Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

CJ Taylor, UPenn
Jaime Moreno, IBM Research
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.
Agenda

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

• Definition changes for each person differently throughout the years
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, ...
- 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
- ...

Identify the internal sources of imbalance

- Unrealistic goals
- Forcere creativity
- Procrastination
- Lack of planning
- Replying on external affirmation
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 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
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
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!
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