

SWIMMING TOWARD SUCCESS

Margaret Guo, NCAA's 2016 "Woman of the Year," describes how she balances her passions for learning, leadership, and competitive athletics.

By Stephanie Schorow | Connector Contributor

The first question someone might ask upon learning about the accomplishments of Margaret Guo '16 is simply: "How?"

As in: how did she graduate from MIT with dual degrees in electrical engineering/computer science and biological engineering while maintaining a perfect grade point average (GPA)—and, among other activities, heading the MIT Society of Women Engineers during her senior year? And, especially, how did she manage all that while also becoming a national collegiate swimming champion? (In October 2016, thanks to that last achievement, Guo won the NCAA's "Woman of the Year" award — the first MIT student to do so in the award's 26-year history.)

So how did she do it all? The answer is simple, yet surprising: Passion.

"I think one of the things MIT has taught me is how to prioritize things that I am passionate about," says Guo, a native of San Diego, who is now studying for a medical degree and a PhD at Stanford University. "For me, that meant spending my weekends as part of the Society of Women Engineers, mentoring young girls, and showing them the wonders of science."

It also meant spending 20 hours a week practicing in the MIT pool. But Guo says that time spent swimming forced her to be more productive elsewhere. "Over the semesters, I learned to focus on the things I care about and do those things really well," she says.

Her focus brought her star-athlete status: She earned five All-America honors from the College Swimming Coaches Association of America, and an additional six all-conference accolades. In 2016, Guo and her relay teammates set New



England Women's and Men's Athletic Conference records in three events, and Guo qualified individually for the Division III Women's Swimming and Diving Championships.

"I don't particularly think that my MIT education and swimming were in direct conflict," says Guo, who has been swimming since she was a toddler. "I loved being surrounded by people who shared a common set of values and a mutual determination to achieve a team goal."

Indeed, she credits her MIT classmates for helping her become "a better version of me." They helped wake her up for 6 a.m. practices, toiled with her on problem-set questions, and supported her during the highs and the lows. "The inherently collaborative nature of the school fits well into its innovative vibe," she says. "We weren't competing against each other for the grade; we were working together to gain a deeper understanding of the world in order to make it a better place."

Guo has now taken her passion back to the West Coast to pursue an MD/PhD. "Being a student athlete, I've been always interested in human physiology and always wanted to explore the physical and functional properties that make us so uniquely human," she says. "It can be argued that the human body is a basically the world's most complex system, with intertwining feedback loops, a lot of different inputs, and a lot of different parallel processes."

Taking the viewpoint that diseases might be considered "system failures," Guo hopes to work on creating directed and effective therapeutics for systems-based diseases, such as cancer or autoimmune disease. Ultimately, she says, she wants to help people lead healthier, happier lives. 