center for scientific review

peer review notes

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Richard Nakamura Named CSR Acting Director

Richard Nakamura, Ph.D., has become Acting Director of the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) at the National Institutes of Health. NIH Director Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D, made the appointment to replace CSR Director Toni Scarpa, M.D., Ph.D., who resigned September 2, 2011. (See following article.)

Dr. Nakamura has had a 35-year tenure at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), where he has served as both Scientific Director and Deputy Director of the institute, and as Acting Director from 2001 to 2002.

"I appreciate Richard's willingness to lead CSR in this transitional period," said Dr. Collins. "He received various professional and government awards, including the Presidential Rank Award for outstanding leadership."

Dr. Nakamura will lead CSR's 450 scientists and administrative staff, overseeing their efforts to manage about 80,000 incoming NIH grant applications a year and review the majority of them in CSR peer review groups. CSR holds 1,600 review meetings a year, involving about 18,000 reviewers from the scientific community.

"I look forward to working with the many dedicated individuals engaged in this great enterprise," said Dr. Nakamura. "It's a privilege to help NIH identify research with the most promise for making our world more healthy and productive."

Dr. Nakamura Wants Your Input

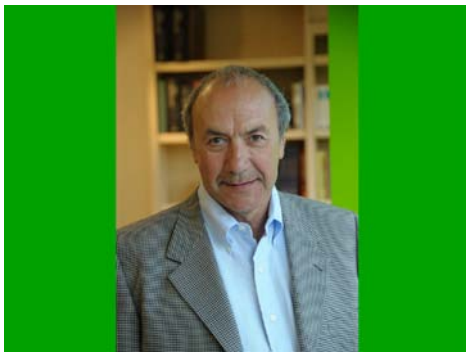
"CSR has experienced many changes in a short time," he said. "We need to take time to systematically gather data and determine what works and what doesn't work, so we can make data-based decisions going forward." While NIH continues to evaluate its trans-NIH peer review enhancements, Dr. Nakamura wants to directly hear your comments, concerns and constructive suggestions. **E-mail him at CSRDirector@csr.nih.gov**

Dr. Nakamura came to NIMH in 1976 as a postdoctoral fellow. In the mid-80's he coordinated NIMH's Biobehavioral Program and later was Chief of its Integrative Neuroscience Research Branch. Between 1997 and 2007, he served as the institute's Deputy Director. From 2007 to 2011 he has been institute Scientific Director. While at NIMH, he also has held other positions, including Associate Director for Science Policy and Program Planning; Chief, Behavioral and Integrative Neuroscience Research Branch; and Coordinator, ADAMHA Office of Animal Research Issues.

He earned his B.A. in psychology from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, his M.A. in psychology from New York University, and his Ph.D. in psychology from the State University of New York in Stony Brook.

Dr. Nakamura has expertise in a number of areas, including cognitive and comparative neuroscience, science policy/funding and ethics in science. He has published 30 peer reviewed scientific journal articles, most related to neurocognition in primates.

Toni Scarpa Retires as CSR Director



On July 26, 2011, Dr. Toni Scarpa announced his resignation as CSR Director.

"My six years at CSR were exhilarating," he said. "I was privileged to serve in a period of unprecedented changes and opportunities in peer review. Thanks to a dedicated staff and reviewers, CSR excelled during this time, reviewing 50 percent more applications in addition to 40,000 applications for federal stimulus funds two years ago. This was only possible due to a shared passion and unfailing commitment to the quality and efficiency of peer review."

During his tenure, CSR succeeded in doing more with less. "CSR now saves $35 million a year," said Dr. Scarpa, "by using innovative electronic review platforms that reduce travel cost, providing non-refundable airline tickets to our reviewers, sending applications and meeting materials electronically rather than on paper or CDs, and holding meetings on the West Coast once a year where many reviewers live."

"Toni brought imagination, innovation and not a little artistry to the otherwise pedestrian, yet vital process of peer review," said Dr. Garret FitzGerald, associate dean for translational research at the University of Pennsylvania and member of CSR's advisory council. "His enthusiasm infected those of us who interacted with him in the academic community, and as a result of his efforts, we have a more transparent, efficient and fair process, so important in this era of constrained resources."

Dr. Scarpa played a significant role helping NIH design and implement the first major changes to NIH peer review in 65 years. A list of these and other CSR accomplishments during his tenure are posted on CSR's Web site:
http://cms.csr.nih.gov/AboutCSR/Publications/Reports/CSRaccomplish05-11.htm

CSR Launches Program to Mentor Early Career Reviewers

CSR is now recruiting up-and-coming researchers into a new Early Career Reviewer (ECR) Program. “We want highly qualified Early Career Reviewers who will help meet the needs of our study sections now and in the future,” said former CSR Director Dr. Toni Scarpa. “The gradual inclusion of these reviewers will help ensure the process remains fresh and dynamic.”

