Facilitating successful research grant applications

31 January 2000, 0400h: Daylight is still hours away. The courier deadline is later, at 3:00 p.m. (but seems imminent). There are eleven grant application packages to complete, proof, edit, revise, compile and copy. Questions fly: Does this paragraph make sense? Have those typos been fixed? Has the budget been double-checked? Where is that letter? Do we have the signatures? Is there enough paper? Toner? Where are the cookies? Is there any fresh coffee? And: Are we ever going to get these out in time? (Absolutely.)

This is just another deadline day at the office for Centre for Systems Science (CSS) Research Grants Facilitators, Dr. Sara Swenson and Dr. Dawn McArthur, and the CSS staff.

Grant writing and application coordination skills are crucial to increasing the odds of a successful outcome when applying for grants in support of research. In 1997, the Vice-President, Research started contributing funds to support a Grants Facilitator position created by Dr. Brian Funt, the Director of the CSS. Dr. Sara Swenson was hired into the position, which was to be responsible for critiquing and editing applications, coordinating the compilation of applications, and bringing researchers together to take advantage of collaborative opportunities. She also currently serves as the SFU Institutional Liaison to the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI).

After her initial successes, the demand for Sara’s assistance was so great that Dr. Dawn McArthur was hired to be a second Facilitator.

In the past three years, the Grants Facilitators have worked on grant applications to a wide variety of external funding sources. They have assisted many faculty members and their associates, from undergraduate students to professors emeriti.

Both Sara and Dawn have strong academic backgrounds, with solid research training and extensive experience writing papers and applications. They also have complementary backgrounds and knowledge: where one leaves off, the other usually begins. And what they don’t know, they will find out. These two women love to learn new things. They love to integrate new knowledge and old information. They think editing is fun. And, most importantly, they love to write.
According to Vice-President, Research Dr. Bruce Clayman, “SFU’s successes in CFI and British Columbia Knowledge Development Fund competitions to date, and expected successes in the future, are due in large measure to the excellent work and tireless efforts of Sara and Dawn. Of course, excellent researchers are the other key ingredient, and they are unanimous in their agreement that the contributions from the Grants Facilitators were key to the production of strong applications.”

Dr. Diane Finegood, School of Kinesiology, concurs. “With their help I was able to put together a multiproject, multicentre group grant application to the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation/Medical Research Council of Canada. This grant was funded for $2.7 million over three years.” And Dr. Jonathan Borwein, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, remarks, “The establishment by the CSS of the Grants Facilitators has been one of the most significant enhancements of research life at SFU. The presence of sophisticated, scientifically knowledgeable people with the time, knowledge and commitment they bring has transformed the process of major grant proposals at SFU. It has already paid off and will continue to pay off as we look to succeed in a more and more competitive world. With Sara and Dawn’s help, I personally will continue to look actively for resources where I would not otherwise.”

One of the most important services provided by the Grants Facilitators is helping new faculty members secure funding to begin their research programs. Sara and Dawn quickly identify the appropriate funding agencies and assist in developing the optimized proposal with the correct attention to the details particular to the program. Dr. Ljiljana Trajkovic, School of Engineering Science, reports, “During my first two years at SFU, with Sara’s and Dawn’s help, I submitted seven proposals for research funding. Six of these proposals have been funded.”

Sara and Dawn have become prototypes for the position of Grants Facilitator. Research institutions across British Columbia and other departments at SFU are attempting to replicate these positions and their function. “With the assistance of the Faculty Deans, my office will be supporting similar positions elsewhere in the University,” says Dr. Clayman.

Sara Swenson can be reached by email to saras@cs.sfu.ca. Send email to Dawn McArthur at mdmcarth@cs.sfu.ca.
“Research is the raison d’être of a university,” comments SFU’s President-Designate, Dr. Michael Stevenson. “I am very proud to be associated with a university that is a national leader in research. All those involved in SFU’s excellent record of research deserve congratulations. That record and the clear commitment to continuous improvement of the research environment were decisive in my interest in the SFU Presidency. I look forward to enhancing SFU’s research profile, its culture of innovation, and its vital contribution to economic and social development.”

Dr. Stevenson, a political scientist, is currently completing his seventh year as Vice President (Academic Affairs) and Provost at York University and takes over the post as SFU President in December 2000.

“I am delighted with the appointment of Dr. Stevenson to the Presidency,” Dr. Bruce Clayman, Vice-President, Research says. “He is extremely supportive of our research and knowledge-transfer agendas. He has made it clear that he will be a strong advocate of the strategic enhancement of SFU’s research expertise and infrastructure, and an enthusiastic supporter of our efforts toward communicating the impact of SFU’s research successes. I look forward to working with him to further these essential goals.”

