# Personal Statement

## Preparation and Potential for Space Technology Research

Early in my education, I learned of the major impact space technology like satellites has on our personal lives. The researchers who developed this technology changed the world, and I longed to make similar impactful contributions to benefit mankind. This desire led me to pursue a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. During my undergraduate studies, I discovered that I had an aptitude for and love of controls and robotics. I found that the best way to get involved in robotics research that would benefit society was to pursue a graduate degree. Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. My education will empower me to positively influence the world through my career by performing cutting edge space technology research which will benefit society. The following sections highlight a few of the most prominent experiences that have prepared me to push forward the frontiers of space technology research in controls and robotics.

### Los Alamos Dynamic Summer School – 2014

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) was my first exposure to the world of research. In a disaster scenario, humans on foot can take a long time to navigate unsafe terrain to locate people who need help. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are one of the most promising technologies in the effort to improve response times as they could quickly locate survivors and direct responders accordingly. In many disaster scenarios, UAVs would need to fly indoors to find people. One of the challenges of flying a UAV indoors via onboard visual feedback is encountering reflective and transparent barriers. Glass office partitions, windows, and mirrors can confuse the operator (or autonomous navigation system), reducing the ability to accurately identify the location of people in need of rescue. During this nine-week fellowship, I worked with two other students to design a multimodal sensing system capable of determining 1) whether a barrier was transparent, reflective, or opaque and 2) the distance and angle of approach to that barrier. I personally came up with the system architecture we ultimately chose to use, headed the mechanical design of our prototype, and designed and implemented the algorithms for determining the distance and angle of approach to the barriers.

By the end of the fellowship, we had built and tested a successful prototype. We also published our research in an SPIE conference paper [1], and I was selected to present our results at the SPIE conference. Working as a researcher at LANL left me amazed by the depth of knowledge my mentors possessed. They were able to guide us to the most viable solutions of our difficult research problems while performing impactful research of their own. During this experience, I developed a strong desire to become a technical expert so that I could also help younger researchers while contributing to the solutions of difficult problems.

### BYU Tactile Sensor Development – 2015

After my experience at LANL, I sought out more research opportunities at Brigham Young University (BYU). Being particularly interested in dynamics and control, I decided to become involved with the BYU Robotics and Dynamics (RaD) Lab under the direction of Marc Killpack. Before joining the lab, I was required to have a certain skill level in Python, Linux, and other third party robotics software libraries. To compensate for my lack of knowledge in these areas, I spent 30 hours in a single semester outside of class and work completing tutorials and developing these necessary skills. As a result, I was able to join the lab and gain valuable research experience. This demonstrates my drive to succeed and ability to overcome obstacles in my path, both valuable skills that will continue to benefit me as a researcher.

At the RaD Lab, we work with pneumatically actuated soft robots. These soft robots are inherently safer around humans than traditional robots and have significant space technology applicability (weighing an order of magnitude less than Robonaut 2). I led a team of three other undergraduate students to develop a fabric tactile sensor that wrapped around the soft robots to provide force feedback for control implementation. I wrote both the microcontroller code to collect data from the sensor and the Python code to implement the sensor with the robots in the lab. This sensor has been effectively implemented as feedback for a soft robot force controller. Now, these robots will be able to operate even more safely around humans (e.g. performing astronaut assistance tasks in the International Space Station or equipment maintenance on Mars).

### The Aerospace Corporation - 2016

This past summer, I worked at a second federally funded research and development center, The Aerospace Corporation. While there, I worked primarily on three projects. First, I designed, built, and calibrated a testing setup to successfully measure the thrust generation of a new type of UAV in Martian atmosphere. This included selecting vacuum compatible load cells, designing the mounting hardware, and writing the LabVIEW code to collect the data. Second, I was responsible for determining the heat transfer rate of new thermoelectric cooling modules. The Aerospace Corporation was researching these modules as a potential replacement for cryocoolers on satellites. I designed a test plan and wrote a thermal PID controller in LabVIEW that regulated the temperature difference across the module. My LabVIEW code completely automated the data collection which saved weeks of engineering time. To tune the PID controller, I performed system identification to create a first order model and simulated its response in Simulink. During my last project, I wrote a gradient based optimization in MATLAB to orient six accelerometers on a reaction wheel jitter test stand.

