

Endocrine Society comments in response to [NOT-OD-23-110](#), “Request for Information (RFI) on Recommendations for Improving NRSA Fellowship Review”

Response was developed by the Research Affairs Core Committee of the Endocrine Society

Comments submitted electronically via online submission form on June 23, 2023.

Please provide your comments on the proposed changes to NRSA fellowship review criteria.

On behalf of the Endocrine Society, thank you for considering our comments on recommendations for improving NRSA fellowship review. Founded in 1916, the Endocrine Society is the world’s oldest, largest, and most active organization devoted to research on hormones and the clinical practice of endocrinology. The Society’s membership consists of over 18,000 scientists, physicians, educators, nurses, and students from more than 120 countries. Our members include scientists who serve as mentors, and trainees who stand to benefit from changes to the NRSA fellowship application and review process. As a member society, we also support and endorse the comments submitted separately by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB).

The Endocrine Society is appreciative of the proposed changes to NRSA review criteria, which aim to address sponsor/institutional bias and reduce reviewer burden. In particular, we are supportive of the proposed change that encourages reviewers to evaluate the applicant’s scientific potential *in the context of their opportunities*. Ideally, this framework will consider highly-qualified applicants that previously scored lower for having fewer “credentials” due to a disadvantaged background. However, to ensure the most equitable outcomes, we encourage the NIH to **make training for peer reviewers a priority** when rolling out these changes. Preferably, this would be via in-person training directly before the study section meets. We believe it would be most effective to hear about these changes from a position of authority at the NIH, as opposed to an impersonal module that may not be as effective at conveying the intent and objectives of the changes. Without a strong reviewer training program from leadership at NIH, we are concerned that issues related to bias may persist.

We also support the proposed change to reduce the number of scored criteria from 5 individual criterion scores to 3 to achieve the goal of reducing administrative burden on reviewers. We understand that removing the scored sections titled “Sponsors and Collaborators” and “Institutional Environment and Commitment” are intended to address the goal of reducing sponsor/institutional bias. While this is a worthy goal, we are concerned that the new proposed criterion appear to have descriptions that still ask reviewers to score and consider the sponsor and environment at length. For example, under the proposed “Science and Scientific Resources” section, it directs reviewers to “assess whether the scientific expertise of the mentorship team is appropriate for the proposed science.” Additionally, under the proposed “Training Plan and Training Resources” section, it says to “evaluate the training environment for this applicant and assess whether the necessary institutional training resources are well-specified and available,

specifically the practical availability of resources.” While sponsor and institution no longer have their own sections in the proposed reviewer changes, they are still essentially being assessed under scored criteria that have different headings. This could lead to a continuation of biases against applicants with early-career mentors or those proposing research at under-resourced institutions.

To address this, **we propose that the mentor’s expertise to support the applicant’s project, as well as the availability of resources needed for the applicant’s project at the institution, be a binary yes or no assessment** for reviewers, similar to what was recently proposed by the Center for Scientific Review for NIH Research Project Grant applications. Implemented properly, and with training for reviewers on the intention behind the change, this could significantly reduce reputational bias against applicants whose sponsor/environment is appropriate for the research project proposed. We believe that making these assessments binary, rather than scored under different categories, will go further in preventing reputational and institutional bias.


Please provide your comments on the proposed changes to the NRSA application instructions and materials.

The Endocrine Society is supportive of the proposed changes to applicant materials. We applaud the proposed change that grades would no longer be allowed in the NRSA application given that undergraduate grades do not correlate with graduate school “success.” We are also very supportive of the optional statement of special circumstance, as this will give applicants an opportunity to add context to their career trajectory if needed.

However, we are hesitant about the continued encouragement of precise career goals from applicants. Our members report that continued bias exists towards individuals who express a strong desire for a career path in academic research. In fact, in the background section of this Request for Information, it states that “the first stage of NIH peer review serves to provide expert advice to NIH by assessing the likelihood that the fellowship will enhance the candidate’s potential for, and commitment to, a productive independent scientific research career in a health-related field”. We are concerned that this unnecessarily restricts the applicant pool, and disincentivizes individuals from pursuing other career paths.

We recommend **removing the emphasis on a specific career path in the application**, to encourage sincerity about an applicant’s career goals, particularly since exploration of various careers at this stage is appropriate and should be encouraged. We echo FASEB’s justification which argues that “expanding to a less singular focus on a specific career path also makes space for the applicant to indicate crafting a mentor network, developing transferable skills, and making use of institutional resources to help inform their future career choices.” We believe that the fundamental intention of the fellowship program should be to support applicants with high potential to carry out the proposed project while developing professionally, not to try to predict who may be the most committed to a specific career path and long-term objectives.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our recommendations for improving NRSA fellowship review. The Endocrine Society wholeheartedly supports the overarching goal of reducing bias;



we are encouraged that NIH is making concrete steps to ensure a diverse pool of promising applicants are considered for this prestigious fellowship.

If we can be of further assistance, please contact Alyx Scott, PhD, Manager of Science Policy and Research Affairs at the Endocrine Society (ascott@endocrine.org).