

Department of Physics & Astronomy

PHYSICS NEWS FLASH

They Came, They Saw, and Here's what They Said

A Roundtable Discussion with the Physics Department's Spring 2005 Graduating Seniors



Stephen Ogden



Olga Ovchinnikov



Chad Overcast



Gail Zasowski

Not
Pictured:
Bill
Holmes

With nine days to go before graduation, five of the department's graduating seniors took time to sit down and share ideas about their undergraduate experience at UT. Bill Holmes, Stephen Ogden, Olga Ovchinnikov, Chad Overcast and Gail Zasowski reflected on what they learned, what could be better, and what wisdom they would impart to incoming freshmen.

Nearly all said that financial considerations were among the primary factors bringing them to UT. In-state scholarships certainly made the university's flagship campus more attractive. (Chad, in fact, turned down a football scholarship to Ole Miss.) But they didn't necessarily arrive on The Hill planning to major in physics. Gail wavered between physics and classics her first year, eventually deciding to double major in the two (she was also one of the College of Arts and Sciences top graduates). Bill started in engineering but switched to math and engineering physics his junior year. Stephen began his academic life at UT as a computer science major, but didn't care for programming and so chose physics instead.

Several aspects of the program, especially the prospect of cultivating relationships with the faculty, appealed to the group.

"You know all your professors and most of the students in the department," Olga said. "How many departments have an open door policy with the department head?"

The range of options and opportunities also drew praise. Stephen liked the flexibility offered by the different concentrations within the major. He chose the general concentration with an emphasis in business. The chance to attend meetings (including the American Association of Physics Teachers national conference) and to find rewarding research projects provided an added dimension to the undergraduate experience.

Chad spent the summer of 2004 and the following Christmas break working at Arnold Air Force Base in Tullahoma. Gail worked at the University of Rochester last summer and used her astronomy work there as the basis for her senior honors project. She worked with the KamLAND (Kamioka Liquid scintillator Anti Neutrino Detector) project the summer before. Among Olga's summer research appointments have been stints at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the University of Colorado, where she busied herself with photoionization studies, Bose-Einstein Condensation, and atomic clocks.

Certain courses also had their adherents. "Contemporary physics is a great class," Bill said. "They should promote that class more."

Overall the group gave the department solid marks, but they also saw room for improvement. Advising could use some help, although certain faculty won commendation for their attentiveness to the task ("Dr. Elston is really good," Bill said.). While the thermal textbook was roundly criticized, a course on relativity would be most welcome. Gail, who plans to pursue her doctoral degree in astronomy, would like to see an astronomy/astrophysics major and some reinvigoration of the upper-level astronomy courses. Olga suggested more crossover with the chemistry department. As a group, the students heartily concurred that an 8 a.m. class on electricity and magnetism is never a good idea. And some help preparing for grad school applications would certainly be met with enthusiasm.

"I think there should have been a GRE physics course," Chad said.

What comes next for these brand-new alumni is an impressive list of ambitions. All five graduated on May 7 with a rank of cum laude or higher. Bill is headed to Indiana University, enrolling in their joint math/physics Ph.D. program. Chad has accepted a full-time position with Arnold Air Force Base and will pursue an advanced degree at UT's Space Institute. Stephen is considering the United States Marine Corps and possibly a future in law. Both Olga and Gail are going for doctoral degrees: Olga at the University of Colorado and Gail at the University of Virginia.

And what parting advice do these graduates have for the new students coming to the department this fall?

"Don't be shy," Olga said. "Hang out in the (undergraduate) lounge."

And listen to those who came before you.

As Gail said, "Make friends with the upperclassmen early, because they'll advise you better than anyone else."

*The department offers congratulations to **all** our Spring 2005 graduates:*

Ph.D.

-Hye-Jung Kang

M.S.

-Kevin Charles Baker (UTSI)

-Kevin David Berry

-E. Darren Ellis

-Ryan L. Holloman

Bachelor's in Engineering Physics

-James Ethan Alsup

-Alan Halsey Bergheimer (technically, expected summer 05)

-Levi Loveday Greenwood (technically, expected summer 05)

-William Robert Holmes (Bill)

-Daniel Chadwick Mitchell (Chad)

Bachelor's in Physics

- Anton Viatcheslavovich Naumov
- Olga Sergeevna Ovchinnikov
- Gail Zasowski
- William Chandler Overcast (Chad)
- Stephen James Ogden
- Stacey Elizabeth Thomas