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CSR Works to Manage Flat Budget as Applications Increase

“Budget pressures have forced us to be creative,” said CSR Director Dr. Toni Scarpa. “We’ve had to do more with less.” He continued, saying “while researchers send more applications and inflation creeps up, our budget has remained essentially flat.”

Excluding applications we received for special Federal stimulus funds in 2009 and 2010, the number of applications CSR received in 2010 increased more than 9% from 70,000 in 2009 to 77,000.

Current Savings

“So far, we’ve been able to find savings without impact on the quality of peer review,” he said. He then listed the major ways CSR has found savings:

- $17 million: giving reviewers non-refundable airline tickets while allowing them one change without question.
- $11 million: using electronic platforms to review 25% of the applications we review, including internet-assisted, video, telepresence and phone reviews.
- $4 million: using 4,000 fewer reviewers by assigning reviewers on average 2.5 more applications, which are shorter than before.
- $1.8 million: having study sections hold one meeting a year on the West Coast, where hotel costs are less than in D.C.

Looking Forward

Given the current fiscal climate, it is likely that CSR’s 2012 budget will continue to be constrained. With no reason to believe researchers will submit fewer applications, CSR will need to be even more creative with its business model.

More Electronic Reviews: We started using internet and video assisted reviews so we could engage reviewers who could not travel to Washington for a face-to-face meeting. The fact that
electronic reviews save money was icing on the cake. Now, CSR is looking for situations where
electronic reviews are viable alternatives. Four years ago it cost $867 to review an application in
a face-to-face meeting, and $107 and $237 to review an application in internet and video
assisted meetings, respectively. Today, the cost to review an application in a face-to-face
meeting is $524 since in the aggregate reviewers are assigned more applications than before.

Reduced Hotel Expenses: CSR has negotiated more favorable terms with hotels for meetings
that will be held in 2011.

Other Savings: Since the largest part of our budget is for salary, the proposed freeze on
federal salary increases will help us meet our budget challenges. Dr. Scarpa noted that “we
always think twice before we implement a new cost-saving initiative . . . ensuring the quality of
NIH peer review is still our number one priority.”

CSR Updates

CSR Gets New Advisory Council

Scientific leaders from across the country have joined a new
council to advise CSR on its efforts to coordinate the review
of NIH grant applications. “We’re thrilled so many
exceptional scientists have joined our council,” said CSR
Director Dr. Toni Scarpa. The CSR Advisory Council (CSRAC) will focus on CSR efforts to review NIH grant
applications while other NIH committees will advise NIH on
trans-NIH peer review policies.

CSRAC met May 2, 2011, in Bethesda and discussed a new tool to assess the fields of science
covered by CSR study sections, the review and realignments of CSR’s scientific review groups,
and the possibility of using software to assign applications to review groups.

Visit the CSRAC Web site to view the May 2 presentations and learn more about this new

CSRAC Members

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<tr>
<th>Bruce Alberts, University of California, San Francisco</th>
<th>Garret FitzGerald, University of Pennsylvania</th>
<th>Peter MacLeish, Morehouse School of Medicine</th>
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<td>Etty Benveniste, The University of Alabama at Birmingham</td>
<td>Heidi Hamm, Vanderbilt University Medical Center</td>
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<td>John Cacioppo, University of Chicago.</td>
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<td>Alice Clark, University of Mississippi</td>
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<td>Toni Scarpa, (chair) CSR/NIH</td>
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CSR Posts New Overall Impact Paragraph Examples Online: http://go.usa.gov/j5Q
Ensuring Reviews Are Balanced and Fair Reviews Across Career Stages

In late 2009, NIH started clustering reviews of new investigator applications as part of the Enhancing Peer Review process. We recently ran the numbers to see how this new practice affects scoring.

In 2001, about 15 percent of new R01 applications (Type I) submitted by new and established investigators scored within the 20th percentile. In the following years, a gap developed as new investigator applications did less well by 2-5 percent. Since clustering, the gap has narrowed.

