DEMYSTIFYING NIH STUDY REVIEW GROUPS*

In submitting a grant proposal to NIH, you may have been advised to select or recommend peer-review study groups – the panel of similar researchers – to review your proposal. Obviously it makes sense to ensure that the reviewers are people who understand and are familiar with your area of work and your methodologies. But how does that happen? When does that happen? How do you know who is on the review panel? This note sets out to demystify that process.

In order to understand your role in selecting a review panel, it’s important to understand what happens after your proposal is received. After submission, your proposal is reviewed by the Division of Receipt and Referral (DRR) for NIH compliance (e.g., it must be complete). Then DRR assigns your proposal to a Scientific Review Officer (SRO, also known as SRA). Since competing applications may be funded through more than one institute or center (ICs), DRR decides which IC is most appropriate for your research. The SRO then assigns your proposal to a CSR Study Section (or to an IC Review Committee) by looking at the title, overview and PI profile. It is a human process: a real person is looking at your application. The full detail of this process is available here: http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/Submission+And+Assignment+Process.htm.

The researcher can help by letting the SRO know what might be a good choice. The place to provide this guidance is in the optional cover letter, which is one component of the application SF424(R&R) package. First specify which program official(s) you’ve been speaking with about your proposal, which IC you think is most appropriate and any secondary possibilities, and which research program it fits into (more is not bad: it shows that multiple ICs might be interested in funding your work). The Study Group is also the kind of thing you should discuss with your program official before you submit the application. They are aware of nuances of reviewer strengths and focus.

Second, you suggest possible review groups. Some ICs have CSR do all the review, in other cases the IC will handle some of the reviews. For example, NICHD reviews its own R03’s but NIA sends them to CSR. There are regular standing groups, and there are special emphasis panels for unusual expertise or conflicts of interest. Different groups review R01s, R03s & R21s, K’s and F’s. Yet even if you suggest a group for your R03 that only reviews R01’s, you’ve still provided valuable insight.

To find your group, you can start here: http://cms.csr.nih.gov/. For example, type in ‘migration’ into the search menu. You’ll see two options for social sciences research, one for R01s (SSPS) and one for R03s (ZRG1 PSE C 90). Click on the link for a description of the kind of research this group reviews. Click on the roster: do the names seem appropriate? Another way to find study groups is: http://www.csr.nih.gov/Roster_proto/section1.asp or http://era.nih.gov/roster/index.cfm.

Rosters are released 30 days prior to the actual meeting. Even though you should suggest which study group makes sense in your optional cover letter, if you see it’s now not appropriate (e.g., now there’s several medical doctors and you want social scientists), then it’s time to write to your SRO and let her/him know. DON’T MENTION REVIEWERS BY NAME. Instead, mention expertise that you want.

Conflicts of interest between the researcher and review panel members are taken very seriously, and should be discussed prior to making formal requests in writing. An example of a serious conflict of interest issue to be discussed is previous experience of ethics violations between yourself and the reviewer. Another is, suppose your research sets out to show how Professor John Doe’s theory is inadequate and you see that Prof. Doe is on your panel. It should be mentioned as an issue for the SRO to consider. They NEVER share this kind of information with the reviewers.

To sum up, the optional cover letter can be an essential part of your application.

*This document is available for download on the Popcenter website.