

# From Sci Fac UOC to US Grad Life Some Tips to Excel !



Dr. Kirthi Premadasa  
Dr. Oshadha Ranasingha

A presentation by CUFSA  
(Colombo University Faculty of Science Alumni Association of North America)  
06/12/2016

# Outline



1. Tips on surviving the first year blues
2. Pitfalls and dangers to be avoided and things to do for the future
3. Tips on being an exceptional TA
4. Tips to balancing your life between research, teaching and graduate course work
5. Getting an early start for the qualifying exams
6. How to balance multiple applications to the same US university ?
7. How to deal with multiple offers ?
8. When and how to look for the best apartments ?
9. What do search committees look for in new PhDs ?
10. GPA conversion
11. About CUFSAA

# Tips on surviving the first year blues



- Have faith. The committee would not have selected you unless you are. Besides, since around 1978, hundreds of UOC grads and competed this journey.
- UOC now has a large number of faculty members who successfully navigated American graduate life. They have been through this and they have trained you well. You will Excel. Believe !
- Do not postpone grading your students work. It will only make matters worse. Do it right after class.

# Tips on surviving the first year blues



- Find an outdoor activity that you will like (jogging, hiking, cycling )
- Hang out with your American and International friends, go to potlucks, picnics, parties.
- Find some friends and travel during breaks
- Everyone who came from UOC to USA for the last forty years made it ! The chances of you being the exception is really really remote ! So relax, work hard and don't forget to enjoy !

# Tips on surviving the first year blues



- Learn how to cook some food before leaving SL. This might help a lot.
- Always try to eat a balanced meal. There is a lot of junk and cheap food which makes you gain weight.
- If you have room mates, deal with them very carefully
- Try to stay close to university at least for 1<sup>st</sup> year. Public transportation might not be good in some of cities.

# Tips on surviving the first year blues



- Stay connected with your friends and family.
- Most of the course work (lectures) have continuous evaluation procedures. There might be several exams before final exams. Final grade will be calculated using all the exams, home work and final exams. So start studying from the beginning of the semester.



# Pitfalls and dangers to be avoided and things to do for the future

- Put only the wonderful things which happen (nice compliment from a student, acceptance of an article, news of a presentation you made etc.) on Facebook. Never put crazy party pictures or comments which criticize the campus and department. Never put comments which can have an ethnic, religious or gender bias Never post that you are stressed.
- Pay your bills on time and build a credit history.



# Pitfalls and dangers to be avoided and things to do for the future

- Use gender/ethnic/sexual orientation neutrality when teaching. Careful about jokes. Never ask students about their personal stuff.
- Never drink and drive. Never do things even slightly illegal. Careful of what you bring from Sri Lanka. Declare all food. Sniffer dogs catch “abin” in Sri lankan medicine and now even rice is banned.





# Pitfalls and dangers to be avoided and things to do for the future

- Maintain the personal space with your students as well as in the community. American people greatly appreciate it.
- Don't cheat on your home work/assignments or any kind of exams. They have take-home final exams (in some universities) and professors expect your honesty.
- Build up a good relationship with a number of professors both with respect to teaching and research. Their references will really help you during your job search.

# Tips on being an exceptional TA



- Be confident. UOC students have gone on to win statewide teaching awards.
- Learn to give, not to expect.
- Do not judge students but try to help individual students. They will love that. In the US, providing access to students is key
- Provide group work opportunities and HIP in class and reach every student in class.

# Tips on being an exceptional TA



- Use recognized teaching interventions.
- Use acceptable instructional technologies such as clickers to give each student a voice (and try out others such as twitter, cellphone clickers etc.).
- Attend professional development workshops.
- Keep scan copies of student cards, complimentary letters.

# Tips on being an exceptional TA



- Try to finish grading on time
- Adopt in to US grading system: it is very linear than SL grading system
- Do not get close to students too much (sometimes they expect favours) but be friendly with them
- Be on time for all the teaching classes (if you are late just 5 minutes, students may leave the class and you will be in a big trouble)

# Tips on being an exceptional TA



- If you have any doubt or concern, contact your grading/teaching supervisor ASAP. Don't try to solve problems by yourself, if they are beyond your grading/teaching responsibilities)
- If you catch students cheating, always get instructions from your grading/teaching supervisor. There are special procedures to report the cheating. If you don't follow that procedures, you might be in trouble.

# Tips to balancing your life between research, teaching and graduate course work



- Most of you will get a Teaching Assistantships for the first year.
- You have 3 major tasks: teaching, research and graduate course work
- You have to finish all the teaching work on time (It's your job)
- You have to start and continue your research
- You need to maintain a good GPA to maintain the F1 visa status (university will update your status to the government at the end of each academic semester)

# Tips to balancing your life between research, teaching and graduate course work



- Contact graduate advisor before you register for course units.
- In some universities teaching load is very high. You can take minimum course units, if you have a very high teaching load.

*TIP: try to finish teaching and grading at the department. Schedule a specific time for research. Spend other times on week days for course work. Try to keep weekends free for shopping, cooking and to have some fun*

# Getting an early start for the qualifying exams



- Universities have different standards for qualifying exams
- Some universities have on arrival qualifying exams. (Ex: first week of Fall semester)
- For on arrival qualifying exams you have to prepare before you leave Sri Lanka
- Ask from the departments about the structure of qualifying exams
- Try to contact former SL students (CUFSAA will help you) who were in the same department to get useful information and tips



# How to balance multiple applications to the same US university ?



- Talk among your batch mates and try to separate out the universities among yourselves before applying
- Similar references from a Sri Lankan campus to a large number of candidates to the same campus can cause confusion to the selection committee.