“Engaging researchers a little earlier than before is a win-win,” he said. “The experience of writing critiques, scoring applications and participating in the review discussions will prepare them to be full-fledged reviewers later. Reviewers gain not only valuable perspective on the peer review process, but they see firsthand what makes for a strong grant application.”

ECRs will participate in a CSR study section meeting once a year for up to two years and have a limited role, serving as the third reviewer on two NIH grant applications each time. This lighter load will help ECRs stay focused on advancing their research and careers.

“It’s important to note, this is not just a training program,” said Dr. Scarpa. “We want ECRs who will help meet the current needs of our study sections and complement our reviews.”

In selecting ECRs, CSR will consider researchers who have an active research program, who are published in high-impact journals, and who have not reviewed for NIH in a face-to-face meeting. An ECR does not necessarily need to have NIH or equivalent funding.

While CSR will consider any qualified ECR candidate, we are seeking to enrich the pool of reviewers by making a special effort to recruit qualified ECRs from less research-intensive institutions.

The Initial Steps and Recruitment Goal

As a first step CSR has sought ECR nominations from almost 350 research institutions, and we have encouraged Scientific Review Officers (SROs) to recruit one ECR each review round, with the goal of having at least 50 percent of our SROs recruiting an ECR in the current round. To date, we have received about 650 nominations. We hope to eventually engage several hundred ECRs each year.

Results from a Pilot

Feedback from a recent ECR pilot has been positive. “The program makes intuitive sense,” said Dr. Alan Engelman, from the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. He chaired a recent meeting of CSR’s AIDS Molecular and Cellular Biology study section, which included an ECR. “The reviewer fit in well and did a good job.” The SRO, Dr. Ken Roebuck, agreed. “The ECR picked up important points and definitely contributed positively to the discussion . . . so I’m looking at this individual as a future ad hoc or regular member.”

The new reviewer was equally pleased, saying, “It was an amazing experience . . . It has both opened my eyes to the reviewers’ perspective and given me extreme faith in the peer review system . . . Many of my colleagues who have already served on study section are envious, as

they recall their first experience as a new reviewer and say they would have loved to have received the experience I did."

To Learn More, Visit Our ECR Program Web Page

http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ReviewerResources/ECR.htm

New CSR Video for New Applicants Now on YouTube

New applicants attending our outreach talks at regional and national meetings often tell us they learn a lot from them. So more can benefit, we produced a new video that essentially puts viewers in the front row of one of these popular PowerPoint presentations.

Our new "What Happens to Your Grant Application" video provides an overview of CSR and the peer review process. It covers more key details than our NIH Peer Review Revealed video, which presents a mock study section meeting.

View these videos at: http://www.csr.nih.gov/video/video.asp

Other Resources for Research Mentors and Trainers

An outreach flyer associated with the video can be downloaded from our outreach publications Web page: **http://cms.csr.nih.gov/publications**

Reviewers and Applicants to Benefit from New CSR Web Site

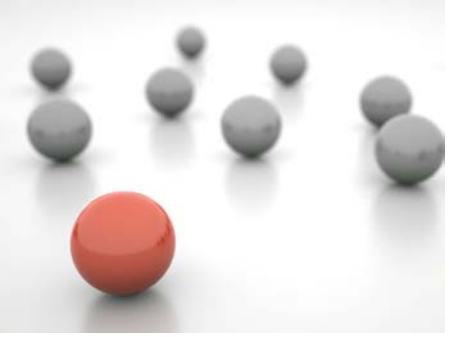
CSR will roll out a redesigned Web site later this fall that will make it easier for reviewers and applicants to get the information they need.

- Users will have an improved search engine that will make it easier to find things—particularly study section descriptions.
- Experienced reviewers will find ready access to information on policy changes.
- Applicants will have a new launch pad for needed information. The site will clearly define CSR's unique role in the application submission, review and award process and direct applicants to CSR and NIH information that will help them become successful applicants.
- Applicants also will quickly discover who at CSR/NIH can help them during the different stages of the application preparation, submission, review and revision processes.

The new site will retain the same Web address: **http://www.csr.nih.gov**. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Reviewer Reminder: R15s Are Different

NIH recently posted a reviewer's guide to R15 grant applications to help reviewers fully appreciate the unique goals and policies that govern this grant program.



