

SUPPORTING GRADUATE STUDENTS

with Recommendations for Competitive Awards
and Academic Jobs



Who We Are



Dr. Andrea Hilkovitz

External Funding Coordinator
The Graduate College

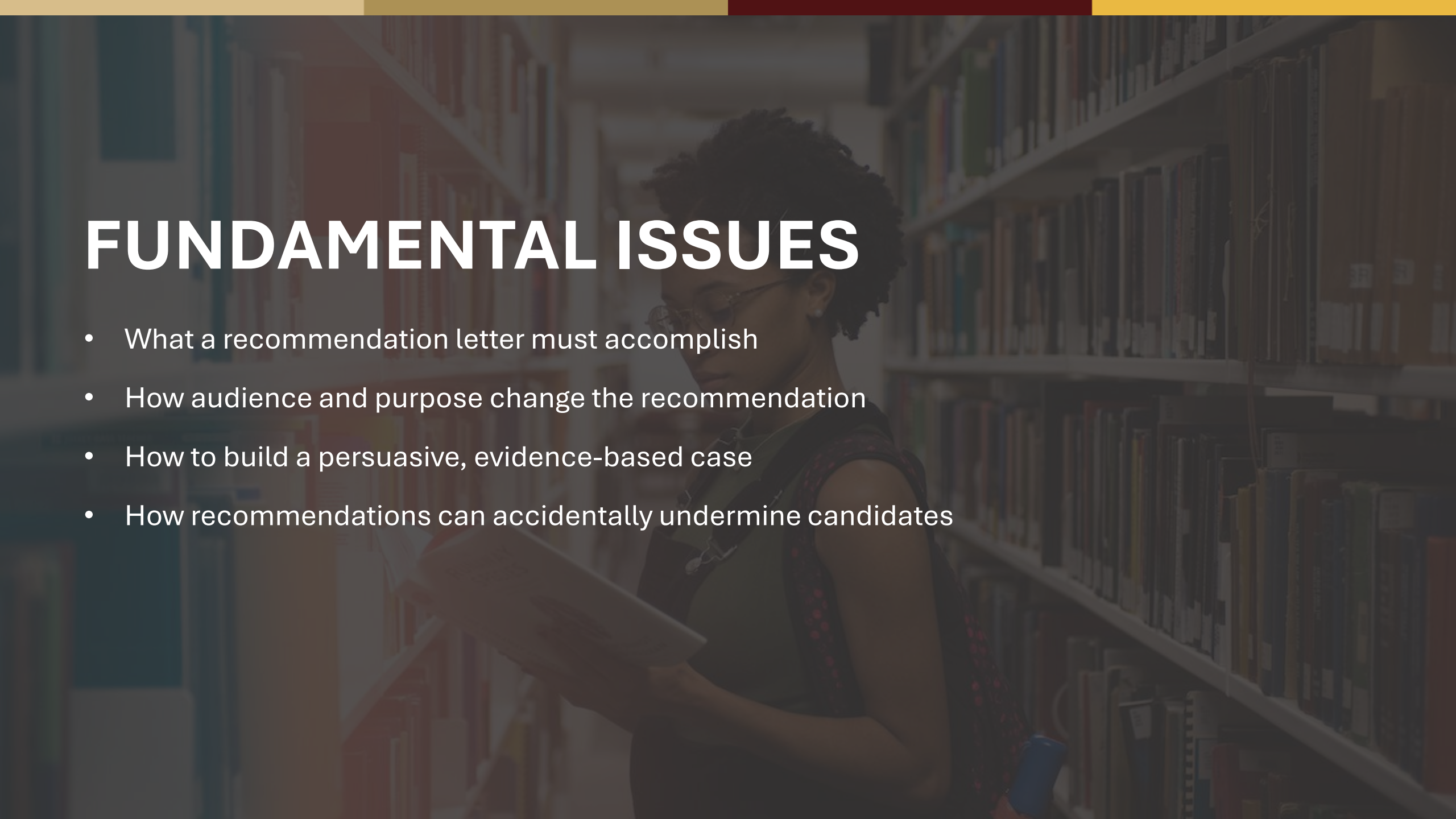


Dr. Brian Smith

External Funding Coordinator
The Graduate College

Role — to help graduate students

- learn about the external funding process
- identify potential sources of funding
- apply for scholarships, fellowships, and grants
- request and secure strong recommendations

