Canada Foundation for Innovation

Process Improvement Study

Summary

i THE IMPACT GROUP

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1.0 Introduction

In July 1999 the Board of Directors of the Canada Foundation for Innovation requested an independent third-party assessment of CFI's administrative processes. The third-party assessment is part of CFI's ongoing commitment to service improvement. The Board wanted to know what improvements and changes were needed for future competitions. During August, The Impact Group conducted 161 in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of institutions that had successfully or unsuccessfully participated in the first CFI competitions. The number of completed interviews was:

- Presidents (17)
- Vice Presidents Research and Liaisons (41)
- Project Leaders (83)
- Multidisciplinary Assessment Committee members (20)

Separate questionnaires were used for VPs/Liaisons, Project Leaders, and MAC members. An interview guide was designed to collect Presidents' opinions. The survey focussed on respondents' perceptions of how well CFI's administrative processes were working in 9 theme areas:

1. Communications/information (7 items)
2. Contact with CFI and the respondent's own institution (4 items)
3. The application process (10 items)
4. The project assessment process (8 items)
5. Award notification and award administration (7 items)
6. Contact handling by CFI and its staff (7 items)
7. Overall performance of CFI and respondents' institutions (15 items)
8. Overall satisfaction with CFI (7 items)
9. Suggested improvements to CFI's administrative processes (4 items)

For many of the issues, the survey invited respondents to provide information both on the incidence of problems ("Did you experience a problem with ...") and their importance ("How important or unimportant was it ..."). In most instances respondents were asked to rate issues (e.g. problem importance, satisfaction) on a 5-point scale[1]. Ratings were used to generate weighted averages. Instead of asking respondents simply to recall problems they had experienced with CFI's administrative processes (unaided recall), the survey prompted them with 42 potential problems and asked for their views on each (aided recall). This approach biases responses toward identifying problems, and readers should bear this in mind in reading the report.

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[1]Eg. "Very Important (Satisfied)", "Somewhat Important (Satisfied)", "Neither Important (Satisfied) nor Unimportant (Unsatisfied)", "Somewhat Unimportant (Dissatisfied)", "Very unimportant (Dissatisfied)".

Overall, the study found that CFI is seen to be a highly successful program, professionally managed and responsive to the needs of its stakeholder community. We believe that a combination of fine-tuning of CFI's process, together with increased familiarity with the program on the part of applicants, will improve the performance of an already successful program.

2.0 Summary of Findings

Following is a summary of the key survey findings.

2.1 Communications

A minority of survey respondents identified communications issues arising from their interaction with CFI. Chief among them were issues related to CFI's <u>program guidelines</u>[2]; principally, how clear the guidelines were, a perception that guidelines and policies were adjusted mid-stream, and how flexible CFI was in interpreting them. Respondents whose proposals were unsuccessful were far more likely to report difficulties with communications, as with many of the other CFI processes.

2.2 The Application Process

In identifying application process difficulties, respondents who experienced problems tended to cite those concerning <u>the clarity of the application process guidelines and instructions</u>, <u>understanding and usefulness of the self-assessment process</u>, and a number of issues related to CFI's <u>electronic forms on the website</u>. Only a minority of respondents reported experiencing problems with the application process.

2.3 The Project Assessment Process

Those respondents who reported difficulties with project assessment specified concerns related to <u>understanding how project assessment worked</u>, <u>the amount of feedback they received (especially for unsuccessful projects)</u>, <u>use of ProGrid</u>, and <u>whether or not Multidisciplinary Assessment Committees</u> had appropriate knowledge or expertise. Many respondents - especially those with unsuccessful projects - were concerned whether their proposals received a fair hearing and whether CFI's selection criteria were appropriate. As project assessment is directly related to the success of a proposal, it is not surprising that participants were concerned that issues related to project assessment be properly dealt with. Many respondents expressed concern about understanding how the project assessment process worked. MAC members were concerned about <u>having sufficient knowledge or expertise on their respective committee</u> to assess the proposals before them, and about the <u>use of ProGrid</u> and the project self-assessment. MAC

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[2]<u>Underlined phrases</u> refer to specific issues being considered.

members expressed a certain degree of concern over <u>CFI's guidelines and policies being adjusted mid-stream</u>.

