



## Financial Aid Appeal Letters

*Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick*

Writing a letter to the Financial Aid Appeal Committee can be a very intimidating task. For many people, it is difficult to ask for help. The purpose of this handout is to give you some tips to writing your letter and making your case to the committee. When writing such a letter, I recommend you follow a “past, present, future” outline, so that is how this handout is organized.

### The Past: What Happened?

- 1. Reflect on the past.** Think back carefully to the circumstances that may have contributed to your performance at Parkland College. Were there medical or family issues you needed to deal with? Perhaps you had children and experienced childcare difficulties. Maybe it was a matter of just not feeling ready for college or having to work too many hours to pay for it. **This information is required by the federal government in order for the committee to even look at your appeal.**
- 2. Be Specific.** It is important to be specific when describing these circumstances. The better the Financial Aid Committee understands the reasons you may have struggled, the more likely they will be in considering your appeal.
- 3. Be Honest.** Don't be shy talking about grades, as the committee will have a complete breakdown of your grades to review anyway.
- 4. Be Accountable.** Bluntly put, accept responsibility and own up to your mistakes. Even though you very well may have had some bad breaks or difficult issues to deal with, try to be candid about your own role in your education. If you realize now that you goofed off, didn't communicate with your teachers enough, tried to do too much, blew off too many classes and deadlines, and so on, **'fess up**. That level of honesty, while difficult, is respected more than just complaining.
- 5. Document as Much as You Can.** Try to provide written documentation for as much of the information you have provided as possible. Go through your files and see if you can find items such as hospital bills, legal paperwork, military documents (in case you were in the service). Members of the committee will want to see **evidence** to back up your narrative. Some students will even get people to write letters on their behalf.
- 6. Ask Yourself What You Would Do Differently.** Again, some issues may have been out of your control, but an honest and reflective look at your choices, the good and the bad, can go far with the committee.

### The Present: What Are You Doing Now?

- 1. Understand the Importance of This Step:** OK, if you have read this far, you are already ahead of the game. Too often, people stop with “The Past,” thinking that their stories are so compelling, the Financial Aid Committee will of course give them money. Not true. In fact, what is as important, if not more important, are the answers to these questions: **What has changed and what are you doing differently? This information is required by the federal government in order for the committee to even look at your appeal.**

**2. Describe How Your Circumstances Have Changed.** This is a critical step. The committee wants to know how your situation has changed. Maybe you have arranged for back-up childcare in case your daycare provider is sick. Maybe you have been, or are being treated, for a medical condition which you struggled with in the past. Maybe you have saved up some money and don't need to work as many hours each week. Regardless, be honest and specific. Providing additional financial aid is kind of like a gamble, and you want the members of the committee to think you are a safe bet.

**3. Describe Academic Steps You Have Taken.** Are there things you are doing now, in terms of your academic life, that you didn't do last time? Maybe you are attending more classes or stopping by your instructors' office hours. Perhaps you have sought assistance from programs at Parkland College such as Disability Support Services, the Center for Academic Success (CAS), or TRiO (TRiO is a federally funded program designed to help students successfully complete their degree in three years and transfer to a 4-year university). Maybe you have formed a study group with fellow classmates or now have a computer that will allow you to do your coursework. Again, the battle cry here: be specific, be honest, and be accountable for your own education.

**4. Document as Much as You Can.** Try to provide written documentation for as much of the information you have provided as possible. For example, ask a few of your instructors to write letters on your behalf (just remember, writing a letter takes time, so ask those instructors well *ahead of time*). The folks at CAS can, for example, give you a computer printout of your visits there as long as you have been faithful about logging in and logging out. If you are working with Disability Services, ask them for some documentation of your progress. TRiO will write letters of support for students actively participating in the TRiO program.

### The Future: So What's Next

**1. Think about Your Future Plans:** Sometimes, students don't do well because they originally lacked motivation or focus; it happens. However, it's important to the Financial Aid Committee to know that not only have you addressed past obstacles; you now have a vision and a drive to complete your education. Be specific about your academic and career goals and describe how your education will allow you to achieve them. Again, remember, the Financial Aid Committee is looking for "safe bets," and people who have a sense of what they want to accomplish are stronger candidates than those still uncertain of why they are in college.

**2. Think about Future Challenges/Obstacles.** Maybe next semester, you are taking the toughest class in your degree program. What are you doing to do about that? If you are taking a tough chemistry class, for example, plan on making use of CAS's peer tutors. If you know you have a huge writing project, plan on weekly visits to the Writing Lab. If you know you will need to work more hours to pay for your education, talk about how you are going to reduce your course load a bit to compensate. In other words, planning for *future* problems is not only good for this letter; it's good for life.

### Final Thoughts

In the Financial Aid Committee meeting, your materials have to do the talking for you. Take the time to write a clear, thoughtful, and **carefully edited letter** (here is where we in the Writing Lab can help!). If you have outside documentation, organize it and label it so the Financial Aid Committee members know what they are looking at. Remember, you will not be around for Financial Aid Committee to ask for clarification. You have a story to tell, and the Financial Aid Committee wants to hear that story. The quality of your materials can have a direct impact upon the Financial Aid Committee's final decision.

**Remember, the committee and the federal government want to know what happened and what has changed now that would allow you to be successful. Good luck to you!**

