Site Visit Procedures
Research Resource & Program Project Applications

A site visit is held according to these procedures if the reviewers need to acquire information that cannot be conveyed by the written application. Similar procedures are followed for reverse site visits.

PRE-SITE VISIT MEETING

Prior to the site visit, the Principal Investigator (PI) is asked to submit a detailed tentative agenda to the Scientific Review Officer (SRO). The final agenda, however, is agreed upon by the panel at the pre-site visit meeting. Any significant changes should be relayed by the SRO to the PI before the site visit.

The site visit reviewers usually assemble for a meeting on the evening prior to the actual site visit. For relatively uncomplicated applications, a breakfast meeting on the morning of the site visit may be suitable. The purpose of the pre-site visit meeting is to:

- Orient the reviewers about conflict of interest, confidentiality, and review procedures
- Allow reviewers to state openly their overall impression of the proposal. This could be a numerical score or a brief description of how they weigh the strengths and weaknesses.
- Discuss how the site visit will be conducted.
- Discuss problem areas in the application and generate a list of questions to be addressed at the site visit.
- Assign reviewers the responsibility to cover particular areas at the site visit.

Often the SRO arranges to contact the Principal Investigator following the pre-site visit meeting to relay requests from the reviewers for additional information or for the opportunity to visit certain parts of the facilities.

Reviewer Duties

- Prior to the site visit, each reviewer should study thoroughly the application, supporting documents, and other information received from NIH. In general, a reviewer is specifically responsible for that area of the application reflecting her/his expertise, but may be assigned other areas such as administrative considerations or adequacy of the facilities. Writing assignments—in preliminary form—should be completed before the site visit, and duplicate hard copies, plus the CD sent by the SRO, should be brought to the site visit.
- If a reviewer needs clarification regarding an assignment, s/he should contact the SRO.
- Also contact the SRO where a need is perceived to supplement expert knowledge to evaluate an aspect of the application.

THE SITE VISIT

The SRO is the Designated Federal Official and is responsible for ensuring that NIH policies and procedures are followed. The SRO works with the Chair and PI/PD to arrange laboratory tours and executive sessions. The Chair acts as moderator and is responsible for the scientific conduct of the meeting. The purpose of the site visit is to collect information needed to evaluate the grant application. However, an applicant's impressions of the visit also are very important. An applicant should feel that s/he received an adequate opportunity to make an effective presentation, as well as a fair and informed appraisal of her/his application. *Note*: While reviewers are responsible for obtaining information necessary to complete the evaluation process, avoid wording questions or statements that might be construed as demonstrating preconceived opinions or bias.

Introductory Session

The first item on the agenda is generally a short overview presented by the PI/PD with the key scientific staff present. The purpose of this session is to provide the reviewers with adequate time to ask questions about the broad concept of the proposed program and how it relates to other activities within the institution. A meeting with administrators (Dean, department chair, program administrator, etc.) may be made part of this meeting, but should be kept as short as possible.

Scientific Program Presentation

All reviewers should be present throughout the site visit. Avoid separating into small groups for parts of the review and early departures by individual site visit reviewers. All reviewers should hear the same presentations for later discussion and final recommendation. Reviewers should base assessment of the scientific merit of an application on the totality of the following:

- Soundness of the research plan
- The competence of the investigators
- Evidence of past productivity
- Evidence of well-formulated strategies for the immediate future, and
- The nature of any long-range goals

It is ***not*** necessary for an investigator to make a presentation as in a seminar. Reviewers will have had ample time to study the application and background material, such as reprints. Rather, each speaker should:

- State the scientific question posed;
- Briefly describe the experimental approach to be used;
- Present data obtained since the application was submitted; and
- Indicate the probable future direction of the work.

Each participant should confine formal remarks to no more than half the time scheduled for her/his part of the program, to allow adequate time for reviewers' questions. This informal opportunity to clarify specific points and exchange ideas is an invaluable part of the site visit. The amount of time scheduled for each participant should be commensurate with his/her role in the overall project. Each investigator should be well-briefed as to his/her part in the program, the attendees, and the importance of observing scheduled times throughout the visit.

