NIH Director's Early Independence Award Program

Preliminary Results: Process Evaluation

Council of Councils Overview
August 15, 2011
Early Independence Award Program

Purpose
To provide a mechanism for exceptional, early career scientists to omit traditional post-doctoral training, and establish an independent research program. Junior scientists must receive Ph.D. or complete medical residency within 12 months (before or after) of application submission date.

Review Process
• Electronic review by outside experts (Stage 1 review)
• Editorial board review (Stage 2 review)
  – In-person interview with each of the 25 finalists
• Recommendation by Council of Councils and final selection by NIH Director

Award
• RFA-RM-10-019: Posted 10/6/2010; Application Due Date 1/21/2011
• 10 total awards anticipated in pilot year
• Awards will be for up to $250,000 in direct costs each year for 5 years
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Feedback Process

107 Applications

Stage 1 Review

Stage 2 Review

Jan. 21
Feb.-Mar.
April
May
June

- Interviews with NIH Program Staff
- RFI
- Website for Mail Reviewers
  - Survey for Junior Scientists
  - Survey for Host Institutional Officials
- Interviews with Directors/Fellows of similar program
  - Feedback Form for Editorial Board Reviewers
  - Website for Finalists

Note: Institutions internally select EIA candidates prior to proposals being submitted to NIH
Preliminary Findings

• Most junior scientists applied with their current institution where they held post-doctoral or faculty positions

• Institutions’ challenges: Understanding eligibility requirements, integrating this novel position into existing structures, and committing support to external candidates

• Junior scientists’ challenges: writing the NIH proposal in limited time due to institutions approval timeline, securing collaborators support, generating preliminary data, and determining level of detail to include in proposal
Preliminary Findings

• RFI respondents and EIA applicants felt time between RFA release and application deadline was short, considering the internal selection/approval process at institutions

• No common understanding of the qualities of an “exceptional” junior scientist among reviewers and applicants

• Mixed opinions about the program: Most junior scientists were very supportive, while some RFI respondents did not understand or agree with the premise of the program
Preliminary Findings

• Junior scientists were evenly split on strategies for connecting host institutions with candidates – maintaining current system, having NIH match investigators with institutions, and giving the money to institutions to recruit candidates
• Most editorial board reviewers felt two-stage review process worked well, and 30 minute interview format was excellent
• Most Important Review Criteria were Approach, followed by Significance in Stage 1, and Investigator, followed by Environment in Stage 2
• Stage 1 reviewers requested more guidance on assigning weights to institutional support and commitment, and letters of reference
Preliminary Recommendations

- Operationalize the qualifications of an “exceptional” junior scientist so reviewers, institutions, and potential candidates have the same interpretation
- Increase awareness and educate host institutions about the goals of the program
- Create a centralized database consisting of interested institutions
- Increase the time between the release of RFA and application deadline
Preliminary Recommendations

• Consider providing options to stage 1 reviewers with only one application to calibrate their scores with other reviewers
• Include a standard set of questions or items to address in letters of references
• Clearly state to reviewers which criteria should be weighted more heavily when providing overall impact score
• Consider holding the interview in a room conducive to better interaction between finalists and editorial board reviewers
• Provide finalists with information on the qualifications that will be assessed during the interview
• Increase the number of awards