Persistence is Key: Resources for Resubmission

Session Transcript:
2021 HHS Small Business Program Conference: Diverse Perspectives SEEDing Impactful Innovations

Eric Padmore: Good afternoon and welcome. My name is Eric Padmore, and I'm Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of Extramural Research Office of the Director at the National Institute of Health, and I have the pleasure of serving as your moderator for today. Thank you for joining us for this session entitled "Persistence is Key: Resources for Resubmission." Throughout the program this afternoon our sessions have focused on putting together the elements to build as competitive an application or project proposal as possible, and in this last session of the day, we want you to understand that the process does not end if your initial application is not funded. Persistence really is the key to success. Our distinguished panelists for this discussion include Stephanie Fertig who is the Health and Human Services Small Business Program Lead, from the Office of Small Business Education and Entrepreneurial Development here at the NIH. Dr. Nishadi Rajapakse is Program Director at the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, and Dr. Allen Richon, Scientific Review Officer at the Center for Scientific Review a the NIH. So without further ado, let me turn it over to Stephanie to get us started. Stephanie.

Stephanie Fertig: Thank you, Eric. So we're going to just have a few slides today to provide a little bit of an overview, but we really want to make sure that there's plenty of time for questions and some time to actually look at some actual summary statements. Well, today you may have seen this in a couple of different places, today and yesterday, but this is the overall NIH application and review process. Now, the overall process from time of application to time of reward takes about 6 to 9 months. However, companies do get feedback on how their application did within review well in advance of that, and that could be anywhere be 3 to 4 months. What we're talking about here, as Eric alluded to, is, well, what happens if after getting that feedback you didn't quite get the score that you had hoped for? You either not discussed or maybe your application just didn't quite make it, either after due diligence from the program staff or again the score wasn't quite enough for you to get considered. What happens then? Well, first off, I want to think about, how did you get there? Where did the score come from? Well, there's five scored criteria, and for those who are used to and have submitted to the NIH before, these should look shockingly familiar: significance, investigators, innovation, approach and environment. But for an SBIR, while these might be the same as the standard research grant, an R01 or an R21, or a small business grant, SBIR or STTR, these review criteria really focus on product development. So again, it's not about hypothesis-driven research. It's about developing that product. We also have some additional review criteria that are not scored individually, and they're listed here. What's interesting to note, budget is not a scored criteria. It's not even an additional review criteria. Budget is discussed after the scores have been given out. Then they actually talk about budget recommendations. So budget, not part of the score. So what happens if you're not going to be moving forward for funding? Well, applicants have the ability to resubmit. Applicants can review the summary statement and modify their application and resubmit it for review. It's important to think about resubmission and be prepared to resubmit because, as we've stated a couple of times now, the success rate for first-time submissions is only about 11 percent, but the success rate for resubmissions is 18 percent. Now, we recognize that it can be a tough route, and I included this great quote because I think it kind of encapsulates the whole resubmission process. "The reviewers aren't concerned about feelings, but take criticism seriously, correct things that need correcting and be prepared to resubmit. Don't give up because of a depressing review." And of course this quote, which I pointed out yesterday from one of our successful applicants, Dr. Carter. It may be a difficult journey, but it's long and trying, but also worthwhile. And even if at first you don't succeed, that's okay. It doesn't mean you won't fail if you try again. So we want you to succeed, and resubmission is how you do that. Most important piece of advice, I think you've heard this multiple times at this point, but talk to your program officer and give yourself plenty of time to do that. You can find the program officer that's assigned your application in the upper left-hand corner. I circled it here on the picture, but you get the contact information, which includes phone number and e-mail. Generally I encourage people to start with an e-mail. Things can get very busy, particularly as you get closer to that application deadline, so it's helpful to reach out with an e-mail and schedule a call.

Eric Padmore: So, Stephanie, if I could jump in very quickly.

Stephanie Fertig: Absolutely.

Eric Padmore: We have a question directly to that point, and the question is, can a program officer help to interpret some of the confusing feedback?

