

# Balancing Graduate School & Personal Life

*2019 CRA-W  
Graduate Cohort Workshop*



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# Your Panelist: Rebecca Wright

## Education

- Ph.D, Yale 1994, Columbia B.A. 1988

## Career

- Bell Labs and AT&T Labs, 1994-2002
- Stevens Institute of Technology → Rutgers → Barnard College
- Research Areas: security, privacy, distributed computing

## Family and Fun:

- 20-year old son at University of British Columbia
- Hobbies: yoga & handstands, travel, the beach, gardens



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# Your Panelist – Andrea Danyluk

- Education
  - Ph.D, Columbia University 1992, Vassar College B.A. 1984
- Career
  - NYNEX Science and Technology, Expert Systems Lab, 1990-94
  - Professor at Williams College since 1994
  - Year off from Williams: Academic director of Align M.S. in CS at Northeastern University 2018-19.
  - Research Areas: Machine Learning (but also CS and Data Science Curriculum)
- Family and Fun:
  - Kids: son (26) and daughter (24).
  - Hobbies: Hiking, Travel, Crossword Puzzles.



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# Your Panelist – Mondira (Mandy) Deb Pant



Mandy Pant

Principal Engineer, Academic  
Research Director



- Education
  - Ph.D, Georgia Tech 2000, MS, Georgia Tech, 1996, IIT Kharagpur, India B.Tech. 1995
- Trajectory
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Family and Fun:
  - Kids: two daughters (17) and (14).
  - Hobbies: Dancing, Yoga, Hiking, Travel



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# Top 5 Reasons Why Personal Life is Essential

People with meaningful lives outside of work have:

- Higher risk tolerance (support networks & self-esteem)
- Brain rejuvenation (required for creative brain work)
- Good citizenship (both outside and in the lab/office)
- Broad skills (people skills, unexpected idea cross fertilization)
- Perspective (long-term thinking, combat narrow-mindedness)

Note: having a meaningful work life is also important and can also contribute to overall balance!



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# Life in Grad School – Andrea

## Big changes

- Got married 2 weeks before starting
- Changed research area; then lost primary advisor due to tenure denial
- Started job search just a little too early; started full-time research job while ABD
- Very pregnant at graduation

## Kept a life outside of research

- Rediscovered exercise and especially hiking
- Went to lots of concerts
- Small but great set of grad school friends; worked on research and spent time at the gym together
- Stayed close with high school and college friends



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# Life in Grad School – Mandy

## Me

- Moved 8500 miles across the seas (from India) leaving my family behind
- Got married after my MS
- Did two internships
- Two body challenge at school

## How I kept my sanity

- Hikes, dance, exercise (aerobics)
- Won “free tickets” over the radio to attend many concerts (couldn’t afford as a poor grad student)
- Great support from spouse/advisor/lab mates
- Volunteered at Atlanta Olympics (Gatech was the host village)



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# Life in Grad School – Rebecca

## Me:

Long-distance relationship

Learned to adult (first time in my own apartment)

Got a cat

Several lasting friendships with other students

Spent a lot of time as a TA

## Interests and Activities Beyond Academics:

Sang with the Yale Slavic Chorus

Danced with the Yaledancers

Some good vacations with friends, family



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# Self Reflection

1. Is your life in balance? Rate how the balance of your life feels on a scale of 1 (imbalanced) to 5 (well-balanced)
2. When do you feel most in-balance and out-of-balance?
3. List three things that trigger you to go out of balance.
4. List three non-academic activities you enjoy the most.
5. List five things that are most important to you.



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# Possible External Sources of Imbalance (1)

- **Academic demands:**
  - **Courses:** advanced topics, new skills required, required courses vs. courses of interest, ...
  - **Research:** identifying a topic, not sure where to start, open-ended questions, creativity, vague definitions of quality, pressure to publish, no obvious finishing line, ...
  - **Relationships:** (co-)advisor, labmates, remote collaborations, ...
  - **Work:** TA, RA, internship, ...
  - **Logistics:** decisions whether to focus on course work or start research earlier, choosing/changing advisor, summer internships vs. staying at your institution vs. other, ...
  - **Culture:** fallacy of “they who work the most hours accomplish the most,” ...
  - ...



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## Possible External Sources of Imbalance (2)

- **Personal life:**
  - Many people in our lives: partners, parents, children, friends, ...
  - Life commitments
  - Physical and mental health
  - Finances
  - Logistics of caring for loved ones, home, pets, vehicles, ...
  - Homesickness
  - ...



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# Possible Internal Sources of Imbalance

- Forced creativity
- Unrealistic goals
- Procrastination
- Relying on external affirmation
- Lack of planning
- Worrying (vs. productive activity)
- ....



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# Tip 1: Time Management

- Barriers:
  - Unstructured nature of research, and long-delayed rewards
  - Enduring bad myth of workaholism being correlated with success
  - Solution: practical and philosophical (Reject the myth!)
- Time management helps a lot! Some potential solutions
  - Find your “best time” in the day, block it. (Find your best work style)
  - Consider blocking one day a week for research only (no email/social media)
  - Schedule “rejuvenation” (gym, concert tickets, community service)
  - Schedule fixed hours for “stuff”, be ok with that.
  - Reward yourself for process not output.
- Many books, find one that “fits” your nature
  - Deep Work (Newport) is written by a computer science professor who has also become a bestselling author.



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## Tip 2: Consider Tradeoffs

- You cannot have it all. At least, not all at one time.
- Tradeoffs can be made:
  - between goals and expectations
  - between ambitions and reality
  - Between what you want to do and what you can do
  - ...
- Saying “NO” is a choice you can make.
  - Take time to decide (but not too long, especially if you plan to say no)
  - Consider trade-offs
  - Avoid guilt-driven decisions
- Sometimes ok to accept some imbalance and adjust temporarily.
  - e.g., to finish thesis this year



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## Tip 3: Boost Self-Confidence

- We are human beings, admit that:
  - we may succeed and may fail on stuff
  - having insecurity is normal
  - we exist in a society that has certain social norms
  - we are being evaluated by others
  - ...
- AND we can:
  - enjoy our successes
  - think positively
  - seek out support
  - exhibit confidence
  - ...



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## Tip 4: Make Time for Yourself

- Why do we need this?
  - Creative and highly technical work is hard on our minds and bodies
  - Burn-out is a real thing that effects creative and talented people
  - Often worse for women because it's still a patriarchal society
- Brain Rejuvenation!
  - What do you love?
  - Happiness is strongly correlated with “small” things.
  - Schedule “rejuvenation” (a walk in the woods, exercise, community service, friends & family, weekends)
  - Take some vacations
  - Don't neglect sleep, nutrition, and hydration.



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# Self Reflection

- Reevaluate your goals.
- Mark the importance of stress triggers.
- List three activities you can do to de-stress.



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**Questions?**



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