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From Policy to Practice: The Evolution of SSHRC Application Processes, 1979—Present

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on a case study of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant application procedures between 1979 and 2023, this article highlights the shifting landscape of Canadian federal research funding. Through an analysis of application procedures and requirements, the article argues that changes in the SSHRC grant process reflect broader shifts in government priorities and financial contexts. While complexity and competition have been consistent factors dating back to the early 1980s, each change to the application process illustrates changing federal priorities and values. The article argues that SSHRC's processes have evolved alongside broader trends in public accountability. This historical understanding helps to provide necessary context for contemporary debates around federal grant funding in Canada.

RÉSUMÉ
S'appuyant sur une étude de cas portant sur les procédures de demandes de subventions du Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines (CRSH) entre les années 1979 et 2023, cet article met en lumière le paysage changeant du financement fédéral de la recherche au Canada. À travers l'analyse des procédures et des critères de sélection, cet article démontre que les changements dans le processus d'attribution des subventions du CRSH reflètent les changements plus larges des priorités gouvernementales et des contextes financiers. Même si la complexité et la concurrence sont des facteurs constants depuis le début des années 80, tout changement apporté dans le processus de demande de subventions illustre l'évolution des priorités et des valeurs fédérales. L'article soutient que les processus en vigueur au CRSH ont évolué parallèlement aux tendances plus larges en matière de responsabilité publique. La compréhension de cette réalité historique permet de contextualiser les débats contemporains autour du financement fédéral de la recherche au Canada.

The shape and form of grant applications reflects the context in which they were created: a mixture of government and researcher initiatives, broader technological change, and the societal expectations placed upon government. Grant application forms themselves serve as a barometer for federal priorities, as federal policy and governance shifts are reflected in the questions asked of applicants. From 1980s budget

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cuts to the 2000s push of "knowledge mobilization" to the more recent push towards equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and research data management (RDM) in the 2010s and 2020s, the evolving criteria and structure of grant applications underscore federal shifts. This dynamism, however, is set against a significant degree of continuity. A consistent theme for researchers, stemming from fund scarcity since 1982 when applicants outstripped funding for the first time and necessitated the triaging and ranking of applications, has been competing with each other for funds. This requires lengthy and complicated applications in order to compete with peers on the basis of merit. Yet this remarkable continuity belies dynamic changes that have taken place over a granting agency's history.

Through a case study of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) applications spanning 1979 to 2023, I make two arguments. First, each iteration of application requirements—and the underlying debates behind the purpose and the allocation of research grants—provides insight into the evolving relationship between researchers and the federal government. Secondly, despite perceived increases in complexity (from knowledge mobilization to EDI), the intrinsic burden of a grant application's challenge has been a consistent and recognized challenge.

Why Study Grants?

Understanding changes to grant applications is not an academic exercise, but rather is an essential way to understand the shifting landscapes of research priorities and how they impact the professional lives of researchers. Changes to application and eligibility guidelines have a dramatic impact, particularly for early-career researchers who may require grant funding as either external validation or in order to carry out essential components of a research project.[1] For example, if applicants can only apply annually, as opposed to biannually, that structures the researcher ecosystem. For early-career researchers or those seeking tenure, the timing and frequency of grant opportunities can define the trajectory of their entire career. A longer application may give an applicant more space to argue their case for scientific merit, but also add more burden. Occupation or field codes meant to capture disciplinary backgrounds for assigning peer reviews or for administrative purposes can also structure work. For example, the ways in which disciplines have been codified has meant some scholars feel excluded by virtue of their hard-to-characterize work.[2]

Grant application processes are a particularly important subject to study because they have a large impact on academic life. These applications are one of the main pressure points for academics, and there is little love for applications among researchers. Writing a strong application takes time and causes stress. In one Australian study, the vast majority of respondents (87 per cent) saw grant writing as taking priority over personal commitments, 88 per cent felt grant writing restricted their holidays, and 93 per cent felt stressed. Tellingly, 95 per cent wanted changes to the proposal process.[3] It is hard to imagine any other question engendering such consensus among academics. While there is not an equivalent Canadian survey, there would be similar numbers. Researchers argue that they spend more time proposing projects than doing

them.[4] Given these stresses, it is no surprise that some researchers reify a "golden age" where things were simpler and may blame the granting councils or institutional research offices for this burden. Historical context, however, suggests that these changes reflect changing federal priorities and are also often driven by the research communities themselves.

The Tri-Agencies — SSHRC, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR; Medical Research Council [MRC] until 2000) — have considerable power in Canada. At my own research-intensive institution, for example, Tri-Agency funding makes up roughly 40 per cent of our institution's sponsored research portfolio. As the largest funders in the field, the Tri-Agencies set the Canadian research agenda. If they dictate that institutions and researchers need to concern themselves with research data management, Canadian institutions respond. This is also true in domains such as research ethics or the responsible conduct of research. Despite education being a provincial responsibility in the Canadian federation, federal research funding and oversight tends to similarly structure research administration and evaluation across most Canadian post-secondary institutions. A change in federal priorities — more emphasis on fiscal restraint, for example, or an added emphasis on understanding research impact — will be reflected in the application forms that a researcher completes. Indeed, it is only when the forms are updated that a federal initiative actually feels "real" to a researcher.

