

## 2 Choosing a Supervisor

“Any supervisor worth his salt would rather deal with people who attempt too much than with those who try too little.”

Lee Iacocca

You are not expected to run off and hide in some lab, conduct research, get a result, write a thesis and defend it on your own. You are expected to work closely with a supervisor who is a member of the graduate faculty of the program.

Choosing an appropriate supervisor is a very important decision in your graduate research career—possibly the most important! They are the ones who guide you, train you, teach you and assess you more than anyone else. In the section below you will read why they are critical and why you cannot simply stumble into some prof. and get them to supervise you.

### 2.1 Duties of a Supervisor

The official duties of a supervisor are legion:

- Assess your progress through the program
- Determine your suitability to continue
- Help select and Chair your thesis supervisory committee and,
  - meet regularly with you;
  - review your thesis proposal and recommend its approval to the Program Director not less than three months prior to the expected date of program completion;
  - review the your progress on the thesis at least once a term, and report to you and the Program Director on whether that progress is satisfactory; if progress is deemed unsatisfactory (i.e. a UNS designation is given), inform you, the Program Director and the Dean of Graduate Studies in writing with detailed reasons for this judgement;
  - evaluate a thesis readiness to be examined, and make a recommendation to the Program Director regarding a date for the defence;
  - ensure that a copy of the student’s thesis is sent to each member of the student’s Examining Committee as far as possible in advance of a scheduled oral examination, but no less than three weeks prior to the date scheduled.
- Work with you to select appropriate courses
- Help you select a research topic
- Guide your research effort
- Guide you in the preparation of your thesis arguments in document form
- Sit on your examination committee

## **2.2 Strategies for Selecting a Supervisor**

That's my main flaw: I always think authority figures or my boss is going to think something I do is funny. And usually they don't.

Jimmy Kimmel

The most important thing to do is talk to several professors before asking one to become your supervisor. Do not trust others in this decision and do not be unduly influenced by the performance of a professor in non-supervisory tasks. Just because the prof. teaches well or badly, is

late or early for meetings, dresses well or badly actually tells you very little about how good a fit they might be with you.

Even if a professor approaches you before you have had a chance shop around, hold off on the decision until you can make an informed choice.

## **2.3 Criteria for choosing a supervisor**

The sections below will give you some guidelines in how to select a supervisor.

### **2.3.1 Money talks**

You don't want to starve as a graduate student. There are limitations on how much you can actually work (10 hours/wk) in any job—academic or not. However, there is no limit on the amount of research you can perform and the best way to do research is to be paid for it. Believe it or not, it is the goal of most supervisors to pay you. Supervisors pay you through research grants and contracts that they hold. Therefore, from a pure survival point of view selecting a supervisor with research grants in an area you wish to pursue trumps selecting one that cannot pay you.

### **2.3.2 They should know about the area you want to investigate**

A supervisor will normally advertise what research areas they are interested in. In many cases they have projects that they can suggest to you in an area you might be interested in. Do not attempt to fit a square peg into a round hole by suggesting projects to potential supervisors who have no expertise in the area you are interested in. Your supervisor must be familiar with the body of knowledge that already exists in an area so that the supervisor can make an estimation of the importance of your contribution.

### **2.3.3 Check their availability**

Being a graduate student is often a very lonely life at various stages of your journey through the program. Often you will need reassurance, guidance, money, signatures, direction, keys, and more signatures. If the person you select will be off on sabbatical and cannot be reached at a critical time you will be even lonelier.

There is a corollary to this issue: The professor should have time to actually deal with you in a way that will lead to your successful completion of the program. You should ask

potential supervisors if they are not over extending themselves and listen to how they answer.

### **2.3.4 They should be compatible with you**

You have survived an undergraduate degree where a professor's style mattered very little as you were in classes of up to several hundred nameless and faceless students. Your supervisor will be in your face, they may call you on a weekend, they may want to know your cell phone number, they may not want to see you at all except in formal meetings. The point is you should try and determine how comfortable you will be in spending many terms with the person you select.

From the description I have provided of supervision it sounds very similar to marriage—this is not the case. In marriage you have the option of divorce where you get to keep half of everything.

### **2.3.5 They play nice with others**

People are people and some get along better with some personalities than others. Your supervisor and you will be working with your supervisory committee. It is often prudent to determine if a potential supervisor is on good terms with potential committee members.

### **2.3.6 They have a track record**

This may or may not be important but if they have a record of successfully producing graduate students at least you know that the “pump is primed”. If the prof. is new or the program is new, you may wish to discuss related supervisory experience. Have they co-supervised anyone? Have they been on supervisory committees before? Do they have refereed publications with their students?

It is often useful to check the public information that a professor makes available. This usually consists of information on their web site but it may also be found in other sources. It behooves you to check around. Make use of all the information available.

## **2.4 Assignments**

- Read the following article:  
“*How to Succeed in Graduate School: A Guide for Students and Advisors*” by Marie desJardins (<http://www.acm.org/crossroads/xrds1-2/advice1.html>)
- Find a supervisor.