fields I am ignorant of will have to do. I am, you know, brilliant at interpreting such letters. Surely, my good woman, you would admit that The Letters are worth something, that they are some sort of evidence?"

No, my dear Dean, they are not worth anything. They are not any sort of evidence. That, you see, is the problem.

The Letters have a hopeless selection bias. No responsible person, for example, writes a Letter if she dislikes the candidate. So The Letters are a sample with shockingly bad statistical properties.

The implied reader (Literary Jargon Alert) is not specified—is it the provost, the dean, the committee, the colleagues? Cut bone? Whose interest is being served here? So the writer writes strategically, if not confusingly; anyway not truthfully.

The Letters are routinely mishandled—they are in some states, for example, read by the candidate. And the chair can deep six letters he does not like (after all, they come to him). So the writer and some of the readers truncate the sample.

The writer therefore has no incentive to be truthful. If she disapproves of the candidate she will probably (in the University of California system, certainly) be sued.

The rare truthful letter is therefore a disaster. The field for subtle malice is open. That truth telling should be made so mischievous is an undermining of the moral basis of academic life.

The fiction is that other colleagues' professors are gentlemen (sic) of leisure who have scads of spare time each autumn to craft their single man-to-man letter this year. The rising N in recent years makes the fiction insulting. In some fields (economies, for example, and now imposed on all fields in a deadly passion for modernity) it has been commonplace for twenty years to seek ten letters for each promotion. More recently it's gotten worse. Figure out the math, and you will see why prominent scholars get an uneasy feeling round about October.

Yet the workperson is never deemed worthy of her hire. Beyond the "sincere gratitude" of the chair, no one is offered a cash stipend, or a book or two from the local university press, or the coin of serious consideration (everyone knows that nine other letters are being solicited), or even the courtesy (sometimes promised but rarely acted on) of telling the writer after the dust has cleared what happened and why. The gentlemanly fiction is that the job will be done out of a sense of duty. In the circumstances it is surprising that so many high-minded people in fact waste their time trying to do a serious job on a Letter that is misused or not used at all. High-minded people should not be exploited by a system already corrupted by low-minded, or merely thoughtless, people unwilling to defend their practice.

The rhetoric of letters varies radically from field to field. In historical economics, for example, the dual standard of excellence—in economics and in history, with two very different scholarly standards—makes even a favorable letter interpretable as bad: "Williams is an excellent archival scholar" can be read as saying that Williams is a bit of a doof in using economies. In history itself only long letters count, a waste of scholarly time. True, in mathematics The Letter can take the form of an ordinal number: Schwartz is the 16th best number theorist at a state university in California. Mathematiicians think this way. But in many fields (and in math itself, I bet) such sports-talk is pretty silly. It's not soft-minded to think that intellectual qualities are a vector (or indeed a matrix in interaction with outside conditions). It's true.
What is worse, the rhetoric varies radically from person to person. In economics it's well-known that a certain Nobel laureate claims in every recommendation he has written that the present recommendee is "the best student I have ever had," in a remarkable monotone increasing series since around 1950. (The story is a good one, and true. I should make clear, though, that I am not proposing that recommendations for students be abandoned—the students have no recourse, since they have not yet become active scientists and scholars whose work is available for public inspection yet it is obvious, alas, that many of the warnings about the invalidity of Letters do still apply.) Some people—I can name an eminent historical economist—are known well, the one I'm thinking of is known to some other people, in this case me) to be incompetent at such breathless rhetoric. Pity the candidate who chooses him as her letter writer. But the P & T committee staffed with professors of geology, French does not know this. And in truth though the No are large every year, they are not large enough to make the overstatements and understatements knowable even to most people in a particular field.

In such circumstances, no one can interpret any but the most damaging Letter ("Robert is an idiot: for Lord's sake, fire him"), least of all the collection of a chemist, a biologist, an English professor, and a professor of economics who make up the typical P & T committee. Forget about the provost being actually able to read the letters as truth, though she will think she can, with great if mised intensity, paying due attention to her mistaken notions of who is best qualified to write, and will imagine. That's nice. We are all glad to make provosts and deans and P & T committees feel good. But some day they should grow up and face the facts.

A serious Letter deserves serious payment. Your local economist can explain to you, oh Dean, why pricing scarce resources correctly will result in their rational use. A letter that costs $1,000 would not be solicited casually, would not be written without research, would not be handled without care. The Nobel committee, conducted in 1889 and 1960. This yields information on average monthly or daily wages and the weekly cost of board.

Chapter 2 reviews previous work on antebellum wages as well as the shortcomings of previous wage series. The remainder of Chapter 2 evaluates the representativeness of the new data and the comparability of the two new data sets.

Chapter 3 contains the quantitative foundation of this work. It presents an extended discussion of how the data were collected, collated, and analyzed. It also presents a detailed interregional and intersectoral wage series for the period 1820-1860. The latter series appears in a lengthy appendix.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal, respectively, with the intersectoral efficiency of the labor market and geographic aspects of labor market integration. These chapters conclude that, when adjusted for geographic differences in the cost of living, the real wages of agricultural and nonfarm workers appear to have been about the same in 1850 and 1860. Moreover, although real wages differed across regions in the 1860s, real wages converged in most regions by the 1860s. Chapter 6 deals with the impact of the California Gold Rush on local labor markets.