

## **The nature and implications of the growing importance of research grants to Canadian universities and academics**

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes a significant but virtually unexplored recent development within Canadian higher education, namely the growing importance of research grants to universities and academics. It addresses three main questions. First, the paper examines why and how research grants are becoming more important to Canadian universities and academics, focusing in particular on the role played by federal higher education policy. Next, it explores how the growing importance of research grants is transforming relations between and among the key players in Canadian higher education and academic research, including university administrators, academics, government, and the broader community. The paper's final section takes up some of the actual and potential implications of these changes and raises concerns about detrimental effects on Canada's universities and citizens. Prospects and possibilities for reform are also addressed.

**Keywords:** academic work, Canadian higher education, Canadian university research, higher education policy, research grants

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on a recent development within Canadian universities which, though significant and consequential, has received little scholarly attention. This development is the growing importance of research grants to Canadian universities and academics. While research grants have always been important, particularly to academics, this paper argues that grants are becoming more important for new reasons and in different ways, and that this is having, and will have, some potentially dramatic effects on the social relations of Canadian higher education and academic research. In turn, these effects have implications for the nature and quality of Canada's universities and their social contribution which academics, policy-makers, and the general public would do well to consider sooner rather than later.

Before discussing the growing importance of research grants, some words about the current state of research on this issue are in order.

Although research grants are clearly a matter of great concern to those within Canadian universities, they do not appear to be of particular concern to those who study Canadian higher education. Extensive database searching yielded no academic books or articles that focused on this issue in its own right within the English Canadian context. Rather, academic grantsmanship tended to be subsumed under or conflated with more general issues such as corporatization, commercialization, and ongoing changes in university funding and culture, and was thus given short shrift<sup>1</sup> (see, for example, Turk 2000; Chan and Fisher 2003; Reimer 2004). From the perspective of this paper's approach and methodology, the paucity of existing research is not a serious problem. Indeed, when tracking changes in social relations, other sources such as interviews, documentary analysis, and participant observation often yield superior results to literature reviews. However, from the perspective of the academic enterprise itself, a lack of existing research can be a serious problem, given that others' research is generally used to locate, develop, and/or legitimize one's own. I found no simple way to deal with this problem, save to make the most of the minimal available material and to offer the following analysis as a preliminary exploration of an important emergent issue. I hope the discussion will help generate a more extensive literature on this topic which may further develop the claims presented here.

This paper is organized around three main questions. The first section attempts to answer why, and especially how, research grants are becoming more important to Canadian universities and academics. The second section explores how the growing importance of grants is helping transform the social relations of Canadian higher education and academic research. The third section looks at some of the main implications that flow from the analysis in the previous section. Strategies for change are briefly alluded to in the paper's conclusion.

### **The growing importance of research grants to Canadian universities and academics**

Approve of it or not, most academics and university administrators (and all whom I interviewed) would concede that the importance of getting research grants is on the rise in Canadian universities today. From the growing number of workshops, mentoring programs, and other initiatives designed to promote and enhance academic grantsmanship, to the ubiquitous announcements, publications, and events showcasing

departmental, faculty, and/or university research success stories, Canadian academics can hardly pass a day without some message to apply, apply, apply! Indeed, several interviewees suggested that the old imperative to ‘publish or perish’ is being displaced by another – ‘provide or perish’. Whereas it is not difficult to establish that research grants are becoming more important, it is more difficult to explain why and how this is the case. A brief discussion of recent developments in federal government policy for higher education helps provide answers to these questions.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last 20 years, the Canadian government (as most governments of Western countries (Geuna 2001)) has progressively come to see the university as a key instrument of national competitiveness in the global knowledge-based economy.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, it developed a number of policies to help universities fulfil this role, including those that promote investment in targeted research areas, the cultivation of centres of excellence, and the commercialization of academic knowledge (Industry Canada 2002). The federal government also dramatically changed the way in which it financially supports Canada’s universities. In the mid-1990s, it reduced its support for core university operations by significantly cutting transfer payments to the provinces (for postsecondary education, health, and social services) by \$10.6 billion over 4 years (Wiggins 2004, p. 100). Then, with the slaying of the deficit in 1997, it began reinvesting in universities, but this time through their research function. In addition to increasing the budgets of the national granting councils, the government created a number of new and well funded bodies and programs to further support academic research, most notably the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program, and the Indirect Costs program,<sup>4</sup> whose budgets total well over \$4 billion.

One impact of federal policy and funding is that it has increased the traditional importance of research grants to academics. Whereas researchers, particularly in the applied sciences, have always needed grants to do their research, grants may be more important than ever today due to persistent shortfalls in university operating budgets, the increased targeting of funds to selected strategic research areas, and rising research costs stemming from the growing privatization and commercialization of academic knowledge.

Beyond helping academics to do research, however, grants are taking on some other roles.<sup>5</sup> For Canadian universities, grants are becoming an increasingly important income source. While sponsored research comprised 15.6% of university revenues in 1992, it comprised 23.5% of

university revenues in 2003 (Canadian Association of University Teachers 2004, p. 3). Further, given that universities' sponsored research track records (from the national granting councils only) are being used by the government as the basis for allocating some CFI and all CRC and Indirect Costs funds, grants are not simply an end in themselves for universities, but have become an important means of their securing access to additional – and substantial – research dollars. As well as greater material impact, grants are having a greater symbolic impact on Canadian universities, as a university's granting record is increasingly being seen and used as a primary measure of its excellence. Not only may a university's grant record affect its reputation, but the reverse may also hold, producing a mutually reinforcing effect.

