Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

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Russ Joseph, Northwestern University
Agenda

• Introductions
• Importance of grad-school/life balance
• Self reflection
• Sources of imbalance
• Some suggestions to achieve balance
• Self reflection recap
Melanie Moses, U. of New Mexico

- Professor, Computer Science & Biology
- External Faculty, Santa Fe Institute
- PI, Project VolCAN
- PI, SIMCoV Project
- Co-PI, AI research institute planning grants w/ SFI & UVT
- Director, Swarmathon & NM CSforAll
- Co-PI, UNM ADVANCE program

- PhD in Biology, U. of New Mexico
- BS in Symbolic Systems (Agent based modeling and AI)
- Computer Security Research (6 years)
- Switched to Biology (after 1 year courses & internship)
Melanie in Grad School

- 2000-2004 explored new ideas & New Mexico
  - Good Times!
  - Research: I loved the intellectual freedom of grad school & interdisciplinary science
  - Fun: hiking, skiing, lab parties
  - Community: Young Women United
- 2005, had my son 3 months before dissertation defense
  - no sleep, no time, lots of stress
- I was CLUELESS about academic jobs and pathways. A postdoc was a paycheck.
- Asst, Assoc, Full Professor...and then came COVID

Balance == work + fun + family + me  (¾ isn’t bad!)
Russ Joseph, Northwestern Univ

From: St. Thomas, USVI

Education:
- BS Carnegie Mellon
- PhD Princeton

Now: Associate Professor, Northwestern

Research:
- Computer Architecture (Power/Reliability Aware Systems)

Family:
- Lovely Wife and Two Troublemaker Girls (10 and 7)

Fun:
- Running (Ten Marathons in Ten States)
- Golf
Russ in Grad School

- Got married after first year
  - Wife worked full time in corporate America
  - Pressure to solve two body problem after grad school...
  - Didn’t have kids until much later in life
- Far from home in many senses
  - Geographic distance/climate, sure...
  - But missing connections to culture
- Internships (2x IBM Research, Agere (Bell Labs))

Balance==Finding Time + Space For Growth
Why personal life is essential for successful graduate studies?
Top Reasons

• People with meaningful lives outside grad school have
  • Higher risk tolerance
    • Support networks and self-esteem
  • Brain rejuvenation
    • Required for creative brain work
  • Good citizenship
    • Both outside and in grad school setting
  • Broad skills
    • People skills, unexpected idea cross fertilization
  • Perspective
    • Long term thinking, combat narrow-mindedness
Self-Reflection
How do we define “balanced life”? 

• No single answer; different people have different perspectives 

• In general terms: ensuring your interests and priorities in life are properly tended to 

• Definition changes for each individual throughout the years 

• Healthy in one’s priority areas (e.g., family, spirituality, health, work)
Is your life in balance?

• Rate yourself: 1-imbalance, 5-well balanced

• When do you feel most in-balance and out-of-balance?

• List
  • Three things that trigger you to go out of balance.
  • Three non-academic activities you enjoy the most.
  • Five things that are most important to you.
Sources of Imbalance
Identify external sources of imbalance

• Academic demands
  • Courses: advanced topics, new skills required, ...
  • Research: open-ended questions, creativity, vague definitions of quality, pressure to publish, no obvious finishing line, ...
  • Work Relationships: (co-)advisor, lab-mates, collaborators, ...
  • Logistics: focus on course work or start research earlier, choosing/ changing advisor, ...
  • Desire to do service for your community

• Personal life
  • People in our lives: partners, parents, children, friends, ...
  • Life commitments & Health issues
  • Finances as graduate student
  • Logistics: caring for loved ones, home, transportation
  • Homesickness
Identify the internal sources of imbalance

Unrealistic goals

Forced creativity

Lack of planning

Procrastination

Replying on external affirmation
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Tips to balance work-life
Tip 1: Time Management

Barriers
- Unstructured nature of research, and long delayed rewards
- Enduring myth of work-aholism being correlated with success
- Solution: Practical and Philosophical (Reject the Myth!)

Time management helps a lot!

Some potential solutions
- Find personal “best time” in the day, block it (find your best work style)
- Block one day or hours-per-day for grad-work only (no email/social media)
- Schedule “activities”
- Schedule fixed hours for “stuff”, be ok with that
- Reward yourself
- Read books, find one that “fits” your nature
Tip 2: Trade-offs

• Admit it: we cannot do it all, we cannot have it all

• Trade-offs
  • Between goals and expectations
  • Between ambitions and reality
  • Between what you want to do, what others want you to do and what you can do

• Saying “NO” is a valid choice you can make
  • Take time to decide
  • Consider trade-offs
  • Avoid guilt-driven decisions
  • Have a “NO” buddy, someone who helps you prioritize & say NO when appropriate

• Accept and adjust to imbalance
Tip 3: Boost self-confidence

• Admit that
  • We can succeed in the long term, but may fail on some things on the way
  • Some insecurity is normal
  • We exist in a society that has a certain social normal
  • We are being evaluated by others--peer review is hard!

• But we can
  • Enjoy and be proud of our successes, even small ones
  • Think positively, always, even in difficult times
  • Extract confidence from within, exhibit it
  • Seek out support, when needed

For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.
- Amanda Gorman, Jan 20, 2021
Tip 4: Make time for yourself

• **Why?**
  • Creative and highly technical work is hard on our minds and bodies
  • Burn-out is a real thing that effects creative and talented people

• **Brain rejuvenation**
  • What do you like most? What do you love?
  • Happiness is strongly correlated with “small” things
  • Schedule “rejuvenation” (gym, concert tickets, community service, friends, weekends)
  • Take time off!
Tip 5: Get Organized

• Use productivity software

Tip 6: Ask for help when you need it

• Why?
  • You know why
Self-Reflection Re-Cap
Self reflection : Activity

• Re-evaluate your goals

• Recognize the importance of stress triggers

Do This Now

• Identify three activities you can do to reduce stress

• Identify steps you will take to improve balance