Michèle Boutin returns to the pages of *International Innovation* to discuss her role as Executive Director of the Secretariat of the Canada Research Chairs Program. She also outlines how the Program seeks to train the next generation of researchers and the process through which Chairs are nominated.
**International Innovation** interviewed you in your capacity as Executive Director of the Canada Excellence Research Chairs (CERC) Program back in 2012. Welcome back! Could you recap the key responsibilities of your role and highlight any new developments?

As Executive Director of the Chairs Secretariat, I administer a number of programmes including the Canada Research Chairs Program (CRCP). I also oversee a programme called the Research Support Fund – formerly called the Indirect Costs Program – which supports the indirect costs of research at post-secondary institutions across the country. Recently, I have also taken on the additional responsibility of administering a new, large and exciting initiative announced in the Government of Canada’s 2014 Budget, called the Canada First Research Excellence Fund.

**Why is CRCP so important, from both a national and international viewpoint?**

From a national point of view, the Program has been responsible for establishing 2,000 research professorships across the country in universities of all sizes, in all disciplines. This has built a critical mass of internationally renowned and established researchers who are recognised by their peers as being the top researchers in their field. That has enabled Canada to showcase its talents across the globe and be recognised as a leader in R&D.

Another of the Program’s objectives is to train the next generation of experts in a range of scientific fields. By what means are you performing this task? What educational opportunities are made available through the Program?

The training of highly qualified people is one of CRCP’s core objectives. When a university submits a nomination, it is asked to describe how the nominee will engage in mentoring and supervising students and the sorts of activities that he or she will undertake to train the next generation of researchers. From undergraduates getting involved in research programmes, to Master’s and doctoral students pursuing their theses, to postdoctoral fellows pursuing further training, the Program involves a range of academic levels.

**How are you working collaboratively with universities to identify and share strategies and practices that adhere to a high level of transparency and equity?**

CRCP was first created in 2000, and in the first few years the proportion of women who were nominated by institutions was very low, at just 14 per cent. The number of women put forward by universities was much lower than the number of women represented in the faculties. Since then we have implemented a number of measures to promote equity and encourage universities to have open and transparent processes for identifying nominees. That includes women and other designated groups in Canada – Aboriginal Peoples, persons with disabilities and visible minorities. By working with institutions we are striving to ensure that all of these groups have opportunities available to them through CRCP.

Our CERC Program also faced similar challenges, so the two programmes together are sharing a best practice guide for universities in terms of recruiting top researchers and being equitable in that process. Every three years we ask institutions to set targets for the representation of designated groups among their CRCP nominees. Over the last three years, we have recognised one particular institution every year for their equitable practices – an initiative that continues to promote dialogue and the sharing of best practices. We have spent time reviewing the literature about unconscious biases and other factors that can impact the selection of candidates, which has led us to amend our guidelines to reviewers and people who write reference letters to make them aware of unconscious biases.

**Could you explain the process by which you allocate or nominate a Chair?**

The Canada Research Chairs are allocated to institutions. At the programme level, the 2,000 Chairs are allocated among the different...
disciplines as follows: 45 per cent are allocated to natural sciences and engineering, 20 per cent to social sciences and humanities and the remaining 35 per cent to health disciplines.

The number of Chairs that are allocated to each institution depends on that institution’s share of grant agency funding; that is, research funding provided by the three granting agencies: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). If, for example, an institution receives 7 per cent of the funding from CIHR, they will be allocated 7 per cent of the Chairs in the health field. The process is dynamic; we do these allocations every two years to recognise that institutions evolve and develop their research programmes.

Each university must then nominate someone to fill the Chairs it has been allocated. The process by which they decide where to allocate it, and in what discipline, is internal and depends on their research priorities. The nominated Chair then undergoes peer review managed by the Secretariat. The criteria are: the quality of the candidate, the quality of the research programme, the institutional support provided to the Chairholder, the fit with the institution’s strategic research plan and the institutional commitment (which includes the environment in which the Chair will operate). The peer review is a pass or fail decision based on these very stringent criteria of excellence.

With the Program investing almost CAD $265 million annually to attract and retain the most expert minds, how do you ensure these funds are distributed effectively?

When a university is allocated a Chair, those Chairs are organised into two tiers: Tier 1 applies to established researchers who already have international stature, and Tier 2 Chairs are for emerging researchers who have the potential to gain international status. For Tier 1 Chairs, the university receives $200,000 per year, and for Tier 2 Chairs the university receives $100,000 per year. This is how the $265 million budget is spent.

It’s awarded to institutions based on the Chairs that they have nominated and who were approved through the peer review process.

What does the near future hold for CRCP? Do you have any exciting plans in the pipeline?

The Program is going to be 15 years old next year. It’s really a long-standing programme. Since it was launched, quite a bit has happened both in the world and in the wider environment in which universities and researchers operate. Also, government policy has changed more generally; the Canadian Government has implemented a number of initiatives to support science, technology and R&D. Fifteen years down the line, this is an ideal time to scrutinise CRCP and examine how it contributes to our country’s priorities. We have an evaluation coming up, which will take a close look at how the research environment has evolved and how CRCP continues to contribute to the success of Canadian institutions. Depending on the findings from that evaluation, we will decide whether or not we need to make changes to the Program and determine how well it continues to fit into the broad landscape.

A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Devoted to excellence in research and research training, the Canada Research Chairs Program invests approximately CAD $265 million every year to attract and retain some of the world’s most accomplished and promising minds. The Chairholders themselves aim to achieve research excellence in a broad spectrum of different fields, ranging from engineering and natural sciences to health sciences, humanities and social sciences.

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