Just as the agencies structure institutional activity, their granting programs impact individual researchers as well. This has become increasingly true as grants become even more important to Canadian faculty members. As Claire Polster noted in a 2007 article, drawing on a series of interviews she conducted, "the importance of getting research grants is on the rise in Canadian universities today."[5] Given the widespread perception that a SSHRC grant is critical for tenure (or that a candidate needs to at least try to get one), researchers spend a lot of time applying for them — as do the research administrators that support researchers in their efforts at obtaining sponsored research funds.[6] Related to this are the increasingly complex and rising costs of research and the need to support growing numbers of graduate students and other research trainees.

A Short History of SSHRC, 1978 to the Present

A short history of SSHRC from its 1978 inception to the present helps us understand the broader context in which application changes arise.[7] Before SSHRC, there was the Canada Council for the Arts, established by the federal government in 1957 as an arms-length agency to "encourage research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences."[8] Created by an initial large endowment, the Canada Council's arms-length nature had the dual effects of both insulating the government from its decisions, but also restricting the level of federal direction and oversight. The role of the federal government in research also stretched back to the 1916 establishment of the National Research Council. In sum, while higher education is a provincial

responsibility, the federal government has supported the direct and indirect costs of much research.

In 1974, the federal government under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced that they would create a new body to fund research in the social sciences and humanities.[9] This would give the federal government more direct control of Canadian research funding. Following the SSHRC Act (1977), the agency officially commenced operations in 1978, adopting the research-funding mandate previously held by the Canada Council (which continues today as a supporter of arts and literary endeavours in Canada).[10] SSHRC was joined by its fellow organizations, NSERC and MRC. Around the same time, in 1977, the federal government moved away from the Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements Act (1967), which had seen a 50:50 cost-sharing arrangement for post-secondary institutions, towards cash transfers, which could be spent at provincial discretion.[11]

SSHRC was mandated to support academic research in the social sciences and humanities, primarily by Canadian researchers (mostly, but initially not entirely, faculty members) and graduate students. Whereas the Canada Council had been largely autonomous, thanks to its large initial endowment that insulated it from annual federal funding cycles, the agencies would be responsive to government initiatives and would be treated as departmental corporations.[12] They would be arms-length yet rely upon regular budgetary allocations, and would report to a minister (although not being directly part of the relevant federal department, originally Industry, Trade and Commerce; now Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada).[13] The governing council (akin to a board of directors) was itself appointed by the federal government. SSHRC's federal support would wane after the 1984 election of the Progressive Conservatives, which led to layoffs and budget cuts across the federal government, SSHRC included. I will return to this diminishing support at length.

SSHRC's fortunes mirrored the federal fiscal situation. One rare exception to this was the 1979–80 initial "Proposed Five-Year Plan for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada," which, while appearing amid late-1970s economic malaise, articulated an energetic vision. This plan foresaw growth in real dollars well beyond the period's high inflation rate. In June 1979, SSHRC argued that "we feel we can set an optimistic face towards the new year," in light of a federal commitment to increase grants to universities and researchers by some 17 per cent.[14]

The ebbs and flows of SSHRC's budget, however, would soon reflect wider economic conditions. Austerity measures would soon rear their head. By 1982, alarm bells were sounding. As compared to NSERC and MRC, SSHRC's 1982 report noted that its "budget, compared with that of the other two councils, was shrinking steadily … thanks to the efforts of a large number of scholars, we were able to convince the government of the importance of the social sciences and humanities and to obtain additional funds."[15] By 1983, "hard times" had come:

> Financial restraint, which cast a long shadow over Council activities last year in proportion to the increasing cloud of nation-wide recession, has shown no

> signs of lifting. It has been obvious to us, too, that we cannot expect any large infusions of government funds in these hard times.[16]

SSHRC's evolution from its inception to the present day thus mirrors broader shifts in federal policies and budgets. Indeed, the budget cuts under the Progressive Conservatives from 1984 onwards would mark a pivotal moment for SSHRC, underscoring the agency's vulnerability to broader political and economic tides.

These would be especially felt in core programming such as research grants. One of SSHRC's main programs involved the awarding of research grants to individual researchers, primarily (although at first not exclusively) mediated through institutions that would administer and oversee the funds. SSHRC inherited this research grant function from the earlier Canada Council, a program dating back to 1965. That year, the Canada Council — thanks to specific parliamentary appropriations above and beyond its original endowment — launched a "Research Grants" program.[17] The grant application process consisted of administrative staff receiving applications and finding external peer assessors. Staff would then either decide themselves on the final decision, or if the grant was larger than a certain dollar value, would turn to an external panel. Initially, SSHRC followed Canada Council's grant model, with administrative staff and peer reviewers playing important roles in a process that would evolve over the agency's first decade or so. Twenty years later, in 1985, the Crocker Committee would reflect on the evolution of the research grants program:

> As time passed, additional features were added to the model, as the size of the program increased and as pressure for funds became more intense. In general, little thought seems to have been given to the cumulative effects of these changes until the program was absorbed in 1978 by the newly formed Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.[18]

These changes included the addition of assessments, adjudication committees, and the merits on whether to use small adjudication juries or not (considered by the Canada Council but never operationalized). These iterative refinements were responses to the growing pressure for funds and the ensuing need for rigorous adjudication and ranking.