Renewal R01 applications (Type II) from established investigators scoring in the 20th percentile have averaged about 35 percent during this time.

Pilot to Reduce Need for Small Special Emphasis Panels

CSR has been concerned about the use of many small special emphasis panels (SEPs), which are often needed to accommodate member conflicts and applications submitted by reviewers eligible to submit many of their applications at anytime.

Convening many small meetings represents an inefficient use of both reviewer and staff time. To help address this problem, CSR has identified a possible way to review more of these applications in regular study sections. We are piloting the pairing of similar study sections and the staggering of their meetings.

Background

More than two years ago, NIH offered continuous submission to many who provide substantial service to NIH peer review: chartered study section members, other reviewers with substantial service records, NIH council members, et al. This practice allows these researchers to submit at any time R01, R21 and R34 applications that would otherwise have standard due dates.

Removing fixed deadlines for these applicants has proved valuable, particularly in alleviating the burden many reviewers experienced when they had to review applications while preparing their own.

To date, about 6,000 reviewers and others are eligible to take advantage of this opportunity. Because NIH is committed to the goal of conducting peer review within 120 days of receipt, CSR has had to convene more small SEPs to review these applications.

The Plan

For many areas of science, CSR has identical or very similar study sections to accommodate the volume of applications in similar areas. For these areas, we will pair and stagger the two similar study sections so that one meets early and the other meets later in the review round.
Scheduling these study sections in this way will allow applications that otherwise would have been reviewed in a SEP to be reviewed in a regular study section. Like all CSR pilots, we will assess this one to determine how well it works.

**How Cover Letters Aid Application Reviews**

NIH encourages applicants to submit cover letters to help guide applications to our review groups and give us other information that will help us review them. A majority of applicants now take advantage of this opportunity.

**Popular Reasons to Use a Cover Letter**

- Suggest we assign your application to a review group you think is best.
- Suggest we assign your application to an NIH institute(s) or center(s) you think would be interested in your research.
- Describe the kinds of expertise needed to review your application.
- Let us know about potential reviewers who you think might be in conflict with your application.

Our scientific staff members make the final decisions after they carefully consider your suggestions and explanations.

**Suggesting a Study Section**

We designed our study sections with a deliberate amount of overlap, so more than one study section may have the expertise to review your grant application. You may express a preference, and we will work to accommodate you if possible.

- **Check our online study section descriptions** to identify a review group you think is best suited to review your application. Last year, this area of our Web site registered nearly 1.7 million page views.

- **Examine recent study section rosters** to help you gauge the scope of our study sections. But note that CSR study section rosters can change significantly from round to round since we recruit reviewers for a meeting based on the specific scientific content of the applications to be reviewed.

- **Consider seeking guidance from a CSR scientific review officer overseeing a study section** you think could best review your application. Program officers can also give guidance on suitable study sections.

**Requesting Assignments to NIH Institute(s) and Center(s)**

You can also request that your application be assigned to one or more NIH institutes or centers you think would be interested in your research. It’s usually a good idea to contact one or more NIH program officer(s) to get guidance. You can identify program officers via the NIH Institute and Center staff listings on their respective Web sites: [http://www.nih.gov/icd/](http://www.nih.gov/icd/).
Helping Ensure Your Review is Appropriate and Unbiased

- **Note essential expertise needed** to evaluate your application in your cover letter. You should not, however, list the names of potential reviewers.

- **Identify reviewers who you think could be in conflict with your application.** Learn about these conflicts at [http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/coi_information.pdf](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/coi_information.pdf).

Your scientific review officer (SRO) will consider the situation and make the final decision. If he/she agrees there is a conflict, the reviewer will not be assigned to your application and will not be in the room when it is discussed. Rosters are typically posted online 30 days before your review meetings, and if you see a reviewer on it who could be biased, contact your SRO as soon as possible.

Notifying NIH that You Are a Reviewer Eligible to Submit an Application Without a Deadline

Learn more about this and other uses of cover letters by checking out our new cover letter Web page: [http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/CoverLet](http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/CoverLet).

