Hello, and welcome to our conference call, "MBA Admissions Insights: Preparing for Your Letters of Reference and Essays." Thank you for joining us. My name is Allison Davis. I’m Associate Director in the MBA admissions Office. I’m joined by Derrick Bolton, Assistant Dean for MBA Admissions.

Derrick: Hi everybody.

Allison: In the next 30 minutes, we'll be talking about what to keep in mind as you prepare your essays and approach recommenders for your letters of reference. We'll start by briefly reviewing the requirements for both, and offer some tips along the way. We'll also discuss some questions that you may find useful to ask yourself at this stage in the process, and how you might go about answering them. We'll wrap up by answering some of the questions submitted by you in advance.

All right. Let's start with essay requirements and tips. The requirements, word length, formatting, et cetera, for the essay questions are all on our website, and you should definitely read all of them. But it could be useful to review the basics again here.

There are two personal essays. Essay one is "What matters most to you, and why?" This is a pretty fundamental question that really invites self-examination and self-reflection. Derrick, what sort of things are we looking for there?

Derrick: Well, I think when you said "personal essays," you said more than you even intended to. Because they're not intended to be professional, in that you're speaking about work topics, but truly a personal reflection on the people, on the experiences, on the situations that have influenced you, and, more important –

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how those have shaped your perspectives, not just about what your accomplishments are, or what you've achieved. So we'd say focus on "why," rather than focusing on "what."

Allison: Second essay question is pretty broad. It's "Why Stanford? And how will earning your MBA at Stanford enable you to realize your ambitions?" So what are we looking for there, Derrick?

Derrick: I think if you look back over the decade or so that I've been – well, about 15 years I've been in this role – and we used to ask a question that was really specific: "Tell us about your short-term
goals. Tell us about your long-term goals. Why will an MBA help you, and then why do you want the MBA from Stanford?” And over time, we've shifted toward a broader question, because we didn't want to lock applicants in unnecessarily. It wasn't something we were using and assessing viability as candidates, and so we said, "What's a question that will actually help the candidate?"

And so we want you to reflect on why you want this graduate education in management, how it's going to help you in realizing your objectives, and really thinking about the distinctive opportunities you'll pursue at Stanford. Because once you get here, you get, I think, overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices in front of you, so it's helpful to do some reflection up front.

**Allison:** I think I've even heard you say sometimes students have actually held onto their essays and posted them on their mirror, and that kind of thing.

**Derrick:** Put them on the door of your room at Schwab or at Highland Hall, and every day it's a reminder of why you're here and what you want to take away from the experience. But I think that gets back to the point again that they're personal essays. They're meant to be valuable to the applicant who's writing them. There are no shortcuts here. You really have to think carefully about who you are, about the experiences that have shaped you, and about where you want to go from here.

**Allison:** So in general, I think our advice is, keep it simple; don't overthink it. Be sure to actually answer the questions we're asking. Follow directions. That sort of thing. What else?

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**Derrick:** Well, we're talking about essays and letters of reference today, and at their simplest form, both of those are stories. And so I think what you're trying to do with the essays is to tell a story that only you can tell. It should be fresh versus being packaged. You know what I mean by that, and we can tell the difference, when things are inauthentic.

One of my favorite alums, Leo Linbeck, always said, "Think of the admission process not as a marketing activity, where you're trying to look at someone and deliver exactly what they want, but to look at it as an accounting activity, where you're looking inside and then trying to express that clearly. So I think that's a good shorthand for me of what the aim is of the essays. I hope that candidates are
reading what we said on the website, because we do encourage people to get feedback. It's helpful, right, to get a sense from people who know you very well, on whether the essays are coming across in your voice: whether this is the brother that I know, or this is the wife that I know, coming through on paper. But I caution you to think carefully about the difference between feedback and coaching.

Allison: Can you say a little bit more about that?

Derrick: Well, I think feedback is – you've done the reflection, you've done the thinking, you've put in the effort, and you're getting sanity checks from people who really know you, to ensure that what you're putting on paper is authentic, that it does reflect you.

Allison: Right.

Derrick: That's a couple of times. That's one or two times. That's not many, many hours of people giving you wordsmithing, and rearranging your flow of your topics, and telling you what Stanford wants, that kind of thing.

Allison: All right. Let's go on to letters of recommendations. Again, all the requirements are on our website, including the questions that we are asking your recommenders, so of course you're going to want to take a look at that.

There are two letters of reference that are required. The first one would come from a current direct supervisor at work, or, as we say, next best alternative.

