

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

**Meeting Minutes
September 19, 2022**

The Center for Scientific Review Advisory Council (CSRAC) convened at 10:00 a.m., Monday, September 19, 2022, via a hybrid meeting. Noni Byrnes, Ph.D., chaired the meeting.

Members

Anton Bennett, Ph.D.
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

Jonathan Epstein, 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 in-person –one council member attended via Zoom. 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 24th 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](#))

Dr. Byrnes thanked all members for attendance and welcomed new member Anton Bennett, as well as ad hoc member Jonathan Epstein. Three retiring members, Jinming Gao, Tonya Palermo, and Mark Peifer, were thanked for their service.

Overview: Mission, Strategic Framework & Scope (NIH Videocast: [00:09:33](#))

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 strategic plan for 2022-2027, consisting of 5 goals, which has been released. CSR incorporated feedback solicited from both individuals and societies into the final plan.

CSR Scope FY 2022 (NIH Videocast: [00:13:45](#))

CSR reviewed ~76% of all NIH applications received in FY 2022 and reviewed the majority of R01, SBIR-STTR, and Fellowship applications – CSR achieved this by engaging ~19,000 reviewers across ~1,200 meetings. In addition, CSR reviewed 167 special initiatives for the NIH including many high-profile and high-priority NIH efforts. In FY 2022, both NIH and CSR saw an overall drop in application numbers – CSR still reviewed the same proportion of applications as previous years.

Post-Pandemic R01 Submissions (NIH Videocast: [00:15:37](#))

The number of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic R01 submissions has not changed considerably overall, and the proportions submitted by women and by underrepresented minority (URM) scientists have remained steady. No differential effect of the pandemic on application numbers from women or URM scientists is seen at this level.

Scientific Leadership/Management Transitions (NIH Videocast: [00:17:00](#))

CSR welcomes two new branch chiefs (Gagan Pandya and Wei-Qin Zhao), four new referral officers (Jian Cao, Aurea De Sousa, Afia Sultana, and Mark Vosvick) as well as three new branch chiefs in the technical and administrative branches (Blair Gosnell, Rashid Shah, and Leo Wu).

Future Review Meetings (NIH Videocast: [00:18:30](#))

Current plans--subject to changed based on COVID-19 guidelines --are to have a mix of in-person and virtual meetings. The expectation is that 1 of the 3 meetings per year for standing study sections and some recurring SEPs will be in person (~200 meetings/year) – the other 2 meetings will be virtual (~1000 meetings/year). CSR's approach is based on a balance of considerations which include data on reviewer engagement/preferences, recruitment, environmental and fiscal factors with an emphasis on quality of review. CSR will be piloting hybrid options in February/March 2023 meetings.

Reviewer Training: Review Integrity Training (NIH Videocast: [00:24:39](#))

CSR launched an interactive, scenario-based training in August 2022. CSR/OER-eRA are collaborating to make it available NIH-wide. Content of the training is based on input from a 2019 CSR Advisory Council Working Group on Reviewer Integrity and has been updated to emphasize key issues in an engaging format.

CSR Office of Training and Development Updates (NIH Videocast: [00:26:50](#))

The Bias Awareness Training developed by the office is slated for integration with eRA/IAR. CSR held 9 New Chair Orientation sessions this summer engaging ~90 incoming charter study section chairs. The office is holding multiple trainings for SROs on a variety of different topics. There is an upcoming expansion for the office to include systems training and training/development for support staff.

Staffing Update (NIH Videocast: [00:29:11](#))

SRO staffing levels have improved significantly over the last year due to adoption of a proactive rather than a reactive approach to hiring, a multi-pronged hiring approach including the incentive of a remote work option, and outstanding efforts from CSR's branch chiefs. CSR has also increased its focus on retention. There are multiple ongoing efforts that are focused on recruiting/retaining strong review support, administrative, and technical staff.

