

# EVALUATION REPORT: SPARC-PDFO INTERNAL REVIEW TRAINING PROGRAM (CIHR PROJECT GRANT)

Two evaluation surveys were distributed among the participants of SPARC's Internal Review process to (i) determine the **appropriateness and effectiveness** of the pilot training program and (ii) assess the **quality and relevance** of the feedback provided by internal reviewers. The comments summarized below serve to provide feedback to the participants of the training program and to assess the overall value of the pilot program to determine if the second phase of the pilot (Mentor Cohort) should proceed.

## Key Findings:

- Participants (Postdoctoral Fellows) were very satisfied with the scope, content and delivery of the pilot program. Participants estimated that they spent ≈25 hours to complete the training program over a two-week period. All respondents were enthusiastic to participate in the next iteration of the program to train and mentor the next cohort of internal reviewers.
  - Key outcomes for participating in the program included the development of grantsmanship skills and gaining an in-depth understanding of the inner workings of a review panel.
  - The written and verbal feedback provided was positively received by faculty participants and was viewed as relevant, objective and of high-quality.
  - The mock, panel review meeting was identified as a unique strength of the program which served a dual purpose to operationalize the learnings of the training program and ensure quality assurance of the reviewer feedback.
  - Respondents suggested that more proposals should be reviewed by the panel and that reviewers should have the opportunity to participate in the applicant face-to-face meeting.
  - No negative, inadequate or impractical elements were identified by the participants suggesting that the pilot program was practical and positively received.
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## Survey Summary

### Survey 1: PDF Participants

The six-question survey summarized below was completed by four of the five post-doctoral fellows admitted to the pilot training program. Participants were asked to reflect on the training materials, activities and their overall experience in the program three months after the start of the program.

#### 1. Participant expectations

As described on [SPARC's website](#) and outlined in the original email invitation sent to prospective reviewers, the expected benefits of participating in the pilot training program were the development of grantsmanship skills, gaining peer review experience and new networking opportunities. Overall, survey respondents agreed that their expectations of the program had been met and they expressed a high-level of satisfaction with the program. Importantly, respondents were unanimous in their interest to return as a mentor and lead a training session for the next cohort of the training program.

#### 2. Training sessions

Participants were highly satisfied with the scope, content and delivery of the three mandatory training sessions and highlighted the small group dynamic, facilitated discussion and the mock panel review meeting as key strengths of the program.

### **3. Training outcomes**

Collectively, respondents identified grantsmanship and effective grant writing skills as the key takeaways from the program. As reviewers, participants gained a deep appreciation for clearly addressing the competition adjudication criteria (including sex and gender considerations) and optimizing the use of figures, appendix and formatting to highlight key concepts. Participants also valued the knowledge gained in understanding the inner workings of a review panel, and recognized the value of the feedback generated through internal review.

Overall, participants estimated that they invested 25 hours ( $\pm 4.0$ h) to complete the two-week program (10h training sessions + 15h take-home assignments). This estimate is in-line with SPARC's initial assessment that 28 hours would be required to complete the full training program (17h take-home assignments).

### **4. Areas for improvement**

Participants identified a need to review a greater number of proposals to develop a broader view/ sense for assessing the 'appropriateness' of project scope, level of ambitiousness and outcome measures. Respondents also indicated that all participants should have the opportunity to participate in the follow-up, in-person applicant review meeting. Lastly, it was recommended that the evaluations be carried-out without delay, following the applicant review meeting.

## **Survey 2: Faculty & SPARC Participants**

The four-question survey summarized below was completed by two faculty participants and two SPARC staff members. Participants were asked to reflect on the written feedback and the discussion that took place at the face-to-face meeting.

### **1. Participant expectations**

Faculty participants noted that the quality of the feedback was good and that the [Internal Review process](#) had met their expectations. SPARC staff members were also highly satisfied with the process overall.

Respondents also noted the consistency among the reviewers in identifying common strengths and areas for improvement in the proposals. This quality indicator was evident at the mock panel review meeting and is largely reflective of the reviewers' willingness to learn and apply the knowledge gained in the training program. The reviewers mimicked the typical panel discussion process with minimal guidance from SPARC and demonstrated a willingness to compromise when discussing the proposals. Overall, the reviewers were proficient in articulating their concerns and in problem-solving/ suggesting solutions to remedy key concerns amongst each other, and with the faculty participants.

### **2. Quality of Feedback**

Overall, SPARC and the faculty participants were highly satisfied with the quality of feedback provided noting strong scores across the five dimensions of SPARC's evaluation rubric (Appropriateness, Feasibility, Credibility, Communication and Value). As mentioned, there was a high level of consistency across the reviewers in the strengths and areas for improvement identified in the proposals.

