



2015 AMERICORPS EXTERNAL REVIEW HANDBOOK



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Know Your Resources: the Reviewer Resource Webpage

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/AmeriCorpsReviewerPageFY15>

The Reviewer Resource Webpage is specifically intended to support the Corporation for National and Community Service’s (CNCS) 2015 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Application Review Process (GARP). The webpage provides Review Participants with a central location to access the comprehensive information and tools needed to participate in this review; it does not provide information that is particular to each panel.

Please be sure to review, initial, sign, and submit the Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form and the appropriate Participation Agreement before getting started.

CNCS has developed Orientation Sessions that complement this Handbook to ensure that Review Participants are fully prepared for the review process. Reviewers should read the Handbook first, followed by the Review (Scoring) Rubric and Criterion Descriptions. These materials will be referenced during the Orientation Sessions and should be reviewed before taking the trainings.

The majority of the Orientation Sessions are self-paced (pre-recorded) for your convenience. In addition to the pre-recorded sessions, there are two live trainings: one for Panel Coordinators only and the other for all Review Participants. **All orientations must be completed in the order provided before the start of the review on Tuesday, February 3, 2015.** Please see the Reviewer Resource Webpage for a complete list of sessions and their scheduled times, as appropriate.

The following list shows the resources available on the Reviewer Resource Webpage.

Application Resources

- ◆ Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity (*Notice*)
- ◆ AmeriCorps List of Prohibited Activities
- ◆ Frequently Asked Questions

Administrative Forms

- ◆ Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form
- ◆ Participant Agreement for Reviewers
- ◆ Participant Agreement for Panel Coordinators

Review Forms

- ◆ Individual Review Form (IRF)
- ◆ Reviewer (Scoring) Rubric
- ◆ Criterion Descriptions
- ◆ Panel Coordinator Notes – for Panel Coordinator’s only

Review Resources

- ◆ Timeline & Milestones for the Review
- ◆ eGrants Instructions for Downloading Applications
- ◆ Reviewer Tips: Writing Meaningful Comments & Sentence Starters
- ◆ Sample Application
- ◆ Sample Individual Review Form (*to be posted after the training period is complete*)

For any questions or suggestions about this Handbook or any of the training materials, please contact PeerReviewers@cns.gov

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Welcome to the 2015 AmeriCorps External Review Handbook

CNCS has developed this Handbook and other training materials to prepare Review Participants for their role in the 2015 AmeriCorps External Review process. As part of the training curriculum, this Handbook serves as the central reference for preparing for External Review activities.

After reading this Handbook and participating in the required orientation sessions, Review Participants will understand:

- ◆ the steps of the External Review process
- ◆ CNCS’s expectations for Review Participants
- ◆ the schedule, responsibilities, and requirements for participation
- ◆ the importance of the Selection Criteria
- ◆ how to assess applications using the Selection Criteria
- ◆ how to write meaningful, evaluative comments for applicant feedback
- ◆ the importance of fairness and equity in the Review, and how Reviewers fit into that responsibility
- ◆ how to be a productive panel member
- ◆ how to participate effectively in Panel Discussion Calls.

*All Orientation Sessions are mandatory and must be completed before the start of the review on **Tuesday, February 3rd***

It is also important to note that while the majority of this Handbook focuses on the roles and responsibilities of the Reviewer – such as assessing applications, writing comments, etc. – it is imperative that Panel Coordinators understand these expectations in order to support the Reviewers in an informed, effective way. Information tailored specifically to Panel Coordinators, in addition to the overall guidance, has been provided in [5.0 Supplement for Panel Coordinators](#).

2.0 CNCS’s Grant Application Review Process

CNCS is a federal agency with a mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. As the nation’s largest grant-making agency supporting national and community service programs and volunteerism, CNCS engages more than five million Americans who serve through its core programs to meet local and community needs in response to President Obama’s national call to service initiative, United We Serve. Additional information on CNCS and its programs is available online at www.nationalservice.gov.

2.1 The CNCS Grant-Making Process

CNCS has established a multi-step grant-making process that begins with the appropriation of funds, the awarding of grants, monitoring grant activities, then closing out the award. A summary of this process is presented in Figure 1, *The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants*.

