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Show the love for the Canada Research Chairs

It's appreciation time.

by David Mitchell



A couple of years after the Canada Research Chairs were created, the president of the University of British Columbia, Martha Piper, visited Ottawa with an impressive entourage in tow. She was accompanied not only by senior university administrators – vice-presidents and deans – but also by a group of researchers who'd received freshly minted [Canada Research Chairs](#).

Over a couple of days, the UBC gang fanned out in the national capital, meeting with officials in the prime minister's office, the [Privy Council Office](#), and with ministers and deputy ministers. Their coordinated message was twofold: first, to thank the government for its visionary funding of university research; and second, to show how these research chairs aimed to positively impact Canadian society.

This year, as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Canada Research Chair program, current university leaders might benefit by reflecting on the lessons of those earlier, often-discussed pilgrimages from the West Coast.

I believe two important lessons stand out. First, Martha Piper and her team weren't asking for more money; rather, they were expressing appreciation for the support of the federal government. This pointed towards a potentially interesting new form of advocacy, focused more on the public interest than the more narrow interests of a specific institution. Second, and as important, the UBC researchers were attempting to explain the importance and relevance of their work, something that can never be taken for granted.

Admittedly, Dr. Piper had a special motivation – she was, after all, one of the architects of the CRC program. Along with Robert Lacroix, rector of Université de Montréal, she had worked assiduously to help the government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien develop and design this major national research initiative.

Along with the creation of the [Canada Foundation for Innovation](#) and a major expansion of research funding, the CRCs represent a signal policy achievement of the Chrétien era. The specific objective of the CRC program was to establish up to 2,000 well-funded research chairs at universities across the country that would help retain and recruit top scholars, ensuring Canada's research competitiveness at a global level.

Ten years later, how have we done? The cost of the program to date has been almost \$2 billion. Its impact, especially at Canada's research intensive universities, is undeniable. More than 1,800 CRCs have been appointed at more than 70 postsecondary educational institutions. Of those, 550 were recruited to Canada from abroad, and many Canadian scholars were repatriated. The program's success is also reflected in the fact that other countries have emulated this bold Canadian initiative. And, successive federal governments have maintained the program and a deep commitment to research funding. Most provinces have also followed it with support.

Yet, it would be a mistake for universities to regard this as an entitlement. As we enter a period of restraint in public funding,

when balancing budgets will be the chief policy priority for the next several years at all levels of government, few programs that require continued funding will be sacrosanct. Thus, it is incumbent upon universities to demonstrate the relevance and impact of research-funding initiatives such as the CRC program. In my opinion, this kind of demonstration has not been a strength of most Canadian universities.

That's why I was pleased to be asked to take part in an important display of appreciation for research funding on Parliament Hill in February. Hosted by University of Alberta President Indira Samarasekera, the evening event brought 14 Canada Excellence Research Chairs from across Canada to speak to an impressive audience, including four cabinet ministers, about their research and why they chose to move to Canada. The research community must increasingly build these kinds of linkages with other sectors, particularly the private sector. Public funding can and must leverage additional support.

Not only do our university presidents and senior administrators need to do a much better job explaining to governments what they do – as Dr. Samarasekera is doing so energetically today – but they also need to help demystify the world of university research for the broader community. If Canadians as a whole don't understand the value of research, how can universities expect our politicians and governments to continue their generous support? This is our challenge and opportunity as we celebrate a decade of Canada Research Chairs, and simultaneously wonder if one day we will mark a second decade.

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