

Kevin Belanger

Program Officer, NSERC

Written by Alana Rangaswamy, M.Sc. Trainee



Background

During his undergraduate career, Kevin chose to pursue human kinetics and kinesiology as it combined his talent for science and athletics. Many students who graduate with a B.Sc in kinesiology seek careers in physiotherapy or occupational therapy, or else go on to teaching, coaching or graduate studies; but Kevin enjoyed the research aspect of his studies. During his fourth year, he was looking into master's programs, and received a full scholarship to pursue a M. Sc in kinesiology, which he completed with a specialization in physiology.

After completing his Master's degree, Kevin was considering his career options. In a casual conversation with his thesis supervisor, he was advised not to pursue a PhD unless he was particularly inclined to do so, and to take some time to work if he was unsure. Kevin found a position as a Research Assistant at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario with the research group he completed his Master's with. This opportunity allowed him to play to his strengths, produce a consistent academic output by means of publications (in case he decided to return to an academic career) as well as providing some small managerial roles. Knowing that developing a balanced skillset was essential in the job market, he sought out more management opportunities, before eventually joining NSERC in May of 2018.



Current position

Kevin's role at NSERC is as a Program Officer, where he manages two selection committees within the Research Tools and Instruments Grant program. His job includes recruiting members to his selection committees: that is, seeking out experts to review applications; as well as monitoring the policies that are in place within the program, enforcing them and modifying them if need be. He needs to be skilled not only in managing people, but also in understanding the nuances of policies, and the nature of the programs he runs with four other Program Officers. He assured me that although much of his work is hands-off with respect to understanding and reviewing grant applications, his background in health science gave him a certain familiarity with the subject matter, making him more comfortable and confident in his position.

I asked Kevin what he enjoyed most about his work, and what was most challenging. He answered immediately that the community was the best part: that in some ways it was similar to participating in a lab group where everyone has advanced degrees and a high level of expertise in their work, but all made the decision to turn away from the academic route. It's a comfortable environment for research-trained individuals to work, but there's no anxiety due to the need to maintain funding which academics face. That said, the greatest challenge he described was based on funding, because all of the money they manage comes from the government, i.e. the taxpayer, so the Program Officers and senior staff must be meticulously accountable for how that money is spent, ensuring it goes towards benefitting the Canadian people. Kevin describes his work, and the work of NSERC in general, as "para-public": not strictly industrial (seeking to make money), but rather seeking to allocate money to support those who do research.

General Remarks

A person best-suited to do this kind of work must be organized, have great attention to detail, and above all, be able to communicate effectively and persuasively. Recruiting



reviewers means asking top-tier scientists to do pro-bono work, just to give back to the scientific community.

His best piece of advice to those entering the job market is to find a great boss, not (necessarily) a great job, because your career trajectory is largely influenced by the professional mentoring received early on in one's profile development.