

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



- 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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