A person with short, curly hair and glasses is reading a book in a library. They are wearing a dark vest over a patterned shirt. The background shows tall bookshelves filled with books, creating a sense of a quiet study environment. The image is dimmed to allow text to be overlaid.

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

- What a recommendation letter must accomplish
- How audience and purpose change the recommendation
- How to build a persuasive, evidence-based case
- How recommendations can accidentally undermine candidates

What does a recommendation do?

- **Defining Context:** A recommendation letter is not a testimonial; it is an argument written for a particular decision-making audience.
- Primary Functions:
 - **Validate** an applicant's credentials
 - **Interpret** how an applicant meets—or ideally exceeds—award/job criteria
 - **Evaluate and Contextualize** the applicant based on the author's professional perspective
- How is this accomplished?
 - Contributing information and judgment the committee cannot obtain simply by reading the candidate's own materials
 - Supplement; don't summarize

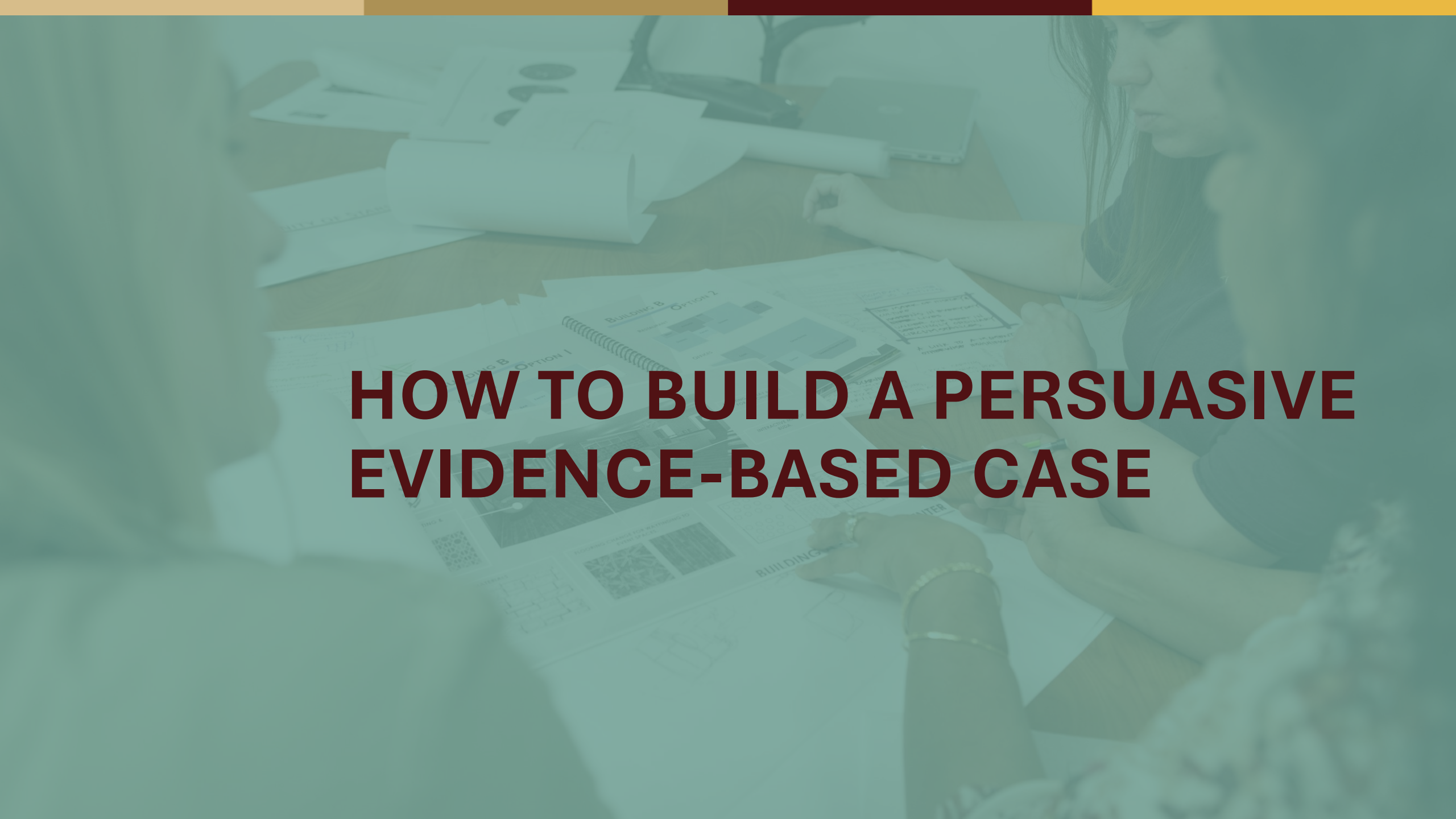
HOW AUDIENCE & PURPOSE CHANGE THE ARGUMENT



