

How to Find a Graduate Supervisor



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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Introduction



Your time as a graduate student will be filled with exciting challenges and experiences. The first is of utmost importance: finding the right graduate supervisor for you. You'll want someone who shares your research interests, who can help you achieve your academic goals, and with whom you feel comfortable sharing ideas.

Effective communication and a good working relationship with your supervisor will have a huge impact on your entire graduate experience. Although achieving your academic and research goals will involve contributions from many people, having a good understanding of the expectations in the student-supervisor relationship from the start will help you identify the right supervisor for you.

This guide will take you through the steps for selecting the ideal graduate supervisor: Whether you're an undergrad applying to a graduate program or a graduate student thinking about a research-based degree, this resource will help you navigate an important step in applying for grad school.

While completing your undergrad degree...

Deciding to pursue a graduate degree is an important step toward building a future loaded with opportunities for exciting research, indulging your intellectual curiosity and for meeting inspiring people from all over the world.

Finding a graduate supervisor means that you will have found someone whose research interests match your own and whose expertise will guide you in your research for the next two to five years. Having a great graduate supervisor will propel you to achieve big things such as winning major scholarships, presenting at conferences and even contributing to journal articles.

The path toward finding a faculty member who will fill this important role can start as early as your undergrad degree when you are narrowing down your interests to a specific research area.

If you're still unsure of what you are interested in, here some questions that can help clarify:

What classes have you found the most interesting?

Have any subjects captivated you or made you want to learn more on your own?

Why do you find a particular area of study interesting?

Maybe it's due to personal interest, or perhaps you admire someone researching the subject or working in the field. Obviously, it's very important to have mentors you admire, but it's just as critical that you find motivation on a personal level.

What subject do you see yourself studying in the long term?

Graduate studies are self-directed, so you'll have to search for new discoveries and ask your own questions.

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Talking to as many people as you can will also help you get a sense of what it's like to conduct research in particular disciplines. Ask professors of your favorite courses about their work. Find out what challenges and rewards their research brings. Graduate students in your faculty can also help narrow down your options and offer you guidance on what classes to take and which professors to reach out to.

While you are finishing your degree, make sure you take advantage of any opportunities that come your way for research projects and start building your academic resume. Here are some things to consider:

- Gain as much field and lab experience as possible. This will help you find out how you like to learn and conduct research. Then, you can search for potential supervisors who match your learning and working styles.
- You'll need between two and four references for your grad school applications, so start cultivating relationships with advisors and professors early on. Choose professionals who work in your area of study and who can comment on your work ethic, level of independence, and ability to think creatively.
- Read papers and stay up to date with new and interesting research — especially papers published by faculty members.

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- Create a dream list of people you would love to work with.
- Connect with as many people as possible in your field to build your network and you'll have a large base to work from. Attend career fairs, workshops, and seminars hosted at the university. At the University of Calgary, you can find events through:
 - [Student Success Centre](#)
 - [My GradSkills](#)
 - [International Student Services](#)
 - [Graduate Student Association](#)
- Talk to current grad students to discuss their research, workloads, working with supervisors, the application process, etc. You'll likely discover some useful information and appease any worries. If you don't know any grad students, contact the Graduate Student Association (GSA).

Important Points of Contact

Along with your supervisor, your Graduate Program Administrator (GPA) will be your main point of contact throughout your program. Your GPA is there to answer all your questions about program requirements, the admission process, supplementary materials, and can advise you on your searching for a supervisor within their department.

Your Graduate Program Director (GPD) is another important contact. They may be able to advise you if a particular faculty member is taking on new students and can answer your questions regarding funding and the overall direction of the department.

How to Find Your Best Match



Once you've decided on your area of study, and, if your graduate program of interest requires you to find a supervisor at the time of application, you can begin your search.

Talk to your current professors as well as graduate students in your faculty. They can provide insight into supervisors who can best match your needs.

Visit faculty websites to find out which professors are studying areas that align with your research interests. Their profiles or websites will offer details about conference participation, previous courses taught, CVs and lists of publications.

An important note — not all programs require students to have a supervisor before applying. Even if this is the case, it's always a good idea to find out now who will be available to supervise your work. The department Graduate Program Administrator is the best person to talk to.

VISIT FACULTY WEBSITES TO FIND OUT WHICH PROFESSORS ARE STUDYING AREAS THAT ALIGN WITH YOUR RESEARCH INTERESTS.

As you research, try to discover the following:

- What topics are these professors publishing papers on?
- How active are they in publishing their research?
- Are graduate students included on the authors lists?

Use all the information you’ve gathered to narrow down your options and create a shortlist. Your final selections should consist of a few potential supervisors whose current work closely matches your own research goals.

- Read papers written by faculty members to improve your understanding of their research.
- Talk to graduate students who are currently working with these potential supervisors. Ask them if they think your research would complement the supervisors’ work.