This internship reinforced my love of working in a research based environment. I want the algorithms I develop during my graduate research to influence the lives of real people. This means that they will need to be implemented on real hardware. This experience in working with control system design on real hardware and writing an optimization for real data has been invaluable in preparing me for graduate research in controls and robotics.

## Space Technology Research, and Career Goals

Through my internships at LANL and The Aerospace Corporation, I learned that participating in cutting edge research and obtaining a graduate degree will greatly enhance my ability to benefit society. I fully intend to participate in similar research activities throughout my career. In fact, my work at The Aerospace Corporation was received well enough that I have the opportunity of returning to work there after the completion of my degree to contribute to the nation’s scientific understanding of space dynamics and control.

## How My Proposed Course of Study and Research will Help Me Achieve These Goals

I am pursuing my graduate degree in the RaD Lab at BYU where I will research multi-arm manipulation with soft, pneumatically actuated robots. As a part of this research, I will develop advanced dynamic models, write and implement controllers, and work with a variety of robots. This experience of solving open ended problems will be priceless in my future career. I will also have the opportunity to present my research at multiple conferences and collaborate with other researchers in my field. My graduate degree will enable me to work shoulder-to-shoulder with other experts to address some of the nation’s most difficult challenges.

# Project Narrative

## Introduction and Motivation

Robots revolutionized the manufacturing industry 30 years ago, but human-robot interaction is still in its infancy. Imagine a robot that could gently help a disabled person into their wheelchair, lift a survivor to safety in a disaster scenario after carefully digging through rubble, or even work alongside an astronaut in space. Industrial robots, though highly precise and capable, have a relatively high inertia. This severely limits how quickly and safely they can move to avoid unexpected collisions and high impact forces while operating in close proximity to humans.[2] Current robots for space missions, like Robonaut 2, mainly rely on rigid links with compliant joints. One of the purposes of Robonaut 2 is to provide performance data on how a robot works side-by-side with astronauts.[3] Despite having compliance at the joints, Robonaut 2 still has relatively high inertia which limits how quickly it can move around delicate equipment or human collaborators. The footprint and weight of robots used in space are also critically important, and the current robots used are comparatively large and heavy. My research will focus on inflatable, pneumatically actuated (soft) robots–like the one in *Figure 1*–which will use comparatively less payload, weighing an order of magnitude less than Robonaut 2 and occupying significantly less volume when deflated. Because these robots have soft links with low inertia, they are *inherently* safer around people and equipment even when moving at higher speeds than traditional space robotics. In short, development of soft robotics has significant merit in space technology and human-robot interaction.



*Figure 1: Five degree of freedom soft robot developed by Pneubotics*

One important feature in robots capable of working around humans or mimicking human dexterity is the ability to use two or more arms. Many tasks such as lifting heavy/bulky objects or service and assembly tasks are difficult or even impossible with only one arm. Furthermore, because soft robots are so lightweight, it’s possible that a single robot may not have the capacity for tasks requiring high force. In these situations, it makes sense to have multiple lighter robots in space for redundancy and to collaborate in manipulating heavier things. These challenges have sparked a large amount of research into multi-arm manipulation. My research will focused on coordinated, multi-arm manipulation using inflatable, pneumatically actuated (soft) robots like the one in *Figure 1.*

## Background

Multi-arm manipulation does not have a specific agreed-upon definition. It could be many fingers on a hand manipulating a small object, or many arms manipulating a large object. In fact, both of these scenarios could use the same control principles. Furthermore, multi-arm manipulation can be categorized by un-coordinated and coordinated tasks. Un-coordinated manipulation tasks are those in which the arms are performing tasks that do not require interaction (e.g. one arm is moving parts while a second arm is performing an unrelated assembly task). Jobs which require two or more robotic arms to physically interact with the same object are classified as coordinated manipulation tasks.[4] My research will be focused on coordinated, multi-arm manipulation tasks.

