Reply to the Editor:

We thank Feldman and colleagues for their insightful comments. We agree that best practices for drafting letters of recommendation (LORs) should be updated with current evidence. We propose a checklist for applicants and letter writers to mitigate bias in LORs.

CHECKLIST FOR APPLICANTS REQUESTING LORs

Providing supporting information for letter writers can improve the quality and influence of LORs. Giving letter writers ample time to generate thoughtful LORs decreases bias.

1. Choose letter writers who can describe an authentic and favorable relationship with the applicant. The letter writer should describe experiences with the applicant.
2. Create a list of strengths and accomplishments that the applicant wishes to highlight.
3. Ask letter writers to comment on these key strengths and accomplishments. For a multidimensional representation, ask each letter writer to comment on different qualities and accomplishments.
4. Provide a curriculum vitae, personal statement, and list of top program choices.
5. Give letter writers 6 to 8 weeks to complete LORs. Thoughtful letters take time to research and compose. Hastily written letters are prone to bias and platitudes.
6. Uphold gratitude and respect for the letter writers. Programs often contact letter writers for additional details about the applicant.

CHECKLIST FOR AUTHORS TO FAIRLY REPRESENT APPLICANTS IN LORs

1. Routinely assess implicit biases using the Harvard Implicit Association Test. Awareness of implicit bias can mitigate unintended behavior, including advancing bias in LORs.
2. Create and adhere to a structured template for consistency and clarity.
   - Prepare a standard, brief introduction of oneself. Our work demonstrated that authors who are men disproportionately discussed their own leadership and status in letters for women candidates compared with those for candidates who are men.
   - Describe the scope of the relationship with the applicant.
   - Develop a personalized list of qualities and skills critical for success in cardiothoracic surgery and consistently comment on these skills for each applicant. Use specific examples to illustrate the evaluation.
   - Collaborate with applicants to identify specific qualities and accomplishments that they would like to highlight.
   - Conclude with a holistic summary that differentiates the applicant from others.
3. Review LORs for alternative, unfavorable interpretations. Our data demonstrate that LORs for women applicants emphasize the applicant’s social relationships (eg, fathers, husbands, friends) and leisure activities. While discussing relationships and leisure activities may demonstrate familiarity, it may have the unintended consequence of diminishing a woman applicant’s professional achievements.

These interventions will hopefully increase personalization and decrease bias in LORs. Further studies are needed to understand how gender, race, and ethnicity influence writing and reading of LORs. These differences may impact acceptance into cardiothoracic surgery training programs. We hope that the continued research and development of equitable assessments will lead to a diverse cardiothoracic workforce poised to meet future challenges.

Valeda Yong, MD, MSED
Kaleb Rostmeyer, BA
Cherie P. Erkmen, MD
Department of Surgery
Temple University Hospital
Philadelphia, Pa

Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University
Philadelphia, Pa

Department of Thoracic Medicine and Surgery
Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University
Philadelphia, Pa

Partially supported by Temple University Fox Chase Cancer Center and Hunter College Regional Comprehensive Cancer Health Disparity Partnership, award No. U54 CA221704(5) (contact principal investigators: Grace X. Ma, PhD, and Oluronseun O. Ogunwobi, MD, PhD) from the National Cancer Institute of National Institutes of Health (NCI/NIH). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NCI/NIH.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors reported no conflicts of interest.

The Journal policy requires editors and reviewers to disclose conflicts of interest and to decline handling or reviewing manuscripts for which they may have a conflict
of interest. The editors and reviewers of this manuscript have no conflicts of interest.

References

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcvs.2023.08.043