

FAQ regarding Use of Standardized Reference Form

- Why is APPIC requiring a Standardized Reference Form (SRF)?

In 2013, a workgroup of the Council of Chair of Training Councils (CCTC) was formed to consider ways in which the process of recommendation could be improved. For many years internship training directors expressed concerns about the lack of consistency and a general global inflation across letters of recommendation undermining their utility, as they routinely neglected student areas for growth and development. After considering multiple options the committee decided to recommend a modified version of the Guidelines for Letters of Recommendation put forth by the Canadian Council of Professional Psychology Programs (CCPPP). CCTC then asked APPIC to move forward with implementing this revised version of the letter, the SRF.

- Why is it important that the SRF be related to health services provider competencies?

Although the competencies listed in the SRF are not identical to the health service provider competencies that will be required by the Commission on Accreditation, APPIC hopes that eventually, once the competencies are set and there is a standard way to assess them, the AAPI can increase the focus on competencies and reduce the focus on the collection and detailed reporting of hours. Also, since education and training are designed to be developmental and sequential, it should be helpful for students and programs to see progress on shared competencies, eventually from practicum to internship to postdoctoral experiences and licensure.

- By emphasizing competencies, isn't there a risk of turning the reference letter into a checklist?

The SRF asks for your narrative description of competencies observed in the student. By describing the learning opportunities mastered and highlighting examples of demonstrated competence, it is hoped that a rich depiction of the applicant will be provided.

- What benefits can the SRF provide to internship programs?

At present, letters of recommendation are often so vague, general, overly positive, and without a standard format, they are not very helpful in determining a student's strengths and growth areas. The objective of the SRF is to level the playing field for applicants and to give internship programs access to more useful data as they make decisions about interviews.

- What benefits can the SRF provide to applicants?

The standardized reference form provides more certainty within the evaluation process for students throughout their training, as well as when requesting letters. Because students have access to the form, they are able to consider their choice of letter-writer with less ambiguity about what will be addressed in the letter. Additionally, some students experience anxiety when requesting letters, understanding that supervisors are asked to write several over the course of the year. The hope is that using a

standardized reference form across students makes the task less onerous for the writer and less anxiety provoking for the letter requester. Furthermore, students will know they are being compared on similar domains, with the length of letters and areas addressed similar across all students. Lastly, having a section that specifically addresses areas for growth encourages honesty about trainee performance and development, potentially assisting in optimizing fit between applicants and programs, as well as facilitating more individualized training at the internship level.

- Is this same form to be used by Canadian programs?

Yes, the SRF will be used by all programs involved in the APPIC match, including all Canadian programs. The current form will replace the reference form that was originally endorsed for the 2003-4 application process and that has since been used annually on a voluntary basis by member programs of the Canadian Council of Professional Psychology Programs (CCPPP). Representatives of CCPPP have participated in the current revision of the form and agree that the revision aligns well with the Core Competencies for an Internship Program recognized and accredited by the Canadian Psychological Association as well as by the American Psychological Association. We believe that having one standardized North American reference form will be easier for referees and for students applying to programs in both countries, may benefit programs that accept students from both Canadian and American programs, and may facilitate increased cross border training for students.

- What if there are competencies I can't speak to?

It is anticipated that letter writers may not be able to address each competency area. When that occurs, they may leave that area blank or state that it is not relevant to their contact or setting.

- The form now asks about various health services provider program competencies. I am primarily this student's academic mentor. How should I use this new form?

It is understood that academic mentors often are asked to write letters of reference for their students even though they may not have supervised them clinically. Such letters complement those from clinical supervisors. The nature of your involvement and the type of activities you have directly observed and supervised (e.g., teaching, research and data analysis) are described along with your setting and the training provided. You may be in a strong position to comment on a student's foundational competencies such as communication skills, professionalism and ability to work with diverse individuals effectively, as well as research interests, publications, and career plans. You can also relay your indirect knowledge of functional competencies in assessment and therapy learned through practica by incorporating information from practicum evaluation ratings and comments. There is also a section to describe the applicant's personal characteristics and resources, about which you might be the most knowledgeable observer.

- As a reference writer, am I able to include information from secondary sources in my reference letter?

Letters of reference are primarily about one's direct knowledge of the applicant as acquired through working together. Historically, letter writers have included supplemental information such as the status of dissertation progress as assessed by the advisor or particular examples of laudatory applied work provided by a supervisor. Adopting the standardized reference format does not change or preclude such comments.

- The form specifically asks me to address areas for future growth. I am concerned about the internship match imbalance. If I provide such information would it not be a disadvantage to the applicant?

The practice of psychology demands that we all strive to grow and expand our clinical competencies. Implementation of a standard reference form that highlights a student's existing strengths as well as addresses gaps in training captures this philosophy. We appreciate that students who are in the process of applying to doctoral internship programs already possess academic prowess and are well on their way to becoming highly skilled clinicians. Asking referees to provide thoughtful comments on a student's gaps in training or areas for future growth can benefit the application process in that it increases the likelihood of better fit between what the internship program provides and a student's current training needs. Internship Training directors reading this section will be able to solidify their sense of "good fit" between the applicant's training needs and the unique training opportunities that exist in their program. For example, if a referee identifies an area for future growth as gaining competency in couples counseling or group therapy and a program offers that training, there is a greater potential for evaluating and facilitating goodness of fit.