Considerations

- Who is making the decision?
- What are they being asked to evaluate?
- What evidence will be persuasive to this audience?

Competitive award	Academic job
Selection criteria / mission	Job ad / departmental need
Candidate + proposed activity	Research, teaching, service, institutional fit
Often <i>interdisciplinary</i> reviewers	Often <i>disciplinary</i> specialists
May require translation/context	May require disciplinary specificity
Potential, preparation, fit	Candidate as future colleague

A group of people are gathered around a large wooden table, looking at and pointing to various architectural blueprints and documents. The scene is dimly lit, with a soft light source from the left. The blueprints feature various diagrams, including floor plans, site plans, and sections. One blueprint prominently displays 'Building B Option 1' and 'Building B Option 2'. Another document shows a 'BUILDING' section. The people are dressed in business casual attire. The overall atmosphere is professional and collaborative.

HOW TO BUILD A PERSUASIVE EVIDENCE-BASED CASE

Get what you need from the candidate

- CV/résumé
- opportunity announcement/job ad
- selection criteria
- application essays/research statement/cover letter
- list of details to highlight
- deadline and submission instructions

Communicate expectations (e.g., minimum 3-4 weeks notice) in advising meetings, syllabi, and homepages



Recommendation as Argument

Components

- criteria
- claims
- evidence
- interpretation
- comparative judgment

Show; Don't (Just) Tell

- claims **tell**: “[student] is an unusually sophisticated researcher”
- evidence **shows** what have **you** observed
 - Independently determining appropriate and innovative research methodologies
- your interpretation **explains** why this evidence matters for this opportunity
 - This capacity for independent problem-solving is particularly important for [student's] proposed overseas fieldwork

Anatomy of a persuasive recommendation

- Opening
 - Relationship — how long you've known the applicant and in what capacity
 - Credibility to evaluate
 - Comparative judgment — explain the relevant comparison group(s)
 - Overall recommendation
- Body Paragraph(s)
 - Criteria/qualifications + evidence + interpretation/contextualization; use language from the sponsor
 - Competitive awards: one paragraph for each selection criterion; group criteria if needed
 - Job Applications: one paragraph each for teaching, research, service; address all job qualifications listed in the advertisement and anything that distinguishes the candidate
- Closing
 - Summative evaluation
 - Avoid “please feel free to contact me for additional information” (All info should be in the letter.)

