

Early Career Reviewer – Q & A – May 24, 2021

Applying

Q: How often do you accept applications for ECRs?

A: All the time. There is no specific deadline or window for applications.

Q: I have applied to be a reviewer to help diversify NIH study sections through the Society of Behavioral Medicine. I have not been selected yet, but should I still apply for the ECR? Or would that be redundant?

A: You should apply to the ECR program. CSR has several initiatives to diversify our reviewer pools and one is to ask scientific societies to send us names of independent researchers in their field that they recommend for review service. Your chances of being asked to serve as a reviewer might be higher through the ECR program as scientific review officers are required to recruit ECRs for most meetings.

Q: I had problem applying the NIH commons ID. I tried but was not successful. Need help here.

A: You will need to enlist the signing official at your institution for assistance. You can find information here: <https://era.nih.gov/register-accounts/create-and-edit-an-account.htm>

Eligibility Requirements

Position

Q: Am I eligible to apply when I am working in one of the NIH organizations?

A: Yes

Q: I am Research Assistant Professor. Am I eligible to apply for ECR?

A: Yes

Q: Is Instructor (early faculty member) eligible for the ECR program?

A: If you are independent and have an active research program as evidenced by publications, very likely. We have an ECR Vetting Committee that makes these determinations; they try to be very liberal in applying the criteria for involvement.

Q: Are researchers not working as faculty eligible? I work as a nurse scientist for a health system.

A: Yes

Q: Are non-tenure track faculty (e.g., Clinical Assistant Prof level) eligible to apply assuming they meet the other criteria?

A: Yes

Q: Are only researchers who are early stage investigators (10 years since doctoral degree) eligible for this program?

A: The eligibility requirement is based on professional rank, not length of time since terminal research degree.

Publications

Q: How is 'independent research project' defined as eligibility criterion? Should I have my own funded project?

A: No, it's not necessary to have extramural funding. You have to show evidence of an independent research program and that basically means meet the publication requirement.

Q: Do first-author publications count as senior-authored?

A: Yes

Q: Is co-first author considered senior authorship?

A: Yes

Q: Does co-corresponding author count as senior authored paper?

A: Yes

Q: Do in-press publications count?

A: Yes

Q: Do senior authorship on preprint platform count?

A: No

Q: Do textbook chapters meet the publication requirement?

A: No. Publications must be peer-reviewed, research publications.

Grant & (lack of) Funding Requirement

Q: Are you still eligible if you've submitted a grant application to AHRQ, but not NIH proper?

A: No

Q: I am a faculty, but since I am not a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, I am not eligible to apply for NIH grants, will the criterion on NIH grant submission be replaced by other, non-NIH grant application submissions?

A: NIH recognizes the institution as the "applicant". Generally, there is not a requirement that the principal investigator be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. See: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/who-is-eligible.htm>

Q: Does K submissions count for a qualification? Or does it need to be R series?

A: As long as you submit an NIH grant application and receive the summary statement (whether it was discussed or not), it counts. K-series is acceptable, R-series is acceptable, F-series is acceptable...

Q: I noticed that one of the requirements is a grant application with a summary statement. I had a grant application reviewed but not funded. How should this be listed on a CV, since it was scored, not funded?

A: There is no need to list your grant submission on your CV. The application process to the ECR program includes an automatic check of an NIH database of grant submissions.

Q: Is this program available for those who are NOT U.S citizen/permanent resident?

A: Yes

Q: I am the PI on an SBIR grant - can I apply for this as a non-academic?

A: Yes

Q: Does MPI on an R01 count as receiving an R01 as PI. Would this disqualify one from the ECR from the program?

A: Yes, it would disqualify you.

Q: Can you qualify if one has received a K01?

A: Yes, you may. It is successful [R01-equivalent](#) grant applications, in the principal investigator role, that are disqualifying.

Q: Does having an R01 or U01 from another federal funder (CDC) disqualify an applicant?

A: No, but we rely on an automatic check of an NIH database to consider this criterion. Data from CDC may be included in our database. If you are in this situation and you receive an automated message stating that you are not eligible due to having R01-equivalent funding, please respond to the message and we will fix it.

Q: What would occur if one was accepted as an ECR and then subsequently received R01 funding?

