CMSC 601:
Time Management & Success Strategies

Adapted from slides by Prof. Marie desJardins

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Outline

• Early in your graduate student career
• Late in your graduate student career
• General

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

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/portfolio, 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