

You and Your Annual Progress Report:

An Epic Tale for Graduate Students

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1 How to Use this Document

This document was created for two reasons. First, it gathers together a list of things in Section 2 that you can mention on your progress report; often some of these are forgotten or overlooked. Second, the relationship between progress reports and department research awards is often asked about, and Section 3 explains how this works.

The list in the next section can also be interpreted as a set of opportunities you can be looking for as a graduate student. For example, you might ask to give a talk to your research group, or look for ways you can apply your technical skills within the local community. Take the initiative!

2 What to List on Your Report

Below is a list of things you could write about on your progress reports. Obviously, not everyone has done all of these. Think of this as a union of all the things that grad students may be doing.

Also, a lot of these are up to your supervisor's discretion. This list should *not* be taken to mean that your supervisor should be having you do all these things. A grad student learning the literature in their field, for instance, will likely not yet be doing a lot of paper reviewing. Your supervisor would decide when it's appropriate for you to begin helping review.

To avoid total linguistic silliness in the list, "conference" is used generically to refer to conferences, symposia, and workshops.

Accepted papers. Papers that have been published or are accepted and to appear are an important indication of your research production and its quality. This is not a numbers game – many average papers are not better than a few good papers! Refereed papers rank more highly than unrefereed ones, like technical reports, and the venue makes a difference too: even one paper in a good location can outweigh several papers in poor locations. See "Perspective" below for more on this. Also, some research areas are much harder

to publish in and require more work to produce solid papers.

Submitted papers. Unfortunately, nothing really can be said about the quality of papers submitted but not yet accepted. This simply acts as an indication of some research production.

Perspective. The people assessing your annual report may not be experts in your particular research area, so it is crucial that you put your work into perspective. If you know the acceptance rate for a conference you have a paper accepted to, put it in. If a journal/conference is the top one in your field, say so. Explain why the work you've done is important and of high quality. In cases where papers have been co-authored, clarify your role in the research and writing of the paper. All of this helps lend perspective to the accomplishments that you're reporting.

Side research projects. Some students get involved in research which is tangentially-related, or even totally unrelated, to their thesis research. If you're able to do well in your thesis research plus some additional research too, this is also something worth talking about.

Courses. At first, courses may be all you have to talk about in your annual report. Even in regular coursework, look for chances to do papers and projects (subject to what the course instructor wants, of course) that either overlap with your thesis area, getting you that much farther along, or are novel research that you can later refine into an extra publication. If you voluntarily take courses beyond those required of you, be sure to point this out also.

Presentations. There is a wide range of presentations you may give as a graduate student. Often, the difference is in the scope of the audience; a talk given at an international conference results in much more visibility for you and your work than one given for your research group. That said, you should strive to give at least some kind of presentation every year regardless. Presentation skills are something that only

improve with practice. Invited talks (where the “invitation” isn’t from your supervisor!) should be noted prominently, because that implies that others think highly of you and your work.

Conferences attended. This is not vital, but attending conferences can present networking opportunities. You can also discover first-hand how good/bad conference talks can be, and the flavor of the questions that can follow a talk. Conference attendance is less important than it once was in terms of keeping up-to-date in a research field, because so many papers and proceedings are online. (There are exceptions, however.)

Conference organization. Some conferences look for student volunteers to help run things, often with fringe benefits like free admission and T-shirts. Less often, you may be able to help organize part of a conference, especially if your supervisor is involved somehow.

Grants. List all grants, scholarships, and bursaries you’ve received – this probably goes without saying. You should also note ones you’ve applied for unsuccessfully, since the applications can take a fair bit of time, and it demonstrates that you’re making efforts to learn about grantsmanship.

Other awards. Awards that don’t involve (much) money can be listed too, such as teaching awards.

Media. Although rare, media coverage of research does happen from time to time. Since this should be arranged through the university’s External Relations department by your supervisor, media coverage indicates both some institutional backing of your work, and also the appeal of your work to the general public.

Student supervision. More senior students (usually Ph.D. students) will sometimes help supervise student projects, like undergraduate CPSC 502 and 503 work. This is not an official arrangement, but sometimes happens unofficially nonetheless.

