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## PhiLab Interviews: the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research



**Mary Milner**, Advancement Manager, Corporations & Foundations, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR)

By Kristen Pue, PhiLab

**Kristen:** Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to work for CIFAR.

**Mary Milner:** Well, it's been a winding road. I've been working in the non-profit sector since 2009 in a variety of roles, but the through line has been that donor relations has always been a part of my job. Whether it was at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection working to reduce child exploitation, the Digital Public Square trying to create safe online forums for Iranian citizens to engage in politics, or working in Sierra Leone with eHealth Africa to combat Ebola... every nonprofit needs someone to develop proposals, conduct grant management, and manage relationships with the donors in order to keep the lights on. CIFAR is the first opportunity I've had to work at a nonprofit of this scale and in a specific 'advancement' department, which has added a dimension of discipline and process to my professional experience.

**Kristen:** Some people might not be familiar with CIFAR. Could you tell me a little bit about what CIFAR does and why its work is important?

**Mary Milner:** CIFAR, the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, funds high-risk and (potentially) high-reward research. CIFAR funds research that may not otherwise be supported through traditional university or government funding mechanisms. CIFAR currently has 12 Research Programs, made up of the leading minds in each field, on everything from studying space to developing artificial intelligence to trying to understand the role the microbiome has had on human evolution and health. Our goal is to break down traditional research silos and bring together



interdisciplinary groups from around the world to make significant breakthroughs in science that will change the way we approach medicine, education, technology, and governance (among others).

**Kristen:** What does your role as an Advancement Manager entail?

**Mary Milner:** I'm largely responsible for the stewardship of our corporate and foundation donors. This means, once a donor has signed an agreement with us, I'm responsible for keeping them engaged and reporting on how we've used their money. Ultimately, it's my job to convey to a donor the impact they've had on research and how this research might ultimately change the world. Ideally, this then leads to continued funding into the future. To a certain extent, I'm also involved in donor prospecting and cultivation, which means identifying donors who might be interested in funding us, going to meetings to develop a relationship, and creating proposals that appeal to their funding interests.

**Kristen:** What, for you, is the best part about being an Advancement Manager for CIFAR?

**Mary Milner:** Learning about all the different things that are happening at the forefront of cutting edge research. Every day I hear about something that has been achieved that I would have never thought possible. I'm very excited to see where these discoveries lead and how they might make the way we all live better in the future.

**Kristen:** What is something that Canadians might be surprised to learn about CIFAR?

**Mary Milner:** That we're a charity! I'm mostly kidding about that, but a lot of people - even those that have known us for a while - think we're a government agency. CIFAR was established in 1987 and the organization has grown tremendously thanks to the support of very generous donors who believed in our mission to catalyze ground-breaking research.

**Kristen:** Is there such a thing as a 'typical donor' for CIFAR? What are some of the different kinds of donors that you engage with?

**Mary Milner:** Not really, we're funded by a pretty diverse group of foundations, corporations, individuals, and governments.

Our individual donors are typically curious and intellectually entrepreneurial. They're interested in what we're doing and believe in our mission to fund science and research. They give anywhere from a few dollars a month, to tens of thousands a year, to millions in annual funds and legacy gifts. Usually they want to give to us because they're intrigued by a research program (the extreme universe or artificial intelligence) or maybe they were affected by something that our research touches on (Alzheimer's or autism, for example).



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Our corporate donors tend to be large and established but range from banks to social media companies. They tend to be forward thinking companies who want to invest in proactive solutions to issues that affect their business and the world. For example, a health insurance company might fund our program in Child & Brain Development which does research into the factors that set a child up for healthy development.

Our foundation donors are very diverse and typically target their philanthropy towards a particular social or environmental cause designed to improve society over time. For example, we have a cluster of foundations out west that are very focused on developing a clean energy future and put their donations towards our program in Bio-inspired Solar Energy. Our largest foundation donor, the Azrieli Foundation, established two new programs at CIFAR: the Brain Mind & Consciousness program, which is in line with their other funding, and also our Global Scholars program, which is designed to develop the next generation of research leaders.

