

“Chair of Chairs” Receives CSR’s Highest Service Award

When the call came, Dr. Alice Clark was excited. She thought to herself, “this must be something big if Toni Scarpa is calling.” It was indeed something big: CSR’s Director was calling to tell her she had won the 2010 [Marcy Speer Outstanding CSR Reviewer Award](#).



Dr. Clark, however, wasn’t thinking about the highest award for scientists who review NIH grant applications. She recalls thinking he was about to ask her to “serve on something really big . . . it will be great fun whatever it is!”

When Dr. Scarpa described how CSR set up the Speer award to honor distinguished reviewers, her enthusiasm only increased as she waited for the opportunity to say “sure, I’ll help however I can.”

When the truth came out, Dr. Clark was speechless. “Everything seemed to come to a stop, and it took a moment to realize what he was saying,” she said. “I’ve worked with so many who deserve recognition. I couldn’t believe it.”

“There was no mistake about it,” said Dr. Scarpa. “With her wonderful enthusiasm and passion for rigor and fairness, Alice personifies all that’s great about our reviewers.” He noted that Dr. Clark was nominated by four CSR staffers, three program officers and three fellow reviewers. They called her the “Chair of Chairs,” for her exceptionally “fair, efficient and collegial” way of running meetings.

Dr. Clark is a review veteran who is the Vice Chancellor for Research and Sponsored Programs and the F.A.P. Barnard Distinguished Professor of Pharmacognosy at The University of Mississippi.

In the last 20 years, she participated in 63 reviews, including those as a regular reviewer and chair for the AIDS and Related Research Study Section and the Drug Discovery and Mechanisms of Antimicrobial Resistance Study Section. She was also a regular member of the Bio-Organic and Natural Products Chemistry Study Section and has served on multiple special emphasis panels.

Why do you continue to serve?

Without exception, every single time I’ve served on any panel, I’ve come away grateful for the opportunity and consciously aware that I learned some new science and developed skills to interact with people with different attitudes and opinions. I’ve met so many interesting people, some of whom have become life-long friends . . . and I always come away with a sense of purpose, believing we’ve helped in some small way ensure good science gets done for the public good.

What’s the most important thing you’ve gained?

At each stage in my career, serving on study sections has helped me to listen and appreciate the perspectives of others and to use my voice to represent others who can’t be there to speak for themselves. And I’ve always loved to get one of the proposals that I was just a little bit jealous of because it makes me really proud to be their advocate. This experience, more than

anything helped me decide to move into an administrative leadership role, because it is so fulfilling to see others succeed.

What advice do you give applicants at your university?

Start by visualizing what you hope your overall impact paragraph will say when you get your critique back. Your idea and the science behind it should make those reading it say your research will really have a big impact, that it will make a big difference in what we know or how we do things. Before you put much effort into writing, run your concept by your colleagues and get some feedback: Is this an innovative concept? Do you think this is a good approach to the problem? Too often, applicants spend enormous effort writing a proposal outlining a solid experimental approach that will only yield an incremental advancement, which may not generate much enthusiasm or get a lot of support.

Read and adhere to the guidelines. Respect the reviewers . . . remember that your proposal is being read by knowledgeable and very busy colleagues. Be sure to think about alternative strategies, and how the interpretation of the results you generate will guide decisions on the project and future directions.

What advice do you give new reviewers?

When you write your critiques, you need to remember how important it is to be clear in your comments and criticism, because applicants deserve to understand specifically how and why they got the score they did.

When you go to your first review meeting, it can be intimidating, even for those not easily intimidated. Always remember that you were asked to serve as a reviewer because you are a respected scientist; your responsibility is to voice your opinion on the merits of the proposals — especially if you disagree with other reviewers; the whole point of the process is to allow varying opinions to be shared so that all participating can provide more informed recommendations.

What advice would you give to a new chair?

Be prepared; control the process but not the discussions; inject humor whenever possible, but not at the expense of individuals. It's your responsibility as chair to keep the discussions professional, relevant, and appropriate. Try to achieve consensus when possible, but realize that there will be times when the study section members just don't agree, and you have to be prepared to stop the discussion. One of the hardest things to do is to maintain the balance between keeping the discussion moving and giving sufficient time for full committee input and differences in opinion; knowing when to wrap up the discussion is important so that all proposals can be fairly discussed. Be sensitive to the fact that all of the reviewers have worked hard to prepare their reviews, and take frequent opportunities to say this; encourage input into each proposal from all members of the committee.