

The Informal Guide to ACM Fellow Nominations

Recommendations for a Successful Nomination Process

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The ACM Fellows program recognizes the top 1% of the ACM membership that have shown excellence in technical, professional and leadership contributions. The ACM web site (<http://awards.acm.org/fellows>) provides detailed information about the criteria of the program and detailed instructions about the process and requirements for nominations. This short blurb aims to complement these formal instructions with informal advice about writing good nominations and endorsements. It is based on the personal experience of the author and of other current and past members of the ACM Fellows committee. It is not an official ACM document.

The success of a nomination depends first and foremost on the quality of the candidate. Usually, the candidate will not be familiar to most or all the committee members; a committee member that knows the candidate well could have a conflict and not be able to participate in the discussion of that candidate. Further, few committee members are likely to be thoroughly versed in the candidate's subfield. Therefore, decisions on candidates will be based almost uniquely on the information provided by the short nomination and endorsements. Hence, the quality of these documents is paramount: While a good nomination may not help a weak candidate, a lousy one may certainly sink a good candidate. Most nominators and endorsers understand this and write well-considered nominations and endorsements.

Unfortunately, we still see some poorly written nominations and we see a substantial number of poorly written endorsements. We hope that the following suggestions will reduce the frequency of those. Similar and additional suggestions were made in a blog by Jim Horning more than a decade ago (<http://horning.blogspot.com/2006/10/making-case-for-acm-fellow.html>).

We assume that the process starts with a decision that a candidate is ripe for nomination and with the selection of a nominator. Many institutions have an award committee that is responsible for this first step. In other places, the candidate will start the process. The nominator writes the nomination and selects the endorsers. The endorsers then submit their endorsements. The recommendations below cover the stages of this process: Selecting a nominator, writing a nomination, selecting endorsers, and writing endorsements; they address the people involved in these various activities.

1. Choose an experienced and willing nominator

Writing good nominations is a skill that improves with experience; it is also a time-consuming activity. If no experienced and willing nominator is to be found, then consider having a more experienced person read the nomination and suggest improvements.

2. Involve the candidate in the nomination process

A nominator might be tempted to nominate a candidate without her knowledge, to avoid disappointment in the case the nomination fails. This is a bad idea, for a variety of reasons: The candidate is best placed to provide accurate information on her achievements and for

selecting plausible endorsers. Besides, since each nomination is a bet that carries a risk (a two-year waiting time before the next attempt) it is best to consult the candidate before making the bet on her behalf.

3. Don't let the candidate write the nomination on her own

A candidate may want to write her own nomination; such a write-up could be a useful draft, but should not be the final nomination. For one thing, the nomination is supposed to be contributed by the nominator and express his views, not the views of the candidate. A nominator will have a more objective view of the importance of various contributions and a better understanding of how the nomination will be read by a committee that is not necessarily familiar with the candidate. The nominator should have more experience writing this type of document.

4. Start creating the nomination early

An earlier start means more time to iterate on the nomination text. It means that endorsers are more likely to agree to endorse, since they have not yet been approached multiple times, and they have time to write a quality endorsement. It means that endorsements are likely to be submitted well ahead of the deadline, thus ensuring that unforeseen events will not prevent a submission. ACM will accept five endorsements to be submitted. Rather than soliciting more endorsements than needed and creating superfluous work, it may be advisable to solicit five endorsements from the preferred endorsers and ensure that an additional person will be willing to write an endorsement on short notice, if needed.

5. Ensure the formal requirements for Fellowship are satisfied

ACM requires five years of continuous membership. People might be well known in the field and have a long association with ACM, but could have dropped their membership for a period during the last five years through negligence or frugality. Check that the five-year requirement is satisfied before starting the process.

6. Focus the nomination write-up on the formal requirements for an ACM Fellow

“The title of ACM Fellow denotes professional excellence, as evidenced by technical, professional and leadership contributions that:

- *advance the arts, sciences and practices of computing,*
- *promote the free interchange of ideas and information in the field,*
- *develop and maintain the integrity and competence of individuals in the field, and advance the objectives of ACM.”*

The text speaks quite specifically to contributions in the field of computing. Contributions outside the field are not relevant to the nomination. The committee usually takes a broad view of computing to include cognate areas. But success in an executive position unrelated to computing (e.g., as Provost at a University or manager of a non-IT unit in industry), or voluntary work unrelated to computing will not carry much weight. Think carefully before devoting precious nomination text to such activities.

The large majority of the successful candidates are selected mostly on the strength of their scientific and technical contributions. A very small number is selected mostly on the

strength of outstanding service to the ACM community. However, candidates are expected to have contributed both.

7. *Avoid platitudes and do not spend your word budget on evident claims or meta-discussions*

One obnoxious example is “*This nomination is a no-brainer*”. It may be a no-brainer for the nominator (or endorser), but no nomination is a no-brainer for the committee. Let the evidence show that the nomination is a no-brainer.

Another common example is: “*It is my opinion that the candidate is in the top 1% of ACM members*”. The nominator is very unlikely to be acquainted with a representative sample of the entire ACM population, so such a statement weakens the credibility of the nomination.

