



Building a healthy Saskatchewan through health research

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SHRF Research Funding Peer-Review Committee Guidelines

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Table of Contents

<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>i</i>
1. Overview of Programs and Peer Review	1
1.1 Purpose of Research Funding Programs	1
1.2 Peer Review for Research Funding Applications	1
2. Roles and Committee Membership	2
2.1 General	2
2.2 Review Committee Chair	3
2.3 Review Committee Members	3
2.4 Funding Programs Manager	4
3. Review Procedures	5
3.1 Confidentiality	5
3.2 Conflict of Interest	5
3.3 Eligibility Decisions	5
3.4 Assigning Reviewers	6
3.5 Review Materials	6
3.6 Review Criteria & Scoring	6
3.7 Review Meeting	7
4. Funding Decisions and Announcements	8
4.1 Board Decision	8
4.2 Informing Applicants	9
4.3 Announcing Results	9

1. Overview of Programs and Peer Review

1.1 Purpose of Research Funding Programs

- 1.1.1 SHRF's grants and awards programs are key tools for achieving a legislative mandate to encourage, facilitate, and disseminate health research in Saskatchewan in a strategic way to benefit the people of Saskatchewan (*The SHRF Act, 2002*).
- 1.1.2 For program purposes, SHRF defines health research broadly to include: biomedical research; clinical research in a wide range of health disciplines; health services and systems research; and research into the social, cultural and environmental determinants of health.
- 1.1.3 Within the broad scope of health research outlined above, SHRF's funding role is largely developmental. Its funding programs aim to build health research capacity and foster research of particular relevance to Saskatchewan.
- 1.1.4 Current priorities and programs are outlined in detail in our *Awards Guide* and on our website: www.shrf.ca under Funding.
- 1.1.5 Saskatchewan's *Health Research Strategy* was launched in July 2004 by the Minister of Health and this 10-year blueprint is designed for all members of our research community to focus research energies on areas of particular importance to our province. SHRF's funding programs have been aligned with the strategic themes and priority areas outlined in the Strategy and, therefore, placing more emphasis on research activities that address:
 - Health needs of specific populations, with emphasis on Aboriginal people and seniors;
 - Health systems and policy research, with emphasis on: health human resources; quality improvement; health service delivery in primary care and mental health; and rural and remote health service delivery;
 - Determinants of health status, including early childhood development and the prevention and underlying causes of chronic and lifestyle-related disease (particularly diabetes, obesity and smoking);
 - Public health, including infectious disease, water safety, and food safety; and
 - Synchrotron-based health research.

1.2 Peer Review for Research Funding Applications

- 1.2.1 All applications to SHRF research funding competitions are adjudicated according to principles of peer review. Review committees, made up of active researchers and health professionals, play a central role in that process.

- 1.2.2 Review committees evaluate applications according to scientific standards and SHRF-specified criteria and recommend meritorious applications to the SHRF Board for funding.
- 1.2.3 Review committees also play an important role in providing feedback to SHRF about procedures, policies, and programs and about trends in the health research community.
- 1.2.4 Currently, SHRF has four standing review committees, described below. Other committees are formed as the need arises.
 - a) Biomedical Establishment Grant Review Committee: adjudicates applications for Establishment Grants whose subject matter lies in the biomedical sciences.
 - b) Socio-Health, Systems, and Clinical Grants & Awards Review Committee: adjudicates applications for both Establishment Grants and Research Fellowships in the areas of the social, cultural and environmental determinants of health, clinical, and health services and systems research.
 - c) Biomedical Personnel Awards Review Committee: adjudicates applications for Research Fellowships in the biomedical sciences.
 - d) Collaborative Grants and Awards Review Committee: adjudicates applications for Health Research Group Grants and Saskatchewan Research Chairs Awards, in any area(s) of health research (basic biomedical, clinical, health systems and policy, and/or the social, cultural and environmental determinants of population health).

2. Roles and Committee Membership

2.1 General

- 2.1.1 Each review committee consists of a chairperson and up to eleven other members.
- 2.1.2 Review committee members are selected to achieve a range of expertise and experience in relevant fields; geographic representation; and reasonable gender balance.
- 2.1.3 Review committee meetings are called by the Chair, with assistance from the SHRF office. A quorum consists of the Chair plus 50 percent plus one of the other members.
- 2.1.4 The Funding Programs Manager provides administrative support to all peer-review committees.

2.2 Review Committee Chair

- 2.2.1 The Chair is a respected researcher with experience relevant to the adjudication area.
- 2.2.2 The Chair is appointed by SHRF's Chief Executive Officer (CEO), in consultation with the Funding Programs Manager, normally for a term of up to three years, renewable.
- 2.2.3 Duties of the Chair include the following:
- a) select reviewers for each application, with the Funding Programs Manager;
 - b) chair review committee meetings so as to ensure reviews are thorough, fair, consistent, confidential, and take into consideration all relevant criteria and standards;
 - c) vote to break a tie in the final rank ordering, should that become necessary; and
 - d) advise the Funding Programs Manager on issues of eligibility, appeals, and any other major issues that may arise with respect to individual applications or awards.