There are certainly situations where you may not be able to get a reference from your current direct supervisor. You might be self-employed or working at a family business, or in a new position where your supervisor really doesn't know you well yet, or maybe you can't even tell your employer that you're applying. So if you can't get one from your current direct supervisor, what would be, Derrick, other alternatives?

Derrick: I think this is probably the most commonly asked question at information sessions. And the short answer is, use your best judgment, because you're gonna know, far better than we, who are good choices to provide that insight. But I would think if you're working in a services firm, it could be a client. If you work in a
sales role, it might be a customer. If you have extensive operations with management, it could be a previous manager, an indirect supervisor, a portfolio company you've worked with, someone you work with at your organization who has direct exposure to you and who cares enough about you to make the time to write a detailed and thoughtful letter.

But I think you're trying to get, as Allison said, the next best alternative means as close to that current direct supervisor as possible.

_Allison:_ The second reference actually has a lot of flexibility for you. You really have four different choices here for the second reference. It could be, again, another supervisor, or a peer, and those could come from the workplace. Or it could be someone from outside the workplace who has perhaps worked with you or supervised you in an extracurricular activity.

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And so those four quadrants are what you have to choose from. In general, though, Derrick, would you say the strongest reference typically comes from the workplace?

_Derrick:_ Absolutely. Again, with thousands of applicants, each person's situation is unique, but in most cases what we've observed is that the recommender who has worked with you for 40 or 50 hours a week for six weeks, or six months, or three or four years, has deeper insight into your strengths and your areas of development than someone who sees you in a volunteer activity for a few hours a week, even if it's a sustained commitment. So you just have to be careful in thinking about those choices.

We are on your side as applicants when we're reading the applications; it's not that we're gonna look and say, "Oh, this really doesn't give us what we're looking for." But I do see files every year where I read it and say, "Gosh. The recommender really let this person down."

_Allison:_ Let's talk a bit about how somebody would go about choosing their recommenders, advice about that, Derrick.

_Derrick:_ Sure. Well, this brings me back to my point earlier, that both essays and recommendations are stories. Essays are stories that you're telling us, and recommendations are stories that others are telling us about you. The reason that we ask for references in addition to the essay is that others see things in you that you may
not see in yourself, and so it's really helpful for us to have both those perspectives as we're trying to understand you a little bit better.

You can see exactly what we're asking the recommender, so I strongly encourage anyone who's applying to go to the letter of reference page on our website to look at the traits, the competencies that we're asking the recommenders to assess, as well as the three questions we ask them to answer.

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But I'd suggest someone who can provide, at a tactical level, detailed anecdotes, who can give examples, who's excited to write a letter for you and will actually spend sufficient time to write a thoughtful letter. At a more philosophical level, I'd pick someone who is in a position to see how you've developed, who cares about your career, and is rooting for you to succeed.

Allison: I think sometimes as you're approaching a recommender, the conversations that come out of even asking them to write a recommendation can really be constructive conversations.

Derrick: One of the things you hear us say – Allison, you know this, but candidates may not – we often say that we're looking for candidates for whom success has been a byproduct rather than a goal. And that notion of byproduct and goal comes to mind as I think about references as well, because in a lot of ways, the goal of the recommendation could be to have a great conversation with your recommender, to talk about your experiences and to talk about things that you've done well, or areas that you may need to grow, and to get that person's feedback on those experiences. And if that conversation is a productive one for you and for the recommender, the byproduct of that is a great letter of recommendation that he or she turns in.

So I think it's great to sit down with your recommender. This is not an activity that I'd say, simply register him or her, and then make sure the person turns it in by the deadline. No, no, no. I think you actually do want to invest a little more, sit down over coffee or tea or champagne, whatever the situation might be, and have a good coaching conversation. And I think it can be beneficial whether or not you even apply to business school.

Allison: We often hear applicants worry about, if they approach the recommender at work, that sometimes the recommender will say,
"Well, why don't you draft it for me, and I'll sign it." What should people do in that situation?

Derrick: Yeah. I know that's a tough situation. Actually, when I was applying to business school last millennium, I had a manager who felt strongly that every consultant in the firm who asked him to write a recommendation should draft it on his or her own. So I ultimately ended up picking someone else. The goal here, I'll reiterate, is to get insights about you from someone else. And if you're drafting the recommendation, then I think it defeats the purpose, and you end up kind of doubling down on the things that you already know about yourself. Whereas the recommendation should be providing insights that may be new to you and hopefully may be new to us.

