Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

2015 CRA-W
Graduate Cohort Workshop
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?
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...
The diagram illustrates the weekly output of a graduate student, with peaks and troughs corresponding to various life events. The timeline spans from Monday to Friday and weekends.

- **Monday**: Fantasize how much work will get done this week.
- **Tuesday**: Peruvian soccer league results posted on internet.
- **Wednesday**: Advisor drops in unexpectedly, rumor about conference in Cancun.
- **Thursday**: "Must see" t.v., weekly meeting with advisor.
- **Friday**: Feel guilty over homework due previous week.
- **Weekend**: Happy hour.

At the bottom, there are cartoon characters depicting the student's thoughts and actions:
- **Monday**: All right, I'm gonna wake up early tomorrow.
- **Tuesday**: One more search.
- **Wednesday**: I have 13 hours to do a week's work.
- **Thursday**: I'm not worthy. I'm not worthy.
- **Friday**: ...
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…
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?
Exercise #4

<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>
<tr>
<td>My #1 goal personally for next 3 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My #1 goal professionally for next 3 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</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: Choose activities carefully

• 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

• 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: Manage 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

• Seek out a support system
  • Mentors
  • Family and friends
  • Other students

• 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

• 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
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