A: We do daily validations of our ECR database against the NIH database of grant submissions and funding. If/when you receive R01 funding in the principal investigator role, we will remove you from our ECR database. That said, it doesn't mean an opportunity for review service has passed you by. You should feel free to contact SROs running panels in your field and let them know that you recently received funding and you are interested in serving as a reviewer.

Review service

Q: If I was invited to serve as an ad hoc reviewer for a career development study section this summer, am I no longer eligible for this program?

A: If it was for an NIH study section, that's correct, you are no longer eligible to serve as an ECR.

Study section choices

Q: Out of the four study sections you can recommend, how likely are you to be appointed to your first (or second choice)? What are the criteria with this appointment? Do institutional conflicts apply?

A: We don't view the study sections you suggest as first, second, choices. They are used as a way for scientific review officers to identify people that might fit their study section. Which panel you are invited to serve on is a function of which SRO needs what expertise. Institutional conflicts apply in that they limit your assignments and access to grant applications. Similarly, institution matters in that we avoid and limit the number of dyads on a review panel. Dyads are instances where there are two reviewers from the same institution. Therefore, if a panel you are interested in serving on has a standing member from your institution, you are less likely to be invited to serve for that panel.

Following Up

Q: If accepted, is there a way to check whether you are still in the database? I had been asked to be an ECR for a study section meeting in Feb and they ended up not needing me. Then they requested I do it in June, but I have not heard from them. I wondered if I would still be considered as ECR for other study sections in the future? I can also check with the SRO who originally contacted me. Thanks so much!

A: You can send an email to CSREarlyCareerReviewer@mail.nih.gov and ask if you are still in the database. You are also more than welcome to email the SROs you've been in contact with again and express interest in serving.

Q: After how long, should we expect to be contacted for a review panel after we apply? it has been several months that I have applied, and I did not hear anything back yet.

A: We recently analyzed the wait time - 52% of those accepted into the ECR program are recruited for review service within 6 months. But wait time is highly dependent upon the field. CSR panels cover the full range of science at the NIH and there are some areas of science for which we have a large number of people accepted into the ECR program and other areas where we have fewer people. It is a good idea to contact scientific review officers running panels in your field and express interest in serving. That simply helps to put you on their radar.

Q: My questions are 1) do all section officers know about this program and know people may reach out to them directly, and 2) are there other ways to increase our chances of being selected?

A: Yes, all scientific review officers (SRO) know about the ECR program. There is a requirement that standing study sections include 2 ECRs at every meeting. SROs are aware that we tell ECRs to feel free to contact them directly.

Q: Would be ok to write to the scientific review officer (SRO) where your current R01 is going to be reviewed?

A: Yes. You would not be able to serve in the same review cycle as when your grant is being reviewed but it's still completely fine to contact the SRO and express interest in serving in the future.

Q: If you have a preferred study section in which you want to participate, but receive an invitation from another study section, could you turn it down? As you only have a chance to serve, right?

A: Yes, you can turn down an invitation. You may serve as an ECR only once. That said, serving on a different study section than the one you've been targeting might be a good thing – you might learn that there are multiple study sections that are a good fit for your research.

Mechanics of being a reviewer

Q: Is there flexibility in the 2 grants to review (could we ask for 3 or 4)? I've heard that the experience is less helpful if both grants you review are ND.

A: No, you will be assigned 2 applications as Reviewer 3. There is no flexibility in this. However, ECRs, like all panel members, should participate in the discussion and evaluation of applications beyond their assigned proposals. You certainly will have expertise in applications beyond your two assignments and we want your input. Additionally, the more you participate, the more you will gain from the experience. In advance of the meeting, you will have access to all grant applications and to the critiques submitted (with the exception of any that you are in conflict with). This access allows panels members to come to the meeting prepared to participate broadly.

Q: Do ECRs serve only on special emphasis panels?

A: ECRs are recruited to special emphasis panels reviewing 25 or more R-series grants and all standing study section meetings must include 2 ECRs.

Q: Are review meetings in-person now, or will they be virtual?

A: Meetings will be entirely virtual through Fall 2021. However, it is unlikely that review will continue to be conducted entirely virtually in the future. We anticipate a return to some in-person meetings.

Q: When meetings are held in person again, are ECRs invited/expected to attend?

A: Yes!

Q: Will ECRs be expected to travel to a specific site (NIH campus in MD?) to participate in a study section? How has the pandemic influenced/changed how study sections operate?