As research grants become more important to universities as institutions, their importance to Canadian academics is increasing – and changing – as well. Not only are grants a condition of (some) academics doing their research, but they are also becoming an increasingly important factor in all academics' ability to get, keep, or advance in a university job.<sup>6</sup> This transformation stems in part from university administrators' growing interest in faculty members' financial contributions to their institution. It also stems from the equation of research grants with academic excellence (which is being extended from institutions to individuals) and from the mutually reinforcing dynamics between academics' granting record and reputation.

### **The changing social relations of Canadian higher education and academic research**

While it is helpful to consider why research grants are becoming more important, this paper's main aim is to explore the impacts and implications of this development. My approach is inspired by Dorothy Smith's method of institutional ethnography, which takes social relations, i.e., those coordinated and ongoing courses of human activity in and through which the social is given its particular shape and form, as the primary object of analysis<sup>7</sup> (Smith 1987; Campbell and Gregor 2002). Here I examine the social relations of higher education and university research and how they are being reorganized in and through the transformation of academic grantsmanship. Specifically, I explore the ways in which the activities of the key players (namely university administrators, faculty members, government, and the wider community) are being reoriented and reconcerted as both cause and consequence of the

changing nature of grantsmanship in Canadian universities today. As the organization – and reorganization – of social relations are reflected in talk, texts, and practices, I used a variety of methods to map this reshaping of Canadian higher education and academic research. These include formal interviews with 25 Canadian academics, graduate students, university administrators, and government officials involved in academic research; informal discussions with many more of them, both as individuals and collectives (at conferences, for example); documentary analysis; participant observation; and close readings of contemporary studies of Canadian higher education.<sup>8</sup> I also drew on my own and others' research on the more general changes in Canadian higher education (such as Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Tudiver 1999; Shaker and Doherty Delorome 1999–2004), and on higher education research in other Western countries, particularly the United States and England.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most significant impact of the growing importance of research grants is that it is helping produce a new survivalism in Canadian higher education. By a new survivalism, I am referring to a new context, and a new state of mind, in which institutions and individuals are simultaneously more at risk and more open to new opportunities for advancement than they have been before. As research grants become more important to universities' finances, reputations, and future prospects, administrators experience their institutions as being both more precarious and more poised to expand and excel relative to their counterparts. Similarly, as grants become more important to academics' standing in their institutions, professors feel more vulnerable but also more open to advancement relative to their colleagues. This new and contradictory situation is altering the ways in which university administrators and faculty relate to and interact with one another, with external parties, and among themselves. Below I address the nature and implications of some of these changes.

### *Relations between university administrators and faculty members*

The greater importance of grants to universities is having a significant impact on relations between administrators and academics. **Whereas, in the past, administrators saw their role as facilitating the work of their faculty members, today administrators are increasingly regarding faculty as a resource to facilitate the work of their institution.** In other words, rather than getting the necessary funds to support their faculty, administrators are now (also) expecting professors to bring in funds,

both to support their own research work and either directly or indirectly to support the institution as a whole. This reversal is altering academics' position in, and relationship to, the institutions within which they work. From autonomous members of a 'republic of science', they are being converted into players who work on, and who work for, a particular university's research 'team'.

"I think there are a lot of people . . . feeling that there is this obligation put on them to bring in money. That's what their real role is as a researcher. I feel that if I am not applying [for grants], I am letting down 'the team'" (academic, interview 21).

This transformation is leading administrators to produce or intensify a range of initiatives to instill in faculty members a sense of their responsibility to seek research grants and to help them to succeed in the endeavour. These include publicizing new (and old) funding opportunities, organizing various sessions and workshops on preparing grant applications, establishing informal mentoring programs for new applicants, producing formal programs to strengthen and/or vet grant applications, providing seed money to support the production or revision of grant proposals, hiring new staff members to help academics work on grants, etc. Administrators are also taking more steps to reward granting successes (with university-wide announcements, receptions for grant holders, greater access to discretionary funds, etc.) which by default if not design also serve to shame them for their failures. "The message that we get from these announcements is 'so what have YOU done recently?'" (academic, interview 21).

Their changed relationship to academics is also leading administrators to become more interested, and more involved, in the hiring of new 'team' members. This intervention is making it more difficult for academics who do not or cannot provide grant money to gain full-time employment in universities.<sup>10</sup> It is also producing more offers from administrators of valuable – and expensive – perks and benefits to lure top grant producers to their institutions. Beyond eroding the autonomy of university departments and faculties, this administrative intervention is transforming academic hiring criteria, so that financial considerations are diluting if not trumping traditional academic considerations, such as ability to teach, potential contribution to scholarship, and commitment to public service. The statement, made in the context of one university's search for a Dean, that "so long as he brings in \$20 million, the rest doesn't matter" (academic, interview 5) starkly illustrates the point.