Given the slow and somewhat uneven evolution of the program, there was never a sustained statement on *why* there was a research grants program. It was something that SSHRC did because the Canada Council had. Perhaps the mandate was understood as self-evident. Indeed, the Crocker Committee noted in 1985 that the "origins of the program, and its original rationale, are somewhat obscure." After dismissing the idea that a program would not need something beyond a nebulous "supporting excellence in research" statement, the Crocker Committee suggested that SSHRC could argue either that "the advancement of knowledge is inherently meritorious," or perhaps that they needed to write an argument around research's positive contributions to the "national interest."[19] I return to this below, but it is notable that when SSHRC assumed ownership of the research grants program in 1979, it had

no tangible mission statement or goal. Some of this would find itself reflected in the unstructured manner through which it was launched.

With the Liberal government of the mid-1990s, thanks in particular both to better advocacy efforts among research universities (the G10 alliance of research-intensive universities, forerunner to today's U15, was formed in 1991) and a receptive ear within the Liberal government, fortunes began to turn. The first Liberal budget was unfriendly to science and research across Canada, with fairly significant budget cuts.[20] In a 1996 meeting, however, Finance Minister Paul Martin became convinced that more research investment was necessary. This led in part to the subsequent formation of the infrastructure-focused Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the researcher-focused Canada Research Chair (CRC) programs.[21] SSHRC also saw funding increases.[22] Towards the end of the millennium, SSHRC's strategies began to highlight the return on investment that Canadian taxpayers were receiving from their support of the social sciences and humanities. By the 2000s, arguably responding in part to a logic whereby funders sought to understand the "returns" that their research investments were having and in turn to convince the federal government of them, came the turn towards "knowledge mobilization" as a framing concept.[23] Despite universities still largely prioritizing and privileging traditional peer-reviewed publications in their annual assessment and, crucially, their tenure-and-promotion processes, researchers were now asked to explain in their proposals the broader impact that their work was having socially (and in turn, the ways in which society may be impacting their work—knowledge mobilization was seen as a two-way street).[24] The other agencies had also mobilized their researchers, NSERC more or less from its origination thanks to its connections to the private sector, and following the 2000 creation of CIHR from the MRC, the medical research body shifted towards strategic and targeted research as well.[25]

While I will return to these contextual moments in the following section, this was the background of SSHRC's history from its inception to the 2000s. Overall, the 1980s witnessed financial austerity, coupled with increased maturity, competitiveness, and a growing sense of mission. The 1990s saw a shift towards increasing federal involvement in research infrastructure, coupled with a post-secondary advocacy strategy that underscored the returns governments would get on their (hopefully) substantial investments. By the 2000s, this would trickle down to researchers as they increasingly needed to underscore how their knowledge would be "mobilized" in the service of the public. All of the above changes would be reflected in the applications that researchers submitted to make their case for funding.

From Uncompetitive to Competitive: The Early Years of SSHRC's Application Process

With the broad context of SSHRC's history established, I turn to the specifics of the research grants program itself. In this early period, between 1979 and the early 1990s, changes to the process were largely shaped by a growing sense of financial austerity. The research grants program was relatively unstructured during SSHRC's first few

years, continuing the earlier Canada Council approach. In 1979, an applicant could submit their application "at any time during the year since no formal competition is held."[26] Crucially, this was *not* a competitive adjudication process: any grant deemed meritorious by assessors on its own merits would be funded. Evaluation was binary. An applicant was funded or not funded on the merits of the application itself, regardless of the merit of fellow applicants.

The process varied based on the amount of funding requested. Applications were received, sent out for peer review, and staff could unilaterally approve on the basis of that feedback if the value requested was under $10,000 ($38,052.88 in 2023 dollars). An advisory academic panel was required to approve grants between $10,000 and $25,000 ($95,132.21 in 2023 dollars), and the council itself would review grant requests exceeding $25,000.[27] Turnaround on smaller requests was quick, with applicants "usually informed of the decision within four months of submitting his [*sic*] request."[28] This gave applicants leeway. For example, one scholar applied to SSHRC in 1980 for a project to study Lucy Maud Montgomery (author of *Anne of Green Gables*) and recalled receiving very negative assessments ("to be brutal, Montgomery has a very limited appeal and challenge," one wrote). Yet she received encouragement from SSHRC officials and "they gave [her] some funds to sustain the project."[29] Note the discretion given to project officers. Indeed, it appears the main criticism from researchers was that they needed not just funds, but "substantially more funds … to permit them to take time off from their teaching duties for scholarly reflection and research."[30]

If there was ever a golden age, it was during these few brief years. Even before the Progressive Conservatives took power in 1984, budgetary storm clouds were closing in. First came administrative changes. For the 1981–1982 research grant competition, staff no longer made a final determination based on assessments. They instead deferred to a standing adjudication committee. With this shift from internal to external adjudication, committees would make final decisions. Deadlines were thus now necessary to ensure applications were presented to them for consideration.[31] There would now be only two intake deadlines per year, as opposed to applying at any point. As the next section illustrates, the more structured approach to intake (and triage) would prove unpopular among researchers.

