

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<sup>th</sup> 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, *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  $(GPA < OK_{\text{program}})$  and  $(GRE < OK_{\text{program}})$ ; reject
  - If  $(GPA > WOW_{\text{program}})$  and  $(GRE > WOW_{\text{program}})$ ; admit
  - else {check letters; check research experience; *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?
- A: Formal and concise. Avoid jargon and redundancy.
- Q: Since I would not care about financial aid and will leave for China to be with my fiancée whenever graduate, what kind of concentrating should be in my personal statement?
- A: Nothing special. Same tips as above.