The increased importance of research grants is also leading administrations to invest differentially in academic staff and units. At several universities, actual or potential ‘research stars’ (such as Dawson Chair holders at McGill University) are being offered generous resources to enhance their research and grant productivity. As well, university funds, which have been progressively centralized in administrators’ hands, are being disproportionately allocated to those departments and faculties, such as Engineering and Administration, that have greater grant generating capacity than others. The new importance of research grants is also helping to spur universities’ investment in research centres and institutes, which are generally less expensive to support than departments and faculties and also more successful in generating and managing research grants. This reallocation of university resources based on grant generating ability has the potential to restructure the university’s core and its periphery as well as the relations between them, and to significantly reorganize relations between administrators and academic workers.

Academics’ granting performance is changing how they are treated by administrators in other respects. In general, academics who bring substantial funds into the university are seeing their stock with their administrations rise, leading to greater institutional power, influence, and perks.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, those academics who do not perform as well for the team are losing stock: “In the big universities, not to get big funding means that you will lose your voice” (Paul 2004, p. 240). As well as diminishing their formal and informal power in the institution, this may jeopardize their positions within it for a number of reasons, not the least of which is **the obligation to compensate for the privileges accorded to more valued colleagues**. As the new hierarchy based on granting performance moves beyond institutional boundaries, permeating the Canadian academic profession as a whole, the personal bargaining power of star academics vis a vis their own administrations as well as those of other universities grows. This has a number of additional implications for academic/administrator relations, including the potential to erode the bargaining power of ‘ordinary’ academics and perhaps to undermine collective bargaining altogether.

Finally, it is worth noting that while their granting performance has much to do with academics’ own talents and efforts, institutional decisions, such as to target particular research areas in strategic plans, also have bearing on academics’ success. This realization is transforming some academics’ involvement in institutional affairs: not only are they attempting to increase their personal influence over certain kinds of

university decision-making, but their motivations and strategies for participating in university life are becoming more complex and self-serving. For example, in the context of faculty planning, some interviewees observed that rather than promoting and supporting collegial planning for the collective good, increasing numbers of faculty were trying to influence the process in other ways and/or intervening only if and when they perceived their particular interests to be at risk.

### *Relations between those in universities and the federal government*

#### *Administrators and government*

One of the most significant changes in relations between university administrators and the federal government is that the former is losing some autonomy and power in relation to the latter. Whereas in the past, university administrators interacted with the federal government primarily as partners in the policy-making process, new federal programs of research support have turned administrators also into applicants to the federal research councils. As they are far less able, in this capacity, to shape the conditions within which they work, administrators are seeking to sharpen their competitive edges by responding as best they can to the perceived and actual desires of the granting councils and the federal government. According to government officials, they are doing this in a variety of ways, including by devising institutional plans that closely reflect federal priorities for academic research (such as genomics and informatics) and by informally “pre-screening” Canada Research Chair nominees in order to maximize the likelihood that they will meet with the government’s approval. This erosion of university autonomy is exacerbated by changes in relations among universities that the federal government has put into place through its new programs. Whereas universities were formerly allies vis a vis the federal government, these programs turn them, for the first time, into competitors for its research funding. This new relationship undermines inter-university solidarity and encourages individualistic and reactive behaviour, limiting the degree to which administrators are able and willing to collectively resist government infringements on their autonomy.

New relations between university administrators and the federal government also transform dynamics within universities. For example, new federal programs enhance managerial power by enabling administrators to develop institutional plans without the active participation of faculty and by assigning them (as opposed to academics) responsibility

for selecting Canada Research Chair nominees. These programs and the general funding context also provide administrators with a strong and credible excuse to override other academic norms and practices, namely the increasingly fierce struggle to protect their university's national standing. A further change is a shift in how administrators mediate between faculty and the federal granting councils. Whereas administrators have traditionally overseen relations between the two parties, today they are far more actively involved in them. Not only are they strongly encouraging faculty to apply for grants and rewarding them for their successes, but administrators have taken it upon themselves to understand, and to educate faculty about, the workings and desires of the councils.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, administrations are arguably acting more as agents of the granting councils with respect to faculty than as agents of their faculty who represent the latter's interests to external parties – yet another dramatic reversal in the social relations of Canadian higher education.

#### *Academics and government*

The growing importance of research grants is transforming relations between academics and the federal government, particularly the granting councils. Whereas in the past, many academics (especially in the social sciences and humanities) felt no compulsion to apply for granting council funding, in the present context most academics, and especially newer faculty, are feeling pressure to apply to the councils to serve their own and their universities' interests.

“As a new faculty member, I should apply for a SSHRC. It's pretty much general knowledge. I've talked to faculty around here, and they say. . .you should do it soon” (academic, interview 4).

“No SSHRC, no tenure – it's as simple as that” (government official, interview 7).

