Balancing Graduate School and Personal Life

Monica Anderson, Alabama
Hakim Weatherspoon, Cornell
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
Monica Anderson, U of Minnesota

- Assoc Professor, Computer Science, The University of Alabama
- PI, iAAMCS (Institute of African American Mentoring in CS)
- Co-Director, DREU (Distributed Research Experiences for Undergraduates)

- PhD in Computer Science and Engineering, U of Minnesota
- BS in Computer Science, Chicago State University
- Software Engineering-12 years
  - Cargill
  - Target, Inc
  - Northwest Airlines
  - IBM
Hakim Weatherspoon, Cornell University

- Assoc Professor, Computer Science, Cornell University
- Associate Director of the Cornell Initiative for Digital Agriculture
- Co-founder Exotanium
- Postdoc at Cornell University

- PhD in Computer Science and Engineering, Univ of CA, Berkeley
  - Thesis - Design and Evaluation of Distributed Wide-Area Online Archival Storage Systems
- BS in Computer Engineering, University of Washington
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
Monica in Grad School

- Family with 4 teen-aged daughters
  - Did the occasional field trip
  - Drove lots of friends home
- Trailing spouse moved to Alabama (from Minnesota)
- Two internships
  - Avaya, New York City/Basking Ridge NJ
  - ARL, Laurel MD
- Hobby
  - Smart house (X10 back then)

Balance==Setting an example for my girls of what they should expect from life
Monica in Grad School

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Balance==”What do I want my legacy to be?”
Hakim in Grad School

- **Organizations**
  - Vice Chair and Webmaster for Region VI of NSBE
  - President, Secretary, Black Graduate Engineering and Science and Students (BGESS)
- **Two internships**
  - Intel Research Lab, Berkeley, CA
  - IBM Research, Almaden, CA
- **Family with 2 babies**
  - Married the second year of grad school followed by baby 1 and 2
  - Spouse worked full time
- **Hobby**
  - Travel
  - Changing diapers

**Balance==”What do I want my legacy to be?”**
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
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
- Forced creativity
- Lack of planning
- Procrastination
- Replying on external affirmation
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
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 affects 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