About Jorge Cham

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- John Nonnamaker, Graduate Student Career Development, M.I.T.

"The talk was just terrific. We all loved it."

- Mary Johnson, Director, Graduate Career Services, Yale University

"Jorge Cham is not a Nobel laureate, but the popularity of his keynote lectures and his following in the scientific world are enough to make even the most distinguished professor green with envy."

- Science Magazine
Jorge Cham is the creator of *Piled Higher and Deeper* (PHD Comics), the popular comic strip about life (or the lack thereof) in Academia. He is also the co-founder of PHD TV, a video science and discovery outreach collaborative, and a founding board member of Endeavor College Prep, a non-profit school for kids from disadvantaged communities in East Los Angeles.

Often called the Dilbert of academia, PHD has appeared in the Stanford, MIT, Caltech and Carnegie Mellon newspapers among others, and is published online where it is read by over 7 million visitors a year from over 1000 universities and colleges worldwide.

Jorge Cham was born and raised in the Republic of Panama. He obtained his B.S. from Georgia Tech and his M.S. and Ph.D. from Stanford University, specializing in Robotics. He was subsequently an Instructor and Research Associate at Caltech from 2003-2005, where his work focused on developing “Smart” Neural Implants. He travels and presents all over the world to thousands of graduate students, faculty and administrators on the graduate student experience.

Five PHD book collections have been published with over 100,000 copies sold.

“Hilarious.”
- The Chronicle of Higher Education chronicle.com

“You’ll laugh and wince at Jorge Cham’s smart comic strip.”
- USATODAY.com

“Use this comic strip for procrastination or decompression, as you see fit.”
- Nature (Journal)
In his lectures, Jorge Cham recounts his experiences bringing humor into the lives of millions of stressed out academics and tells stories from his travels to over 300 universities and research centers in the US and across the world. Thought-provoking yet humorous, Jorge Cham's talks examine the source of academics' anxieties, explore the myth of procrastination, and help academics figure out how to convey what they've learned to the outside world.

Typical talk duration: 60 minutes, 15 minutes Q&A
Feedback from Jorge Cham’s Lectures

From event organizers:

“The talk was humorous and helpful. Cham’s cartoon strip has been a giant plus in helping graduate students acknowledge and cope with the stress they experience.”
- Isaac Colbert, Dean of Graduate Students, M.I.T.

“Jorge Cham’s talk was just terrific. I loved it and obviously so did our audience here.”
-Mary Johnson, Director, Graduate Career Services, Yale University

“The message of the presentation really resonated with our students. The graduate school journey can be extremely isolating, and Jorge Cham's presentation and comics normalize the experience and provide solace and humor.”
-John Nonnamaker, Graduate Student Career Development, M.I.T.

“We had such a great turnout and I still can't believe how enthusiastic everyone was!”
-Angela Noel-Hvitved, Graduate Student Association, Rice University

"I've never heard so many graduate students *really* laughing at the same time!"
-Jory Zmuda Ruscio, Chair, Graduate Life Center's Speaker Series, Virginia Tech

"Everyone that I talked to really enjoyed the lecture."
-Gavin Reddick, Chair, Graduate Student Council, Univ. of Virginia

"This was such a successful event for us."
-Cara Skeat, Associate Program Director, Georgia Tech Student Center

“An excellent talk, people thoroughly enjoyed it. The Q&A session was lots of fun.”
- Sidharth Jaggi, The Caltech Y

"We were so happy that we were able to pack the room! It was definitely one of the most successful events we've run!"
-Shin-Yi Lin, Chair, Graduate Student Government, Princeton University
From event organizers (cont’d)

“It was an enormous success resulting in some very nice PR for our office.”
- Sharon Belden, Assistant Director, Office of Career Services, Harvard University

“The crowd was so big at Cornell that they were actually hanging from the rafters... It was one of the few times I think the students really thought we ‘got it right’!”
- Victoria A. Blodgett, Director, Graduate Student Life & Career Development, Cornell University

“Penn students loved him! We got lots of positive feedback.”
- Julie Vick, Associate Director, Career Services, Univ. of Pennsylvania

