



Center for
Scientific Review

Fellowship Panel Chair Orientation: Revised NIH Fellowship Application and Review Process

Mufeng Li, Ph. D.
Fellowship Point Person
Scientific Review Officer

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Changes to the Fellowship Applications

1. Eliminate grades

- Grades are no longer required or allowed in candidate biosketch.

2. Revise the Applicant Section (now “Candidate Section”)

- Candidate’s Preparedness section should include information regarding the candidate’s educational, scientific, and professional experiences
- Better assess the candidate’s scientific thinking

3. Revise the Sponsors, Collaborators and Consultants section (now “Commitment to Candidate, Mentoring, and Training Environment”)

- Emphasis on sponsor’s mentorship approach, plan for the trainee and fit to trainee’s goals and needs

4. Revise letters of reference

- Targeted, trainee-specific questions in word-limited fields
- Intended to discourage boilerplate and to make it easier for reviewers to evaluate

5. No significant changes to the Research Training Project Plan Section

- Specific Aims, Research Strategy, Responsible Conduct of Research - unchanged

Changes to the Fellowship Review Criteria

***Expired* Fellowship Review Criteria**



Fellowship Candidate



Sponsors, Collaborators,
Consultants



Research Training Plan



Training Potential



Institutional Environment &
Commitment to Training



***Current* Fellowship Review Criteria**

1

Candidate Preparedness and Potential

2

Research Training Plan

3

Commitment to Candidate

***No changes to Additional Review
Criteria or to Additional Review
Considerations***

Scored Review Criteria: What to Consider?



Scored Review Criteria: Where to Look?



1. Candidate's Preparedness and Potential

Evaluation focus

- Stage of Training and Opportunities Available
- Candidate's Qualities
- Potential Benefit of Training

Rationale

- Preparedness and training needs vary:
 - Different career stages (2nd vs. 4th year graduate student; Pre-doctoral vs. Post-doctoral fellow).
 - Same stage, different environments.
- Qualities such as scientific understanding, creativity, curiosity, resourcefulness, and drive are strong indicators of training potential. In contrast, grades from years ago are not directly correlate with research potential.

2. Research Training Plan

Evaluation focus

- Rigor and feasibility of the research training project
- Training goals and needed development
- Guidance and resources available

Rationale

- The research project serves as a training platform to address the candidate's needs and help achieve their training goals.
- Professional development is necessary for the candidate's growth.

3. Commitment to Candidate

Evaluation focus

- Mentoring plan
- Alignment between the commitment and the research training plan
- Level of commitment

Rationale

- The sponsor(s)' commitment is reflected in the mentoring plan, not professional rank.
- A strong mentoring plan is one that addresses the training needs well.
- Strong organizational commitment is to ensure there are necessary resources and support for the candidate to successfully complete the research training.

Role of the Chair

- **Actively facilitate the discussion**
 - Make sure key questions are answered
 - Step in when needed
- **Chairs no longer summarize the discussion**
 - Focus the chair's attention on facilitating a high-quality discussion
 - Encourage non-assigned reviewers to be fully engaged throughout the discussion
 - Improve meeting efficiency
 - Reduce potential bias
 - Pilots in earlier rounds were well received by chairs and panelists
- **Partner with the SRO to implement changes and promote culture change**
 - Meet before the meeting to strategize and after the meeting to debrief

A Template for Discussing an Application

- **Presentations of critiques:**
 - Each reviewer should clearly explain to the panel how they arrived at their score
 - Focus should be on score driving issues, positive and negative
- **Panel discussion:**
 - Assigned reviewers should explore their differences regarding facts, weighting, perspective, scoring etc.
 - Panelists should request clarifications and/or offer new (score-driving) considerations
 - Score calibration is important
- **Well-presented critiques and a good panel discussion allow for panelists to make informed judgments about the application.**
- **Clarity, not consensus, is the goal.**

Facilitating Discussion: Step in When Needed

- **Intervene to end long descriptions of the application**
- **Step in to mitigate reputational bias of the sponsors/institution**
- **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
- **Not your job alone, but if no one asks, you should, when:**
 - Training potential is not made clear.
 - Major differences in assigned reviewers' views are unexplored.
 - There is significant discrepancy between comments and scores.