Sankaran Vaidyanathan

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Goal

Developing principled tools grounded in causal reasoning for explaining and evaluating complex AI systems, including large language models and reinforcement learning agents.

Education

University of Massachusetts Amherst — *Sept 2021–Dec 2026*
Ph.D. in Computer Science

University of Massachusetts Amherst — *Sept 2019–May 2024*
M.S. in Computer Science

Anna University — *Aug 2013–May 2017*
B.E. in Electrical and Electronics Engineering

Experience

Research Assistant — *Amherst, MA*
Knowledge Discovery Lab, University of Massachusetts Amherst — *May 2020–present*

Project Associate — *Chennai, India*
Robert Bosch Center for Data Science and AI — *July 2017–June 2019*
Indian Institute of Technology Madras

Publications

[1] **Judging the Judges: Evaluating Alignment and Vulnerabilities in LLMs-as-Judges**
Aman Singh Thakur, Kartik Choudhary*, Venkat Srinik Ramayapally*, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan**, Dieuwke Hupkes*
ACL Workshop on Natural Language Generation, Evaluation, and Metrics (GEM), 2025

[2] **Adaptive Circuit Behavior and Generalization in Mechanistic Interpretability**
Jatin Nainani, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan***, AJ Yeung, Kartik Gupta, David Jensen*
arXiv:2411.16105 (under review), 2024

[3] **Automated Discovery of Functional Actual Causes in Complex Environments**
Caleb Chuck, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan***, Stephen Giguere, Amy Zhang, David Jensen, Scott Niekum*
arXiv:2404.10883 (under review), 2024

[4] **Data-driven Learning of Chaotic Dynamical Systems using Discrete-Temporal Sobolev Networks**
*Connor Kennedy, Trace Crowdis, Haoran Hu, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan**, Hong-Kun Zhang*
Neural Networks, Volume 173, May 2024, 106152

[5] **Hypergraph Clustering by Iteratively Reweighted Modularity Maximization**
*Tarun Kumar, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan**, Harini Ananthapadmanabhan, Srinivasan Parthasarathy, Balaraman Ravindran*
Complex Networks and Their Applications VIII, 2019

[6] **A New Measure of Modularity in Hypergraphs: Theoretical Insights and Implications for Effective Clustering**
Tarun Kumar, **Sankaran Vaidyanathan***, Harini Ananthapadmanabhan, Srinivasan Parthasarathy, Balaraman Ravindran*
Applied Network Science 5(1), 52

Technical Skills

Languages: Python, R, C++

Frameworks: PyTorch, Pyro-PPL, Box2D, TransformerLens, SAELens

Tools: Git, Linux, Figma

Collaborative Research Projects

Sequential Circuit Discovery in LLMs *Feb 2025–May 2025*
AI Safety Camp

- Investigating multi-token mechanisms in LLMs that explain how specific components and features in the model influence not just the next token generated, but also tokens further ahead in the sentence generated.
- Extending causal mediation analysis with time-varying treatments and mediators to identify how specific model components and features affect token sequences over multiple prediction steps.

Quantitative LLM Judges *Feb 2025–May 2025*
Adobe Research

- Analyzed limitations of the LLM-as-a-Judge paradigm, where the performance of an LLM is evaluated by using another LLM to review and score its outputs.
- Developed generalized linear models on pretrained LLM embeddings to produce calibrated scores with uncertainty estimates and worst-case performance guarantees.

Evaluating Alignment and Vulnerabilities in LLMs-as-Judges *Feb 2024–Dec 2024*
Meta

- Evaluated thirteen LLM judge models on scoring model outputs from a multiple-choice QA benchmark, identifying Scott's π as a more reliable metric for evaluating judge models.
- Identified failure cases such as prompt sensitivity and revealed misalignment with human judgments in top-performing LLM judges, with competitive performance from smaller models and simple lexical metrics.

Analysis and Prediction of Cognitive Load During Cardiac Surgery *May 2023–May 2024*
National Institute of Health and Harvard Medical School

- Predicted cognitive load and stress among surgical teams during cardiac surgery using time-series models of heart rate variability (Transformer, LSTM) with MCMC-based imputation for missing sensor data.
- Applied Explainable AI techniques (SHAP, feature ablation, permutation importance) to identify key heart rate variability features driving model predictions, and validated findings against clinical expert knowledge.

Competence-Aware Machine Learning *May 2020–Aug 2022*
DARPA Competence-Aware Machine Learning Program

- Determined the causes of failure for a pre-trained reinforcement learning agent navigating in the AirSim driving environment, by estimating causal effects of various environmental conditions on mission failure.
- Built causal models for estimating the agent's competence (probability of mission success) with confidence intervals, given the environmental conditions for an upcoming route.

Teaching Experience

University of Massachusetts Amherst: *Data Structures*, *Decarbonization and Data Science*, *Probabilistic Graphical Models*, *Artificial Intelligence*, *Probability Theory — Guest Lecture on Markov Chain Monte Carlo*

Indian Institute of Technology Madras: *Introduction to Machine Learning*

Service and Outreach

- Mentor, UMass Data Science Industry Independent Study: Adobe, Meta *2024–2025*
- Mentor, UMass Ph.D. Applicant Support Program *2021–2024*
- Co-organizer, UMass Machine Learning and Friends Lunch *2019–2020, 2023–2024*
- M.S. Graduate Representative, UMass College of Information and Computer Sciences *2020*
- Volunteer Pen-Pal, Letters to a Pre-Scientist *2024–2025*

Relevant Graduate Coursework

Bayesian Statistics, Causal Inference, Probabilistic Graphical Models, Reinforcement Learning, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, Advanced Natural Language Processing, Neural Networks: A Modern Introduction, Optimization in Computer Science, Math Statistics, Research Methods in Empirical CS, Probability Theory, Distributed and Operating Systems, Quantum Information Systems, Fixing Social Media