Annotated Example Recommendation

It is my privilege to give my highest recommendation to [Student Full Name] for an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship. I am the Chief Technology Officer of [Company], which develops [X] technology for industrial applications. I hold a PhD in Chemistry, have over 15 issued patents to my name, and direct our research and development program. I have known [Student] since he joined [Company] in [MM/YYYY], and I have been his direct supervisor for more than six years, first when he was a bench chemist and, since January 2022, as Laboratory Manager of our primary R&D facility. Of the more than 100 chemists and engineers I have supervised over my career, [Student] ranks in the top 5%. What inspires me to support him is simple: he has already shown he can turn an observation at the bench into industrially relevant inventions and externally funded research, and he is asking the fundamental question beneath the technology we build.

Intellectual merit of the applicant. [Student]'s intellectual merit is demonstrated by a record of independent, productive research in both academia and industry. He completed two NSF REUs, graduated summa cum laude in Biochemistry, and co-authored two peer-reviewed papers, one built on a new method he designed to quantify [X]. At [Company] he was promoted to Laboratory Manager in under two years because he consistently did more than the procedure required: he questioned results that did not make sense, proposed better experiments, and improved designs written by our PhD scientists. Since 2022 he has been turning our senior scientists' research plans into executable work for up to nine chemists, which requires him to master the chemistry, equipment, and analytics of every project we run. Three accomplishments stand out. First, he built [Company's] partnership with the DOE Critical Materials Innovation Hub and, as Co-PI, secured a \$200,000 project on [x] carried out with scientists at Ames and Oak Ridge National Laboratories, something I have never seen from someone without a doctorate. Second, he is a co-inventor on a 2026 PCT application for [x] and a yet-to-be filed on [x] where [Student] has developed novel [x] methods producing an industrially relevant process for patent and sale. Third, he has been invited three years running to lecture to industry professionals at [x]. These accomplishments provide evidence of [Student's] ability to advance knowledge and understanding in the field of [x].

Establishes
credibility

Explains
relationship

Provides
comparative
assessment

Uses review
criteria to
structure
argument

Provides
evidence
instead of
arguing from
assertion

Contextualizes
evidence
relative to
opportunity



HOW RECOMMENDATIONS CAN ACCIDENTALLY UNDERMINE CANDIDATES

Inadvertently Introducing Doubt

Common Pitfalls

- unnecessary caveats (“Despite initially struggling...”)
- faint praise/understating accomplishments
- hedging (“With sufficient guidance...”)
- disproportionate attention to weaknesses
- introducing information the committee does not need
- having students draft their own letters

Be alert to the following:

- describing personality when competence is more relevant
- highlighting character vs. agentic behaviors
- emphasizing effort rather than accomplishment
- discussing personal circumstances differently across candidates
- using diminutives or overly familiar descriptors
- praising “helpfulness” or “likability” without addressing professional achievement

Formatting

Use current [TXST letterhead](#) (1st page only)

Compose an appropriate length

- Undergraduate student applications to graduate school: 1-2 pages
- Graduate College scholarships: 1-2 pages
- External Awards: 2 pages (unless the requirements state otherwise)
- Job applications: 2-3 pages

Headers, **bolding**, and topic sentences are helpful

For external awards: accept our offer to review drafts



Letter Review Services for Faculty

What we do:

- Review letter for fit with the funder's expectations and guidelines
- Provide targeted feedback in relation to audience and purpose
- Suggest surface-level corrections
- Troubleshoot access and submission problems

What we do not do:

- Tell you to change your assessment of the applicant
- Insist that you use our recommended wording
- Share your letter with the applicant

What Reviewers Notice

Tailored recommendations help committees decide among top-ranked applicants

Recommenders who have not read the applicant's materials

Mistakes with names, pronouns, program titles, institutions, and opportunity names

An excellent recommendation:

- shows reviewers how to interpret the evidence
- adds expert perspective, context, and insight applicants cannot provide themselves

Recommendations that “glow in the dark”



Questions?

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