

**Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council Meeting
National Institutes of Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

**Meeting Minutes
September 21, 2020**

The Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council (CSRAC) convened at 1:00 p.m., Monday, September 21, 2020, via an online video meeting. Noni Byrnes, Ph.D., presided as chair.

Members Present

Noni Byrnes, Ph.D.
Jinming Gao, Ph.D.
Alfred George, M.D.
Yasmin Hurd, Ph.D.
Deanna Kroetz, Ph.D.
José López, M.D.
Scott Miller, Ph.D.
Tonya Palermo, Ph.D.

Mark Peifer, Ph.D.
Julie Price, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Villa, Ph.D.

Ad-Hoc Participants

Narasimhan Rajaram, Ph.D.
Alexis Stranahan, Ph.D.

Bruce Reed, Ph.D., was the executive secretary for the meeting.

CSR/NIH/HHS Employees and Members of the Public Present

The meeting was held online via a Zoom. Observers from CSR senior staff and an interpreter attended via the Zoomgov platform. All other observers, members of the public and CSR staff, attended virtually via NIH videocast.

Welcome and Introductions

Dr. Reed welcomed CSRAC members, ad-hoc participants, and attendees to the 20th CSRAC meeting. He then announced that CSRAC's next meeting will be March 22, 2021. Members introduced themselves and then approved the minutes from their March 30, 2020, meeting.

CSR Update

After discussing management changes, Dr. Byrnes provided the following CSR updates.

Leadership Transitions (NIH Videocast: [12:40](#))

An acting division director will be overseeing the Division of Neuroscience, Development and Aging. Several new chiefs have been hired as well as new referral officers, a chief of staff, and a reviewer training coordinator.

Impact of COVID-19 on Peer Review (NIH Videocast: [15:05](#))

CSR was ahead of the curve when the COVID-19 pandemic became an issue. It already had a secure FedRAMP-certified Zoom platform ready for an emergency. With an advanced telework policy, its entire workforce was able to immediately work remotely with 100 percent productivity. CSR will continue to hold virtual review meetings through spring 2021.

Reviewer/Scientific Review Officer (SRO) Survey Results (NIH Videocast: [18:25](#))

CSR recently conducted a survey to assess reviewer and SRO sentiments about virtual review meetings. Both prefer in-person meetings. However, the largest percentages of reviewers and SROs said Zoom meetings were about the same in terms of overall quality of the meetings except with regards to durability of attention span, which was a larger concern in Zoom meetings. SROs felt it was slightly easier to recruit minorities and women for Zoom meetings.

What's the Future of Peer Review Meetings? (NIH Videocast: [25:28](#))

Dr. Byrnes said that the Zoom platform is easy to use and it is becoming more accepted. However, a decision on future use will be driven by objective data, reviewer/staff surveys, and environmental and fiscal considerations, as well as a concern for maintaining/advancing quality.

Scott Miller, Ph.D., said that the unique experience associated with in-person meetings can help investigators advance in their careers. CSR should be proactive in looking for ways to preserve these benefits going forward. Dr. Byrnes agreed and said networking is a valuable incentive for reviewers.

ENQUIRE: Evaluating Panel Quality in Review (NIH Videocast: [35:13](#))

Dr. Byrnes gave an overview of the ENQUIRE initiative to adjust the scope and guidelines of CSR's review groups to ensure they best match current and evolving scientific fields. Last March, CSRAC endorsed four reconfigured sets of study sections. Due to COVID-19, their implementation was delayed until the October 2020 receipt dates. The reorganized study sections will begin meeting in February 2021.

CSR just began evaluating 16 basic science study sections and will soon focus on two clusters of epidemiology and oncological science study sections.

Bias in Review (NIH Videocast: [37:04](#))

- **Assessing the Role of Topic Choice:** In 2019, NIH published an article that looked at topic choice and success rates and found topics with lower award rates were favored by Black/African American investigators. An [August 12 Open Mike blog](#) presented further analysis that showed Institutes and Centers (ICs) with overall higher award rates were associated with the topic areas that had the highest success rates and the ICs with the lowest overall award rates were associated with the topic areas with the lowest success rates.

Later in the meeting, Dr. Byrnes said that NIH leadership is discussing ways to directly address this gap.

- **Reporting on CSR's Anonymization Study:** CSR will soon publish a study evaluating the 1,200 applications that were reviewed in standard and anonymized form. The anonymization showed no effect on the scores of Black applicants while it worsened the scores of White applicants—slightly but significantly.
- **Piloting Multi-Stage Partially Double-Blinded Review:** CSR is collaborating with the NIH Common Fund to study the reviews of applications for NIH Director's Transformative Research Awards. These reviews are already partially double-blinded, with an editorial board and subject matter experts separately reviewing key, anonymized parts of the applications before the Editorial Board views the whole application and finalizes its reviews.
- **Bias Awareness Training for Reviewers and SROs:** In summer 2020, CSR piloted bias awareness training with NIGMS and the NIH Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity. Based on feedback, CSR is designing an interactive training module for reviewers and SROs for launch in spring 2021.
- **New CSR Data Book:** CSR is working to create an interactive website to provide public access CSR data on applications, meetings, reviewers and demographics. Plans call for CSR to share a prototype with CSRAC members at their next meeting.
- **Demographics, Career Stage of CSR Reviewers:** Dr. Byrnes presented 2015 and 2020 demographic data on CSR reviewers and applicants. Only small increases were seen in the numbers of female, underrepresented and Black/African American reviewers and applicants. However, representation of these groups on CSR's chartered study sections is higher than in the applicant pool due to CSR's recruitment efforts. She also noted that efforts to increase the numbers of associate and assistant professors have created better balanced review groups.

