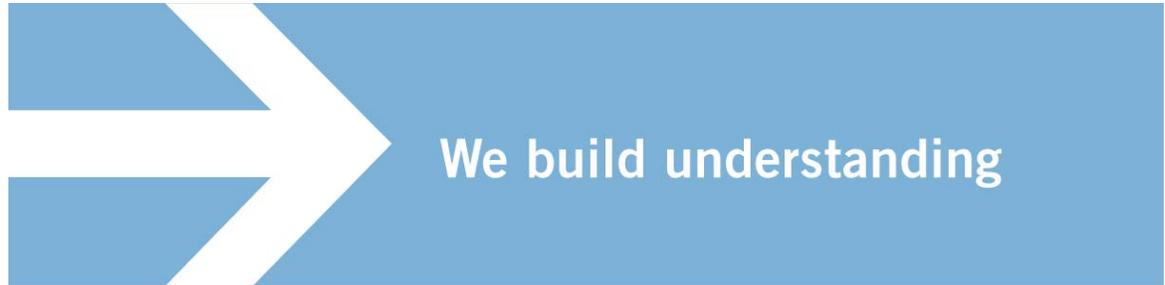




Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada



Working Group on the Future of the Humanities

A Response from SSHRC Council

July 2001

Report of the Working Group on the Future of the Humanities

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Introduction

In May 1999, when Council appointed a “Working Group on the Future of the Humanities,” we did not realize how much we were embarking on a journey of discovery. But we were—and this the *Report of the Working Group* amply documents.

We discovered, first of all, that despite years of shrinking financial support and negative propaganda, humanities research and teaching in Canada remain vigorous and vibrant. Humanities professors remain creative and committed. Students enrol in humanities subjects in steadily rising numbers. And, out in the job market, employers compete to attract the best humanities graduates.

We also discovered that the impact of new technologies on methods of work and the development of new theories and models of research are transforming the various disciplines.

Moreover, we discovered a determination among humanities scholars to open themselves to other disciplines, to regain their central place in the academy and in public discourse, and to meet the challenges of, and take advantage of the opportunities offered by, new information and communications technology.

These discoveries—and others articulated in the *Report*—call upon us to take concrete action. The following outlines Council’s commitments to do just that.

1. The Public Role of the Humanities

Council endorses the unanimous view expressed at the Humanities in 2010 conference—and reinforced in the Working Group’s *Report*—that the “humanities need to find ways of speaking clearly to broad audiences using forms, languages and media that they can both comprehend and appreciate.” This is an essential ingredient in a recipe to whet the public appetite for greater exposure to learned humanistic commentary. (Indeed, one of the greatest and oldest friends of the public engagement of the humanities is CBC Radio’s “Ideas” program—from which SSHRC in particular and the humanities community in general could learn much.)

To do its part to address the issues mentioned above, SSHRC will:

- revise its Web site to make it attractive to a broad audience, including adding a section highlighting research results from the humanities as well as providing new tools to facilitate access to disciplinary research and expertise;
- expand the Aid to Occasional Conferences, Workshops and Congresses in Canada program to include support for transfer of knowledge to broader audiences;
- include public outreach among the criteria that adjudication committees will evaluate when reviewing research proposals;
- require that researchers provide a plain-language summary of the nature and significance of their research results—which Council can then use for publicity and educational purposes;
- develop a proactive media strategy to promote the humanities;
- enlarge the scope of the Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge (SPARKS) pilot program which provides support for university students to profile social sciences and humanities research in the popular media.

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2. Collaboration and Partnerships

SSHRC affirms the Working Group's recommendation to continue and enhance collaboration with key groups in the research community. Accordingly, we will continue to work with the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada (HSSFC) and, in particular, to support the Federation's communications activities and events.

To expand awareness of issues surrounding graduate education in the humanities, Council will also pursue collaboration with the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS). Already we are contributing organizational expertise and funding to the CAGS Fall 2001 Conference on "The Canadian Graduate Enterprise," a major topic of which will be the changing world of humanities education.

SSHRC will seek to strengthen support for, and raise the profile of, the humanities by expanding (or reinstating) three important collaborative SSHRC programs—Joint Initiatives, Community-University Research Alliances (CURAs), and Research Development Initiatives (RDIs).

Joint Initiatives—Using the framework of this program, we shall explore forging new funding partnerships with Heritage Canada, museums and the Canada Council. A partnership with Canada Council in particular will afford a vital opportunity—too long neglected—to support research that addresses the interface between the creative and the interpretive arts. Jointly supporting research on new technologies in the humanities and the creative arts and funding the work of artists who are also university academics are only two of many possibilities.

CURAs—This popular program offers a ready-made framework to strengthen existing and create new partnerships among university-based humanists and their communities. Reinstating the CURA program remains a SSHRC priority for other excellent reasons—its potential as a vehicle to promote *la recherche humaniste engagée* merely makes an already bright light into a veritable lighthouse beacon.

Research Development Initiatives—Council will vigorously promote humanities participation in this program. This will greatly expand humanists' opportunities (and motivation) to explore new theoretical and methodological approaches, to define innovative research agendas and to create research networks that will be more than the sum of their parts.

