# Managing My First CIHR Grant:
## Reflections of an Early Career Researcher

*By Natasha Gallant, PhD (Regina)*

Last September, I started as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Regina. The transition from trainee to faculty member was not an easy one and, in the midst of a pandemic, it was even more challenging. Given the circumstances, I was extremely fortunate to be working as a new faculty member at the same institution where I completed my graduate studies. I already knew most of the faculty members in my department quite well and I was familiar with many of the campus policies and procedures. Even so, I feel that I missed out on a lot of casual conversations that would have taken place while attending department and faculty meetings, waiting in line at a campus coffee shop, or simply walking down university hallways. I was not able to pop into a colleague's office for a quick question or to brainstorm ideas for a new project. Grabbing coffee or lunch with a colleague was not an option.

Natasha Gallant, PhD

Then again, our new virtual reality laid the groundwork for me to establish collaborations across Canada. With support from the Institute of Health Services & Policy Research (IHSPR), I started co-leading a recurring virtual learning collaborative with a dozen or so early career researchers interested in aging, older adults, and long-term care. This virtual learning collaborative began around the same time that reports of rising COVID-19 infections and deaths in long-term care homes were brought to light and, together, these early career researchers and I sought out ways of supporting long-term care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In September of last year, such an opportunity presented itself to us when CIHR announced the Implementation Science Teams: Strengthening Pandemic Preparedness in long-term care funding opportunity. With support from mid- and late-career researchers across the country, we prepared an application for this funding opportunity and, to my genuine surprise, our team's application was one of the successful ones. We were chosen to carry out a project aimed at successfully reintegrating essential care partners into long-term care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As excited as I was to have landed my first CIHR grant in my first year out of grad school, I felt that I had so much to learn about managing a grant. And consider that this wasn't a small project: As the Nominated Principal Applicant, I was leading a team of 20+ interdisciplinary researchers and knowledge users from Saskatchewan to Nova Scotia! So, for anyone else who is an early career researcher with their first grant, I wanted to share my thoughts on the lessons that were most valuable to me.

## 1. Don't get trapped in a cycle of endless planning.

In the early days of managing the grant, I spent a lot of time planning the logistics of the project. I created guidance documents and budgets and timelines and Gantt charts and whatever else you

can think of... until I realized that I was trapped in a cycle of endless planning. Planning is an important part of project management, so it is an essential part of doing research, but it's also important to limit the time you spend planning so that you don't wait too long to get started on ethics applications, data collection and analysis, and so on.

## 2.  Delegate, delegate, delegate!

Many trainees learn to manage all aspects of a project—from ethics application to data collection and analysis to write up—with the help of their supervisor. Managing all aspects of a project is a valuable experience as a trainee but as a faculty member, it is not a feasible approach to managing grants. During the first few months of the grant, I think I was still in the trainee mindset as I was trying to run many aspects of the project on my own. Once I hired a couple of Research Assistants (RAs) using funding from the grant, I started delegating some of these tasks. I was able to step back from the details of the project so that I could see the bigger picture of the program of research that was developing.

## 3.  Enjoy your mentorship role.

Learning to delegate was one of the most challenging lessons for me but, to my surprise, it was also a really rewarding experience because it provided more opportunities for mentorship. Instead of trying to do everything on my own, I was able to provide guidance to the RAs on the grant as they were developing their research skills. Watching someone at an earlier stage in their career grow as they learn about implementation science methodologies, qualitative approaches to data collection, or ways to write up a literature review have been rewarding experiences.

## 4.  But don't be shy to seek mentorship yourself!

Another side to the theme of mentorship was the fact that I also needed to reach out to my own mentors. I reached out to some of the more experienced researchers that I knew in the field. I also reached out to my fellow early career researchers on the team since they provided me with guidance based on their own experiences conducting research. As early career researchers, we move into a space where we are no longer considered trainees but, in all honesty, early career researchers still need guidance from their mentors as they learn the nuts and bolts of being an independent researcher.

## 5. Let others play to their strengths.

Make sure that you understand everyone's strengths (and areas of growth) so that they can make valuable contributions to the team's efforts. If I need to create a strategy for engaging policymakers around in the discussion on essential care partners in long-term care, for example, I set up a

meeting with those with expertise in public health and policymaking so that we can brainstorm together. If I need to decide which self-report questionnaires to include so that we can measure changes in perceptions of loneliness, social support, burnout, and so on… Well, I think psychology can handle that one. If anything, I need to call on others on the team to help me limit how many questionnaires I include.

Despite the challenges of starting a position as a faculty member during the COVID-19 pandemic, I think that the rise of the virtual format allowed for opportunities that might not have been made available had I started as a faculty member in a non-pandemic year. Managing a grant as an early career researcher has meant that I have learned so much in such a short period of time. That is, I have learned to plan just enough so that I can get started on the project, delegate so that I can be a mentor for trainees, reach out to mentors myself because I still have a lot to learn, and enable meaningful contributions from everyone on the team.

> Instead of trying to do everything on my own, I was able to provide guidance to the RAs as they were developing their research skills.
>
> Early career researchers still need guidance from their mentors as they learn the nuts and bolts of being an independent researcher.
>
> *Natasha Gallant, PhD*