

The Slippery Pole of Using Connections

Anyone who has lived in this city for more than five minutes knows one thing: If you want to secure acceptance to one of New York's most exclusive clubs, co-ops, social organizations or elite private schools, you could use a little pull.

Many believe that for their children to gain acceptance to one of the city's top schools, they must persistently work the system, consistently network and tirelessly calculate who can help them in their quest.

Yet there's influence, and then there's influence.

Since the majority of select high-profile people are besieged with requests for favors all the time, they pick and choose carefully and thoughtfully which favors they really want to get done. They may tell you they'll make

a call or write a letter on your behalf, but there are calls and letters, and then there are calls and letters. Obviously, if they use their clout too much, it becomes diluted and, thus, ineffective.

An example dates back to when a myriad of letters was written on behalf of slews of private-school-seeking parents who had asked the late Sen. Jacob K. Javits to write a letter of recommendation on their child's behalf. Admissions directors snickered about the letters they received from Javits, which in most cases served only to fatten candidates' files.

One generous donor and parent at a top private school recounted how she's asked at least a couple of times a year to recommend applicants to the school. Over the years, though, there's only one youngster's application that she actually went to bat for, and the kid was accepted.

Of course, the applicant met all of the school's requirements for admission, but, almost as important, the family met hers.

One mother of two teenagers at top private schools recalls the days when time and again she was asked to write letters of recommendation for applicants to her children's former nursery school, Temple Emanu-El Nursery School and Kindergarten. She was happy to write the letters but ultimately felt it would make no difference.

"There are very, very few people whose recommendation is going to make a difference, to push an application over the line. Most people can't produce the request that's being asked for," she explained. "There's such an enormous group of well-qualified applicants that the majority of recommendations just give [admissions directors] another piece of the puzzle."

How do A-list New Yorkers pick and choose whom they'll wholeheartedly endorse?

"It's pure and simple," reveals one such influential patron, who's been asked to endorse applicants to each of his children's private schools, from nursery on up. "I know immediately if I'd recommend someone. It comes down to who I like and who I don't like."

If someone he doesn't know too well, or doesn't like, asks him for a recommendation,

he'll say, "Oh, I'll make a call," and then not do it. He feels it's easier to say you'll call than to get into an argument with someone who is asking for a favor.

"How will they ever know if I really called or not?" he said. "I wouldn't go to hurt somebody, but what am I going to say to them? Your kid stinks?" Or worse, that he doesn't care much about them, either.

One important criterion for this New Yorker is if the family has real money or not.

"I would recommend someone with a lot of money who I think would give some to the school, but [the schools] can usually figure that out for themselves anyway," he said.

When it comes to getting an edge in the college admissions sweepstakes, the ante goes up, and key recommendations can ultimately make a difference.

One Cornell alumnus, who received undergraduate and law degrees there in the mid-1950s and who is a continuing supporter of the school, has written quite a few letters for applicants over the years. He said he, too, is discerning when it comes to conveying his thoughts concerning various candidates to admissions officials.

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"It depends on the person who's asking," he confided. "There are letters, and then there are detailed letters."

One such detailed letter he wrote on the behalf of his stepson chronicled their long, personal relationship.

"I wrote that I knew him since he was a child, spent all kinds of time with him, how he's overcome hardships, and is a bright, ambitious and well-rounded kid," the man recalled.

He also got his stepson an interview with a professor, who in turn wrote Cornell a glowing letter on the young man's behalf.

It worked, but so did the kid.

Nevertheless, there are always people, friends or, more typically, relatives who lack the etiquette and sensitivity to know whom, and how, to politely ask for a reference.

Most people agree they can deliver an earnest recommendation only for someone they know well, who has something unique to contribute to a school's community.

"Otherwise, it may backfire, as it's probably worse to have someone write a lukewarm letter who could have written an enthusiastic one," added the A-list New Yorker.

The bottom line is you probably won't need recommendations to gain acceptances if your kid meets or exceeds the school's requirements for admission. ■



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