



Preparing Your Scholarship Application for the Vanier and Banting Competitions



People. Discovery. Innovation.

Michael Thompson and Eva Mueller

Understanding the objectives and
method of evaluation of the programs

Zoom, Wednesday August 10, 2020

Objective of this Talk

- **Intent of this seminar**
 - Provide insight into how the applications for the Banting and Vanier scholarships are evaluated by reviewers and to provide tips on how to increase your success rate
- **What's not covered**
 - Some general information on the two programs 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

Michael Thompson

- Current Associate Dean of Graduate Studies
- Reviews Vanier and Banting application in McMaster's internal process for past 6 years

Eva Mueller

Ph.D. candidate, Chemical Engineering

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 limited # of applications may leave the university each year (<10, TBA)

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 expected
- 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

General Information

- **Engineering/Science/Health Sciences applicants may apply to the Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship**
 - Onus is placed on excellence of research, but also has a strong focus on leadership. **Think weighting as 50%, 50%.**
 - Applicants may not be proposing to use this fellowship in the same institution where they completed their doctoral program
 - A two-stage internal review process is involved
 - No maximum on applications leaving McMaster but we are very restrictive on what the university wants to represent as our standard of excellence

Eligibility - Banting

- **Canadian citizen or LI or foreign citizen**
- **Did not receive doctoral degree from the same institution to which they are applying.**
- **Evidence of research excellence – such as journal articles, conference papers, abstract (but always as first author for maximum weighting)**
- **Evidence of leadership roles must be demonstrated. Volunteering is not a replacement for leadership.**

Two Stage Internal Process

- **Stage 1 – early Fall**
 - 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.

Views on the two programs

- **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.
- **Banting**
 - Identifying and retaining future academics. If the applicant doesn't look good on paper as a person to hire as a tenure-track professor then they aren't likely to get this fellowship. As the best of the best, this applicant should already stand out – even without the postdoctoral experience.

Academic Excellence

- **Required evidence for Vanier applications but not for the Banting (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
 - 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 Banting website for sections/content expected in the proposal. Don't make the reviewers guess if it was all provided
- If an application proceeds to stage 2, then 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

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.
 - Give examples, don't just state that 'I led'. **No evidence, no credit for leadership.**
 - In the support letters, but in the case of the Banting in particular, the supervisor/chair will not know the applicant well and relies upon the CCV for evidence

Excellence in Leadership

- **Vanier**
 - **Has additional evidence requirements**
 - Description of leadership and communication skills
 - Leadership reference letter
 - **Avoid terms like a ‘natural leader’. In fact, try to avoid the word ‘leader’ altogether.**
 - **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.



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

Special Circumstances – Staying at the same institution as doctoral degree

- **Only applicable to the Banting**
- **This is a rare exception**
 - **Nearly no reasons will be accepted for taking a postdoctoral position at the same institution as where the doctoral degree was completed**
 - **Short of a very restrictive medical reason, few explanations will be considered.**

Supervisor's Statement

- Supervisors are expected to write a supervisor's statement (Banting) and the institution letter of the Dean (as a draft)
- The supervisor's statement is the place where evidence of the faculty member's expertise is provided.
 - The first half of this statement should be about the supervisor. Their expertise and ability to mentor must be well displayed.
 - The second half of this statement is about the applicant. How will the research environment and resources develop the professional and analytical skills of the applicant.

Referee Letters

- Next to the proposal, these are requirements of the application most likely to determine the chances of the application leaving McMaster
- For the Banting, this is the letter of endorsement, supervisor's statement (both written by the supervisor, at least as drafts) and referee letters
- For the Vanier, this is the Leadership reference letter and referee letters.

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