

References

Dear Committee,

It is an honor to tell you about one of the best students I have ever worked with—Peter Zheng.

Did you know that it is possible to graduate with four majors in four years? Peter Zheng is living proof. I am the dean of the University of Pittsburgh's Honors College, where I work with some of the highest-achieving students at the University of Pittsburgh who are using their capabilities to enrich the world. Even within this community Pete stands out. From my first meeting with him, I was impressed with Pete's personal background and academic achievements. Defying expectations, Pete manages to balance multiple degrees and majors, to volunteer in the community weekly, conduct graduate level research, mentor others, advocate for social justice, take care of family members (he legally adopted his brothers three kids for a semester), and work at his family's business, all while maintaining a perpetually positive attitude and very competitive GPA!

Pete has a passion for social justice, has ideas on how to enact this passion, and follows through on those ideas. One of the most impressive projects on which he has worked is at University Preparatory High School (UPrep), which focuses on low income students. As part of the Student Civic Engagement Council, Pete was asked by Dr. Kathy Humphrey, Pitt's Senior Vice Chancellor for Engagement, to work with UPrep. A Pittsburgh Public School and one of the lower-performing schools in the state, one of the challenges faced by UPrep students is hunger, which not only effects health and quality of life, but also school performance. Pete did appropriate background research, proposed programming, and implemented the proposal by collecting and organizing snacks that the high school students could eat during the day. Pete also instituted a mentoring program. This demonstrated that he not only knows the power of role models and making people feel valued, but that he is truly a systems thinker. I was very proud to see how he took this task from idea to conclusion, making an important impact on the students of the school by helping fill both their bellies and their minds. For an undergraduate student to start an initiative like this—especially while balancing the responsibilities mentioned above—is truly remarkable.

Just a couple of weeks ago, his research was published in the Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology, an international peer reviewed journal, with first authorship. As you know, a first author paper in a major journal is a phenomenal accomplishment for an undergraduate. And last month, he was announced as a finalist for senior of the year for the entire university, an award based on academic excellence, leadership, and civic engagement. I especially wanted you to know about these accolades because they are so recent that he probably did not have the opportunity to put them in his original application.

Given his personal background of being a first generation, queer, low income, and Chinese-American youth with parents who do not speak English, it is uncommon to witness a student overcome these systematic barriers towards success within our education system. Yet, Pete breaks these stereotypes and proves that hard work, resilience, and optimism can yield wonders. He is the type of student, humanitarian, and citizen, the University aspires to produce and what society needs. As you can tell from the list of schools to which he has been accepted above, I am not the only individual impressed with Pete.

Therefore, it is an honor and pleasure to endorse Pete. He has the heart, intellect, and passion to be an outstanding change agent in our society. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information about this remarkable individual.

Brian Primack
Deans of Pitt Honors College

Dear [REDACTED] Selection Committee:

The University of Pittsburgh is thrilled to nominate Peter Zheng for the [REDACTED]. Zheng is pursuing four majors—psychology, economics, business, and political science (with a concentration in global governance, economy, and China). He is on a quest to take a leadership role in addressing food insecurity, especially among LGBTQIA+ youth. Deeply committed to fighting hunger and positively impacting vulnerable populations, he possesses the intellectual stamina and dynamic leadership skills to reach his goals. Growing up as a queer, low-income Chinese-American youth living in poverty, and with parents who did not speak English, Zheng became a vital resource for his parents. He is a first-generation college student who, in Pitt's sole history, is the only individual to graduate Summa & Magna Cum Laude with 4 distinct majors and a masters in four years, and whose contributions to the surrounding community demonstrate extraordinary talent and ambition.

I first met Zheng at a summit commencement of the Hesselbein Global Academy for Student Leadership and Civic Engagement. He was one of 50 delegates chosen for the Hesselbein. The mission of the academy is “to produce experienced and ethical leaders who will address critical national and international issues and advance positive social and economic initiatives throughout the world.” It was a delight meeting these young leaders from approximately 30 countries worldwide. My first impression of Zheng: he was popular and having a ball interacting with everyone. I encouraged him to visit the national scholarships office in the honors college. Fortunately, a 2016 [REDACTED] finalist urged him to set up an advising appointment.

