Dear State Presidents:

We are beginning our 2017 scholarship application cycle, and some of you are asking about your President’s letters. Let me begin by thanking you for the critical part you played in our deliberations and selections in our 2016 application cycle. In this process, we have the paperwork; you tell us about the people. You tell us what you know of them either through personal contact or a telephone interview. You ask questions and hear the answers. Through those you get an understanding of the person that cannot be communicated through an essay or a transcript. You also give to us your judgment about the people you write about, and in this you are irreplaceable.

Given that we have so many new state presidents, let me review what we are looking for in your letters and what does not help us in our decision making. We need your impression of the student. Did the student enjoy the interview and the possibility that might spring from it, or did he feel put upon by having to talk with you? When you tell her about the NFB, does she demonstrate an interest in what we do, express any curiosity about where the money comes from to award scholarships, or feel any kinship with us as we try to help blind people? Do you see passion in this person, and is that passion reflected in actions that show there is more to her than academics? Is there community involvement that indicates that this applicant is mindful that one of life's greatest enjoyments is finding a cause larger than oneself?

The most important thing we want to know is if you think we should give this person a scholarship. If so, why? If not, why not? Knowing what you think is important, but knowing why you think it is just as crucial. The committee has to make tough decisions, so if you tell us you love everyone from your state, we have no idea which of the candidates you interviewed most merits a scholarship. We only know you would be glad to see someone from your state win. With fifty-two state affiliates and thirty scholarships, not every state will have a winner, and since these are merit scholarships, where a person lives is of little importance to us.

It is helpful if you can assess an applicant’s attitude about his or her blindness. Applicants need not have a “Federationist” point of view, but it is helpful to understand whether they are comfortable with their vision loss. What adaptive techniques do they employ?

We need to hear the good, but also the bad, and you need to know that what we hear stays within the committee. Anything less than full confidentiality would condemn our selection process to mediocrity, and this would be unacceptable. We want the best of the best, and we depend on you to guide us to these people. As a scholarship committee we have the responsibility for picking winners, but we need your knowledge, your impressions, and your candor.

Thank you for all that you do to make our Federation the dynamic organization it is, and thank you for making the scholarship program one we can be proud to run and fund.