



**Chad Gaffield, President**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Bringing together top-level experts from a plurality of disciplines, **SSHRC** provides the resources to help social scientists and humanities researchers excel. Valued as crucial players in today's research arena, Chad Gaffield, SSHRC President, explains how the Council plans to prepare for tomorrow in the first of a two-part exclusive interview

**As a leading federal funding agency, how does the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) promote and support research and training in the humanities and social sciences?**

SSHRC uses two approaches. Through its programmes — Talent, Insight, Connection — SSHRC funds research excellence across all fields in the social sciences and humanities and supports the advanced education of emerging leaders in graduate and postdoctoral programmes. SSHRC also promotes continuous improvement in how Canada develops talent, generates insights and forges connections across campuses and communities through engagement and policy activities. Our enduring objective is to ensure that knowledge and understanding about people, in the past and present, contribute to a better future for Canada and the world.

**How has the Council evolved since its inception in 1977?**

It began its operations when the baby boom generation was coming of age, immigrants were arriving from all over the world, computers were entering the workplace and Canadians were rethinking key domestic and international policies and identities. One urgent need was for a better understanding of Canadian society in a global context. The problem was that, as late as the 1960s, most professors in Canadian universities had received their graduate degrees outside Canada, and most instructional material was imported from either Europe or the US.

Over the last four decades, SSHRC has helped Canada's social sciences and humanities grow in capacity and strength so that we now have a strong made-in-Canada research community that is highly respected around the world. This research community includes over 80,000 individuals involved fulltime in social sciences and humanities research — professors, doctoral students and Masters' students. In addition, these campus-based researchers increasingly collaborate with the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and thereby enhance the contribution of research to prosperity, justice, resilience and quality of life.

In promoting and supporting the development of a top-quality Canadian research community, SSHRC has increasingly worked to benefit from the latest social sciences and humanities research about the characteristics of high-performance organisations. We have updated our governance structure, engaged with staff to develop a People Strategy, and streamlined our funding opportunities to facilitate our support for the full range of innovative approaches, including those based on digital scholarship. We were all delighted when SSHRC received the Deloitte-IPAC Award for Leadership in 2011, an award that 'recognises organisations that have demonstrated outstanding leadership by taking bold steps to improve Canada, through advancements in public policy and management.'

**You have been President of SSHRC since 2006, what inspired you to take up the position? How have your background and experiences enabled you to progress in this role?**

Having benefited enormously from research support as a doctoral student and then as Professor of History, I jumped at the chance to contribute to the crucial role that SSHRC plays for advancing the social sciences and humanities. My experience as a professor in diverse universities such as McGill, Toronto, York, Victoria and Ottawa made me deeply appreciate the pan-Canadian character of SSHRC's mandate.

In thinking about programmes as well as activities, I am cognisant that campuses and communities are not all the same in Canada, and that this diversity is a great strength that promotes excellence and ensures resilience. In addition, my six years as Vice-Dean and Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, helped me learn about the similarities and differences across campus, as well as the multiple connections with the larger society. This work encouraged me to see the study of change as a key element of many different research fields, from those dealing with particles through to those dealing with people. Most of all, I draw upon my historical studies to gain perspective on the present, as well as to think through the decisions that will help craft the future. While history does not, in fact, repeat itself, there is no doubt that learning about the positive and negative experiences of those who have gone before us can be helpful for fulfilling any position today.

I should add that my experience in sports has certainly made me value a team approach, as well as metaphors related to coaching and high performance. One of the great privileges for me has been to work on the SSHRC team and to do my best to help us all perform at the highest level, something that we strive for each day.

**How can the social sciences and humanities contribute to advancing our economic, cultural, social, technological, environmental and intellectual understanding?**

By focusing on people in the past and present, SSHRC-supported research in the social sciences and humanities enhances our understanding of social, cultural, technological, environmental, economic and wellness issues. Our fields explore who we are as human beings, what we need in order to thrive in complex and challenging times, where we have been in the past, and where we may be headed in the new century. In so doing, we inspire innovative researchers to learn from one another's expertise, to collaborate across campus and with communities, businesses and governments in order to improve people's lives. And by investing in scholarships, fellowships and research training, SSHRC helps transform the best and brightest individuals into Canada's future leaders.