The “Academic Research Enhancement Award” (AREA) grant program was designed to support small-scale research projects at educational institutions that have not been major recipients of NIH grants but provide baccalaureate or advanced degrees for a significant number of students who may become research scientists.

In addition to the usual goal of supporting meritorious research, this program was designed to strengthen the research environment and expose students to research at these targeted institutions. Applications should include plans to expose students to research but should not include training plans like traditional training or fellowship applications.

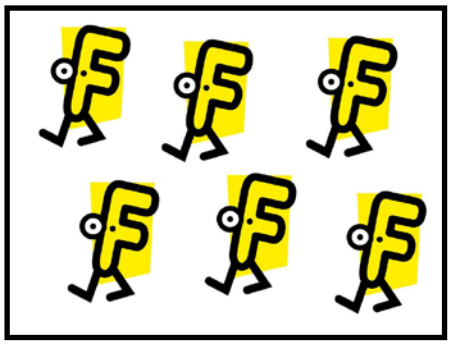
Enhancing research environment and student exposure to research currently are not specific review criteria, but reviewers are asked to consider these issues when they assess “overall impact” and the “investigators” criterion.

AREA grants are limited to institutions that receive a total of $6 million or less in research and training grants in 4 of the last 7 years. Awards are limited to 3 years and $300,000 in direct costs over the entire project period.

Learn more about the review of R15 applications by viewing the R15 Guide for Reviewers on the NIH Web site: **http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/r_awards/R15_Guide_for_reviewers.pdf**

What’s New with Fellowship Reviews

This round, CSR’s Interdisciplinary Molecular Sciences and Training Integrated Review Group (IRG) is piloting a new approach to reviewing fellowship applications. Instead of holding standard one- or two-day face-to-face meetings, Internet assisted meetings or video assisted meetings, this IRG will conduct their fellowship reviews over the telephone after reviewers participate in an Internet assisted pre-meeting. Reviewers will devote about the same amount of time reviewing applications, with the meeting itself being reduced to about four hours.



Why consider these changes?

Experience has taught us that a broad reviewer consensus exists on many fellowship applications, making many lengthy discussions unproductive. By shortening discussion where agreement is present, the length of the meeting can be dramatically reduced and more effort can be devoted to those applications where agreement is not obvious. We are not, however, asking reviewers to devote less time to assessing these important applications.

For this approach to work well and for applications to receive appropriate consideration, we will ask reviewers to use some of the time they save from shorter discussions and devote additional effort in the week prior to the review. During this Internet pre-meeting phase, reviewers will address various issues that don’t require much discussion. By shifting some of the review effort to the pre-meeting phase, we hope to increase effectiveness and efficiency at the meeting.

These changes will help lessen reviewer travel burdens. Before expanding this practice, CSR will carefully survey reviewers and staff involved in this pilot.

Editorial Review Boards for Small Business Applications

"Soon after CSR piloted editorial reviews in 2008 and 2009, we found they worked well for evaluating groups of diverse, complex and multidisciplinary small business applications," said Dr. Don Schneider, Director of CSR's Division of Basic and Integrative Biological Sciences. "Our Interdisciplinary Molecular Sciences and Training Integrated Review Group is implementing these reviews for all its small business applications."

What Are Editorial Board Reviews?

They are typically two-stage reviews that function much like journal reviews. In stage one, two or more subject matter experts mail in full critiques and criterion scores. In stage two, we assign each application to three reviewers from a group of reviewers with broad and complementary expertise. These reviewers meet face-to-face to consider the stage-one reviews and score the applications for overall impact. When feasible, we use the two-stage process to review applications covering diverse topics, including small business applications (SBIR/STTR) and other groups of complex and multidisciplinary applications.

Benefits

- Reviews are deep and broad, with every application being reviewed independently by at least five reviewers
- Additional expertise can be added if needed
- Stage-one reviewers do not have to travel or schedule teleconferences
- Stage-two meetings can be small and interactive
- The process promotes better scoring and assessment of impact for complex, multidisciplinary applications

Positive Feedback

A March 2010 survey of participating reviewers, SROs and program staff was very positive:

- Editorial board reviewers and program officers liked the final review products
- The majority of reviewers said they were willing to participate in either review stage in the future
- Three-quarters of the reviewers said this review format increased expert reviews
- Two-thirds of the reviewers said they preferred to have their own applications reviewed the same way

Learn More Online

http://cms.csr.nih.gov/AboutCSR/ReportStorage/EvaluationReports/EdBoardReview.htm

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