Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

2016 CRA-W Graduate Cohort Workshop
SIGH... I HAVE TWO PAPERS, A GRANT PROPOSAL, A HOMEWORK SET, AND A PRESENTATION ALL DUE THIS WEEK! AND I HAVE TO ASK MY PARENTS TO LEND ME MONEY!
It’s all about you!

• Your definition of grad school/personal life balance is **yours**!
• Requires continual reflection and reconsideration
• Lack of balance tends to drive stress higher
(Hopeful) Session take-aways

- What does graduate school and personal life balance mean to you?
- When do you feel in balance versus out of balance?
- What are your professional and life goals?
- What changes should you make (if any!) to achieve your goals?
The plan

```go
func doFacilitate() {
    topics := [4]string("meaning",
                      "characteristics",
                      "goals",
                      "actions")
    for _, value := range topics {
        doExercise()
        seedIdeas()
        suggestTips()
    }
    discussion()
}
```
Q1: What does graduate school and personal life balance mean to you?
Exercise #1

- Think of a time when you have felt “in balance”

- Think of a time when you have felt “out of balance”
Why we might lose balance...
General Academic Stresses

- The nature of grad school itself
  - Research: open-ended, exploration of the “unknown”
  - Milestones more vague than course requirements
  - Your solution needs to be the “best” and “only”
  - No obvious finishing date
- You here because you are a “high achiever”
  - Goal-oriented perfectionists: always more to do
  - Competition for “who works the hardest”
- Stress of multi-tasking
- Insecurities (we all have them!)
- We cannot manage an insane pace forever
Specific Academic Stresses

- **Courses**
  - Master all the material, want to do well
  - Sometimes, “well enough” is ok

- **Research**
  - New experiences and new levels of independence and maturity (paper submissions, rejections…)
  - Need to push through times you are just stuck
  - Requires multi-tasking (literature survey, idea generation, coding, experiments, writing…) and creativity!
  - Requires learning from but also “managing” your advisor

- **Advisor/Thesis Topic**
  - Choosing a good thesis topic is a non-trivial task

- **Work as a TA, RA, etc.**
  - Work-load, multi-tasking…
Personal Stresses

- Many people in our lives (partners, parents, friends, children…)
  - They make us happy but their stress can become ours
- Finding a partner, starting a family
- Finances on a grad student stipend
- Logistics of caring for a home, pets …
- Health issues
- Being away from people you care about
Q2: When do you feel in balance versus out of balance?
Exercise #2

• Write down three points for each of these statements
  • I feel in balance when ...  
  • I feel out of balance when ...
Factors affecting balance...
Grad student work output:

- Fantasize how much work will get done this week.
- Catch up on web surfing.
- Clean out email inbox.
- Consider quitting PhD.
- Feel guilty over homework due previous week.
- Happy hour.
- Weekly meeting with advisor.
- Advisor spreads rumor about conference in Cancun.
- Advisor drops in unexpectedly.
- "Must see" TV.
- Feel guilty over homework due previous week.
- Feel guilty over homework due previous week.

Monday:
- All right, I'm gonna make up for sleeping off all weekend!
- One more search.
- I have 13 worms to do. It's a week's work.
- I'm not worthy. I'm not worthy.
- ...
Unrealistic goals

Procrastination

Forced creativity

Lack of planning

Relying on external affirmation
Factors affecting balance

• Figure out which factors affect your balance
  • Unrealistic goals?
  • Procrastination?
  • Forced creativity?
  • Relying on external affirmation?
  • Lack of planning?
  • Working too close to deadlines?
  • Others???
Q3: What are your professional and life goals?
Exercise #3

• My #1 goal for the grad cohort is to …

• My #1 goal personally for the next three months is to …

• My #1 goal professionally for the next three months is to …
Setting and managing goals and expectations...
YOUR LIFE AMBITION - What Happened??

Ambition

- Win Nobel Prize
- Revolutionize your field
- Get a job at a top University
- Attend that Conference in PoDunk, MN
- Get a job
- Hope they have Pepperoni Pizza

1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year 4th Year 5th Year

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Achieving balance with goals and expectations

• **Know your goals!**
  - Make them realistic; Write them down
  - Post them where you can see them
  - Ruthlessly prioritize

• **Understand expectations of others**
  - Which expectations are self-inflicted!

• **Understand what is required to achieve a goal**
  - Why do you want to achieve the goal?
  - Is the goal achievable?
  - How will you evaluate progress?
  - Talk to mentors and others

• **Learn to enjoy the process**
  - Focus on the present
  - Appreciate achievements before moving on
Q4: What changes should you make (if any) to achieve your goals?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My #1 goal for grad cohort is to…</th>
<th>Achievable?</th>
<th>Realistic?</th>
<th>1 think you might have to change?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</table>
Tips and strategies to help achieve balance and goals...
Tip #1: Time management (Productivity != Time spent)

- Treat graduate school like a job
  - Doesn’t need to be and shouldn’t be 24 hrs/7 days a week
- Know when it’s time to stop
  - Keep the perfectionist under control
  - Break work into 1-2 hours tasks
- Get organized
  - To-do lists: next, later, scheduled, someday
  - Keep a calendar
  - Set aside time to review tasks/calendar each day
  - Keep track of progress
- Avoid distractions
  - Make a list of bad habits
  - Find where you work productively
  - Set aside time for email
  - Write down stray thoughts, save for later
Tip #2: Consider trade-offs

- Saying “yes” to one thing means saying “no” to something else
  - Or at least it means having less time for what you are already doing
- You aren’t always in control of some trade-offs
  - Accept and plan for some imbalance at some points
- Take some time before you decide
  - “Thanks for the invitation, let me think it over and get back to you by X”
- Does it fit your goals and priorities?
- Do not do anything out of guilt
  - Say “yes” or “no” to the task not the person
Tip #3: Collaborate well with others

- If you plan to say “no” to a request to take on a new responsibility
  - Do it as soon as possible
  - Suggest someone else who might be available, want to do it and be good at it
  - If you really wish you could do it, say so; ask to be invited again
- Set boundaries and parameters
  - Explain why you believe it will take longer
  - Communicate the resources you will need
- What to do about the advisor, student (e.g., if you TA), fellow grad student who needs you now
  - I’d be happy to talk/help you/etc. Can we schedule a time (in 5 min, an hour, next week …) to do that?
Tip #4: Cope with insecurities

- **Realize we all have insecurities**
- **Prepare for tasks/meetings to minimize your chances of failing**
  - But we all fail once in a while. It’s a natural consequence of doing something hard
- **Seek out a support system**
  - Mentors
  - Family and friends
  - Other students
- **Learn to enjoy your successes**
  - Don’t belittle your own accomplishments
  - Keep a “good file” of positive feedback
Tip #5: Make time for yourself

- Schedule time for yourself
  - You need to make “free time” sometimes
- Exercise! Hobbies!
- Share responsibilities with friends
- Streamline
- *Do not apologize for a life outside of graduate school!*
Tip #6: Learn what motivates you

• Figure out how you are motivated
  • “Fear” – e.g., sign up for a half marathon
  • “Big reward” – e.g., trips, clothes, stuff
  • Publicity – e.g., tell all your friends about it
  • …?

• Use your motivators to help achieve your goals
Sigh... I have two papers, a grant proposal, a homework set, and a presentation all due this week! And I have to ask my parents to lend me money!

How do you do it, Tajel? How come you are never stressed out about grad school or anything??

Well, whenever I start to feel stressed, I ask myself this question...

Would I really want to be doing something else with my life?
• What does graduate school and personal life balance mean to you?
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