Best Practices and Lessons Learned: Applying to SSHRC

The following advice was collected during a round table discussion (April 11, 2018) with Laurentian researchers who successfully applied to SSHRC's Insight Grant *or* Insight Development Grant *and/or were part of IG or IDG review committees.*

Round table members included: Drs. Diana Coholic, David Fortin, Susan Glover, Alicia Hawkins, Aven McMaster, Johanne Melançon and Manon Robillard

Tips for Getting Started

- Start your research before applying to develop your idea; greater familiarity with your project will help you in writing a convincing proposal
- Start early; start working on your application six months before the deadline
- Start working on the Common or SSHRC CV early, as it is very time consuming, if one isn't already made. Also, if you start early enough, you might even be able to fill a few blank spots in your CV before submitting
- Set aside dedicated times to work on your application every week; this will reduce stress come the deadline
- Identify what gap your research is filling
- Keep it simple; focus on one main research question
- Envision your application as the development of a research plan that can be put into action when approved; all of that work will prove useful when the project starts
- Read successful applications (even those outside of your field of research) to get a better sense of what makes a good application
- Work with the Office of Research Services; the ORS can answer SSHRC related questions and also review and comment on your application
- Think long-term as it could take a few tries before obtaining funding

Tips for Writing an Application

- Having a clear idea of your research project before you start will make writing easier
- The *Summary of Proposal* section is key, as this is typically what reviewers read first
- Highlight why the project is timely and relevant; justify why this research should be funded now
- Use all of the space you are given to fully develop your ideas, but refrain from "padding" your application
- The *References* section is important and researchers should take full advantage of the allotted space to demonstrate an up-to-date literature review; that being said, this section should reflect your application's detailed project description and should avoid simply referencing works that are considered important (i.e. "name-dropping")
- Clarity is crucial: not every reviewer will necessarily be in your discipline

- Avoid using too much jargon, though some specialized language can be relevant
- Buzzwords are fine, but can definitely be overdone, especially when not relevant to the project
- When making a claim in your application, explain how said claim will be accomplished and what results you are expecting; if you claim that the results will change something, explain how it will be changed
- Proofread; don't make reviewers grumpy because of typos; good writing and a consistent style helps sell the reviewers on your idea
- Use headings
- Share your work and application with others; don't work in isolation or silos
- Demonstrate not only the need for the research, but that you are the person to do it
- Demonstrate that there is interest in your research
- Write your application in the language (English or French) in which you will be best able to write a clear and convincing proposal
- Committee members are expected to be bilingual, but may not master the technical language in both French and English; it is important to use clear language, whether you write your proposal in French or in English
- Make the application and research part of your career trajectory; show how it can grow with your career and work
- Details are important; be specific
- Some researchers asked students to read applications to make sure the proposal was very clear
- If you have done pertinent research that will not show up in your CV because it was not done in the past five years, find a way to mention it in your application
- If your research lines up with one or many of SSHRC's "Future Challenge Areas", be sure to indicate how and to make those links. However, if the research does *not* line up with any of the "Future Challenge Areas", you do not have to make those links

Tips for Convincing the Review Committee

- Be compelling by highlighting what is interesting, unique and novel with your project
- It's a competition, not a modesty contest; keep in mind that you are selling your idea and your capabilities to the committee
- On the other hand, don't oversell what you can do
- Get successful applicants to read your application, as well as those outside of your discipline. People who are not in your research field should be able to understand your proposal
- Show that you are capable of doing the research; that you are building on something you've done before or similar projects

- If you have been successful in previous grants, mention what you have accomplished and show how you are building on this previous work; show them that you used those funds well and for a variety of stakeholders

Tips for the Budget and Calendar

- Justify every single expense in your budget
- Don't inflate your budget and make it very clear how it will be used
- Show that you are using your professional allowance for the research as cash contributions
- Ask for funds to publish open access articles, as accessibility to knowledge production is becoming more and more important
- Even when not necessary, indicating that you have external sources of funding signals to the committee that others think the research is important
- Keep your calendar and budget simple: clarity is more important than style
- A well thought-out calendar signals that you know how to successfully conduct your research and manage a research budget
- Demonstrate in the calendar and application that the project is doable; for example, if you have a sabbatical or a lighter course-load certain semesters that will allow you to travel for data collection, mention this
- Be realistic on how much of your time the project will require; SSHRC does not fund teaching credit releases anymore. Credit releases at Laurentian are allotted and approved by the researcher's Dean