When several investigators participate in a component project, the "lead" investigator—namely the individual responsible for the scientific direction of the work—should make the formal presentation. All others, however, also should be present to answer possible questions. To be sure, a well-established investigator may reasonably confine her/his formal remarks to briefly describing future plans, based on a record of achievements documented in her/his publications. Younger investigators or scientists entering a new area should allow sufficient time to describe their approach to the research problem at hand, as well as future plans. Specific budget issues also may be addressed here.

Executive Lunch Session

Lunch should be planned to last less than an hour. It is used most productively as an executive session to review the preceding presentations; discuss problem areas; and, if necessary, consider any revisions to the afternoon presentations and/or agenda. A cold lunch served in the meeting room has been found to be preferable; it permits maximum flexibility in timing. If dining in a public facility on campus, reviewers should be sequestered to the extent possible and avoid discussing the application in the presence of their hosts. Reviewers are expected to pay for their share of the lunch out of their per diem allowance.

Tour of Facilities

Facility tours typically are brief in duration. Where relevant, they may include walking through important laboratory facilities, animal quarters or clinical units, as well as any areas planned for renovation with grant funds. In general, the best tour times are either at the end of the site visit or immediately around lunch. For example, reviewers might choose to consolidate time by touring a facility that is en route to another area where lunch will be held. The tour may be conducted earlier, however, where a visit to a laboratory, for example, is essential to understanding the scientific program. If key demonstrations of equipment or techniques are to be presented during the tour, then reviewers must remain together. The PI/PD should be prepared to be flexible about this part of the agenda.

Budget Session

A formal budget session should be scheduled after the scientific presentations to allow the site visitors to make certain that they understand each request.

CONCLUSION OF THE SITE VISIT

The site visit ends with a meeting with the PI/PD and any key people s/he may designate. At this time, participants may present anything perceived to have not been covered adequately earlier, as well as answer any additional questions, especially those of a confidential nature.

Special Emphasis Panel (SEP) Meeting Following the Site Visit

Following the site visit, the reviewers return to the hotel and convene as a Special Emphasis Panel (SEP). Hopefully, this occurs by early afternoon. The following are discussed:

- Revisit the scores – each reviewer openly states his/her score and how the site visit findings affected that score
- The subject application
- Site visit findings
- Presentations of the investigators
- Recommendations on the application

In striving expeditiously to reach a consensus on whether the proposal merits further consideration, the reviewers should concentrate early in the discussion on reaching this decision.

The review usually begins with each panel member giving a preliminary impact/priority score for the whole application followed by consideration of the component projects, one by one. For the first project, the assigned reviewers state their preliminary levels of enthusiasm as a numerical score. The reviewer designated as primary presents the project and critiques the strengths and weaknesses, including how it fits with the rest of the proposed program. Next, the other reviewers comment, followed by any other panel member who wishes to contribute.

When the discussion winds down for each section of the application (Cores, collaborative projects, etc.), final impact/priority scores are obtained from the assigned reviewers. In turn, each panel member declares his/her impact/priority score openly before writing it on the score sheet. After voting on each component, the budget is finalized. The reviewers assign a final overall impact/priority score to the overall application. [*Note*: This is generally ***not*** the average of the component scores]. Any additional budget details also may be finalized at this point.

Next, the reviewers adjourn to combine their reviews, either individually or in small groups. The Chair is responsible for the *Overall Critique*, which often involves modification of the preliminary version based on the site visit and panel deliberations. Reviewers are reminded that key information obtained at the site visit should be included in the report, and indicated as having been obtained during the site visit. The SRO writes the Resume and Summary of Discussion paragraph.

Final Meeting

After the breaks for writing and dinner, or perhaps the next morning, reviewers meet for a "read back" session in which the combined critiques are read aloud and modified as desired, beginning with the *Overall Critique*. The goal is to have agreement on the report prior to final adjournment. This report will form the basis for the *Summary Statement* prepared by the SRO.