

SIGCSE 2016 NEW Priorities and Time Management

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As someone who considers himself disorganized and poor at time management, I'm not sure why I'm giving this presentation, but then again, maybe that's why! Despite being organizationally challenged, I have managed to (successfully?) run the SIGCSE symposium and many, **many** courses.

For context, I'm tenured teaching-oriented faculty at UBC. I do some CS Education research and a very small amount of mainstream CS research (almost exclusively when co-advising a ugrad or MS student with another faculty member), but teaching is my passion and primary commitment. You can probably tailor much of my advice to **your** goals, however.

Some of this advice comes from my wife Rachel Pottinger, who is traditional tenure-track faculty at UBC and believes in David Notkin's credo that (graduate) students are the great contribution of researchers.

1 Prioritizing *Yourself*

You need to decide the goals that truly matter to you. Then, create the time and circumstances to allow yourself to excel at those goals.

- Schedule more than half-hour You Time
Each term, block out some weekly times to accomplish non-half-hour thinking, and **DENY** those times to others.
- Write reflectively after every class
After **every** class, write reflectively. If research or service is key to your sense of your career, pick moments when you can take time to write reflectively about those.

Check out Philip Guo’s blog for an exemplar of reflective writing on research, teaching, and much else!
- Manage your commitments consciously.
 - Fulfill as many commitments as you can, but be prepared for the fact that you’ll fall through on some even though you hate doing that and even though it sucks.
 - Stop and think when someone asks you to commit to something. “No” is an OK answer.
 - Don’t say “yes” to a commitment until you think about your list of items to which you’re already committed. If it helps, think of your commitments as a zero-sum game and don’t ask “Is this an important/valuable thing I’m being asked to do?” but “Is this such an important/valuable thing that I should sacrifice this other thing I care about and have already committed to?”
 - From Rachel: It’s easy to feel like you should be doing “Big Work” (like publishing) all the time, and that leads to untenable amounts of stress. So, figure out a medium-term schedule of goals that’s sustainable that doesn’t lead to huge stress but does keep you focused on the ‘long-term’ things.

2 Work/Life Balance

From Steve: “In my sixth year at UBC, UBC had an unusual two week spring break. I spent almost the entire break working on my classes. It was good work, I imagine, but I don’t remember it. On the other hand, the one day

off I used to take my daughter around the Olympic festivities in Vancouver was **amazing**, and I'll never forget it."

Moral of the story: Some things **matter** more than others. Take the time to figure out what those are to you.

To a large extent, this overlaps with prioritizing yourself.

- Use the "Tenure Race" as a tool
From Rachel: Get tenure at a job you might want to do for the rest of your life.
- Be consistently social with colleagues
Have lunch with actual people besides yourself at least one day a week and preferably significantly more!

3 Miscellaneous (But Important!)

- Find an organizational tool that works for you
 - I use emacs's org-mode. It is manna from heaven. :)
 - But, in the past, I've also used: 'starred' items in my inbox, a small paper planner that could fit in my pocket, Outlook's calendar and task list features.
 - It doesn't really matter, but it **does** need to be easy for you to use and available to you almost anytime.
- Double-count whenever possible
 - Key Example: You'll end up assigned service. Find a service assignment you can ask for that will also contribute to your teaching/research/whatever else you're trying to be successful at. (E.g., TA assignment.)
 - Example: Whatever the latest cool research idea, new tool, or nifty assignment is that you're using in one class that you're teaching, find a way to use it in both! (E.g., I'm going to use Cloud9 in multiple classes next year!)
 - Example: Have a TA attend your class and take notes on what works/doesn't work. Use it to get feedback to the students and improve the class but also to build evidence for your teaching portfolio.
- Create consistent, external forcing functions

- Where advance preparation really does make things easier (like exam writing or staff meeting agenda prep), commit publicly to that advance preparation to people you will not disappoint. (No need to tell them you’re just using them for your respect for them!)
 - Let everyone on your team know when you expect tasks that you promise or ask for to be completed and how long you’ll need to respond/give feedback.
- Cultivate mentors

A (career) mentor is a person with whom you communicate well whose guidance helps you succeed in some aspect of your career.

Don’t get hung up on getting **A Mentor**. It’s more important to have *several* mentors.

4 Quadrants

Rachel: “My first year I felt like every day I came in fighting a fire. And then one day, I came in thinking ‘Well, I wonder what the fire will be today?’ That was the day I found out one of my Master’s students had been stabbed in a train station. After that, the fires didn’t seem as bad anymore.”

5 Questions from Attendees

- How can I receive good evaluation from students without sacrificing my own time too much?
 - Minute papers with **super-rapid** pile-making. (See Classroom Assessment Techniques by Angelo and Cross.)
 - Limit the number of times you do it, but make those predictable and consistent. (E.g., say “every Friday” or “every other Friday”.)
 - **WARNING**: actually summarize the results, share with students (including how you did summary), and discuss next steps (even where you’re not responding, briefly and respectfully explain why not or not right now). Else, you’re failing to “close the loop”.
- More efficient prep—how to create a new course (or 3), and still retain sanity.
 - From Rachel: Try not to freak out about how much time class-prep takes the first couple of times you teach. It will get better.

- Plan (and write!) your assessments first, and make them good. (See the book Effective Grading by Walvoord and Anderson for an example.)
 - Pick a good textbook/MOOC/online tutorial/set of videos/etc. and **rely** on it.
 - Use simple, low-stakes, pre-class or early-class quizzes to enforce textbook reading. (Not comfortable with that? Give students the option to have 5% of their grade go to “attendance and quizzes” and emphasize it’ll be an easy grade if they do the prep and attend **or** to have it go to the exam/project—which presumably won’t be an easy grade but won’t require them to attend.)
 - Flip the class around exam/project-like problems with labeled steps an expert would take (and ask for those steps on your assessments!).
- Strategies for maintaining reasonable work/life balance?
 - Best advice: Really make your work time **work time**. Schedule any work social time you’re going to have (e.g., lunches) and commit to it.. but don’t let it expand. This sucks, but it does help.