What graduate school is about: goals and survival skills

Anne Condon, UBC
Jo-Anne Ting, USC
Redefining success

• Class performance is not as important as before

• Critical and creative thinking are essential
  – Need strong evaluation skills
  – No “correct” answer!

• Research = discovering new ideas
  – Advisors don’t know the answer either
  – BUT they have the skills & experience to help YOU find it
Outline

- How to succeed in grad school
- How to overcome common issues
Do good research

• Learn from all aspects of grad school
  – Class discussions & projects: basic research skills
  – Seminars: critical analysis
  – Peers & colleagues: sounding board for ideas

• Research is a perpetual learning process
  – a result may reveal more questions than answers
  – Inspirations for new ideas while working on current one
Manage your time

• Take charge of your time
  – Prioritize
  – Eliminate context-switching overhead

• Prioritize
  – Decide what is most important
  – Make time to think about and do research!

• Eliminate context-switching overhead
  – Allocate enough time per task to amortize the overhead
  – For TA duties, respond to emails in batches, rather than being interrupt-driven
  – For research, allocate several contiguous hours & eliminate distractions
Communicate technical material well

• Distill complex ideas down to a few clear, concise statements
  – Teach (TA)
  – Volunteer to present in seminars

• Learn how to make & deliver presentations
  – Practice, practice, practice
  – Prepare the “elevator pitch” (1, 5 and 15 minutes)
Select courses and profs strategically

• Choose course content to:
  – Satisfy breadth requirements
  – Get project experience similar to research projects
  – Learn about other areas you might want to do research in!

• Select professors by:
  – Taking courses with potential advisors: impress them!
  – Talking with their students to find out their styles
Plan for milestones

• Map out a timeline with your department’s milestones
  – Include deadlines for completion of courses, qualifying exams, choosing an advisor, thesis completion, etc.
  – Budget extra time for reaching some milestones

• If you anticipate you won’t reach a milestone, let someone you trust know *as early as possible*. If you know beforehand, workarounds can be made.
Not that you expect to, but...

• Sometimes unanticipated situations arise when working closely with others...

• Consensual relationships with faculty are risky, due to inherently unequal positions of power
  – Best case scenario:
    • not a good forum for experiencing & evaluating a relationship
  – Worst case scenario:
    • uncomfortable at best
    • may color what other faculty think of you
    • the faculty won’t leave
    • may compromise your career
Outline

• How to succeed in grad school

• Some common issues and how to overcome them
Adjusting to grad school

- Everybody arrives with different strengths & experiences
  - But really, they are all in the same boat

- Grad school is very “bursty”
  - At times, it will demand enormous amounts of time
  - Give yourself time to recover between the bursts
Making it “click”

• Different people will “click” with different research areas, advisors, and peers
  – when it clicks:
    • you’re passionate about what you’re working on
    • you’re good at it
    • you enjoy the people you’re working with

• You might need to explore several different areas and advisors before it “clicks”
  – Don’t be afraid to change things if it’s not working out
  – Bringing in a co-advisor may be enough!
Growing as a researcher

• A major transition happens in grad school (often year 3)
  – Classes are finally done
  – Now, you have to define your own research agenda
  – Self-driven schedule

• Having a good support network will smooth this transition
  – Build relationships with mentors during first 2 years
  – Turn to them for support and inspiration
  – Re-introduce structure to your environment
    • reading groups
    • monthly social lunches to build a sense of community with peers
The advisor/advisee relationship

• Best case: life-long friendship and collaboration
  – Many success stories like this
  – Research community foundation is built on it

• Sometimes, the relationship needs work to work
  – You can and should take steps to make it better
  – Advisors are almost always willing to help -- but you may need to help them realize that it’s needed

• Sometimes, it won’t work out
  – Bad chemistry
  – Switching advisors is the right thing in this case
Managing the relationship

• Your advisor is as human as you
  – They have personality flaws, quirks and are over-extended

• Be proactive!
  – Meet regularly
  – Talk about process and expectations as well as research
  – Talk especially when you feel “lost” or frustrated

• Other people / places can help too:
  – Find a coadvisor
  – Discretely talk to faculty and grads to get constructive suggestions
  – Internships can give “fresh perspective”and experience with success
  – Campus counseling services
You are in charge of your graduate career...

• You need to make things happen
• You CAN make things happen
  – and if you need it, help is there. Use it!
• Good luck! You’ll do great!