



NSERC Management Response to

The Evaluation of the Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge (SPARK) Program

(Report submitted by the Policy and International Relations Division, February 2006)

Recommendation 1: Use of Stories

Student-generated SPARK stories are mainly used in university communications, such as newsletters and Web sites. In order to broaden the reach of the program and to meet its ultimate objective of raising public awareness of Canadian research and innovation in the natural sciences and engineering, the stories must be disseminated externally as well as internally. NSERC must demonstrate leadership in this area by ensuring that the SPARK Web site is kept up to date, and by systematically reviewing new stories and assessing their potential for further use as Web features, news releases or success stories.

It is therefore recommended that the use of the SPARK stories be increased through an external distribution of the stories both by the participating institutions and by NSERC itself. NSERC staff may need to support mentors in these activities by providing them with information and training on external dissemination and by linking the institutions with relevant contacts in scientific or other publications.

- **Response:** Agreed. SPARK will be included in NSERC's overall Communications strategy. We will make every effort to increase our use of the SPARK stories and will encourage participating universities and colleges to do the same.

Recommendation 2: Program Resources

A significant problem encountered in a majority of participating institutions is the maintenance and expansion of the program once the three-year NSERC funding period ends. **The contributions of external sponsors such as those highlighted in the University of Guelph model are difficult to secure by most institutions and should not be a central component of the national SPARK model. Instead, some thought should be given to a longer-term model that includes continued NSERC funding.** For instance, the current three-year model could be extended to five years, with an additional \$1,000 provided to institutions in the 4th and 5th years of the program based on their performance in the first three years. Along with contributions from internal sponsors, the additional funds would help mentors further reinforce the program's position within the university and build on the implementation phase which often lasts two or three years.

A review of program resources should also be considered within the context of program coverage. Out of 70 eligible institutions, only 28 have participated in the SPARK program so far. Some non-participating institutions have applied for program funding but did not receive it due to a lack of proper mentorship or institutional support. Many others,



however, have never applied to the program. Although their specific reasons for not applying are not currently known, it is conceivable that a lack of awareness of the program may be responsible and can easily be remedied. **It is therefore recommended that additional program resources be allocated to the SPARK program in an effort to increase the number of participating institutions. Along the same lines, it is also recommended that NSERC work towards raising the awareness of higher officials within the university community about the program in order to increase or enhance their commitment to implementing it on a permanent basis with university resources.**

- **Response:** Agreed. NSERC is well aware of the difficulties some universities have encountered attempting to obtain external sponsorship funding and we are working on restructuring the program parameters by late 2006. NSERC management will give careful consideration to the recommendation that additional resources be allocated to the SPARK program. We will also work towards increasing the awareness of the program among university officials.

Recommendation 3: Other Disciplines

Many universities use the contributions from internal sponsors to develop profiles of researchers not working in the natural sciences or engineering disciplines and not receiving NSERC funding. NSERC recognizes the institutional need for stories spanning all research disciplines and has no objection to this practice, as long as NSERC funds are spent profiling NSERC-funded researchers only. The stories written about NSERC researchers should also clearly identify the NSERC SPARK program, as is indicated in the program documentation.

At this point, it is not recommended that the SPARK program be expanded into a formal tri-council initiative, due to the fact that both SSHRC and CIHR demonstrated little interest in this possibility in 2003 and because the institutions have found ways to make the program work for all three research fields without governmental intervention. In addition to this, the administrative resources required to manage the program are already insufficient and a tri-council initiative would only increase the time and budget required to administer the program adequately.

- **Response:** Agreed. There are no plans to expand SPARK into a formal tri-agency initiative at this time.

Recommendation 4: Program Administration

Although the administrative burden of the program on NSERC staff is relatively modest, **more effective program management would likely result from an increase in administrative resources. Additional resources would allow the officer responsible for the SPARK program to communicate with mentors more frequently and would result in more timely and accurate reporting as well as an increased submission rate of SPARK stories.**



If no additional resources can be found to alleviate the workload associated with program administration, other steps could be taken to manage the program in a more cost-effective manner. For instance, the introduction of an open competition process would result in fewer intensive work periods for the program officer. Alternately, devolving some administrative responsibilities to NSERC Regional Offices would allow the communications officer to help mentors with issues related to science writing or research promotion while leaving some program responsibilities to other staff members. For example, the regional offices could provide assistance in organizing local workshops for mentors and for screening applications before they are submitted for review.

It is also recommended that existing tools and resources such as the SPARK LISTSERV be formally presented to mentors and that they be strongly encouraged by NSERC to use them. The LISTSERV could be used as a primary communications mechanism between NSERC and the mentors on administrative matters, or between mentors who could use it to share information about lessons learned along the way.

Finally, the development of reporting templates to be completed by mentors is strongly recommended to improve program administration and performance measurement. Currently, program reporting requirements are provided in a general manner, leaving the choice of presentation format to the mentors. As noted elsewhere in this report, this has resulted in little useable program data and incomplete progress reports. A standardized annual progress report would help clarify NSERC's expectations and ensure high-quality data used for both program-level decision making and grant administration. Such a report template would replace the current progress and annual reports and could be designed to collect both quantitative output data and to capture more qualitative descriptions of individual SPARK programs.

- **Response:** Agreed. These recommendations are being taken into account in our restructuring review. Program changes will be announced to Vice-Presidents, Research, and Directors of Communications, or their equivalents, and on the SPARK Web site early in the new year.