Developing a Telling Personal Statement & Obtaining Strong Letters of Recommendation

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About The Ohio State University

- We are a top 20 public University; in research activity
- The Engineering Department is ranked 26\textsuperscript{th} nationally
- Computer Science and Engineering is growing
  - Hired 6 new faculty in 3 years, expanding our research interests video games, computational economics, data-intensive computing, \textit{sustainable computing (me)}
  - Our research has influenced products at Intel, HP and Yahoo. Our students regularly take research positions at similar companies.

Join us!
Background: Personal Statements

- Qualifications: I have served on graduate school admission committees at the University of Rochester (06' and 07') and Ohio State (11')

- Lesson: Personal statements don't convince, they confirm.

  If (GPA < OK\textsubscript{program}) and (GRE < OK\textsubscript{program}); reject

  If (GPA > WOW\textsubscript{program}) and (GRE > WOW\textsubscript{program}); admit

  else {check letters; check research experience; \textit{read statement};…}

- The above metrics rarely conflict
Tips for Personal Statements

- Write about your accomplishments
- Tailor to specific departments
- Avoid dramatics, especially about personal hardships
- Avoid typos and incorrect mailing labels
- Don't write “I am a hard worker.”
Background in Recommendation Letters

- Been on both sides: High-stakes requests for faculty jobs (09'), Written letters for students at Ohio State and Rochester

- Takeaway: Letters of recommendation are always a distraction for the letter writer.

Make it easier on the letter writer; you will get a better (and more predictable) letter.
Tips for Recommendation Letters

• Before you ask
  – Focus on accomplishments, choose writers that shared in your successes
    • A class where you were the best student
    • A class project that only you completed
    • A successful research project
    • A successful (related) internship
  – Write a few pages summarizing your accomplishments
  – Create a resume/ Select diverse letter writers

• Here's how to ask: “Prof. X, will you write a letter of recommendation for me. You can focus on my grades in your classes and my research publication. I plan to apply to X,X,X so I will need a strong (pretty good) letter of recommendation from you.”
Tips for Recommendation Letters

- After you ask
  - Be wary of reluctance
  - Trust the sincerity of your letter writers
  - Don't trust their memory
Questions

- Q: How would you develop great personal relationships with your professors so they would write great letters of recommendation for you?
  - A: Do their bidding. First, take a leadership role in class (ask good questions, stimulate debate). Second, complete an undergraduate research project.

- Q: Is it better to have research mentors recommend us, rather than professors?
  - A: Mix it up, choose both. Exemplary performance in a hard class is impressive. Strong research experience is also impressive. Combined, they make a very impressive candidate.
Questions

- Q: Do you have any tips on how best to frame a research project for scholarship funding (NSF, Soros, Goldwater, etc.)

- A: Undergraduate research typically isn't groundbreaking. It is supposed to be preparatory. The best write ups typically include: 1) a clear understanding of the bigger project, 2) a description of how you fit in, and 3) how it prepared you to address the next (bigger) problem
Questions

- Q: What is the appropriate level of formality for a personal statement?

- Q: Since I would not care about financial aid and will leave for China to be with my fiancee whenever graduate, what kind of concentrating should be in my personal statement?
  - A: Nothing special. Same tips as above.