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SSHRC Insight Competition 2012: Analysis of Results Executive Summary

Prepared for the Faculty of Public Affairs
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Executive Summary and Top 10 Tips

Over the last three years, we have witnessed the phasing in of the new program architecture at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This renewed architecture has brought a number of substantive changes to the way research is funded in Canada. There is an increasing emphasis on dissemination to non-academic audiences and, within the Insight Grant (IG) in particular, a greater emphasis on research projects of a larger scope (up to \$500,000 in funding over five years). In comparison to the Standard Research Grant (SRG), the Insight Grant tends to fund fewer projects at 100% of the requested budget, resulting in declining national success rates and increased budgets for those that are successful in obtaining funding. The Faculty of Public Affairs results of the 2012 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Grant competition were disappointing (3 awards out of 17 applications). These numbers are lower than in past years and reflect a decline in our success rates (from 31.3% in 2011 to 17.6% in 2012). Carleton University has seen a similar decline from 33.3% in 2011 to 14.8% in 2012. Nationally the decline is less dramatic, 27.0% in 2011 to 21.1% in 2012. We would like our success rate to be closer to the national percentage.

In an attempt to better understand these results and better position our faculty for future applications, the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs (ODFPA), led by Associate Deans (Research and Graduate Affairs) Karen Schwartz and Diana Majury, undertook to analyze our past performance and generate recommendations for future applicants. Using the committee scores and the external reviewers' comments, generously provided to us by the 2012 Insight Grant applicants, ODFPA conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results. This project sought to determine if there were specific areas in FPA applications that could be addressed in future competitions. The research team sought to answer the following research questions based on the scores and assessor comments:

- Are there common weaknesses and strengths in applications that FPA researchers submitted to the 2012 Insight Grant program?
- What can be done to improve our applications in 2013?

Using the 13 results packages provided to ODFPA by the 2012 Insight Grant applicants, we undertook a quantitative analysis of the scores. FPA applicants in all success categories (successful, 4A, and unsuccessful) garnered their highest scores in *Capability*, which assesses “the

expertise to succeed”. *Challenge*, which assesses “the aim and importance of the endeavour”, scores were high as well, however, there is a spread of almost a full point between the average awarded score (5.22) and the average 4A score (4.27). The *feasibility* category, which asks assessors to judge “the plan to achieve excellence”¹, had the lowest-scoring average for all FPA applications and in each success category.

For the qualitative analysis, the team coded all external assessor comments from each section (Challenge, Feasibility, Capability and Additional Comments), separated by success category (funded, 4A and unsuccessful), application number, and assessor number in accordance with ten themes: (1) Contribution/Impact, (2) Literature Review, (3) Theory, (4) Methodology, (5) Conceptualization, (6) Student Training, (7) Knowledge Mobilization/Dissemination/Deliverables, (8) Credibility/Track Record, (9) Budget, and (10) Timelines. Our qualitative findings indicated that overall our applicants are doing very well in terms of contribution; however the methodological and overall conceptualization aspects of the applications show significant room for improvement. Secondly, it appears that FPA applicants have done an excellent job in presenting themselves as the ideal researchers for their projects, and have successfully outlined their plans for the products of their investigations. When it comes to budget, however, it seems that assessors saw more flaws. Applicants may need to pay greater attention to the construction and presentation of their budgets.

Based on these qualitative and quantitative findings, we strongly believe that while applicants cannot necessarily produce applications that guarantee success, there are substantive areas for improvement in FPA applications to the Insight Grant program. While the full report provides a comprehensive detailing of our findings, we also generated the following advice for future Insight Grant applicants based on the results from our analyses:

¹ All quotes are from SSHRC’s definitions of the adjudication criteria. For more information, see http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/insight_grants-subventions_savoir-eng.aspx.

1. Present a consistent and coherent narrative that continues from the first page of the application to the final page
2. Craft a clear and pithy research question that visually jumps out at the reader in the summary and the first page of the detailed description. This research question should be restated, not rephrased, where relevant throughout the application.
3. Explain why your project is not only timely and important, but how your approach is novel or original.
4. Ensure your literature review is analytical, not merely descriptive. Your research question should clearly emerge from your literature review. Focus the literature review on demonstrating what is original or novel about your research question and how answering it will contribute something important to your discipline or field of study.
5. Fully describe your theoretical framework. It should build on your analytical literature review to demonstrate why your chosen framework is best and most feasible for answering your research question, and build upon your past work. Lastly you should articulate how your research, using this framework will make a contribution to the development of this theoretical framework.
6. The timeline should include more than the data collection and analysis stages of your research. It should also include all the activities in your student training and knowledge mobilization sections of the application.
7. Fully describe your methodology, including very specific details on data collection and analysis. The methodology section should be thoroughly integrated into the rest of the proposal, clearly linked to the theoretical framework and the literature, detailed, and the variables clearly operationalized.
8. Ask a senior scholar knowledgeable in your field (possibly your departmental Research Mentor) to critically review your CV in light of your proposed research topic. To ensure that you have time to get substantive feedback about your application from the FPA

Research Facilitator and ADR consider submitting the literature review, theory and methodology sections earlier in the process, before the entire application is completed.

9. Explicitly and convincingly connect all items in your budget justification to the project's objectives and activities. Make sure that your budget is consistent with your time line.
10. Think creatively about the dissemination and knowledge mobilization aspects of your project. Innovation in dissemination and knowledge mobilization, i.e. plans that go beyond academic presentations, publications, and a web site will be favourably noticed.

From our review and analysis, we conclude that there are concrete aspects of the application that can be improved and that will increase the chances of being funded. We hope that by explicating these concrete steps, we can encourage applicants to be more strategic in deciding which programs to apply to and to consider alternative programs, including the Insight Development Grant. We acknowledge that there is always an element of luck in any funded application. All applicants are susceptible to committees that disagree fundamentally with the validity of the proposed methodology or with the importance of the topic. In these cases, there is little an applicant can do to improve their success. However, based on our findings here, it is always in the applicant's best interest to submit the best possible application in order to mitigate genuine concerns and leaving them solely in the hands of fate.

