

Enhancing the research approval process at Canada's colleges

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Responsible ethics evaluation is the heart of Canada's research community, but some believe that the evaluation process could be better tailored for the college sector.

Research ethics have become an increasingly important concern at colleges as the growth of research centres at these institutions continues to accelerate. Over the past two decades, many colleges have begun offering baccalaureate degrees and become

more research-intensive. Yet one could argue that the processes for approving new research at colleges has yet to be adapted to their unique institutional needs. Some of those working in PSE believe that now is a pivotal time for colleges to become more effective in greenlighting cutting-edge research, and this effectiveness begins with a carefully considered review of research ethics boards (REBs) and the approval processes for new projects.

Although the enforcement of ethics is a crucial concern for any research institution, some argue that most of Canada's college-based research rarely tests ethical limits when it comes to the use of human or animal subjects. Most of the research focus for colleges, according to Colleges and Institutes Canada, is to help small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) use applied research to improve products, processes, and services.

Krista Holmes, a PhD candidate in the department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, believes that the low-risk aspect of most college research should influence how these institutions apply for and receive research approval. Holmes believes that developing a set of best practices that can be applied across Ontario's colleges will ease the workload of researchers and help accelerate research that is both valuable and low-risk. "Currently," says Holmes, "this process is extremely arduous, as different colleges have different requirements and processes for obtaining REB approval. The time required by the REB approval process varies considerably across all the colleges and often creates major challenges for researchers who are bound by timelines for completion of their research."

Holmes believes that now is the time to determine the best practices for standardizing the approval process for low-risk research in a college setting. "Or," she says, it is time to create "at least a best practices agreement on the governance and administration of college research ethics. Right now, there are too many grey areas." Holmes is quick to add that there is yet to be a published study in Canada focused on the governance and administration of ethics at the college level. Her proposed PhD thesis at uToronto will seek to examine and address many of the issues involved in accomplishing this work.

Rod Skinkle, CEO of Academica Group, has been coordinating applied research with colleges and universities for 25+ years, and he believes that Holmes' efforts are valuable to the sector. Yet he also suggests that there is a need for more sector-wide discussion on the definition of "low risk" in college research. "For sure the REB processes, particularly for multi-institutional projects, can be too slow," he says. "Often, it may simply be due to the backlog of studies to be reviewed by the REB committees. That being said, for research involving human subjects, the basic concerns are pretty universal and should apply in all settings. What I don't believe we want to see is any development that might imply that research ethics are receiving inferior review in colleges or institutes. So, I welcome process improvements and would support in principle an initiative to have one institutional committee approve studies; but I would hope to see a pretty wide discussion of definitions for 'low risk' to ensure the protocols are reliable (i.e., consistently interpreted) and to follow the basic guidelines for research involving human subjects."

Holmes sees a successful precedent for responsibly modifying research approval processes in a 6-month pilot study presented in 2014 by Lynda Atack, Co-Chair of the REB at Centennial College, and Otte Rosenkrantz, Chair of the REB at Fanshawe College. This project sought to promote more efficient quality reviews across the Ontario college sector, to streamline the ethics review process for researchers, and to reduce redundancies in multi-site college REB review processes.

Atack says that as a result of the pilot project, there is now just one form for applicants to complete as they apply for multi-college ethics reviews, as opposed to the old system, in which applicants had to fill out individual forms for each college. "For researchers," explains Atack, "there was a lot of frustration for multi-site ethics approvals. It could take weeks, sometimes months for approvals to be processed." The pilot project has, according to Atack, been a resounding success—one that will lead to broader, stronger, and higher quality research from the college sector as more multi-site projects receive approval.

Under the new system that Atack has helped introduce, investigators looking to conduct research at several colleges can submit a common application to their home

institution noting that their project is multi-college and minimal risk. An expert panel will review the application and send a recommendation letter (not to be confused with an approval) to the researcher, who will then make a submission to the REB. At the primary college, one person, likely the REB chair, will review the application. If they deem it appropriate, they will issue a certificate of ethical approval to the researcher.

Atack notes, however, that the pilot project received mixed reviews in this final phase of approval, adding that, "One third of the 21 individual REBs still took weeks and even months to approve the research. This might be a result of some REBs not being comfortable with one person signing off on a project." However, Atack believes that these new initiatives have created a "general sense of excitement" among all of the REBs involved in the process. "Over time," she says, "some REBs have taken on the responsibility of monitoring institutional risk requirements and the focus has shifted away from ethics reviews." The new initiatives, Atack believes, will allow REBs to resume their roles as supporters of research.

Atack says that the next steps for the ethics review pilot project are underway. This January, her project team will begin educating REBs and researchers on the new processes via webinar and PD events. The goal is to have all interested colleges in Ontario agreeing to new, finalized processes by September 2016.

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