This shift transforms academics' relationship to the granting process which becomes more of an obligation and less of an option. It also transforms their relationship to the granting councils, which are viewed less as a resource that is there to serve them and more as a powerful judge to whom they must prove their worth.<sup>13</sup>

According to interviewees, their new relationship to the granting councils is producing at least three different kinds of responses from academics. The most common reaction is for academics to become, grudgingly or willingly, more responsive to and compliant with the desires of the granting councils and, by extension, the federal govern-

ment. Among other things, these academics are taking advantage of the myriad opportunities offered by their universities to make their applications more “granting council friendly”; getting more involved in the granting councils themselves to figure out their “inner workings”; and changing their research topics, approaches, and/or collaborators to better fit the preferences of the councils and government. The second, less common, reaction is for academics to withdraw from the granting process altogether. These academics conclude that the increasing amount of work involved in preparing grant applications, administering and reporting on research grants, and sustaining one’s granting record is simply too onerous and not worth the costs in time and energies away from other obligations. It is noteworthy that only older and established academics are taking this route. Interviewees conceded that such a response is not a viable option for new faculty who must obtain grants both to secure their position in the university and their future access to grants. “It is my impression that for newer faculty, getting grants is a matter of life and death. It’s a very important step in their career, so they will pursue them” (academic, interview 20).

The third – and most rare – response from academics is to attempt, through collective action, to shape the granting councils in their interests. Some academics were doing this through their professional organizations, for example, by lobbying for the support of certain research areas over others. Others were doing this by trying to develop new programs within the granting councils that better served their particular needs.<sup>14</sup> It seems likely that as grants become even more important to academics, greater numbers of them will try to influence the directions that the councils take. They may also employ a more varied and aggressive set of strategies and interventions than we have seen heretofore, which could include an increase in the numbers and kinds of legal challenges to federal granting bodies’ decisions and/or operations, such as the Human Rights challenge that was recently initiated in response to the underrepresentation of women among Canada Research Chair holders (<http://www.unb.ca/PAR-L/CRCcomplaint.htm>).

### *Relations among university administrators*

The greater emphasis on grants has resulted in an expansion of research administrations at all levels within Canadian universities and an increase in their importance relative to other branches of university administration. The research mandate is also seeping into and/or

impinging on the mandates of other academic administrators. It is increasingly common, for example, for research administrators to oblige Deans and even department heads to privilege academics' research work over their other duties. Intensified competition between universities is also transforming how administrators from each institution act in relation to others. According to government officials and university representatives, it has increased the degree to which universities monitor each others' plans and actions and take them into consideration when devising their own. It has also increased the raiding or poaching of some institutions' top grant producers. Another seemingly paradoxical implication of greater competition is an increase in the numbers and kinds of alliances and collaborative activities among universities aimed at acquiring valuable research grants. Not only are administrators trying to increase their opportunities to collaborate with others, but they are also becoming more strategic and selective in terms of whom they will work with and how they will cooperate.

"I am being strategic. I will align or loosely couple whenever it makes sense ... But there are other people who say "in my list of people I will partner [with], I will always partner up and never partner down" ... In some places, the competition is extreme and it may be dysfunctional" (research administrator, interview 8).

As inter-university collaboration itself becomes more competitive, both aspects of the new survivalism experienced by administrators (i.e., greater precariousness and opportunity) are likely to intensify. This, in turn, will reinforce many of the dynamics discussed above.

### *Relations among academics*

In the past, Canadian academics were mostly oriented to those who worked in their own disciplines or research areas, and they were mostly concerned with their status and power relative to these colleagues (which, for want of a better term, I refer to as inter/disciplinary power). Increasingly, however, academics are orienting also to all faculty who work in their institution. One reason for their growing preoccupation is that, with new federal research programs, all academics stand to benefit more directly from their colleagues' granting successes. Another reason is that they also stand to be harmed by these successes, as each academic's standing in the university is increasingly based on their relative financial contribution to it. (What applies to individual academics applies equally

to university departments and faculties: they too both gain and lose from their counterparts' successes). These new, and conflicting, interests are producing a range of tensions and conflicts within departments and faculties, between departments and faculties, and across the collegium as a whole. For example, several productive academics who did not hold large research grants expressed their own and others' frustration and/or demoralization at the growing institutional status and power of top grant producers, given that the latter were being rewarded not for their academic contributions, but for acquiring only the means to do research (which is no guarantee of, much less a proxy for, its quality). Others alluded to growing hostilities between units, such as Humanities and Engineering faculties, that had divergent grant generating capacities and views on how they were, and should be, treated as a result.

Interviewees also observed that the greater importance of grants is intensifying competition among academics. This is reducing some colleagues' willingness to support one another in a variety of ways, such as reading or discussing research proposals and papers. It is also taking a toll on academic collegialism and morale.

“Time has become a commodity, especially in the sciences, and people feel like that commodity has got to be geared toward research activity ... They are eating lunch in their offices, working with their doors closed, and they don't interact” (academic, interview 22).

At the same time, greater competition is promoting more intra-university – and inter-university – collaboration while altering its bases and forms. For instance, several interviewees stated that some academics are becoming more calculating in terms of the colleagues with whom they work, selecting partners more for their grant generating potential<sup>15</sup> than for their intellectual strengths and commitments. Others alluded to various attempts on the part of faculty members to “cluster” together not out of intrinsic affinities, but in order to advance their interests over and above the interests of others (see also Mulazzi 1998, p. 161). These new bases and patterns of collaboration (which are often encouraged by administrators) may have a host of repercussions for collegial relations, for more general relations within the university, and ultimately for the nature and organization of various research areas themselves.

#### *Relations between those in universities and the broader community*

The greater importance of research grants is reinforcing existing patterns of interaction between the university and the broader community.