Although your research interests are the most important factor when choosing a supervisor, there are some other criteria to consider that can help you narrow down your list.

Funding opportunities	As a graduate student, you will need to apply for funding and be able to state why your work is worth an investment. When you are ready to approach a potential supervisor, ask if their projects have existing funding, or if there exists opportunities for grants, bursaries, or scholarships in your field. A potential supervisor will know of funding options and will be willing to advise you through the application process.
Availability	You need to confirm that supervisors have the availability to take on another graduate student. Ask supervisors if they’ll be away on research leave at any time during your study period.

Making Contact



With your shortlist finalized, it's time to reach out to faculty.

You can initiate contact via email, or by using the web form in the supervisor profiles, which you can access from your graduate program. You can get to your graduate program page from the [Explore Programs](#) section on the university website.

Be careful to avoid even the slightest mistakes in your initial contact with your future supervisors — double check the spelling of names and be accurate when referring to research. Keep emails short and concise, tailoring each to the individual recipient. Refer to facts to show you've done your research and make it obvious that you're excited about the chance to work with the supervisor.

Your email is your first impression to potential supervisors. You can easily stand out from other inquiries by following these tips:

- Use proper letter format.
- Open with a formal salutation (Dean/Professor/Dr. last name) and close with “Yours sincerely” followed by your full name and contact information.

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- If you are sending an email, attach your CV and current transcripts. Make sure to use an appropriate file format.
- Specify the program or specialization for which you are applying.
- Explain why you are interested in grad studies, talk about your career goals, and highlight your research experience and leadership skills.

Grad Students say:

“Don’t be afraid to show your passion and enthusiasm for the subject area that you are interested in. It’s important for your potential supervisor to see your interest and will help you get noticed among all the other inquiries they receive.”

“Tailor each application you send to the specific supervisor. Use the research you’ve done to write a letter that shows you know a little about the supervisor and their research. Using a generic cover letter with the name and subject area slotted in can appear impersonal and is more likely to be overlooked.”

- If you already have funding, specify the source, value, and duration. As this may be the most important detail in your email, make sure it’s near the top.
- Talk about why you would like to work with the supervisor and how your research interests are a good match. Refer to specific published articles that interest you.
- Suggest further discussion through a teleconference, video conference, or perhaps in person.
- Don’t embellish your past accomplishments, or projects and, of course, don’t lie. If you are unsure, sticking to the facts will help you tell your story in the best way possible.

Grad Students Say:

“Be confident in your abilities and experience — this will make you stand out. However, there is a fine line between confidence and exaggeration ... knowing the difference will show good judgment and attract the best response.”

Grad Studies Tip

Please see our pages on [academic integrity](#), [academic misconduct](#) and [student misconduct](#) to understand the university's regulations and how misconduct can affect your studies.

- End your letter by suggesting a time to discuss future graduate opportunities.

Whatever happens, don't get discouraged. Remember, professors are busy people, and you may not receive an answer to your email immediately. If you don't hear back within a reasonable amount of time, follow up with a phone call to the department of the supervisor and ask them if there's a better way you can get in touch. Make sure to check that the professor is not on research leave when you call.

Interviewing Potential Supervisors

When you hear back from one or more of your potential supervisors, you'll need to prepare for your interview. At a minimum, make sure you cover the following:

Experience

Has the professor supervised many grad students? What are these students doing now?

Availability

How often will you have the chance to meet? How will you stay in touch? How many students are currently under the professor's supervision? Is the supervisor eligible for Research and Scholarship Leave during your period of study?

Responsibility

Will you have the chance to gain experience by presenting in conferences? Will you be working as a team or individually?

If you interview in person, you will also get a sense of how you get along, and how easy it is for you to speak and share your thoughts and opinions. This should give you an idea of how you will work together.

You should also interview the professor's former students. Ask students if they spent most of their time working independently or if they had regular check-ups with the supervisor. Find out if the professors encouraged publications by their students.

Grad students say:

Some things to ask current students are:

Is the supervisor more hands on, or hands off?

How often do they meet with students?

Are they often in the lab?

What other responsibilities does the supervisor have?

Visiting In Person

If you are planning to meet with a supervisor in person, set an appointment.

Be prepared and bring along a list of questions. Read up on the program and its requirements before you arrive. You should also bring a printed copy of your work, your CV, and a pen and paper to take notes.

During your visit, pay a trip to the graduate studies office to pick up additional information about the school, and anything else you want to know about. Walk around the campus to get a feel for the environment — this could be your new home! Some places to visit are:

- [Active Living Centre](#)
- [Crowsnest Hall](#)
- [International Student Services](#)
- [Wellness Centre](#)
- [Taylor Family Digital Library](#)
- [Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning](#)