# Graduate student recruitment: Notes of a Faculty of Forestry workshop

Oct 8, 2021, 1-2:30 pm

Organizers: Nicholas Coops (FRM DH), Pia Smets

Panel: Faculty: Sally Aitken (ADRI), Cole Burton, Sarah Gergel (prev. AD-EDI)

Staff: Julie Morey and Robin Poirier-Vasic (FoF), Shane Moore (G & PS)

Topic: When and how to select excellent graduate students

**1. Active vs passive recruitment**

An active approach, which is designed to reach a wider audience, is needed when starting up a new lab. It allows for more diverse recruitment, but does require a strategy to deal with the flood of incoming applications. Passive recruitment happens in response to prospective students contacting you spontaneously. Your 'join our lab' webpage (example) can provide general information (currently accepting applications or not), and posting your criteria on that page (e.g. tell me what your favourite wildlife species is) gives you a fair and easy manner to screen out applicants who haven't read your website.

The G & PS can help you with advertising positions widely, and holds workshops "demystifying the application process" which may help your graduate students.

Ultimately, G & PS decides whom to admit. These applications go through "e-vision": make sure you have access to this portal as a prof. The staff in Forestry can help prepare the application and make sure all boxes are ticked. Sometimes staff take note of disrespectful behavior of students towards staff at this stage, but would not communicate this to you without prompting.

**2. Hiring local undergraduates, non-locals, and mature students**

Hiring an undergraduate from one of your courses (or colleagues' courses) means you already know the student. The student is already in Vancouver (pandemic!) and knows how to survive there (cost of living!). It is also more family friendly, as students may have partners and families whose needs they need to take into account.

Mature students can bring practical experience, planning skills and efficiency, and new points of view.

To help international students, apply early (visa delays), contact International House, and refer them to other international students in your lab. Adding international students can be one way of adding diversity to your group. Domestic and USA students are easier and faster to recruit.

**3. Selecting for a 'good fit'**. When we select people like ourselves, implicit biases are active. Consider strategically thinking about Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) from the start, because most funding agencies request evidence of such considerations and actions. Consider the history of your discipline, and which people have historically been excluded from the field. Focus your recruitment strategy on one or a few of those groups for best effect. See also: 6. Selecting team players.

**4. Desired qualifications**, traits and experience of successful students. Motivation, passion, curiosity: some combination of these is welcome. Experience is often welcome, but not all students have had the opportunity to engage in camping or field work. Re. Language skills: selecting for correct grammar or published papers will reduce diversity in the applicant pool: consider asking students for a piece of writing they are proud of, instead. Formulating desirable skills and experience as strengths rather than requirements will avoid discouraging students who are very smart and able to learn, but from whom the "hidden curriculum" presents barriers (e.g. presentation standards). Good grades are a requirement for

scholarships and so may become a financial imperative. Likewise, project requirements may force you to select students who can 'hit the ground running'. In general, though, students come to learn. Team spirit and leadership skills can be demonstrated in many ways.

**5. Interview process**: Include general questions about students' strengths to allow students from a variety of backgrounds to shine, including first generation students, working students, etc.

**6. Selecting team players:** Allow informal (unsupervised) interactions with the rest of your lab group as part of the interview process. Ask open-ended questions about other demonstrations of team spirit/work.

**7. Reference letters**: can be a stumbling block for first generation students. The ones required by FoGS have a very specific format. https://www.grad.ubc.ca/forms/reference-letter-report-applicant-admission-graduate-studies.

**8. Ideal lab composition**: varies by lab. Funding tends to be the limiting factor. Limit yourself to a number of students you can fully support and mentor. Having students at various stages can promote horizontal mentoring. Having a cohort can also be efficient.