### **3. Area for improvements**

Suggestions to improve the written feedback included a comment to clearly state the rationale for the reviewer's assessment of a particular strength/ weakness, increased brevity and to strengthen comments relating to sex and/or gender considerations. Other comments suggested improving the alignment between the proposal and the reviewers' areas of expertise, reducing the turn-around time and limiting feedback to 2-3 reviewers.

## Appendix: Survey Question and Answers

### Survey 1: Internal Review Training Program – PDF Participants

#### 1. Expectations: Overall, did the training program meet your expectations\*?

- This program more than exceeded my expectations. I learned so much about the review process and saw firsthand what makes an effective grant proposal from the perspective of those reviewing.
- Yes, it was a great experience. I wasn't totally sure what to expect, or if it would be useful, but found this training to be very much so.
- The program certainly met my expectations and in fact provided me additional insights into the process which I had not anticipated
- Yes; the program met my expectations

#### 2. Training: In your opinion, what were the three most important takeaways from participating in the training program?

- Effective grant writing; how to provide constructive feedback and be willing to accept criticisms and incorporate these into future grants
- Understanding the adjudication criteria and structure the grant to meet all criteria
- Appropriate use of figures and appendix (and be conscious of the fact that material in appendix won't necessarily be reviewed)
- Getting to understand the inner workings of the peer review panel
- How valuable internal reviews are! Hope to be able to take advantage in the future!
- Appropriate formatting to highlight key concepts and improve readability
- What makes a grant proposal sink or swim
- Addressing the marking criteria of the CIHR project grant guidelines is key to success
- Sex and gender considerations are imperative for any project proposal
- I personally gained a lot of perspective in the method of thought and reviewing from other reviewers

#### 2b. Training: How long did it take you to complete the following take-home assignments?

Questions	n/a	<1h	2-4h	4-6h	6-8h	>8h	Avg	Tot
<b>Total</b>								<b>25h</b>
<b>1.0. Orientation Meeting (3h)</b>							3h	<b>9h</b>
1.1. Review IR training materials & complete CIHR's Peer Review Learning Modules	1	2	1			3h		
1.2. Complete the mock proposal review exercise			4			3h		
<b>2.0. Debrief Meeting (2h)</b>							2h	<b>4h</b>
2.1. Review SPARC case study materials (i.e. from draft proposal to funded grant)	2	2				2h		
<b>3.0. Mock Peer Review Panel (PRC) Meeting (2h)</b>							2h	<b>8h</b>
3.1. Complete the review of the two assigned proposals			2		2	5h		
3.2. Revise & submit final IR written feedback (following the mock PRC)	3	1				1h		
<b>4.0. Face-to-face (f2f) Internal Review Meeting (2h)</b>							2h	<b>2.5h</b>
4.1. Prepare notes & materials for the face-to-face IR meeting with the applicants	2	2				0.5h		
<b>5.0. Other Activities (e.g. preparation time)</b>	1	3					0.5h	<b>0.5h</b>
<b>6.0. Networking Luncheon (1h)</b>							1h	<b>1h</b>

#### 3. Gaps & Improvements: Are there any gaps or areas for improvement?

- A larger number of drafts for the panel to review would help to get a better scope of proposals
- It would be great to have a wider range of grants to work from so that more PDFs could be involved in face to face meetings to go over feedback.

\*It is expected that PDFs who complete the program will gain grantsmanship skills, peer-review experience, and networking opportunities.

- It was a very well designed workshop! I really enjoyed the mock panel, as well as the small group dynamics and discussions.
- It would also be nice if everyone could experience the face to face portion at the end, even if it's just as kind of background observers

#### 4. Future: How can the pilot program evolve to better meet the needs of PDFs and/or faculty participants?

- It would be useful to provide this evaluation feedback shortly after the final session with the applicants.
- My only suggestion is to have more reviews that way PDFs can get more exposure and engage in more F2F meetings. I understand however that is not controlled by the SPARC office and as such is not a direct criticism.

