

# Historians Speak Out about SSHRC

This winter, the CHA prepared a questionnaire for historians to solicit their opinions on the policies and programmes of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Over 1000 questionnaires were sent to CHA members and nearly 4000 additional copies were sent to university departments of history for distribution among non-members. The responses reflected an interesting range of opinions about both the functioning of SSHRC and of government research policies in general.

The majority of respondents were very concerned about the implications of the proposed merger between SSHRC and the Canada Council. While some believed that the move was a positive step (reducing administration costs, for instance), most believed that the move was a step backward. The most common concern was that research in the humanities and social sciences would be given less priority in such a new council. Related concerns were that the move represented greater government interference in the setting of research agendas and that research in the humanities was being relegated to the margins in face of dominant scientific research models. Those who replied also expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with a range of current SSHRC policies and procedures. Only 5 people felt "generally quite satisfied". The most common complaints were about the review and evaluation process of grant applications. Many argued that the new emphasis on past performance is problematic because it tends to discourage innovation and encourages researchers to put together quick projects that have not been well-considered. There were complaints about reviewers and the SSHRC review committees ranging from "too much cronyism" to too much secrecy at all levels. Many researchers would like to have more comments from the reviewers, as well as more explanation from the committees as to why grants were not made when reviewers had recommended the project.

A number of replies expressed considerable anger at the dropping of the independent scholars' program, noting that it was particularly unfair to younger scholars unable to find academic employment as well as to retired academics, public historians, archivists, teachers at community colleges and spouses of university-employed historians.

On the other hand, opinions were mixed on the strategic grants program. Some

felt that the program was a blatant example of government interference in directing research while others felt that it had been useful in highlighting areas that had previously been neglected, like "women and work". Others had no objections in principle to strategic grants, but felt that the topics to date have been too narrow, too applied or too "presentist" with little room for historical research.

Opinions were also mixed on the question of release time. Some historians argued emphatically that release time was the most important part of their SSHRC grant; that without the luxury of time, research in history was impossible. On the other hand, a majority of respondents also said that if awarding release time meant that other grants would have to be reduced, they would prefer to drop the release time grants, or at least, award only a limited number on a competitive or as-needed basis.

For those who had applied for release time grants, two-thirds complained that the cancellation of these awards had affected their projects, mostly in terms of prolonging the research and delaying the publication of results. One historian said that she/he had been unable to complete a proposed book and another claimed to have taken early retirement as the only way to fulfill obligations undertaken to publish.

It should be noted that there was some confusion about the question on release time, which asked "Did the cancellation of release time grants affect your own research project?" It was not SSHRC's policy to cancel release time grants, but rather was a decision of the history committee as a means to deal with severe shortages of funds.

Many of those who replied were critical of the "mega-project" approach to research that they felt was being encouraged through SSHRC's program. While a handful of historians wanted to see more encouragement for team research and interdisciplinary work, the majority argued that their projects and interests were not amenable to group research.

Several historians argued that the evaluation and awards process works to the disadvantage of people from smaller universities and people from outside Ontario and Québec. There was a perception that committees were generally composed of scholars from Central Canada who tended to favour their colleagues. Scholars at smaller universities felt that they were

unable to obtain supplementary funding or are unable to take time away from teaching in order to undertake research on a SSHRC grant.

There were a number of specific suggestions. Reviewers would like to be told the outcome of competitions. Results of competitions should be announced sooner (and information provided to department chairs) to facilitate departmental planning. Grants should be paid sooner to facilitate research scheduling. There should be support for M.A. level research. More should be permitted in budgets for travel and maintenance on research trips. The application forms need to be seriously rethought. SSHRC should be more active as a lobby organization in the interests of humanists and social scientists in Canada. Two historians also argued that SSHRC should consider funding Canadianists working outside Canada, otherwise those scholars might very likely drop their Canadian studies and the visibility of Canadian scholarship outside Canada would be reduced.

Generally, historians who replied to the questionnaire felt that governments are increasingly hostile to research in the humanities or to research outside the universities. They wanted more funding for individual scholars, whether associated with a university or not, and more support for the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program. They were emphatic in their opinion that SSHRC's first priority should be funding for individual projects.

Finally, it was obvious that many historians do not understand SSHRC policies and procedures very clearly, even among those who had applied for and received SSHRC grants.

While the response rate was somewhat disappointing (only about 12% of members replied), the results have already proven useful in assisting Council and the Executive in making decisions about CHA lobbying activities.

Please address your comments or questions about the questionnaire results to Kerry Abel, Department of History, Carleton University, Ottawa, K1S 5B6 (fax 613-788-2819).