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Multiobjective optimization of gene circuits
for metabolic engineering

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Abstract: Metabolic engineering has enabled the production of a wealth of chemicals with microorganisms. Classic strategies for pathway engineering rely on the expression of heterologous enzymes in a host that convert native intermediates into target products. Although traditional implementations are based on open-loop control, recent advances in gene circuit engineering offer opportunities for building feedback systems that dynamically control pathway activity. Here we present a framework for the design of metabolic control circuits based on multiobjective optimization. We show that positive and negative feedback loops produce a range of optimal dynamics along a Pareto front. Such regulatory loops define connectivities between pathway intermediates and enzymatic genes that trade-off metabolic production against the burden to the host. Our results lay the groundwork for the automated design of gene circuitry in applications at the interface of synthetic biology and metabolic engineering.

Keywords: Metabolic engineering; Synthetic Biology; multiobjective optimization

1. INTRODUCTION

Metabolic engineering has been extremely successful in the production of valuable chemicals with genetically modified microorganisms (Lee et al., 2019). Microbial strains can be equipped with enzymatic genes that catalyze native metabolites into target chemical products. A common strategy in metabolic engineering is the “push-pull-block” approach (Liu et al., 2018). This involves up-regulation of native enzymes to push flux from precursors, expression of heterologous enzymes to pull flux towards the desired product, and knockdown of native pathways to block the diversion of flux away from production.

In traditional pathway engineering, foreign enzymes are expressed at constant levels from inducible or constitutive promoters. This corresponds to an open-loop strategy where pathway expression cannot adapt to perturbations or changes in bioreactor conditions (Venayak et al., 2015). Moreover, the diversion of metabolic flux from native processes towards chemical production alters the energetic budget of the host. This causes metabolic imbalances that often impair growth and limit production. Such imbalances arise from e.g. the accumulation of toxic intermediates or the depletion of key metabolites for survival. Pathway expression also draws resources from the genetic machinery of the host, thus affecting the biosynthesis of native proteins needed for growth. As a result, a central challenge in metabolic engineering is to determine enzyme expression levels that maximise production with a reduced footprint on the host.

Last decade has witnessed the birth of dynamic metabolic engineering, a new technology that aims to use gene regulatory circuits in conjunction with engineered pathways (Zhang et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2014; Doong et al., 2018). The core principle is to design feedback control circuits that adapt pathway expression in response to the metabolic state of the host (Mannan et al., 2017; Stevens and Carothers, 2015). These control circuits can potentially resolve many of the challenges typically encountered in pathway engineering (Oyarzún and Stan, 2013). Yet to date there are no systematic strategies to navigate the design space and single out candidate circuits that can achieve given performance specifications.

Here we present a circuit design strategy based on multiobjective optimization. Our approach automatically finds circuit architectures and parameters that optimally trade-off the production flux against the metabolic burden on the host. This is a first step towards automated design of control circuits for engineered pathways and can speed up the iterations between circuit design, implementation and testing. As a proof-of-principle, we illustrate our approach with a toy pathway that contains some of the key elements encountered in real applications. We show
that optimal solutions produce Pareto-optimal fronts with different feedback loops between pathway intermediates and metabolic genes.

2. DYNAMIC MODEL OF AN ENGINEERED PATHWAY

We consider a heterologous pathway that branches from a native pathway that is essential for growth (see Fig. 1). We denote by $x_0$ and $x_1$ the concentration of the metabolites of the host and synthetic pathway, respectively. The pool of native metabolite ($x_0$) is synthesized at a rate $V_{in}$ and consumed by a native enzyme $e_0$. The synthetic pathway contains two enzymes, denoted by $e_1$ and $e_2$.

We model pathway kinetics with mass balance equations:

$$\dot{x}_0 = V_{in} - V_0 - V_1 - \lambda x_0,$$
$$\dot{x}_1 = V_1 - V_2 - \lambda x_1,$$

where $V_i$ are the fluxes of each reaction in Fig. 1B and $\lambda$ is the growth rate of the culture. In particular, the reaction flux $V_2$ represents the flux through the engineered pathway. We model the expression of the pathway enzymes by:

$$\dot{e}_1 = u_1 - \lambda e_1,$$
$$\dot{e}_2 = u_2 - \lambda e_2,$$

with $u_i$ being the expression rate of the pathway genes. The reaction rates are assumed to follow irreversible Michaelis-Menten kinetics of the form:

$$V_0 = e_0 \cdot \frac{k_{cat,0} \cdot x_0}{K_{M0} + x_0},$$
$$V_1 = e_1 \cdot \frac{k_{cat,1} \cdot x_0}{K_{M1} + x_0},$$
$$V_2 = e_2 \cdot \frac{k_{cat,2} \cdot x_1}{K_{M2} + x_1},$$

with kinetic parameters ($k_{cat,i}, K_{M,i}$) that are specific to each enzyme.

