

Research News

umanitoba.ca/research

SSHRC awards \$1million in new funding Social sciences and humanities researchers discuss their future challenges

BY SEAN MOORE
Research Promotion

Chad Gaffield, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), visited campus last week to make a funding announcement and speak candidly about Canadian research in the social sciences and humanities.

A highlight of his October 24 visit was his announcement of \$1 million in new funding for the Centre on Aging, which was celebrating its 25th anniversary. While on campus, Gaffield also took the opportunity to speak to faculty members about the changing social science and humanities research environment.

Having seen research from both sides of the fence – he is also one of Canada's leading social historians – he shared, often bluntly, his views on the status of university research and its funding.

The key, Gaffield said, is being able to show the relevance of the research.

"We cannot expect tax payers to give us money if we cannot prove we are benefiting Canadian society."

In the morning, Gaffield spoke at the opening ceremony of the Centre on Aging's 25th anniversary conference. He told participants their research on innovative housing programs for seniors has improved the lives of many Canadians, but then he said something that made clear his theme for the day.

"We talk a lot about impact these days and I think it's important to come and see success," he said. "I think the Centre on Aging has made a real difference, but I don't have any hard evidence for this."

With that, he challenged the conference participants to provide him with data to show their successes so he could highlight them at SSHRC's thirtieth birthday in three years time.

Gaffield's point was that unlike most research in the applied sciences or health sciences, work in the social sciences and humanities can be hard to quantify and does not have easily measured impacts.

There are no patents to track and the kind of groundbreaking discoveries that appeal to today's media are rare. What's more, Gaffield repeatedly said throughout the day, the humanities seem to have "shot themselves in the foot" by refusing to accept impact-evaluations of their work.

At a faculty luncheon, Gaffield stressed this point again.

"We have no evidence – none – about what impact our research has made," he said. "That's a scary thing. We've lost millions in potential funding because we lack evidence showing our work is relevant."

So how can things be improved? Simply put: gather the data.

An easy starting point, Gaffield said, would be to conceptualize



Photo by Sean Moore

Dr. Chad Gaffield, the president of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, recently announced \$1 million in new funding for the Centre on Aging, which is investigating ways to make communities more age-friendly.

humanities work by showing the talent it produces.

Every year, universities produce graduates trained in the social sciences and humanities, and even though they may not pursue academic careers, they make valuable contributions to Canadian society.

By keeping track of graduates, a discipline can collect "where-are-they-now" data and when need be, show the public how many successful societal leaders it has produced.

And once the data is there, Gaffield noted, most politicians should be open to it because they are, after all, humanities graduates. "So we have got to be able to relate to them. We trained them."

The message he wants to relay is that the research being done by SSHRC's grant recipients is of very high quality and relevance. And the work being done by researchers at the University of Manitoba, he added, is a perfect example of this.

That aforementioned \$1 million in funding Gaffield announced was part of SSHRC's Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) program. Across Canada, 13 CURA projects were funded, but three of those were from Manitoba.

"Manitoba's participation in three of 13 is unprecedented and the adjudication is not done to balance things out, it's decided by quality."

Shortly after he said that, Gaffield left the faculty luncheon to hold an open-forum meeting with researchers that focused on SSHRC's action plan

for the future.

The 90-minute meeting sparked some lively debate about both the current research climate in the social sciences and humanities and how that might change in the coming years.

One relatively heated exchange focused on proving relevance.

Why, one academic asked, are politicians choosing what research is relevant when academia is equipped to decide such matters? Surely, she noted, scholars and their peers can decide what is, or is not, important.

Gaffield responded that elected officials represent tax payers and it's tax payers who fund the research. So to ensure future funding, researchers must better convey the importance and relevance of their work to the public, which, judging by news headlines, should not pose difficulties.

If you look at the front page of any newspaper, most stories, if not all, have a connection to the social sciences and humanities.

Gaffield stressed that most people take this for granted, and often underestimate the value and importance of research in these fields.

As an example, he noted that if you had asked the average person on September 10th, 2001, whether or not it was valuable in North America to study 15th century Middle Eastern politics, most people would have answered "no."

Of course, the following day, you would hear a different response.



Photo by Sean Moore

Dr. Chad Gaffield held an open-forum meeting with a variety of faculty members to discuss the future of social research and its funding.

Bringing Research To Life

Research News is Published
by the Office of the Vice-President (Research)
Comments, submissions and event listings to:
kim_stefaniuk@umanitoba.ca
Phone: (204) 474-9020 Fax (204) 261-3475