CMSC 601: Time Management & Success Strategies

Adapted from slides by Prof. Marie desJardins

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Sources


• J. Cuny, *Time management and family issues*, CRA-W Workshops

• H. T. Kung, *Useful things to know about Ph.D. thesis research*, CMU Immigration Course, 87
Outline

• Early in your graduate student career
• Late in your graduate student career
• General
How long is a graduate career?

- Lots of variables: MS vs. PhD, part-time vs. full-time, discipline, school, student characteristics, advisor characteristics, age, etc.

- Typical mean-time-to-finish in Computer Science, full-time, starting with a BS
  - MS: two years
  - PhD: five years
The First Two Years (or So)
What Matters?

• Taking core classes is important...
  —...but not as important as finding an advisor...
  • ...and a topic...
    —...which means that classes in your area matter most

• Grades are important...
  —...but not as important as research
Peters: Things to Do Right Away

• Buy a good computer
• Set up a calendar system
• Set up a filing system
• Keep a log of daily progress
• Apply for fellowships
• Set up regular meetings with your advisor
• Create or join a grad student support group
• Start looking for a thesis topic
Electronic or Paper Calendar?

• Use whatever works for you
• Many technically savvy people still prefer a traditional date book
• Electronic calendars have their advantages
• Google calendar seems to be achieving a dominant position
  – UMBC will switch to using Google calendar as its official calendar for staff
  – Its well supported on many devices (e.g., phones)
Balancing Classes and Research

• This is the biggest challenge of the first one to two years

• Our old PhD comprehensive exam system emphasized classes
  – Must pass three core exams and two elective exams. Two tries.

• Our new PhD portfolio system privileges research accomplishments
  – Get good grades in core classes. Show progress on research: papers, proposal, etc.
Last chance to take classes

• You probably won’t take any semester-long classes again
  – You’ll take tutorials and maybe a short course or two
  – You may teach a course you never had, which is a good way to learn

• If you think you should really understand a topic in depth for your future career, take the course now
The Third (or So) Year and Beyond
The three most important things

• Finishing your dissertation
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Graduate School Characteristics

• Unstructured environment
• Few landmarks or milestones
• Have to balance many things

• Reading
• Thinking
• Sketching out ideas
• Talking to colleagues, advisor
• Designing and implementing systems

• Learning your craft
• Empirical evaluation
• Theoretical analysis
• Writing
Time Management

• Divide and conquer
  – Make a list of tasks and refine them until they’re doable

• Do *something* every day
  – Have easy tasks and hard tasks on your To-Do list

• Set weekly goals
  – Review these with your advisor and/or “research buddy”

• Set deadlines
  – Even if artificial, they help to create structure

• Make time for other important activities
  – Prof. service, extracurricular activities, exercise, socializing

• Keep a journal and/or notebook
  – Jot down stray thoughts; review to assess your progress
Making Steady Progress

This is the biggest challenge of the third year and beyond
General Tips
Prioritize

• What is most **important**?
• What is most **urgent**?
• Long-term vs. short-term priorities
  — Use your long-term goals to prioritize short-term tasks
  — Plan for the year/month/week, not for the day
• Avoid extreme reactivity
• Avoid queue starvation
Organization Systems

• Timeline for graduate school
  – Classes, comps/portolio, prelims/proposal, deadlines

• Monthly calendar

• Weekly schedule

• Daily log

• Prioritized and organized task list
  – Bring this up to date periodically

• Peters suggests monthly progress reports
  – Weekly progress reports, emailed to your advisor, can be very helpful for both of you
Things to Track

• Deadlines for filing paperwork, forms, etc.
• Conference deadlines
  – Know what the important conferences are, when they are held, and when the paper deadlines are
• Course assignments and exams
• Meetings
• Use an electronic calendar effectively
  • Put items with deadlines on your electronic calendar with one or more email and/or popup alerts
Keep a notebook

• Many people use a notebook for meeting notes and research ideas
  – Save them as they fill up for later reference
• Others always have a laptop or tablet and take notes on that
  – Searchable, but not good for sketches
• Others use random scraps of paper to take notes and then lose them
• Find out what works for you and try to be consistent
Filing

• You will probably have to do this both on paper and electronically!
• Papers you read
  —organized by topic or author’s last name
  —cross-indexed in a BibTeX-like database
• Papers you write
  —organized by topic or venue
• Research ideas
• Back up your electronic records or keep them on a server or in the cloud