Don’t spend space reporting Google citation counts. Committee members are given reports from ACM on citation rates (both Google and ACM Digital Library) and similar metrics. Given the large diversity of computing the numbers are relevant only when compared to numbers of people of a similar age working in the same area. Don’t paraphrase the CV of the candidate.

8. *Do not assume the committee is familiar with the candidate’s research area*

A committee of ten people cannot possibly represent all research areas in computing, and the committee member most familiar with the candidate may have a conflict. Therefore, it is essential to explain why an achievement is important. “She proved theorem xxx” is not useful without an explanation of why people care about xxx; “she developed protocol yyy” is not useful without an explanation of how broadly the protocol is used.

9. *Do not assume the committee is familiar with the candidate’s country*

ACM strives to have an international representation on the committee, but not every country can be represented. Committee members may not be familiar with the importance of national awards, national academic societies or national leadership positions. Please explain their importance.

10. *Provide evidence of accomplishment that is most relevant to the type of accomplishment*

Accomplishments are meaningful if they have a visible impact. Impact will be of different nature for different types of impact. If the achievements are in theoretical computer science the impact is intellectual advance in our understanding of computing; the evidence could be subsequent research that builds on this advance as evidenced by citations. If the achievements are in applied research, the impact would be in the use of the developed technology; tangible artifacts could be more important than citations. If the achievement is to the computer industry, then the impact would be industrial success, with products as evidence of impact. Of course, these are not hard set rules, and many caveats apply: The last inventor of a new concept is often more cited than the first one; and commercial success of a product is only weakly correlated to its technical quality.

11. *Speak of the past, not of the future*

Fellows are selected for their actual accomplishments, not for their potential accomplishments in the future. The nomination and the endorsements should focus on the impact the research has had so far, not on the impact it is likely to have in the future.

12. Provide all the required information

The nomination is required to include

- *Candidate's most significant professional accomplishments and their foundational, technical, commercial, or other achievements (limited to 750 words).*
- *Up to 8 specific contributions epitomizing the significance and lasting impact of those accomplishments (limited to 300 words).*
- *Candidate's most significant leadership roles in ACM or other service activities (limited to 300 words).*
- *Formal professional recognition the candidate has received for his/her contributions, such as awards or other honors (limited to 300 words)*

Don't skip any of these sections. Please remember that "contributions" need not be publications. Also please explain why the contributions, roles, or recognition are significant. As noted above, don't assume the committee members will just know.

13. Select the endorsers carefully

One is naturally tempted to pick the most famous ACM Fellows that are willing to write an endorsement. Most will be diligent in doing so. However, some will write an endorsement that sounds like the "*Model of a Letter of Recommendation of a person you are unacquainted with*" that Benjamin Franklin once composed (<http://sites.sas.upenn.edu/bfranklin/pages/letter-recommendation>). Famous people are busy people and, with the best intentions in the world, time pressure may result in pro-forma, weak endorsements. This is particularly likely if the famous person is not already deeply familiar with the candidate's work.

Endorsements are more convincing when they come from people who work in the candidate's field of specialty and have made use of the candidate's work. If the candidate co-created a key result in their field, having at least one of the collaborators as an endorser is recommended. Such a collaborator could be in the same organization as the candidate. On the other hand, endorsers from the same organization that are not closely connected to the candidate's work are discouraged, as are endorsers who have an obligation to the candidate (e.g., former grad student or current supervisor). Having only collaborators as endorsers is a bad idea. Having all endorsers chosen from a narrow community (a small sub-specialty or a small national community) is a bad idea. Carefully weigh the trade-off between the familiarity of an endorser with the candidate and his perceived objectivity; and between the familiarity of the endorsers with the candidate and the breadth and diversity of the community they represent collectively. If one cannot find five endorsers that are ACM Fellows or have equal standing, and balance well these conflicting requirements, then it is likely that that the candidacy is premature.

For a candidate coming from a smaller country, or a country with a smaller community of ACM Fellows, it is important to have endorsers of another nationality. The committee wants to know how famous the candidate is in her field; not how famous she is in her country.

Good nominations often use endorsers that can testify to the importance of different contributions; one might focus on service, others on different aspects of the technical contributions. The right mix will depend on the types of contributions and their relative importance.

While the candidate's advice is important in selecting the endorsers, it is better that the endorsers be approached by the nominator: It will be easier for a potential endorser to say no if he is approached by the nominator, rather than by the candidate; a straight no is preferable to a tepid endorsement.

14. Write meaningful endorsements

A one-sentence endorsement such as "I believe this candidate merits fellow status" is poison, even if it comes from a very illustrious computer scientist. Don't agree to provide an endorsement if there is a risk you might not be able to say more; don't choose an endorser you suspect may be content with a one-sentence endorsement. Substantive, thoughtful, convincing endorsements will provide enough detail for credibility. This generally uses most of the space allotted.

There is no point repeating text that appears in the nomination – this is not new information. The endorsement is a "personal assessment of the candidate's impact on the computing field". The endorser should explain why he believes the impact is important enough to merit recognition with fellow status. Ideally, this explanation is distinct from or expands upon the explanation provided in the nomination. If it is not obvious why the endorser is able to assess the quality of the candidate's contribution, then a short explanation to that effect will be useful.

Please remember: An endorsement of the form "I am famous and trust me on this one" is likely to do more harm than good.

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