Competition came in 1982. Somewhat ironically, the shift to competitive adjudication for SSHRC came as the granting council itself was increasingly competing with other federal departments and agencies, which themselves had to compete under the federal government's "envelope system."[32] These limited funds meant that only three years into SSHRC's existence, tough decisions needed to be made in how ever more scarce funds would be allocated. In 1982, it was clear that more researchers were applying than there were funds. This meant that not all meritorious projects could receive the requested funding. In August 1982, SSHRC announced its shift to "competitive adjudication."[33] Rather than a binary determination of whether a project had merit or not, all projects would now be ranked. While this did not manifest itself in a large change in success rate (the success rate dropped from 66.9 per cent in the last pre-competitive year to 60.3 per cent in the first competitive one), the new

category of "recommended but not funded" appeared for researchers who would have been funded under the old model, but not under the new one.

The financial situation continued to worsen (as did federal finances more generally). By 1984, SSHRC's sobering annual report noted that they feared that "the continuing tight money situation may have a demoralizing effect on researchers, who will be discouraged from going to the trouble of applying if they have only a 50-50 chance of success."[34] The success rate fell to 50.4 per cent. Crucially, the ratio of requested funds to awarded funds fell to 26 per cent on average for three-year projects (in other words, for every $100,000 requested in aggregate funding by the research community, only $26,000 was being awarded). Pressures also increased on SSHRC, which by 1986 was facing both a 50 per cent researcher application increase and the prospect of needing to reduce its own staff head count by 10 per cent as part of broader federal cuts.[35] The last major change in this period was the cancellation of the May 1986 competition. SSHRC announced that from that period onwards, there would only be *one* funding call per year.[36] Success rates would slowly decline over the next decade: 56 per cent in 1987–88, 52 per cent in 1988–89, 44.9 per cent in 1992–93. The 50 per cent line had been crossed.

Amidst this upheaval, the grant application forms themselves remained relatively consistent. Indeed, "Form 410" was introduced by 1983 and would form the foundation of applications until the move to online forms in 1995. Components of this application included a basic form to capture administrative data, a brief form for qualifications and experience, a one-page summary, a project description (fifteen single-spaced pages, or 7,500 words), and a relatively detailed itemized budget.[37] By 1986, the project description was reduced to 3,000 words or eight pages, roughly where it is today for SSHRC Insight competitions.[38] In 1993, while the contours of the application remained the same, the detailed description shrank to six pages, typed directly onto a form.[39] One addition was that scholars could provide a sample of their scholarly work.

The big change was in shifting requirements for each grant. The actual "detailed description" might have shrunk, but by the 1990s the number of separate forms increased. A "Training (Role of Students)" form appeared by 1993, and within a decade after that, so did reports on the "Description of Team" and "Previous Research Grant Results." Similarly, the actual covering application forms grew quite a bit as well, from the one-pager of 1983 to the twelve-page form of 2003, which captured a lot of administrative and biographical data.

Underpinning these surface-level changes to application processes and adjudication changes were a series of reports carried out into the research grants programs. These attempted to grapple with the core questions of the program's raison d'être, as well as how to best balance the need for merit reviews with the goal of reducing the administrative burden. A brief overview of these reports helps to understand the evolution of the granting portfolio, and some of the avenues considered. Critical questions included whether projects or people should be assessed, how to evaluate early-career academics, and whether to fully fund a small number of projects or to try to spread the wealth around.

A Growing Emphasis on Sound Investments: The Crocker and Courtney Reports

The 1980s were defined by two reports. These reports — the Crocker and Courtney reports, each named after their chairmen — were written in the context of 1980s financial austerity and growing researcher discontent. Both reports laid the foundation for a more mature and articulate research grants program. They also approached the program not solely from the question of academic excellence, but also increasingly considered the responsible stewardship of public investments, with an eye to ensuring that the public received benefits from their substantial investments into research. A poor choice in adjudication would increasingly be framed not just as a loss to the academy, but also resulting in the loss by a more deserving — and impactful — application.

The first report came in response to competitive, once-a-year adjudication, which had proven controversial within the research community. In May 1984, SSHRC thus established a three-person external committee to explore the policies, procedures, and rationale that underpinned the research grants program. The committee was chaired by Robert K. Crocker, a professor of educational research at Memorial University. Other members of the committee were Elizabeth Arthur, a historian at Lakehead University, and Terrence P. Hogan, a professor of psychology at the University of Manitoba and a research administrator. They would deliver the Crocker Report.

The committee met and deliberated amid the austere climate of early 1985. SSHRC faced both growing concerns about the program's productivity, as well as looming federal budget constraints. The pending 10 per cent administrative staff reduction would almost inevitably necessitate adjudication changes since program staff would not be able to maintain current service levels.

Even absent these external pressures, critical reflection was overdue. As noted, the research grants program had grown out of the Canada Council without considering its goals.[40] Questions that needed to be asked included how external assessment should work (streamlined for smaller financial asks?) and whether projects or persons should be subject to assessment (was funding for a specific project or was it to evaluate individuals who could then use the funds to support their research programs?). A survey was distributed. Around 700 researchers responded. The Crocker Report subsequently delivered a holistic overview of the program, as well as forty-eight specific recommendations. As it would shape the research grants program, its recommendations are worth exploring.

