Panel: Applying to Grad School

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Panelists:

Miguel Holgado, Melanie Archipley (maa14@illinois.edu), Cassidy Wagner (cwagner4@illinois.edu), Charles Gammie

Why Grad School?

- Grad school

Application Process

- How many schools to apply to?
  - Miguel applied to five, got into 4.
  - Melanie started with a list of 25 schools, compiled by talking to friends, faculty, etc. Applied to 9.
  - Cassidy applied to 8 schools.
  - Charles applied to 8 schools.
- Physics vs. Astronomy Departments
  - Miguel applied to astronomy
  - Melanie mostly applied to astronomy departments, but some physics too.
- How did panelists decide where to apply?
  - Miguel: interested in computation & simulations.
  - Melanie: geography, GRE requirements, cost to apply, feasability.
  - Casssidy: interested in NANOGRAV, so applied to schools involved in the collaboration.
- Why did panelists choose UIUC?
  - Miguel liked computational strengths of UIUC, smaller department, and less intense candidacy requirements.
  - Melanie liked resources, friendliness of department.
- No such thing as a safety school for astronomy grad school!
  - Even small, out-of-the-way schools might be leaders in certain fields.
  - The *people* in the department determine a lot.

        * Professor webpages are poorly maintained, check arxiv.org for up-to-date research and home institution.
- Advice from grad application committee members:
  - Your interests might change! It's good to apply to places where you won't be restricted to working on a single topic or with a single person.
  - Maybe not a good idea to apply to a department if you're only interested in working with one person
  - Visits can help figure out whether you'll mesh/enjoy working with certain people.
  - Put yourself in the shoes of the grad committee members: what are they looking for?

Personal Statements:

- Charles thinks it's not very important, except as a metric of ability to write (but a good way to provide information that won't come through elsewhere in your application).
- Naming specific faculty can actually *hurt* your application in certain cases, if they're not taking on students, ect.
- Good to recycle personal statements for different schools, but make sure to personalize for each school!
- Specificity vs generality: make yourself stand out and sound focused, but don't make yourself look inflexible!

Letters of Recommendation

- People who might write your letters:
  - Research advisors (preferred)
  - Teachers who *know you personally*
    * Going to office hours can help if you think you might ask that professor for a rec! Even if you're doing well in the class, it will help you make an impression on the professor.
  - Outreach coordinators/organizers if they can speak to your commitment, etc.
  - Experienced letter-writers are good: a vote of confidence from someone who has worked with 100s of people is worth more than a vote of confidence from a first-year postdoc.
- Make sure your letter-writers will actually write you positive/strong recommendations!
- Be nice to your recommenders! You can give them some kind of spreadsheet with application deadlines, how to submit letters, etc.
- "Do you have a time to write me a strong letter of recommendation?"
  - ask *at least* two weeks in advance, ideally a month or two out.
  - Send reminders! (BUG THEM)

- Letters of rec are very important part of your application!
- Send thank you notes!

GREs

- Many schools are getting rid of it!
  - Cost-prohibitive, probably discriminatory, shown to not correlate to success in grad school.
- General
  - Cost: $300, $150 waiver available
  - Often university-wide score cutoffs.
  - Watch out for math section!
- Physics (PGRE):
  - Charles: not much difference between 80th and 99th percentiles, but significant difference between 15th and 30th percentiles.
  - Astronomy majors usually score worse than physics majors on the PGRE, astronomy schools usually account this.
  - Most undergrad physics educations won't prefer you for the PGRE..
  - Get "Conquering the GRE"! Very helpful book.
  - Cost: $150, $75 waiver available