Dr. Stevenson has been active in interdisciplinary research at York University as Associate Director of the Institute for Social Research and as founding Director of the Centre for Health Studies. His research interests include public opinion and ideology, health policy analysis, African and Canadian politics. He has published extensively on post-independence developments in Sub-Saharan Africa, Canadian political culture and public opinion (including a recent book on politics and ideology) and health policy in Canada.

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applications of their idea. I am there to provide insight, advice, experience and even encouragement at key points in bringing their ideas to market.

rl: You bring up the concept of researchers learning the technology transfer process. In your estimation, what part of the process is the most difficult to undertake?

MF: Each researcher brings to the table different skills and interests. As a result the challenges will be as unique as the individuals themselves. If I had to choose one common point however, it is that for those commercializing intellectual property for the first time, the amount of information and number of issues that must be considered can seem overwhelming.

rl: How do you work with researchers to overcome this challenge?

MF: My approach is to find a common point of understanding with the researchers and move forward from there. Considering we operate in a research environment, I start by pointing out that while the information base is different, the commercialization process is similar to conducting pure research. For example, research begins with identifying a gap in the knowledge base and from there, developing a hypothesis, creating and refining a methodology, conducting the research, analyzing the results and then submitting your work for peer review. In business, you begin by identifying a gap in the marketplace and from there develop a product (your hypothesis), create and refine a business plan (methodology), start to implement the business plan (conducting the research), for peer review. In business, you begin by identifying a gap in the marketplace and from there develop a product (your hypothesis), create and refine a business plan (methodology), start to implement the business plan (conducting the research),

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The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has announced the launch of a new Strategic Theme: “Rethinking Productivity.” The goal of this program is to encourage and support interdisciplinary and collaborative research and training on relationships among economic, social and cultural development. Two types of funding are available under this program: Strategic Team Research Grants and Interdisciplinary Conference Grants. A program description appears on SSHRC’s Web site at www.sshrc.ca/english/programinfo/grantsguide/productivity.html. Questions concerning strategic themes may be addressed by e-mail to: themes@sshrc.ca.

This program, referred to as the Strategic Monitoring and Assessment of Research in Transportation (SMART) program, is aimed at identifying and assessing emerging trends, issues, and practices in crash prevention and injury rehabilitation. ICBC’s investment in SMART’s Strategic Research is $500,000 over a two-year period. It is anticipated that about 15 new research projects will be undertaken within SMART between September 1999 and July 2000. Some areas of interest include: developing risk-taking behaviour assessment tools; innovative safe driving incentives; measuring the impact of safety advertising and communication messages; dynamics of claiming behaviour; review of best practices on return-to-work strategies for injured claimants; emerging issues in rehabilitation; and emerging issues in transportation planning. Potential topics are not limited to these, and proposals for related topics are welcomed. Contact Dr. John Vavrik, Manager, Strategic Research, at 661-6910 for information regarding this program.

The Letters of Intent Deadline for this program has changed from April 1 to August 15 starting this year. This program is designed to support groups of two or more accomplished investigators over a period of years for collaborative work in especially productive areas. The Grants and Awards Guide and the Letter of Intent Form (MRC 42, available on the web) will be revised to reflect these and other changes after the current Group competition is completed in June 2000. If you have any questions about the Group Program, please contact: Jenny Allen, Program Coordinator, Groups, (613) 957-3118, jallen@mrc.gc.ca, or, Karl H. Tibelius, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Programs Branch, (613) 954-1805, tibelius@mrc.gc.ca. For further information, see MRC’s Web site: www.mrc.hcsc.gc.ca/programs/index.html

The University/Industry Liaison Office (UILO) has established a permanent presence at the TIME (Technology, Innovation, Management, and Entrepreneurship) Centre located on the seventh floor of SFU’s Harbour Centre Campus. Technology Manager Daphne Gelbart is now located at TIME and other UILO staff members regularly work from that office. This downtown Vancouver presence facilitates the UILO’s provision of its technology transfer services to a broad range of businesses and to SFU researchers located at Harbour Centre.

As well as offering technology transfer services at TIME, the UILO is operating an incubator facility called TIME Ventures Innovations. The incubator facility allows new companies, including SFU spin-off companies, to be housed on a low risk basis and receive the benefit of the services offered by the UILO staff assigned to the TIME Centre. The UILO is also managing the TIME Business Centre, which offers drop-in business facilities and services to its industrial members. Services include access to computer workstations, printers, and a number of databases. The Business Centre will foster networking and liaison between the University and the corporate sector by bringing industry representatives onto the Harbour Centre campus.

For more information about the UILO@TIME, visit www.sfu.ca/time/business.html. Daphne Gelbart can be reached at 268-7986, email: dgelbart@sfu.ca.