

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

**Meeting Minutes
September 27, 2021**

The Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council (CSRAC) convened at 1:00 p.m., Monday, September 27, 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.
Michelle Janelins, Ph.D.
Deanna Kroetz, Ph.D.
Scott Miller, Ph.D.
Tonya Palermo, Ph.D.
Mark Peifer, Ph.D.
Julie Price, Ph.D.
Narasimhan Rajaram, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Villa, Ph.D.
Denise Wilfley, Ph.D.

Ad-Hoc Participants

Emilyn Alejandro, Ph.D.
Anton Bennett, Ph.D.
Andrea Tedeschi, Ph.D.

Bruce Reed, Ph.D., served as 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 Zoom.gov platform, as did the interpreters. 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 September 2021 CSRAC meeting. Each person introduced themselves along with their institutional affiliations and respective areas of science.

CSR Updates

Dr. Byrnes provided the following CSR updates:

Welcome ([NIH Videocast](#): 00:07:50)

“Retiring” Advisory Council members, Alfred George, Deanna Kroetz, Julie Price, Scott Miller, and Denise Wilfley were thanked for their service; new members, Narasimhan Rajaram and Michelle Janelins were welcomed, as well as a welcome to ad hoc participants; Emilyn Alejandro, Anton Bennett and Andrea Tedeschi.

Overview: Mission, Strategic Framework & Scope (NIH Videocast: 00:09:10)

Dr. Byrnes reviewed the mission of CSR and its operating principles of transparent data driven decision-making and operations, involvement/engagement of stakeholders and open, multi-directional and respectful communications. In terms of scope, of the ~88,000 applications (R01, small business and fellowships) the NIH received in fiscal year (FY)

2021, CSR reviewed ~66,7000, which is about 75% of all applications. In FY 2021, CSR also reviewed 182 special initiatives, many of which were trans-NIH and high-profile.

CSR Workload and Staffing (NIH Videocast: 00:13:26)

CSR application counts have increased steadily, on average about 1000 applications a year over the past 6 years. Dr. Byrnes expects the numbers to steadily increase as NIH branches out into broader scientific areas. In anticipation of increasing applications and a desire to manage reasonable workloads for SROs, CSR is implementing forward-thinking, multi-pronged recruitment and retention strategies for SROs.

R01 submissions (NIH Videocast: 00:15:03)

Data on R01 submissions for the last eight council rounds were presented, showing overall numbers and numbers for women and minority applicants. Responding to a prior Council request, CSR examined whether rates of non-discussed applications differ for applications from women vs. men. Rates were very similar and did not change significantly over the last year.

Scientific Leadership and Management Transitions (NIH Videocast: 00:17:11)

The Division of Neuroscience, Development and Aging has a new Division Director, Delia Olufokunbi Sam; Dipak Bhattacharyya is serving as acting director for CSR's newest Division of Planning, Analysis, and Information Management; Cathleen Cooper for the Division of Receipts and Referral is retiring as Director and Deputy Director Duane Price will serve as acting director. Two new Integrated Review Group (IRG) Chiefs have been hired: Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew and Kumud Singh. Two IRGs recently appointed acting chiefs, Thomas Beres and Emily Foley; CSR is now looking for permanent placements to these IRGs. Three new referral officers have been appointed: Jianxin Hu, Suzanne Ryan and Srikanth Ranganathan.

A New CSR Office of Training (NIH Videocast: 00:20:47)

Located within the Office of the Director, the aim of this office will be to add additional training resources by consolidating established, existing training programs. The office will cover four main training components: New SRO Training, Continuing SRO Training, SRO Handbook Resource and centralized Reviewer Training resources that will be in addition to the specific training that SROs already do.

Annual Summer Chair Orientation Sessions (NIH Videocast: 00:22:49)

CSR hosted approximately 90 incoming chairs for a two-hour, interactive facilitated session reviewing the nuts-and-bolts of chairing by utilizing an interactive discussion format with a vignette-based framework. In Summer 2021, CSR incorporated discussion of the new anti-bias training as a part of the Chair orientation sessions.

Bias Awareness Training (NIH Videocast: 00:23:35)

In August 2021, prior to October/November meetings CSR launched a multi-media, interactive bias training for reviewers and SROs. This training is targeted toward raising awareness of the most common biases in the review process and giving reviewers approaches for combating bias. The training is 30 minutes and is delivered to reviewers approximately 4 weeks prior to review meetings. CSR implemented extensive training and discussion for review staff in advance of rolling this out to reviewers.

Reporting Mechanism for Concerns (NIH Videocast: 00:25:18)

In response to listening sessions conducted by CSR in Summer 2020, the Center has established a process for PI, POs, applicants, SROs and anyone else to report concerns about fairness/bias in peer review. CSR has added language on every outgoing staff email, on CSR's webpage and on every study section page about how to report concerns. Dr. Gabriel Fosu, CSR's Associate Director for Diversity and Workforce Development (G.Fosu_AssocDir@csr.nih.gov) can be contacted about all things that could affect the fairness of the review process.

Dr. Byrnes also reviewed CSR's existing policy that allows Chiefs and Division Directors to initiate re-review of applications if their review was seriously flawed by bias or irregularities in the review process. CSR does this rapidly,

within the same council round so that applicants do not lose a round.