One difficulty in coordinated, multi-arm manipulation with traditional robots is that small deviations in end effector position or orientation from any of the arms while holding a rigid object can result in large stresses on both the object and internally on the arm. To compensate, many researchers have proposed hybrid force/position control schemes which seek to control the position of an object being grasped by several manipulators while either keeping the forces below a certain threshold or maintaining a certain force.[5, 6, 7, 8, 9] A challenge with this approach is the coordination of high bandwidth centralized controllers. Additionally, if the software or hardware malfunctions and the force control stops working, traditional robots could exert a dangerous amount of force on the object being manipulated, themselves, humans, or other delicate equipment nearby.

An alternative and novel approach is to mitigate buildup of high forces by using a robot with flexible links and passive compliance in the joints from the compressibility of air. Because soft robots are inherently compliant, deviations in object position result in significantly lower buildup of forces; thus, they lend themselves nicely to tasks involving several arms. Even tasks with one rigid arm and multiple soft arms become simpler as the whole system is forgiving of end effector deviations due to compliance of the soft arms. Therefore, one of the major concerns with successful implementation of coordinated, multi-arm manipulation is eliminated. Additionally, because these robots are soft and inherently compliant, they are very safe around humans and delicate equipment even if something malfunctions. On the other hand, compliant links and joints introduce new challenges (addressed below) into the control paradigm, and currently do not perform as well as state of the art torque controlled robots like Robonaut 2.

## Hypothesis

I propose that coordinated multi-arm manipulation can realistically be implemented with inflatable, pneumatically actuated robots. My goals are to implement coordinated multi-arm control for (1) impact tasks with rigid objects (like sweeping off a solar panel or assembly of construction materials that require impact for insertion) and (2) soft object manipulation tasks (like moving a tarp or a flexible solar array). Here are the underlying questions to address:

* Two key challenges with soft robots are accuracy and repeatability. The dynamics of the arms can change with a variety of different stimuli such as temperature change (which can be drastic in space), pressure loss through bladder punctures, and actuation hysteresis. Additionally, the bladders often reseat themselves as the arms move. What type of control scheme will result in the highest task space accuracy and repeatability?
* There are many different types of control schemes for coordinated multi-arm manipulation presented in the literature. Which type of control scheme will be most effective in coordinated manipulation tasks for soft robots?
* Some tasks require more stiffness than is nominally available in a single soft robot arm. I propose that such tasks could become more feasible by grasping one arm with the other (increasing the rigidity by forming a closed kinematic chain). This type of task would not be feasible with a rigid robot. How will the control scheme need to be altered to accurately control this system?

To answer these research questions, there are many intermediate steps described in the following section.

## Research Plan

*Manipulability Improvement:* After spending the last year in the RaD Lab, I am familiar with the challenges of accurately controlling soft robots. Recent design changes have left the robot in *Figure 1* with only four degrees of freedom per arm. To perform general multi-arm manipulation tasks, each end effector needs to be controllable in at least six degrees of freedom. I will work with undergraduate students to help add at least two additional degrees of freedom per arm to improve manipulability. Another student in my research group recently submitted a paper to ICRA 2017 on rigorous design optimization of soft robots. I will build on this work in selecting which degrees of freedom to add and how they should be mounted.

*Single Arm* *Hybrid Controller Development:* Task space accuracy and repeatability are affected by dynamic and kinematic model error (accurately modeling the robot in *Figure 1* and other soft robots is not trivial).Previous researchers in the RaD Lab have designed an algorithm using model predictive control (MPC) that can command a single arm in joint space.[10] I will use inverse kinematics libraries – like TRAC-IK in the Robot Operating System–to compute desired joint angles for this controller; however, this control method alone will not result in accurate task space positions and orientations due to dynamic and kinematic error. A common control technique to close error is visual servoing.[11, 12] My first approach to this problem will be to create a hybrid controller using the RaD Lab’s high-precision motion capture system for servoing to close the position error and improve repeatability. A more mobile solution will incorporate an HTC Vive virtual reality system with sub millimeter tracking accuracy. This system tracks targets which, when attached to the end effectors, should provide task space position/orientation feedback. This controller will be of the form:

∆q is the result of an optimization defined by:

minimize:

subject to: *Joint Limit Constraints*

Where qdes is the original joint angle commands (from inverse kinematics) sent to the MPC controller, qcmd is the joint angle commands updated by ∆q which is the change in the joint angle commands, xdes, ydes, and zdes are the desired end effector position in Cartesian space, θdes, des, and ψdes are Euler angles describing the end effector orientation, ∆x is the task space position and orientation error, and J is the Jacobian. It should be noted that the objective function for the optimization relies on an approximation which is only valid for small ∆x and ∆q.