Stephanie Fertig: Absolutely, and in fact as an ex-program officer, I can tell you that was a good amount of my time. Program officers, we see a ton of summary statements, and program officers actually also attend to the review, when they can as much as possible. So since the program officers really do see that reviewer feedback, we can help look at the reviewer feedback. We also can see your application, and oftentimes we can help you think through and interpret some of that feedback because again we've seen a ton of these. And the good news is, actually there are sample applications and sample summary statements online, so you can get an idea of the feel of what the summary statements look like for these specific applications. I want to do a quick shout-out to all the applicants and awardees who have allowed us to use their application, post the redacted applications and summary statements online. I know that this is something people ask for a lot. We could not do it without you, so I just want to personally thank those people who have allowed us to share their applications and summary statements. And with that, I'm going to take a minute and switch over and show one of those summary statements. Excellent. It's nice when everything works well from and IT perspective. All right, Allen. Over to you.

Allen Richon: All right. Thank you, Stephanie. I'm Allen Richon. I'm an SRO within CSR, and I'm also the SBIR review coordinator for CSR. So I also see a ton of these things, and rather than go through a series of slides, what we thought we would do is highlight an actual summary statement and its resubmission and talk about what happens. So when you look at your summary statement, it reflects the fact that there is a two-stage review at NIH. The first stage is done at CSR, and we're the folks where the scores come out and are sent to program. So when you look at the first section of your summary statement, as Stephanie said, that program contact is probably one of the most important things you're going to see. Then there is the overall impact score that's down towards the bottom, and what that reflects is the consensus view of the entire panel on the application. If you scroll down the summary statement, there is a different section, which is the individual critiques. We'll skip the resume for a minute. Okay. So you start here with the reviewer number one and their critique, and you see that they have provided their initial view of the application before the meeting, and that's reflected by the scores that you see for significance, investigator, innovation, approach and environment. So those are the initial scores. After the meeting, if they have substantially changed their view of the application, we ask them to go back and make changes to their comments and their scores. Reviewers are busy, though, and we cannot control whether they're going to do it or not, but we do push for that to happen. One thing to consider is the fact that the score that's provided, the initial overall impact score, is not the average of those five scores. As many people tell you, we're scientists, and we think that that's the way things are done, but that is definitely not the case. One of the things at CSR we do push in terms of the training of the reviewers is that if you have a very high overall impact score, i.e., good, then probably the significance score is going to be high as well. It's really difficult to have a high overall impact on something that's not significant, so those two might track a little bit, but the rest of it informs the overall impact score, but they're not the sole determiner. All right. Within that critique, you will see the reviewer's high-level view of the application, which is the overall impact, and that should contain the things that drove their overall impact score. That's what they feel was important in terms of strengths, weaknesses and their understanding of what the application is doing. Then you get into the whole list of strengths and weaknesses, and here you will see several comments. Many of those comments are not going to make it into the discussion, and one of the things that happens when an applicant receives their feedback is that they will start focusing on individual strength or weakness comments within the body of the summary statement. Those are, as you know because you're scientists, your initial reaction to the application, and because we're scientists, we tend to pick things apart. So on occasion you'll see lots of weaknesses or maybe not so many if the person really doesn't want to say, "Oh, I have a problem with this." But those are the high-level view of the application that each of the reviewers provides. Okay. So that sets up the background for the discussion that happens at the meeting, and if you've seen the whole process of how a review is done, you understand that we only talk about the top-scoring 50 percent of the applications based on the preliminary overall impact score from the three reviewers. Now, at the meeting, we will have the three reviewers present what they think of the application and highlight the strengths and weaknesses that were the predominant features that drove their scores. After the three reviewers are done, then the entire panel will be discussing the application, asking questions, getting those questions answered and that is reflected in the summary of discussion. The SRO takes notes, tries to identify all the strengths and weaknesses that were the score-driving issues and puts those into the resume and summary of discussion. That is the top-level view of what the whole panel thought of the application because frequently you'll have someone who is not an assigned reviewer that will bring up a point which will completely change the discussion, either better or worse, and that does happen. So the pieces where.. . that drove the score are going to be contained in that resume and summary of discussion. So that would be what happens. Now, when an application is resubmitted, the applicant has the choice of either submitting a response to the reviewers, and that means that the application comes in as an A1. Go ahead and flip to it. So it would come in as an A1 application, which means that this is something where you have a one-page introduction that the applicant can provide to the panel that explains what some of the issues were with the weaknesses that were identified. Our advice, any time we've talked to an applicant is, look at the top level and look for themes that are contained within all of the comments. Don't home in on one particular comment that really bugs you. That's not the objective of the review. So look at the overall idea of what's been done and respond to those. The second thing to understand is the all these SBIRs are special emphasis panels, and the panel members are recruited based on the content of all of the applications that come in. So if we have applications that change radically, you may have an entirely different group of people. So if you see that the group responds to your one-page and says, "Yeah, great, it looks good, but we have new issues," it's because it's a new group of people.