**What are SSHRC's priority research areas?**

In recent years, SSHRC has supported research in five priority areas: aboriginal research; innovation, leadership and prosperity; the environment; Northern communities; and the digital economy. In each case, SSHRC funding, as well as policies and engagement activities, have helped researchers and their partners address major issues of the day not only in Canada but also internationally. By working with elders and embracing all ways of knowing in the criteria for our funding opportunities, SSHRC has become a world leader in supporting aboriginal research on topics such as schooling, governance and economic sustainability. Similarly, SSHRC-funded researchers are helping rethink the relationship between humans and the rest of the environment with a view toward new policies and practices that promote sustainability and prosperity, resiliency and improved quality of life including, for instance, Northern communities undergoing rapid change.

SSHRC has contributed to a new model of innovation that recognises the essential value of research on human thought and behaviour as well as the central role of people in moving ideas and knowledge beyond campus. Thanks in part to significant impacts of research, this new people-centered

model of innovation is now replacing the ineffective, linear technology-transfer approach of past decades. This trend is especially evident in research related to how the private, public and non-profit sectors are all increasingly using digital technologies to improve productivity, learn about customers, users and citizens, and implement new ways of thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While we will continue to actively support research on such topics, the results thus far have clearly made an impact and given new optimism to how a better understanding of people can improve our ability to tackle the most challenging problems. In order to build on one of the most successful components of this approach, we will be moving away from the general category of priority areas next year in order to focus specifically on future challenge areas, those topics which may not be in the headlines today but whose importance we can anticipate for the coming years and decades. Our recent initiative to select such future areas is entitled *Imagining Canada's Future*.

#### What have been the key drivers of the *Imagining Canada's Future* initiative? What challenges have been identified?

Launched two years ago, the goal was to identify future challenge areas for Canada in an evolving global context and to which the social sciences and humanities research community could contribute its knowledge, talent and expertise. Following a cross-Canada and international consultation process – during which we engaged more than 13,000 subject matter experts, both on-campus and beyond, as well as public and private sector leaders – we selected six future challenge areas. They represent lenses through which SSHRC will enable the Canadian social sciences and humanities research community to increase its ability to help Canada and the world confront these issues and seize the opportunities they present.

Throughout the consultation process, four cross-cutting topics emerged as essential concerns for Canada and Canadians in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing world:

- Sustainable, resilient communities
- Creativity, innovation and prosperity
- Values, cultures, inclusion and diversity
- Governance and institutions

Against this background, SSHRC identified six future challenge areas in June 2013. We need to answer:

- 1 What new ways of learning, particularly in higher education, will Canadians need to thrive in an evolving society and labour market?
- 2 What effects will the quest for energy and natural resources have on our society and our position on the world stage?
- 3 How are the experiences and aspirations of aboriginal peoples in Canada essential to building a successful shared future?
- 4 What might the implications of global peak population be for Canada?
- 5 How can emerging technologies be leveraged to benefit Canadians?
- 6 What knowledge will Canada need to thrive in an interconnected, evolving global landscape?

#### How did you become involved with *Building a Digital Nation for the Benefit of Humanity in Canada*? How will SSHRC and the

“ In my travels across campuses in Canada and beyond during the past seven years, I have become increasingly optimistic that, despite many challenges and the uncertainty of the deep changes now underway, the future is bright if we continue to increase our attention to building evidence-based people-centred institutions, communities and societies ”

**Chad Gaffield**

#### social science and humanities sectors benefit from a transition to the digital age?

In recent years, leaders across society are increasingly emphasising that the Digital Age is only partly the result of new technologies; in fact, new ways of thinking about human relationships have been inspiring the development of these technologies and their proliferation across society. In my own research as a historian, I began using mainframe computers to build large databases composed of information from documents such as census enumerations, parish registers of births, deaths and marriages, and land ownership records. This work reflected a new way of thinking about historical change; rather than simply being the result of decisions by official leaders, significant transformations came to be recognised as the result of decisions by the ‘anonymous’ – those whose lives had been dismissed as passengers on a train driven by the famous. Similarly, new thinking across research fields from literature to sociology and anthropology has been fueling the emergence of digital scholarship, transforming how we attempt to understand all aspects of the past and present. In turn, this transformation has been spreading to the private, public and non-profit sectors as they too embrace new ways of thinking, analysing, building new products and services, and interacting with customers, students, patients, citizens and so on. It was in this context that the social sciences and humanities have become centrally involved in initiatives to help Canada thrive as a Digital Nation, one that has successfully integrated world-class digital technologies, robust digital content and sophisticated digital literacies to enhance quality of life. Since the early 1980s, SSHRC has played an important leadership role in cultivating digital scholarship as well as in helping companies and communities take advantage of digitally enabled strategies and operations. One of our recent initiatives is the international *Digging into Data* Challenge.

