The joy (and pain) of fundamental research grant applications

Daniel Lamb et Catherine Fichten
Dawson College

You think that having a good idea, knowing the literature and how to present your information in a way that grant reviewers will like is what it takes to get a fundamental research grant? Think again. What you really need to know is how to navigate your way around the alphabet soup of granting agencies, the vagaries of Web based application and curriculum vitæ forms, and a really good organizational system for passwords. And did we mention infinite patience with recalcitrant computers and Web sites? Yes, that too! In abundance.

Alphabet Soup

As a cegep researcher you have access to many fundamental research granting organizations. The key provincial organizations are listed below. We won't bother to tell you what these organizations fund — it will all be different for next year anyway. But you can apply to all of these organizations in English or French, although most will require a French title and abstract.

- Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la nature et les technologies (anciennement le Fonds FCAR) [http://www.fcar.qc.ca]

- Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (anciennement le Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale. CQRS) [http://www.msss.gouv.qc.ca/cqrs]

- FRSQ (Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec) [http://www.frsq.gouv.qc.ca]

Key federal organizations are listed below. Their names tell the tale about what types of research they fund.

- SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) / CRSH (Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada) [http://www.sshrc.ca]

- CIHR (Canadian Institutes of Health Research) / IRSC (Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada) [http://www.cihr.ca]

- NSERC (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada) / CRSNG (Conseil de recherches en sciences naturelles et en génie du Canada) [http://www.nserc.ca]

Web Based Application and Curriculum Vitæ Forms

Remember the bad old days when you used a typewriter and tried to put 10 words in a space designed for three? We sure do. Then came the improved version. You printed out the information on a computer printer and cut the words or phrases out. Then, covered in glue, tried to paste them into boxes which also did not have enough room. But this was no problem. You could reduce the font size and make the 10 words fit.

But there was a fly in the ointment. Each agency had its own forms and its own format for the same information. How many different places were there to paste "Dawson College" and your CV information? If only they would come up with a uniform format! Well, your wishes have been answered, albeit by a mischievous, sometimes malevolent genie. Enter the

Web based application and curriculum vitæ forms.

Now all of the agencies listed above allow us to fill in the boxes on line in a Web based application form. Perhaps "require" is a better word than "allow." Most agencies do not permit any alternative. You can save your information on the agency's Web site and revise it later. After entering the required information, your CV or application can be downloaded and printed as an Adobe Acrobat PDF file. In principle, such a process sounds simple. In application, there are numerous glitches and pitfalls.

Glitches and Pitfalls

Web sites crash. It's one thing for a crash to occur on a favourite home page while you are surfing. Having a site crash two days before the deadline while you still have 16 hours of work left is enough to make anyone choke on their coffee. And then there are the special little added extra hassles that organizations have been known to inflict on hapless researchers. For example, last year one of the agencies listed above decided to change the Web site address for their on line applications a week before the deadline. They did not bother to tell anyone. This made several people, including both of us, apoplectic.

Web sites are more likely to crash the closer it is to the deadline. As perfectionists and "last minute people" sign on to the system in the 11th hour in a bid to meet deadlines, Web sites get overly busy. They cannot take the high volume, and so they do what all overloaded Web sites do. Crash!!! Frantic calls and e-mail to the help desk at 4:00 in the morning do not, regrettably, do much good.

What Can Be Done

Start early. The best advice we can offer goes back to what you have been trying to drum into your students about their assignments: start early. Do not count on a time of day when there is less demand on the Web site. Everybody else has the same idea and there is no such period unless you like to work between 2:00 and 6:00 in the morning. All Web sites provide telephone and e-mail contacts for technical support. Print this information for later reference. Crashed sites rarely yield up such goodies.

Beware the box size. The problem of trying to squeeze 10 words into space that allows for three surfaces is a new guise in Web based applications. Note that although you pasted your text into a box, it is not all necessarily in there. Some forms simply cut off "excess text." How do you know that there is "excess text?" By printing out the form and finding that the information is not here. Proof carefully!

When do 750 characters not equal the space provided for 750 characters? When words wrap at the end of the line. This was a dilemma we faced last year. Certain questions required answers of up to "750 characters including spaces." However, lines of text are not perfectly square. Empty spaces caused by words wrapping at the end of a line must be taken into account. How to get around the problem? Save the text in a word processor and paste it into the Web based box. Preview or print the form and hope all the words fit. If the passage is incomplete, calculate how many characters are cut off and... rewrite, being more succinct. This can take two or three tries and is good nocturnal exercise for the already stressed researcher.

Save and preview or print often. This is easier said than done. Completed PDF forms can be viewed and printed using Adobe Acrobat. A feature of Adobe products is Web browser integration to allow Adobe to work within Netscape or Explorer to show PDF files while you are on line. This can cause difficulties because in some cases the application form will not be loaded, giving the impression the Web site has crashed. For best results, shut off Web browser integration in Adobe (go to File | Preferences | Options and uncheck Web Browser Integration). This forces the PDF form to be downloaded. Once on your computer, the PDF form can be viewed and printed in Adobe.

Do not despair. You are not alone. The technology is evolving and improving. The three provincial agencies all use a similar format and share their data base. So you generally have to input information only once, even if you are applying to more than one agency.

And, best of all, if you did not make it for this year's deadline, your information stays saved on the agency's server. You can reuse it next year.

Good luck and happy hunting and pecking!

Demande de la Fédération des cégeps

À la suite d'une rencontre tenue en début d'automne entre la Fédération des cégeps et le Comité permanent des présidents-directeurs généraux des fonds de recherche du Québec, le Service conseil et recherche de la Fédération des cégeps a fait parvenir à chaque direction des études un questionnaire portant sur les plans de développement de la recherche des collèges ou les préoccupations de ces derniers à cet égard. Dans ce questionnaire, chaque collège est invité à présenter une brève description de son plan de développement de la recherche s'il en possède un, ou la liste des activités de recherche prévues dans son plan de développement général ainsi que celle de ses projets de recherche en cours, et finalement, la liste des publications de ses chercheuses et chercheurs dans le cadre d'une recherche subventionnée. Si vous faites de la recherche, la direction des études de votre collège a besoin de vous pour que soit mieux appréciée la réalité de la recherche collégiale!

❖

PSCCC

L'édition du guide d'attribution des subventions du programme Soutien aux chercheurs et aux chercheuses du collégial (PSCCC) pour 2001-2002 est disponible à l'adresse électronique suivante : [http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/college]

Outre les renseignements généraux et les conditions d'admissibilité, ce document contient tous les formulaires requis pour présenter, en tout temps, une demande de subvention au cours de l'année 2001-2002.

Comme par le passé, le PSCCC favorise la publication d'articles scientifiques et la présentation de communications scientifiques par les chercheuses et les chercheurs financés par un organisme subventionnaire. À titre d'exemple, l'an dernier, le PSCCC a accordé 15 subventions à l'une ou à l'autre de ces fins. La liste complète des personnes en ayant profité figure dans le numéro d'octobre du *Bulletin*, vol. 15, n° 1.