Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

CJ Taylor, UPenn
Jaime Moreno, IBM Research

2018 CRA URMD Grad Cohort Workshop

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Notes to presenters

- **Envision this session to be highly interactive.**
- **Use the charts simply to drive a conversation with the attendees**
- **Get attendees to share their views and comments on the topics**
- **Share personal experiences as part of the interaction**

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Agenda

- **Introductions**
- **Importance of grad-school/life balance**
- **Self reflection**
- **Sources of imbalance**
- **Some suggestions to achieve balance**
- **Self reflection recap**

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CJ Taylor, UPenn

- **Originally from Jamaica**
- **Degrees in electrical engineering**

  A.B. Harvard

  PhD Yale

  PhD from Yale

  Postdoc U.C. Berkeley for 3 years
- **Currently Professor of Computer and Information Science at Upenn**

  Research areas – Computer Vision and Robotics
- **Married – 2 kids**

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Jaime Moreno, IBM Research

- **Originally from Chile**
- **Electrical Engineer, University of Concepcion, Chile**
- **Computer Science, MS, PhD, UCLA**
- **Faculty Member, University of Concepcion, Chile**
- **Researcher, IBM TJ Watson Research Center, NY**
- **Current role**

    Senior Manager, High-Performance Data Centric Systems

    Distinguished ResearcherΩ

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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**

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CJ in Grad School

- Lived in dorm for first 2 years.
  - A useful opportunity to meet people outside of the lab context.

- Met my wife during those 2 years.

Jaime in Grad School

- **Had already work for 5 years (in Chile) prior to graduate school**
  - **Faculty position, with salary, independent, ….**
  - **But interested in pursuing training in research**
- **Admitted to UCLA**
  - **Got married the day before travelling to USA for grad school**
  - **Transitioned from Electrical Engineering to Computer Science**
  - **Had to learn programming in Pascal in one afternoon…**
- **TA several years**
- **Grad-students Computer Architecture group**
  - **Group seminars, wine-and-cheese events, team lunch, shared office**
  - **Grad school friendships lasting throughout the years**
- **Movies, performances, racquetball, outings, birthdays, evenings with friends, etc.**
- **Upon PhD graduation: collective graduation party**

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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 being properly tendered to**

- **Definition changes for each person differently throughout the years**

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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.**

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# *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, ...**
  - **Relationships: (co-)advisor, lab-mates, collaborators, ...**
  - **Work: TA, RA, internship, ...**
  - **Logistics: focus on course work or start research earlier, choosing/ changing advisor, ...**
  - **…**
- **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**
  - **…**

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Identify the internal sources of imbalance
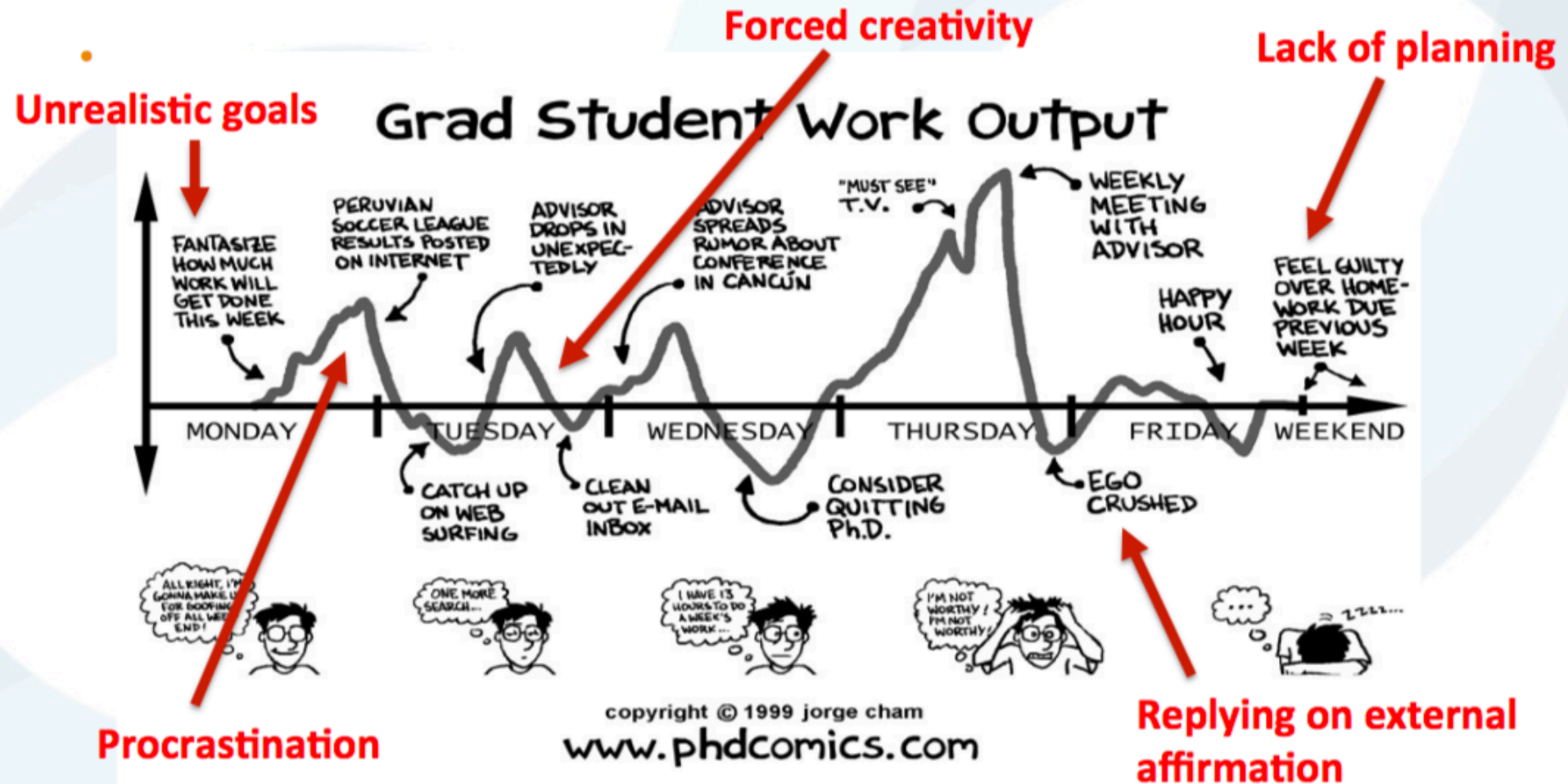
Tips to balance work-life

Tip1: 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**

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Tip 2: Trade-offs

- **Admit it: we cannot do nor get it all**

- **Trade-offs**
  - **Between goals and expectations**
  - **Between ambitions and reality**
  - **Between what you want 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**

- **Accept and adjust to imbalance**

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Tip 3: Boost self-confidence

- ## Admit that
  - **We will succeed overall 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**

- ## 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**

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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!**

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Self Reflection Re-cap

Self reflection

- **Re-evaluate your goals – constantly**

- **Recognize the importance of stress triggers**

- **Identify three activities you can do to de-stress**

- **Identify steps you will take to improve balance**

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