

Cuts cause pain, but not panic

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With plenty of buzz surrounding a new undergraduate tuition grant, introduced this month by the provincial government, details of the Liberals' decision to cut roughly \$42 million in research funding from the Ontario Research Fund (ORF) attracted significantly less attention, despite almost simultaneous implementation.

In the past week, media outlets, academics and graduate students alike expressed both concern and outrage over yet another reduction to research funding that supports work in arts and humanities, social sciences, as well as university-industry ties, through the Research Excellence (RE) program of the ORF.

While some media outlets are treating this as news, universities were made aware of the cuts last fall, says Andrew Nelson, associate dean (research) in Western's Faculty of Social Science.

That's not to say researchers at Western won't miss ORF funding, Nelson adds.

"Provincial funding is really important to us and we've had some success with it in the past. We're disappointed to see it go, but we anticipate funding will continue," he says.

Nelson explains the cuts could affect ongoing work receiving ORF funding, including that of Western neuroscientist Adrian Owen, as well as projects involving tracking innovation in the global marketplace, population and diversity in immigration, transitional justice and efforts toward creating a digital database for archeological artifacts.

And these are just within Social Science, Nelson says.

"The future is unclear. Three specific competitions were cut. We have assurance that other competitions such as the CFI (Canada Foundation for Innovation) match are going ahead."

But this isn't a time to despair, Nelson explains.

"We're well positioned to take (a lead) in the digital media push. And this is something I think is quite important. If you're at Western, we actually have considerable strength in digital media, the digital humanities and social sciences," Nelson says, noting the work of developing a digital database for archeological artifacts and the work going on in the CulturePlex lab, led by professor Juan Louis Suárez in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

"Digital media is a state of research priority for the province and the arts and social sciences at Western, I think, are extremely well positioned to take advantage of that."

To do this, Nelson adds, universities have to be creative in looking for different funding opportunities.

"Governments have to make decisions. I think we have to be responsive and creative and what we have to do is make the case better that we do contribute to the economy, and to the training of students and to the training of citizens," he says, pointing to recent publications that demonstrate the need for arts and humanities- and social

science-trained individuals to support humanitarian projects and socio-economic efforts at home and overseas.

Nelson also says researchers will have to roll with the punches, keeping in mind they aren't necessarily being targeted.

"In some ways, this is comparable to the shift in health-related funding from SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) to CIHR (Canadian Institutes of Health Research). We've been trying to stop that shift, trying to maintain the social sciences-related research in the health field, but that's a losing battle. So our researchers are retooling themselves and trying to repackage themselves so they can be competitive with the CIHR (applications)," he explains.

"What this means is that there is an application competition that was created for us that's no longer available. But it didn't exist before, either. So I don't choose to read this as we're being targeted."

And Dan Sinai, Western's associate vice-president, research (acting) agrees.

"With the current economic downturn, our government is clearly concerned with creating jobs and with training students. These cuts mean we will need to remain flexible, and to identify other avenues for funding. We remain confident in the high calibre of projects Western's researchers have proposed and I believe strong projects with strong partnerships will continue to thrive regardless of the name of the funding program," he says.

"At any given time, Western holds funding from more than 300 different programs – from provincial, federal and international sources, as well as from industry, foundations and donors. This flexibility is critical to our success in today's funding landscape."