

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

**Meeting Minutes  
March 29, 2021**

The Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council (CSRAC) convened at 1:00 p.m., Monday, March 29, 2021, 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.  
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.  
Denise Wilfley, Ph.D.

**Ad-Hoc Participants**

Leopoldo Cabassa, Ph.D.  
Matthew Carpenter, Ph.D.  
Christine Hendon, Ph.D.  
Michelle Janelsins, Ph.D.  
Narasimhan Rajaram, 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 remotely. CSR senior staff attended as observers via the Zoomgov platform, as did an interpreter. 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 21<sup>st</sup> CSRAC meeting. Each person introduced themselves along with their institutional affiliations and respective areas of science.

## CSR Update

Dr. Byrnes provided the following CSR updates:

### **Leadership Transitions** (NIH Videocast: [10:08](#))

The Division of Receipt and Referral has a new Deputy Director, Duane Price, and a new Assistant Director, Marc Boulay. Two new Integrated Review Group (IRG) Chiefs have been hired, Chee Lim and Bree Rahman Sesay. Two Acting IRG Chiefs have just completed an initial rotation as part of pilot program, Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Gagan Pandya. A new SRO Training Coordinator, Vanessa Boyce, has been recently appointed. Long-term Chief for the Risk Prevention and Health Behavior IRG, Weijia Ni, is retiring.

### **Two Levels of Review at NIH** (NIH Videocast: [13.28](#))

The first level of review takes place at CSR where the focus is on assessing the scientific and technical merit. CSR's mission is to ensure grant applications receive a fair and independent review. The second level of review takes place at the funding Institutes and Centers. In addition to merit, their Advisory Councils are responsible for making sure that programmatic and scientific priorities of the Institute are considered; discretionary funding decisions are made by these Advisory Councils.

### **Workload** (NIH Videocast: [14:56](#))

In calendar year 2020, NIH received 85,000 applications, an increase of 2000 from 2019. CSR reviewed ~65,000; an increase of 2400 from 2019. CSR reviewed 76% of all applications received by NIH. A staff of approximately 250 SROs interacted with 18,000 different reviewers to review these applications. Approximately 50,000 of the applications reviewed were Research Project Grants that represent approximately 85% of all research project grants received by NIH. We have also taken on large emergency initiatives in response to COVID. RADX Prevail was one of those initiatives.

### **Impact of COVID on Submissions From Women and URMs** (NIH Videocast: [17:03](#))

Dr. Byrnes noted that questions had been raised previously about whether the pandemic had an impact on the numbers of applications submitted by women and URMs. She said that the data show the number of applications from women remained relatively the same; 12,000 or approximately one-third of all applications submitted. Applications from URMs remained flat at 7-8%. There was discussion about the rate of actual funding of applications submitted by women.

### **What's the Future of Peer Review Meetings?** (NIH Videocast: [19:00](#))

Dr. Byrnes said that the reviewer survey to assess reactions to the Zoom platform, initially conducted after the summer 2020 review meetings, is being repeated following the winter 2021 meetings. While the evaluation is not completed, it appears that the results are approximately the same: the largest share of reviewers, more than 40%, prefer in person meetings; 30% prefer virtual meetings and the remainder have no preference. Results from both surveys show ongoing

challenges with “Zoom fatigue” in long meetings. The surveys do not reveal any major concerns about the quality of review in virtual meetings. Dr. Byrnes reported that the decision has been made that all fall review meetings will be conducted virtually.

**Budget** (NIH Videocast: [29:03](#))

Dr. Byrnes reported that CSR’s annual budget is \$141M. As a result of the pandemic, \$22M in cost savings was returned to the NIH. Almost all of that money went to the Clinical Center for COVID-related research and treatment; the rest went into increased costs for IT security.

**NIH’s UNITE Initiative** (NIH Videocast: [38.42](#))

Dr. Byrnes reported that this initiative came out of the Advisory Committee to the Director and has five broad committees to address different domains of structural racism in biomedical research.

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Activities at CSR** (NIH Videocast: [41.38](#))

Dr. Byrnes reported that activities have been initiated or are continuing in five different areas. Direct reporting of bias in review or reviewer-to-reviewer bias is a new initiative. The point of contact is [Dr. Gabriel Fosu](#). Other activities include: development of bias awareness training, diversifying review panels, piloting blinded reviews, and ongoing attention to CSR workforce diversity. A new advisory council work group has been formed to develop a bias awareness training module for reviewers and for scientific review officers.

**Targeted Outreach** (NIH Videocast: [1:12:55](#))

Dr. Byrnes asked the group to contact [Kristin Kramer](#) to provide referrals to societies and institutions serving diverse populations so that they can be targeted for specific outreach activities.

**Advisory Council Workgroup: Simplifying Review Criteria for Clinical Trials** (NIH Videocast: [1:20:16](#))

Dr. Reed reported on the findings of Workgroup #2 (focused on clinical trials applications) in response to the charge it received from Workgroup #1 (focused on applications without clinical trials). The group examined concerns expressed by CSR and the Office of Extramural Research that current review practices were reducing the focus on merit and increasing scientific burden.

The group took into account the recommendations from the first WG and built on it to develop a framework applicable to all. The WG recommended a new, simplified set of criteria for review of all R01s and made recommendations to reduce reviewer burden. The criteria are structured around whether the work should be done, whether it could be done well, and whether it will be done.

**ENQUIRE: Evaluating Panel Quality in Review** (NIH Videocast: [2:27:09](#))

Dr. Ray Jacobson reported on the [ENQUIRE evaluation](#) of Cluster 7, a group of 16 basic science study sections; 12 in the Division of Basic and Integrative Biological

Sciences and 4 in the Division of Neuroscience, Development and Aging. Dr. Jacobson reported that the number of applications reviewed in some of these study sections had dropped significantly in recent years and had become unsustainable. Recommendations from the external panel of scientific experts were presented, as well as revisions to these recommendation suggested by an internal panel of NIH stakeholders. Recommendations were made to charter three new standing panels to review the MIRA R35 grant mechanism and to change the scientific scope of existing panels by combining like topics together that had been spread across multiple panels and reorganizing the scientific areas covered to make the standing panels more cohesive. After discussion amongst the panel, Dr. George introduced a motion to approve the study section reorganization resulting from the ENQUIRE assessment. The motion was seconded and unanimously carried by the other members of Council.

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

The meeting adjourned at 4:10 p.m.

We hereby certify that, to the best of our knowledge, the foregoing minutes of the March 29, 2021, CSRAC meeting are accurate and complete.

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

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