Overview of Peer Review Process

Office of Special Education Programs,
U.S. Department Of Education

July 2019

Purpose of This Webinar

- This Webinar is designed to provide an overview of information on the grant review process (or peer review process) conducted by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education (ED). (Note: the processes for grant review in other ED offices will likely differ).

- Target Audience: novice reviewers and reviewers who have not participated in recent OSEP grant competitions.

- Reviewers who have agreed to participate in a particular competition also will be asked to attend an orientation that will discuss the details of the specific competition (e.g., priority and selection criteria).

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Topics to be Covered

- Foundations of Peer Review (Confidentiality, Conflicts of Interest, Bias)
- Roles and Responsibilities in the Peer Review Process
- General Process for the Technical Review
- Completing the Individual Technical Review of Applications
- Participating in the Panel Discussion
- The Panel Summary

Basics of the Grant Funding Process

- The Peer Review process provides a RECOMMENDATION to OSEP concerning applications worthy of funding. Subsequent to the peer review process, OSEP makes its recommendations to the Secretary via a "slate memo" that also contains a description of the review process, and the applications' final rankings.

- Applications are ranked based on the average raw scores across reviewers in the panel. **Generally**, only applications with average scores of 70 or above are recommended for funding.

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Purpose of Peer Review

To obtain the best professional judgments regarding each application submitted to the program for funding.

FOUNDATIONS OF PEER REVIEW

Confidentiality

To safeguard the *rights* of each

applicant and the *anonymity*

of the reviewers.

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Conflicts of Interest (COI)

- Actual or *Appearance* of a Conflict

- Financial

- Personal (professional, familial, or social)

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Specific Conflicts of Interest

- The reviewer has agreed to serve as an **employee or consultant** on a project for which funding is being sought, or has been offered the opportunity to do so and has not yet accepted or declined, based on whether a grant is awarded

- The reviewer's **personal financial interests** will be affected by the outcome of the competition;

- The reviewer **helped prepare an application** in the competition, even if the reviewer has no financial interest in the outcome of that application

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Conflicts of Interest-Relationships

- The reviewer has a relationship with an entity or individual that has a financial interest in the outcome of the competition. The following relationships are covered under this section:

  – The reviewer's spouse, his or her child, a member of his or her household, or any relative with whom he or she has a close relationship;

  – Any employer the reviewer has served within the last 12 months, a business partner, an organization the reviewer has served as an officer, director, or trustee within the last 12 months, or an organization that he or she serves as an active volunteer;

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Conflicts of Interest-Relationships-continued

- Any person or organization with whom the reviewer is negotiating for future employment;

- Any professional associate – including any colleague, scientific mentor, or student – with whom the reviewer is currently conducting research or other professional activities or with whom he or she has conducted such activities within the last 12 months; or

- Any individual with whom the reviewer has, or has had, a personal relationship where the nature, duration, or recentness of that relationship would impair his or her ability to impartially review any application in the competition.

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Conflicts of Interest-Documentation

Reviewers who have been selected to serve on a panel will be asked to sign a form and acknowledge in G5 that they have no Conflicts of Interest. At that time, the situations described previously will be offered again for the reviewers' consideration.

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Sensitivity for Professional Bias

Recognize and avoid personal biases

- Philosophical
- Methodological

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Examples of Potential Bias

Factors that might impact reviewer objectivity for a given grant competition might include:

- Significant connections to teaching methodologies
- Significant identification with pedagogical or philosophical viewpoints
- Significant connections to related matter

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ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Key Roles in the Peer Review Process

In addition to the 3-5 peer reviewers comprising one review panel within a competition, there are other key roles:

- Competition Manager
- Panel Manager
- Lead Reviewer
- Logistics Contractor

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Competition Manager

- Coordinates with the Logistical Contractor
- Oversees the application screening process
- Determines eligibility of applications
- Assigns applications to 1 or more panels
- Selects reviewers and assigns them to panels
- Provides guidance throughout the review process to panel managers and reviewers
- Prepares a "slate" with funding recommendations to the Secretary

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Panel Manager

- Establishes panel review meeting times
- Identifies low scoring applications that will not be reviewed
- Assures the integrity of the panel review process
- Assures a fair and equitable review of each application
  - Assigns lead reviewer for each application
  - Determines the order in which applications are discussed
  - Verifies all review forms for accuracy, completeness, and requests additional documentation, where needed
- Monitors all panel discussions
  - Encourages discussion that results in a common understanding of the merits of each application
- Reports problems or questions to the competition manager
- Evaluates all panel reviewers

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Lead Reviewer

The Panel Manager assigns the role of Lead Reviewer by application to one of the Peer Reviewers on the panel. It is likely that each panel member (reviewer) will be a "Lead Reviewer" on at least one application. The various functions of this role are described later in the Panel Review Process section.