Broadening the Pool of Reviewers (NIH Videocast: [1:08:34](#))

- **CSR's Early Career Reviewer (ECR) Program:** With CSRAC guidance, CSR enhanced its ECR program in multiple ways. Nine hundred and forty ECRs were recruited in 2020 vs. 575 in 2019, and the ECR pool is more diverse than CSR's overall reviewer pool.
- **Critical Role SROs Play:** Dr. Byrnes discussed the way changes in SRO guidance and resources can broaden the diversity of CSR's study sections and special emphasis panels, including diversity of race/ethnicity, gender, career stage and scientific field.

- **New CSR Reviewer Finder System:** CSR recently launched a new SRO resource that merges listings in the ECR database, program officer recommendations, a list of funded investigators with limited service, and scientific society recommendations. In response to CSRAC discussions, Dr. Byrnes said she plans to discuss at the next CSRAC meeting ways to incentivize funded investigators who will not review.

Update CSRAC Workgroup on Simplifying Review Criteria (NIH Videocast: [1:28:11](#))

Dr. Byrnes said CSRAC recommendations to simplify NIH review criteria were well received by NIH leadership.

Simplifying Review Criteria for Clinical Trials (NIH Videocast: [1:34:15](#))

Dr. Reed discussed how CSR and CSRAC have worked to address the recommendation for an additional workgroup to simplify review criteria for clinical trial (CT) applications.

Members of the Simplifying Review Criteria for Clinical Trials Workgroup

- **CSRAC:** Alfred George, M.D.; Yasmin Hurd, Ph.D.; Tonya Palermo, Ph.D. (Co-chair)
- **Ad Hoc:** Brian Boyd, Ph.D., University of Kansas; Matthew Carpenter, Ph.D., Medical University of South Carolina; Brooks King-Casas, Ph.D., Virginia Tech; Pamela Munster, Ph.D., University of California, San Francisco
- **NIH Staff:** Sally Amero, Ph.D., Office of Extramural Research; Dr. Bruce Reed, CSR (Co-chair)

Initial Work of the Clinical Trials Workgroup

Dr. Reed summarized the workgroup's major focus points: the three-factor structure proposed by the initial work group can be translated well to the review of CT applications. The additional material required in the human subjects/CT information forms is burdensome and doesn't drive review outcomes.

He then discussed how workgroup members are drafting proposed modifications to the three-factor review criteria structure proposed by the initial workgroup.

Discussion

Dr. Palermo said there is a lot of variability in what applicants put in the additional CT forms. The burden on applicants and reviewers could be reduced if program officers collected and evaluated much of this information when funding is possible. Dr. Hurd agreed that program staff could do more of the evaluation. Members then discussed the usefulness of the timeline in assessing feasibility since CT timelines are often changed later to address program concerns.

Dr. Byrnes thanked members for their work in this important effort and said she looked forward to sharing the workgroup's detailed recommendations at the next meeting.

Report on CSR Open Forums on Racial Disparities

(NIH Videocast: [2:00:00](#))

In July 2020, CSR held three online discussion forms with the extramural community to listen to concerns about racial disparities in NIH peer review. A [report](#) on these forums was posted on the CSRAC Website and has been shared with NIH leadership. The overwhelming message was that the extramural community is frustrated by slow progress in this area and would like to see NIH addresses this with broad and fast action. Dr. Reed said participants focused on many issues beyond peer review, such as NIH funding practices and pipeline development efforts as well as racial barriers in academia and the scientific community at large.

Discussion

The following suggestions were made by CSRAC members:

- ***Form an NIH working group*** to address these issues that could include community representatives, SROs, and program officials.
- ***Continue dialogue*** on how to change the environment and bias training and encourage NIH to address the whole complex of factors contributing to racial/ethnic disparities.
- **Enhanced bias training for chairs**
- ***Explore what can be applied from NIH's Early Stage Investigator program*** to help advance minority researchers.
- ***Consider content mining and quantitative metrics*** to assess review bias/quality.
- ***This is a bigger issue than CSR: Encourage the NIH Director, Institutes and Centers to take immediate action to address racial disparities in funding—CSR cannot work alone with this***
 - Examine the role of decisions made by program officers on applications in the gray area and consider implicit bias training
 - Continue to build diversity in trainees, create the role models of tomorrow, but recognize the very slow progress at the faculty level —the new cluster hires and the MOSAIC program are good new efforts
 - Consider the NIGMS model on funding differences between Institutes to increase funding in areas where underrepresented minorities work
 - Recognize the difficult economic/social challenges minority trainees may face

- Participate in the Support of Competitive Research (SCORE) mechanism
- Encourage increased use of diversity supplements

Dr. Byrnes said she appreciated the discussion, noting that these recommendations would be shared with NIH leadership.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 p.m. We do hereby certify that, to the best of our knowledge, the foregoing minutes of the September 21, 2020, CSRAC meeting are accurate and complete.

Noni Byrnes, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Scientific Review

Bruce Reed, Ph.D., Executive Secretary
Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council