Eric Padmore: So, Allen, if I could jump in here, we have a question that I think may pertain to just what you're speaking about. So if a given proposal with an attractive score, let's say in the 20s, is not funded by one agency, can the applicant reach out to other agencies for consideration?

Allen Richon: Okay. That one is going to be set by DRR, and then if you'll scroll up for a second, Stephanie. There should be somewhere around here where it says .. . Oh, no, it's on the cover page of the application. It says funding agencies. If DRR has looked at it and decided that there are multiple locations that could fund the work, then yes, the agencies have the option of discussing that, and I'm sure that .. .

Eric Padmore: And we should probably say who DRR is, just for folks who don't know.

Allen Richon: Yeah. That one is the Division of Receipt and Referral. They're the folks that process these applications when they come in, and Naziri is probably going to talk about what program does once they get these applications because, yeah, that's more programmatic decision to make, whether it's funded in agency A or agency B. But yes, it is possible.

Stephanie Fertig: And when we say agency, I think we have to be a little careful there. So we do look at different institutes and centers, but agency, particularly for some of our applicants here who may be used to thinking about agency like NSF or DOD. That's not what we're talking about.

Allen Richon: Right.

Eric Padmore: Right.

Stephanie Fertig: We're talking about different institutes and centers and that a specific application, unfortunately not this one, but some applications can get a primary assignment to one institute or center and then secondary assignment to others.

Eric Padmore: So, Stephanie, we should probably address that question for somebody who might be thinking if NIH doesn't fund them, can they cross and go to NSF, for example?

Stephanie Fertig: You can, actually, and there is a checkbox on the application. We do ask that if you submit the same proposal to NSF and NIH, you identify that that's what you've done. The federal government doesn't like to pay for something twice, so if you do get successfully funded in one place, you can't take the money to do the same thing again. We do frown on that, but otherwise, yes, you can certainly submit to, say, NSF and NIH at the same time. But maybe this is good to transition to what we do with .. . So once program has these summary statements, what do you do with them?

Nishadi Rajapakse: Okay. So do you want me to start?

Stephanie Fertig: Yep.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Okay. Perfect. So what happens at the programmatic level once the review is done is we get all of these .. . Usually the summary statements are released within 4 to 6 weeks of review. So at that point, as the applicant .. . So maybe I'll talk about my side first. So the programmatic side, we collect all of these summary statements, and each of the summary statements are reviewed by the program officer. And then oftentimes, each of the institutes at NIH may or may not have a cut-off for the funding level. So my institute, for instance, NIMHD, we don't have a cut-off, but we may cut .. . There are multiple factors that go into funding decisions ultimately from scientific priorities to the innovative aspect of the project, and of course definitely we do look at the score. It has to be a good score. And so from the applicant's side, what I would recommend is that as soon as you receive your summary statement, schedule a meeting with the program officers to go over the summary statement, so then we could .. . Who's listed on the left top corner of the summary statement. And then program officers are here to help, and they're more than happy to discuss the summary statement and then also oftentimes if there are discrepancies between what review one says versus what review two says, so we could have a discussion around how to respond since you have an opportunity to respond to the summary statement and provide some clarification of things that are missing that was not clear on the application.

Eric Padmore: And .. . Sorry, Nishadi. So we have a question. Once somebody is assigned a program officer, is that same person carried forward if they were to revise and resubmit the application?

Nishadi Rajapakse: Oftentimes yes. Oftentimes it's the same program officer that will be assigned the second round, unless somebody leaves or something happens, but oftentimes yes.

Eric Padmore: Great. Thank you.