Over the last two decades, Canadian university administrators have become increasingly responsive to the needs of the private sector and other groups that can afford to co-sponsor academic research (or otherwise financially support the university), at the expense of other groups. This is for a number of reasons, including the progressive incorporation of Canada's universities into the national innovation agenda and of representatives from the private sector into policy-making processes regarding academic research (Polster 1994; Turk 2000). In that the growing importance of research grants encourages administrators to view and relate to the broader community not only as a beneficiary of the university's work, but also as a resource for its work, it further skews their attention and efforts toward well-resourced groups over others.<sup>16</sup> In a context where inter-university competition for external support of all kinds is heating up, this increases, in turn, the leverage that these groups already have over the university.

While the new context also encourages and rewards more pragmatism in academics' relations with the broader community, interviewees suggested that this is being tempered by other considerations such as academics' intellectual interests and commitments, concerns about inter/disciplinary power, and their (generally) stronger public service ethic. Nonetheless, they feared that as the dynamics noted above developed, academics' ability if not willingness to serve those who cannot financially contribute to their research would be curtailed or undermined.<sup>17</sup> "When you consider the costs to academics' careers of doing this kind of [unfunded or underfunded] community interest research, what academic in their right mind is going to do it?" (academic, interview 16). Thus, certain community members may ultimately be as neglected by academics as by administrators, albeit for different reasons.<sup>18</sup> Reduced access to and cooperation from those within the university may produce or reinforce community concern over the university's decreasing responsiveness to the general public. As well as eroding public support for the university, this concern may generate a wide variety of reactions, ranging from quiet resignation to more militant responses including lawsuits based on universities' failure to fulfil their statutory commitments.<sup>19</sup>

## **Implications**

The above reveals that the growing importance of research grants is changing the university and academic research in some fundamental

ways. While these transformations are quite interesting in themselves, they can and should be assessed in relation to their implications for Canadian higher education and its social contribution. Due to limitations of space, I do not elaborate on the benefits (such as some graduate students' greater access to financial support) that flow from the emphasis on research grants. Instead, I focus on some actual and potential negative implications that have quite serious consequences for Canada's universities and citizens.

*Reduced value for money*

One negative – and ironic – implication is that universities are incurring more and more costs in the pursuit of research grants. Academics are spending more time and other resources applying for their own grants<sup>20</sup> and supporting colleagues' grant applications. Administrators too are devoting increasing and substantial resources to encourage, support, strengthen, and reward faculty granting activity and to enhance grant-related activities of their own. While these extra – and costly – efforts are understandable from the perspective of individual academics and institutions seeking to survive and thrive in an increasingly competitive context, they are less justifiable when viewed from a systemic perspective. Given that the amount of available grants (particularly for academics) is not increasing in proportion to the additional efforts being expended in seeking them, the returns on this investment of university resources are diminishing.

There is a more serious, even perverse, way in which the growing importance of research grants may conflict with the public's interest in getting the utmost value for the funds it invests in universities and academic research. As several informants acknowledged, the current context encourages academics to seek and to spend as much money as is possible, rather than as much money as is necessary, for their research.<sup>21</sup> They further noted that in serving the public interest by restraining their research spending, academics may actually damage their own interests, or at least be forced to forgo the benefits that a less frugal approach would yield.<sup>22</sup> Beyond being wasteful, the incentive to inflate research budgets may harm Canadian universities and citizens in other ways such as by decreasing the number of research areas that are investigated, the number of researchers that are supported, and/or the number of options available to graduate students in terms of their research training.

*Undermining excellence*

Although the greater importance of grants stems in large part from the federal government's desire to promote excellence in Canadian universities, the dynamics set into motion may undermine academic excellence. To begin with, and as virtually all informants (including government officials) conceded, research grants are a poor measure of the excellence of either individual academics or academic institutions. Thus, to award funding to universities based on their granting records is problematic at best, and potentially harmful to the Canadian university system (Graham 2000). Beyond its direct effects, the indirect effects of the greater importance of grants may also harm academic excellence. For example, the concentration of research resources on 'star' academics and units may deprive others of valuable resources that they need to sustain and enhance the quality of their work.<sup>23</sup> As well, the skewing of institutional prestige toward top grant producers may erode the quality of university research, as academics become demoralized by their own and/or others' declining status within their departments, faculties, and universities. "I sort of feel like I am a second class academic because I don't think I can get research grants, and I think that I wear my second class status wherever I go"<sup>24</sup> (academic, interview 16).

The responses of faculty members to the growing importance of grants may further erode research excellence. Although the majority of academics are critical, even dismissive, of the equation of granting record with excellence, many informants conceded that they and/or their colleagues are doing "whatever it takes" to strengthen their granting performance.<sup>25</sup> Among other things, academics are switching their research topics to well funded areas in which they often have lesser expertise; changing their research approach or methodology in order to increase the amount of funding they may apply for; getting involved in as many research projects as possible in order to boost their granting record; and lending and/or borrowing 'research names' not to work on research projects, but only to enhance the likely success of grant applications. Academics are also adopting various strategies to increase their numbers of publications, given that the latter are becoming an important means of obtaining research grants (yet another interesting reversal). Be it by reducing academics' available time for, commitment to, and/or skill and interest in their research, such responses may diminish the quality of academic work and its value to the general public. More generally, the growing willingness to "chase dollars" in contravention of academics' inclinations or better judgement is

corrupting of academic integrity and values that are vital to sustaining the university's excellence.