The young man I have grown to know over the past several months continues to inspire me. During our last appointment he got a phone call, and he politely asked if he could take it. It was his niece's school—she was sick. He asked me if he could make some phone calls. He quickly contacted both of his parents, speaking Mandarin to them, and arranged for one of them to pick her up. Peter is the legal guardian of his brother's three children (under the age of six). In addition, he continues to work at his family's restaurant in addition to his part-time work on campus, assistant teaching, research, and many responsibilities in various organizations. Not surprisingly, when I emailed him at 5am this morning with a quick question, he responded immediately.

Zheng plans to graduate with a Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) degree and a Bachelor of Arts. The BPhil is the highest level of scholarship attainable by an undergraduate at Pitt, requiring graduate level research and a rigorous thesis defense. Focused in his psychology major and drawing from his experience in the Kid's Thinking Lab, he will examine the educational disparities of children with parents of different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., comparing immigrant parents and those born in the United States). Furthermore, his business, economics, and political science studies enrich his scholarly pursuits, and have been instrumental in his grassroots work and public service. He rapidly and naturally synthesizes what he learns, whether becoming familiar with new communities (he works in the South Side, East Liberty, and the Hill District, three vastly different neighborhoods in Pittsburgh) or discovering new areas in his disciplines. As his faculty recommendation writer Dr. Melissa Libertus says, he radiates with curiosity.

Zheng has many strengths, resilience and dogged determination top among them. His success in creating the snack program with a mentoring component in an elementary school in one of Pittsburgh's at-risk school districts is rooted in his own experience combating hunger and poverty. His mother and father came to the United States during China's one child policy (the oldest son stayed behind in China until Zheng was in the 8th grade). His mother found work as a waitress and his father as a chef. When his father wanted to open his own business, as a child in elementary school, Zheng was responsible for making business transactions for his father with a seafood supplier shipping from the Gulf of Mexico. When I first was getting to know him, he was embarrassed when I asked him about his high school activities. “I did NOTHING, Judy!” he said. “What do you mean you did nothing,” I asked

incredulously. “I was always working in my parents’ restaurant and making deliveries,” he replied. He spent his summers and weekends working alongside his mother and father. Not at academic camps, experiential learning programs, sports because his family could not drive him due to work, or activities high-school students typically engage in to prepare for college applications.

Zheng has faced numerous obstacles – ones that no human, let alone child, should have ever experienced – but you would never guess this to meet him. One could suspect this based on his maturity but hard to pinpoint with how he never complains about his tribulations. His tear-jerking upbringing was a result of his parents having no support or resources arriving in America and the challenges that came along with not knowing English. Some of his strongest attributes seem contradictory. For instance, he has keen sense of discipline and time management, yet he is one of the most spontaneous students I have ever met; he possesses unparalleled grit, yet he wears his heart on his sleeve. His unwavering compassion for others and ability to connect to people of diverse backgrounds are key to his innumerable and growing accomplishments. He gets people involved, successfully communicating and reaching out to students, businesses, and nonprofits alike. He is creative and innovative. The Pitt Day of Service is a long tradition at our university and gets a lot of hype as Pitt students go to different establishments citywide and volunteer in some capacity. For various reasons, many students cannot participate that day. Zheng organized the New Day of Service, bringing students together in one big room on campus making “do it yourself” items to donate to the community. The spirit in which he engages college students with the city is brilliant, whether it’s setting up and coordinating weekly volunteer opportunities through Epsilon Sigma Alpha Service Fraternity for its one hundred brothers—to play with the children, cook, or bake at the Ronald McDonald’s or Family House—or connecting Pitt mentors via video and letter writing to 30 third grade children in a low performing school in Texas.

This past December, he and a sophomore engineer, a member of the National Society of Black Engineers, founded Students 4 Social Justice, a student run organization that evolved from Zheng’s participation on the University Diversity Council. He is excitedly working on programming—partnering with Rainbow Alliance, the Women’s Organization and other activist organizations on campus—for a social justice symposium this April. When he incorporated an educational component to the snack program in the Hill District, it demonstrated that he not only knows the power of role models and making people feel valued, but that he is truly a systems thinker. We are confident that with his vision and business acumen he will develop the expertise he needs to make a significant impact in helping homeless and hungry LGBTQIA+ youth. Zheng is a true gentle powerhouse.

It is an honor and pleasure to endorse Peter Zheng for the [REDACTED].

Judy Zang
Director of Pitt National Scholarships