Stephanie Fertig: So I have a question, and I guess .. . And I know this from a question that was raised in the last panel, so I figure I'll ask it here if Eric is okay with me jumping in. But several people have asked, what happens when you do have that discrepancy in review? I know, Allen, you want to talk about how that happens in review, and then what do we do with it as program officers? It kept coming up in my last session, and we didn't get to it, so I feel obligated to mention it here.

Allen Richon: Yeah, and it's a very good question because it does happen. Any time you get three scientists in a room you're going to have at least three opinions. So each scientist will look at it and may have their own biases, their own viewpoints, their own way of doing things, their own history, and that will inform the way that they look at an application. The reason that we do this in terms of the first three reviewers setting the stage is that gives you a starting point. At that point the entire panel discusses it. So you may have anywhere from 12 to 40 people that are participating in the evaluation and asking questions, and they are very good at hearing discrepancies in terms of score and what's being said. So frequently one of the panel members will say, "Well, reviewer one, you've got this thing rated as a two, and when you were going through it I heard several weaknesses, and I don't really understand where you're coming from with the score of two." "Well, reviewer two, you found several strengths, and your score is a four. Can you explain?" So the people that are in the room will ask for justification for what was done, and we try and capture that during the discussion. So that will be what happens, and the other piece is that the SRO, when the critiques are coming in the week before the meeting will be reading them, and if there are big discrepancies, the SRO is going to reach out to those reviewers and say, "Folks, you need to take a look what you've written and try and come to some understanding." There may be a difference of opinion, and that's fine. You don't have to agree with scores, but at least explain it to the point that the rest of the panel can understand, and then once that goes to program, they're going to get involved as well.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right because then oftentimes what you see is also that sometimes in the summary statement, the discrepancy might be revealed in the scoring, right? So the reviewer one may have still decided to stay with the three that he or she gave, whereas the reviewer two might stick to the six that they gave. So I think from a programmatic point of view, I would like to know from the applicant what their thoughts are on some of the review concerns that were raised by each of the reviewers and sort of say, "Do you agree with reviewer one or two?" And then respond to the summary statement accordingly because you do have an opportunity to provide a response before the application is actually presented to council for now the level of funding decisions.

Eric Padmore: So we have a related question about that, and that is, should new applicants request for specific expertise to review their proposals instead of requesting that expertise as a response to the first summary statement?

Allen Richon: Who's going to jump on that one?

Eric Padmore: [Indistinct]

Allen Richon: There is a form when you submit your application, and in that form you can request an institute to look at it. DRR will then compare what you've requested to the institute's list of priorities and let you know or make a decision whether that's appropriate. You can also request a study section. So if you have, for example, a drug discovery application that deals with neurological diseases, then ETTM is probably the place that you want to have reviewed. You can also request or identify specific areas of expertise that you feel are important to the panel, but you cannot identify specific individuals. So if you have an area that you think is important, tau receptors for example or something like that, and tau receptor biology, then you can have that included, and the SRO will see that and will endeavor to get that type of expertise on the panel.

Stephanie Fertig: But you can identify conflicts of interest.

Allen Richon: Oh, absolutely.

Stephanie Fertig: And those people you can comment on and identify individually or if you know there's a specific company that's going to be in conflict, and so I think that's really important to note, and, Allen, when you're looking at your summary statement, the last page shows all the individuals from the review group, but those individuals may or may not have been present for your review. Is that correct? People get this summary statement, and they see this list of names. Where does that list of names come from?

Allen Richon: That is the entire panel, and the SRO will put into conflict any individual that they identify that the applicant identifies or that the reviewer self-identifies. And what that means is that reviewer will never see the application, and they will not be present for the discussion.

Stephanie Fertig: So even though they're on the list, they might not have even been part of it.

Allen Richon: That's correct.

Eric Padmore: So you guys have warmed up. I'm going to quit with the softball questions now and start with my fastball pitches.

Stephanie Fertig: Uh-oh.

Eric Padmore: So get ready. So we have a question here. "Sometimes scores do not reflect the review. I got a good review overall, but it was still not discussed. How is that possible? If there's not much weakness in the grant, why is it not even discussed?"