One issue raised was that researcher engagement with SSHRC was "relatively low in relation to the size of the community served, as compared to our sister councils."[41] Only 24 per cent of eligible humanities and social sciences researchers applied to SSHRC, with 84 per cent turning instead to internal funding. This in part reflected the modest financial needs of many humanists and social scientists to fund their research. As the research grants program had a minimum request of $2,500 (in 1984 dollars; this would have a value of $6,445 in 2023), with lower amounts being funded out of a general institutional grant, research grants did not serve researchers

with extremely modest requirements and no need to fund graduate students. The report also concluded that there was overwhelming agreement—with which they concurred—that funding should remain project-based rather than person-based.[42]

The Crocker recommendations were provocative. Their first recommendation was that the "existing principle of 'essential funding under competitive adjudication' be maintained in preference to a system of partial funding."[43] The Crocker Report considered the problem of "false positives"—where a funded project was unsuccessful in obtaining its objectives—and "false negatives," where a potentially successful project was not funded. Any adjudication system would need to try its hardest to decrease both types of errors. A false positive leads to the waste of public funds, and a false negative the loss of human knowledge. What to do, then? The report suggested that

> in a tight budgetary situation, the only alternative to a competition is some form of partial funding. It might be argued that the consequence of partial funding would be many more false positives, for two reasons. First, there would likely be a tendency on the part of adjudicators to award grants to more marginal applications. Secondly, researchers might find themselves unable to meet their project objectives in the face of inadequate budgets.[44]

The committee noted that the worst outcome was a waste of public funds. This was an early mention that explicitly framed a return on investment, which makes sense in the overall climate of financial austerity and tough decisions. Competitive adjudication would best help funded projects succeed and minimize the number of false negatives. The competitive system was here to stay, ensuring that ranked adjudication would persist. If there were insufficient funds to fund all deserving applicants, it was deemed better to pick and choose among them, rather than funding them all at a reduced level.

Researchers were evidently unsatisfied by the Crocker Report. "Continuing concerns" (somewhat undefined) had been sent to the SSHRC Governing Council about the research grants programs. Only three years later, a second committee was formed: the Courtney committee. Chaired by John Courtney, a political scientist at the University of Saskatchewan, the committee consisted also of law professor André C. Côté from Laval, philosopher of science François Duchesneau from the Université de Montréal, literary scholar Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz from the University of British Columbia, economist Alice Nakamura from the University of Alberta, and historian Bernard Vigod of the University of New Brunswick (who died in a car accident in 1988, during the committee's tenure).

The Courtney committee thus had a three-fold mandate: to review the Crocker recommendations, to explore related issues or problems, and to recommend modifications to the research grants program.[45] Launched in March 1988, the committee consulted across the community, circulated a draft version (receiving some 225 replies), before presenting its final report in August 1989. This time there would be thirty-two recommendations.

Chief among them was that the research grants program needed to consciously articulate its objectives. Such a recommendation was submitted to SSHRC (which

accepted it with slight modifications). It read as follows, the first stated objective after a decade of SSHRC's history.

> The objective of the Research Grants Program is to offer support for the conduct of high-quality independent research, as proposed by scholars and judged by their peers. In the context of university-based research, while contributing to the advancement of knowledge, the program should also provide, wherever appropriate, for the training of future social scientists and humanists. In meeting these objectives, the program should be seen as fair in its competitive adjudications, and responsive to changes and variations in approaches to research in the human science.[46]

Given the above emphasis on adjudication, it is perhaps not surprising that much of the Courtney Report concerned itself with adjudication (whether of projects or people), and how to balance the needs of established versus emerging scholars.

One critical recommendation, accepted by SSHRC, was to move from an adjudication method that prioritized project evaluation in favour of evaluating scholarly track records. The latter was seen as better able to provide an ongoing, sustainable program of funding. The Courtney Report held that a system that considered "*both* the candidate's previous research achievements and the proposed program of research" would be supported by the vast majority of the community. Critically, the committee argued that the applicant's track record was more important ("past research achievements are the real guarantee that the investment is guaranteed").[47] Project proposals would become less important.

SSHRC would operationalize this by basing adjudication on the "70/30 rule." Seventy per cent of the final adjudication score would be based on a candidate's track record, 30 per cent on the project. For early career researchers, those in the first five years of their career, weights would be reversed. These early researchers would also receive a reserved funding envelope. This was to ensure that early career researchers would receive sufficient initial funding to get their research programs off the ground, so as to be successful in future competitions. Secondly, Courtney inspired SSHRC to move away from its principle of "full funding." Budgets could now be cut, and the allocation of funds would be tied into the adjudication process. If a few cuts could fund another application (within reason), a committee might elect to go that route. Finally, while Courtney recommended a pre-application registration process (similar to a modern-day letter of intent), SSHRC noted that they were reluctant to "impose additional administrative duties on applicants."[48]

Cumulatively, these reforms helped alleviate some applicant burdens. As one retrospective explained, a goal of all of this would be "to reduce the administrative burden which researchers previously had to deal with because of short-term grant financing and the requirement to submit overly detailed, itemized explanations of their research projects."[49] Indeed, the Courtney Report concluded by noting that by moving towards longer grants (ideally three years in length), ultimately programs and people would be supported more sustainably and effectively. Program rather

than project evaluation would "reduce the burden of repeated, short-term applications for scholars, [and] simplify the application requirements for them." The report concluded with an observation that this would prevent researchers from being forced into the "sometimes partly fictitious confines of a specific research project."[50]

These significant changes were adopted in April 1989 and rolled out for the fall 1990 application cycle. The news release explained the changes as being "vitally important to support the competitiveness of its scholars through policies designed to reward the performance and excellence of the best, ensuring them continued, flexible funding while simplifying administrative procedures."[51] These changes were notable.

