Chair Orientation

The purpose of this document is:

- To promote Chairs as effective leaders of Scientific Review Groups (SRG)
- To assist Chairs in achieving peer review of the highest quality and fairness

Orientation of Chairpersons

Once selected, Chair orientation must include training in pre- and post-meeting responsibilities as well as training that addresses meeting management skills (as needed).

Pre-Meeting Responsibilities:

- Be available to the SRO for discussion of meeting plans and expected changes in procedure
- Assist in training new members, particularly in how to write and present critiques
- Know the specific criteria relevant to the particular meeting, as well as the non-score driving, administrative issues that must be addressed
- Examine all of the applications that will be reviewed at the meeting; read critiques for applications where there is wide divergence in preliminary scores to help guide discussion of those applications at the meeting. (Chairs should continue to be assigned reviewers of proposals, since reviewing enables them to serve as role models for other panel members, although they may ask for lighter assignment loads in order to devote time to reviewing all the applications)
- Model good behavior, by posting critiques on time, focusing on Significance/Impact, and encouraging reviewers to base their scores on their historic experience as reviewers, awarding the best scores in comparison with applications they have reviewed in previous rounds.

Additionally, in partnership with the SRO, the Chair might constructively communicate directly with the SRG members on topics of administrative importance (e.g., implementation of new review procedures, etc).

Meeting Responsibilities:

- Partner with SRO for expert and fair peer review
- Operate consistently with NIH/CSR review procedures and practices, and actively support their implementation
- State clearly at the outset of a meeting that all reviewers are expected to be present for the entire meeting
- Effectively set the tone of the discussion
- Keep members engaged during discussions
- Manage to keep the meeting on schedule without cutting off discussion prematurely. *Remember that discussion does not always lead to consensus, since consensus on scoring is not required*. Airing of all major issues is essential, and the reasons for differences of opinion are clear to all and recorded in the summary statement

- In order to ensure review is fair, equitable and free of bias, watch for evidence that a reviewer may be influenced by inappropriate personal interests (competition, scientific bias, personal antagonism etc.) and speak to the SRO
- Prevent reviewers from referring to applications as the "best in my pile" or trying to spread their scores within their pile; rather remind the panel that any given round of applications should be evaluated in the historic context of previously reviewed applications and that any kind of "normal" distribution is cumulative over several rounds
- *Beware of his/her own potential biases:* Although the Chair should not hesitate to state his/her scientific opinion when appropriate, it is essential to be cognizant of the role as Chair, without championing favorite areas of science over others. To promote third-party moderation of all review discussions, the SRO will appoint an "alternate" Chair when the Chairperson is assigned as a reviewer/discussant on an application
- Work with the SRO regarding inadequate reviews and irregularities when they arise
- Chair and monitor discussion threads if the application is reviewed during an Asynchronous Electronic Discussion meeting

Meeting logistics and procedures that the Chair should practice include:

- Follow the order of review established
- Announce number and principal investigator of application that is being reviewed
- Ensure that conflicts are out of the room (with the assistance of the SRO or NIH staff)
- Announce reviewers by first and last names (helps those on phone)
- Clarify differences in the review of different categories of applications. For example, R21s do not require the same degree of preliminary data as R01s; they are not mini-R01s and should not be evaluated the same. After the SRO has made clear the differences, the Chair should make sure the discussion follows those parameters. (This is particularly important given that applications are now reviewed in order of preliminary score, not grouped by mechanism usually, so different mechanisms may be comingled)
- Ask reviewers to provide their initial level of enthusiasm and preliminary score
- Ensure that reviewers always speak clearly into microphones or telephones
- Ask reviewers to provide concise review of each application with emphasis on the overall impact on the field and then the other main review criteria, emphasizing major strengths and weaknesses.
- Ask for any comments about human subject research, vertebrate animal research, or biohazards
- Open up the review for further discussion by all members of the panel
- Briefly summarize the reviews, pointing out any disagreements among the reviewers
- Ask for assigned reviewers' final scores
- Ask any reviewer scoring outside the stated range to so indicate by raising his or her hand, and stating the rationale if it has not been explained during the discussion
- Remind reviewers that they should modify their written critiques in light of the discussion
- After final scores have been entered, ask about budget recommendations and any other non-scorable issues

Post-Meeting Responsibilities:

The SRO should plan to have a post-meeting discussion with the Chairperson, in which the Chair will be expected to:

- Provide feedback on reviewer (and SRO) performance
- Assess suitability of any temporary reviewers for SRG membership
- Discuss issues and problems that arose during the meeting and potential solutions

Further, the Chair should be available to:

- Consult with the SRO on Resume and Summary of Discussion, particularly in cases where the SRO needs confirmation that it accurately reflects the final recommendations of the SRG
- Assist in evaluation, selection, and training of the next Chairperson, when it is appropriate
- Be open to candid feedback from the SRO and reviewers (through the SRO), and modify practices when necessary

Finally, once/year a proactive Chair should send a post-meeting e-mail to all panel members, soliciting feedback and suggestions to improve study section function.

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