Logistics Contractor

- OSEP contracts with one or more firms to assist us with the logistics of the Peer Review. For example, the contractor provides consistent communications with the reviewers, constructs the G5 e-reader environment for each competition, provides an initial screening of applications, and pays the reviewer honoraria.

- It is important that reviewers attend to emails and phone calls from the contractor and respond accurately and promptly to their requests.

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GENERAL PROCESS FOR THE TECHNICAL REVIEW

NOTE: OSEP uses e-reader software, available in G5, for Panel Reviews,
Location of e-reader: www.G5.gov;
G5 Help Desk: 1-888-336-8930

Steps in the Review

- After receiving the reviewer packet, carefully read the Priority and the Selection Criteria

- Attend the orientation call by the Competition Manager and ask any questions regarding the Priority/Selection Criteria on the call

- Go to G5 and create/update the reviewer profile, check accessibility, and SAVE the username and password

- The date when the applications assigned to each panel can be accessed in G5 will be provided to the reviewers on or before the orientation call

- As soon as are able to access the applications, go through them for Conflicts of Interest, and if concerned, notify both the Competition Manager and the Panel Manager

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Steps in the Review-continued

- Carefully read each application.

- Using the Technical Review Form (TRF) for each application: Decide on the appropriate score for each criterion and justify that score by clearly articulating comments on each subfactor of the criteria. Document the presence/absence of each of the Priority Requirements, and when appropriate, add competitive preference points.

- The TRF should be completed **independently**. Work in a WORD version of TRF and copy the contents into e-reader, as the TRFs are completed. **Do not wait until the panel convenes to complete the TRF in e-reader**

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Steps in the Review-continued

- Have all reviews completed and scored by the date provided by the Panel Manager

- Be prepared to provide any clarifications to the write-ups suggested by the Panel Manager

- Actively participate in the panel discussion, change scores and narratives based on the discussion

- Complete forms and post-panel assignments following instructions from the Panel Manager and the Logistics Contractor

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING INDIVIDUAL REVIEWS ON THE TRF

Application Information to Review

- Carefully read the priority and selection criteria

- Each application assigned to a reviewer in G5 is to be reviewed. The Competition Manager has determined them all to be eligible.

- In each application, reviewers are required to **read** the budget section, the narrative section and Appendix A for applications that designate Appendix A for supplementary charts, graphics. Reviewers should review the other Appendices for information pertinent to the criteria (e.g., personnel vitae).

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Individual Review: Scoring

- Scoring within each criterion should correspond to the degree to which the applicant has successfully addressed the criterion and its subfactors.

- Beware of the Halo Effect—even though a reviewer may really like or support the purpose or ideas presented in an application—apply the criteria only.

- Do not deduct points for the same issue under multiple criteria. Choose the criteria most closely aligned with the issue and take the points off there.

- If the applicant is not receiving all the points under a particular criterion, there should be some weakness or insufficiency **stated** in the comments. Similarly, there should be multiple positive comments stated when a criterion receives all possible points.

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Scoring Guidelines

Each selection criterion has a *Scoring Guideline,* similar to the one below, based on the total number of points available for that particular criterion. It provides a rubric to guide decision making about both scoring and related comments relative to how well the applicant addressed the criterion.

Scoring Guidelines   Very Poor: 0-4; Poor: 5-8; Fair: 9-12; Good: 13-16; Very Good: 17-20

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Individual Review: Scoring-continued

To repeat a very important point….

Scores are to be assigned based only on how well the application addresses the selection criteria and their subfactors, NOT on other factors, including a) typos, organization of the application; b) comparisons to other applications; c) personal or professional bias; or d) information a reviewermay have from other sources on the institutions, the programs or the personnel mentioned in the application.

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Individual Review:
Writing Comments

- Make clear and objective **evaluative** statements concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the application in addressing the selection criterion and subfactors. Do not simply summarize the application.

- Substantiate all evaluative statements by citing evidence from the application narrative, tables, performance measures, appendices, and/or budgets.

- Demonstrate support for a position by including the page numbers of substantiating evidence in the application (**use the e-page number**).

- Use paragraphs to organize related evaluative statements clearly.