*Coordinated, Multi-Arm Controller Development:* My first approach at coordinated multi-arm manipulation will be to design and implement an object level model predictive controller. This approach uses a forward model of the object dynamics to predict the effects of control inputs over a short time horizon. In this case, the control inputs are forces and torques applied to the object by each manipulator (see *Figure 2*). It then selects the optimal inputs for that horizon to achieve the desired object motion. Another student in my research group has researched estimating the dynamics of an unknown object. I will build on this research to estimate dynamic models for the various objects I will manipulate. These models will likely have error, but previous research with MPC has found it to be robust to modeling error (even with plus or minus half of nominal mass values).[13, 14] My proposed control scheme is of the form shown in *Figure 3*.

*Figure 2: Manipulators exerting forces on an object*

Xdes and Xmeas are desired and measured end effector position and orientation, F1 to Fn are wrenches at the end effector of each arm which are fed into a low level joint torque controller, J is the Jacobian of each arm, and τ and τmeas are the required and measured joint torques.

*Figure 3: Proposed object level control scheme*

One of the first steps in designing this controller will be to develop a path planner which will have two main objectives. First, it will output an optimal object path which avoids obstacles when given a desired object position and orientation. This path must be constrained to object motion that is possible given the force/torque constraints of the robot manipulators. A student in the RaD lab has already worked extensively on this problem for a single arm, and I will build on his work. Second, the path planner will determine the optimal location on the object for each arm to grip in order to maximize the force manipulability ellipsoid over the course of the path. Maximizing the force manipulability ellipsoid will enable each arm to better compensate for disturbances/deviations over the course of the path. I took a graduate optimization course during my bachelor’s degree which will help me to formulate and solve this optimization problem.

Once I can accurately and repeatably manipulate objects using the two arms on the robot in *Figure 1*, I will expand my research to utilize more soft arms and even a more traditional torque controlled Baxter Research Robot Arm. This will demonstrate the applicability of my algorithms to systems that include multiple soft robots and a rigid robot.

*Closed Kinematic Chain Modeling:* To address my last research question, I will begin by modeling the gripping of one arm by the other as a closed kinematic chain. Previous students in my research group successfully implemented simultaneous joint angle and stiffness control for an inflatable robot.[15, 16] I will build upon this research by developing a controller for the closed kinematic chain with two additional tuning parameters (the stiffness of the gripping arm and the gripping location) which can be optimized for a given task.

## Choice of Academic Institution

I chose to pursue this research in the RaD Lab at BYU for many reasons. As part of a NASA Early Career Faculty Space Technology Research (ECF) Grant, the RaD Lab has a unique availability of compliant robot arms (four arms from two Baxter robots and six pneumatically actuated soft robot arms). Because of this, BYU is ideally positioned for me to work on this kind of problem. With less time and money spent procuring and setting up hardware, I can focus my efforts on developing useful dynamic models and control algorithms. Additionally, other researchers in the RaD Lab have made significant progress with robots in the lab which provides a foundation for my research. Finally, the RaD Lab has the expectation that every graduate student will publish a *minimum* of two conference papers and a journal paper. This expectation ensures that I will disseminate my results so that other researchers in the field can build on my progress.

