



Preparing Your Scholarship Application for the Vanier Competitions



**NSERC
CRSNG**

People. Discovery. Innovation.

Michael Thompson

Understanding the objectives and method of evaluation of the programs

JHE A114, Tuesday August 13, 2019

Objective of this Talk

- **Intent of this seminar**
 - Provide insight into how applications for the Vanier scholarship competition are evaluated by reviewers and to provide tips on how to increase your success rate
- **What's not covered**
 - Some general information on the program will be provided, but in general it is expected that attendees will go to one of the School of Graduate Studies seminars to learn more.

Presenters

- **Vincent Leung**
 - Former recipient of the Vanier Scholarship
 - Assistant Professor in Chemical Engineering
 - Recently graduated
- **Michael Thompson**
 - Associate Dean of Graduate Studies
 - Reviews Vanier and Banting application in McMaster's internal process for past 5 years

General Information

- **Engineering/Science/Health Sciences applicants may apply to the NSERC Vanier Canadian Graduate Scholarship**
 - Onus is placed on excellence of academics and research, but also leadership. **Think weighting as 33%, 33%, 33%**. (different from the CGS-D on the value of leadership)
 - Expected to be entering the doctoral program or already in the doctoral program
 - A two-stage internal review process is involved
 - A maximum of **7** applications may leave the university this year (2019/2020)

Eligibility - Vanier

- Canadian citizen or LI or foreign citizen
- Not completed more than 20 months of doctoral studies, full time (part-time, only in rare cases).
- Achieved a first-class average
 - 11.0 or greater cumulative average based on last two years of full-time study. But really, an 11.5 or greater is typical.
- Evidence of research excellence – such as journal articles, conference papers, abstract (but always as first author for maximum weighting)
- Evidence of volunteering or leadership roles can be demonstrated

Two Stage Internal Process

- **Stage 1 – early Fall (Sept 10, 2019 by 10am)**
 - Is the threshold of excellence evident in all three categories for an application?
 - Comparison of excellence within the group of applications.
 - Inviting the strongest application to proceed to stage 2 by providing a revised application
- **Stage 2 – ~2-3 weeks after decisions announced from Stage 1**
 - Were suggested revisions followed and does the application now show the strongest case for excellence, representative of McMaster.
 - Recommend which applications are going to be sent.

Dr. Vincent Leung

**Reflections on applying for the
Vanier to maximize success**

Dr. Michael Thompson

Knowing how you will be evaluated

Purpose of the program

- **Vanier**

- Identifying and retaining research leaders. It is an early career assessment of excellence. Applicant should be able to display much more extensive evidence of research and leadership excellence compared to a CGS-D recipient.

Academic Excellence

- **Required evidence for Vanier applications but not for the CGS-D (though some mention is desirable)**
 - **Displayed by a provided transcript**
 - **Displayed in the support letters and supervisor statement**
- **Make sure discrepancies in the timeline to degree completion are explained (leaves of absence, maternity, etc).**

Research Excellence - Proposal

- Too often done to impress peers but not the review committees (which are comprised of persons from unrelated fields and may not even be in the STEM area)
 - **Avoid jargon** and science/engineering terms
 - Be clear, no spelling mistakes
 - Formulate around a well understood **hypothesis** (Engineering students tends ignore this, instead choosing to provide a purpose and hence loss many reviewers)

Research Excellence - Proposal

- Use the keywords listed on the Vanier website for sections/content expected in the proposal (they are actually disguised in the bullet points). Don't make the reviewers guess if it was all provided
 - Background
 - Objectives, hypothesis, or research question
 - Experimental or theoretical approach/methodology
 - Research plan including projected timeline
 - Roles and responsibilities of the applicant, the supervisor and/or other collaborators in the proposed research
 - Benefits of undertaking your research at the nominating institution
- If an application is allowed to proceed to stage 2, it will be returned for required revisions.
 - This is not a journal manuscript review process where debate on the changes may occur, the changes are required



Tip:

Write the proposal/support letters
for a non-STEM audience.

Research Excellence - Output

- **This is nearly exclusively reliant upon published first author papers**
 - State the impact factor of the journal if you want recognition. The committee won't know. Few papers with very high impact factors are often consider equivalent to a lot of papers.
- *If papers are not the norm for the field (such as conferences for computer science) then indicate that but then be prepared to rank the value of the contribution*
 - *Reviewers will not work to put a value to a contribution but will check a stated value.*

Excellence in Leadership

- The difference between leadership and volunteering is determined based on the role you had in that extra-curricular activity.
 - **Volunteering** in the context of this evaluation implies following tasks given by others
 - **Leadership** implies developing a strategic goal by one's self to the benefit of a larger body and delegating tasks to others.
- The title of the role does NOT preclude reviewers from deciding that leadership skills were displayed
 - Example: president of a society versus camp councillor, both could have roles of leadership depending on how the position was described

Excellence in Leadership

- Evidence of leadership
 - In the CCV, use the sections for extra-curricular events or positions to show leadership
 - Use action words and clearly indicate how you conceived of the event/goal and how you got others to implement them.
 - Give examples, don't just state that 'I led'. **No evidence = no credit for leadership.**
 - In the support letters, the supervisor/chair will not know the applicant well and relies upon the CCV for evidence

Excellence in Leadership

- **Personal Leadership Statement (2 pgs)**
 - Only evidence of leadership actions are meaningful. And make sure the difference between volunteering and leadership is understood.
 - If referees don't see the candidate as a leader or can't identify leadership activities then reviewers will assume that aren't present in the candidate.
 - Avoid terms like a 'natural leader'. In fact, try to avoid the word 'leader' altogether.
 - Avoid telling 'your life's story'. Don't use space on your aspirations or goals, etc. You are wasting space and it looks like you have no leadership examples to give.



Tip:

Your CCV is more than a list of academic and work experiences. Its evidence of excellence in all categories. Make sure you are taking advantage of the CCV

Referee Letters

- Next to the proposal, these are requirements of the application most likely to determine the chances of the application leaving McMaster
- Two Leadership reference letter (written by those who know you in a non-academic capacity)
 - Support for leadership statement
 - Elaborates on how the candidate has gone above and beyond the opportunities presented in order to achieve a goal, contribute to their community, or how they have taken on responsibility for others
 - Some discussion of research excellence is acceptable but don't waste too much space on that topic.

Referee Letters

- **Among the Engineering faculty, it is quite common to see very brief letters of support, filled with unsupported comments – like ‘hard worker’, brilliant, innovative, etc.**
 - These are easy words to use without meaning or substance.
- **Aim for 2-pages in length, highlight excellence in the three areas (academic, research, leadership) and make sure every trait of the applicant being described has meaningful evidence provided.**



Tip:

If the referee doesn't know the applicant intimately, then don't bother to use them