# How to deal with multiple offers ?



- There are several factors to be considered before making the final decision
  - ✓ Research strength of the department
  - ✓ Rank of the department or graduate program
  - ✓ Guaranteed assistantship
  - ✓ Amount of the stipend
  - ✓ Amount you need to pay for the university (fees)
  - ✓ Geographical location and weather

# When and how to look for the best apartments ?



- It is very difficult to find a good apartment for reasonable cost in some areas.
- Start apartment search right after you accept the offer.
- Contact former SL students (CUFSAA will help you) to get up to date information about the city and apartments
- There are several types of apartments. (Ex: studio, 1 bed/1 bath, 2 bed/2bath, 2 bed/1bath etc.)
- For some apartments you have to pay for utilities (water, electricity, internet and trash etc.) in addition to the rent. Contact property manager/owner to get an estimation for utilities.

# When and how to look for the best apartments ?



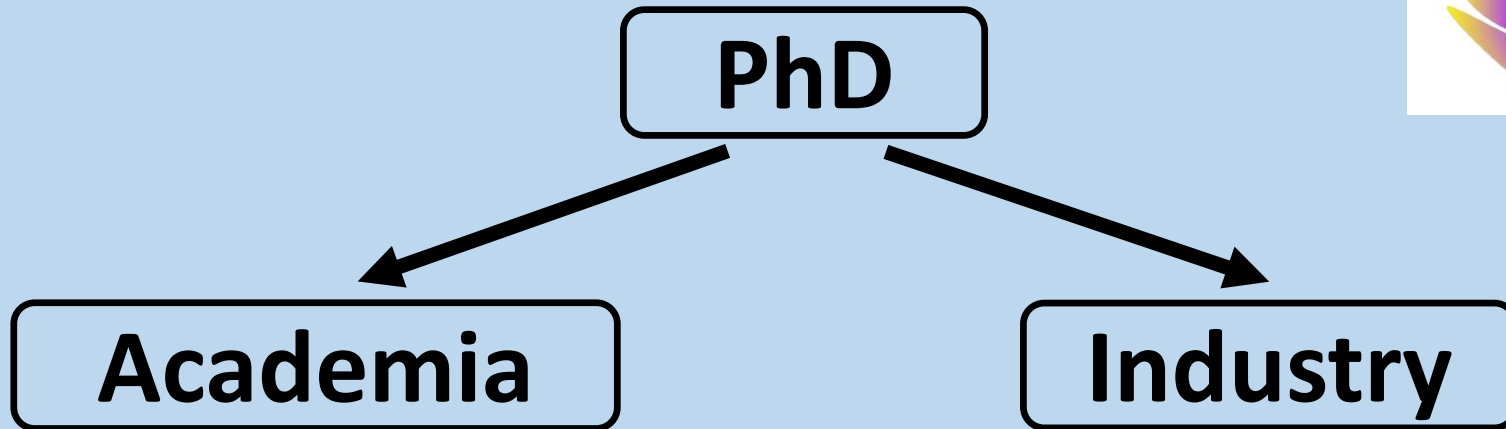
- Try to stay close to the university because you may need to do teaching or grading in some evenings. In some cities public transportation is not good.
- Read reviews for apartments. It's very useful. In US, most people write reviews about the quality of products and services.
- Carefully read the lease (legal document for the apartment) before you sign it. After you sign the lease you are responsible to pay the rent for the entire period of lease term..

# What do search committees look for in new PhDs ?



- Proof of exceptional teaching (very good teaching evaluations)
- A very good teaching reference and an equally good reference .
- Documented use of effective teaching interventions and instructional technology
- An excellent teaching philosophy statement
- Very good references.
- Sound and achievable career plan
- You need to get from 200 applicants to a short list of 5 or 6 :-). But you will !

There are 2 main career paths after you get the PhD



- Postdoctoral associates/ fellows
- Teaching professors
- Teaching/Research professors

- R&D postdoctoral fellows
- Engineers
- Senior scientists

- Making professional connections is very important
- Start networking from your 1<sup>st</sup> year of graduate school
- Maintain a LinkedIn profile for your professional connections. Don't add unnecessary connections in LinkedIn unless they are in similar professional area (use Facebook for this).

# GPA conversion



- The actual value of SL GPA is higher than the value of US GPA
- You can convert SL GPA in to US GPA using “World Education Service (WES)”. You have to send the official transcript through the UOC exam department and WES will evaluate your transcript and send the converted GPA to any university in USA but you have to pay for this service.
- This is more useful if you have a barrier to reach the minimum requirement of the graduate school.
- Before using this service, you can check the estimated US GPA for free

# About CUFSAA



- Colombo University Faculty of Science Alumni Association (CUFSAA) was recently formed under the guidance of Prof. Viranga Tillekaratne (former dean of faculty of science, University of Colombo) and currently interim committee of 20 alumni run the association until the inaugural meeting in this September.
- Currently have over 400 members in north America
- Currently over 50 mentors (and counting) are ready to help current UOC science faculty students at any stage of settling down in USA and Canada

**For more information or guidance contact us on**

**Email : [info@cufsaa.org](mailto:info@cufsaa.org)**

**Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CUFSAA/>**



# Thank you



- Prof. Ranjith Mahanama, Dean, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo
- All the academic staff of Faculty of Science, University of Colombo
- All the non-academic staff of Faculty of Science, University of Colombo
- FOS media unit
- All the CUFSAA members in USA and Canada



# Q & A