Disclaimer: the following presentation is based on my perspective as a member of the admissions committee in MSE and AS&T at Berkeley.
Graduate Admissions: the review process

Admissions committee goals

• Maintain highest standards of scholarship
• Admit applicants who will succeed in grad school
• Meet research needs of faculty and department
• Recruit for potential added value (fellowships)
• Diversify student body

Application review

• Identify "strongest candidates"
  - academic record (grades, GRE scores)
  - letters
  - research, publications, other activities (statements)
• Rank applications based on strength
• Perform full review of applications
• Admit "top" applicants—keeping balanced pool
Graduate Application

- Grades—upper division, major, junior year
  
  higher is better
- Exam scores—impact is no longer clear
- Letters of recommendation—a key intangible
- Statement(s)—can’t make but can break

Graduate Admissions: setting the record straight

- Admission to Univ. A does not mean admission to Univ. B
- Admissions process differs even within Univ. A
- Academic excellence does not guarantee admission—reviewers seek the best matches
- Research experience rarely trumps academic excellence
- Money/funding can make a difference—having a fellowship is a major plus
- Hardship does not justify underperformance

Don't take it personally!
Graduate Admissions: some recommendations

• Plan ahead (prepare for exams, investigate programs, seek advice)
• Write to your audience (e.g., faculty reviewers at Univ. A)
• Choose your letter writers wisely
• Apply for fellowships
• Apply to a wide range of programs (tiers 1 and 2)
• Be responsive even if we may not be
• Visit schools