Allen Richon: Okay. The way that the discussion list is put together is that, as I said, the three reviewers provide preliminary overall impact scores. Those are averaged, and then the SRO will divide the applications into Phase I and Phase II Fast-Track. So there are two tranches of applications. Phase I it will be the top 50 percent, and Phase II Fast-Track will be the top 50 percent. Depending on what applications come in, a score of three may be really good in one group of applications, and it may be below the 50 percent line in a second group. It's just it depends on the applications that come in, the views that the reviewers have had of those applications and where the scores fall.

Eric Padmore: So it depends on whether or not Usain Bolt is in your heat.

Allen Richon: You got it.

Eric Padmore: Okay. Good to know. I've got a couple here with the same kind of theme, so I'm going to try to roll these up, and, Nishadi, this is probably going to land in your court. But essentially it's, "My program official or officer didn't respond to my request for reviewing the summary statement". And another one is, "Didn't respond to my e-mails. What should I do, or where should I go next?"

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right. So after multiple attempts to try to contact the program officer, if you're unable to do so, certainly you could check out the website for their particular IC and go to the division or branch chief or identify another program officer who might be listed in the SBIR, STTR program, and oftentimes they might try to contact the other PO and connect that way. So that's one suggestion.

Eric Padmore: Yes, and I certainly received my share of forwarded e-mails from our IC director when people decided to escalate it far enough up the food chain, but I wouldn't recommend doing that

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right. No, don't send it to the IC director. It's not .. .

Eric Padmore: Not fun for anybody.

Allen Richon: Not at all.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Yes.

Stephanie Fertig: But there is a small business program coordinator for each institute and center, and that's another person that you might want to consider reaching out to as well.

Nishadi Rajapakse: That's right. That's actually a good .. . Yes, a good idea. Yep. Yeah because these days program officers get so many e-mails, so it might be that it just got buried, you didn't see it. Yes, it's worth trying another person at the same institute. Yeah.

Eric Padmore: Okay. So this one is not quite as contentious, but I think it's worth addressing. "Do I only get a program officer after I submit the application?" So I don't know if, Stephanie, you want to jump on this one.

Stephanie Fertig: Sure. So that is correct. You get assigned a program officer when your application is submitted. You actually get assigned an institute. You get assigned a study section, and then the institute will put that application into the portfolio of a specific program officer, which may or may not be the SBIR or STTR coordinator for that specific institute or center because each institute and center does have their own structure and their own way of managing their small business grants. That said, you can reach out to the small business program contact before application, and they may be able to help you determine which program officer you should speak to, whether you should be speaking to them about your application or a specific program officer, and they can help guide you to the right person within their institute.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right, and if I may add, also each of the ICs have their own SBIR, STTR funding opportunities. As well there are smaller RFAs that go out, and then of course the program officer is listed who is in charge of that particular funding announcement. So you want to reach out to that person and share your idea about the application and see whether it even aligns well with the priorities or whether it's a topic that's of interest to that particular IC or not.

Eric Padmore: Yes. So I think the takeaway message here is that even though you're not assigned formally to a program officer, it does not preclude you from talking to a program official within a given institute, and you can do so by contacting the folks at the SEED office who will direct you to the right coordinators and so forth. So you certainly have the opportunity to get some guidance and advice before submitting your application.

Stephanie Fertig: seedinfo@nih.gov.

Eric Padmore: Perfect. This is an easy one. I'm giving you all a softball right now, but it's come up a couple of times, so apparently there's still some confusion there. "For each of the five criteria, is it better to get a high number or a low number?" And we've actually had three people ask that question, so clearly .. .

Allen Richon: Yeah.

Eric Padmore: .. . we need some better messaging on that.

Allen Richon: Yeah. We're number one versus 10 on the movie scale. The best score is one. The worst is a nine. So if you have solid ones, you're number one. If you have solid nines, you're probably a dog.

Stephanie Fertig: And then the overall priority score is obtained by when the average for the entire session is done. It's multiplied by 10, so that's how you remember from those study sections you see 29 or a 45. That's .. . You want to think about that the average there was a 4.5 or a 2.9.

Allen Richon: Yeah, that's the average score of all of the reviewers times 10.

Stephanie Fertig: Yep. So we like to make it that extra bit complicated.

Eric Padmore: Okay. Well, hopefully that was clear as mud.