A: All Fall 2021 review meetings will be virtual. However, we do anticipate a return to some in-person meetings in the future. We've done some initial analyses of the impact of virtual meeting formats on peer review. You can find that information here:

<https://www.csr.nih.gov/reviewmatters/2020/11/13/should-we-keep-meeting-this-way/>

Q: Would the ECR have access to all the grants that the study section is reviewing so they can read them beforehand?

A: Yes, all panel members have access to applications and the critiques submitted in advance of the meeting. The only exception are those proposals (and associated critiques) with which you are in conflict (e.g. proposals from your institution, proposals from your collaborators, etc.)

Q: How do NIH reviewers protect the information in a grant that is not funded from being shared with other individuals who may use ideas in the grant in their own research?

A: Reviewers are expected to keep all meeting materials confidential. Reviewers are also expected to keep meeting procedures, scores, and discussions confidential. You can find more on the NIH policy and procedures around confidentiality of grant applications here:

https://grants.nih.gov/policy/research_integrity/confidentiality_peer_review.htm. Any concerns about review integrity should be reported to the CSR Review Integrity Officer at csrrio@mail.nih.gov or the NIH Review Policy Officer at reviewpolicyofficer@mail.nih.gov. NIH follows up on all allegations.

The ECR Experience

Q: What is the typical total time commitment (in hours)? Also, does participating in ECR Program increase opportunities to serve on a regular study section?

A: As you might expect, the time it takes to provide a thorough review varies from reviewer to reviewer and varies depending upon the proposal being evaluated. R01s involve a 12-page research strategy to evaluate as well as bio sketches of key personnel and information related to the environment. A new reviewer will need more time to do this than will an experienced reviewer. This is part of the reason for a lighter review load for ECRs. Participation in the ECR program does not automatically lead to additional review opportunities.

Q: Are ECRs assigned to review any type of grant (K, P, R, F-series etc.) or would ECRs tend to review a specific type of grant?

A: As one goal of the ECR program is to provide experience that might serve early career scientists in writing their own competitive research grant, they are assigned research grants (usually R01s, sometimes R21s) to review.

Q: Do you find ECRs are better reviewers? And do past-ECRs have a better funding track record after participating? I.e., are the program goals/hypotheses being met?

A: ECRs are among our best reviewers! Scientific review officers invest a great deal of time in training ECRs and ensuring that they are well prepared to review their assignments and to participate in the review meeting. In our experience, ECRs care greatly about providing thorough, expert reviews.

We know from past, large-scale surveys, that the vast majority of ECRs feel that they are better prepared to write their own R01, but we do not have quantitative data on R01 success rates after service. This is something we might revisit in the future. We changed the program significantly in the Fall of 2019 and some time will need to pass to evaluate the effect of the current program on funding rates. One difficulty in evaluating this is determining the most appropriate control group.

Q: If the ECR thinks that their expertise does not fit the assigned grants, can they decline or ask for a change?

A: You are welcome to discuss your concerns with the scientific review officer (SRO).

Submitting your own grant

Q: Could we submit an R01 proposal while we serve as an ECR?

A: Yes. However, if your proposal is under review in the same review cycle as when you are serving as an ECR, you could not serve on the same panel that is reviewing it.

Q: How do you reconcile reviewing applications and having submitted/submitted applications at the same time? Are you just excused from a particular session?

A: No one may serve on a panel that is reviewing their own application. Being key personnel on an application is an “off-the-panel” conflict of interest. You could serve on a review panel that is different from the one reviewing your own application.

Q: Does serving as a ECR prohibit you from submitting a proposal to the same study section - after your ECR term is completed? And if yes, for how long?

A: No. You may submit an application to the panel on which you served. You just can’t serve as a reviewer on that panel when your application is under review.

[Review experience beyond the ECR program](#)

Q: Are there any review opportunities available for postdocs?

A: Not at CSR. However, it’s not uncommon for groups such as scientific societies or departments or colleges to run mock study sections. That can be a valuable source of information.

Q: What happens after? How do we join a study section long term?

A: Scientific review officers regularly recruit ad hoc and new standing members to their panels. After serving as an ECR, the best thing you can do is to use that experience to gain your own funding. Once your research program is well established, you might consider reaching out to scientific review officers running panels in your field and expressing interest in serving as a reviewer.