

**QUANTITATIVE PERFORMANCE AND TRADEOFFS**  
**IN THE MAP KINASE SIGNALING MODULE**

Thesis by  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Pasadena, California

2009

(Defended January 23, 2009)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Anand Asthagiri. His most inspirational qualities (in the scientific sense) are his deep curiosity, insightful guidance, and his conscientious scientific analysis. Navigating the everyday life of research, which can be characterized by extended bouts of frustration tied together by brief periods of euphoric success, requires diligence and focus. Anand's tireless patience, steady encouragement, and positive motivation were vital to my development and accomplishments here at Caltech.

To the members of the Asthagiri group, Nicholas Graham, Claudiu Giurumescu, Niki Galownia, Melissa Pope, Keiichiro Kushiro, Jin-Hong Kim, Paul Minor, and Ehsan Jabbarzadeh, I thank you for providing assistance, advice, and a welcoming work environment. I am particularly grateful to Claudiu for readily lending a helping hand with all things math, coding, and computers. And to Nick, thank you for helpful discussions, elder guidance, and weekly tacos from Ernie's.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee, Mark Davis, Christina Smolke, and Paul Sternberg, for their comments and advice. Caltech is a wonderful community in which to pursue science, encouraging seamless collaboration between labs and departments, in large part due to the generosity of the faculty that work here.

I am very grateful for the generosity of Ray Deshaies, who allowed me to pursue experiments in his lab, taking advantage of their expertise in yeast. Many Deshaies lab

members readily shared their time and knowledge to my benefit. I would like to thank Rusty Lipford for getting me started with yeast, Dane Mohl for tirelessly answering my many questions and supplementing my reagent stock, and Nathan Pierce for helpful discussions about my project. I would especially like to thank Geoff Smith and Heenam Park, who in addition to their assistance with experiments, gave me a home in the Deshaies lab by generously sharing their bench space with me.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Lizette Loya, for always encouraging me throughout my time at Caltech, and my daughter, Alexandra, for her energy, joy, and curiosity.

**ABSTRACT****QUANTITATIVE PERFORMANCE AND TRADEOFFS IN THE  
MAP KINASE SIGNALING MODULE**

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Intracellular signal transduction networks propagate and integrate the information that cells sense from environmental stimuli. The quantitative performance of signaling networks regulates cell decisions, and aberrations in network performance lead to pathologies such as cancer. The mitogen-activated protein (MAP) kinase cascade is a highly-conserved signaling module that regulates diverse cellular processes, such as proliferation, differentiation, and apoptosis in eukaryotic species ranging from yeast to human. While the principal components and mechanisms that define the MAP kinase module are well established, our understanding of and ability to tune its quantitative performance is limited. Here, we probe more deeply how the quantitative properties of the MAP kinase module may be affected by variations in the expression levels of the key constituents of the cascade—kinases, phosphatases and scaffolds.

Using a computational approach, we delineate how four quantitative properties—responsiveness to input, dynamic range of output, signal amplification, and signal

lifetime—depend on the relative abundances of the two core components of the MAPK module, kinases and phosphatases. We identify a reduced metric termed the ‘resistance to activation’ that predicts the quantitative properties of the module across a wide range of parameter values. Its predictive utility extends to dynamic properties such as signal lifetime, which often dictates the MAP kinase’s effect on cell function. Our analysis highlights tradeoffs in design, as not all quantitative attributes of the module can be simultaneously optimized. Thus, the resistance to activation captures the fundamental principles that determine cascade behavior and can be exploited to guide quantitative redesign of the MAP kinase module.

In addition to the expression levels of kinases and phosphatases, scaffolds play a key role in signal propagation through the MAP kinase module. Protein scaffolds bring together multiple components of a signaling pathway, thereby promoting signal flux along a common physical “backbone.” Scaffolds figure prominently in natural signaling pathways and are emerging as a promising platform for synthetic circuits. To better understand how scaffolding quantitatively affects signal transmission, we conducted an *in vivo* experimental sensitivity analysis of MAP kinase response to broad perturbations in the expression level of Ste5, an exemplar scaffold of the yeast mating pathway. Our results demonstrate that the expression level of Ste5 significantly affects several quantitative aspects of signal propagation, including signal throughput, pathway ultrasensitivity, and baseline leakage. These new insights into the quantitative role of scaffolding in MAP kinase signaling suggest advantages and limitations in designing synthetic scaffold-based regulatory networks.

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