Allen Richon: Occasionally we get reviewers that do the same thing and reverse the score, and we're reading along, and all the comments are wonderful, and the score is eight and nine, and we're thinking, "Wait, something is wrong here."

Eric Padmore: Okay. Let's see. We have .. . "What happens if an applicant identifies a reviewer who has a conflict of interest and requests that that person not review the resubmission? Is that reviewer notified or not?"

Allen Richon: No. The SRO will put the reviewer into conflict, and it will just appear as a conflict flag for the meeting.

Eric Padmore: Perfect. Thank you for that. Stephanie, this might be one for you. "Is the timing of the comments intended to provide an opportunity to revise in time for the next subsequent filing period? So filing in January, review in March. There's not likely to be time .. . Excuse me, not likely to be enough time for an April filing."

Stephanie Fertig: That's correct, and this is actually a question that we get a lot. No, it isn't always meant to allow you to do that, and sometimes the timing isn't right, and sometimes it really depends on the nature of the comments that you receive. If it's .. . Some things are easier to fix than others, to be perfectly honest, and there are some individuals who are able to take those comments, turn it around fairly quickly. May have been a quick misunderstanding or a quick fix, and they are able to be successful, but Nishadi probably can weigh in on this as well. When I was a program officer, one of the things I saw was that oftentimes people made the mistake of pushing to try to resubmit, try to address everything as quickly as possible, and maybe they didn't take the time to really think about how to address the reviewer's comments, and so that quick turnaround time did them a disservice. I don't know if you want to .. . you see the same thing that I did, but I certainly saw that.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Yeah. No, I agree with you, Stephanie. You don't want to rush the resubmission. You want to make sure that you do the best possible effort in your resubmission, address all of the concerns, have time to think through some of the concerns that the reviewers raised to oftentimes you may even change a few things in the way you approach your topic area. So, yes, please take your time, and don't rush it, but you don't want to stay too long either, but yes.

Allen Richon: One of the things that also helps is to have a third party read through your application, especially if the reviewers disagreed over something. You can ask that third party, "Is it clear that I am doing A, B, C here to you?"

Stephanie Fertig: Well, and I would add, there were several times when people would come and ask me and say, "Look, I put this in my application. It was right here," to some comment that the reviewers made, and then me, as somebody reading through the application, I could see how what was stated in the application could have been taken in two different ways.

Allen Richon: Absolutely.

Stephanie Fertig: The written language is not perfect. And so there was definitely some misinterpretations there, and it was really about that clarity. So having someone read it is really important.

Eric Padmore: So Stephanie and I kicked off the meeting yesterday with a session on perception of bias, and so this question kind of goes to that issue, and it was mentioned that reviewers bring into review their own biases, and we have witnessed that, unfortunately, on our part. How is NIH dealing with situations where reviewers bring their biases to a review?

Allen Richon: Oh, it's a tough question, and it's an ongoing issue. All of the SROs read very carefully when the applications are brought in to make sure that we bring the expertise needed to look at an application. We also look at the critiques when they come in and watch out for problems in statements, and then we listen to the discussion of the meeting, and if we hear evidence of scientific bias or personal bias being introduced, we will stop and try an use it as an education minute and say, "Wait, what you're saying is this. Have you thought about that?" and try and keep the conversation on a strict level playing field.

Eric Padmore: Thank you. Stephanie, did you want to add anything to that?

Stephanie Fertig: I don't have much to add except to say that I know that Allen and the other scientific review officers do review the summary statements very carefully. I've been at study sections where Allen or his colleagues will stop the review and will make sure that not just issues of bias but basically making sure that the policy is being followed, that reviewers are following the instructions that they're provided.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right. And the fact that there are three reviewers reviewing each application also sort of to some extent reduces the bias that's been introduced, correct?

Allen Richon: Absolutely, and we try and make the review as efficient as possible, but on issues where an application has a thorny problem and there is a lot of disagreement, that conversation is going to go until either people agree that they disagree and it's a difference in the way they view it, or they're going to change their scores, and that does happen too.

Eric Padmore: So there's a question, in the introduction of a resubmission, should every critique be addressed, even if there was an outlier critique? Should that also be addressed in the introduction?

Nishadi Rajapakse: I would say no because you have to sort of look at the summary statement carefully and pick the ones that you think are the most important ones to address, not every critique.

