

Career in focus : Scientific Review Officer

In contrast to the bench side of science that produces research, there is the granting side of science that facilitates research. Here, we feature Dr. Kathryn S. Kalasinsky, Ph.D., a Scientific Review Officer (SRO) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, MD who more or less runs the granting side of science (from NIH) for her specific field of expertise. Dr. Kalasinsky earned her Ph.D. in Chemistry at the University of South Carolina and eventually came to NIH after a long 40-year career as a principal investigator working in government-based research for the Department of Defense. Although she's in a more administrative role now, she is still surrounded by some of the best science and scientists in the world. Read more about her job as an SRO and how she made the transition from academia to her current position.



FAQs

What is a Scientific Review Officer?

A Scientific Review Officer (SRO) is a scientific administrative position that directs the review process by which scientific grants are critiqued and ranked in order of scientific merit for consideration for funding by the NIH. There are about 300 SROs at NIH covering about 300 different scientific disciplines. For example, Dr. Kalasinsky's scientific expertise is instrumentation development for disease diagnosis; thus, she is the SRO for the Instrumentation and Systems Development study section. An SRO will review the science in the grant applications when they come in to assure that they have been assigned appropriately to their scientific topic panel for review. Then the SRO will recruit scientific experts in the field to review the grant applications and assign specific reviewers to various grant applications as the primary reviewers. The SRO instructs the reviewers on the appropriate procedures for review, and once the experts send in their written critiques the SRO reviews them for completeness. The SRO then conducts a meeting (the study section) where the experts fly in from all over the country to discuss the top 50% of the grant applications (based on the preliminary critiques). After the meeting, the SRO writes a summary of discussion for each of the discussed applications. There are about 100 applications per study section discipline with about 30 experts from the field convening for the meeting, and this process repeats every four months.

Why switch to a career as an SRO?

An SRO position is good for those who want to stay in touch with the forefront of research science but do not want to continue in the laboratory themselves. SROs are involved in some of the top science in the world and associate with some of the top scientists as well, both as reviewers and applicants.

What kinds of skills are needed to be successful as an SRO?

Obviously, you need a strong background in research science and extremely good organizational skills. You also need to present a leadership command when you are in the panel meeting, where some of the top scientists have convened to discuss the scientific merit of the newest research ideas. Good communication skills in speaking and writing are also needed to complete the tasks of an SRO.

What kinds of activities can one do now to better prepare for a career as an SRO?

An SRO position is a good "end-of-career" position because you need a background as an established well-recognized research scientist before you can be considered for an SRO slot. However, some mid-career scientists have filled the roles of SROs as well.

Opportunities while you're at Yale:

If you're interested in exploring a career as an SRO, there are many ways to better prepare yourself for this field during your academic training period:

- 1) Practice your writing skills by starting a blog, writing a guest post for the [CNSPY blog](#), writing event summaries for the CNSPY Newsletter (apply to join the CNSPY team [here](#)), and applying for grants and fellowships.
- 2) Attend grant-writing workshops and classes; [author Angelika Hofmann](#) at Yale hosts [courses](#) every semester.
- 3) Review and edit manuscripts for the [Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine](#)
- 4) Volunteer to judge poster competitions to practice evaluating projects and providing constructive criticism: the [New Haven Science Fair](#), the [NYC Science & Engineering Fair](#), the [Science Media Awards](#) (video judging)

How did you get interested in scientific reviewing?

After 35 yrs in government research, the institution for which I worked was closing for budget considerations. I wanted to continue working in science but felt that I did not have the time left at the end of my career to start a new research program again, so I looked for ways to stay involved in top tier science without running a lab. During my job search, an SRO position became available in my specific field, and I jumped on the opportunity.

Can you share your career path with us?

I went directly into government laboratory service from grad school and began in pesticide chemistry at a state agricultural lab. From there, I tried industry in the field of toxicology and decided I preferred the government lab atmosphere better, so I then moved into a federal government position doing forensic toxicology. I later moved within federal departments to the Biological Agent Detection Division and then into Instrumentation Development for Disease Diagnosis. All of these positions were research-oriented where I wrote grants and published primary research. My final move was a transfer to NIH to become an SRO. This covers 40 years of work.

What was the most challenging part of your transition from academia to your current field?

Lab withdrawal - I love bench science! Although I am still associated with some of the top science in the world, I am not doing it. Also, the job can be very intense at certain times of the year and very slow at other times.

Can you describe the interview/application process?

Since I was coming from a government lab that was closing, my resume was sent to other government institutions in my local area for primary consideration over new federal service applicants. My scientific background matched an SRO slot that was specifically needed at NIH, so I was offered the opportunity and I accepted.

What did you highlight on your resume/CV?

I think what caught the eye of the administration at the Center for Scientific Review at NIH was the fact that I had served as the President of two different professional societies at the national level. This is the kind of scientific recognition that they are looking for in SROs besides a track record in productive research science. Joining in activities of professional societies and networking has many advantages, and starting early is very good.

What is a typical day like for you?

The work is very cyclical. Many times the work load is intense (when grant deadlines are nearing), but then there are several lulls where you are waiting in between deadlines, so it depends on what time of year it is. There are policies that dictate deadlines for various phases of your work to be completed within a grant submission cycle. Once the grant applications come in, you have to recruit the reviewers and assign the applications, and then you wait for the critiques to come in from the reviewers. Then the meeting occurs (the study section), and you have a set period of time to write all the discussion summaries from the meeting. Then the cycle starts again.

What skills do you need to develop to be an SRO?

Having been in academia will prepare you with most of the skills you need for an SRO position. You need to understand the grant application process, how to read science, how to write science, and how to communicate effectively both written and orally. Organizational skills need to be prominent as well. It also helps to have a good professional network of experts in your discipline that you can pull from to serve as reviewers.

What are your most & least favorite job aspects?

I like interacting with other scientists at NIH and the reviewers at the meetings. I least like writing the discussion summaries because I want to make sure that I capture the essence of the discussion to give the applicants and the institutes that will fund the science the most accurate description of the scientific merit, which takes time.

Is there room for career development & advancement for someone in your position?

You can move up the line in administration relatively quickly as an SRO, but the further you move up the further away from the science you get. I prefer to be more closely related to the science where I can make an impact.

Is there any last advice you would give to someone looking to make a similar transition like you did?

The hiring process for any federal government position can take ~6 months through USAJobs.gov, which is where the SRO positions are advertised. Sign up on the website long before you are interested in transitioning. The SRO positions are considered a "Health Scientist Administrator." Look for that topic, and check the website often, as positions are only posted for just one week.

Thank you for reading!!

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