

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

**Meeting Minutes
March 28, 2022**

The Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council (CSRAC) convened at 1:00 p.m., Monday, March 28, 2022, via an online video meeting. Noni Byrnes, Ph.D., presided as Ex Officio.

Members

Leopoldo Cabassa, MSW, Ph.D.
Matthew Carpenter, Ph.D.
Jinming Gao, Ph.D.
Christine P. Hendon, Ph.D.
Michelle C. Janelins-Benton, Ph.D.
Tonya M. Palermo, Ph.D.
Mark Peifer, Ph.D.
Narasimhan Rajaram, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Villa, Ph.D.

Ad-Hoc

Karen Anderson, M.D., Ph.D.
Sean Davidson, Ph.D.
Edda Frauke Spiekerkoetter, M.D.
Lynn Yee, MPH, M.D.

Executive Secretary

Bruce Reed, Ph.D.

Ex Officio

Noni Byrnes, Ph.D.

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 (NIH Videocast: 00:00:05)

Dr. Reed welcomed CSRAC members, ad-hoc participants, and attendees to the 23rd CSRAC meeting. Each person introduced themselves along with their institutional affiliations and respective areas of science.

CSR Updates ([NIH Videocast: 00:06:56](#))

Dr. Byrnes provided the following CSR updates:

Welcome ([NIH Videocast: 00:07:35](#))

Dr. Byrnes thanked all members for attendance and welcomed new members Leopoldo Cabassa, Matthew Carpenter and Christine Hendon as well as ad hoc participants Karen Anderson, Sean Davidson, Edda Frauke Spiekerkoetter and Lynn Yee.

Overview: Mission, Strategic Framework & Scope ([NIH Videocast: 00:08:23](#))

Dr. Byrnes reviewed the mission of CSR and scope 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. Dr. Byrnes updated council on CSR's draft strategic plan – currently CSR is in the ongoing process of collecting comments from which it plans to conduct a content analysis. CSR plans to adjust aspects of the plan based on feedback when possible and will present main findings to the public. CSR hopes to publish the full plan by spring of this year.

Post-pandemic R01 submissions ([NIH Videocast: 00:14:57](#))

The number of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic R01 submissions is not appreciably different, and the proportion submitted by women and by underrepresented minority scientists have remained steady. The Office of Extramural Research has published additional information regarding this.

Scientific Leadership/Management Transitions ([NIH Videocast: 00:16:19](#))

Chief of the Basic Neuroscience review branch, Carole Jelsema, is retiring. CSR has created a new position, Senior Scientific Review Officer (SRO), who are a cohort of SROs that are scientifically flexible, have a strong grasp on policy and can manage special, fast-track initiatives. Senior SROs located in the Office of the Director are, Jonathan Arias, Jessica Bellinger, Michael Bloom, Heidi Friedman, James Li and Linda Macarthur. CSR has three new branch chiefs: Thomas Beres (Health Services and Systems), Emily Foley (Disease Control and Applied Immunology), and Elia Ortenberg (Social and Community Influences across the Lifecourse). Dipak Bhattacharya is the newest addition to Executive Leadership, he serves as the Director of the new Division of Planning, Analysis, and Information Management (DPAIM).

CSR Office of Training and Development ([NIH Videocast: 00:19:27](#))

Located within the Office of the Director and lead by Director Mariam Mintzer, this office covers four main training components each led by a training coordinator. The office is now currently staffed – Vanessa Boyce coordinates new SRO training, Natalia Komissarova coordinates SRO workshops/continuing SRO education, Tanya Cohen coordinates reviewer training, and Ben Shapero coordinates the SRO handbook and policy portal.

Early Career Reviewer (ECR) Program ([NIH Videocast: 00:20:54](#))

The ECR program was overhauled in December 2019 based on recommendations of an advisory council working group. Modifications to the program included doubling the number of ECRs in standing study sections from 1 to 2, developing a new set of criteria to focus on junior investigators without experience, created a central process for application, evaluation/acceptance in the program and a new database to allowing tracking and evaluation. Dr. Byrnes presented data on diversity of ECRs from February/March 2020 meetings to February/March 2022 meetings. Data on outcomes, successfully competing for an R01 or equivalent and serving as a standing member, was also presented. CSR plans to conduct targeted outreach efforts to increase ECR participation in areas of science where needed. CSR continues to evaluate the effects of the ECR program.

Update: Simplifying Review Criteria Recommendations ([NIH Videocast: 00:25:02](#))

In July of 2021 the concept of the simplifying review criteria recommendations was approved by an NIH senior leadership committee on extramural activities. This committee also recommended the formation of another internal NIH working group to assess which recommendations are feasible and practical. This NIH working group focused on criteria for non-clinical trials applications and developed recommendations which were approved by the NIH senior leadership committee on extramural activities in February 2022. Next month, the workgroup will present recommendations to the NIH Steering Committee.

Reporting Mechanism for Concerns ([NIH Videocast: 00:26:49](#))

Dr. Byrnes reminded the council and members of the public that Dr. Gabriel Fosu (G.Fosu_AssocDir@csr.nih.gov) can be contacted about anything that could affect the fairness of the review process – CSR has added language on every outgoing staff email about how to report concerns. Every allegation that is received is taken seriously– if CSR agrees that a biased/flawed review occurred then CSR re-reviews the application in the same council round so as not to disadvantage the applicant. If CSR does not agree, then CSR directs the individuals to the official NIH appeals process which is available to all investigators. CSR Division Directors have also started to follow-up with reviewers about their actions in order to foster culture change around bias.