Allison: Let's move on to talking about some of the questions that you as prospective applicants might be asking yourselves as you get ready to write your essays and approach those recommenders. You will find that answering these questions for yourself now could really save you some time later in the application process. So one question you should be asking yourself is, "Do I actually have time to do all that thinking and reflecting and self-examining before I write my essays?"

Derrick: Yeah. But I think there's no shortcut here. We're looking for a holistic view of you, the applicant, as a person: your values, your passions, your ideals, your experiences, your hopes and your dreams. And our goal is to understand what motivates you and how you've become the person that you are today. And then again, how Stanford can help you in terms of realizing your ambitions. And so I think you just have to be prepared to think a lot, and then write.

And for each person it will be different. For one person, it might be a morning run, where you kind of find some time to clear your head. For another person it might be the subway ride to and from the office. But there's no shortcut here, so you really do have to put in that time to think.

Allison: So Derrick, you had talked about how the essays and recommendations are stories.
So another question people should ask themselves is, "What is a story that only I can tell?"

**Derrick:** Yeah. I think what makes it a story that only you can tell, and is not the person or the event or the situation that you're talking about, but how that has affected you, and how that's shaped your outlook, your perspective, your choices. So I'll reiterate what I say on the road all the time, which is, "Don't worry about standing out. You never know what other applicants are sharing with us." I think differentiation occurs naturally if you concentrate on telling us who you are, and no one can know that better than you.

What I see happen all the time with applicants, especially applicants who have the fortune, or misfortune, of being in large communities where there are many people applying, is that they will kind of lose faith in themselves throughout the process, and so start comparing. "My GPA is two-tenths of a point lower than hers." And, "He was promoted three months ahead of me." It's easy to get focused on all the little aspects where someone may have done better than you, but we're reading the application looking for strengths, and so I just want to reiterate that we want candidates to really have faith in yourselves; have some confidence as you go through the process. Think about the essays as conversations on paper.

**Allison:** Well, the "have confidence and faith in yourself, and don't compare yourself to other people" – that's good advice, not only for writing applications but good advice for life, I think.

**Derrick:** Well, honestly I think the application process, if done correctly, is great in terms of pulling candidates up from working so hard on their daily goals and asking some more fundamental questions that'll be helpful, again, whether or not they apply to business school.

**Allison:** So another question to ask yourself is, "How will Stanford help me turn my dreams into a reality?"

**Derrick:** Well, I guess the key there is, do you have some dreams? Do you have some sense of focused interest of what you want to do after business school?

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I think Stanford's a really magical place, and if you come here with something in mind, you can take advantage of all the resources of
the university, from business school to engineering or law, medical school, whatever it is, to make your dreams happen. But have some ideas of what your best self would be after Stanford, and related goals for your education here.

You don't need to make them up, by the way, if you don't have really specific goals. There's a reason that we kind of put the goals themselves as kind of a tweet, kind of a text box in the application, whereas the essay is focused on how you're going to maximize your experience and make the most of your time at Stanford.

Allison: Well, let's move on now to questions that the applicants – I'm sorry that the audience – we hope you'll be applicants – but that the audience has submitted in advance. "What kinds of information should I be providing to my recommender?"

Derrick: I think that's going to depend on your relationship with your recommender. I've seen candidates that provide the entire application and essay to the recommender, and I've seen candidates who simply sit down with him or her and talk through the process. You don't have to worry that every single part of your application makes it look like you've been lined up since birth to be admitted to business school at Stanford, right? Life is messy. We understand that. Not all of your choices will make sense as you're making them.

But our hope is, again, that when you look back on them, you're able to extract some common themes and kind of connect the dots as you look back. But again, it's not like you have to ensure that every single thing that your recommender says is perfectly aligned with every single thing that you say. So I don't think you have to go overboard on providing information but again I'll reiterate:

there is benefit to you as an applicant from sitting down and talking with your recommender as a person who knows you well, a person who cares about you and whose opinion you value, about your performance and about your future.

Allison: "Is it ever worth it to submit an additional letter of recommendation?" Beyond the two that we ask for?

Derrick: Well, Allison, you know; you've been through our admission committee discussions many, many times as we think about what the requirements are for an application. So we have asked for two recommendations because we think that is the most helpful across
our applicant pool. We do, however, give candidates a bit of flexibility on what they're providing. But it's a risky move, right?