Figure 1: The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants



The *Assess Applications* step is where External Reviewers contribute to the CNCS grant-making process. CNCS uses a multi-stage review process to assess applications, which includes the involvement of External Review Participants (Reviewers and Panel Coordinators) and Internal Reviewers (CNCS staff). External Reviewers read, assess, discuss, and provide feedback on each eligible application. Based on the results of the External Review, an Internal Staff Review and subsequent decision-making process is conducted for applications that meet the quality and criteria to advance in the review process.

2.2 The Grant Application Review Process

2.2.1 The External Review Process

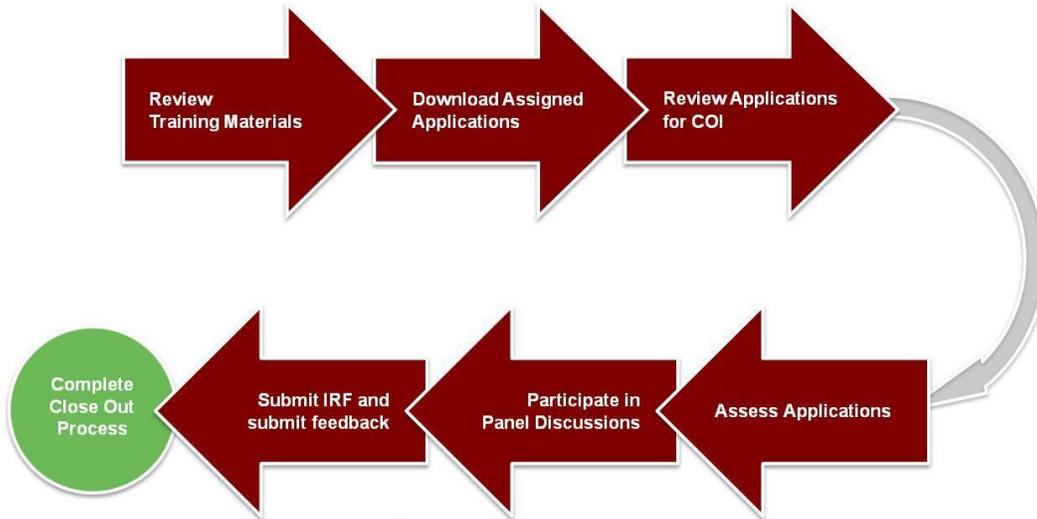
Using panels of Reviewers to assess grant applications submitted to CNCS for funding is established in CNCS’s statutes and regulations. CNCS meets these requirements through the External Review process. The purpose of External Review is to identify the highest-quality applications based on the Selection Criteria published in the *Notice*.

CNCS carefully chooses Review Participants based on their expertise and ability to objectively assess the quality of proposed projects. **It is important to understand that Reviewers are not making**

judgments or determinations on whether applications should be funded, but are providing an assessment of the quality of particular aspects of the applications. CNCS staff are responsible for all funding decisions and will use the results from External Review to help inform those decisions.

The steps involved during CNCS’s External Review are depicted in Figure 2, *The External Review Process*. Each step is briefly described below.

Figure 2: The External Review Process



Review Training Materials: All Review Participants are required to review the training materials and participate in the required Orientation Sessions to ensure all Review Participants understand their roles, responsibilities, and the expectations of CNCS to conduct a fair and equitable assessment of the applications.

Download Assigned Applications: Each panel is assigned a specific set of applications that are made available for download through eGrants, the web-based system used by CNCS to support grant management and competitions. Each panel only has access to its assigned applications.

Review Applications for Conflicts of Interest: The first step when beginning the review of any application is to determine if there are any potential conflicts of interest. This is a very specific conflict of interest review related to a panel’s assigned applications; it is different from the initial conflict of interest report provided during the confirmation process. This conflict of interest review must take place within the first day of receiving your panel assignment email; prior to reviewing the technical content of the application, in case recusals or reassignments are necessary.