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Individual Review
Writing Comments: Style

- Use simple, declarative, complete sentences whenever possible.

- Use statements, not questions.

- Be professional, tactful, and constructive.

- Do not use statements that infer personal bias, such as "I feel," "I think," or "The applicant should."

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EXAMPLES OF SELECTION CRITERIA AND TRF COMMENTS

Sample Selection Criterion-Key Personnel

The quality of key personnel, including:

- A qualified and sufficient staff to accomplish the goals of the project, including the techniques proposed to ensure that an adequate supply of qualified staff are enlisted in a timely manner;
- The extent to which there is evidence that key project staff, by virtue of their training or professional experience, have the requisite knowledge to design, implement, and manage projects of the size and scope of the proposed project; and
- The extent to which the identified key personnel have the requisite authority to commit their agency and its resources to the implementation of the project.

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Example of TRF Comments- Key Personnel

Quality of key personnel is supported by having the majority of staff identified in the proposal (pg. e75). Trainers all have experience in this program, including experience in working with students with a range of disabilities and connections to the LEA's as well as expressing commitment to the new proposed program (pg. e76). Timelines for hiring the required personnel are included, and Appendix B supports that key project staff have the required knowledge to implement and manage this project. Process and timeline for awarding the contract for Project Support is clearly outlined. In addition, required trainings for all direct service staff have been identified and outlined (pg. e54). This section could have been strengthened by more specifically addressing how positive efforts would be made to employ qualified individuals with disabilities in project activities. The percentage of time commitment for key personnel was not broken out.

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Sample Selection Criterion-Quality of Services

The Secretary considers the quality of the services to be provided by the proposed project. In determining the quality of the project services, the Secretary considers the following subfactors:

- The extent to which the project will recruit and retain high-quality scholars;
- The extent to which the training or professional development services to be provided by the proposed project are of sufficient quality, intensity, and duration to lead to improvements in practice among the recipients of those services;
- The extent to which the proposed activities constitute a coherent, sustained program of training in the field;
- The extent to which the professional development to be provided by the proposed project reflects up to date knowledge from research and effective practice.

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Example of TRF Comments-Quality of Services

Strengths: The applicant relies on a strong and sustained mentoring approach to train scholars (p. e12). This is likely to enhance the retention of scholars. The mentoring approach coupled with coursework, apprenticeships, etc. ensure that the professional development provided by the project is of sufficient quality, intensity, and duration to lead to improvements in practice by the scholars. The editorial apprenticeship (p. e15) provided to scholars is particularly innovative and compliments the research experience. The coursework in literacy (pp. e18-20) is intensive and scholars are able to supplement those required with a range of additional literacy courses. Literacy appears to be a strength of the applicant institution. The proposed professional development activities are coherent and generally reflect up to date knowledge from research and practice.

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Example of TRF Comments- Quality of Services, continued

Weaknesses: Specific details on scholar entrance criteria and data on past scholars at intake would have enabled a better assessment of the extent to which the project will recruit high-quality scholars, including higher numbers. Related directly to this, information on the particular recruitment strategies that will be used would have strengthened the application.

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Completing the Individual Review

- Complete the Technical Review of General Requirements page(s) by searching for each of the requirements in the application, and if found, answering "yes" **and** citing the e-page number(s).

- Assign Competitive Preference Points, if applicable
  - A Competitive Preference reflects a particular interest of the Department and is added to the priority to encourage applicants to address this interest.
  - If individual reviewers are expected to add points based on one or more competitive preferences, scoring instructions will be provided at the orientation.

- Complete all individual reviews, including scores and comments, by the date established by the Panel Manager.

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THE PANEL REVIEW PROCESS
(PANEL DISCUSSION)

Panel Review-Triage Procedures

- The panel manager may remove an application from panel review, if all reviewers scored an application at 50 or below during their pre-panel, individual reviews.

- If all reviewers are in general agreement regarding the causes for their scores of 50 or below, the application is removed from further discussion and a Summary of the Panel Discussion is **not** completed.

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Participating in the Panel Discussion

- Approach the panel discussion as an opportunity to examine individual perspectives, issues and questions. Reviewers are responsible for presenting their views objectively and considering the views of other reviewers on the panel. Reviewers are strongly encouraged to consider other opinions and, if appropriate, to change their scores and narrative comments based on what they have learned from the panel discussion.

- Listen carefully; participate fully and respectfully as a valued member of the panel.

- Make sure there is access to G5 during the panel and use a land line if possible for the discussions. If a reviewer must use a battery-powered phone have a second one available. Be on time to all calls.

