

Answers for Applicants for NIH Funding: Integrity & Fairness in Peer Review

From the NIH Center for Scientific Review

The mission of CSR is to ensure that NIH grant applications receive fair, independent, expert, and timely scientific reviews - free from inappropriate influences - so that NIH can fund the most promising research.

At CSR, we continuously strive to maintain review integrity and to reduce or prevent bias in the peer review process. We do this by ensuring reviewers are assessing the merit of grant applications, without outside influence from the investigator or others. Efforts include:

- CSR conducts training so that all involved—our staff and reviewers—understand their responsibilities in protecting the integrity of review.
- CSR’s review integrity officer (RIO) works in close collaboration with the NIH Office of Extramural Research (OER) to gather information about concerns related to review integrity, as well as report and manage those concerns.
- CSR’s RIO collaborates with CSR’s Division of Planning, Analysis, and Information Management to develop artificial intelligence approaches to identify networks of reviewers attempting to influence review.
- CSR takes actions, in concert with OER, to ensure that scientists with credible evidence of integrity violations no longer review for NIH.

CSR convenes diverse review panels. The peer review process depends on having reviewers with strong scientific qualifications and a wide range of perspectives.

- The center has broadened the pool of potential reviewers by increasing diversity in such areas as academic rank, race/ethnicity, gender, and region of the country. This has been accomplished through targeted outreach, increased enrollment in the [CSR Early Career Reviewer Program](#), staff education, development of new tools and resources to identify new reviewers, and oversight of review panel membership.
- CSR has addressed the “gatekeeper” phenomenon, where a reviewer has participated in the NIH peer review process at a rate much higher than his or her peers, and thus had a disproportionate effect on review outcomes in a given field. CSR does not recruit reviewers with excessive review service.

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CSR is acting to reduce bias in review. Bias distorts judgments of excellence. Reducing bias allows review panels to better identify high-impact science.

- In August 2021, CSR launched an interactive and engaging training to increase awareness of bias in review and to provide tools and strategies for reviewers to intervene. As of March 2022, more than 6,000 CSR reviewers had completed the training; [initial results](#) suggest the training is effective.
- In 2021, a reporting avenue for concerns about bias in review was launched and widely publicized. Concerns may be reported to CSR's Associate Director for Diversity and Workforce Development, Dr. Gabriel Fosu, at G.Fosu_AssocDir@csr.nih.gov.

Fairness matters. Say something! For possible violations of peer review integrity, contact your Scientific Review Officer (SRO), the CSR Review Integrity Officer at csrrio@mail.nih.gov or the NIH Review Policy Officer at reviewpolicyofficer@mail.nih.gov.

For issues related to respectful interactions, bias or anything else that could affect the fairness of the review process, contact your SRO or the CSR Associate Director of Diversity & Workforce Development, Dr. Gabriel Fosu, at G.Fosu_AssocDir@csr.nih.gov.