The Role of Study Section Chair

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Preparing to be a study section chair

- Scientific expertise
- Experience as a reviewer
- Knowledge of peer review policy
- Familiarity with how reviewers and study sections behave
- Understanding of the role

Complementary meeting roles

SRO

- Designated Federal Official
  - Authority regarding attendees, meeting process and review policy
  - Keeps official records
  - Must be present for all proceedings
- Works to implement policies and promote good practices
- Takes notes and writes the resumes of discussion

Chair

- Leads discussion
- Works to implement policies and promote good practices
- Summarizes discussion

Every Reviewer

- **On assigned applications**
  - Writes critiques
  - Presents to panel on discussed apps
  - Considers others' views
- **On every application**
  - Casts an informed vote
  - Questions/comments as needed
  - Judges the merits of the application

Why discuss applications?

- Interactive committee discussions are a signature feature of NIH review.
- Legal perspective: SRGs are FACA committees. Review outcomes are determined by committee vote.
  - All votes count equally. Reviewers' votes should be *informed* and *independent*.
- Measurement perspective:
  - Multiple assessments lead to more accurate, more reliable estimates of scientific merit
  - Non-assigned reviewers can add valuable **additional perspectives on importance** and on **rigor and feasibility**: fundamentals of design, rigor and reproducibility, assessing feasibility often does not require deep understanding of technical methods
- Process perspective:
  - Presenting to peers encourages careful work
  - Promotes transparency
  - Can reduce bias and improve fairness

A template for discussing an application

- **Presentations of Critiques:**
  - **Each reviewer should explain to the panel why they gave it the score they propose**
  - Focus should be on score driving issues, positive and negative
  - Simplified Review encourages brevity and better focus on the big questions of review
- **Panel Discussion:**
  - Assigned reviewers should explore their differences
  - Panelists should request clarifications from each other
  - Differences regarding facts, weighting, perspective, or scoring should be aired
  - Offering a new (score-driving) consideration is appropriate
  - Score calibration is important

- **Well presented critiques and a good panel discussion together give members the information they need to make informed judgments about the application**
- **Clarity, not consensus, is the goal.**

Guiding discussion—four goals for chairs

1. Make sure key questions are answered
2. Actively facilitate good discussion
    - Encourage engagement
    - Step in when needed
3. Discourage bias
4. Mind the time

1. Make sure key questions are answered

When a discussion concludes you and the panel should understand:

1. **How important is the proposed research?**
    a) Evaluating the importance of the science is hard, but vital.
    b) Reviewers confuse public health need with scientific importance.
    c) A clear message that significance is lacking can be a favor to everyone.
2. **How rigorous and feasible is the approach?**
    a) Don’t nit pick.
    b) Don’t require certainty—can they overcome challenges.
    c) Do require rigorous and feasible methods.
3. **Is the team well suited to the science and are the needed resources available?**
    a) An area where bias tarnishes NIH review.
    b) Don’t confuse reputation with qualifications.

2a. Facilitating discussion--Encourage engagement

Better review comes from thoughtful, lively discussions that, over the course of the day, engage the entire panel.

- Maintain a collegial atmosphere where every voice matters
- Encourage disagreement; don't tolerate disrespect.
- Be aware of differences in power--expect good manners.
- Aim for clarity, rather than consensus. No one needs to win and no one needs to concede.
- Be neutral, be fair.

2b. Facilitating discussion—step in when needed

- Wrap up discussions that carry on after the score-drivers are clear.
  - E.g. the interesting but tangential scientific discussion
  - E.g. a battle to win the point
- Intervene to end long descriptions of the grant application.
- Discourage weedy discussions of methods.
- Not your job alone, but if no one else asks, you should, when
  - Major differences in assigned reviewers' views are unexplored
  - There is a big discrepancy between comments and scores
  - The basis for differences in assigned reviewers' scores is unclear.
- Limit your "reviewer" comments.

3. Discourage bias

Bias is most apparent in comments on investigators and environment. Well known people may get a pass; unknowns may get extra scrutiny.

- Evaluations should be specific and pertinent to the proposed science.
- Discourage general remarks on reputation. E.g. “This application comes from a world-renowned expert….leading authority….thought leader….”
- Discourage empty comments on environment: “It’s from ------- so obviously the environment is excellent…”
- Such comments should be much less common under Simplified Review—but don’t wait.

4. Mind the time

Good time management is a matter of fairness.

Good discussions make time management easier.

Well presented critiques and good discussions cover a lot of ground in 15 minutes. People tune out when discussions are not focused.

- Be flexible but stay on track.
- Set expectations and enforce them.
- Problems with time often reflect a failure to focus on what matters, e.g.
    - Critiques that are overly descriptive, excessively detailed
    - A focus on methodological minutiae
    - Repetitive or circular discussions

Chair summaries

The purpose of the summary is to focus the panel's attention on the set of major strengths and weaknesses. It is not a record of the discussion.

A good summary should:

- Be concise (a minute). This is a change for many study sections.
- Summarize score driving strengths and weaknesses
- Note areas of consensus and points of difference
- Be balanced and fair
- Flow naturally from your focus on getting key questions answered

A good summary does not:

- Describe the grant more than what is needed to convey the strengths and weaknesses
- List every point made
- Substitute for reviewers paying attention to discussions.

SROs take their own notes and are solely responsible for writing the resume of discussion.

Read applications and critiques in advance?

- Generally not. Remember your role.
- Read enough to be comfortable with what will be discussed.
- Assigned reviewers should be explaining the basis for their score to the panel. If you don't understand it, others likely don't, either. Use the discussion to clarify things.

Communicate with your SRO!

Expect that SROs will be communicating with you before and after the meeting.

- **The premeeting meeting is for planning.**
  - nuts and bolts
  - touch on big picture goals as appropriate
- **The post-meeting meeting is for feedback and lessons learned**.
  - clear up questions, review sticky situations
  - Give feedback on ad hocs

Make sure you and SRO are on the same page

Implementation

- **Shift roles**
  - Being study section chair is quite different from serving as a reviewer
  - Switch from reviewing applications to leading discussions about applications
- **Take this opportunity to change things**
  - How well do your study section practices align with today's talk?
  - If there are differences, talk about them today, plan to change.
- **Breaking with past practice requires culture change**
- **Work in partnership with the SRO**

And don’t make it harder than it needs to be

1. Clear the deck, no multi-tasking
2. Use a cheat sheet
3. Have your in-meeting technology plan (and backup plan) set

Thank you for your service!

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