So if you, for example, give us a third recommendation, first of all, I can't guarantee that we'll read it, because it really depends on when it gets submitted. But let's say it was submitted with your application at the time you applied, and we read that. Well, then the question from the reader is going to be if this is a helpful recommendation or unhelpful recommendation. If it's helpful, then I'm gonna say, "Why was it not one of the two other recommendations?" If it's unhelpful, I may ask, "Why is it submitted at all?" And so it's not a risk-free move, because it does call into question the self-awareness and judgment of the candidate.

And frankly there's also an issue around fairness. I think of the admission process, it's almost like when you take a test. You turn the test in at a certain point, and then it gets graded, and then we set the curve, and then you get the grades back. Well, providing extra letters of reference is, in a way, like giving someone a chance to do extra work on a test, or to change the answers after it's been turned in. That's not exactly fair to all the other candidates. So we'll always try to give applicants flexibility, but I do think that they have to think very carefully.

Allison: And I should add that it will certainly be added to your application, in terms of what we do with it, but as Derrick said, it may not be read, depending on if we've already read your application, or where we are in the process.

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Derrick: Because again, it's like taking a test.

Allison: Yeah.

Derrick: Once the first person's graded your test, well, we're not going to keep letting you change the answers on it after that. So, yeah.

Allison: Right. We talked about how the second recommendation can come from a supervisor or next best alternative, or a peer. So Derrick, can you talk a little bit about what counts as a good recommendation from a peer, as opposed to one from a supervisor? And again, we're talking about that second reference.
Derrick: I guess the reason that we think a peer can be helpful in the first place is that most of you will spend your careers after business school leading without authority in a lot of cases, so you're always basically trying to move the organization or your department or your team, or whatever it is, probably a level ahead of whatever your actual job responsibilities are, or whatever your actual title is. And so peers are folks who influence without authority, right? Someone who can give us insights on what it's like to work with you very closely, elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, can be really valuable in understanding how you'll participate as a member of our community, which is a very strong peer learning community, as well as giving us a sense of areas where you'll want to develop as a student, and strengths that you'll draw upon once you're an alumnus or alumna.

Allison: Okay. Here's another question. "Both of my supervisors speak English as a second language. If they're not able to write as eloquently as a native English speaker, is that going to affect my candidacy?"

Derrick: The short answer would be no. We're—with apologies to vegans—looking for the steak, not the sizzle. If it's a real drawback for the recommender, then he or she could submit the recommendation and have it translated, and we just would ask for the original as well as the translation. We don't want the translation done by the applicant, by the way.

[0:21:50] So someone else who's in a position to do that translation, and then we'd ask for that person's contact information as well. But no, we are able to extract from recommendations the basic premise that's coming through the recommendation: how the applicant has performed; what makes him or her successful in a role. It really won't come down to word choice or things that are particularly nuanced, is my sense.

Allison: Okay. So it's really the content, it's not the syntax or the—?

Derrick: It's the gist of it, right?

Allison: Right.

Derrick: The gestalt.

Allison: Derrick, what's your opinion of using an academic reference versus a professional reference?
Derrick: When we think about references for Stanford, we're looking at them as a way to understand ways that you've demonstrated leadership and understand your leadership potential. And so in most cases, academic references have not had the opportunity to see candidates demonstrate leadership. Again, there are obviously exceptions. Maybe you've been a teaching assistant for a professor, or maybe you've done a research project for him or her, and so that faculty member would be able to provide some detailed anecdotes or evidence.

But for the most part, when we see academic references, they tend to be very brief. They tend to be generic, and, sad to say, in a lot of cases they talk more about the faculty member than about the candidate. If you're a college senior and you're applying for a deferred admission, then the academic reference may be the only choice that you have, so we see them more frequently for folks who are applying for deferred enrollment. And in those cases, obviously we know how to calibrate them. But just be careful.

Again, this applies to anybody, but be thoughtful and careful as you're thinking about your recommender to ensure that he or she is able to address the specific traits, the competencies, the characteristics that we're asking on the recommendation form and in the questions. And again, I suggest looking at those on the website before picking a recommender –

[0:23:47] because if we get a form that says "no basis for judgment" for 85 percent of the things that we're asking, well, that doesn't help you, and it also doesn't help us.

Allison: Okay. How about for reapplicants? What's the expectation in terms of letters of rec and essays? I mean, is it going seem weird that "what matters most to you," which is such a fundamental topic, changes significantly from the year before?

Derrick: Our view has been that, as a reapplicant, you're evaluated on the basis of your new application in the context of the new applicant pool. There are sister institutions of ours that will say, "You applied before; tell us what's changed since the last application." And we don't do that. It always felt to me that asking that question came from an understanding that "My last decision was correct, so please explain to me what's changed, to change my decision."

