

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 On-line 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

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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

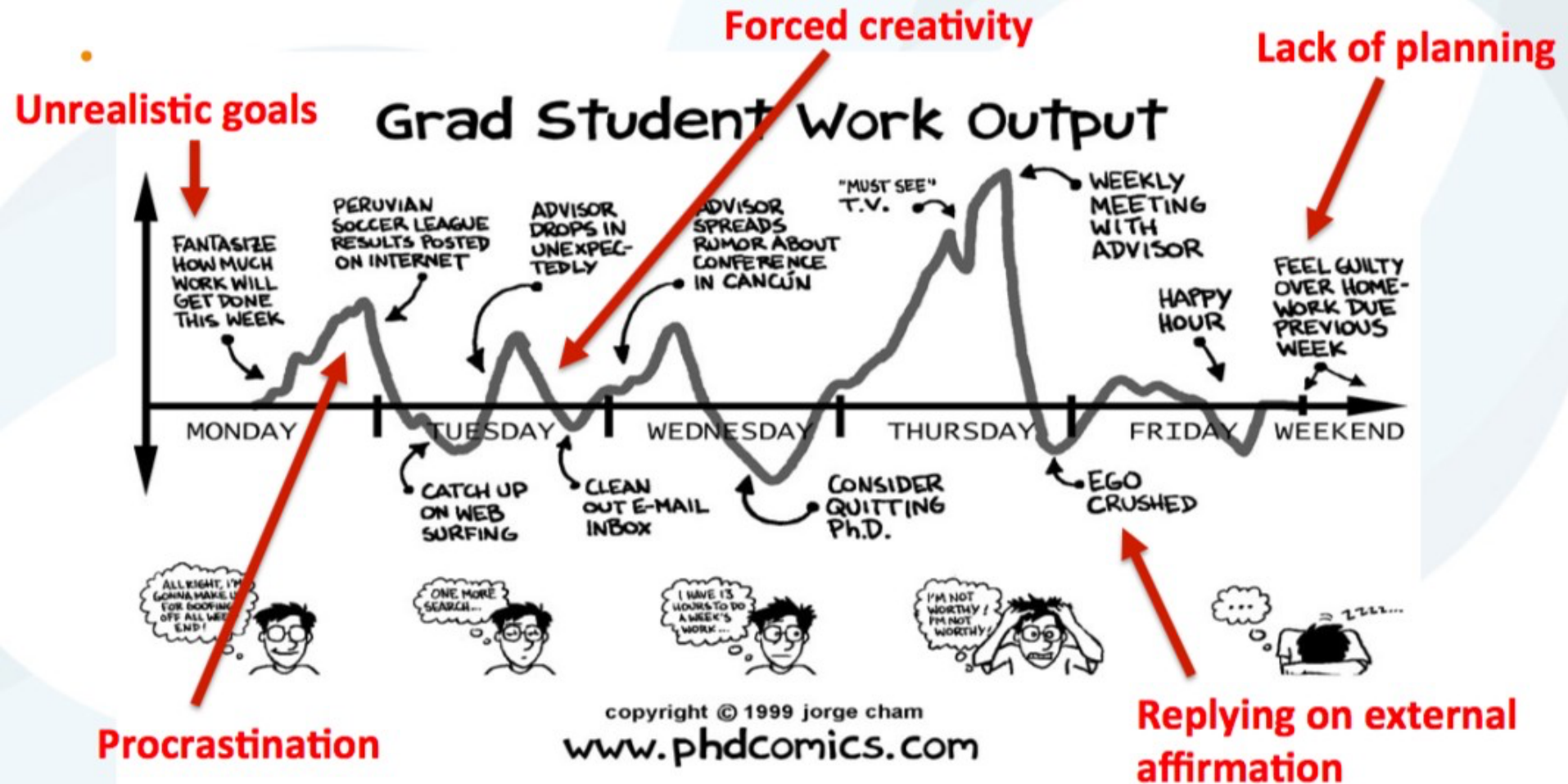
- **Academic demands**

- **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



CRA

Computing Research
Association



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 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**