> [T]he preparation of a grant application will be greatly simplified. A research program … will cover a three-year period. Accordingly, the description of the research program will outline the general aspects of the research proposal, rather than describing an extremely detailed short-term project, as was previously the case.[52]

Furthermore, only one productivity report would be needed. There would be no more annual reporting.

Unfortunately, the overall goals of moving towards once-every-three-year applications and a theoretical focus on "broadly-defined programs of research" ran into the cold, hard reality of a merit review system fundamentally grounded in disciplinary expertise. Adjudication committees and chairs were inevitably drawn from experts. Glimmers of this tension appeared in a 1993 program evaluation in which SSHRC evaluators (diplomatically) bemoaned that committees were engaging "in somewhat lengthy discussion of the individual details of each research activity within the proposed research program, and on that basis, to debate the fine points of each budget item," as opposed to a holistic approach of thinking about a program and then an ensuing sum.[53] Similarly, in 1994, in a journal article, SSHRC's Robert Hanson argued that "the adjudicators have been slow to adjust and have tended to retain the traditional project-based approach to the valuation of grant reports." Accordingly, review committees remained "hungry for methodological details and specifics of proposed budget."[54] This speaks to the problem of culture change across academia, both within funding agencies and within universities, as scholars bring their own disciplinary expectations to the table which need to be balanced against institutional imperatives. This may speak to the need for stronger committee chairs or more training of merit review committee members, so they can balance their disciplinary expertise with their deputized role in the funding system, but that is a broader question beyond the scope of this paper.

Other reforms would be more successful. In 1992, 90 per cent of submitted grant application requests were for three-year projects (as opposed to 29 per cent before the reforms). Committees were also empowered to work within a budget "envelope," giving them the ability to partially cut projects down to a minimum level in order to fund more deserving projects. This came at the expense of some projects, as the "dollar success rates … total funding awarded relative to total funding requested" across a

committee, decreased from 30.1 per cent to 24.2 per cent.[55] Ultimately, while more work remained to be done on implementation, the Courtney Report was generally seen as a success and laid the groundwork for many contemporary SSHRC policies.

Mobilizing Knowledge: From Granting Council to "Knowledge Council"

In 2003, SSHRC celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and began a new series of consultations to recast itself as a "knowledge council" as opposed to a granting council. The organization would be "exploring its role not only as an active and essential player in funding research and scholarship, but also its potential role as a knowledge broker or facilitator to ensure understanding gained through research makes its way to decisionmakers, other researchers and Canadians from all walks of life."[56] This reflected the shift towards knowledge mobilization, which was understood as a growing interest in interdisciplinary research and the broader dissemination of knowledge, but also reflected a market-based logic around ensuring that Canadians received a "return" on their research investments.[57] SSHRC would begin to explore new priority areas, explore training, international collaborations, and also ensure that the needs of new researchers and smaller institutions were met.[58] In January 2005, SSHRC announced that it would indeed make this shift towards becoming a "knowledge council."[59] Yet as Russell LaPointe has argued, the announcement also reflected activities that were already happening in SSHRC; in other words, "SSHRC was already becoming a knowledge council, defined in its own terms, well before the change in name."[60]

The document "Knowledge Council: SSHRC, 2006–2011" presented SSHRC's new strategic approach as a "knowledge council." Outgoing SSHRC president Marc Renaud was eloquent in explaining this shift, in a passage worth quoting at length.

> To take up Northrop Frye's challenge and create out of the world we have to live in, the world we want to live in, Canada needs humanities and social sciences research; and Canadian researchers and research institutions, SSHRC among them, must do a better job of getting hard-won knowledge out into the world, to families, community groups, policy-makers, legislators, and the media.
>
> Canadians must be able to benefit from and apply the best social sciences and humanities research the world has to offer. That is what a knowledge council is all about. That is the transformed role for SSHRC to which our consultations and the proposals in this strategic plan point.[61]

The logic was clear: Canadians invested in their researchers, and in turn, expected that their society would be impacted by returns on these investments. The fruits of federally-funded research belonged not just to the academy, but to the society that funded them. Researchers would be encouraged to explicitly consider how their knowledge would be mobilized, be that through traditional publications but also increasingly through public outreach, policy impacts, and beyond. This often

put researchers in a difficult position, as disciplinary expectations—embodied in tenure and promotion, for example—might take a narrower view of knowledge mobilization.