Confidentiality Agreement and Self-Identifying Conflicts in IAR

This round, you may feel you’ve hit a roadblock when you log into the Internet Assisted Review system—you now cannot access any review materials until you agree to a confidentiality statement.

Many reviewers and SROs, however, should find the road ahead much smoother. This change will help ensure that confidential materials in applications are protected. Moreover, a new “Recruitment Phase” module allows reviewers to self-identify conflict of interest before applications are assigned to them. This feature could greatly reduce the stress reviewers and SROs experience when conflicts are discovered late in the review process. As a result, SROs can be more judicious and efficient in assigning applications and recruiting reviewers.

You will find this IAR confidentiality agreement on the List of Meetings screen in the Action column on the far right of the screen. Click on a hyperlink titled “Confidentiality Statement.” After you agree with the statement, a “Check Conflicts” link is displayed for this meeting if your SRO has activated the “Recruitment Phase.” Regardless of whether or not your SRO uses the Recruitment Phase, you must concur with the confidentiality agreement the first time you access materials for each review meeting. You will also continue the practice of signing the pre-meeting and post-meeting Conflict of Interest forms.

New Chairs Report on Spring Training

“What was I going to learn?” Dr. Thomas Kupper, from Harvard Medical School, asked himself when coming to CSR’s spring training for new study section chairs. Like most incoming chairs,
he wasn’t really a rookie. He has served as a reviewer for over 20 years and has already served as an acting chair. “But it was very, very useful, and I ended up learning a lot about NIH and peer review,” he said.

Dr. Janet Rubin, from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, echoed his enthusiasm, “I loved the history and learning about the first military peer review.” She said she also “really liked the data” shared because it helped her understand why NIH had to change its grants and peer review systems.

“A lot of us have been complaining about the changes, so to get a window of what NIH is doing and why it did it was really helpful.” She continued, saying “there seems to be a new review standard” now that paylines have gone up. “It is very difficult to distinguish between things that are really, really good and things that are really, really, really good, but I think some of the changes such as the new weighting given to impact help reviewers to identify applications that may be slightly more worthy.”

Since 2009, over 450 chairs have participated in these seminars to learn more about peer review, policies and best practices for chairs. This year, CSR held regional meetings in six cities across the country, and a few more are planned for this summer.

“We had great discussions among the chairs,” said Dr. Susan Kinder Haake from UCLA. “A lot of it was oriented towards fairness and issues that come up in meetings. For example, if reviewers start to discuss their own findings, it is critical to clarify that such data is off the table if it isn’t published, whereas if a paper comes out a month before the review takes place and it does everything the applicant wants to do, the research is no longer high-impact science.”

Incoming chairs are clear on what makes a good chair: “Being fair and being able to deal with different personalities,” said Dr. Kupper, “from the very junior reviewer who is a little bit intimidated and trying to make an impression, to another reviewer who is perhaps being unrealistically negative or positive about it.” Dr. Haake added that “the chair helps set the tone for the panel” by recognizing that “there should sometimes be differences of opinion . . . and then summarizing them fairly.” Getting it just right can be difficult, but Dr. Kupper has confidence in the process. “Even if your summary is imperfect, that provokes a good discussion with reviewers who think the summary should be a little different.”

What advice do you have for new reviewers? “Read through all the materials that are provided,” said Dr. Haake, “because they provide an excellent overview of what to expect at the meeting.” Dr. Kupper tells new reviewers to “focus less on the minutiae of the approach and more on the significance . . . is the work really worth doing.” Dr. Rubin says “you should listen carefully and if you disagree . . . counter the other reviewer’s argument. Don’t just say ‘I don’t think that’s important.’ You have to say why it’s not important.”

“It’s a little scary,” Dr. Rubin reflects on her new position with a little laugh. “Some applicants will say I’m the reason they didn’t get funded, which is ridiculous . . . grant reviewing is in the hands of the reviewers . . . the chair can adjudicate the review but cannot get a grant funded.” Funding, of course, she notes comes from Congress, with the NIH institutes and centers making the final decisions.