Lab FAQ

Grid Verification Lab
University of Vermont

October 9, 2025

Introduction

This document serves as an internal FAQ for common questions that arise in our lab. This document was written by Sam and sometimes uses his voice (I $\triangleq$ Sam) and sometimes uses your voice (I $\triangleq$ you).

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why are we doing any of this?

A: Why do anything at all? Why go to the Moon? Everyone has very different reasons for pursuing academic research: career advancement, travel to the US, solve climate change, explore hard problems. Sam's reason: I like to think deeply and creatively about different applied mathematical problems each day, and I don't think I can have this level of mathematical freedom in industry. I could be wrong.

Q: I am funded by project X. Should I spend all of my research hours on project X?

A: Some of my best ideas and most successful papers on topic Y have emerged when I was working on and funded by project X. This is another perk of academia: you get to spend some of your time working on unfunded, interesting ideas with colleagues and lab mates. However, if you are funded by project X, the most important goal is to successfully accomplish project X deliverables.
- ➔ If you are able to do this, I encourage you to explore other problems and new collaborations.
- ➔ If you are unable to accomplish project deliverables, it's important to "get your house in order" before you start branching out.

Q: How many credits should I register for?

A: In the summer, MS and PhD students should register for 5 research credits. During the semester, "full-time GTAs/GRAs are required to be enrolled in a minimum of 9 credits per semester." For first year PhD students, this is typically 6 credits of academic courses, and 3 credits of research. **Note:** Each credit represents 3 hours of commitment per week.

Q: My offer letter says my employment is 20 hours per week. (Hurray! Half time!) How much time am I expected to be working?

A: In the summer, if you pair this with 5 credits of research, then we expect 5*3+20 = 35 hours of effort, at a minimum. In the winter, if you are taking X research credits, then we expect X*3+20 hours of research (so, 38 hours of research, if you are taking 6 research credits).

- Personally, I have never succeeded in a job where I was counting the hours. If you want to succeed in research, but you are watching to clock until 5PM each day, then you might think about why this is the case.

Q: What classes do I need in order to graduate?

A: Generally, I don't know. To find out, I alwasy check here (or, whatever the most recent version of this graduate EE handbook is). Knowing the requirements stated in this hand book are your responsibility. Check it each semester. Are you on track? Are you missing something?

- Don't assume other people are crossing your t's and dotting your i's! In grad school, my advisor left when he didn't get tenure, so I switched to a new advisor in a different department. Through this tumult, I learned my handbook backwards and forwards, since I needed to make sure I was on track to graduate.

Q: How can I get VACC access?

A: Ask Sam, and he will add you to our lab's VACC account.

Q: Should I apply for summer internships?

A: Yes, please do! I will be very support if it aligns, even loosely, with your research. Consult with Sam, though.

Q: I need to buy lab or office supplies (monitor, markers, paper, etc). What should I do?

A: Find items on Amazon, and then send the link to Sam. He will use UVM's Amazon business account to purchase the items, as needed. **Note:** UVM doesn't buy these things for us; Sam uses grant money or startup cash.

Q: I need to register for a conference or a pay a professional society fee. How can I do this?

A: Ask Sam for his UVM credit card (called a "PurCard", like a purring catamount, or a purchase card). If you buy something in the state of Vermont with this card, you cannot pay tax with it! UVM is a tax-exempt organization. We cannot pay tax in the state.

Q: I need to travel for a conference. How can I book my travel? How much money can I spend?

A: UVM must approve all travel. Don't just book on your own! The easiest way to have automatically approved travel is to book through College Travel Partners' (CTP) Lightning tool. You can pay with your own card and get reimbursed, or Sam can pay with his PurCard. Alternatively, CEMS administrators can book group travel for multiple students at once. To set this up, email CEMS Research Support (CEMS.Research@uvm.edu), and Coco Hall will help book travel arrangements and hotels. Note: hotels can be booked independently (i.e., directly through hotel or AirBnB websites), but flights cannot).

Expenses ($$): Every lab has its own culture. Ours is this: be thrifty. Travel to major cities is very expensive! Big travel budgets drain grant money more quickly. Two $3k trips are better than one $6k trip. Please do look for cheaper accommodations and flight options, when possible. Most important to know is this: when we travel, UVM doesn't pay for the travel costs, WE do (i.e., we use lab grant money or internal lab cash). Please be mindful of this when booking travel and accommodations!

Q: After a conference or trip, can I be reimbursed for meals and petty travel (e.g., Uber, metro, etc)? Do I need to save all receipts?

A: Yes, you can be reimbursed through UVM's per diem policy. Generally, you can receive up to $60 per day for domestic travel, and $75 per day for international travel. See more rules and rates here. You do not need to submit itemized food receipts to receive this reimbursement (Sam never really saves food travel receipts). If you have additional things you need to be reimbursed for (e.g., an expensive taxi ride to get to the airport), do save the receipt.

To file reimbursement, you fill out a travel reimbursement form. See a recent example here. For each day of travel, request a per diem amount. Per's Sam's guidance, this is how you should request per diem.

- Each meal is worth ∼$20. If e.g., lunch is provided at the conference and you eat it, but you have to buy your own breakfast and dinner, request $60 - $20 = $40 for that day.
- This is not a hard-and-fast rule, but please try to abide my something similar.

Once you have filled out the per diem request form, send it to Sam for signature. Also, have Sam sign a "Student University Business Certification Form". Email these signed forms, along with a conference itinerary, to travel@uvm.edu, asking for help with filing a per diem expense report.

Q: How much time can I have off?

A: Nominally, please take up to 4 weeks of vacation per year. I recommend you take all of it. I will not formally keep track of how much time you take. If you need more time off, (e.g., a 5th week), please contact Sam. When you are taking time off, please (1) let Sam know at least two weeks in advance, (2) mark it on your Outlook calendar, and (3) keep track of your time.

- When you are not on vacation, I expect that you will generally be reachable by phone, teams, slack, or email Monday through Friday.

Note I: Academia is flexible. That's a perk of the job! Please don't feel like you need to formally take time off to, e.g., go to the dentist, stay home sick with a cold, swim across the lake, or show a friend around town. Also, in academia, learning (reading, studying, watching tutorial videos, etc.) is often times indistinguishable from working.

Note II: Research shows that it takes many days (approximately 8 days) before you really enter relaxation mode. So, taking two days off for a long weekend trip multiple times in a summer isn't necessarily as beneficial as just taking two weeks in a row (16 days!). Opt for more infrequent, longer holidays, when possible. Although, do as I say, not as I do, with this one.

Contributing to this FAQ

Someday, you will be able to open a pull request on the lab's internal GitHub in order to contribute.