In dynamic pathway engineering, gene regulatory circuits are employed to adapt enzyme expression levels in response to a metabolic signal in the host. A common strategy is to use pathway intermediates to modulate the expression of enzymatic genes through metabolite-responsive transcription factors. The dose-response curve of such transcription factors can be modelled by a sigmoidal dose-response curve (Mannan et al., 2017) of the form:

$$\sigma^+(x) = a_i \frac{x^n}{\theta^n + x^n} \quad \text{(gene activation)},$$
$$\sigma^-(x) = a_i \frac{\theta^n}{\theta^n + x^n} \quad \text{(gene repression)},$$

where the parameter $a_i$ represents the maximal expression, $\theta_i$ is a regulatory threshold, and $n$ is an effective Hill coefficient.

For the system in Fig. 1B, we seek to find gene control circuits that maximize the production flux $V_2$ with a low footprint on enzyme expression. To formulate these specifications as a multiobjective optimization problem, we parameterize the enzyme expression rates $u_i$ by the general function:

$$u_i(x_i) = b_i + |\eta_i| \cdot \left( \frac{1 + \eta_i}{2} \cdot \sigma^+(x_i) + \frac{1 - \eta_i}{2} \cdot \sigma^-(x_i) \right),$$

where $\eta_i \in \{-1,0,1\}$ is an integer variable and $b_i$ describes the basal expression rate for each enzyme. The parameterization in (6) encodes all the regulatory circuits shown in Fig. 1B into a single function that is amenable for simultaneous optimization of regulatory parameters, comprised in the Hill functions $\sigma^+$ and $\sigma^-$, and regulatory architectures, described by the integers in $\eta$. This formulation accounts for two regulated genes and three modes of regulation (activation, repression, and no regulation) exerted by the metabolite $x_1$. Each regulatory circuit can thus be described by a two dimensional integer vector $\eta = [\eta_1, \eta_2]$ and a six dimensional, real positive vector of regulatory parameters $w = [a_1, a_2, \theta_1, \theta_2, b_1, b_2]$.

3. CIRCUIT DESIGN AS AN OPTIMIZATION PROBLEM

Our goal is to design a gene circuit that maximizes the production of the metabolite of interest while keeping the burden of enzyme production at a minimum. To this aim we define two integral objective functions for our optimization problem. The first objective accounts for the flux through the production pathway:

$$J_1 = \int_0^T |V_2(t) - V_{in}| \, dt.$$  

The second objective describes the genetic burden caused by pathway expression:

$$J_2 = \sum_i \int_0^T u_i \, dt.$$  

In both objectives, $T$ is a pre-specified final time. The objective function $J_1$ decreases when the production flux $V_2$ is high and close to the feed flux $V_{in}$. But since this requires high enzyme expression, a low $J_1$ can be only achieved at the expense of a large value for objective $J_2$.

To find the optimal circuit architectures that trade-off production against enzyme expression, we formulate the following optimization problem:
subject to:

i) The dynamics of the pathway in eq. (1)–(2) and a given initial condition.

ii) Upper and lower bounds for the decision variables:

\[ w^L \leq w \leq w^U \]

\[-1 \leq \eta \leq 1\]

iii) Inequality constraints to avoid the potential toxic effects caused by high concentration of product \(x_1\):

\[ x_1(t) \leq x_{1,\text{max}}, \text{ for all } t. \]  

To solve the resulting mixed-integer multiobjective optimization problem, we employ an \( \varepsilon \)-constraint strategy combined with mixed-integer hybrid global optimization algorithms. We employ the global heuristic eSS proposed in Egea et al. (2010) combined with MISQP by Exler and Schittkowski (2007) as a local solver. This optimization strategy has been shown to perform well for mixed-integer problems involving gene circuit design and allow for an efficient search over the space of circuit architectures and parameters (Otero-Murias and Banga, 2017).

