WRITING WINNING NOMINATIONS

REFLECTIONS ON SUCCESSFUL ACADEMIC AWARD NOMINATIONS

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17 Isabella Street Toronto, ON M4Y 1M7 <u>www.ocufa.on.ca</u> ocufa@ocufa.on.ca Phone: 416-979-2117 Nominating a colleague for an academic award is a major undertaking, whether it is the OCUFA Academic Librarianship or Teaching Award, a university-based recognition award, a 3M National Teaching Fellowship, or a similar such recognition. Each award has a list of criteria, but lack of specificity in the terms for the award is seldom the problem. The attributes of the candidate are often stellar. So why was your candidate unsuccessful? The reason may lie in the care taken by the nominator to present a strong case in the format and manner specified by the call for nominations. This brief article will provide some guidelines for strengthening your application on behalf of a candidate colleague.

The most obvious advice, to read the award guidelines, is not always followed. For example, the OCUFA guidelines speak to the value of the nominator's brief, a summary and persuasive commentary on the evidence at hand. Nonetheless, over the years I have seen nominators' briefs as concise as one and a half pages, written in toogeneral terms and frequently insufficiently persuasive in making the case for their candidate. The nominator's brief is the document which the committee will likely spend the most time reading, and on which they will largely base their decision. Do not confuse a cover letter with the nominator's brief. A nomination brief takes time to write. It is not the product of a half hour squeezed in between classes or other commitments, but rather should be the well written testimony of a colleague who has amassed, digested and reflected upon the evidence in support of their candidate. A well written nomination brief is not tediously lengthy, but neither should it be so concise that it fails to perform the function for which it is intended: to "comprehensively

and yet succinctly justify the nomination and clearly identify how the supporting documents fit with the nomination." A brief of four to seven, single-spaced pages, well-organized with subheadings, and quoting appropriately from the corpus of letters and support documents, is ideal.

In terms of the application package in its entirety, bigger is not always better! In fact, it can mitigate against a candidate. Be selective. Awards committee members take their work very seriously, recognizing awards as reflecting the high esteem of colleagues, and often being the crowning achievement in one's academic career. Hence, committee members read every page of every submission. For this reason, the entire nomination package (inclusive of appendices and all supplementary material), should not exceed 50 pages.

Please follow nomination guidelines and summarize the teaching evaluations and testimonials. A table summarizing quantitative teaching scores over the years, and chronicling the academic year, course title and codes, number of students in each course, the range of scores possible, the mean, the standard deviation (or something to contextualize your nominee's scores), and including the most recent year, is far

more useful to the committee than 30 page or two of selected quotes from appropriate. The OCUFA website has including an appendix dedicated to summarizing student ratings of



pages of raw computer printouts. A open-ended comments would also be the complete awards guidelines, specific "instructions for teaching."

Testimoniallettersareveryapplicationpackage.Themore

important components of the breadth to the corpus of letters, the

better; it is important to ensure that the nominee is in the high esteem of various constituencies, from current and former students, to faculty colleagues, to the chair or director of the program, and/or to the dean and provost. Try to ensure that as many constituencies as possible have been enlisted, and that letters (a maximum of 2 per constituency) have been requested particularly in support of the nomination. Importantly, the content of the letters should demonstrate the nominee's impact on student learning. The quality of letters will vary, but you can assist others in their letter preparation in a number of ways. For example, provide letter writers with the award guidelines and ask them to write their letter in the context of one or more particular evaluation criteria consistent with your nomination's focus. A possible strategy is to request more than 2 letters from each constituency, and then carefully select only those which most clearly and convincingly demonstrate the criteria on which the nomination is based.

The process of assembling the nomination requires time. Give yourself adequate time to prepare the necessary paperwork, to organize it appropriately and to write a reflective and persuasive brief. Start early rather than rush a nomination with inadequate documentation. OCUFA awards guidelines specify that nominations should be compiled particularly for the OCUFA award, and that "only in unusual and clearly

explained circumstances will it [the committee] accept copies of material taken from promotion and tenure files or collected for other awards."

Is it worth all the time and effort required to prepare a good nomination? Absolutely! As someone who has had the privilege of reading hundreds of nominations, I am encouraged to see the superior quality of teaching and academic librarianship at Ontario universities. I urge faculty and librarians to take the time to nominate the work of their colleagues. While the OCUFA award recognizes cumulative contributions of faculty or librarians, not all recipients are nearing retirement. Indeed, many are mid-career, contributing to the advancement of teaching through their scholarship and day-to-day interaction with students in and out of the classroom. Teaching everything from anthropology to zoology, or playing key roles as academic librarians, there are colleagues to be celebrated. Let's do it!

(Image source: Suwit Ritjaroon / FreeDigitalPhotos.net)