**9. Funding for students** comes from these sources: scholarships, projects, Mitacs, TA salary. There are no faculty or departmental guidelines for salary levels, but there is general recognition that the minimum stipend set by the University (19K and will rise to 22K in the near future) is inadequate to cover costs of living in Vancouver. https://www.grad.ubc.ca/awards/minimum-funding-policy-phd-students. TA positions can be used to either top up salaries, or be integral part of the package and help you to tide students over if they need additional time: how this is done varies by faculty member. Important is that the conversation with the prospective student address the issue clearly and explicitly. Some faculty prefer to under-promise and over-deliver. For scholarships, contact the faculty's graduate studies admin staff and consult the G & PS website.

**10. Recruiting PDF vs. RA** (Research Associate): the RA requires more administrative steps to recruit, is more suitable for a longer time commitment, comes with a higher minimum salary, and is more flexible with regard to full-time/ part-time status. Pia has worked as RA variously at 60, 90, 70 and 100%, providing her with work-life balance, but given the cost of living, such may not be feasible for others. https://hr.ubc.ca/working-ubc/salaries/faculty-salaries/minimum-salaries-purpose-benefits-eligibility

**11. Student graduation and tenure**

Is there a magic number of graduated students required for achieving tenure? There is none. Your tenure may come up before many or any of your PhD students have graduated. Certainly one/some PhD students should have made clear progress (passed the comprehensive exam) and one/some MSc should have graduated. Demonstrate that you have a working pipeline. The exact output is not relevant, because it depends on your field and circumstances. The average duration for an MSc in Forestry is 3 years: https://www.grad.ubc.ca/prospective-students/graduate-degree-programs/master-of-science-forestry

**General info :** Sally Aitken and Scott Hinch run a workshop each year for our undergrads to demystify graduate school and application processes. The Diversity Crew also sometimes hosts a (local) 'introduction to grad school' from the student perspective.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

FoF = Faculty of Forestry; G & PS = Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Students.
FRM= Forest Resource Management; FCS= Forest and Conservation Sciences; WOOD = Wood science
DH= Department Head, AD = Associate Dean (Research and Innovation; Equity Diversity and Inclusion)

**RESOURCES** from Julie Morey:

Our FRST Current Grad Student Info Portal: https://forestry.ubc.ca/students/graduate-student-portal/

G+PS Resource for Faculty: https://www.grad.ubc.ca/faculty-staff

Awards available to our students: https://forestry.ubc.ca/students/future-graduate-students/financial-support/

Great G+PS Grad Student cost of living calculator: https://www.grad.ubc.ca/prospective-students/tuition-fees-cost-living/cost-living

International students https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/international-student-advising

Dedicated UBC Post-Doc office: https://www.grad.ubc.ca/prospective-students/faculties/graduate-postdoctoral-studies

Policies re. program duration https://www.grad.ubc.ca/faculty-staff/policies-procedures/duration-program

**FURTHER READING**

First generation students: https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/10/09/first-generation-phd-student-describes-her-struggles-opinion

The hidden curriculum (what is it) : https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/06/author-discusses-book-grad-school Jessica McCrory Calarco, A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum. 2020. Princeton University Press.

Spontaneous letters and generic inquiries : https://smallpondscience.com/2019/02/06/responding-or-not-to-prospective-students/

Letters of reference: being aware of potential bias in the ones you receive, avoiding bias in your own. https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf

Further EDI considerations for references: referring to candidates by title and last name, using non-gendered language https://www.chairs-chaires.gc.ca/program-programme/referees-repondants-eng.aspx

Avoid reliance on metrics : https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3923635/

RE. salaries: ask your departmental HR person first. TA rates are set by the union. https://cupe2278.ca/how-we-help/pay-rates/ The same is true for Work-Learn (UG) students. https://students.ubc.ca/career/ubc-experiences/work-learn-program

In the social sciences, stipends or hourly models may be used. In SSHRC proposals, hourly amounts are preferred, and I've seen the following ranges: UG: 18-20 $/h; MSc: 25-30 $/h; PhD: 27-33 $/h; but this depends also on the required skill levels. Nonetheless, Forestry profs have successfully used stipends in IG and IDG application budgets.

Currently, the minimum wage in BC is $15.20/hour and the living wage for Metro Vancouver is $20.52/hour. https://www.livingwageforfamilies.ca/living_wage2021