Recommendation One: The federal government should mandate increased targeted undergraduate funding opportunities in all three Tri-Council agencies.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NSERC policy states, “undergraduate student participation in final-year projects and summer projects is an important first phase in research training and plays a major role in encouraging excellent students to pursue research careers.” While research experience for undergraduate students is highly valued, the funding opportunities for undergraduates within Tri-Council agencies are limited. NSERC offers a strong model, providing “Undergraduate Student Research Awards” which are allocated among universities, and are advertised, applied for, and selected within departments. With such high numbers of students in social science, humanities, and health sciences disciplines, it is problematic that these students are missing out on such valuable educational opportunities.

Research opportunities for undergraduates in fields covered by SSHRC and CIHR are far more limited. This past year, SSHRC had a targeted undergraduate opportunity through their “Storytellers” contest, which challenged students to effectively communicate the impacts of SSHRC-funded research on the lives of Canadians. While this is a beneficial initiative for students, it does not provide any research opportunities. Similarly, CIHR offered a summer internship program, which was open to both graduate and undergraduate students in health professional programs. Unfortunately, this program also provided less reach and opportunities than various NSERC initiatives.

Encouraging undergraduate participation in research does not require every student be funded to complete full-time summer internships. Rather, having enough funding set aside to encourage on-campus initiatives could foster the development of research skills and encourage student participation. Funding opportunities for smaller initiatives, like the creation of on-campus undergraduate research journals, could provide similar experiences and outcomes for comparatively small investments.

For social science, humanities, and health sciences students to obtain the same benefits that undergraduate students in science and engineering receive, SSHRC and CIHR must offer targeted undergraduate funding, and NSERC must build on its current initiatives for science and engineering disciplines. In 2011-2012 NSERC allotted $18,522,000 directly to undergraduate funding, which offered initial opportunities for research. However, this program would similarly benefit from an increased financing to further invest in Canada’s future in excellence in research.

DATA COLLECTION

Recommendation Two: The federal government should increase data collection on targeted Tri-Council funding opportunities for undergraduate students, as well as the current numbers of undergraduate student trainees involved in Tri-Council-funded faculty research proposals.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

SSHRC and CIHR lack an undergraduate outreach mechanism to foster undergraduate research. Unlike NSERC, there is sparse information about existing undergraduate opportunities offered by either of these funding agencies. Thus, it is difficult to obtain any information on how much money is currently provided to undergraduate students. If we are not able to track the research dollars dedicated to undergraduate students, we cannot identify the current gaps. While NSERC has dedicated undergraduate research funding opportunities and has published the amount of funding allotted to these programs since 2001, unfortunately, there is no accessible information after 2011. This information is crucial in understanding which universities have received undergraduate funding, to compare various universities in the opportunities they offer. Furthermore, it allows universities to track the growth of the funding they receive, and compare their offerings with other Canadian schools. This is the ideal model, however, it is currently unreachable due to the fact that no information is available for SSHRC and CIHR, or for NSERC after 2011. We ask that SSHRC and CIHR adopt the NSERC model of data collection and that NSERC makes their data available after 2011.

Many tri-council grant applications have a mandatory student training section, which requires some funds be used to train students in conducting research. This requires some of the funding be directed to student research assistant salaries, positions that can be filled at by both graduate and undergraduate students. However, as many U15 schools have large and prestigious graduate programs, these positions are often filled predominantly by graduate students. At Queen’s University, for example, research services estimates that out of all SSHRC grants received, graduate students make up approximately 85% of the student trainees included in these research projects. At schools that do not have large graduate programs, there is a greater likelihood that undergraduate students will fill these positions, but it is likely that most U15 universities have statistics similar to Queen’s due to robust graduate programs. However, this is merely an estimate as there is inadequate data about undergraduate student trainees at any other universities across Canada. There needs to be more data to track undergraduate participation in Tri-Council funded research projects. Until more data is obtained on the current climate of undergraduate research opportunities and funding, we cannot create metrics for success to demonstrate where targeted funding has created new opportunities for undergraduates, or recognize the gaps that continue to persist.

For the NSERC data collection example, see: http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/_doc/FactsFigures-TableauxDetails/2010-2011Tables_e.pdf
In a 2011 report by the Assembly of First Nations, an overwhelming number of indigenous students cited post-secondary education as a fundamental requirement of First Nations Self-Determination and Governing. While education is of clear value, the funding to support indigenous students attending post-secondary education has been minimal. The funding has been eroded by inflation, inhibiting its ability to benefit indigenous students over the past decade. Specifically, funding for the Post-Secondary Student Support Program has not increased more than 2% for many years due to a cap placed by the previous Conservative government. This cap has severely limited the impact of this program and its ability to make post-secondary education accessible for indigenous communities.

During the 2015 Federal Election campaign, the Liberal Party promised to lift the 2% cap on funding increases to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program and provide an additional $50 million dollars per year to the fund. However, this promise was not included in the most recent federal budget. Thus, the members of ADVOCAN implore the government to continue on the path towards reconciliation and follow through with its campaign promise by increasing funding and support to the Post-Secondary Student Support Program.