2.3 Review Committee Members

- 2.3.1 Review committee members are respected researchers or other professionals with expertise relevant to the areas of review and are not members of the SHRF Board or staff.
- 2.3.2 Members are appointed by the CEO, on the advice of the Chair and the Funding Programs Manager, normally for a term of three years. The CEO may make appointments for one or two years to ensure orderly committee turnover and inclusion of appropriate expertise.
- 2.3.3 Duties of the members include the following:
- a) review assigned applications according to scientific and ethical standards and to SHRF's stated criteria;
 - b) provide SHRF with constructive reviews; *Please note that reviews are shared with applicants (anonymously) and should provide applicants with constructive feedback that can that be used to improve future submissions, any wording that may be construed as personal, derogatory or offensive should be avoided.*
 - c) read all applications in the competition so they can participate in the general discussion and scoring of all proposals;
 - d) participate in a review committee meeting to discuss, rate and rank all applications in the competition; and
 - e) offer feedback to SHRF about the process and the program.

If a committee member wants to provide additional information about a candidate or a candidate's claims in addition to what is presented in an application (positive or negative), this information must be vetted through the committee chair prior to the review meeting. Any such information not vetted through the chair will not be eligible for discussion during the review process.

- 2.3.4 Members agree to undertake their role in good faith and abide by accepted standards of peer review and by other criteria and expectations prescribed by SHRF. They sign a written agreement to this effect.

2.4 Funding Programs Manager

2.4.1 The Funding Programs Manager is a staff member responsible for administering SHRF's research funding programs according to policies set by the SHRF Board and the CEO. This includes evaluating processes and outcomes of the funding programs.

2.4.2 Specific duties of the Funding Programs Manager related to the peer-review committee process include the following:

- a) with input from the Chair, suggest review committee members for appointment by the CEO;
- b) assist the Chair in selecting lead reviewers for each application from among review committee members;
- c) assist the Chair in selecting external reviewers from outside Saskatchewan, as required;
- d) ensure committee members receive materials necessary to carry out a thorough and confidential review;
- e) ensure that review materials are handled and distributed in a confidential manner;
- f) advise the Chair and review committee members on points of procedure, eligibility, program requirements, and other related administrative matters; and
- g) respond, in consultation with the Chair and with the CEO, as needed, to questions of eligibility, appeals, and any other major issues that may arise with respect to individual applications or awards.

2.4.3 The Funding Programs Manager is supported in this work by the Administrative Assistant for Research Funding.

3. Review Procedures

3.1 Confidentiality

- 3.1.1 Confidentiality is vital to maintaining the credibility of the adjudication process. All information in the applications, all review comments and discussions, and all scores and rankings will be kept confidential by the Chair, committee members, external reviewers, and staff.
- 3.1.2 Committee members must not discuss individual applications, reviews, or rankings with anyone not formally involved in the process. They will refer any comments or questions from colleagues and others about the review process to the Funding Programs Manager.

3.2 Conflict of Interest

- 3.2.1 A conflict of interest exists when a committee member or the chair has collaborated with the applicant in the last five years, is from the same department and/or research group as the applicant, is in a close personal relationship to the applicant, or has other connections with the applicant creating an interest in the outcome of the review.
- 3.2.2 Committee members in a conflict-of-interest with respect to any applicant or co-applicant must not participate in any way in the evaluation of that person's proposal. The member must declare the conflict and leave the room during that review, must not score the application, and will refrain from participating in discussions about the application.
- 3.2.3 Any committee member may identify a potential conflict of interest of another committee member, and the Chair will decide whether a conflict exists. Decisions by the Chair are final.
- 3.2.4 When the Chair is in conflict of interest with respect to an application, he/she will leave the room and the Funding Programs Manager or committee member designate will take the chair for that review.

3.3 Eligibility Decisions

- 3.3.1 Immediately after the application deadline, the Funding Programs Manager screens all applications for completeness and eligibility, according to program criteria. The Funding Programs Manager also screens applicants' declaration of priority area fit and indicates this assessment to the review committee. If a committee member questions the accuracy of SHRF's assessment of the priority area fit, it should be raised during the review discussion.

3.3.2 The Funding Programs Manager may take steps to verify applicants' qualifications for eligibility purposes and may seek the advice of the Chair, committee members, or the CEO, as needed.

3.3.3 The Funding Programs Manager makes the final ruling on eligibility issues.

3.4 Assigning Reviewers

3.4.1 The Chair and the Funding Programs Manager assign each application to two committee members, known as lead reviewers, for in-depth review to lead the committee's evaluation of the application.

3.4.2 For each Establishment Grant, two external reviewers are also recruited from outside the province. These reviewers complete their evaluations and return them to the Funding Programs Manager, who provides committee members with copies.

3.5 Review Materials

3.5.1 The Funding Programs Manager sends review materials to committee members within two to three weeks of the application deadline. These materials include: copies of all applications in the competition; a master list of applications showing lead review assignments; review forms for each lead review assignment; a list of committee members; the current *Awards Guide*; and a copy of these review committee guidelines.