Allen Richon: Absolutely. Look for overall things. If there's something that all three reviewers identified, even though the language is slightly different, that was probably a score-driving issue. Look at the summary of discussion. Were the major weaknesses brought up and the major strengths identified? Those are the ones that you should look at.

Eric Padmore: Thank you. Nishadi, there's a question here. "Is the program officer part of the review panel? "Can you maybe talk about the role of the program officer in review and how that works?

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right. So the program officer is not part of the review panel. The program officer has a very limited role during review. So one thing that they actually do is to sit and just listen. We are not even allowed to talk during the review unless the SRO calls us to explain something that's in the funding announcement or to clarify a scientific issue, but other than that, we do not participate in the actual review of applications.

Allen Richon: And then when program has their meeting and SROs attend, SROs are silent as well.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right.

Allen Richon: So it is a two-stage review, and those stages are separated. It may not be by a huge wall, but there is a wall between so that we avoid conflicts of interest.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Right.

Eric Padmore: And there's a follow-up question, should you remove .. . Sort of like gymnastics, I guess. "Do you remove one highest and one lowest score to get the average?" We're going with a whole Olympic theme here.

Allen Richon: Yeah, it sounds like it. I think that's probably above all of our pay grades.

Eric Padmore: Okay.

Stephanie Fertig: But the answer there is no, we do not do it that way.

Allen Richon: We do not do it that way.

Eric Padmore: Yes.

Eric Padmore: To the point, that is not how it works. Okay. Let's see here now. Trying to .. . I know we're running out of time, so I'm trying to combine question as we go. Oh, so this is a good one. Did .. . Let me change that. How did the pandemic affect how submissions were reviewed and processed, and did it hamper it in any way? I think that's a fair question.

Stephanie Fertig: Yeah, Allen, how has it been going?

Eric Padmore: How's your basement, Allen?

Allen Richon: Yeah. We have done metrics on all of it, and the review process has not been impacted whatsoever. We have still managed to review all the applications that come in. We even have had the 1-week window, 2-week window in addition so people that were have problems could submit. The meetings have gone on just they way they have been on face to face. We haven't seen any degradation in the quality of the review. The discussions have been just as robust, so it really surprised us somewhat that there was no change.

Eric Padmore: Yeah, and if I may .. .

Nishadi Rajapakse: If anything the applications have increased.

Allen Richon: Oh, the numbers have. Absolutely.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Yeah, the numbers have increased. Yep.

Eric Padmore: Yes. And there was another question about whether or not the funding for COVID projects really overtook, but I think as we all know it was in addition to, not instead of.

Allen Richon: Right.

Eric Padmore: So if I may speak on behalf of all my NIH colleagues, the real impact of the pandemic just meant that we all stayed up all night while trying to do both jobs.

Nishadi Rajapakse: That's right.

Eric Padmore: Pretty much how that worked. Anyway. Okay. I think we're down to 1 minute here. [Indistinct]

Allen Richon: One thing that we haven't covered that I want to make sure that people hear is that .. .

Eric Padmore: Please, go ahead.

Allen Richon: .. . when you resubmit your application, especially if it's a Phase I or a direct Phase II or a fast track, you do have the option of submitting it as a new application, taking into account the reviewer's comments, but not commenting specifically upon them in the application, or you can do it as a resubmission, and you get the one-page where you can make comments and then incorporate marked sections within the application. So you really want to talk to your program officer about what the best choice is going forward because you do have that option.

Eric Padmore: Great. Well, we are just about out of time, and I want to thank our panelists, Stephanie Fertig, Dr. Allen Richon and Dr. Nishadi Rajapakse. We hope you found this session useful and informative. As I said earlier we will be posting the questions that we did not get to in FAQs, which will be available after this session. But if you have additional questions, please take the opportunity to .. . As part of this conference you can meet with a small business program expert for a 15-minute appointment this week. Just visit the hub on the conference site to get you started and to book those times, and if you have any issues, click on the information tab, and there is a help function there. So please provide your feedback on this session, and again, thank you for your attention and your time this afternoon. Good day.

Nishadi Rajapakse: Thanks, everyone.

Allen Richon: Thanks.