Sample Questions for Nomination Letter Writers

One of the most challenging aspects of preparing an award nomination is gathering letters of support. When you ask someone to write a letter, they may ask for guidance about what to write. Depending on their affiliation, you can suggest that they answer some of the questions below in their nomination. You can also use the questions to help choose a range of nominators, based on their connection to, and their ability to address, different aspects of the honoree’s background.

Questions for Outstanding Achievement Award, Award of Distinction, and Honorary Degree nominations

• Has the nominee won an honor or award, or membership in a professional or honorary society that holds special meaning to her/him because of the group that bestowed it? For example, is it:
  – The highest honor in his or her field? (Nobel, Pulitzer, Caldecott Medal, etc.)
  – Given by a group or organization in which this person normally would not qualify for membership? (A nominator of OAA winner Omer W. Blodgett mentioned Blodgett’s membership in the Ironworker’s Local 563, Duluth. Blodgett was not an ironworker and therefore not eligible for membership in the local union. However, he developed many of the welding techniques members of the union use, and in recognition, Local 563, from his hometown, granted him honorary membership, a gesture that was particularly meaningful to him, and one that illustrated Blodgett’s impact on the trade.)
  – Given by the nominee’s peers (e.g. National Academies)

• Can you share something unusual or unexpected about the nominee that most people might not know, and that would add to the dimension of his/her personality, show his/her humanity, or illustrate the depth and breadth of his/her interests? For example:
  – Does the nominee have an unusual hobby?
  – Does s/he volunteer with an unexpected charity?
  – Has s/he held a previous career position outside the normal career trajectory? Did s/he switch careers or take on new challenges in retirement?

• Has the nominee overcome significant obstacles to achieve her/his level of distinction?

• Describe how the nominee’s work or personality has helped her or him transcend the boundaries of her or his primary field of work or study.
  – Has it opened new areas of research?
  – Does her or his work have implications for unrelated fields?
  – Has it lead to a new field of inquiry or new disciplinary fields?
  – Has the nominee’s stewardship brought together seemingly unrelated disciplines?
  – Has it enabled previously separate fields to work together?
  – Has it lead to new tools or techniques for research, business, industry, the arts, medicine?

• In a related vein, share an example of how this person has been an early adopter in some field of endeavor, or of some new technology or technique, whether personal or professional.

• Has the nominee promoted international education and collaboration between different educational institutions?

• Share an example of how the nominee has used/applied his/her particular career expertise or experience outside his/her normal field of work for a volunteer or community endeavor.
• How has the nominee helped to improve the human condition through the advancement of knowledge? Has s/he inspired or explored new ideas and breakthrough discoveries that address critical problems and needs of humanity, our environment, etc?
• How has the nominee participated in, or promoted, extraordinary education, such as dynamic teaching methods or research protocols?
• What has s/he done to challenge or mentor outstanding students here or elsewhere?
• How has the nominee participated in, promoted, or inspired dynamic public engagement?
• If an award will be presented at a specific event, elaborate on how the nominee’s career or volunteer work aligns with the purpose of the event or the sponsoring organization.

Questions about alumni nominees, or those with specific ties to the University
(You can also use these for other nominations; just eliminate the reference to the University.)
• How has the nominee helped the University through volunteer service or benefaction?
• Share an example of how this person has helped the University serve the wider community.
• Share an example of how this person has helped to build connections/relationships between the University and outside entities—businesses, charitable organizations, other educational institutions, international organizations.
• How has the nominee helped the University to become one of the top research universities in the world?
  – What has s/he done to recruit, educate, challenge, mentor outstanding students? Does s/he have extraordinary classroom methods or teaching practices?
  – What has s/he done to make students (or others) into lifelong learners, leaders, or global citizens?
  – What has s/he done to recruit, mentor, reward world-class University faculty and staff?
• How has the nominee
  – been a responsible steward of University resources?
  – improved University service, practice, or performance?
  – inspired or effected the exploration of new ideas and breakthrough discoveries that address critical problems and needs of the University, state, nation, and world?
  – helped to foster a culture of excellence?
  – cultivated international learning?
  – advanced interdisciplinary frontiers?
  – helped to build diverse communities at the University and elsewhere?
  – assisted in generating critical resources?