Assess Applications: Each Reviewer conducts a detailed individual review and assessment of each assigned application according to the Selection Criteria specified by CNCS. Reviewers should prepare a draft IRF for each application to document their assessment, and then submit the draft(s) to the Panel Coordinator for review and feedback. Panel Coordinators should return their feedback before the Panel Discussion Call.

Participate in Panel Discussion Calls: Reviewers participate in Panel Discussion Calls for each assigned application to share thoughts and discuss their assessments. Each panel has an assigned Panel Coordinator who will help prepare the Reviewers for the discussions and facilitate the discourse. Based on the ratings from each Reviewer’s IRF, the Panel Coordinator will guide the panel through additional discussion about the application’s quality. Panel Coordinators are responsible for identifying significant rating variances among panelists and to document any noteworthy discrepancies or talking-points from

the discussion. In cases where significant discrepancies remain in the final Reviewer ratings, these applications may continue through a separate quality control review. ***Additional guidance is also provided in the Panel Coordinator Supplement.***

Submit IRF and Submit Feedback: This year, Reviewers' comments will be provided to the Program Officer Liaison (POL) using the electronic IRF – **Panel Coordinators are not required to complete a separate Applicant Feedback Summary.** After the Panel Discussion Calls, Reviewers should revisit their IRF and make any necessary adjustments. Reviewers should submit their revised IRFs to their Panel Coordinator, who will then provide it to the POL for additional review.

Complete Closeout Process: Each Review Participant will complete a closeout process by disposing of confidential review materials properly, as stipulated in the **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form**; providing feedback in the Review Process Evaluation; and ensuring that all review requirements are satisfied so that CNCS can process the honorarium payment.

2.2.2 Roles and Responsibilities

There are four important roles in the External Review process: External Reviewers and Panel Coordinators (referred together as Review Participants), and GARP Liaisons and POLs (referred together as CNCS Staff Liaisons). Each role has its own set of responsibilities, expectations, and designated interactions; all of which work in concert to ensure a fair and equitable review.

Reviewer

Reviewers assess applications according to the published Selection Criteria. Primary responsibilities include: reading and assessing applications, participating in Panel Discussion Calls, and producing high-quality IRFs. There will be three Reviewers assigned to each panel.

Reviewers interact primarily with Panel Coordinators, and are expected to be readily available and responsive to their Panel Coordinator's requests.

Panel Coordinator

Each panel will have a Panel Coordinator whose primary responsibilities are to guide, support, and monitor the work of the Reviewers assigned to their panel; manage panel logistics; provide feedback to Reviewers on their IRFs; and facilitate the Panel Discussion Calls. The Panel Coordinator works in several capacities to ensure that Reviewers complete a thorough, non-biased review that aligns with the Selection Criteria.

Panel Coordinators also serve as the first point of contact by both their Reviewers and CNCS staff regarding any concerns or relay information. Essentially, Panel Coordinators act as the primary liaison between CNCS staff and the panel.

Panel Coordinators interact with Reviewers and help resolve any conflicts among the panel members. If any panel anomalies arise, the Panel Coordinator should immediately notify the GARP Liaison who will determine the next steps.

Grant Application Review Process (GARP) Liaison

Each panel will be assigned a GARP Liaison who will answer all process-related questions and provide all administrative and logistical support to the panel. The GARP Liaison can provide assistance with obtaining grant applications and administrative forms (electronic versions), access to review resources, as well as providing helpful reminders throughout the review process. The GARP Liaison is the secondary point of contact (after the Panel Coordinator) for any immediate needs with review materials or any roadblocks encountered in participating in the review and completing the review process.

Program Officer Liaison (POL)

Each panel will be assigned a POL from CNCS whose main responsibility is to serve as a resource to the panel on programmatic elements. The POL will review and provide feedback on Reviewers' comments, and can provide clarification or guidance on an aspect of the Selection Criteria that panel members may not understand. The POL also follows up, as needed, with Panel Coordinators on areas that the panel may need to revisit, whether in a Panel Discussion Call or assessments. Interactions with the POL are primarily done through the Panel Coordinator.

Panel Coordinators will receive more information regarding POL interactions during their PC Check-In calls. Additional information can also be found in [Section 5.0 Supplement for Panel Coordinators](#).