Mentoring. On a related note, there are mentoring programs which you may be involved in, e.g., the SCIBerMENTOR program. These, and informal mentoring of other students, should be mentioned as well.

Paper reviewing. Any papers for journals or conferences that you have helped your supervisor review should be mentioned. *However*, because reviewing is an

anonymous process, you should only name the journal/conference and the number of papers you reviewed for it. Do not name the papers or their authors.

Improvement over time. Except in exceptional cases, your previous progress reports will not be referred to. Because there is no real history in the reporting system, you should be sure to point out areas where you have been striving to improve over the year; it may not be apparent otherwise.

TA scores. Teaching is an important part of academics. Be sure to note high scores from students on your TA performance, and also encourage your students to fill them out in the first place – twenty people saying you’re great is more impressive than two people saying you’re great.

Sessional instruction. Sometimes positions for sessional instructors arise, which take inordinate amounts of time, but at least count on your progress report. Here, like TAing, you would want to highlight your student evaluation scores plus any written student comments.

Teaching development. The Teaching and Learning Centre on campus, formerly known as the Learning Commons, offers free workshops on teaching-related topics which are open to graduate students. Besides that, they offer an “Instructional Skills Workshop” and a “University Teaching Certificate” to grad students. Especially if you’re considering a career in teaching, this looks good on your CV.

Presentation development. Other activities may help you improve your presentation skills, like joining Toastmasters or similar organizations.

Ethics approval. This is commonly overlooked on the progress report, but may be required for any research involving humans or animals. It is better to be on the safe side and ask whether or not you need it if you are at all uncertain! In general, even if ethics approval turns out not to be needed, it is responsible to consider the social consequences of your research.

Extracurricular activities. This may be intra-departmental, like being involved with the CSGS. Any involvement in the broader community should be mentioned too, especially where it involves the use of your work-related skills.

Committee work. There are sometimes positions for grad students on various committees, often as a CSGS representative, that need filling. Committees are valuable, rewarding, and enriching, and must be experienced first-hand to complain about them properly.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of being honest in your annual report and, more generally, in anything else talking about your accomplishments like your c.v. or grant applications. For example, if a technical report is accepted as a paper, state that the two are related (or don't mention the tech report) rather than having it look like you have more publications than you really do. If a paper is anything but a full paper, such as a poster or a short paper, say so. If a paper appears in an electronic supplement rather than the main conference proceedings, make that clear. It's very easy for someone evaluating your report/c.v./grant to verify these details, so it's better to be honest and up front about them.

Finally, it is your responsibility to report everything, although your supervisor may help remind you of things you've missed. Your assessment by the grad director is based solely on what you and your supervisor write in your report.

3 Department Research Awards

There are a small, finite number of departmental research awards that are given out during the fall and winter terms. One very important point to note:

You are not guaranteed an award, even if you had one in the past.

Awards are given on the basis of merit relative to your peers. A similar system is in place for faculty members, so grad students are not the only ones to appreciate the joy of such a system. In other words, it is not enough for you to have a really good year in order to get an award; others in your comparison group need to have had a not-as-good year. This is sometimes hard to see, because at best you'll know what's on your report and the reports of a few of your friends, but that doesn't necessarily give the overall perspective of what all grads in the department are doing.

Being research awards, there is a clear preference to give them to students who have an obvious strength in this area, like having an obscene number of high-quality publications. Usually this isn't so clear, however, when assessing all the progress reports. Therefore, students will be given awards who demonstrate that they are well-rounded overall researchers, and are able to balance quality research, quality teaching, and "service." The latter category includes things like paper reviewing (service to the research community), committee work (service to the department/university), and volunteering (service to the surrounding community). Often top researchers are able to balance all of these well. Certainly doing poorly in a category, e.g., performing poorly in a TA position, is not looked upon well when giving awards.

Finally, some grads who would otherwise be extremely deserving of an award do not get one simply because

they've been in the grad program too long; there is a fixed amount of time for which you are eligible for these awards. Also, occasionally students who don't get awards initially may get one later, because students can't accept an award (e.g., they get a scholarship and become maxed-out on funding).

4 Document History

- 18 April 2007 Chiseled by John Aycock onto stone tablets, transcribed by an infinite number of monkeys, then converted to \LaTeX by Chimp2 \LaTeX v1.3
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