Alumni Profile
Shunan Zhang – Psychology with concentration in Cognitive Neuroscience PhD

Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

I did a postdoc with Angela Yu at UCSD on computational modeling, and then became a data scientist at WalmartLabs. Later, I became a machine learning engineer with a startup called SmartNews, and worked on building their recommender system.

Now I'm a machine learning engineer and a data scientist on the sensor algorithm team at Apple. I'm currently the tech lead on algorithm development for a health sensing project.

What made you get into the career that you are in?

I explored a lot of things without knowing specifically what I really wanted. Two years after working in the industry, I finally narrowed down my target to be building something that my parents would find useful and helpful. I ended up building health sensing features in the Apple Watch.

Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

2007-2012.

What program were you in?

Cognitive Science.

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

I knew I would enjoy studying at UCI when I visited during the admission open house: faculty and study resources, the lab's research focuses, people and environment, the climate, and so on.

Reflections

What is your most memorable moment/experience at UCI?

I had my very first academic publication, and got a chance to talk at a conference abroad. I

realized one thing that I still benefit from: people recognize you by your work.

Was there one thing or one person at UCI that really helped or made a difference in your graduate/postdoctoral career? If so, tell us about whomever or what it was?

There are many people who influenced, inspired, and helped me in my graduate career, which I'm always grateful for; however, if I can name only one person, it has to be my advisor, Michael Lee.

Did you do any research while at UCI and what was it?

- How would you explain your research to a layperson? How would you help someone understand the importance/significance of this research?

I studied how people make decisions under uncertainty, while balancing the trade-off between exploring for new information and getting immediate pay-off. I used mathematical models to describe this process, and tested hypotheses using human behavioral data.

This research is useful in many ways, one straightforward example is creating an environment to help people reach their goals more efficiently, as done in many human-interface designs.

- What has impressed you most about the subject matter that you chose for your research/degree while at UCI?

It arouses your curious heart toward human intelligence and cognition, and drives you to learn mathematics, statistics and computer science to approach those questions. Its interdisciplinary nature opens up many paths that are worth pursuing.

Alumni Life

What advice do you have for a new graduate student?

I found the best way to learn a new subject is to sit in the class and do homework.

Also, choose a research topic that you are really interested in, in that case, you will enjoy what you do for the next 5 years, acquire many solid skills on the way, and meet many interesting people who will inspire you.

Is there a typical 'down' weekend for you—how do you relax?

Sleeping works the best. Try sleeping through.