Update: Simplifying Review Criteria Initiative (NIH Videocast: [00:32:24](#))

In January 2020, CSR convened a CSRAC Working Group on Simplifying Review Criteria and charged the group with recommending simplified review criteria to improve the quality of review for RPGs. The workgroup split into two, the first focusing on non-clinical trials and the second focused on clinical trials, bringing in additional. The combined recommendations from the groups were approved by CSR Advisory Council in March 2022. The main recommendation by the group was to group the 5 criteria into 3 factors (importance of the science, feasibility and rigor, and investigators and environment). The recommendations were supported by an NIH senior leadership committee which recommended the formation of an NIH working group to further develop the recommendations. That working group started with non-clinical trials and retained the 3-factor framework and recommended some modifications. This framework was approved by top level NIH leadership in April 2022. There is a second ongoing working group now focusing on integrating clinical trial RPGs into the approved 3-factor framework. This task is expected to be completed in a few months. The current

CSRAC September 2022 Minutes final

plan is to publish changes for clinical trials/non-clinical trials reviews together for applications in the October 2024 council round.

ENQUIRE (NIH Videocast: [00:39:50](#))

This is a two-stage, systematic, data-driven, and continuous process to evaluate study sections – the process is overseen by CSR’s Scientific Division Directors. The process includes 3 stages: an external scientific evaluation panel, internal NIH process evaluation panel, and CSR Advisory Council approval. After council approval CSR takes multiple steps to refine and implement ENQUIRE guidelines. A review of ENQUIRE cluster 3 is underway with the expectation that final recommendations will come before AC in March 2023.

Strategies for Diversifying Review Panels (NIH Videocast: [00:47:25](#))

The percent of women and groups under-represented in science (under-represented minorities, URMs) on CSR rosters in the last 9 council rounds have gradually increased. For standing study sections an increase in representation of both women and URMs is seen over the past 9 rounds of review. For SEPs, more recent improvements in representation are seen for both groups. Representation of both groups on CSR study sections exceeds their representation in the CSR applicant pool (which has remained essentially unchanged over the past 9 rounds).

CSR’s Data Analytics and Technology Support (Dr. Dipak Bhattacharya) (NIH Videocast: [01:06:57](#))

CSR has a new division in the Office of the Director, the Division of Planning, Analysis, and Information Management (DPAIM) which is a critical pattern for the peer review mission and operations. The division provides secure, reliable computing technology, technology support, technology and support for virtual meetings and a geographically distributed workforce, data acquisition and analytic services, webservice and media/media production support. The branch’s purpose is centered around the CSR strategic framework – the division support multiple efforts across CSR to improve review by working with reviewers, keeping study sections aligned with science, as well improving peer review processes. The division played an instrumental role in creating a multi-media, interactive bias training for reviewers and SROs as well as the reviewer integrity training. DPAIM has also developed other tools to aid CSR such as the Reviewer Finder tool, ECR Database, eSlate system, and dashboards relevant to peer review among many other resources. The division is in the preliminary stages of conducting network analysis utilizing AI/machine learning approaches to identify potential flags for conflicts-of-interest. DPAIM also collaborated with the Common Fund, High Risk, High Reward program to develop a TRA anonymization check to support two-stage, partially blinded review. DPAIM plays an instrumental role in supporting CSR’s distributed workforce by ensuring virtual capabilities and continuously providing hybrid workplace best practices.

Final Report of Review of NRSA Fellowship Applications Working Group (Drs. Bruce Reed and Elizabeth Villa) (NIH Videocast: [01:49:07](#))

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 OER and OGC and analysis of data on fellowship applications and review outcomes. The workgroup suggested changes in several different areas pertaining to peer review. Major recommendations by the workgroup were to revise the review criteria to evaluate fellowship applications as well as to change the fellowship application. Additional recommendations by the workgroup included considering partially blinded review models as well as targeting outreach to institutions and applicants who need it the most. The panel also suggested considering granting honorable mentions to meritorious applications who do not receive NRSA awards and broadening the range of career goals that are welcomed by the NRSA program.

CSRAC September 2022 Minutes final

Council was generally enthusiastic about the recommendations. There were minimal concerns about the proposed review criteria although it was suggested that the goal of the evaluation might be more concisely expressed. Most of the discussion focused on aspects of the changes recommended for the application. The idea of having both applicant and sponsor identify 3 strengths and 3 weakness/gaps in the applicant skills attracted attention. A concern was raised that this might be “gamed”. Whether or not it was advantageous to request essentially the same information from applicant and sponsor was discussed, with different perspectives. There was a suggestion to ask for “2 or more” or a flexible number of traits rather than 3 specifically. Additional comments were captured and will be forwarded to the Fellowship Working Group.

A motion was introduced to endorse the workgroup recommendations with minor modifications based on discussion. The motion was seconded and unanimously carried by Council.

The meeting adjourned at 2:32 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