## Application to the NASA Technology Roadmaps

TA 4.3.5: Collaborative Manipulation states, “For collaborative manipulation, the required technical capability is to provide a teamed approach for multiple robots or teams of humans and robots working with objects, equipment, or samples.” This collaboration includes coordinated manipulation tasks, where multiple robot manipulators are physically connected together in tasks like handling a common load. My graduate research directly impacts these goals. I will be researching and implementing control methods for coordinated multi-arm manipulation tasks with soft, pneumatically actuated robots. Furthermore, TA 4.3.5 lists robust safety system development as a goal. TA 4.7.5: Safety and Trust expands on this by setting the goal of having a crew “be able to work next to a robotic assistant, within a one-meter proximity in a controlled and safe manner, without being physically attached to it.” The soft robotic platforms I will be using for my research are *inherently* safe for operation around humans and delicate equipment due to their inflatable structure and low inertia. The algorithms I develop will help these robots have performance on par with humans (for some tasks).

More generally, the sub-goal listed in TA 4.3: Manipulation is to “Increase Manipulator dexterity and reactivity to external forces and conditions while reducing overall mass and launch volume and increasing power efficiency.” Providing structures developed from lightweight materials for robotic arm design is listed as a goal of TA 4.3.1.2: Lightweight Structures.[17] The soft robots I will be researching are not only an order of magnitude lighter than current space robotic technology like Robonaut 2, but also occupy 10 times less volume when deflated. My research on control algorithms for multi-arm manipulation will contribute to making lightweight, inflatable robotic arms beneficial in space applications. A single soft robot may not have the power output of heavily-geared industrial robots or even more recent torque-controlled robots, but soft robots have such a low weight and volume that it would still drastically reduce the overall launch payload to send multiple soft robots on space missions. My research will make this feasible by enabling multiple soft robots to collaborate with each other on the same task.

## Impact of Visiting Technologist Experience

I chose to pursue graduate research largely because I want to create technology that is truly capable of changing the world. Coordinated multi-arm manipulation with soft robots has many space applications as mentioned above, and I view the visiting technologist experience as an opportunity to collaborate with subject matter experts in integrating this promising technology in space specific applications. Furthermore, this will be an opportunity to disseminate my research results within the NASA technical community. The research knowledge and skills I develop during the visiting technologist experience will also greatly benefit the research I will be completing at BYU.

My career ambition is to be involved in space technology research and development. This collaboration with NASA scientists would both introduce me to the research culture of NASA and help me become more familiar with current cutting edge space technology developments. An understanding of the current developments and needs of an industry is critical in performing contributing research. In short, this would be an invaluable experience for my career goal of performing research critical to our nation’s space industry, and I know that my graduate research can have a broad impact on robotic manipulation for future space missions.

## References

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# Degree Program Schedule

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| --- | --- |
| Enter Master’s Program | August 2016 |
| Submit Program of Study | November 2016 |
| Submit Prospectus | January 2017 |
| Submit conference paper to the International Conference on Intelligent Robots and Systems 2017 (IROS 2017) | March 2017 |
| Submit conference paper to The International Conference on Robotics and Automation 2018 (ICRA 2018) | September 2017 |
| Present at IROS 2017 (Vancouver, Canada) | September 2017 |
| Submit to robotics journals | March 2018 |
| Present at ICRA 2018 (Brisbane, Australia) | May 2018 |
| Visiting Technologist Experience with NASA | May – July 2018 |
| Thesis Defense and Graduation | August 2018 |