Our Government donors are typically funding areas of research that address a particular policy strategy. For example, the Canadian Federal Government recognized that there was a significant brain drain from Canada to the States in our tech sector. So, they decided to try and reverse this by putting CIFAR in charge of the \$125 million Pan-Canadian Artificial Intelligence Strategy in order to establish three hubs of research excellence in Toronto, Montreal, and Edmonton. We're now a year and a half into that strategy and the first cohort of 29 AI Research Chairs, half of which have been recruited from abroad to come to Canada and take up positions at Canadian universities, was announced in December 2018.

**Kristen:** What are some of the differences in how you work with foundations and corporate donors?

**Mary Milner:** The basic strategy is the same: we determine what their goals are with their funding, what types of programs or issues they're interested in, and their prospective level of giving. We then develop a proposal for them that we hope will meet those goals. With corporations, because the money they're giving to us is shareholder money, they typically have greater reporting requirements that are much more focused on the impact of their donation to their constituents. Recognition is also a priority for corporations who often use charitable giving as a way to increase revenue in the long term. That being said, there are corporations that give to us with very little in the way of reporting requirements... and there are foundations that have significant expectations in terms of impact and financial reporting... so it all just depends. Every relationship is unique and we manage them all individually.

**Kristen:** Are there particular facets of CIFAR's work that donors tend to view as especially important?

**Mary Milner:** I think most of our donors see their contribution as an investment in the future. CIFAR is largely seen as being a facilitator of innovation and a purveyor of evidence that can be used towards more effective policy and practice. CIFAR also has a well-established history and has demonstrated



that it is a good steward of funds, so donors have confidence when they give to CIFAR that their contribution will make a difference.

**Kristen:** As a research-supporting nonprofit, how does CIFAR balance donor accountability and academic freedom?

**Mary Milner:** I think that's the beauty of CIFAR; we fund the convening of researchers, but the researchers are situated in their own research institutions and their research IP [intellectual property] is with their home institutions. Our research programs have general goals and ideas that the researchers are pursuing, but how they go about pursuing that research and what conclusions they come to are completely independent. We are accountable to our donors for supporting and sharing that research, but we're always very clear in our relationships that there is no donor influence in the outcomes of the research programs.

**Kristen:** What are some trends in Canadian philanthropy that might affect research organizations like CIFAR in the future?

**Mary Milner:** The nonprofit sector as a whole is facing a major challenge regarding the demographic shifts occurring right now. According to Imagine Canada, people 50+ are now responsible for 74.3% of all individual charitable donations (compared to 53.8% in 1985) and people 70+ account for 30.4% of donations (compared to 15.8% in 1985). As those people age out of the donor pool and pass their wealth on to the next generation, it's not clear that the culture of philanthropy will also be passed on, or that the recipients of that wealth will give to the same things their parents or grandparents did. Furthermore, young people are not giving at the same levels their parents did when they were young. For a lot of reasons, young people don't have the disposable income to give to charity that previous generations did. So, the current level of funding available to charities is expected to shrink dramatically over the next ten years. The challenge of getting young people engaged and donating to charities, especially charities such as CIFAR where the impact of our work is long-term and unpredictable, will be a challenge.

**Kristen:** What about trends in the nature of research? Is the enterprise of research changing too, and does that affect CIFAR's work?

**Mary Milner:** Yes, there are many changes in the way research is done taking place. We're seeing an increased focus on applied research and knowledge mobilization (in many ways, donor driven), which is thinking ahead to how your research will be used and what impact it will have as you're conducting it. It's no longer enough to do research and publish it in an academic journal. Researchers more and more have to be out in the world, writing in non-traditional places, and engaging with practitioners before, during, and after their research projects. This requires an entirely different set of



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communication and leadership skills, which is something that CIFAR has recognized and is addressing in training the next generation of scholars through the CIFAR Azrieli Global Scholars program.

**Kristen:** Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Mary Milner:** I don't think so!

**Kristen:** Great – thank you very much for taking the time to chat about CIFAR and the work that you're doing, and the best of luck in the new year.