



Center for  
Scientific Review

# Council Working Group on Review Integrity

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# Integrity in the Peer Review Process



To see that NIH grant applications receive fair, independent, expert, and timely reviews – **free from inappropriate influences** – so NIH can fund the most promising research.

# Integrity of the Peer Review Process

Critically important for all of us

- Maintaining the public trust in the NIH's stewardship of taxpayer dollars to support U.S. biomedical science research
- Confidentiality is critical for candor in discussion and evaluation, and thus impacts the very basis of the peer review process
- Will take the support of the entire research community – investigators, reviewers, chairs, NIH staff, institutional officials
- NIH is taking this issue very seriously– not widespread problem, but increased reporting/action – culture change

# Peer Review Integrity Reviewer Training

- Long-term goal: Raise reviewer awareness/change peer review culture
- Short-term goal: Develop a web-based training module for reviewers
- Web-tool content:
  - Introduction to NIH policies/general principles
  - Case studies of violations ranging from low-level to egregious
  - Guidance on how to respond to cases reviewers encounter
- Format: Brief, interactive (e.g., Y/N, multiple choice questions), trackable

# Potential Model (ACS journal reviewer training)

## EXERCISE 3

Can a professor ask a student or postdoc to assist in reviewing a manuscript?

- Yes, and no need to ask the Editor if the trainee is in the professor's lab.
- Yes, if the professor gets approval from the Editor first.
- No, this is never OK.

Can a professor ask a student or postdoc to login into the peer review system to complete the review form on the professor's behalf?

- Yes.
- No.

Can you ask colleagues for subject-matter expertise related to a paper you are reviewing?

- Yes.
- No.

Can you discuss a paper you are reviewing with someone over dinner?

- Yes.
- No.

Can you use an experiment you see in a manuscript you are reviewing in your own research?

# Content of Case Studies

- Breaches of confidentiality
- Review tampering
- Inappropriate contact between applicant and reviewer
- Undeclared conflict of interest
- Misappropriation of intellectual property

# Examples of Case Studies (confidentiality)

- During the dinner following Day 1 of the study section meeting, two reviewers are openly recounting meeting discussions, what they thought of the scores, etc. in public.
- During the meeting, conflicted reviewers have not fully exited the room when the Chair announces: “Reviewer one is Dr. X, Reviewer 2 is Dr. Y, Reviewer 3 is Dr. Z.”
- During the discussion of an application, a reviewer states: “The approach in this application will be much more effective than the one proposed in Dr. X’s application that we discussed this morning.”

# Examples of Case Studies (review tampering)

- During a study section break, two reviewers are overheard in the hallway discussing their strategy for “getting this grant through” and how to “shut down” the third more critical reviewer.
- A reviewer receives a text from a colleague in the field requesting his/her “support” for an application from his/her former student because the person is having a hard time getting funding.
- After posting his/her critiques to IAR, a reviewer receives an email from an investigator (whose application s/he reviewed) arguing against certain aspects of the reviewer’s evaluation and appearing to quote directly from the critique.

# Examples of Case Studies (slippery slope)

- A reviewer accepts an invitation to give a seminar from an investigator whose application was recently reviewed in the study section on which the reviewer is a member.
- During the visit, the investigator wishes to discuss comments in his/her summary statement with the reviewer, or indicates that s/he knows the reviewer was assigned to the application.

# Discussion

**Council thoughts / ideas?**