V.B. Supplemental Document: Recommendation letter requirement

Context

Roughly three years ago, in about 2019 (give or take), there was a Twitter response to the call for applications (for this scholarship) that was posted by the Publicity and Outreach Officer at the time. This response, by a white individual (who had some notoriety for responding negatively to more than one MLA Twitter post), commented that it was inappropriate for this committee to ask BIPOC folks to prepare three letters of recommendation, because BIPOC folks were less likely to be able to do so. At the time of this tweet, this committee determined there was no need to change the requirements, particularly after the call had already been put out, but we did decide that this topic should be revisited in future years.

Our Committee’s Plans

The 2022-2023 committee discussed this topic in detail. Although our initial gut response was not necessarily positive, we gave it some more thought and decided the following:

I. We will not change the number of recommendations required. Getting three different perspectives on the same candidate from recommenders has been very helpful, and thus, we’d like to continue asking for three.

II. That said, we plan on updating the language of the application itself, to make it more inclusive and clear that an applicant does not need three letters from librarians or faculty members. It’s possible that some applicants may not have three contacts from a library or from professors, for instance, especially if they have only just started considering a career in music librarianship. We want applicants to prioritize finding recommenders that can speak best to the candidate’s character and dedication, rather than focusing on the applicant’s prestige or ranking. Write the best words of recommendation for the applicant, rather than focusing on the applicant’s prestige or ranking.

III. We also will revisit our application rubric: specifically, the scoring. We think we may change how much each recommendation is worth (lowering the points for this, so that the weight of the recommendations are not worth as much). We believe that there are some aspects to letters of recommendations which might contribute to bias in some way, and so we felt it best to attempt to minimize the possibility of this impact.

IV. In addition, we discussed the fact that BIPOC students may not receive the same kind of mentorship and support in academia, and thus may not be as familiar with application
processes and standards. This may potentially be affecting our applicants’ material qualities, for instance, or their ability to find good references. In order to help demystify the application process, we’d like to include some recommendation letter tidbits on the application website itself, with pointers about selecting recommenders, the standard process for asking for a rec letter, advice, etc., in the form of a PDF.

We will dedicate this upcoming year on points II through IV. Should we not complete these changes by the time I rotate off as chair, the committee will continue to work on this until completed.