For the core research grants program, SSHRC noted that it would move towards a "continuum of funding that span[ned] small, medium-sized and larger grants tenable for varying periods of time, with competitions for the different types of grants to be held at separate times of the year."[62] Crucially, three main "ambitions" were core to this new vision: enhancing the quality of research and research training; enabling connections among both disciplines and the broader community; and strengthening the impact of research and training.[63] All of this was not knowledge just for its own sake, but research that would have an impact (whether through training of the next generation of researchers or through a real-world impact).

Indeed, the Courtney reforms that had placed the emphasis on track record and long-term programs of research—as opposed to shorter-term "projects"—were also reassessed. In 2008, under President Chad Gaffield, SSHRC convened an international blue-ribbon panel on its assessment and peer review processes. The panel, chaired by Harvard sociologist Michèle Lamont, found much to praise among SSHRC's procedures and policies. However, it noted that the overweighting of track record versus research project was a mistake. The recommendations were:

> Track record per se should entitle no one to receive another research grant.… The view of the panel is that the quality of the research proposal, its originality and potential significance (scholarly and otherwise) should always be given primary attention. Track record ought always to come second, permitting peer evaluators to decide whether the applicant has a shown ability to take charge and bring research to completion.[64]

Between this assessment, and the new strategic plan with its implementation focus on quality, connections, and impact, the stage was set for another granting architecture.

That came in 2010 with a renewal of SSHRC's overall grants and awards portfolio. This clustered funding opportunities under the auspices of Insight (research grants), Connection (conference, events, journals, and other outreach activities), and Talent (graduate and post-doctoral awards). A further series of partnership-focused opportunities would span all three categories. The goals were framed as reducing complexity, eliminating program overlap, and minimizing "logistical barriers for applicants."[65] The significance of this shift should not be underestimated: an extremely wide array of distinct programs (each with their own processes) was clustered into a small number of relatively consistent funding opportunities.

The main "research grants"—later branded "Insight Grants"—were for long-term projects, between three and five years, and were designed to focus on projects but also to provide the long-term stability that had been highlighted by Courtney. Such long-term support was "central to advancing knowledge in the social sciences and humanities, as it provides the stability of funding that scholars require in order

to address complex issues and build robust research findings."[66] Crucially, evaluation would be based 40 per cent on challenge (scholarly contribution, theoretical appropriateness, training, and impact); 20 per cent on feasibility (plan and approach); and 40 per cent on capability (track record).[67] Newer researchers, and established researchers pursuing new research directions, could turn to "research development grants," smaller 1–2-year grants that would focus on challenge (50 per cent), with 20 per cent on feasibility and 30 per cent on capacity. These development grants would become today's Insight Development Grants.

The new mandate of a "knowledge council" came with significant changes around some of the inner workings of projects, emphasizing new programs (especially for outreach) and attempting to resolve long-standing difficulties connected to emerging scholars, projects, and the application burden. Yet overall, the main scope of the Insight and Insight Development Grants was similar to the Standard Research Grants that had preceded them. These program reforms did not add to applicant burden. Perhaps, however, technology would.

The Burden of the Computer Age: JetForms, CCVs, and Other Digital Headaches

Just as financial and government contexts have transformed the application process, so too has the ever-changing world of technology. No history of SSHRC application processes would be complete without a discussion of the Canadian Common CV (CCV) and its predecessors. Designed with the noblest of intentions, its implementation would cast a shadow over technological innovation in the application process.

Few grant-related platforms seem to have been as universally reviled as the CCV. Dating back to July 2002 as a common CV for a small number of programs, such as Genome Canada, CIHR, and the Canada Council for the Arts, it had the worthy goal of being "a web-based tool that allows researchers to manage their CV data in a single repository and generate multiple CVs to member organizations."[68] In 2013, the CCV was redeveloped and began rolling out to core funding opportunities across the Tri-Agencies, including the Insight Development Grants.

Designed to explicitly increase efficiency and reduce administrative burden — in theory a researcher could design one CV and use it when applying to a grant at any host of funding agencies, from SSHRC to non-profit societies — in practice, the CCV fell short due to an ungainly user interface that confronted users with endless form-fillable boxes and seemingly countless validation errors (seas of red Xs would confront even experienced users). Perhaps the first glimmers of controversy was seen in a 2014 open letter that garnered some 968 signatures, imploring NSERC to stop the use of the form, claiming that the "amount of wasted time and resources and the frustration it generates is incalculable, especially considering that the new format is more difficult to read and presents no added value."[69] In 2016, Lunenfeld-Tananbaum Research Institute director Jim Woodgett noted that the only "thing 'common' about the CCV is the uniform hatred of it."[70] Even the Fundamental Science Review, commonly known as the Naylor Report, noted:

> We feel it is appropriate to highlight the intense frustration of the research community with the Canadian Common CV (CCV), the single CV portal used by multiple agencies. Among the many and persistent problems cited include inconsistent information requested by agencies, a complex and user-unfriendly web interface, an unstable/unreliable IT infrastructure that frequently crashes around application deadlines, and a rigid architecture that precludes freeform entries that can accommodate atypical forms of scholarship and relevant creative professional activity.[71]

One economist, writing a discussion paper on funding agencies, posited that perhaps the CCV imposed a "fixed cost" of application burden, helping to suppress the number of applications. In this view, adjudication committees benefited from a more manageable application load, due to the CCV discouraging applicants (this is an interesting thought experiment, but almost certainly not the real case here, given the CCV's noble aims).[72]