#### 5. Please rate the following sessions:

Questions		: ) :   : ( n/a
<b>1.0. Overall Program Satisfaction</b>		<b>4</b>
<b>2.0. 3h Orientation Meeting (Jul 27)</b>	<b>2.0 Overall Satisfaction</b>	<b>4</b>
	2.1. Goals of the Training Program	4
	2.2. Basics & Principles of Peer Review	4
	2.3. CIHR Peer Review Committees (Membership - Process: Submission to Decision - Resources)	4
	2.4. Internal Review (Managing Conflict of Interest - Evaluation Rubric - CIHR Project Grant program - SPARC Internal Review Process)	4
	2.5. Mock Review Exercise (Overview of the Structured Reviewer Worksheet)	4
<b>3.0. 2h Debrief Meeting (Aug 1)</b>	<b>3.0 Overall Satisfaction</b>	<b>4</b>
	3.1. Debrief: Discussion of the Mock Internal Review Exercise (Your Impressions - Original Review Feedback - Response to Previous Reviews - Discussion with Dr. Anderl)	4
	3.2. Debrief: Case Study (Internal Review Feedback - Editorial Review Feedback - Successful Submission)	4
	3.3. Debrief: Next Steps (Reviewer Assignments - Format: Mock CIHR Panel Review Committee Meeting)	4
<b>4.0. 2h Mock PRC Meeting (Aug 8)</b>	<b>4.0 Overall Satisfaction</b>	<b>4</b>
	4.1. Lottery System/ Determination of PRC Roles	4
	4.2. Review of Proposals	4
<b>5.0. Mentorship</b>	5.0. Would you return as a mentor to help train the next internal reviewer cohort?	4

#### 6. General Comments: For training and learning purposes, do you have any comments you wish to make on the training program?

- This was a fantastic experience and I believe that it is a valuable program for PDFs at UBC. I am glad that I was selected to participate and would gladly participate again!
- The SPARC office has made this pilot training program very comprehensive and a good starting point for PDFs to begin understanding the review process and getting experience in grantsmanship
- I thought in the end this was a very valuable opportunity for the trainees and really appreciate the time and efforts of the SPARC staff! I'd be happy to help out in the future to continue making this program successful.

## Survey 2: Internal Review Training Program – Faculty & SPARC Participants

### 1. Expectations: Overall, did the feedback meet your expectations\*?

- Yes; the feedback followed the prompts of the assessment form and specifically addressed the adjudication criteria, which was helpful to assess the strengths/weakness of the proposed study
- Feedback was quite good overall
- Overall the written feedback was fairly consistent in identifying strengths and common issues among the reviewers, this was also evident at the review meeting

### 2. Please rate the feedback provided in general terms:

Questions	:)	:	:(
<b>Appropriateness:</b> Did the feedback specifically address the adjudication criteria and aid to strengthen the proposal?	4		
<b>Feasibility:</b> Was the feedback practical and addressable within the competition time constraints.	4		
<b>Credibility:</b> Was the feedback well described, justified and contain suggestions to address the identified concerns?	3	1	
<b>Communication:</b> Was the feedback written in clear, understandable and respectful language?	2	2	
<b>Value:</b> Did the feedback result in careful reconsideration, clarification or changes to the proposal?	4		
<b>Overall:</b> Were you satisfied with the feedback received?	4		

### 3. Gaps & Improvements: Are there any areas for improvement?

- Feedback should include focused examples of where specific changes could occur
- Feedback can be more succinct/ direct
- The reviewers' expertise did not exactly match the area of research
- Rationale behind the comments is important in order to understand context and the reviewer's perspective
- 2-3 reviewers per proposals is probably optimal
- Assessment of the sex/ gender considerations were minimal and could be improved
- Can the feedback be provided sooner?

### 4. General Comments: For training and learning purposes, do you have any comments you wish to make to the internal reviewers?

- PDFs were engaged and willing to a) learn and b) put the work in to read documentation, do mock reviews, discuss their reviews.
- The reviewers did a formidable job articulating their concerns with the proposal and provided good suggestions on how to remedy these concerns.
- PDFs showed a willingness to compromise – they started with quite different ratings but listened to each other's rationale and adjusted their preliminary ratings accordingly, this was very impressive.
- The PDFs who attended the research feedback meeting had a very different experience to the mock review panel. Giving feedback face-to-face is difficult to do, and having to stand your ground without becoming confrontational is also hard to do. They conducted themselves commendably.
- In my opinion, the feedback was equivalent in quality to those of faculty peers.
- I hope they remain engaged in the program and are willing to mentor the next group of PDFs next year.
- Although the proposals did not align perfectly with the reviewers' expertise/ background, I strongly believe their collective feedback made a significant contribution in improving the competitiveness of the proposals, well done!

\*SPARC Internal Review aims to **strengthen** and **accelerate** the development of new and/ or revised grant proposals by inviting peer feedback on the **project concept** and **study design** elements. Feedback will also consider the proposal's unique value proposition and provide input on the feasibility, originality and/or urgency of the proposed research study.