3.0 Ensuring Equitable Reviews

An essential goal of the CNCS review process is to ensure that each application receives consideration through a fair and impartial process that preserves the transparency and integrity of the grant application review.

3.1 Diversity in Programs

AmeriCorps applications are very diverse. While a large number of applications may concentrate on only one CNCS Focus Area, other proposals may work in multiple Focus Areas or concentrate in activities *outside* of them. There may also be diversity in program models and designs, location, size, scope, organization type, and target populations. For example, one applicant may propose a Youth Corps model, while another may select a Professional Corps or Intermediary model.

This section corresponds with Orientation V: Ensuring an Equitable Review & Understanding the CNCS Grant Application Review Process

Please also keep in mind that not every organization has the resources to hire an experienced grant-writer. Applications should be assessed based upon how the narrative addresses the Selection Criteria; not how well the narrative was written.

Understanding and expecting these differences will help assess an applicant's proposed project in a fair and objective manner. Some areas of potential diversity of the 2015 AmeriCorps applications include:

- ◆ **Focus Areas:** One Focus Area, multiple Focus Areas, outside the Focus Area
- ◆ **Performance Measures/Service Categories:** Out-of-the-box selections and combinations
- ◆ **Type of Organization:** Intermediary, faith-based, Indian tribes, government entities, and all the other organizations eligible to apply
- ◆ **Scope:** Single city or county, state-wide, multi-state or national organization
- ◆ **Program Model:** Professional Corps, Youth Corps, Community Corps, Encore, etc.
- ◆ **Program Design:** Team-based, individually placed, working in pairs
- ◆ **Program Size:** Large, small, partnering or network
- ◆ **Target Populations:** Rural residents, low-income individuals, Native Americans, New Americans, Older Americans (seniors), Communities of Color, or other organizations in the case of capacity building, etc.

3.2 Bias

Bias is a preference or inclination that may inhibit impartial judgment or objectivity. One's bias is not limited to a negative judgment, or dislike of an application; it is more often found in favor, or an unfounded positive preference of an applicant or an aspect of an application.

Often, individuals are unaware of having a bias, and it may be flagged by another Review Participant, based on a comment made during discussion, or a consistent inflation or deflation of an assessment. Biases are often rooted in opinions and past experiences, something that Reviewers may need to balance when considering the information provided in the application. Utilizing one's opinion in some ways, but not in others can be difficult to separate especially as it is likely that a positive inclination or preference may be founded in a passion and excitement about a program. It is important that Reviewers are open to reconsideration should the issue of potential bias come to light. Panel Coordinators must also be objective, and may address a concern of bias with panel members if something were to arise.

To avoid the insertion of bias, all Reviewers are asked to base their assessments solely on the facts and assertions contained in the application; return to re-assess an application, if needed; eliminate consideration of outside sources or information; and exercise consideration and respect throughout the review.

3.3 Conflict of Interest

For purposes of this review, a conflict of interest is any private interest, affiliation, or relationship which could potentially compromise a Review Participant’s ability to impartially carry out official responsibilities. A conflict of interest can exist even if no unethical or improper act results from it.

Each Review Participant must review, sign, and submit a **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form** prior to the application review (available via the Reviewer Resource Webpage). Because of the unique nature of the review process and the sensitivity of the information being reviewed, **CNCS determines the potential for both direct (actual) and indirect (perceived) conflicts of interest as defined below.**

- ◆ A direct conflict of interest – often through personal involvement, connection to, or benefit from an application submitted to CNCS
- ◆ An indirect conflict of interest – through various forms of affiliation, personally or professionally, with an applicant institution

Prior to reviewing any applications, Reviewers must inform CNCS of any potential conflicts of interest. If a Reviewer becomes aware of a potential conflict once the Review Process has begun, they are required to alert CNCS staff immediately and provide relevant information to assist in the determination. CNCS staff will review the information, make a determination as to whether there is a conflict, and notify the individual of what steps, if any, need to be taken. It is possible, depending on the circumstances, that an individual will not be able to serve as a Reviewer or Panel Coordinator for this grant competition if a conflict of interest exists.

