Selecting the Best Graduate Students:

Selection is a key component in graduate student retention. The key question is: How do we ensure that we are recruiting students who are most likely to flourish in a graduate program, to be successful and to enhance our research programs and knowledge base broadly speaking?

Studies in recruitment, assessment and admission demonstrate that personal interaction remains the best way to gauge suitability. Some strategies emerge as most successful:

- Recruiting our own undergraduates, using the Undergraduate Student Research program is a great way to assess the research potential of your 3rd and 4th year students, as are RAships funded by your research grant or through the Work Study program;
- Attending undergraduate / graduate conferences puts you in contact with promising students and allows you to see them operate in a professional setting;
- Conducting a phone, Skype or in-person interview with a prospective student helps to see beyond the student’s file to assess their suitability for your lab, your academic unit, your research program and the profession.

All of these are important ways to assess interpersonal and communication skills, critical-thinking, self-awareness and self-appraisal, integrity and potential collegiality. Having the prospective student meet with some of your colleagues will help you see beyond your own bias.

1. Determine your capacity:

   a. Assessing your own availability and resources is crucial. Ask yourself:

      i. How many graduate students do my colleagues supervise (and at what stages are their graduate students)? (Recommended: 1-5 advisees)
      ii. How many students do I have time for?
      iii. In what subfields do I have sufficient mastery to truly mentor a graduate student?
      iv. Do I have research funds to support their work? (see below re funding)
      v. What do I hope students will contribute to my research program? Will this student be able to make that contribution?
      vi. Will the student have a cohort with which to interact?

   b. Funding: We know that the best way to attract the highest caliber graduate students is to put together attractive, multi-year funding packages. DGSPDF has recently launched a new funding program for our best students. Please discuss which of your applicants you feel qualify for 2YF or 4YF funding ($18,000 scholarship + $5000 (tuition award) + $5000 (RA, TA, SA) X 4 (or 2) ) with your graduate program chair and committee. Please see https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/procedures/otherprocesses/offer-packages.html.

      i. We provide guidance to our incoming students on what to expect the cost of living to be while a student at SFU. See https://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/future/international-applicants/fees/living-in-canada.html
      ii. Please also note that the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has set the Living Wage for families in Metro Vancouver at $19.62 an hour.

2. Evaluation:

   a. As you assess application files, start with your own set of criteria:

      i. What do you want in a student?
      ii. What role will they play in your research program, your lab and in your academic unit?
      iii. What specific skills do you require?
      iv. What are the skills and capabilities currently required for successful job placement either inside or out of academe?
      v. Add to these the criteria set by your academic unit and/or profession. Remember that students who enter with less than a 3.5 CGPA will not be eligible for Tri-Council scholarships so you will need to provide funding for these students
either in the form of Teaching Assistantships or in the form of Research Assistantships from your research grant.

b. Evaluating Files:
   i. Does the student’s statement of interest show:
      a. An ability to express oneself grammatically, clearly, in good English
      b. An ability to match his/her interest with your own and your unit’s strengths? Have s/he articulated the specific linkages between their own desired research and yours and the strengths of your unit?

ii. Evaluating Transcripts:
   a. Transcripts vary from institution to institution. Most provide a guide to their grading structure on the reverse side of an official transcript. We have a handy CGPA converter on our webpage - http://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/procedures/admission/cgpa-converter.html. There are also a number of guides on this page as well to help you conduct grade conversions. Remember that 3.5 is the minimum for Tri-council funding and that no student may be admitted with a CGPA of less than 3.0 or a GPA over the last 2 years of course work of less than 3.33.

   b. SFU has approved fast-track admission for applicants from a number of schools world-wide. The research we did to establish this process may also be useful to you as you evaluate transcripts. Schools we from which we allow fast-track admissions are well-ranked internationally and we have also provided guidance in reading and evaluating their transcripts. These are listed by country (accessible by clicking on region) on this password-protected webpage on our site: http://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/procedures/admission/academic-requirements.html. Remember that no student may be admitted with a CGPA of less than 3.0 or a GPA over the last 2 years of course work of less than 3.33.

   c. We also have a number of other resources for help with selecting the best international graduate students on this page: http://www.sfu.ca/dean-gradstudies/administration/staff/procedures/admission/gradconverters.html

iii. Language Requirements: IELTS (academic) overall band score of 7.0 of the academic (NOT general) test with a minimum of 6.5 in each section; Internet-based TOEFL 93 with a minimum of 20 in each category; Paper-based TOEFL 580 with a TWE 5.

iv. Writing sample: If your unit requests this – this is a great opportunity to assess all of the skills needed for your program. If the student has not selected a writing sample that adequately demonstrates these skills, this may be a red flag. If your unit does not request this, what additional documentation do you need to help you assess applicants?

v. Letters of reference: Read closely. Referees know that applicants may request to see letters written about them under FOI-POP and we have noticed that the old standard of including some ‘areas in need of improvement’ in order to establish the ability of the assessor is gradually waning as any negative commentary can be grounds for exclusion. That said, it is important to know what our students’ weaknesses are. If you want more information, do not hesitate to pick up the phone and speak to your students’ referees.

vi. Phone/Skype or in-person interview. You will want to contact your prospective students as part of the recruitment process. A conversation is a good opportunity
to assess the various intangibles of suitability. Especially for doctoral students who will be with you for a minimum of four years, you want to be sure that you can live with this student as they are, not as you imagine them to be. If this student is truly one you want, then there is nothing so encouraging to a student than personal contact. And a phone/Skype interview is increasingly the norm among the most successful graduate programs internationally.

c. Risk Assessment:

Want to admit a student with a lower (but still admissible) CGPA? Or with less than stellar letters of reference or writing sample?
If you are pre-tenure or a relatively inexperienced supervisor, resist the temptation. It is relatively uncommon for the flaws in a student’s file to be blatant (most students do their very best to put in the best application possible) so if there are red flags, heed them. Especially heed warnings from their current supervisor or instructors.
But if you feel that the student is worth the risk (if they are from an underrepresented group, or have demonstrated promise) then make sure you have the time and the capacity to help them succeed.

a. Have you got funding for the student who may not qualify for a TriCouncil Award?
b. Have you got the time to devote to a student whose writing skills are underdeveloped?
c. Find out the resources that are available to students (the Research Commons on writing, SFU International and Continuing Studies for language skills and teaching skills for International students) and ensure that your student knows about them, that you encourage them to use them (will not penalize them for time away from the lab, for example).
d. Take the time to explain your own expectations of your graduate students and of your unit/academic discipline.
e. Track their progress. Run this as you would an experiment. How did this student fare? What particular hurdles did they have to surmount? How well did they do at the various milestones in your program? What was their completion time? What would you do differently? And at what stage?