



Georgetown University Student Employment Office

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What is a Reference?

As a supervisor, you may be asked to serve as a reference for your student employee. If you agree to be a reference, the student employee will give your contact information to prospective employers. The prospective employers may then contact you by phone and ask you to comment on the student employee's strengths and past performance.

Step 1: Determine if You Can Be a Good Reference

When a student employee asks you to serve as a reference, it is important to consider your relationship with him/her. If the student has been working in your department for multiple semesters and has consistently produced excellent work, you may want to support the student employee by agreeing to be a reference.

On the other hand, if you have any doubts about your ability to serve as a reference, turn down the request. You may feel that you don't know the student employee well enough, or that it has been too long since you've worked together. Be honest – if you can't provide a strong reference, it is better to let the student employee know now.

Here are some ways to politely decline a reference request:

- "I don't think I know you well enough to provide a strong reference. I'd encourage you to reach out to someone who knows your work better."
- "I'm not familiar with the skills that qualify you for this type of job. I don't feel comfortable recommending you for this position."

Step 2: Prepare Your Talking Points

The student employee will provide you with his/her resume, but you also need to do some homework yourself. If you have any performance reviews for the student employee (hint: [student performance evaluations](#) are a great place to start!), read over your comments. Think about what made this student employee good at his/her job.

- Why did you enjoy working with this student employee?
- What about this student employee stood out?
- What are this student employee's strengths?

You can provide the most benefit to the student employee if you know what he/she wants to emphasize. To get an idea of this, ask the student employee to provide you with some information:

- A job description, or general information about the career path he/she wishes to pursue
- Skills that the student employee feels are important to the job and should be highlighted
- Past projects that the student employee worked on and enjoyed

It's important to come up with concrete examples that demonstrate the student employee's skills and strengths. A strong reference will point out specific instances in which the student employee excelled. For example, "Jack took the initiative on a big office project with little supervision" is more effective than "Jack showed leadership."

Think of the reference call as an interview – now, you are being interviewed on behalf of the student employee. Recall the STAR interview technique: identify the Situation or Task, explain the Action taken, and describe the Results that were achieved.

A list of questions that Human Resources asks when doing reference checks on Georgetown University hires is available on their website: <https://georgetown.box.com/s/guggi4ajrh1kgxcyax4w>.

Step 3: Refresh on Legal Issues

Providing a reference can be tricky. In order to avoid legal issues, remember the following:

- Review the [DC Human Rights Act](#), which prohibits discrimination based on 19 protected traits.
 - Do not talk about race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, personal appearance, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, disability, matriculation, or genetic information.
 - If the employer asks, politely remind him/her that these topics are not relevant in an employment-related discussion.
- Do not discuss the student's personal life. Focus on the student's performance on the job.
- Tell the truth and do not exaggerate. Providing false or misleading information can cause legal troubles. If you make an assertion about the student's performance and/or conduct, be able to back it up with facts.

Step 4: Answer Questions and Be Enthusiastic!

As a reference, you should be ready to answer the phone and talk about the student employee at any time.

- If you receive a phone call from an unfamiliar number, make your best effort to move to a quiet place and answer the call.
- If you miss a phone call, be prompt in your response: it will help the student employee, especially if the prospective employer is looking to fill the position quickly.
- Be cognizant of your tone. If you really believe that the student employee is a great candidate for the position, then that should be apparent in your tone and energy.
- Try not to portray the student employee negatively. If asked what the student employee could improve on, be honest, but frame your answer in a positive light.

Step 5: Follow Up

After you have talked to a prospective employer, it is nice to let the student employee know. You can tell the student employee which employer called and how the call went. The job search can be stressful, so try to keep the student employee updated.