Letters of Support – Essential or Gratuitous?

By Chris Black, M.L.S., Assistant Director of Research Development Support, Office of Research

This is a series of tips published in UMMS Research News about writing proposals.

1. Letters of Collaboration: Essential
   • The goals of a letter of collaboration are to:
     • Specify what the consultant(s)/collaborator(s) will contribute to the research.
     • Convince the reviewer that the consultant(s)/collaborator(s) will fulfill the request.
     • Convey enthusiasm for the work.
     • Lend credibility to your proposal.

     • The role of collaborator on project, qualifications, and effort/resource commitment should be echoed in his/her NIH Biosketch.
2. Letters of Commitment (e.g., Cost Sharing): Essential
   • These will need to be approved by the institution, so allow more time for approval.
   • Be sure to advise the author about the need for cost sharing (e.g., required? voluntary but needed to achieve the goals?).
   • Be specific about resource commitment (remember: cost sharing commitment is mandatory once grant is funded).

3. Mentor’s Letter: Essential
   • This should be a letter of strong, committed mentoring effort and candidate recommendation (not a letter of reference).
   • Include mentor’s expertise in relevant field, effort that will be devoted to mentee, and commitment to mentee’s success.

4. Letters of Endorsement/Advocacy: Gratuitous?
   • If a letter is not required, but the Principal Investigator (PI) feels s/he needs an endorsement to confirm qualifications, resources, etc., be sure the letter focuses on substance and specifics, such as strengths of PI and future directions of the study.
   • Letter must be written by someone who is familiar with the PI or program.
   • Professional letters of endorsement may be more powerful than general, institutional letters of endorsement.

5. The Best Way to Obtain the Letter
   • Draft a copy for the author (including addressee), or send a list of bullet points.
   • Allow enough time for turnaround (two to three weeks).
   • At the U-M Medical School, for a quick turnaround on signatures (and for more tips) follow the directions for letters of commitment and endorsement.