*Neglecting other aspects of the university's mission*

Another significant implication of the growing importance of grants is that it is diminishing (even further) the resources for, value associated with, willingness to fulfil, and thus the quality of other aspects of the university's mission, namely teaching, administrative service, and public service. In terms of the former, many academics are compensating for their greater involvement in granting (and other research) activity by cutting back on time spent on undergraduate instruction. Although officially discouraged, this strategy is implicitly encouraged by administrators who are themselves devoting less resources (in either absolute or relative terms) to undergraduate teaching and who frequently reward top grant producers with teaching 'relief'. Their greater involvement in granting activity is also reducing the time that many academics feel able to devote to collegial bodies, while greater managerialism that stems from and contributes to the importance of grants is reducing the time that academics are willing to devote to collegial bodies.<sup>26</sup> The resultant retreat from academic governance may harm the university in the short term, and particularly in the long term, as skills vital to sustaining institutional democracy atrophy and fail to get passed on to the next generation of scholars. This erosion of institutional democracy also harms the general public by diminishing the space inside the university to represent and consider the public's multiple needs and concerns and by reducing transparency and accountability in university affairs.

The university's public service mission is also eroded as administrators and academics attend more to the research needs of groups that can help sponsor academic research. Further, as universities become more concerned with the latter's research needs, they may also become more responsive to other of their needs or demands (such as industry's demands for secrecy in research or the privatization of knowledge) which may not only fail to serve, but may actually conflict with, the interests of other groups and/or the general interest (Washburn 2005). As well as transforming the practice of academic service, the growing importance of research grants is subtly changing the conception of academic service. Rather than an obligation or a duty, responsiveness to certain social interests and needs is increasingly being seen by administrators and academics as a personal and professional choice, and even as a liability.

“The old model of university extension is gone ... Unless you have a CURA grant, which is a separate issue, there is not much incentive for people to form partnerships with the community. So all the things you do with the community you do on your own time, and with no value. It’s invisible work” (academic, interview 1).

### *Growing instrumentalism*

Perhaps the most disturbing implication of the growing importance of grants, which is implicit in all of the considerations raised above, is that it is contributing to a growing instrumentalism within (and outside of) Canadian universities. One manifestation of this is the progressive incorporation of instrumental rationality into university-related decision-making. For example, both within and outside of universities, financial considerations are becoming increasingly important in a host of decisions ranging from who universities hire and reward, to what research problems are explored, to the amount of resources to which academic units and entire institutions are entitled. The emphasis on grants is also promoting more instrumentalism in relations among and between the various parties involved in academic research. It is leading people to see and relate to others as means of advancing their increasingly self-serving or private ends – a development that generates ever more instrumentalism. The clearest expression of the instrumentalism engendered, however, is the ongoing transformation of the *raison d’être* of Canada’s universities and those who work within them. Rather than simply using their resources to do valuable things, universities and academics are becoming increasingly preoccupied with, and intent on, acquiring valuable resources. Put differently, universities and academics are, and will be, focusing more on the means (defined by others) as opposed to the ends (defined by themselves) of their work. Not only are the former progressively shaping the latter, but they may ultimately displace them.

This growing instrumentalism stands to impoverish significantly the working lives of those within the university and their contributions to the wider society. From institutions where individuals had the time and space to use their talents and energies to produce high quality work they deemed valuable to society, Canada’s universities and those within them are becoming ever more frantic and calculating as they seek new opportunities and ‘edges’ that allow them to maintain and advance their positions in an increasingly insecure and unstable environment. And from institutions where the intrinsic worth of ideas, values, and people

was recognized and respected, Canada's universities are becoming places where worth is progressively determined in relation to financial costs and benefits, at the expense of people's dignity, integrity, solidarity, and security. This kind of environment is not conducive to the kinds of critical and creative thinking (and thinkers) that universities need to thrive. It is also inimical to the kinds, and quality, of knowledge production that citizens need – and expect – from their universities.

## **Conclusion**

It bears repeating that this paper explores only tendencies and potentialities – not full blown trends or realities – that stem from the growing importance of research grants. This being said, one should not underestimate either the speed or the intensity with which they might develop, particularly given the more general transformation or corporatization of Canadian higher education within which they are emerging. Paradoxically, however, the very dynamics set into motion by the growing importance of research grants may generate resistance to it. These dynamics have the potential to create many losers and few winners among the parties involved in Canadian universities and research. Even some winners may find themselves disaffected by the compromises, demands, and stresses that maintaining their successes entail.

As a final point, and without minimizing the difficulties involved, there is a way in which it might be easier, particularly for academics, to resist the developments addressed in this paper than some other troubling changes in Canadian universities, such as increasing commercialization. This is because these developments require and thrive on academics' willingness to invest greater energies in, and to accord greater value to, acquiring research grants. Should sufficient numbers of academics withdraw their cooperation, various dynamics addressed here may be impeded if not stopped. This could pave the way for more expansive and effective resistance to the more general transformation of higher education in Canada and possibly elsewhere.