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Participating in the Panel Discussion- continued

- Do not schedule appointments during business hours on the panel dates

- Develop post-panel amnesia (do not discuss the applicants, the identity of reviewers or the substance of the applications). Delete any downloaded applications or saved forms.

- Make sure all intended corrections to the TRF have been made based on the discussions. Ask for brief breaks, if necessary, to catch up.

- Once the panel discussion is concluded (i.e., the discussion has moved on to another application), reviewers may NOT make any additional changes to an application's scores or comments (i.e., beyond those discussed during the panel) unless directed by the Panel Manager.

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Lead Reviewer & Discussion

Lead Reviewers are members of the review panel and have specific responsibilities in addition to those described for all reviewers. The lead reviewer:

- Begins the discussion by briefly summarizing the application content

- Leads the panel discussion for each assigned application

- Assures discussion of all selection criteria, competitive preferences, and requirements

- Paces the discussion so there is time for reviewers to express their comments and edit scores and narratives

- Takes notes of the discussion for the Panel Summary

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Lead Reviewer & Panel Summary

The Lead Reviewer:

- Accurately documents the key points of the discussion, including agreed-upon strengths and weaknesses of the application, as well as any significant disagreements without repeating the exact reviewer comments.

- Completes the summary in narrative form using complete sentences.

- Identifies any general requirements that were missing according to the majority of reviewers

- Reads each summary out loud so that the other reviewers can have an opportunity to "edit" the summary.

All reviewers must agree to the content of the panel summary before the panel concludes.

44

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Examples of Panel Summary Narratives

#1 The authors do a good job of addressing the current gaps in the service delivery system in State for individuals ages 14-16 receiving SSI. They also clearly identify the state agency partners needed to provide comprehensive and seamless transition services for SSI recipients and their families. One of the strengths of the proposal is the detail and comprehensiveness of the intervention for youth and their families. A variety of interventions are proposed including case management, paid employment, plans for families, monthly trainings for youth and parents, peer support and mentors, and the provision of mental health services. Some reviewers expressed concern regarding the limited direct involvement of school site personnel, noting that most transition services and programming were provided by Vocational Rehabilitation. Other strengths of the proposal included the provision of services on Community College campuses and the strong commitment to the project from employers. One of the major weaknesses of the proposal was that although the RFP-required outcomes were mentioned, it is not clear how progress on meeting these outcomes will be assessed and how data will be collected. There are no specific measures identified or systems in place for progress monitoring. Thus, it will be difficult to determine if the goals and outcomes are met. Additional concerns were that most of the key personnel had not yet been identified making it difficult to assess their capacity for implementing a project of this scale.

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Examples of Panel Summary Narratives- continued

#2   The applicant proposes to prepare six scholars in Evidence-Based Practice within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (EBP-MTSS) at State University. Overall, the panel believed that the application was strong in all areas. The panel believed the focus of the program addressed an important area of special education practice and had a significant track record mentoring and graduating productive scholars. The panel agreed that the significance of the project would have been strengthened if the logic model and evidence-base for the project were more directly linked to scholar competencies and the applicant had provided more information on the scholarship of past graduates. The panel generally agreed that the program was of sufficient intensity and duration to improve practices in the field. However, the panel discussed the need for enhancement of the mentoring within the research area. Related to this, concerns were raised regarding the current funded research opportunities available to scholars. Although the panel members believed that the evaluation plan was feasible and appropriate, they questioned the extent to which the evaluation targeted specific scholar competencies. Additionally, the panel raised concerns regarding the time commitments of key personnel on other leadership grants and the impact of enrolling currently enrolled students on program competencies obtained by the scholars.

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Following the Peer Review Process…

- Applicants will receive final scores (post discussion) and reviewers' comments on each criterion, but not no name or affiliation attached to any of the reviewers.

- OSERS does not use a process that permits an applicant to identify, highlight or otherwise "get credit" for addressing previous reviewer comments in applications submitted under the same competition in later years (i.e., in competitions that are run annually).

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To Conclude….

- Reviewers should consult Competition or Panel Managers with questions.
- Reviewers should attend the orientation for individual competitions provided by the competition manager for important information on the priority and selection criteria.

To confirm completion of the Webinar: Please email the competition manager who directed you to this site using the Subject line, "Completed the Overview of the Review Process webinar, as requested".

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Thank you for your participation in OSEP grant reviews and for your commitment to improving services to infants, toddlers and children with disabilities.