In addition to the foregoing, we envision three other partnership areas in which SSHRC can help bolster humanities research in Canada:

Canada Foundation for Innovation—SSHRC will continue to encourage and assist researchers who wish to apply to the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) for funding to rebuild the infrastructure that is sorely needed for humanities research.

National Research Data Archives Consultation—By building on the findings of the ongoing National Research Data Archives Consultation (NRDAC), we will define, with our partner, the National Archives of Canada, a joint strategy to address the plethora of issues relating to the collection, management, preservation and availability of digital research data. As it happens, humanities researchers have made certain advances in this area far in advance of their colleagues in the natural, health and social sciences and it is essential that all research communities and users of research benefit their expertise and innovation.

Canadian Institutes of Health Research—SSHRC assisted in the transformation of the Medical Research Council into the CIHR. Given the expanded mandate of the new agency, we will investigate how to enhance the ability of humanities researchers to participate in CIHR programs.

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3. New Technologies

Rapidly evolving information and communications technologies have become an integral part of humanities research. SSHRC has already recognized this where it counts—in the pocketbook—by classifying as eligible research expenses the use of new technologies in the conduct of research, the production of research tools and the dissemination of research results.

4. Basic, Targeted and Interdisciplinary Research

As the only national source of funding for basic research in the humanities disciplines, Council reaffirms that its highest priority and fundamental responsibility remains the support of independent, investigator-driven research and scholarship. While for some observers, our goal of raising levels of support to those provided by the other federal granting agencies calls to mind the myth of Sisyphus, we remain committed to increasing the funding rate in our Standard Research Grants program, long a central source of support for the humanities research community.

As the Working Group's *Report* points out, humanities research is changing and SSHRC must respond to those changes. Increasingly, humanities scholars conduct applied, collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

Council will therefore ensure that in reviewing the results of the national consultation on strategic themes the interest of humanities scholars are rightfully considered.

We shall also encourage humanists who wish to conduct *interdisciplinary* research by developing specific criteria for evaluating interdisciplinary research proposals and by ensuring that peer-review committees are both open to such proposals and competent to assess them.

5. SSHRC, the Humanities and the Universities

Council will continue to work closely with the universities to support and promote humanities research and research training. Indeed, this is very much part of our collective *raison d'être*.

In particular, we need to join forces to sustain the quality, integrity and openness of peer-review. Many of the Working Group's key recommendations—concerning the role of the public intellectual, openness to risk-taking in the evaluation of research proposals, partnerships, interdisciplinary and international perspectives on research, the use of new technologies—all presuppose a peer-review system that supports, yet rigorously adjudicates, innovative research topics and methods.

We need, therefore, to ensure that the criteria for peer-review—both the Council's, for evaluating grant applications and the universities', for assessing applications for tenure and promotion—evolve toward recognizing the multiple facets of academic life, the numerous ways in which humanists contribute, not only to the intellectual life of their discipline, but to the civic life of their communities and beyond.

Accordingly, both Council and Academy must build a peer-review system that welcomes originality, diversity and social engagement—without compromising the rigorous academic standards that have earned respect around the world. And to do this, SSHRC needs university administrators to encourage humanities (and, of course, other) faculty to serve on Council review committees *and to formally recognize their contribution in doing so*.

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Conspectus and Conclusion

Council emphatically concurs with the Working Group that the support and promotion of humanities research and teaching in Canada amounts to a collective responsibility. SSHRC plays a leading role in this effort, but ultimately not the most important one. As the *Report* makes clear, only with the involvement and commitment of individual scholars, learned societies, universities, governments and private and public organizations can we realize the fullest potential of the humanities—and therefore of our society—in the twenty-first century. SSHRC is proud to play a role in coordinating and perhaps even inspiring these diverse constituencies, but the real energy—the moxie—must come from them.

Now is the time for the humanities community to follow up the *Alternative Wor(l)ds: The Humanities in 2010* conference with local and regional initiatives. Let the various interest groups now galvanize their disciplines, their universities, their learned societies to act to realize the important goals to which the Working Group's *Report* has pointed.

In this era of globalization and ramifying technology, what the humanities teach us remains not only *au courant*, but more important than ever before. And in a country like Canada, where a hundred cultures somehow make up one country, we need, more than most, the knowledge and the wisdom of these diverse histories, philosophies, religions and literatures. Science and technology succeed best when they make themselves obsolete, but the humanities record and reflect upon that grand complexity—the human condition—about which we can never understand enough. Let us therefore reclaim and revitalize the place of the humanistic enterprise at the heart of our educational system, culture and society.

As a final word, SSHRC wishes to express its appreciation to the Working Group for its prolonged labour and expressive insights. Council also sincerely thanks all the delegates who participated in the *Alternative Wor(l)ds* conference last October. Your reflections, debates and recommendations continue to inspire us.

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL OF CANADA

We build understanding

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is an arm's length federal agency that promotes and supports university-based research and training in the social sciences and humanities. Created by an act of Parliament in 1977, SSHRC is governed by a 22-member Council that reports to Parliament through the Minister of Industry.

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