Format of Future CSR Peer Review Meetings ([NIH Videocast: 00:28:43](#))

Dr. Byrnes reviewed some data from CSR reviewer surveys on conducting study section meetings via Zoom – CSR compiled extensive data on this topic and the outcomes indicated that overall quality and outcomes of review are comparable to reviews pre-pandemic. Pros and cons of both in-person and the virtual meeting format were discussed. In Fall 2022 CSR will begin holding some in-person meetings. Starting in 2023 all standing panels will hold one in-person meeting per year – this effort will begin with 1/3rd of the chartered study sections holding meetings in-person in the

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Oct./Nov. 2022 round. This fall, CSR will not hold hybrid meetings due to technological and management of inequity/participation considerations. CSR will proceed with caution in decision-making, CSR plans to survey reviewers/SROs, assess recruitment success, and analyze participation. The September 2022 Advisory Council meeting will be held in-person on September 19.

Communications and Outreach Initiatives (Dr. Kramer) ([NIH Videocast: 00:56:42](#))

The goals of this office are to increase transparency and facilitate stakeholder input to the peer review process. This office aims to level the playing field through equal access to information and aims to increase trust in an engagement with CSR. The office engages with congressional staff, the external scientific community, internal NIH staff, as well as internal CSR staff. The office added 4 FTE in 2021 and is expanding both its internal and externally-directed communications using a variety of modalities. Tools utilized by this office include social media, websites, presentations, fact sheets and publications, video content, facilitated discussions, as well as direct email campaigns and direct replies. The Office of Communications and Outreach is utilizing analytics to optimize CSR's public website, and to evaluate and shape initiatives undertaken by this office including better targeted communications and improving internal communications within both NIH and CSR.

ENQUIRE: Evaluating Panel Quality in Review (Dr. Shonat) ([NIH Videocast: 1:33:16](#))

Cluster 14: ENQUIRE cluster 14 is a group of 9 study sections and one overflow SEP across 4 topical areas: bacterial pathogen group, viral pathogen group, eukaryotes and vector biology group, and a host-focused and vaccine group. 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 12 new study sections across 5 groups: bacterial pathogen, viral pathogen, fungal pathogen, interspecies and complex life cycles and host-focused and vaccine group, with 2 scenarios for review of fungal and parasite applications. CSR noted that it monitors study section size and if a combined fungal and parasite biology study section were to experience excessively high application numbers it would adjust study section boundaries as needed. Dr. Gao introduced a motion to endorse the study section reorganization resulting from the ENQUIRE assessment using "option 2". Option 2 was to keep fungal and parasite biology together, thus removing parasite biology from 2 study sections proposed by the external panel. The motion was seconded and unanimously carried by the other members of Council.

Cluster 10: (Dr. Ray Jacobsen) ([NIH Videocast: 02:09:19](#))

ENQUIRE Cluster 10 is a group of 11 chartered study sections and 2 recurring SEPs that cover topics related to drug discovery, ranging from basic science from synthetic chemistry to pre-clinical studies for oncology therapeutics. 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 across 3 groups: enabling discovery, drug discovery, and drug development. After discussion amongst the panel, Dr. Peifer 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.

Bias Awareness and Mitigation Training (Dr. Hope Cummings) ([NIH Videocast: 02:36:28](#))

The Bias Awareness Training Module was developed by a diverse group that included extramural scientists as well as staff from CSR, Office of Scientific Workforce Diversity, as well as NIGMS. The aim of the training was to raise reviewer awareness about potential sources of bias in review and to help reviewers intervene to mitigate bias. For the Fall 2021 review meetings (January 2022 council round of review), 9963 reviewers were invited to take the training and 6006 did so. Of those who took the training 53% providing feedback via an evaluation survey. The survey assessed feedback on training-specific measures, measures not related to the training (behaviors and perceptions) and qualitative feedback. Overall, reviewers were highly satisfied with the training and data indicated that the training succeeded in increasing reviewer awareness of bias, empowering reviewers to mitigate bias as well as increasing comfort of reviewers to intervene on bias. Almost half of those completing the survey took the time to write in comments, the vast majority of

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which were highly complementary. Multiple ideas for additions or improvements were also noted. Next steps include increasing reviewer participation in the training, keeping reviewers engaged in bias and mitigation strategies and continuing to train chairs and SROs to play a more active role in bias intervention.

Interim Report of Review of NRSA Fellowship Applications Working Group (Drs. Bruce Reed and Elizabeth Villa) ([NIH Videocast: 02:58:54](#))

This working group was charged with evaluating the fellowship review process and making recommendations to make it as effective and fair as possible for all. The working group solicited external input in a variety of different ways including a content analysis which compiled feedback solicited via the Review Matters blog, informal consultations with the Office of Extramural Research and the Office of the General Council and analysis of data on fellowship applications and review outcomes. The workgroup suggested changes in several different areas pertaining to peer review. These areas included application materials, criteria, review processes, outreach, and reviewer training. Dr. Villa and Dr. Reed both solicited feedback from the council about the proposed workgroup ideas. The working group will incorporate the feedback from council and formulate a final set of recommendations for the September Advisory Council meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 5:06 p.m.

We hereby certify that, to the best of our knowledge, the foregoing minutes of the March 28, 2022, CSRAC meeting are accurate and complete.

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