#### Could you detail some of SSHRC's greatest successes?

The most encouraging development of recent years has been the deepening appreciation of the value of learning about people in the past and present. Rather than viewing disciplines such as history and philosophy as secondary to disciplines that deal with the life or physical sciences, leaders in the private, public and non-profit sectors now increasingly view the intrinsic value of learning about the human condition as a strong foundation for extrinsic value, especially in the connected, global 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In the new approaches to customer-driven marketplaces, patient-orientated health services, student-centred schools, citizen-engaged politics and resident-focused smart communities, SSHRC support for knowledge about human thought and behaviour is embraced. Moreover, such knowledge is now seen as inherently connected to topics once thought to be quite distinct such as climate change, genomics and ocean sciences. The result is discipline-based interdisciplinary collaborations often involving fields from the social sciences and humanities as well as the life and physical sciences. While a great deal of work remains to be done to fully benefit from such innovative approaches, I believe that SSHRC's focus on the combined intrinsic and extrinsic value of the social sciences and humanities has

been highly successful in raising the profile of such research on campus and beyond for the benefit of Canada and the world.

It is gratifying to see increasing recognition of the excellence of scholarly work across the social sciences and humanities. For example, the Council of Canadian Academies recently assessed the quality of research in its *The State of Science and Technology in Canada* report (2012, see p16). Overall, the CCA reported that Canada ranks fourth in the world in research strength with the humanities and social sciences contributing significantly to this excellence, especially fields as diverse as historical studies, the visual and performing arts, business and management, classics and criminology. I have no doubt that Canada's strength in those research areas that concern people help explain our highly respected public policies, strong civil institutions and attractive communities that together compose what is consistently praised as one of the world's most successful societies. The challenge, of course, is to build on this success in the coming years and decades.

### Having undertaken a forward-thinking approach, what are the Council's plans for the future?

As outlined in SSHRC's new strategic plan for 2013-16, *Strengthening Canada's Cultures of Innovation*, SSHRC will build on these accomplishments, not only by focusing on consolidating and sustaining them, but also by helping Canada forge new pathways that lead to the robust cultures of innovation required for prosperous, just and resilient societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. SSHRC is pursuing this strategy with an eye to achieving SSHRC's primary strategic outcome: positioning Canada as a world leader in social sciences and humanities research and research training.

Taken together, these strategic priorities will help us build on the steps forward of recent years as we continue to support and promote the social sciences and humanities for the benefit of Canada and the world.

### *Strengthening Canada's Cultures of Innovation, priorities for 2013-16:*

#### To promote and support Canadian excellence in social sciences and humanities research and talent development by:

- Promoting the skills, tools and infrastructure necessary for success in research and research training
  - Championing merit review processes that are robust, efficient and sustainable, and that recognise a broad range of research contributions
- Strengthening and promoting international connections and collaboration in research and talent development

#### To work with Canadian postsecondary institutions and other organisations to build a 21<sup>st</sup> Century research and training environment in the humanities and social sciences by:

- Facilitating world-class research and research training by regularly updating all steps in the grant management process to ensure they are effective, efficient and enabling
- Strengthening policies and other supports that recognise, preserve and value the full range of outputs, outcomes and impacts of research and training
- Supporting and broadening cooperation among Canada's granting agencies in policy and programme development and delivery

#### To position knowledge and expertise about human thought and behaviour to bring maximal benefits to Canada and the world by:

- Supporting research and talent development in important future challenge areas for Canada
- Promoting the value of multi-sectoral partnerships for Talent, Insight and Connection
  - Enhancing and promoting the contribution of social sciences and humanities to robust cultures of innovation across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors in Canada

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