When examining conflicts of interest, a Reviewer should also consider the following people’s interests as their own: a spouse, domestic partner, or civil union partner; a minor child or dependent; and a relative living in your immediate household. Examples of potential conflicting affiliations or relationships are listed below, as well as in the **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form.**

- ◆ A reviewer’s personal submission of an application to CNCS
- ◆ An affiliation with an applicant institution
- ◆ A relationship with someone who has personal interest in the proposal or other application

Addressing Conflicts of Interest:

- ◆ Before you review any grant applications, you must tell CNCS about any possible Conflicts of Interest or even the appearance of a Conflict of Interest.
- ◆ The duty to disclose potential Conflicts of Interest is an ongoing duty. If a Conflict of Interest or the appearance of a Conflict of Interest arises during the course of your participation, you must tell CNCS.
- ◆ If you have any questions or think a conflict may exist, immediately contact your Panel Coordinator and GARP Liaison.
- ◆ CNCS staff will review the information, make a determination as to whether there is a conflict, and notify you of what steps, if any, need to be taken.

3.4 Confidentiality

During the External Review process, Review Participants have access to information that is not available to the public. This establishes special professional and ethical responsibilities to maintain the confidentiality of that information. Review Participants may use the information provided about applicants only during the review process and in discussions with fellow review participants and CNCS

staff. Review Participants may not use information provided during this review for personal benefit or to make it available for the benefit of any other individual or organization.

Review Participants may maintain archival hardcopy or electronic copies after the completion of the review. If archival copies are kept, they must be maintained in a manner consistent with the confidentiality obligations. Otherwise, the information must be disposed of in a manner consistent with the confidentiality obligations.

The names of other Review Participants must not be disclosed to applicants or anyone else. However, consistent with agency policy, CNCS reserves the right to publish the names of External Reviewers who completed the review process. Additionally, to the extent allowed by law, CNCS will not disclose Review Participant’s association with any specific applications or review forms.

3.5 Verifying Page Limits for all Applicants

Applications are subject to a 15 or 18 page limit according to the *Notice*:

“Applications may not exceed 15 pages for the Narratives (18 pages for Multi-Focus Intermediaries), including the Executive Summary and SF-424 Face Sheet, as the pages print out from eGrants. CNCS strongly encourages applicants to print out the application from the “Review and Submit” page prior to submission to check that the application does not exceed the page limit. This limit does not include the narrative portion of the evaluation plan or the logic model, budget, performance measures, or the supplementary materials, if applicable.

Reviewers will not consider submitted material that is over the page limit in the printed report, even if eGrants allows an applicant to enter and submit text over the limit.”

CNCS reviews the page limits for all application narratives prior to the review. Applications are flagged, and Reviewers must not read beyond the 15 page limit (18 page limit for Multi-Focus Intermediaries). **If you have a narrative that exceeds the page limit and it was not flagged, please report it to your Panel Coordinator and GARP Liaison immediately for final determination and guidance.**

4.0 Reviewing the 2015 AmeriCorps Applications

All Review Participants must complete the required Orientation Sessions and review the training materials provided on the Reviewer Resource Webpage prior to the start of the review. It is important that Review Participants take the time to become familiar with key elements such as the *Notice*, Review (Scoring) Rubric, and Criterion Descriptions, as well as understanding the Selection Criteria and how they should be used when assessing the application.

The AmeriCorps State and National grant competitions are governed by the *Notice* and Application Instructions (see [Appendix B: Links to Additional Reference Materials](#)). These documents detail the requirements and Selection Criteria that applicants must address when writing their applications, and what Reviewers should use when assessing the application's quality. Understanding these requirements and documents is critical to a fair, successful, and objective review.

This section corresponds with Using the Electronic IRF and Orientation VI: Reviewing the Applications & Conducting the Review

The 2015 External Review is based on a non-consensus model – meaning the panel does not need to reach consensus regarding the assessment of an application. Different perspectives and opinions are acceptable and welcomed.