Stakeholder views and CSR data on effects of virtual review format (NIH Videocast: 00:28:32)

Since the beginning of the pandemic CSR has held 2,036 meetings, reviewed 97,385 applications and engaged 24,474 individual reviewers. CSR has also conducted objective analyses of scoring patterns and recruitment compared to pre-pandemic numbers and has conducted surveys of both reviewers and staff. No significant changes can be discerned in meeting impressions from 2020 and 2021 meetings since the pandemic has started. In both 2020 and 2021, ~40% of reviewers overall prefer in-person meetings, ~30% prefer Zoom meeting and ~30% have no preference. Both males and female prefer in-person meetings, but the margins are higher for in-person in men and senior faculty. Overall score distributions and the frequency of out-of-range scoring for in-person versus Zoom meetings is comparable.

Spring 2022 meetings will be virtual, and the status of summer meetings is TBD; CSR will not hold as many in-person review meetings as were held pre-COVID. CSR will take reviewer engagement, recruitment, reviewer input, environmental and fiscal factors into consideration when deciding. CSR's plan moving forward will be a balanced, hybrid model utilizing both in-person and virtual review meetings.

Diversifying Review Committees (NIH Videocast: 00:35:30)

The process for appointing members to standing study section membership process has multiple levels of oversight and approval; CSR is now focusing on enhancing diversity on Special Emphasis Panels (SEPs). One way in which CSR is enhancing SEP diversity is through raising collective awareness, setting expectations and sharing panel-level data with management/staff. The Center has also provided tools for SROs to find a broad range of well-qualified reviewers through a database with multiple sources of scientific experts. The percentage of women attending CSR meetings has been enriched across all meetings just with the implementation of soft interventions to diversify panels. Similarly, URM representation has also increased in all categories in 2021. CSR plans for continued, sustained attention to demographic and gender diversity on all panels.

Stakeholder Engagement: Advisory Council (NIH Videocast: 00:44:19)

In 2019, CSR set the goal of enhancing the role of the CSR Advisory Council; to achieve this CSR broadened membership to include all career stages, increased the total number of membership slots from 11 to 13, and published council member information on the website. CSR seeks the advice of the council on study section restructuring, initiatives, process and evaluation as means of getting input from extramural voices. CSR has established council working groups with council members as well as external scientific community members. The result of the ECR council working group resulted in an expanded ECR program launch in December 2019, the two Simplifying Review Criteria working group recommendations are council-approved and are under consideration by the NIH-wide Extramural Advisory Working Group. An NRSA fellowship review working group was convened in September 2021.

ENQUIRE: Evaluating Panel Quality in Review (NIH Videocast: 1:09:14)

Cluster 5: Dr. John Bowers reported on the [ENQUIRE evaluation](#) of Cluster 5, a group of 10 study sections and one overflow SEP across 3 IRGs. Recommendations from the external panel of scientific experts were presented, as well as revisions to these recommendations suggested by an internal panel of NIH stakeholders. Recommendations were to charter 13 new study sections across the areas of immunotherapy (4 new study sections), therapeutics (2 new study sections), basic cancer science (updated 3 study sections) and other (updated 2 study sections). After discussion amongst the panel, Dr. Palermo introduced a motion to endorse the study section reorganization resulting from the ENQUIRE assessment. The motion was seconded and unanimously carried by the other members of Council.

Cluster 17: Dr. Valerie Durrant reported on the ENQUIRE evaluation of Cluster 17, a group of 9 study sections and two overflow SEPs. Recommendations from the external panel of scientific experts were presented, as well as revisions to these recommendations suggested by an internal panel of NIH stakeholders. Recommendations were to charter 14 new study sections based on a conceptual framework that reflects a multidimensional focus of the field; the three domains that these study sections span across are health states (5 study sections), "exposures" (2 study sections) and methods (3 study sections); in addition, there are also 3 new study sections with overlap in health states and exposures and 1 new

study section with overlap in methods and categories of exposures. After discussion amongst the panel, Dr. Janelins introduced a motion to endorse the study section reorganization resulting from the ENQUIRE assessment. The motion was seconded by all panel members but 1 who chose to abstain from voting due to the uncertainty of recommendation of chartering 14 new study sections from 9 study sections.

CSR Strategic Plan (NIH Videocast: 02:19:25)

Dr. Reed provided background on why a Strategic Plan is needed and how the aims of the plan were derived.

The CSR Strategic Plan is an extension of the strategic framework which includes study sections, reviewers, and the process. In addition, the plan also includes the underlying principles for a fair and effective peer review process. For the strategic plan these principles have been operationalized into goals, objectives, and implementation strategies. CSR has 5 goals that they would like to achieve:

1. Maintain study sections that provide appropriate scientific coverage and review settings for all of NIH science.
2. Further develop a large cadre of diverse, well-trained, and scientifically qualified experts to serve as reviewers.
3. Implement changes to the peer review process that make it more fair, effective, and efficient.
4. Communicate CSRs mission and the critical role of peer review in biomedical sciences to key stakeholders, including the scientific community and general public.
5. Further develop an outstanding, engaged, diverse staff.

After discussion amongst the panel, Dr. Miller introduced a motion to endorse; the motion was seconded by all panel members. CSR leadership also plans to collect feedback from internal stakeholders.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 p.m.

We hereby certify that, to the best of our knowledge, the foregoing minutes of the September 27, 2021, 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