



Exploring a Career at the NIH Center for Scientific Review

For a variety of reasons, scientists at all career levels may want to look into alternative career choices. The NIH offers a range of positions in which a scientist can contribute to the mission of advancing science through an administrative role. This article will discuss some of my experiences as a Science Review Administrator (SRA) at the NIH Center for Scientific Review (CSR). My colleagues include scientists and clinicians with a range of experience, including individuals who left the lab bench after finishing postdoctoral research, former faculty who ran an academic lab (like me), and a former director of an entire research institute.

What We Do

No surprise here, we organize the review of grant applications, although we do not make funding decisions. The NIH review process is two-tiered. One group (most often CSR) handles the review to determine scientific and technical merit. Afterwards, the specific Institute or Center determines whether to fund, based on the review score, overall priorities, and public health needs. The primary function of an SRA is to ensure fair, expert, and timely reviews—so that NIH can fund the most promising research. To demonstrate how this is accomplished, I'll describe the duties involved for a "typical" R01 research application review panel, which meets three times each year.

First, we attempt to make sure that each application is assigned appropriately to the study section. For some applications, the study section choice is fairly obvious. Other applications could be reviewed by any one of several panels. We read through and consider the applications, and, when necessary, interact with other SRAs and the Receipt and Referral Office

to find the most appropriate home. In addition, some investigators contact us to discuss

their assignment, either in advance of submission or after notification of assignment.

We next need to obtain the appropriate reviewers for the upcoming meeting. This will be a combination of regular members and newly recruited ad hoc members. The panel covers certain areas of science every round, so the SRA assembles a roster of regular members to provide this expertise. These hardy scientists agree to a four-

year hitch on the panel, and the SRA updates the panel every year. Each review round, the SRA also recruits ad hoc members to provide additional areas of expertise, and to substitute for the regular members who cannot attend that round. Recruiting involves a combination of persistence, networking, and sometimes plain old good luck.

Having recruited the panel members, the SRA then assigns applications to each reviewer, and sends the applications and supporting materials approximately four to six weeks before the meeting. From this time until the actual

meeting, the SRA carries out activities to ensure that the meeting and review run smoothly. We orient new reviewers to the process, communicate with the applicants about supplemental materials, and make sure the reviewers complete their initial critiques and scores before the meeting. We also deal with issues that may arise, such as the occasional reviewer who withdraws from the panel and must be replaced, or the hotel

that "lost" reviewer room reservations and now has no rooms available.

At the study section meeting, the SRA serves as the NIH representative and "Designated

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Federal Official,” while the panel chairperson manages the reviews. The SRA ensures that the review runs according to appropriate procedures, and provides administrative guidance when necessary. Much of our efforts at the meeting are spent taking notes on the discussions, as these will be used in writing the summary statements. Many SRAs also organize and attend a dinner (or some other social function) with the review scientists.

After the meeting, SRAs complete a number of administrative tasks. For example, they calculate and disseminate the final scores to the applicants. The summary statements need to be compiled and released within 30 days of the meeting.

Things can get busy. SRAs usually handle multiple panels each cycle. Also, the cycles overlap, so that the time for summary statement preparation coincides with the arrival of the next round’s applications. We have additional duties and opportunities, such as attending scientific meetings, recruiting for and preparing the regular roster, and internal meetings/training sessions within CSR.

Life at CSR vs. Life in the Lab

There are many similarities in CSR and lab work. SRAs work relatively independently, within the overall constraints of their responsibilities. We keep up with the progress of science, though on a broader scale, attend scientific meetings, and interact with scientists. (As a representative of NIH, I find that scientists invariably return my emails and messages!) Writing skills are necessary for the compilation of summary statements, which could be described as a combination of original text and abstracting.

There are differences and trade-offs too. While there are deadlines, the pace of work is overall more relaxed, and SRAs have the time and energy to get involved in activities outside of work. There is financial security that comes from being a government employee, although we are subject to the vicissitudes of government. We are out of the lab and not following up on our own ideas, but we do get a first look at future research in multiple areas. And we get to learn lots of government acronyms!

Obtaining a Job at CSR

There are two ways to become an SRA at CSR—apply for an open SRA position, or apply for the CSR internship program. Successful applicants for an open position usually have faculty-level experience, either as an independently funded academic researcher or as an industrial researcher. The strongest candidates also have reviewing experience, either for NIH or for alternate funding agencies. SRA positions are advertised as they become available.

The internship program requires the completion of four years of postdoctoral experience. The application deadline is usually in January, with a start date of July.

Information about current job openings and the internship program is available through the CSR website: <http://cms.csr.nih.gov/AboutCSR/Employment>. ■

—Charles Dearolf

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