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## Notes

1. One notable exception in the French Canadian context is Mulazzi (1998). Much of the contemporary literature on higher education in other countries also tends to subsume academic grantsmanship under more general issues. For example, American authors Slaughter and Leslie (1997) address grantsmanship in the context of 'academic capitalism' which also includes (and emphasizes) various forms of entrepreneurial and commercial activity. Contemporary studies of higher education in England (such as Henkel 2000; Morely 2003) also address grantsmanship in the context of other developments, such as the Research Assessment Exercise. Various studies of the academic profession and culture (such as Becher and Trowler 2001; Ohmann 2003; Morey 2003) also pay relatively limited attention to the issue of grantsmanship, often mentioning it only in passing rather than subjecting it to systematic analysis.
2. In Canada, education is technically a provincial responsibility. However, given the key role of the federal government in higher education, the complexities of analyzing the different policies of ten provinces and three territories, and the fact that provincial and territorial policies often mirror those of the federal government, this paper focuses only on federal higher education policy.
3. The evolution of this conception is reflected, over time, in various government documents and reports including the Throne Speeches and budgets of the Canadian government, the annual reports on federal science and technology produced by Industry Canada, and the various studies produced by Canada's Advisory Council on Science and Technology and its predecessor. It has also been tracked by analysts of Canadian higher education policy, such as Atkinson-Grosjean et al. (2001) and Atkinson-Grosjean (2002).
4. The Canada Foundation for Innovation is an independent corporation that allocates \$3.65 billion in public funds to modernize university research infrastructure (Canada Foundation For Innovation 2003). The CRC program received \$900 million to support 2000 research chairs in Canadian universities for established and emerging 'research stars' (Tri-Council and CFI Secretariat 2000). The Indirect Costs program allocates \$245 million annually to help universities defray the indirect costs of federally supported research (<http://www.chairs.gc.ca/english/indirectcosts>). All of these programs are applied to by universities, not academics, who must first produce and publicize institutional strategic plans. Under some CFI programs and the CRC and Indirect Costs programs, the amount of funding for which universities may apply is related to their track records in obtaining sponsored research funds from the three main national granting councils: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).
5. These roles are not completely new; however, they are taking on greater importance in the university to the point where they are having a transformative effect on social relations.
6. In addition to the testimony of academics and others, numerous pieces of textual evidence demonstrate that grants are becoming more important to academics' careers. These include a recent advertisement for a social science position which listed (for the first time that I and many others have seen) "strong evidence

of ... likelihood of success in external grant competitions” as a requirement for applicants (University Affairs 2004, p. 64) and a statement in a recent granting council document that getting grants is now “a huge part” of an academic’s job (SSHRC 2004, p. 2).

7. Smith’s approach is quite different from those research approaches that attempt to test hypotheses. Its aim is more ethnographic or geographic in the sense of mapping how patterns of human action are organized and coordinated. While I use the analytic of social relations, my approach differs from Smith’s in some respects, including the incorporation of a dynamic element (i.e., a focus on the reorganization of relations) and of prediction into the analysis.
8. Technically, about half of my formal interviewees were academics, and the other half was almost evenly split between government officials, university administrators, and graduate students. However, some academics had held administrative positions (and vice versa), some government officials had held academic positions, and some graduate students also held university teaching positions. University interviewees, who were either known to me or recommended by other interviewees and/or colleagues (as were government interviewees), came from both small and large (research intensive) universities that represented Eastern, Central, and Western Canada. While several of them worked in the ‘hard’ sciences, the majority came from the social sciences and humanities, given that the bulk of Canadian academics work in these areas. (Also, because those in these areas are generally more able to do research without external funding, the impacts of the growing importance of grants may be more keenly observed and/or felt by them). Academic interviewees, who spanned the range from huge grant holders to non-grant holders, and all other interviewees were asked similar questions regarding the role of research grants in the social relations of Canadian universities and research. There was surprisingly little divergence in the views of those from different disciplines, institutions, and university ranks. In terms of documentary analysis, I examined a variety of texts including government and third party higher education documents, university publications, and academic and lay periodicals. I also participated in a number of relevant academic bodies and events, such as hiring and research committees and university and government consultations.
9. Limitations of space allowed me only to include those changes in social relations that seem most consequential for Canada’s universities and citizens. It should also be noted that the dynamics described here are developing in different ways in different places. Rather than examining the particular responses of particular individuals, units, or universities to the greater importance of grants, I explore more general trends and transformations that are emerging, so as to stimulate as much discussion and intervention as possible.
10. Interviewees shared numerous accounts of solid and even stellar academics with weak granting records being denied positions, promotions, and/or special appointments, such as to a Canada Research Chair.
11. The degree of power that some top grant producers acquire in their universities is quite astonishing. One interviewee noted that a very well funded academic was able to singlehandedly overturn a decision on a colleague’s tenure file. Another research star was promised that he could choose the candidate for a university’s high profile research chair if he accepted a similar position at that university.