# CV (see pages 10-11)

# Transcript (see pages 12-15)

# GRE Scores (see pages 16-17)

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| **Dustan Kraus** | | | | | |
| (208) 540-0284 • dustan.kraus@gmail.com | | | | | |
| EDUCATION | | | | | |
| **Brigham Young University |** *Mechanical Engineering* | Provo, UT | Aug. 2009 – Present | | | | |
| * Bachelor’s Degree in Mechanical Engineering:   + Graduated Cum Laude in April 2016   + GPA: 3.89/4.00 * Master’s Degree in Mechanical Engineering:   + Emphasis in controls and robotics   + Enrolled: August 2016   + Expected graduation: August 2018 * Relevant Coursework/Research:   + *Design of Control Systems*: Used the Euler Lagrange equation to develop equations of motion, transfer functions, and state space design models for a 2 rotor helicopter. Designed and tuned the gains for PID and observer based controllers using simulations in MATLAB, Simulink, and LabVIEW. Implemented the controllers onto the actual hardware, and successfully controlled the helicopter.   + *Flight Controls and Dynamics:* Used MATLAB and Simulink to develop an autopilot/controller and flight simulator for a UAV drone. This included implementing algorithms for trajectory following and path planning. Simulated real sensor data, and implemented an Extended Kalman Filter for state estimation.   + *Programming Experience*: C++, MATLAB, Python, Simulink simulation modeling, LabVIEW   + *Tactile Sensor Development*: Using Linux, an Arduino, python, and ROS to develop and implement tactile sensing onto a soft, pneumatically actuated robot arm | | | | | |
| PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE | | | | | |
| **The Aerospace Corporation |** *Electromechanical Controls Intern* | | | | El Segundo, CA  May – Aug. 2016 | |
| * Designed and built a fixture for testing accelerometer alignment of a reaction wheel jitter characterization test setup on a shaker table   + Collected accelerometer data with LabVIEW, filtered the data, and wrote a gradient based optimization in MATLAB that successfully found the rotation matrices to align the accelerometers * Designed an experiment to determine the heat transfer capabilities of a thermoelectric cooling module designed to replace cryocoolers on satellites   + Automated testing by developing a first order dynamic model and writing a PID controller in LabVIEW to control the temperature gradient * Designed, built, and calibrated a testing setup to measure thrust generation of a novel UAV in Martian atmosphere   + Included selecting vacuum compatible load cells, designing the mounting hardware, and writing LabVIEW code to collect data   + Successfully collected thrust data in a large vacuum chamber | | | | | |
| **Brigham Young University |** *Robotics Research Assistant* | | | Provo, UT  Aug. 2015 – Present | | |
| * Led a team of three other undergraduates to develop a fabric tactile sensor to provide force feedback for control implementation on soft, pneumatically actuated robots * Wrote both the microcontroller code to collect data from the sensor and the Python code to implement the sensor with the robots in the lab * This sensor has been effectively implemented as feedback for a soft robot force controller enabling soft robots to operate even more safely around humans and delicate equipment | | | | | |
| **Los Alamos National Laboratory |** *Research Fellowship* | | Los Alamos, NM  June – Aug. 2014 | | | |
| * Created a novel multimodal sensing system capable of detecting and identifying transparent barriers while reporting distance and angle of approach to these barriers onboard a mobile platform (quadrotor drone) * Worked in a multidisciplinary team to design and build a prototype of this system * Demonstrated accuracy, speed of response, and functionality of the completed prototype * Developed technical communication skills by preparing a conference paper and presentation on my group’s research; personally presented our results at the 2015 SPIE Conference | | | | | |
| **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints |** *Volunteer Missionary* | | | | | Jamaica  June 2010 – 2012 |
| * Spent from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day doing the following:   + Teaching, building houses, constructing chicken coops, clearing farmland, and performing other acts of humanitarian service   + Developed leadership by preparing and teaching lessons to 55 other missionaries throughout the island about how to be more efficient | | | | | |
| PUBLICATIONS AND TECHNICAL PRESENTATIONS | | | | | |
| * Conference Paper:   + Acevedo, I., Kleine, R. K., Kraus, D., & Mascareñas, D. (2015, April). Multimodal sensing strategies for detecting transparent barriers indoors from a mobile platform. In SPIE Smart Structures and Materials+ Nondestructive Evaluation and Health Monitoring (pp. 94310V-94310V). International Society for Optics and Photonics. * Presentation: * Title: Multimodal Sensing Strategies for Detecting Transparent Barriers Indoors from a Mobile Platform * Date: March 10, 2015 * Type: Oral presentation with PowerPoint * Conference: SPIE 9431, Active and Passive Smart Structures and Integrated Systems 2015 | | | | | |
| AWARDS | | | | | |
| * Developed leadership by becoming an Eagle Scout * Tuition for 5 years of college paid for by academic scholarships, including:   + BYU Heritage Scholarship – 4 years full tuition   + Sallie Mae Bank Scholarship – 1 year full tuition | | | | | |











