

CIHR Project Grant Review: Implications for O'Brien Institute Members

The pressure on CIHR related to the Project Grant is sharpest in the pillars where O'Brien Institute members work (Pillar 3 and Pillar 4). O'Brien Institute members have outperformed national (all pillars), CSM (all pillars), and Pillar 3/4 benchmarks, but that margin narrowed in the Spring 2026 competition. Most of the [CIHR-proposed changes](#) would affect O'Brien Institute members differently than CSM as a whole.

O'Brien Institute members and CIHR pillars

Most O'Brien Institute members work in health services and policy (Pillar 3) and population and public health (Pillar 4), and many also do clinical research (Pillar 2), including trials. O'Brien Institute members submit about a third of CSM's Project Grant applications.

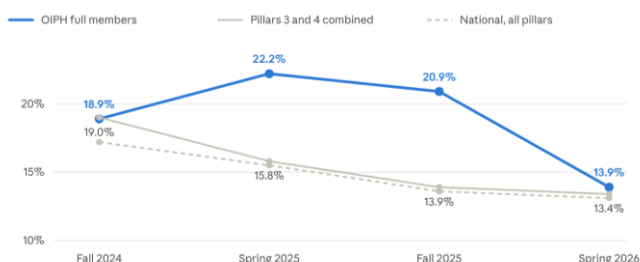
Pressure is greatest in our pillars

- Pillar 3/4 applications rose 50% in four rounds while funded grants stayed flat; combined success fell from 19.0% to 13.4% (Fall 2024 to Spring 2026).
- Pillar 3 now has the lowest success rate of the four pillars (12.6%) and the smallest average grant size (about \$670K, against \$1.04M in biomedical).
- About 58% of Pillar 3/4 applications are streamlined without committee discussion.

The three committees CIHR names as growing fastest are the core O'Brien Institute committees. Applications to each have doubled or tripled since Fall 2022, and CIHR forecasts a further 30 to 38% rise by Spring 2028.

Committee	Fall 2022	Spring 2026	Change	CIHR forecast, Spring 2028
HS1: Health services evaluation (Pillar 3)	109	289	+165%	393
PH1: Population health (Pillar 4)	94	189	+101%	245
RC1: Randomized trials	69	212	+207%	292

O'Brien Institute members are performing well



Source: CIHR results pages; O'Brien Institute results (member NPAs)

- O'Brien Institute members led Pillars 3 and 4 by 5% to 7% in Spring and Fall 2025 and closely matched the average in Spring 2026. More broadly, Institute members have exceeded the national average in each of the last five rounds and in 15 of 20 rounds since 2016, with a pooled success rate of 19.5%, compared with the national average of 16.3%.
- In Spring 2026, CSM and UCalgary each fell to 10.8% while O'Brien Institute members held at 13.9%.

Potential effects of the proposed changes to O'Brien Institute members

Proposed change	Potential effect on O'Brien Institute members	Why
One application per applicant	Limited benefit	About 8% of O'Brien Institute members Pillar 3/4 applicants submit twice, against 17-19% of CSM faculty
Single annual competition	Mixed	CIHR modelled success rising from 14.5% to 20.0%; risk of gaps for soft-funded teams, partner timelines and early career researchers
Letter of intent stage	High risk	A short format may undersell partnered, multi-method work
Feedback-and-response, clearer resubmission advice	Likely benefit	About 58% of grants are streamlined; 23.2% of resubmitted grants succeed compared to 9.9% success for first submissions
Budget caps or standard grant sizes	Possible benefit	O'Brien Institute member grants are already smaller than the average; data access and partner compensation costs need to be protected
Standalone trials program	Potential risk	A fixed envelope for trials may not keep pace with RC1, where applications have tripled
Mandatory peer review	Potential risk	Relies on a small pool of Pillar3/4 experts (O'Brien Institute members)

Proposed change	Potential effect on O'Brien Institute members	Why
		and takes away capacity for this pool of members to submit competitive grants