2-Stage Internal Grant Review

Overview. NIH-funded investigators agree that getting feedback on their proposal is a key step to assembling an effective application. This is especially important for new investigators. Mechanisms for getting this input for researchers at the University of Minnesota vary widely. This initiative proposes an inter-departmental, 2-step process for providing constructive feedback on NIH grant applications. The first step is review of the specific aims page, and the second step is a review of the full proposal. Successful implementation of this process requires adherence to a strict timeline for submission and review, oral discussion of the proposal in the presence of the applicant at each stage, and a faculty commitment from participating departments.

Timeline. Reviewing grants is hard work and that effort is wasted if the critique is not provided in time to revise the application before submission. Writing grants is hard work and much effort is wasted in preparing a full application if the basic premise or structure of the proposal is flawed. Thus, the review is provided early and in two stages.

Week prior to due date
12 notify departmental scientific review organizer (SRO) of intention to submit
11 submit polished specific aims page
10 aims review meeting
  6 submit full application
  4 mock study section

Aims review meeting. The rationale and goals of the “aims review” are clearly presented in an article by Nigovic (2017). The SRO will identify reviewers (a minimum of 3, and preferably 5 – including faculty who have recently served on an NIH study section) and schedule the meeting. A key feature of this process is meeting as a group, with the applicant present. The discussion should help to define the primary concerns.

Mock study section. Mock study section review of NIH grant applications from junior faculty has been standard practice in the Department of Neuroscience for approximately 10 years. Most participants find the process helpful and believe the internal review saved them an NIH review cycle. This local success is consistent with the inclusion of study section type internal review as part of a successful grant mentoring program (Freel et al., 2017). The mock study section includes full review in the format of an NIH study section. The applicant is present but is not allowed to comment. After the meeting, the “primary reviewer” meets with the applicant to discuss any needs for revision.

Departmental commitment. Participating departments will designate an SRO responsible for arranging review groups. Faculty in participating departments agree to review applications.

References: