SECURING A BAD CAREER IN PH.D. PROGRAM

3 bad tips for Ph.D. students

Chang Lou, UVA CS Research Symposium 2024
OVERVIEW

— My research area: **failures** in cloud systems and data centers
  — Conducted empirical studies to understand why systems fail

— Similarly, we applied this methodology to understand **grad school**
  — What are some common pitfalls for Ph.D. students?
  — Observations made on past experience
OVERVIEW

Advising Relations  Time Management  Work-life Balance
HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR ADVISOR?
BAD TIP 1.1: ADVISOR IS YOUR MANAGER

— Principle: show your capability from independence
  — Never ask help from your advisor
  — If they don't reach out, you shouldn't
  — It is fine to ignore their advice

I published a paper.

Sounds good.
BAD TIP 1.2: ADVISOR IS THE ORACLE

— Principle: just wait to be spoon-fed
  — Advisor is always right, follow each concrete instruction precisely

— Never disagree with your advisor
  — It is disrespectful and you will be kicked out of school

I finished XYZ. What to do next?

Now do: ...
GOOD TIP 1: ADVISOR IS YOUR VALUABLE RESOURCE

— Principle: proactive, effective communications
— Don't be afraid to ask for help
  — One main purpose of Ph.D. program is to train good researchers
  — Take the initiate to win more resources for yourself
— Advisor is not always right
  — Dare to voice different opinions
  — Disagreement (with justification) wins respect
MANAGE (UP) YOUR ADVISOR

Progress, methodology, design (with visuals), challenges, raw data...

better quality input

Questions, future plans, feedback requests...

AdviceGPT

Feedback on progress, solutions to challenges, guidance on next steps, motivation ...

timely feedback

Ask this question to yourself: how to make the feedback loop more efficient?
BAD TIP 2.1: COURSE WORK >> RESEARCH

– Try to spend all your efforts in courses
  – "I can't meet the paper deadline cuz I need to get A+ for my OS class..."

– Best Ph.D. students have the best GPAs
  – Make sure you are the best of the best

– Graduate as fast as possible with a 4.0 GPA!
  – Never take courses from unfamiliar areas, which have higher risks
GOOD TIP 2.1: TAKING COURSES WISELY

— As a Ph.D. student, you are eventually judged as researchers
  — People know you because of your work, not your GPA
  — What matters: recommendation letters from researchers who appreciate your work

— Strategy: maintain reasonable grades
  — Almost failed several courses in my grad school..
  — But I made the first successful submission that semester

— Courses from different domains
  — Last chance to learn not on your own
BAD TIP 2.2: PROCRASTINATION
GOOD TIP 2.2: START NOW

– Solution 1: start with a two-minute task
  – Take baby steps first
– Solution 2: visualize the progress
BAD TIP 3: WORK >> LIFE

– Two common pitfalls: burnout and isolation

**Burnout**

**Isolation**
GOOD TIP 3: A BALANCED WORK AND LIFE

— Your health matters more than anything
  — There is still a long path after your get your Ph.D. degree..
  — Developing a healthy hobby actually improves your productivity, e.g., exercise

— Protect your motivation carefully
— People walk further with accompany
  — Find a buddy to make fun of your advisor together 😊
TAKEAWAYS

– Manage your advising relation
– Manage your time schedule
– Manage your personal life

Got questions? Happy to talk!
chlou@virginia.edu
Rice 304

This talk incorporates insights from other amazing advice for Ph.D.:

[1] How to Have a Bad Career in Research/Academia. David A. Patterson, Berkeley.
[3] How to Optimize the Mentoring Relationship with Your Advisor. Ryan Huang, JHU.