2.4 Award Notification and Administration

Generally speaking, most respondents were satisfied with the <u>clarity of guidelines for the release of funds</u>, the <u>amount of time required to prepare a final budget</u>, and the <u>complexity of the information needed to finalize an award</u>, although a minority of respondents reported problems. <u>Finalizing contributions from funding partners</u> was deemed to be an important issue for some respondents.

2.5 Contact with CFI and Own Institution

Project Leaders and Liaisons/VPs who participated in the survey were asked about their experience in contacting their own institution and CFI. Due in large measure to CFI's policy of dealing directly with institution representatives, a minority of Project Leaders reported difficulty obtaining <u>accurate program or application information</u> from CFI. Some also reported a problem <u>obtaining accurate information from their own institution</u>, <u>knowing who to contact at their institution</u>, or <u>getting access to their main contact at their institution</u>. Liaisons and VPs, who were the official points of contact at institutions, had considerably less difficulty dealing with CFI than Project Leaders.

2.6 Contact Handling by CFI and Staff

Liaisons and VPs were highly complimentary about CFI staff. They gave them excellent grades for: <u>knowledge of programs/services</u>, <u>accessibility</u>, <u>information provided in response to issues raised</u>, <u>helpfulness</u>, <u>timeliness of response</u>, <u>follow through</u>, and <u>overall assistance provided</u>. Project Leaders were inclined to award CFI staff lower grades on these measures; however, these results are somewhat influenced by the more negative responses of unsuccessful Project Leaders[3]. MAC members gave CFI staff high marks for <u>providing help when asked</u>, <u>managing paper work efficiently</u>, and <u>keeping them informed</u>.

2.7 Overall Performance

CFI recorded very high overall performance and satisfaction ratings from its principal client groups; Liaisons, VPs, and MAC members. Survey respondents were asked to rate CFI's performance on a wide range of factors (15). According to Liaisons/VPs, CFI scored "very good" on 12 items: <u>offering relevant programs</u>, <u>providing current program information</u>, <u>selecting projects to receive funding</u>, <u>providing timely award payments</u>, <u>providing a fair and open assessment process</u>, <u>providing timely feedback on applications</u>, <u>being flexible</u>, <u>responding to suggestions</u>, <u>providing help when contacted</u>, <u>managing paperwork efficiently</u>, <u>keeping you informed</u>, and <u>consulting on programs/processes</u>. In most cases

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[3]In addition, CFI's administrative processes were not designed for direct contact with Project Leaders.

Project Leaders rated CFI less highly on these measures than their Liaison/VP colleagues, very likely reflecting their distance from CFI staff. MAC members tended to rate CFI staff most highly on the relevant measures. Project Leaders and Liaisons/VPs both expressed concern about CFI's performance in providing useful feedback on applications.

2.8 Overall Satisfaction

Liaisons and VPs were most satisfied with CFI's methods of communications, and very satisfied overall with the application process, project selection process, award administration, and with CFI's performance as a funding organization. MAC members were very satisfied with being a MAC member. Project Leaders tended to rate CFI much lower on these measures, usually declaring themselves to be "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied".

2.9 Suggested Improvements

Individuals who participated in the survey made many suggestions about how CFI could improve its processes, mostly along the lines indicated above. Top of the list were suggestions that dealt with increasing the amount of feedback about why projects were not selected. There is clearly a high demand for ongoing information about CFI's programs, and especially the "winning conditions" for individual projects. To this extent a number of individuals asked for CFI to increase the number of site visits its staff pay to institutions.

There is clearly a great deal of concern over whether the Multidisciplinary Assessment Committees have sufficient breadth and depth of expertise needed to make individual funding recommendations. Smaller institutions - and especially colleges and technical institutes - asked for greater recognition of their unique circumstances, for example in the definition of research (colleges/institutes) and in CFI's partner funding requirements (small, regional institutions).

Respondents asked for a simplification of the project assessment criteria used by CFI. They also asked for improvements to the online application process; for example, adapting the electronic forms to permit institutions to submit spreadsheets. Colleges and technical institutes called for forms to be adapted more to their circumstances. Some asked for the award finalization process to be simplified and for CFI to request less information for award finalization purposes. A number of respondents - especially at smaller institutions - called for continuation of under $350,000 awards. Some individuals suggested that competition deadlines should be moved to coincide with less busy times of the academic calendar.

