



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)



Advice for writing thoughtful rejection letters (essay)

Submitted by Maria Shine Stewart on August 30, 2016 - 3:00am

You researched the campus carefully. You searched your soul to determine if it was a place you truly wanted to work. Then you wrestled with the online application system, your C.V. and your customized cover letter to make sure that your skills and aptitudes clearly match the slot that was open and that no boxes went unchecked. It was no small task to do all that among your other tasks and responsibilities. You invested thought power, muscle power and that priceless commodity, time. Perhaps you skimped on sleep, skipped some meals and rethought your career trajectory in the event the position materialized.

Maybe you got an interview. Then came the waiting. You checked back, learned the search was still in process. More waiting.

Six months later, you learned through a colleague that the position was: a) filled, b) suspended, or c) not funded.

Rod Serling ^[1], TV writer, Army veteran and Antioch College alumnus might have described, at this frustrating point, the limbo of the *Job Search Twilight Zone* ^[2]. And you had begun to suspect you might never hear the outcome of your efforts...with no rejection letter, no update on the online job site and no email or voicemail responses to your most recent inquiry. You were right. This ambiguity is unsettling, may feed self-doubts and leave a bad taste in the mouth about the institution.

Job seekers are creative human beings, not a nuisance. We all know the feeling of being wanted, unwanted or just plain ignored. The latter is not a good feeling. So I offer a reminder for decision makers and those who support them with the power to create kinder campuses. Although higher education doesn't use the lingo of a customer service often, we all create impressions – and collectively, a campus culture -- based on how we treat others. That includes not only current students and colleagues but potential colleagues as well.

Consider the compliment that the application itself gives to the institution. Most people who offer their credentials want to give and to grow. They may be navigating mixed feelings about moving forward; it is not easy. Most newbies know how stiff the competition is and desperately want a break, while the seasoned applicants 'span feelings including "nothing ventured, nothing gained" and "there's no place like home." And whether applicants are uprooting geographically or not, they could bring passion and talents to strengthen your institution and even specific benefits to you as an individual.

Is this all too obvious? If so, why are some applicants treated as if they were intruders -- not valued guests who deserve a response? An abundance of advice is directed to applicants

and sometimes just a modicum to those with hiring power.

Here are some ideas on implementing a kinder rejection letter. Perhaps acting on even one of these ideas might create a kinder campus.

- Create an efficient process for contacting applicants if your institution does not have one in place.
- Prepare a generic but prompt response especially if the “response to the ad was overwhelming.” Better something than nothing. And waiting to shovel nine inches of snow is always so much harder than keeping up with it.
- Examine root causes. If the lack of a rejection letter is a norm for your group, is it an indicator that your institution is short-staffed, overworked or unable to reach consensus? You can and should address such situations.
- Reflect on the quality of communication from human resources to academic departments and back. The applicant should not get caught in the workings of the machine.
- Remember that although you or your institution may not be uncaring, brusque or careless, leaving an applicant dangling may lead to that conclusion.
- Run the draft past the legal ^[3] department if you need reassurance on phrasing.
- Personalize ^[4] the response appropriately if you possibly can.

Appropriate rejection letters might even express gratitude for the person’s time and perhaps an original variation on standard phrases such as, “We have found a candidate whose background better aligns with our goals.” In the old days -- I remember them well -- a letter would arrive on institutional letterhead with a human signature crafted with a pretty good pen. Perhaps that is a rarity these days, but it helped with closure. Your words, or lack thereof, will be remembered.

Furthermore, the applicant is someone whose goodwill counts. Perhaps he or she is more likely to recommend your institution to a student, colleague or family member in the future if treated with care. And maybe down the road, your paths will converge -- at a conference or when you both successfully jump ship and land somewhere else

We are *connected*. Metaphorically, each person in our common pursuit of education can be thought of as fledgling buds or bright leaves on the tree of academe, with common roots and -- certainly -- the need for air, water, soil. Feeling that possibility can help at least some feel less stuck and receptive to new talent -- even if we cannot take it on at a certain place and time. Job searching takes courage from the applicants, and insight and coordination among those considering them.

My cousin ^[5], not in academe, was downsized, got training on career search steps and told me years ago, “Everything has changed since we started working -- it’s hard, sometimes impossible, to follow up.” How right she was. Some people reading this may be thinking that they would never want to work somewhere that treats an applicant poorly or leaves them in the lurch. Sadly, this is a new normal in some places.

A local poet, years ago, taught me a valuable lesson about weathering rejection. By saving and artfully arranging and shellacking many rejection letters about his poems over the years, he crafted a mammoth collage. That artifact hung in the library of Cleveland State University at one time, a tonic for an English major like me. I could read for myself what he experienced; I could infer the importance of perseverance. And I empathized as the poet had turned others’ impressions into a new art form. He had the last word -- without needing any.

There is kindness in sending a rejection letter. It's the last impression an institution leaves on the job candidate, so why not make it a better one?

Author Bio:

Maria Shine Stewart teaches writing and works as a mental health counselor. This is part of a column, A Kinder Campus, that explores human relations in the academy. It offers anecdotal and research support for the idea that when we work kinder, we work better. Workplace morale, civility and collegiality count. Goodwill is free, so stock up and spread it around. Topic suggestions are welcome. Contact mariashinestewart@gmail.com [6].

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/08/30/advice-writing-thoughtful-rejection-letters-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

Links:

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqlhGgsamro>

[2] <http://theredlist.com/wiki-2-17-1483-1492-1497-view-fantasy-sci-fi-10-profile-the-twilight-zone.html>

[3] http://www.businessmanagementdaily.com/40669/thanks-but-no-thanks-the-fine-art-of-writing-legally-smart-rejection-letters#_

[4] <http://humanresources.about.com/od/policysamplesc/a/rejection.htm>

[5] http://www.cleveland.com/lyndhurst-south-euclid/index.ssf/2016/07/post_29.html

[6] <mailto:mariashinestewart@gmail.com>

undefined

undefined