And the reality at Stanford is that there's so many qualified candidates that we're simply not able to admit all the wonderful people we'd like to admit each year. And so I don't ever assume
that, simply because someone applied and wasn't admitted, that that was the correct decision, or that there was something amiss with the application.

All that to say: you can turn in the exact same application in two different years, and I think you could get different results. Not because you've changed, but because the applicant pool has changed. But if what matters most to you, and why, has changed dramatically over the course of the previous 8 or 12 months, then the topic should change. And if it hasn't changed, then it should remain similar to what it was.

But I would definitely take advantage of the opportunity to provide updated references, because my assumption is most of our candidates, most of you, are getting stronger with time as you're building experience and exposure. And so a recommender today would be better than a recommender who had exposure to you 12 months ago. So, just making sure that you take advantage of that.

**Allison:** I would add that even if the topic –

**Derrick:** And as the coda, I will say that we do not compare your previous application to your current application. So as the assistant dean of admission, I would look at both applications at the point that the file gets back from interview, and that's not looking at it to compare word for word what was this application versus the last one, but looking – was there some major red flag that we saw the last time, and was it addressed this time? But for the most part, it's not going to make a difference in my decision, and I would be the only person in the entire admissions office who would have access to the old application. So it really is a new application on its own merit, in the context of the new pool.

**Allison:** Okay. How about client recommendations for people in client service businesses? Are there common mistakes, or are there ways that they can be enhanced that applicants should be aware of?

**Derrick:** I think it kind of depends on the client. It depends on how familiar he or she is with recommendations to graduate school, and to business school in particular. So we have on our website a transcript of a podcast, where we talk about what makes a recommendation sing. Like, what really brings a candidate to life? And so if you're asking a client for whom this may be the first
recommendation ever, then you might want him or her to take a
look at that transcript. I think it would be helpful.

But I would just reiterate to the client, just as I would reiterate to
anyone else, how important the recommendation is in the process,
and I would be grateful to him or her for making the time to write
the letter.

Allison:
You know, there's so many good questions here, but I think we
really only have time for one more. "Should the letters of
recommendation and the essays complement each other, or should
they emphasize different things about the candidate?"

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Derrick:
And I'll say there's no "should." Sometimes we see letters of
reference and essays that are reinforcing. Sometimes we see where
those provide different insights. Sometimes they help us
reinterpret things we've seen. But it's always helpful in context,
and as you're looking at the applicant holistically, to have those
perspectives.

Allison:
Well, we're almost out of time. If you didn't get your question
answered today, please feel free to contact our office by email or
phone to ask your question. Before we go, Derrick, any words of
advice for our listeners today, in terms of the letters of
recommendation and the essays?

Derrick:
Gosh. Well, first I'd say you're putting yourself in a great position
by tuning in for the call today. We have information sessions on
campus here at Stanford, on typically Mondays and Fridays, and
we have off-campus sessions happening all around the world. I'm
literally flying out in about 30 minutes for New York where we'll
be hosting sessions later this week. And then I'll be in India next
week. So we have sessions happening all around the world, and
our goal in traveling to where you are, as applicants, is to be able
to answer questions. So feel free to sign up for those, and try to
come and meet some of our alumni and students, and learn more
about the program and about the process.

I'll reiterate that comparing yourselves to each other can be just
bad for your morale as you go through the process. We really do
look at every candidate, asking ourselves, "What are the reasons to
admit this person?" So it really is focused on your strengths. And
so I'll reiterate to you as candidates: who cares about the things
that you're not so great at? We care about the things that you are
great at. And please tell us about those. Your recommenders will tell us about those. And that's how we make decisions ultimately.

**Allison:**

Great advice, Derrick. Thank you. And thank you to all of you out there for joining us. There are two more "MBA Admissions Insights" conference calls coming up:

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"Being a Great Applicant" on August 10, and "Considering a Joint or Dual Degree" on August 31. You can register for them on our website. An audio recording of each of these conference calls, including the one today, will be posted on our website in the next few weeks. The current application is now available on our website. There are three application deadlines: September 21, January 10, and April 5.

As Derrick said, there's lots of ways to learn more about our program. In terms of information sessions, we do on- or off-campus, as well as on our website you'll find videos of webinars and a calendar of events, and audio recordings. So we look forward to meeting you, either online or in person. Goodbye for now.

**Derrick:**

Thank you.

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