

# How to Succeed in Graduate School

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# Grad School is Different

- Classes don't matter as much
- Research can be shockingly open-ended
- Everyone here is smart
- It's really what you make of it
- The purpose of this talk is to help you get a good start
- “Stuff I wish they had told me when I started”
- This talk is largely Ph.D.-oriented

# Outline

- Informal talk – feel free to interrupt with questions!
- Practical advice
  - Goals for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> years (PhD)
  - Choosing classes and advisors
  - Miscellaneous issues
- Philosophical issues
  - Motivation and time management
  - Coping and social life

# 1<sup>st</sup> Year (PhD)

- Take 4 classes (2 each semester)
  - Get mostly A's
- Talk to lots of people about their research
  - Your professors
  - Your fellow students (& their advisors!)
  - Research talks (Mondays, proposals/defenses, & other seminars)
- Work for a professor over the summer
- Find an advisor (?)

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Year (PhD)

- Take 4 more classes (2 each semester)
- Do some research
- Find an advisor
- Take guided research as a third course (?)

# 3<sup>rd</sup> year and beyond

- Finish taking classes
- Find a research topic
- Propose and complete dissertation

# Choosing Classes

- ONLY TWO CLASSES YOUR FIRST SEMESTER!
  - Unless you're not a TA/RA
- Plan ahead!
- Balance theory vs. programming classes
- Ask around if you're not sure
- Work hard on class projects
- Don't focus entirely on one area in the first semester
- Be open to other subject areas than the one you applied for
- Don't worry; professors don't grade grad courses on the curve

# Choosing an Advisor

- Factors:
  - Funding (grants? TA?)
  - Meeting frequency (biweekly? weekly? daily?)
  - Seniority (new? tenured? dept head?)
  - Busy-ness level (involved-ness)
  - Vision for future
  - General "chill-ness" (must ask current students)
- You **MUST** choose someone you can work with!
- Talk to other professors (you'll need 3-4 letters of recommendation)

# Practical Issues

- Sun-ray stations are less than optimal
  - Use your laptop or find an advisor who will give you a real computer!
  - staff@cs must register MAC addresses for laptops
- Register NOW for parking ([transportation.umd.edu](http://transportation.umd.edu))
  - New license tag system
  - Watch for notices about basketball games
- Keep your files in version control!
  - staff@cs can set up Subversion repositories

# Food Nearby

- Free coffee in 4th floor lounge (bring your own mug)
- Bytes cafe in AV Williams (breakfast and snacks)
- Taco Bell Express and sandwich shop in math building
- Stamp student union:
  - Fast food: McDonald's, Taco Bell, Chik-fil-A, Panda Express, Sbarro, Saladworks
  - Subway is downstairs
  - Student food co-op is excellent!
- North on Rt 1: Food Factory, Pizza Boli's
- South on Rt 1: Potbelly, Marathon, Chipotle, Noodles, Ten-Ren, Ledo's Pizza, Bagel Place, Five Guys, Shanghai

# Motivation

- Responsibility rests (almost) entirely with you
  - Need to be conscious of decisions you make
- Research is inherently undefined
  - Hard
  - Time consuming
  - Juggling act
  - Requires motivation

# Time Management

- Be conscious and track time usage
- Develop a realistic expectation of what can be done
- Keep short, middle, and long term plans
  - The last is important for motivation
- Keep detailed notes so you don't repeat mistakes or lose data

# Coping

- Get used to feeling average
- Lots of people think about quitting
- Read [phdcomics.com](http://phdcomics.com)
- Find or nurture extra-curricular hobbies
- Take breaks to stretch your legs and rest your eyes
- Hang out with office mates outside work
- Get plenty of sleep, eat healthy, and exercise

# Social Life

- Have one!
- Coffee hour, grad lounge, grad pub
- Use the gym (ERC); it's free during the semester!
- Intramural sports (CS teams)
- Many on-campus student groups for religion, music, or hobbies
- \$9 student tickets for CSPAC events
- DC is nearby!!! (SmarTrip card + UM shuttle)

# Good luck! :)



These slides are posted at:  
<http://www.cs.umd.edu/~lam/>