“If you have not engaged Jorge on your campuses, do so. An exceptionally well-received program by UCLA students.”
- Albert E. Dubin, Senior Associate Director, Counseling Services & Campus Relations, UCLA Career Center
Feedback from Jorge Cham’s Lectures

From grad students:

“Your talk was awesome and made me feel so much better. I was at a point in my education where I was completely stressed out and losing sight of why I got into science in the first place. Your talk gave me some insight into why I was feeling that way. Keep doing PhD. . .we all rely on it to keep our sanity!”
- Kim, anonymous

"You were very funny. I found myself REALLY pleased with what you had to say. I think your talk was more motivational and educational than most of the career seminars that are organized to supposedly keep us on track."
- Geoff, North Carolina State University

"Your talk has been the topic of conversation for the past couple of days. It was a great talk and very well delivered."
- Gelareh Taban, University of Maryland

"I can’t remember when I have had as many laughs and I am sure many of our colleagues will benefit from your philosophy and shared experience."
- Damian, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

"Thank you SO MUCH for signing my books and giving a wonderful talk at Yale. You made my month!"
- Robert Clark, Yale University

"Thanks for helping us to keep a good perspective on grad life."
- Calvin Chan, Princeton University

"It was so nice to go to your lecture and laugh for an hour about how life is for all of us. It is SO good to know that other people are in the same spot as you. It’s something we often forget when we’re caught up in papers and the drama of grad school."
- Betty Mohler, University of Utah
Since 2005, Jorge Cham has delivered over 300 invited lectures at Universities and Research Centers worldwide, with audiences of a few dozen to a few thousand.

Please note attendance will vary depending on your institution.
Another popular event is to screen The PHD Movie, the live action adaptation of PHD.

A brainy movie with heart and soul."
- The Times Higher Education

'I don't think I've laughed that hard in a long time! Great movie!!'
- Paige, U. Wisconsin

'I really enjoyed your movie because it helped me get my academic life back in perspective.'
- Kaitlyn, Michigan Tech U.

'It was a huge success. Everyone was very positive. We even needed to add more seats to the auditorium.'
- Pieter, CERN.

'I just want to let you know that we had 1,535 students turn out. Thanks for the great movie!'
- Tim, U. Illinois

For screening information, please contact movie@phdcomics.com
Piled Higher and Deeper: The Everyday Life of a Grad Student

Jorge Cham has been capturing the trials and tribulations of grad school in a comic strip for more than a decade; now he’s left the lab for the lecture circuit

Jorge Cham is not a Nobel laureate, but the popularity of his keynote lectures and his following in the scientific world are enough to make even the most distinguished professor green with envy. Cham, 33, is the brains behind the comic strip Piled Higher and Deeper—PhD for short—and it’s made him a celebrity among graduate students, with 4.7 million visitors a year to his Web site and a battalion of fans in labs all over the planet.

At the time, I was also reading a book about Doonesbury,” the comic strip that has provided wry social and political commentary since 1970, “so I was kind of inspired in that way,” he says. Despite being busy with a full load of classes and teaching assistant duties, Cham says, “I somehow thought it would be a good idea to draw a comic 5 days a week.”

Cham proposed a comic strip that would center on the life (or lack thereof) of a group of overworked, underpaid, procrastinating graduate students and their terrifying advisers. The Stanford Daily’s editors liked the idea, and in October 1997, Piled Higher and Deeper was born. A few weeks later, Cham created the Web site on which, to this day, his comic strip is available for free.

From the beginning, PhD has featured a regular cast of characters: the nameless hero, suspiciously similar to the author himself; geeky Cecilia, the dedicated engineering student; Mike Slackernery, who takes laziness to a whole new level; social scientist Tajel; the absent-minded Professor Jones; and the demanding Professor Smith. Cham insists that none of them is based on real people, but he acknowledges that he was inspired by colleagues “from the research center where I worked, to my cohort of classmates, to a lot of my brother’s friends.”

