

Prologue Research Matters

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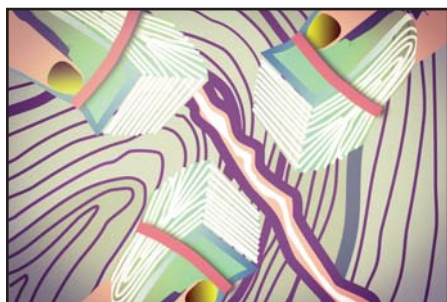
NEW SERIES

PROLOGUE: RESEARCH MATTERS

The content of Geoscience Canada strives to touch all aspects of our professional and/or academic lives. Each day, our work balances research, use of analytical facilities, student issues (undergraduate and graduate), as well as outreach and, for some of us, teaching. Research funding, which primarily comes from government agencies or from industry, enables many of these activities, and with that comes a range of complex issues in an ever-changing landscape. Christie Rowe, McGill University, kicks this series off with an article that compares the cultures of the main government agencies of Canada, United States, and South Africa and their varying approaches toward funding research in Structural Geology and Tectonics. The issues she raises should resonate with the geoscience research community.

I extend an invitation to all members of the geoscience community to share their insights and knowledge, and contribute to RESEARCH MATTERS: a forum that identifies and debates major issues related to research funding.

J. Brendan Murphy, Editor Geoscience Canada



Research Matters 1. Funding for Structural Geology and Tectonics Research in Three Nations

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The quest for funding: it is a constant concern, often a source of unease. This is a unique aspect of academic life - we have the opportunity, and the burden, of funding our own research programs. In the US, some researchers

raise all or part of their own salaries, as well as those of their coworkers. The stress can be compounded by the feeling of not knowing how reviewers might perceive a proposal, or not knowing how to directly pitch the value of one's proposed research to the goals of a funding program or current trends.

Raising funds to support my students and their (sometimes costly) fieldwork is a continuous responsibility. This obligation is balanced by the chance to pursue my own research interests and the opportunity to choose my preferred field sites and investigate the scientific questions that interest me. But, when I'm worried about my ability to come up with funds, or I spend nights and weekends working on a proposal that is eventually rejected, the whole system can be very discouraging. I worry that I won't be able to support the students who are counting on me, and provide the opportunities and research experiences I think they should have. Everyone I know in this business - even those who are unambiguously successful - has suffered disappointment and lean years when it comes to research funding.

In the last five years, I've been

applicant, reviewer, and an occasional member of evaluation panels for the national funding agencies in three countries where I've lived and worked as an academic structural geologist. South Africa, Canada, and the USA have somewhat different approaches toward funding research in Structural Geology and Tectonics. In addition, the funding landscape is evolving in each country with changes to policy and budget. For me, starting out as a new faculty member (twice) brought a slew of challenges. One of the most difficult was to try to make sense of the different funding programs and identify opportunities. The subtleties of tone and pitch that make a proposal 'sound like a winner' can vary for different contexts, and it's also important to have a sense of the overall priorities built into the funding system policies.

Through time, the perceptions of importance of various aspects of grant proposals necessarily evolve - and different countries assign different weight to these aspects. The relative weighting of novelty, innovativeness, researcher track record, contributions to community and return on investment reflect the priorities of funding programs. A well-pitched proposal must appeal to the priorities of