

SUMMARY – CIHR Project Grants: A Panel Discussion

Overview

On Feb. 5, 2019, URS hosted a panel discussion focused on CIHR Project Grants. Our panelists – Drs. Peter Davies, Colleen Davison, Madhuri Koti, Douglas Munoz, and Stephen Vanner – provided their advice on “pitching” projects to CIHR and crafting strong applications. A summary of the discussion organized into themes is provided below.

Grant Development

- **Start planning your Project Grant far in advance of the deadline.** Have a basic plan for your project together at least 6-months in advance of the deadline. One way to do this is to create a conceptual diagram that captures the main elements of your project and then use it to help develop/refine the project idea.
- **Use an iterative approach in your grant development.** Share your early plan with colleagues, refine it based on their feedback, and then share it again for more feedback. Doing this in the early stages helps avoid “fundamental” issues in the project (e.g., overly complex; too incremental; duplicates previous research).
- **Take time to review previously successful grants.** Ask successful colleagues if they would be willing to share their proposals with you. You can also review what has been previously funded by your intended committee.
- **Request feedback from colleagues on draft proposals.** Getting feedback from colleagues on your proposal is essential to ensuring its success; but, request feedback early because close to the deadline they may be too busy.
- **Take advantage of any internal review processes available to you.** These processes normally have deadlines well in advance of the CIHR deadline (e.g., 6-8 weeks in advance), so work them into your planning.
 - Some Departments have formal/informal processes in place for internal review (e.g., Department of Medicine).
 - The Faculty of Health Sciences can help you connect with internal peer reviewers or help you secure external scientific review, if needed (contact Gladys Smith for more details).
 - Research Services offers non-scientific content reviews and provides editing feedback.

Crafting a Strong Proposal

- **Do not write your proposal the way you write a paper.** Papers are reviewed by experts in your field but review panels are more general. Write for someone who is familiar with your discipline but not the details of your work.
- **Use clear & easily understood language.** Reviewers read a large number of applications, so your grant must be straightforward and easy to understand. Consider embedding figures/tables in the proposal to improve readability.
- **Avoid some common reviewer ‘pet peeves’.** Avoid the use of jargon or too many acronyms; ensure the grant has no grammatical/typographical errors; use the correct margin and font size, and; avoid using small font in figures.
- **Prioritize your project’s aims.** The early aims should be exciting and grab your readers’ attention. If needed, limit the number of aims to make sure your project is not too complicated. If you have both basic & clinical aims, be careful about your panel selection as not all clinical panels are open to basic research (or vice versa – see mandates).
- **“Sell” your project in the first page of your proposal.** The first page is critical because it sets your reviewer’s impression of your grant. Your project’s “wow factor” should be clear and emphasized in the opening sections (i.e., what is innovative/exciting/unique about your project? Why is it important & why will it matter?).
- **The summary is a key part of your application.** The summary will influence your reviewers’ first impression of your grant and, during the face-to-face discussion, panelists who did not read your grant will refer to the summary. It should stand alone and cover the specific aims, methods, and emphasize the project’s “wow factor” / significance.
- **Use the background section to help direct your reader’s thinking.** The background should quickly highlight key points and knowledge gaps; it is not an exhaustive review of the literature. Focus on the big picture and get to your research question quickly.
- **Demonstrate your project’s feasibility.** This can be done by providing pilot data and/or demonstrating experience in the topic. If there are gaps in your expertise, have strong co-applicants to fill them. Any errors/issues in the methods are a major red flag; if necessary, have a methods expert review your proposal (e.g., biostatistician).

Resubmissions

- **Be sure that you are addressing “core” issues identified by reviewers – not just superficial ones.** Addressing ‘granular’ feedback from individual reviewers may not be sufficient to get your grant funded. Carefully review the SO notes so that you understand the major issues discussed and request feedback from colleagues. If you did not receive SO notes, getting feedback from colleagues is especially important.
- **Discrepancies in scores can reflect individual differences between reviewers.** Every reviewer is different and some tend to consistently score proposals a little high (i.e., all in the 4s) or a little low. If you have discordant scores, the SO notes will help you identify the most important criticisms, as will feedback from colleagues.
- **Give yourself time to revise your proposal.** Unless your proposal was very highly ranked, it is not advisable to resubmit immediately in the next competition, as you will likely not have time to address “core” issues in the grant.
- **Assume that your previous reviewers will not review your proposal again.** While committees strive to have the same reviewers read your application, that may not be possible. Assume that you may have new readers.
- **Take time to craft a meaningful response to reviewers.** Show that you have addressed your previous reviewers’ comments. Be polite in your response to show that you respect your reviewers’ time.
- **Don’t try to “dodge” reviewers by switching committees.** Selecting a different panel because your grant was not reviewed favorably could reflect negatively on your proposal. Remember: if your grant falls within the committee’s mandate, CIHR staff may just re-assign your proposal to the same committee who reviewed your grant last time.
- **If necessary, reconsider the viability of your project.** If your project has not been funded after three rounds in the competition, it is possible that there is an unaddressed fundamental issue in the project. Share your proposal with colleagues to get additional input and, if necessary, consider a new project direction.

General Advice for New Investigators (or, Anyone Applying to CIHR!)

- **Join the CIHR College of Reviewers.** To be a regular committee member at CIHR, you have to join the [College of Reviewers](#). As a College member, the research keywords you provide will help CIHR match you to a committee. Be sure that these are good matches for your areas of expertise and research interests.
- **Serve regularly on CIHR peer review panels.** The “bar” at CIHR for fundable research continues to get higher, and so regularly serving on panels gives invaluable information on what is “fundable”. New investigators who are not College members can participate in [CIHR’s Observer program](#) to participate in peer review as a non-voting member.
- **Familiarize yourself with the Project grant review process.** Review the CIHR Project Grant [Peer Review Manual](#) because it will provide you with useful details on the competition (e.g., how does streamlining work?).
- **Make sure that you pick the right panel.** Carefully review the [committee mandates](#), check to see who has previously [served on the committee](#) to get an idea of their expertise and review what the committee has [previously funded](#).
- **Ask for feedback from colleagues.** This will help you avoid common issues many investigators new to the program make (e.g., devoting too much space to background and not enough on the methodology).
- **Demonstrating feasibility is important.** Given the high “bar” for fundable projects, provide clear evidence that your project will be feasible (e.g., strong preliminary data; papers that demonstrate your expertise; co-applicants to fill expertise gaps, etc). This is particularly important for new researchers who yet have to establish a CIHR track-record.

Want More Information?

Visit the URS Project Grant webpage: <http://www.queensu.ca/urs/projectscheme>.