Split careers
Cham kept up the comic strip while he finished his master’s degree and continued it during the 4 years he spent at Stanford studying for a Ph.D. His research was part of a multidisciplinary project to build a sturdy and fast six-legged robot—a design inspired by cockroaches—capable of maneuvering in bumpy terrains. Cham’s role was to design the legs and joints. “He was a great student, creative and hardworking and very sharp,”
says Mark Cutkosky, Cham’s Ph.D. adviser at Stanford. Cutkosky remembers his own graduate student days well enough to identify with the comic strip’s characters. “Jorge’s comics capture the special culture of academia, especially in technical fields, quite well,” he says.

Cham’s first book, *Piled Higher and Deeper: A Graduate Student Comic Strip Collection*, was published in 2002, during his last year at Stanford. But despite the growing success of the comic strip, he still planned to pursue a career in research. Cham started looking “very aggressively” for an academic job. He was short-listed for a job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge but didn’t get it. “I always think that I was this close,” he says with a hint of frustration. In the end, Cham stayed on the West Coast for a postdoc position at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena researching neural prosthetics. The work was aimed at developing a system to help paralyzed people control external devices, such as a mouse pointer, with brain signals.

Cham’s second collection of comic strips, *Life is Tough and then you graduate*, was published in May 2005. By then, *PhD* fans had spread beyond Stanford, and his sister Laura volunteered to organize a book signing at MIT, where she was a graduate student. Cham thought it was a cool idea but says, “I offered to do a lecture instead, since it’s a skill you learn as a Ph.D. anyway.” He talked about the books and their characters, and the ups and downs of graduate student life. That talk launched his career as a speaker at conferences and student events worldwide.

His “The Power of Procrastination” lecture presents the comic strip and its characters, explores the pros and cons (mostly cons) of being a graduate student, and discusses the pros and cons (mostly pros) of procrastination. The result is “hilarious,” says Finkelstein of UCL. Finkelstein says he considered several “worthy but dull options” for a keynote speech at the Computer Science 2008 Student Research Conference he was organizing at the University of Cambridge when someone suggested Cham. Finkelstein agreed immediately.

Feedback from the talk at Cambridge was excellent, he says. “[Cham’s] message that research is mentally tough and potentially lonely strangely made the students more enthusiastic,” Finkelstein adds.

**Making choices**

Coordinating his cartoonist activities with his research at Caltech became increasingly difficult, and Cham realized that the comic strip was “growing into something special.” He dithered on whether to become a professional cartoonist or pursue his dream of becoming a professor. Cham says he’s grateful for the advice Joel Burdick, his principal investigator at Caltech, gave him at the time. Burdick encouraged him “to pick one thing and be really good at it” and warned him not to be caught in artificial models of success, such as thinking that becoming a tenured professor at a major university is the only available option.

Instead, Cham learned that “if you have the drive and the creativity, you can forge your own path” and “you can choose your own definition of success,” he says.

Cham believes that part of his drive to become an academic was the thrill of achievement, and he realized that being “this close” to fulfilling his dream of getting an academic job at MIT was “actually pretty good. … So once I got that far, I just said to myself, ‘You know, I don’t need to be a professor anymore.’” So, in July 2005, Cham left Caltech to become a full-time cartoonist.

The *PhD* comic strip is still available for free on his Web site and syndicated for free in university newspapers. Cham makes his living with the sale of books, merchandise, and “The Power of Procrastination” lecture series. The business gives him little rest; Cham gave 46 lectures last year, more than a dozen of which were in Europe. Next month, he’s scheduled to speak at five universities in four states and Canada.

Even though his graduate student years are definitely over, comic ideas are still plentiful: He posts new comics on his Web site “approximately 2.718 times a week.” Cham draws mostly from his own experiences as a graduate student, although he is also inspired by fan mail and people he meets during his talks.

“Running a business can be really challenging,” Cham says, and part of him misses working in a scientific institution and knowing that his research is part of something larger. However, there are quite a few signs that his work is far-reaching: His often-packed lectures usually include graduate students from many different disciplines, and seeing “art history scholars laughing along with biologists, English, and engineering majors is something I imagine rarely happens,” Cham says. “Many people have come up to me to say the comics and the lecture are like therapy for them.” Finkelstein agrees: Part of the appeal of *PhD*, he says, is that “while poking fun at the loneliness of research, [Cham] actually makes us realize that we are not alone.”

—SARA COELHO