

Chair Orientation: NIH's Simplified Review Framework

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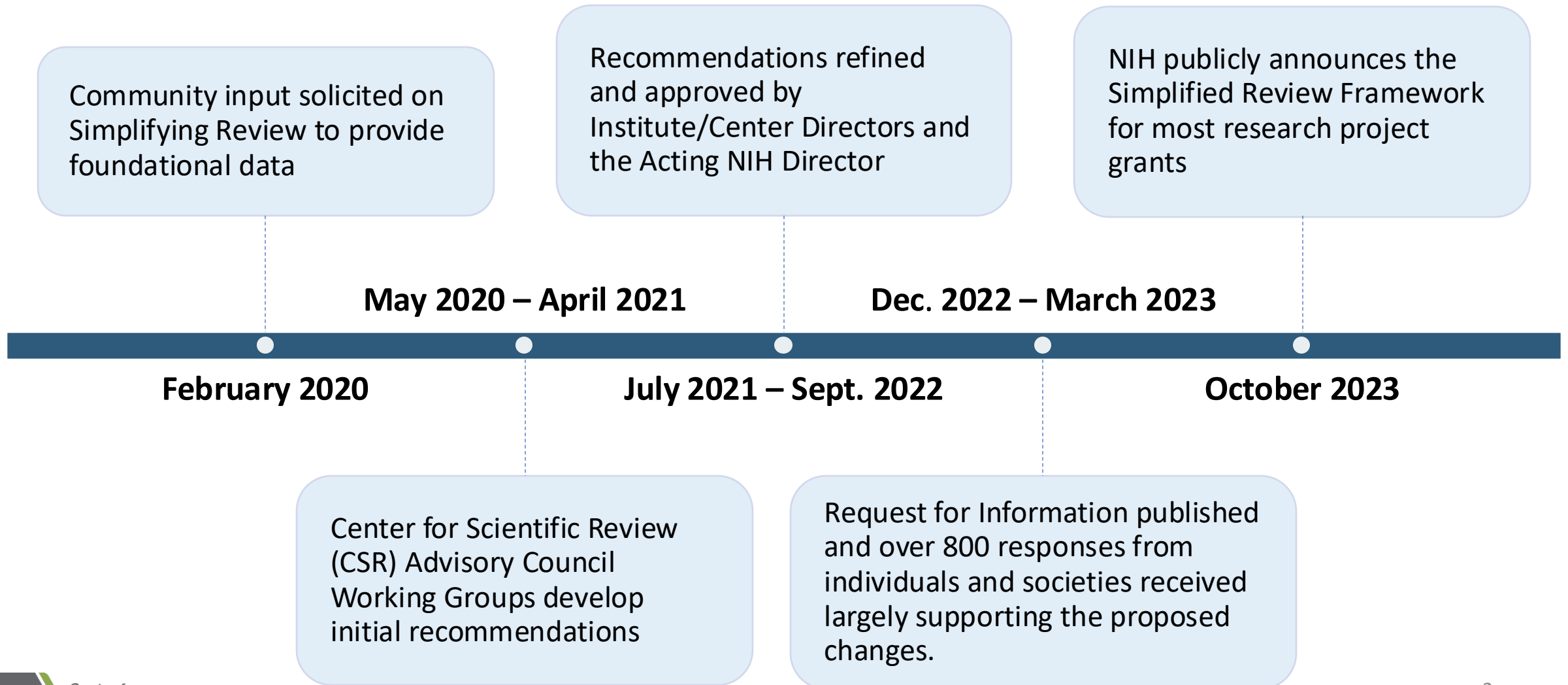
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How We Got Here-Community Input and NIH Partnership with Extramural Scientists



Main Goals of the Simplified Review Framework (SRF)

- **Refocus first-level peer review on its singular role of providing advice to the agency regarding the scientific/technical merit of grant applications**
 - Reframes criteria to focus reviewer attention on 3 key questions
 - Removes distractions of certain administrative compliance items
- **Address long-standing concerns**
 - Inadequate attention to Significance/Innovation
 - Over-emphasis on technical minutiae in the Approach
 - Tendency for reviewers to be risk averse, potentially overlooking innovative research
 - Undue influence of reputation of the Investigator and Environment, making it harder for investigators/institutions less well known to NIH reviewers to be competitive

Facilitate the overarching goal of peer review: identification of the strongest, potentially highest-impact research

Research Project Grant Review: 5 Criteria → 3 Factors

Applications submitted before January 25, 2025

Overall Impact Score based on
5 criteria

- Significance – scored 1-9
- Investigator(s) – scored 1-9
- Innovation – scored 1-9
- Approach – scored 1-9
- Environment – scored 1-9

Applications submitted on or after January 25, 2025

Overall Impact Score based on 3 Factors

- **Factor 1: Importance of the Research** (*should it be done?*)
 - Scored 1-9
- **Factor 2: Rigor and Feasibility** (*can it be done well?*)
 - Scored 1-9
- **Factor 3: Expertise and Resources** (*are the expertise and resources in place to do it?*)
 - Evaluated as “appropriate” or “additional expertise/resources needed”; if additional needs are identified, comments are required
 - Gaps in expertise and/or resources should affect Overall Impact score

SRF Reduces the Burden of Additional Review Considerations

Additional Review Criteria	Additional Review Considerations
<p data-bbox="377 429 1184 482">Can affect overall impact score</p> <ul data-bbox="308 591 1192 1019" style="list-style-type: none">• Protections for Human Subjects• Vertebrate Animals• Biohazards• Renewal• Resubmission• Revision	<p data-bbox="1322 429 2206 482">Do not affect overall impact score</p> <ul data-bbox="1294 605 2168 829" style="list-style-type: none">• Authentication of Key Biological and/or Chemical Resources• Budget and Period of Support

Role of the Chair

- **Actively facilitate the discussion**
 - Make sure key questions are answered
 - Step in when needed
- **Chairs no longer summarize the discussion**

Why? (consistent with SRF goals):

- 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 SRF 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:**
 - SRF encourages brevity and better focus on the most important questions of review
 - 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: Make Sure Key Questions are Answered

When a discussion concludes you and the panel should understand:

1. *Should it be done?* (How important is the research?)

- Evaluating the importance of the science is hard, but vital.
- Reviewers confuse public health need with scientific importance.
- A clear message that importance is lacking can be a favor to everyone.
- Emphasis on importance is reflected in SRF structured scoring guidance.

2. *Can it be done well?* (How rigorous and feasible is the approach?)

- Don't nit pick.
- Don't require certainty—can they overcome challenges.
- Do require rigorous and feasible methods.

3. *Are the expertise and resources in place to do it?*

- Binary rating provides the input NIH needs without leaving room for reputational bias.
- Evaluations should be specific and pertinent to the proposed project.

Facilitating Discussion: Step in When Needed

- **Intervene to end long descriptions of the application and discourage weedy discussions of methods.**
- **Step in to mitigate reputational bias.**
 - If expertise/resources are ‘appropriate’, no comments needed; reviewers should focus on the science as presented.
 - Seemingly harmless laudatory comments can introduce bias into the evaluation.
- **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:**
 - Importance of the research is not made clear.
 - Major differences in assigned reviewers’ views are unexplored.
 - There is significant discrepancy between comments and scores.