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### The Lessons Learned and Experienced Gained Navigating (Graduate) Student life as a Dad and Mentoring a First-Generation Graduate Student

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# The Lessons Learned and Experiences Gained Navigating (Graduate) Student life as a Dad and Mentoring a First- Generation Graduate

**Mitja Trkov**

Flying First | First-Generation Symposium | Rowan University

# About Me

- 2019- Assistant Professor, Mech. Eng.,  
**Rowan University**, NJ, USA
- 2017-2019 Postdoctoral Fellow, Mechanical Eng.,  
**The University of Utah**, UT, USA
- 2016 Postdoctoral Fellow, Mech. & Aero. Eng.,  
**Rutgers University**, NJ, USA
- 2010-2016 Ph.D., , Mech. & Aero. Eng.,  
**Rutgers University**, NJ, USA
- 2009-2010 Junior researcher/‘Mladi raziskovalec’  
**University of Ljubljana**, Slovenia, EU
- 2007-2009 R&D engineer, **Seaway Group**, Bled, Slovenia
- 2007 B.Sc., Mechanical Engineering,  
**University of Ljubljana**, Slovenia, EU



# About Me (cont'd)

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- I am/was **not** a first-generation student
- My parents **were** first-generation students
- They paved the way
- Support is extremely important



# Outline

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- **PART 1 (P-1):**
  - Navigating Graduate Student Life as a
    - Dad
    - An International Student
    - Wife working as a resident (80+ hours per week)
- **PART 2 (P-2):**
  - Co-advising a Female African-American **First-Generation** Graduate Student

# Outline

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- **PART 1 (P-1):**

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# P-1: Student & Parent

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Question:

- How many student parents do we have in the audience?

# P-1: My Family

- I have two kids
- First one - born when my wife was finishing medical school
- Second one - born during my first semester in a graduate school in the US





# P-1: Family is Fun!

Kids:

- bring excitement,
- positive energy,
- make you laugh,
- are full of new ideas,
- curious,
- surprise you with questions,
- tell you what they did in daycare ...



# P-1: Family Can Be Tiring!

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# P-1: Family Can Be Tiring!

- **Tiring** for all of us (kids & parent)!
- We all need a **break & down time**
- Student parents **handle many things** at the same time
- Sometime we just do not know where to start...



# P-1: Student & Family Life

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## Daily Obligations:

- Daily routines & finances
- Studies (classes, homework, exams, group projects-schedules,...)
- My schedule was different compared to many other students and lab members (get up early, take care of kids,...)
- Research (long experiments,...)  $\Rightarrow$  Careful planning to pickup kids from daycare (drive/commuting, tired, hungry, breakdowns...)

# P-1: Lesson 1: Birth of My Son

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- My son was born when I was a first year graduate student in the US
- Date: Mid December = Final Exams
- Asked my professor what happens if the labor day coincides with his exam?



Q: You will have to re-take it next year!

# P-1: Birth of My Son

- Of course, my son was born less than a day before the exam
- Went to take the exam with the wrist band from the hospital!
  - Consequently I may be more accommodating to students in similar situations 😊
  - I have to emphasize and acknowledge that if this same situation would occur to a mom of a newborn, she would not be able to come to the exam!



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# P-1: (Student) Parents

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Faced Daily With Questions:

- Who is driving kids to daycare and picking them up?
- Who is going to the grocery store?
- Who is going to make kids lunch and snack everyday?
- Who is doing the laundry?
  - Got very proficient at this task
  - So good, that now kids come to me asking me how to get stains out of their clothes 😊
- Who is going to stay with the home if they do not feel well or if they are sick? Are you missing classes/work?

# P-1: Good and Bad Days

- We all have good and bad days
- For all the parents, sometimes just preparing a lunchbox was an effort

Bad days:



Good days:





# P-1: Daily Obligations

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- You have classes/work, rush home, exhausted after a full day, you pick them up from daycare ⇒ kids have a melt down, because they are tired, hungry, upset.. (and what do you do?)
- Put kids to bed and start studying (late nights...)
- Should I go to park and play with kids or study/work instead ⇒ this question is always at the back of your mind
- Why studying, working and take care of family?  
⇒ In hard times could easily get derailed from studies.

# P-1: Benefits of Student Parents

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- Kids shift your focus & de-stress you ⇒ you forget about the things you worry about at work
- You see their joy and it gives you new motivation
- Simple things can make your day (just watching them play...)
- Recently, read a quote “I managed my Ph.D., exactly **because** we had 4 kids during that time.”

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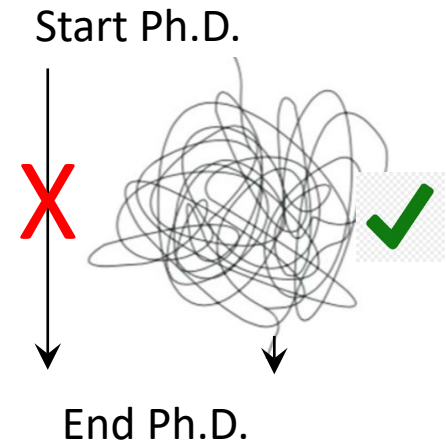
# P-2: Co-advising First-Generation Student

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- **PART 2 (P-2):**
  - Co-advising a **first-generation** graduate student
  - She was a female African-American studying engineering
  - It was during my postdoc
  - Learned about her challenges navigating graduate student life

# P-2: Graduate Studies

- As a graduate student  $\Rightarrow$  your main focus is research (progress is **very non-linear**)
- **Ups and downs** along the way
- You need to have **full support** from family, friends, advisor, ...



# P-2: My Experiences & Lessons Learned

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- Co-advising a first-generation grad student (as a postdoc)
- She was struggling how to initiate her Ph.D. project  
⇒ could **not rely** on help from anyone in her family
- Helped her by closely working with her on her research  
⇒ **led to** her first (first author) **publication**



# P-2: My Experiences & Lessons Learned (cont'd)

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- Was experiencing **financial hardship**
  - (graduate student stipends are low and funding is not guaranteed)
- Her **parents** often **suggested** her to **rather go work in a supermarket to get money than study!**
  - Parents had hard time:
    - seeing the long term benefits of education
    - understanding the struggles you go through as a grad student (parents had no experiences)
    - parent have lack of experiences and their mentality may be different
  - Students:
    - Extremely hard situation for the students
    - What to advise?
    - Needs moral support and convince them to believe in their selves

# P-2: My Experiences & Lessons Learned (cont'd)

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Therefore:

- Advising for such students is very important
  - academic advising  $\Rightarrow$  from faculty and advisors (me/us)
- Having programs such as **Flying First** (amazing work by the whole team!)
- Having community, where students can discuss issues and share thoughts with others first-generation students



# Questions?

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Thank You!

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