While the CCV stands out as an exceptionally difficult user experience, it is part of a historical tradition and can also be coupled to the broader trends in the post-secondary sector around the perception of administrative burden. As noted, the forms have indeed grown in length and complexity. But the process by which one applies has never been easy by any stretch of the word. Before the advent of digital application forms in 1992, researchers would have to apply by typing directly onto application forms and mailing the packages directly off to SSHRC (in one case, after obtaining an endorsement from a university's Office of Research Services, the researcher mailed the package in themselves).[73]

In 1992, when SSHRC joined the digital age alongside the other two main agencies, electronic forms became an optional way in which to apply for funds. These were also not for the faint of heart. The electronic application forms were based on a product named Jetform Filler, created by Ottawa-based JetForm Corp (an "electronic forms automation and enterprise workflow systems" company).[74] A series of DOS commands were necessary to install the forms, including granular information about monitor type, printer ports, cartridge types, separate font installation; once the program was running, operation was done through extensive use of function keys and tabs. "When you are in a field requiring a code you press the F1 function key and you will be provided a list from which you can pick," was typical advice in the user guide, before cautioning the user these lists were "browse only … you will be unable to pick a code from this list."[75]

The CCV is an acute symptom of the challenges of providing structured information to a granting agency. Putting paper into a typewriter to complete a form, or downloading specialized software, or filling out boxes: all of these are difficult to use in their own way. Some researchers may have been able to outsource this to administrative staff to varying degrees, but that too has been uneven and unequal across the higher education sector. It does, however, call out for always ensuring that processes receive adequate user testing, and that attention is paid not only to the scholarly content and the questions asked, but the experience of answering them.

Conclusions

Grant applications are a useful window into changing federal, societal, and technological pressures and contexts. An original period of late-1970s and early-1980s non-competitive adjudication gave way to competition and restraint in the face of financial austerity. By the mid-to-late 1980s through to the 1990s, there was growing pressure to demonstrate impact and a tangible return on investment, which was realized by the early 2000s with the shift towards a "knowledge council." Funders such as SSHRC do not exist in a vacuum. Given contemporary pressures towards researchers considering the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in their grant applications and projects, or the findability, accessibility, and preservation of their research data, or even national security considerations, this is a point worth underscoring.

With this context established, we can also firmly see that there was no "golden age" of applying to SSHRC in Canada. Anecdotally, scholars can idolize a fictional time when it used to be easier. Admittedly, writing about NSERC, for example, Gordon and Poulin argued that the "paperwork needed to write a grant application has increased substantially, from a single page when the system started mid-twentieth century, to massive tomes that take months to prepare."[76] As a research administrator at a large Canadian university, I continually hear this anecdotal argument first-hand when it comes to all three of our federal funding agencies.

I have demonstrated here, at least when it comes to SSHRC, that there was no "golden age." Perhaps between 1979 and 1982 there was a brief honeymoon: a period when there was optimism surrounding the new agency and there was enough funding that any proposal deemed meritorious could be funded. But by 1982, it became clear that there were more applicants than funds, and the writing was on the wall. Accordingly, grant writing has always been difficult, both in terms of the process (articulating an innovative project deserving of federal support) and in terms of the form (providing structured data to help both capture information for government and to support the adjudication and administration of the grant itself). There may have been some growth in terms of the accompanying material, but it is hard to look at the evidence and conclude that it was easier to apply in 1985 than it would have been in 1995 or 2023. When looking for solutions to resolving grant applications processes, we should look forward rather than to an imagined past.

In the spirit of looking forward, new models of research assessment and excellence are on the horizon. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or DORA, appeared in 2012 and slowly gained institutional (and individual) signatories over the decade that followed. In 2019, SSHRC, alongside its funding partners across the federal government — NSERC, CIHR, as well as the infrastructure-focused Canada Foundation for Innovation — signed onto DORA. In their release, they noted that "research results and outcomes are multifaceted, can reflect multiple types of knowledge and ways of knowing and must be assessed on their own merit.… The DORA principles are reflected … [in a] shared commitment to continuous improvement in assessment practices."[77] Starting in 2023, the CCV began to be replaced in

some competitions with a "narrative CV," a lighter-weight process whereby researchers spend less time filling forms and more time explaining their track record in all of its multifaceted ways. Perhaps a change to this decades-long trend is impending. Ideally such shifts will be echoed by universities and disciplinary associations also considering DORA when it comes to evaluating their faculties or members.

Overall, a historical perspective on grant funding helps to nuance some of the more hyperbolic worries about the state of government funding in Canada. Integrating Data Management Plans (DMPs) and discussions on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are not merely administrative hurdles, but rather deliberate strategies through which the federal government promotes desirable practices and values. They are also methods by which scholars can demonstrate their excellence to peers. Especially within the Canadian academy, where most scholars are genuinely exceptional in their own domains and areas of expertise, the decision-making process for funding is especially complex. It is a landscape where the task of distinguishing extraordinary from excellent is a subtle and demanding one. Our society's values, as reflected through our federal government and thus our granting agencies, appear in the questions that researchers are asked when they ask for support from that society.

Notes

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