



Understanding the General Research Fund

A reflection by Dr. Tim Kenyon, Vice-President, Research

In keeping with general Tri-Agency policies, when Brock researchers hold SSHRC and NSERC grants that are partially unspent at the conclusion of the formal grant periods, the remaining funds are transferred into General Research Funds, or GRF. The University may use GRF for other research support purposes, consistent with the broad field/topic areas of the agencies from which the funding originated. These funds can support internal grant programs, for example. However, Brock permits researchers to request a period of continued individual access to unspent grant funding after it has migrated to GRF, at the discretion of the Vice President, Research. Normally this request is granted.

This is an excellent system. It enables the continuation of research project activities beyond the formal end of a grant period. This is especially useful when unforeseen developments in the research project, in the researcher's life, or in the wider institution or society conspire to delay research activities. And it can enable researchers to take advantage of late-breaking opportunities not fully anticipated in the initial project timelines.

In the larger view, however, research grant funds are institutional funds, and they exist to support research, not to be held in trust or hoarded against the day they might come in handy. For Tri-Agencies grants in particular, the agencies monitor an institution's GRF for signs of its appropriate and effective use. It remains within the rights of the funding agencies to reclaim funds if they are not being used. In fact, CIHR reclaims unspent funds and does not participate in the GRF program. In any case, a large-scale pattern of GRF under-use could communicate to funders a lack of efficacy in research planning and implementation.

For at least these reasons, permission to retain access to research funds that have migrated to GRF cannot be extended indefinitely. There is normally a presumption that only a single extension of access to funding will be granted to researchers, who are encouraged to create a detailed, realistic plan for spending out remaining funds, as well as fallback plans in case their primary extension plan doesn't work out.

Under pandemic conditions in 2020-21, extensions to GRF fund access were automatic at Brock; that year was difficult for planning expenditures, with a steep learning curve for pandemic operations. In 2021-22, too, the bar for second extensions is relatively low, although not automatic; some definite plan for the use of funds must be in evidence. And moving forward, with increasing knowledge of how to conduct research through the ups and downs of a long-term pandemic, it will be increasingly important to have both active and resilient plans for spending out GRF authorizations within the extension period.