Tips for Community-Based Research

- The community needs to be reflected in the application:
    - Include community members in the project, explain clearly how they will be involved
    - Have a knowledge mobilization plan that shares the results with the community in a way that works for them (i.e. not just academic journals)
    - Employ community members to help with outreach activities and project logistics
- Make it clear in your proposal that the research question is one that is being asked by the community in question
- Even if your research project is not directly community-based, it can be advantageous to demonstrate how the research could impact a community

Tips for Knowledge Dissemination (Knowledge Mobilization Plan)

- Dissemination should not be an afterthought; reviewers consider dissemination to be an important part of the research project
- Your dissemination plan should share the results with those who will be impacted by the research
- Your dissemination plan should reach its intended audience
- Journals are for academics; if the impact of the research goes beyond academia, other dissemination activities should be planned
- If you have contacts that can help with dissemination (e.g. members of the media or someone with a social media presence) indicate this in your plan
- If you mention that you will create a website for the project, explain your plan for the website (i.e. put it in your budget, include it among your students' tasks, explain how people will know it exists, explain how it will be used)
- It is better to indicate that you will publish articles based on the funding, and to a certain extent present at conferences, starting in the second and later years of the project, rather than in the first year. This should also be reflected in the budget.
- Blogs are a good dissemination tool and the metrics allow you to know how many people consult your blog and where they are from

Tips for Roles and Training of Students

- Show that students will receive real training and experience, and that they will be fully involved in the project
- Have a good training plan for your students and help students develop their professional networks (such as attending conferences)
- Asking for travel funds to help students attend conferences or other professional development opportunities, when possible, is well seen by reviewers
- Include students in the writing of articles, book chapters, etc.
- If you don't have extensive experience supervising students, a good training plan can make the difference
- It is okay to only hire undergrads if it reflects the pool of available students
- If you don't have access to graduate students or post-docs at Laurentian, you can hire students from other institutions. It is advantageous if you already have connections to their institution, such as having a co-PI or collaborator who can co-supervise, or being associated to a research centre or group

Tips for Reapplying

- Don't get discouraged! One reviewer indicated that a proposal was accepted after being submitted for the sixth time; the proposal and the researcher's CV had continually improved until accepted
- Use reviewer feedback to strengthen your application and explain how you incorporated it into your application. You may also want to address why certain feedback was not incorporated, but it is not obligatory
- Use a diplomatic tone when addressing reviewers' comments
- When reapplying, show in your CV how you have progressed
- If you don't get funded, but receive positive comments regarding the proposed research, it could be worth reapplying (even more than once), making the proposal more focused, incorporating feedback and advancing with the research. There are many reasons that an application is not funded, and things might line up when you next apply

Tips Regarding the Review Process

- The competitive nature of SSHRC grants means that reviewers are looking for reasons to not fund your project; small things can give your application a lower ranking, even if it is considered to be a good project
- It is rare that a proposal is universally recommended by committee members as most end up in the middle
- External reviews are typically positive, unless the project is deemed really not good; unlike the review committee members, external reviewers do not evaluate or rank other projects
- If you can suggest external reviewers, pick ones that are from universities similar to yours, who will understand doing research in similar circumstances
- Be strategic in your choice of external reviewers (when you can suggest them); avoid those who could be competitors

Tips for New Areas of Research Interest

- If your proposal is for a new area of research, show how it builds on what you have done in the past
- Demonstrate that you have the capabilities to successfully complete the project
- Do some preliminary research and make connections with other researchers to show that you are on the right track and serious about this new area of research

Tips for Building Your Research Team

- Select Co-PIs and collaborators wisely as they will be important to the project's success
- Co-PIs and collaborators are a good way to address areas with which you are not as experienced or for which you don't have the required expertise

- Build a team of researchers with the right experiences that will demonstrate to the committee that you will be able to accomplish the project in a timely manner