Evaluating NIH Fellowship Applications: Reviewer Guidance

The goal of fellowship review is to provide expert advice to the NIH regarding 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, in order to inform funding decisions. Fellowship review has two important outputs:

1. The written evaluation *(for all applications)*
2. The impact score, and, if applicable, the percentile *(for discussed applications only)*

Who is the audience for your critique?

The primary audience for your critique is the funding NIH Institute/Center's Advisory Council and staff. An important secondary audience is the other reviewers who will be reading your critique to understand what drove your assessment of overall impact. While the candidate will also read your critique, this should not diminish your candor, nor lead you to make recommendations for improving the application. However, reviewers should be mindful that the individual fellowship is intended to help develop the next generation of research scientists; hurtful or discouraging language is always inappropriate.

General guidance for writing effective critiques:

- Remember that a fellowship award is a training award and NOT a research award. Judge the application for its ability to make a strong impact on the candidate's research training and scientific career development.
- Provide specific evaluative comments; do not describe the specific aims. Avoid the use of single adjectives or general comments to summarize your evaluation.
- Explain why you think a point is a strength or weakness.
- Focus on the major (score-driving) factors that drove your assessment; do not include minor points.
- Evaluate the application as it is presented without making assumptions, to ensure fairness to all candidates.
- Make sure the written comments and scores are consistent.

General guidance for scoring:

- NIH uses a 9-point scoring scale (1 = exceptional; 5 = average; 9 = poor).
- An overall impact score of 1-3 should be reserved for applications with high training potential. Scores in the 4-6 range indicate a "good" application that may have less training impact. Scores of 7-9 should be used when the training value is low and major weaknesses are clearly articulated.
- For each of the three scored review criteria, assign a score of:
  - 1-3 if there are major strengths and few or no weaknesses.
  - 4-6 if there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses.
  - 7-9 if major weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths.

Guidance on overall impact assessment:

- Emphasize the candidate's potential for a productive career, the candidate's need for the proposed training, and the degree to which the research project and training plan, the sponsor(s), and the environment will satisfy those needs.
- Explain how you balanced or weighted the criteria listed below (scored review criteria and additional review criteria) to arrive at your overall impact score.

Review criteria:

SCORED REVIEW CRITERION 1: CANDIDATE'S PREPAREDNESS AND POTENTIAL

- Evaluate the candidate's preparedness for the proposed research training plan. Consider the context, for example, the candidate's stage of training and the opportunities available.
- Assess whether the candidate and sponsor statements as well as the referee letters provide convincing evidence that the candidate possesses qualities (such as scientific understanding, creativity, curiosity, resourcefulness, and drive) that will improve the likelihood of a successful research training outcome.
- Consider the candidate's potential to benefit from the fellowship research training plan and to transition to the next career stage in the biomedical research workforce.

SCORED REVIEW CRITERION 2: RESEARCH TRAINING PLAN

- Assess the rigor and feasibility of the research training project and how completion of the project will contribute to the development of the candidate as a research scientist.
- Evaluate the goals of the overall research training plan and the extent to which the plan will facilitate the attainment of the goals.
- Assess whether the research training plan identifies areas of needed development and contains appropriate, realistic activities and milestones to address those needs.
- Consider whether the sponsor(s), scientific environment, facilities, and resources are adequate and appropriate for the proposed research training plan.

SCORED REVIEW CRITERION 3: COMMITMENT TO CANDIDATE

- Assess whether the sponsor(s) presents a strong mentoring plan appropriate to the needs and goals of the candidate.
- Evaluate the extent to which the sponsor(s) and organizational commitment is appropriate, sufficient, and in alignment with the candidate's research training plan.
- Consider whether the level of commitment provided will contribute to the successful completion of the proposed plan and allow the candidate to advance to a productive career in the biomedical research workforce.

ADDITIONAL REVIEW CRITERIA (considered in overall impact score but not individually scored)

- Protections for Human Subjects
- Inclusion of Women, Minorities, and Individuals Across the Lifespan
- Vertebrate Animals
- Biohazards
- Resubmissions

ADDITIONAL REVIEW CONSIDERATIONS (NOT considered in overall impact score)

- Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research
- Applications from Foreign Organizations
- Select Agent Research
- Resource Sharing Plans
- Authentication of Key Biological and/or Chemical Resources