2015 - International Student Research Fellowship
General Application Feedback

Because applicants to the International Student Research Fellowship must be nominated by his/her graduate institution, all of the applications are of very high caliber, and the competition is exceedingly intense (12% award rate). To try to identify the applicants with the highest potential to be scientific innovators and leaders, the review especially focuses on information gleaned from the reference letters and research proposal.

**Due to the high number of applications to this program, individual feedback is not feasible.** This document if our effort to provide feedback to applicants and to institutions in the hope that this will be helpful in the future.

**Evaluating the Scientific Merit of the Research Proposal**
The most important section of the application is the research proposal. Since this section is weighted so heavily, it is critical that both the applicant and the thesis advisor detail their contributions (and that of others) in both the development of the ideas and the writing of the applicant’s proposal. These contributions should be detailed by the applicant in the research plan section, and by the thesis advisor in his/her letter of recommendation.

Applicants also need to understand that not all of the scientists reviewing the proposal will be experts in that field. The burden is on the applicant to make the research plan accessible to knowledgeable scientists, who are not necessarily specialists. The applicant also must explain to a nonexpert why the problem is important, the rationale for using a specific approach, and describe the potentially transformative nature of the approach.

The online system has bulleted prompts to which the applicants were specifically asked to address. Unfortunately, many do not follow these guidelines, making the review more difficult. Common, but critical, omissions include not specifically highlighting the significance and innovation of the project, failing to identify potential pitfalls and discussing alternative strategies, not explaining the value of the model system chosen, and not including a testable hypothesis or design objective. Proposed hypotheses should be testable, not just general ideas. As such, applicants should consider the usefulness of models in the research plan, especially in providing added clarity to the anticipated outcomes.

Applicants should request feedback from multiple scientists on the proposal, especially from scientists NOT in that specific research area.

The applicants are highly competitive, as are the labs in which they are doing their thesis work. We assume that these stellar students in fantastic labs are doing cutting edge research. Thus, a critical factor contributing to the scientific merit of the proposal is the significance and innovation of the research being proposed, and the applicant’s ability to describe that effectively in the research plan.

**Evaluating the Applicant’s Scientific Potential via the Letters of Reference:**
The letters of reference are very important in evaluating the applicant’s potential to be a leader in the scientific community. Beyond superlatives, the reviewers look for evidence that the applicant possesses the traits necessary to be a scientific leader – innovation, talent, creativity, excellent communication skills, perseverance, etc.

Review panel members value letters with specific comparisons – “best graduate student I have ever had” or “in the top 2% of all students I have trained.” <Note: the top 2% means the best one out of 50 trainees. It is important to be objective. > The recommender should then back up these claims and claims of “outstanding” with respect to the categories listed in the application with specifics. The research project advisor should address the applicant’s contributions (both intellectually and practically) to the lab, to the project, and to any publications that came from that research experience. These letters should also include a specific description of the applicant’s role in developing and implementing research projects, and his/her contribution to any publications which might have already come from the project.
**General Notes:**

At the very least, applicants should have their thesis advisors review the research plan/proposal prior to submission. We encourage applicants to seek a review of their materials by at least two individuals. This step is critical to ensure that there are no grammatical issues or incomplete development of ideas which can prevent the reviewers from appropriately evaluating an application.

Additionally, all components of the application (especially the personal statement and research plan) should be written in the applicant’s own voice. At times, reviewers speculate that the proposal has been copied from other grant proposal submissions/literature - written by another person rather than the student – and this interpretation can result in lower enthusiasm from the reviewer.

Additional information can be found at [www.hhmi.org/intl_fellows](http://www.hhmi.org/intl_fellows).

If you have questions or comments email [predoc@hhmi.org](mailto:predoc@hhmi.org).