4. EXAMPLE APPLICATION

As a proof of concept we solved the multiobjective problem for a representative set of kinetic parameters \(k_{\text{cat},i} = 12\text{s}^{-1}\) and \(K_{M,i} = 10\mu\text{M}\) for all enzymes \(i = 0, 1, 2\), with a growth rate \(\lambda = 3 \cdot 10^{-4}\text{s}^{-1}\), influx \(V_n = 1\mu\text{Ms}^{-1}\), and concentration of the native enzyme \(c_0 = 0.05\mu\text{M}\). We considered the parameter bounds given in Table 1 and included an additional upper bound for the product concentration \(x_{1,\text{max}} = 180\mu\text{M}\).

Table 1. Parameter bounds for the optimization problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(w^L)</th>
<th>(a_1)</th>
<th>(a_2)</th>
<th>(\theta_1)</th>
<th>(\theta_2)</th>
<th>(b_1)</th>
<th>(b_2)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>(10^{-4})</td>
<td>(10^{-4})</td>
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We implemented the \( \varepsilon \)-constraint strategy by setting objective \(J_2\) as a constraint in a single objective problem to minimize \(J_1\). To this end we consider seven intervals corresponding to \(J_2 \leq 1, 1 < J_2 \leq 2, 2 < J_2 \leq 3, 3 < J_2 \leq 4, 4 < J_2 \leq 5, J_2 > 5\). The resulting Pareto front of solutions is shown in Fig. 2, together with the titer of product \(x_1\) for each optimal circuit, defined as:

\[ \text{titer} = \int_0^T V_2(t) \text{d}t. \]

The extremes points of the Pareto front, labelled as P1 and P7 in Fig. 2, correspond to solutions that account for the single objectives \(J_2\) and \(J_1\), respectively. The average computational time needed by the solver for each constrained single objective problem is \(658\text{s}\) and no solution exceeded \(1500\text{s}\) using Matlab 2017b on a PC with Intel 2.8 GHz Xeon processor.

The resulting Pareto front contains three different circuit architectures (Fig. 2): solution P1 corresponds to the open loop case (\(\eta_1 = \eta_2 = 0\)). Solutions P2 to P5 require activation of the consumption enzyme \(e_2\) (\(\eta_1 = 0\) and \(\eta_2 = 1\)), which corresponds to a negative feedback loop of \(x_1\) onto itself. Solutions P6 and P7 require repression of the consumption enzyme \(e_2\) (\(\eta_1 = 0\) and \(\eta_2 = -1\)), and thus correspond to a positive feedback loop of \(x_1\) onto itself. In all cases, optimal solutions do not need control on the expression of the first pathway enzyme \((e_1)\). In Figs. 3-4 we show the optimal trajectories of metabolic product \((x_1)\), pathway enzymes \((e_1\) and \(e_2)\) and metabolic fluxes for all optimal solutions.

Table 2. Optimal parameter values for each solution along the Pareto front in Fig. 2. The Hill coefficient was fixed to \(n = 2\). Units are given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a_1)</th>
<th>(a_2)</th>
<th>(\theta_1)</th>
<th>(\theta_2)</th>
<th>(b_1)</th>
<th>(b_2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.5 (\cdot 10^{-3})</td>
<td>3.2 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>6.3 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>1.9 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>1.7 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9 (\cdot 10^{-7})</td>
<td>5.2 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.9 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>5 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>1 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.1 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>9.2 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.9</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
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<td>8.9 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<td>9.1 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>2.6 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.4 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3 (\cdot 10^{-6})</td>
<td>2.7 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.9 (\cdot 10^{-5})</td>
<td>1 (\cdot 10^{-4})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our results suggest that both positive and negative feedback can lead to an optimal trade-off between production and burden to the host. Solutions from P3 to P7 perform significantly better in terms of titer than solutions P1 and P2. Note that solution P1 accounts for one objective only, resulting in a slow, 1st-order like response. In contrast, solutions that account for the second objective (from P2 to P5) display increasingly faster and nonlinear responses as we move along the Pareto front.

5. DISCUSSION

Here we have addressed the regulation of heterologous pathways using a multiobjective dynamic optimization approach. We show that encoding the design problem in a mixed-integer framework enables an efficient search through the topology and parameter spaces simultaneously. Our multiobjective perspective allows us to find...
solutions that optimally trade-off performance in terms of production and burden to the host, as quantified by the cost of protein production. The resulting Pareto front suggests that open loop control imposes the lowest burden at the expense of poor production. A positive feedback architecture lies at the other extreme of the Pareto front, showing high production but at the cost of high protein production. A negative feedback architecture lies in between these two extremes, with a good performance and intermediate values of burden. Our results show promise for future applications of multiobjective optimization in the design of complex circuitry that combine gene expression with metabolic activity.

REFERENCES


