



THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
IMMUNOLOGISTS

**Submission by The American Association of Immunologists
to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “Request for Information (RFI)
on Recommendations for Improving NRSA Fellowship Review”**

June 22, 2023

Please provide your comments on the proposed changes to NRSA fellowship review criteria.

[The American Association of Immunologists](#) (AAI), the nation’s largest professional association of research scientists and physicians who are dedicated to understanding the immune system through basic, translational, and clinical research, appreciates this opportunity to submit comments in response to the NIH “[Request for Information \(RFI\) on Recommendations for Improving NRSA Fellowship Review](#).” AAI appreciates the effort by the Center for Scientific Review (CSR) to review and improve the fellowship application process and applauds its intent to better facilitate the identification of the “most promising trainees and the excellent, individualized training programs that will help them become the outstanding scientists of the next generation.” AAI generally endorses the comments submitted by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) on June 2, 2023. In addition, AAI wishes to emphasize the following points.

AAI supports the restructuring of the five scored review criteria into three scored criteria:

1. Scientific Potential, Fellowship Goals, and Preparedness of the Applicant
2. Science and Scientific Resources
3. Training Plan and Training Resources

This restructuring aims to place the focus on applicants, taking into account the training and opportunities available to them. It further emphasizes additional factors such as determination and creativity that are valuable, beyond traditional academic markers of success, to thriving in the biomedical science research workforce. It is also designed to allow assessment of trainees and projects in the context of the resources available and the suitability of the sponsors and institutions while minimizing reputational bias.

These changes aim to let promising candidates shine based on their own merit. While an applicant’s institutional environment and sponsor(s) are important factors to consider, stakeholder feedback and data show that overreliance on these factors can tip the scales in such a way that deserving applicants are being rejected. Data has shown that applications are highly concentrated at a small subset of institutions, and that these applications get higher impact scores than applications from institutions that submit fewer applications each year. Further, impact scores of applications trend higher as academic rank of the sponsor increases; however, higher academic rank of the sponsor does not necessarily correlate with the quality of training and AAI believes that applicants from more junior sponsors should not be at a

disadvantage. AAI hopes that the proposed revisions will lead to more diversity and equity in the pool of NRSA fellowship awardees.

Please provide your comments on the proposed changes to the NRSA application instructions and materials.

AAI appreciates that the proposed changes to the NRSA application instructions would better align the application with the review criteria, would shorten the application by 2.5 pages thereby reducing administrative burden, and particularly emphasize statements that pertain to the individual trainee. These changes may streamline the application and review processes and help maintain focus on the quality and potential of applicants.

AAI agrees with dropping the requirement for submission of grades, as they do not necessarily reflect the scientific potential of an applicant and may inappropriately disqualify promising young scientists. AAI is also pleased to see that the proposed changes allow for an optional statement of special circumstance. Disruptions or other life circumstances should not necessarily negatively affect an applicant's chances of success; in fact, the ability to overcome obstacles demonstrates resilience which is critical in science. At the very least, applicants need to be given the chance to explain any special circumstances that may affect the score of their application.

AAI also supports the proposed changes to the letters of support. Adding more structure to the letters will allow for better understanding of applicants' strengths and weaknesses, while discouraging boilerplate language that has no real value in assessing an applicant's potential. However, the [language](#) in proposed questions one and two is specific to a career as a research scientist. AAI urges NIH to value and support the multitude of career options outside of research (e.g., science policy, science administration, teaching, etc.).

Finally, AAI urges NIH to measure the success of the implemented changes to the NRSA fellowship review criteria, create specific metrics to analyze the outcomes of the revised NRSA application process, and share the resulting data transparently. Clear and explicit instructions for all aspects of the application process and training for reviewers are of the utmost importance to ensure current biases are not replaced with new biases, and to minimize unnecessary confusion that may ultimately impact an applicant's overall score.