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 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.

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 (±4.0h) 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 satisfactory 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 and reducing the turn-around time.