

How to show your project's worth in social science and humanities research proposals

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Ask Dr. Editor

There are several different ways to define the “significance” of your research in a SSHRC application.

BY LETITIA HENVILLE | NOV 12 2020

Question

When I write CIHR grant applications, it's easy for me to argue that my project is important: it's because of the impact my work will have on the health of Canadians. But when I write SSHRC grant applications, I can't make that same argument, because the reviewers would think I've applied to the wrong funding agency. How do I argue to SSHRC review committees that my work is worth funding?

(Anonymous, Kinesiology)

Dr. Editor's response:

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada – while specifying different criteria for different competitions – is generally looking to fund projects that are significant, important, and valuable.

In SSHRC's Insight Grant competition, for instance, their evaluation criteria are “challenge,” “feasibility,” and “capability”. As part of the “challenge” criterion, they're considering the “originality, **significance**, and expected contribution to knowledge” of the project; under the “capability” criterion, they're considering the “quality, quantity and **significance** of past experience and published and/or creative outputs” (see [SSHRC Insight Grants](#)). Other SSHRC competitions want to know about your top five “most **significant** career research contributions” (see [SSHRC Partnership Grants](#)).

The term “significance” isn't defined in [SSHRC's glossary](#), but from the contexts above, one has the sense that “significance” might mean something like “importance” or “value.” Yet that reference to “quality [...] and significance” of past publications does contain an additional connotation. “Significance” is something other than “quality”, so suggests influence, prestige, or that equally undefined term, “impact.”

You might argue, for instance, that your monograph was “significant” because it won important awards or was published by a high-prestige university press, while your journal article might accrue significance through its inclusion in a journal with a high impact factor. By seeming to have passed the most rigorous standards of peer review, you *could* argue that your research is “significant” without even referring to the quality of its content. But would you want to?

Ideally, your work will be important, not merely prestigious. I spoke with current and former chairs of Insight and Insight Development selection committees to learn more about the ways that researchers can demonstrate the significance of their work in SSHRC funding applications.

Intellectual significance

“Virtually every proposed SSHRC project will make some kind of contribution,” says Penelope Farfan, professor at the University of Calgary School of Creative and Performing Arts and former chair of the Insight Development Grant selection committee for fine arts and research-creation. “But the applicant must also make clear why that contribution matters: what is at stake in the proposed research, why is it important, why should we care?”

One way to answer these questions is by showing that your project will reshape conversations in your field. Igor Grossmann, associate professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo, and former chair of the Insight Grant peer review committee for psychology, points to the theoretical or methodological contributions a project could make as attesting to its significance: “Does the research break new ground? Does it address a meaningful gap in the literature or introduce a systematic way to approach a complex topic? Does it provide a useful methodological tool that can help the scientific community to move forward?” Articulate an answer to one or more of these questions, and you’ll be attesting to the intellectual significance of your work.

You might be able to speak to the intellectual significance of your previous work through conventional means – h-index, journal impact factor, citations, awards – but you might also devise new metrics to attest to the significance of your contributions to your field. You might:

- show that X number of the Y universities in Canada that include your department keep your most recent book in the course reserves section;
- compare your number of Twitter followers to others at your rank in your field (are you the most popular social media user in your field in Canada?); or,
- tally the number of minutes of airtime you received on TV, radio, YouTube channels or podcasts over the past year, or the number of hours you’ve spent being interviewed by people in the media.

The significance of your contributions to academic and broader social discourse is only one way you can show that your work is important, though. “Significance can refer to the applied or practical use of insights from the research, to address pressing societal issues,” says Dr. Grossmann, which brings us to our second type of significance: social significance.

Social significance

The social significance of your work attests to its ability to serve the public good — or the good of a specific population. Hagwil Hayetsk (Charles Menzies), professor of anthropology at UBC and the chair of the 2019 SSHRC Insight Development Grant committee on Indigenous research, describes “significance” as a project’s ability to serve the needs of people who aren’t academics:

“I am interested in the relationship between research, researcher, and community where the research is to be conducted [...]—in how this project is relevant for those who are collaborating and assisting in the research through permitting research to be conducted in their community. Some evaluators will be interested in significance as a driver for ‘innovation’ within the field of research, [but] I am less impressed by that and more concerned about whether there are real and material benefits and important implications for the communities who are part of the research project.”

The kind of significance that Dr. Menzies describes is increasingly expected in research conducted among and about all kinds of communities. Such a focus on social significance doesn’t necessarily mean that all SSH research must be utilitarian or applied — but when your work is focused on an equity-deserving group, it seems to make sense to seek to improve access and advance on the path of equity.

The social significance of your work might be measured in changes in survey responses, interview or focus group feedback, or quality of life measures, or you might name the policy, program, or practice that you seek to inform or revise.

Peter Trnka, associate professor of philosophy at Memorial University and former chair of the Insight Grant committee for philosophy, medieval studies, classics, and religious studies, notes that the social significance of your contributions needn’t be to human society: “Work in the humanities and social sciences is often misconceived as having only to do with humans and social systems, but some of us in philosophy, politics, economics, etc., work on issues having to do with planetary and ecological and environmental wellbeing.” Articulate the way you wish to shape or inform these issues, and you’ll speak to the significance of your work.

Cultural significance

If your work is in the areas of cultural revitalization, sustainability, or production, you

might attest to the cultural significance of your work by articulating your originality and influence. Were you the first of many to hybridize or open up a particular form or genre? The first to stage a particular production? Have you increased the number of people able to participate in a certain artistic, musical, linguistic, or other creative activity? If so, you should describe the cultural significance of your work.

Even if it is small or specialized, your work can still have significant implications — especially if it is in conversation with a broad, important cultural concern, like the representation of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, emotion, reason, capital, the nation-state, or a historical or artistic movement.

Economic significance

None of the committee chairs I spoke to said that they wanted to read about the monetary value of research outputs. In your CIHR application, you might speak to both the needs of a vulnerable population and the potential dollars saved by a particular intervention. For SSHRC funding, however, peer reviewers seemed less invested in an articulation of monetary return on investment. Of course, this may be a reflection of the disciplines of the people with whom I spoke. If you're applying to SSHRC for the first time, request the input of readers in the discipline of your selection committee before you submit, as understandings of significance are context- and discipline-specific.

Nonetheless, if your work has an impact on the bottom line of some system — education, the arts, even healthcare — it seems worth mentioning, as long as you do so in conversation with at least one of the other forms of significance described above. The economic significance of your research could be measured in the number or quality of jobs created, revenue generated, products sold, or spin-off companies created.

In sum: “significance” is a broad term, and stating that your work is generally important seems insufficient. If you can articulate one or more categories in which you seek to make a significant contribution or change, you'll be more likely to persuade your reviewers that your work is worth funding.

ABOUT LETITIA HENVILLE

Ask Dr. Editor is a monthly column by Letitia Henville, a freelance academic editor at shortishard.ca. She earned her PhD in English literature from the University of Toronto. Have a question about academic writing or editing? Send it to her at shortishard.ca/contact or on Twitter [@lertitia](https://twitter.com/lertitia).



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