3.5.2 Electronic copies of the evaluation forms are available at www.shrf.ca under Peer Review and in the Library under Forms.

3.5.3 Copies of other relevant materials that may arrive at the SHRF office later are sent to the committee about one week before the review meeting.

3.5.4 Where applicable, the Funding Programs Manager sends copies of external reviewers' evaluations to committee members before the review meeting whenever possible. Late arrivals are made available on review meeting day.

3.6 Review Criteria & Scoring

3.6.1 Committee members shall follow scientific standards relevant to the field of study and consider additional criteria prescribed by SHRF.

3.6.2 Reviewers shall specifically consider the criteria below when assessing applications:

- a) fit with the purpose and requirements of the funding program, as described in SHRF program materials;
- b) importance and originality of the proposed research;
- c) quality and feasibility of the research design;
- d) suitability of the research environment;

- e) potential of the applicant(s) to carry out the work;
- f) general soundness of the overall research plan;
- g) appropriateness of the budget; and
- h) adherence to principles of ethical research.

3.6.3 Reviewers shall consider institutional support for Research Groups holistically. A commitment of cash to a group by the university is not a required part of an application, but may be part of the support package that the applicant chooses to put together in support of their application as a whole. Cash is not viewed preferentially by SHRF in comparison with other forms of institutional support, such as space or personnel.

3.6.4 Because the Establishment Grant program is intended to support new faculty in their first appointment, and also to recruit established faculty from outside Saskatchewan, ratings for such diverse applicants should therefore take into account applicants' previous experience and career trajectory.

3.6.5 The Funding Programs Manager provides committee members with a review form to guide their assessment.

3.6.6 Reviewers will assign a score to each application that reflects their assessment of its quality and merit for funding, using the scale below. SHRF is committed to excellence and will fund only proposals that achieve an overall committee rating of 3.5 or higher, indicating very good to outstanding research.

Rating Scale:	
4.5 - 4.9	outstanding: highest funding priority
4.0 - 4.4	excellent: very high funding priority
3.5 - 3.9	very good: high priority; should be funded
3.0 - 3.4	good: acceptable, but low priority
2.5 - 2.9	fair: not acceptable for funding but shows promise
2.0 - 2.4	poor: needs major revision
<2.0	seriously flawed

3.7 Review Meeting

3.7.1 The review committee meets to discuss and rate all applications and indicate to the Board which applications are worthy of funding, according to stated evaluation criteria.

3.7.2 The Chair and the Funding Programs Manager review procedures and update the committee on any outstanding matters from the previous year's meeting.

3.7.3 The review process itself entails the following steps:

- The two lead reviewers begin the review by both announcing their initial scores for the application. If both announced scores are **2.5** or lower, the application is not considered further, unless a committee member requests it.
- The first lead reviewer presents his/her assessment verbally and summarizes the external assessments. The second lead reviewer need not provide the same level of detail as the first but should confirm areas of general agreement and explain where there are differences of opinion. General discussion of the whole committee follows.
- Review committees may recommend a grant budget reduction based on the fit between a proposed budget and proposed activities. By ensuring amounts recommended are consistent with the cost to undertake the proposed activities, peer reviewers maximize the use of funding. Reviewers may not reduce a salary award.
- The committee confirms, or discusses and changes, the priority area designation.
- After general discussion, including budget and priority area fit, the two lead reviewers agree on a single consensus score. If the lead reviewers are unable to reach a consensus score, the average of their originally announced scores is used.
- All committee members, including the two lead reviewers, then assign their own individual confidential ratings within +/- 0.5 of the consensus rating, using their individual scoring sheets. For example, with a consensus rating of 3.3, scores could range from 2.8 to 3.8.

3.7.4 After the committee has reviewed all applications, the Funding Programs Manager averages committee members' ratings to produce a final score for each application. The resulting rank-ordered lists constitute the committee's recommendations to the Board.

3.7.5 After the review is complete, the Chair will invite committee members to offer feedback about review procedures and materials, program criteria, and other matters that may be helpful to SHRF's research funding mandate.

4. Funding Decisions and Announcements

4.1 Board Decision

The SHRF Board reviews the committee's recommendations and, after ensuring that due process has been followed, approves funding for as many grants/awards as possible given available resources.

4.2 Informing Applicants

- 4.2.1 All applicants are informed of their outcome in writing within one working day of the Board decision. No results are given by telephone.
- 4.2.2 Feedback to applicants includes their final score (if 3.0 or higher) and a copy of reviewers' comments, without reviewers' names and scores, which offer constructive comments and may be helpful to the applicant.

4.3 Announcing Results

- 4.3.1 A list of successful applicants receiving an offer from SHRF is posted at www.shrf.ca under Funding/ Recipients. Using the Advanced Search function, recipients from a specific program and competition year can be viewed.
- 4.3.2 SHRF may prepare a media release and take other steps to announce competition results and promote research it supports.