3.0 Conclusion

CFI is a new organization that has designed and implemented a novel research infrastructure funding mechanism in a comparatively short time. CFI's programs differ fundamentally from those of traditional research funding bodies[4] in that they provide support to institutions[5] rather than to individuals. As such,

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[4]Such as NSERC, SSHRC, and MRC

CFI demands a level of involvement of partner institutions (in cooperation with third-party supporters) that is above and beyond that of most other funding organizations. Instead of applying directly to CFI, Project Leaders apply through their institutions.

In our opinion, many of the difficulties experienced - and expressed - by the individuals we surveyed, can be attributed to the novelty of CFI's funding requirements, and applicants' unfamiliarity with the different requirements of CFI's programs. CF's funding requirements differ substantially from those that most applicants are accustomed to. This would account for the prevalence of reported problems related to understanding how the project assessment worked, clarity of the program guidelines, and policy/program guide and other information on the website, which were some of the most typical problems experienced by applicants. Paradoxically, CFI's willingness to modify its program guidelines based on lessons learned, is reflected in the difficulty that some applicants had with guidelines and policies being adjusted mid-stream.

CFI utilized a multidisciplinary project assessment (MAC) process that involved disciplinary specialists and non-specialists. Many applicants found this to be a departure from the peer-review assessments to which they are accustomed, and expressed concern over the ability of the MACs to properly assess their projects (understanding how the project assessment worked). Some MAC members expressed a similar concern. However, this in itself does not argue against the use of MACs, but rather for ensuring that assessment committees have access to sufficient expertise to deal with all proposals. Project assessment also relied on a self-assessment by applicants, and a number of them also expressed difficulty understanding how the self-assessment worked or with the usefulness of the self-assessment.

CFI's application process relied on a web-based submission mechanism, and this apparently caused difficulties for some applicants, who cited problems with the amount of space on the application form, and completing the application online. Some applicants referred to technical limitations of the electronic forms[6], and others to the process itself.

Discussions with institutions indicated that presidents of colleges and technical institutes would prefer to have their own application form, customized to their circumstances (e.g. applied versus basic research).

A source of considerable difficulty for applicants is the perceived level of project assessment feedback provided. Understandably, unsuccessful and (to a lesser extent) successful applicants both wanted more feedback about the reasons for their success or lack of it. The level of effort required to fashion a complex CFI application is greater than for most other grant applications, and applicants are hoping for a correspondingly more in-depth explanation of outcomes. It may be that some applicants would like CFI to provide what amounts to a recipe for success.

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[5]Universities, hospitals, colleges, technical institutes, and non-profit organizations.

[6]For example difficulties in using scientific nomenclature.

Successful applicants are concerned about what they sometimes perceive to be unexplained reductions in their requested budgets; <u>amount of funding/aspects of funding decisions for awards</u>. They would like more recognition of the inter-dependency of funding sources prior to budget reductions, perhaps through a more detailed financial section in the CFI application form to explain the make-up of their financial support and the inter-dependencies of funding.

Individuals more closely associated with CFI's operations - Institutional Liaisons, Vice Presidents and Presidents - reported good experiences with CFI and gave good grades to the various processes. Presidents were especially glowing in their comments, and often volunteered that CFI's processes, staff, executives and programs were first-rate.

As a group, Project Leaders were notably less enthusiastic overall. In part, this perhaps reflects the "all-or-none" nature of the competition process from the Project Leader's standpoint. It also reflects CFI's decision to work through Institutional Liaisons rather than individual project proponents; clearly Project Leaders were not accustomed to working through their institution's Liaison, and not having direct communication with CFI. Finally, it was Project Leaders who bore the brunt of the proposal development responsibility and who had most to learn about CFI's novel philosophy and mechanisms.

The survey findings indicate that according to many of those surveyed, CFI has not yet differentiated itself from other research funding organizations. Most survey respondents tended to rate CFI neither better nor worse than other funding agencies. However, Presidents and Liaisons clearly feel that CFI fulfills an important and unique role in the research infrastructure funding system. Many of the Presidents praised the role that CFI plays in attracting and retaining top talent and in addressing pent-up demand for research infrastructure.

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