12. For example, one research administrator recounted taking several of his staff to Ottawa to meet with the granting councils, find out more about their programs, and get advice on being more effective in supporting faculty applications.
13. Some of the images interviewees used to describe the granting councils were remarkable, particularly for the powerlessness and frustration they revealed. The councils were likened to “an autocratic god”, “a dehumanizing machine”, and even “a lottery” which professors had to play but were not sure how to win.
14. One interesting example is the recent effort on the part of some in the fine arts community to develop new funding programs within the SSHRC as opposed to the Canada Council, which has traditionally supported Canadian artists (see, for example, [http://www.SSHRC.ca/web/apply/program\\_descriptions/fine\\_arts\\_e.asp](http://www.SSHRC.ca/web/apply/program_descriptions/fine_arts_e.asp)). Not only do such programs enhance the opportunities for ‘hard’ researchers in the fine arts to access research grants, but given that SSHRC funds are included in university research track records (and thereby increase the shares of CFI, CRC, and Indirect Costs funding for which they can apply) whereas Canada Council funds are not, the move also increases the value of these grants to the academics who receive them.
15. Interviewees conceded that academics are always somewhat calculating in the sense of looking for colleagues who bring something valuable to their research projects. However, it is increasingly criteria defined by the granting councils rather than autonomously defined criteria that are governing academics’ selection of research collaborators.
16. For example, some administrators noted that they were more actively making connections with, and offering their university’s research services to, external clients such as government and business.
17. For example, reduced resources and support within the university for research projects that are not externally funded and increasing emphasis in academic performance review on research grants may pressure academics to work for paying clients, even if they are not so inclined. The growing numbers of academics working in research centres, particularly those who are partially self-financing, experience even greater pressure to serve paying clients.
18. This may be the case particularly in the long term, as those academics who cannot or will not adjust to the university’s new expectations and demands either leave the institution or fail to consider it as an option in the first place, abandoning the university to career researchers who are not motivated by a public service ethic. Several interviewees alluded to “community oriented” colleagues and graduate students who were becoming progressively disenchanted with the university and considering withdrawing from it. Many older academics also expressed relief that they would be retiring soon and would not have to cope much longer with the new demands and expectations that were fundamentally different from those that prevailed during most of their careers and about which they had serious reservations.
19. For one account of a university being sued for failing to fulfil its public service obligation see Author unknown (1988).
20. Academics noted that they were spending more time on grant applications (ranging from one twelfth to one quarter of their academic year (Mulazzi 1998, p. 113)) for a number of reasons, including because they were applying for increasing numbers of grants and because the granting process was becoming more demanding and complex. Surprisingly, several academics admitted to

applying for grants even when their chances of success were very slim. They did this because they felt compelled to apply (“to not apply would be to let people down”), because even the application process brought them greater recognition (“just by applying, I became a somebody”), or because their institution benefitted from the total number of applications submitted.

21. One interviewee confessed that she had difficulties spending the minimum amount of money required to apply for a particular grant. Another new academic was advised to seek three times the amount of money he anticipated needing for his research. He ended up with excess funds he was having difficulty spending.
22. Academics may not only forgo various rewards by curtailing their research spending, but their research itself is increasingly valued in relation to how much it is funded. In this context, several interviewees alluded to a growing perception that “research is ‘real’ research only when it is funded”. This view is also maintained by other Canadian academics: “Increasingly, research ‘counts as research’ when faculty members have brought research dollars into the university in the form of grants or contracts” (Cassin 2004, p. 163). Research done ‘on the cheap’, such as by using one’s professional development fund, is less valued if seen as research at all. The perversity of the situation was brought home at a recent conference where one academic in the Humanities confessed he had stopped applying for grants he didn’t need or get and was using the extra time and other resources at his disposal to support his research work. While he felt this was a more responsible and productive way of working, he realized that choosing this course would limit his career advancement, his ability to access grants should he need them in the future, and his value and mobility in the academic job market.
23. The concentration of resources on fewer academics and areas may also harm the more general scientific enterprise by restricting diversity and capacity in the research system, limiting the contributions of ‘average’ science in such areas as training the next generation of researchers and opening up new fields of inquiry, institutionalizing the ‘monolithic pressures of scientific orthodoxy’, and supporting only research of a recognized kind in established fields (Atkinson-Grosjean 2001, pp. 51–52).
24. The degree to which interviewees were frustrated and demoralized by the growing importance of research grants was quite stunning. They shared many shocking and offensive accounts of how they and/or colleagues were either unfairly mistreated or preferentially treated depending on their success in granting competitions and how this negatively impacted on academics’ morale, health, and performance. Academics interviewed by Mulazzi (1998) and Chan and Fisher (2004) also commented on the significant and growing impact of granting success on academics’ morale and well-being.
25. This finding is in keeping with research on performance indicators which shows that even when people do not approve of the criteria used to judge them, these criteria shape their practice nevertheless (Taylor 1999). The strong degree to which graduate students felt, and complied with, the pressure to enhance their granting records was surprising.

“Without doubt [I feel pressured]. I’ve had the message ‘get money, get it soon, start applying right now, and don’t stop because when it’s time for you to apply for a job, that will make all the difference’ ... Am I responding to the pressure?”

I'm sure I am. Because I need a job when I'm finished and I will do what I need to do to get that" (graduate student, interview 3).

26. Even when they do attend collegial meetings, many faculty members are not actively participating because they feel they won't be heard: "If I were a [name of a university research star], then I'd speak up because people would listen to what I have to say" (academic, interview 24).

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