Each Reviewer is assigned to a panel consisting of up to three (3) Reviewers and a Panel Coordinator. Each panel is assigned between five (5) and seven (7) applications, which are reviewed

individually by each Reviewer and then discussed by the entire panel during the Panel Discussion Calls. Typically, the panel's applications are divided into two or three groups; each group to be discussed in a separate Panel Discussion Call.

4.1 Reviewer Timeline

The **Timeline & Milestones** document on the Reviewer Resource Webpage provides a complete snapshot of the key review tasks and their targeted dates. The External Review process, excluding the one week training period, spans 15 calendar days. Review Participants should use this timeline as a guideline for completing tasks and staying on target for the review closeout on **Tuesday, February 17th**. Reviewers should work with their Panel Coordinators to coordinate schedules and tailor the timeline to the panel's specific needs.

4.2 The 2015 AmeriCorps External Review Selection Criteria

Applications will be assessed using the highlighted Selection Criteria within the *Notice*: <http://1.usa.gov/1GDBE6R>. Please be sure to review only the highlighted criteria; External Reviewers are not required to assess all elements of the application. The Selection Criteria for External Review are also clearly indicated in the Individual Reviewer Form. For more information regarding the Selection Criteria and how they should be assessed, please refer to the following orientations:

- ◆ **Orientation II: Problem/Need, Theory of Change, and Logic Model**
- ◆ **Orientation III: Member Training, Supervision, and Experience**
- ◆ **Orientation IV: Past Performance**

4.2.1 Consideration of the Performance Measures

Reviewers **should not** consider, assess, or comment on the Performance Measures, the structure of the measures, or the quality of the measures themselves. Although the Performance Measures are included with the application narratives, they should not be considered when assessing the Selection Criteria.

4.2.2 Consideration of Past Performance

This year, Reviewers will assess only one Past Performance criterion (in Organizational Capability). It is important to note that this assessment **does not** require written feedback – **Reviewers are only required to select a rating**. For more guidance, and a complete walk-through of how to review and assess the Past Performance criterion, please refer to **Orientation IV: Past Performance**.

4.3 Conducting the Individual Review

4.3.1 Reading the Applications

On the first day of the review, Review Participants will receive a Panel Assignment email that will include the list of assigned applications. **Panel members should read the applications in the order that they are listed.**

When reading the applications, Reviewers should not draw comparisons between applications or allow any outside knowledge to impact their assessment. Each application should be read and considered individually, and assessments should be based on the content found within the entire application.

It is important to note that not all information related to a criterion will be in one specific location; it may be found in different sections of the application. In as much as the information relates to the quality of the application and addresses the criteria, it should be considered. It is also equally important not to assess a single negative aspect of the application under multiple criteria.

When reading the application, Reviewers should strive to answer the following questions:

- ◆ Does the application address the criterion?
- ◆ To what degree and quality does the applicant provide a response?
- ◆ What is lacking or unclear?
- ◆ Has the applicant addressed this criterion in multiple locations?
- ◆ What are the significant strengths of this response?
- ◆ What are the significant weakness of this response?

Answering these questions in your draft IRF are the first steps towards creating a high-quality product.

Key Changes from 2014:

- ◆ Using an Excel-based electronic IRF
- ◆ **There are no separate Standards** – the criteria are written as Standards to improve overall clarity
- ◆ Criterion Descriptions were created to show examples of the ratings
- ◆ The **Applicant Feedback Summary** and **Justification of Evidence Level & Quality Form** were eliminated
- ◆ Reviewers **should not** consider any aspect of the Performance Measures
- ◆ Reviewers **should only rate, not comment on**, Past Performance

REMINDER: Please be mindful of page limits when reading your assigned applications. Check to see if any of your applications have been flagged for exceeding the page limit, and upon review of the narratives, ensure that it was not flagged in error. More information about page limits can be found in **Section 3.5 Verifying Page Limits for all Applicants**.

4.3.2 Completing the Individual Reviewer Form

The next step after reading the application is to draft the IRF. Reviewers should conduct a detailed individual assessment that focuses on the quality of the applicant’s response to each of the Selection Criteria. Reviewers should assess each criterion individually and assign the appropriate rating, as it correlates to the Review (Scoring) Rubric and Criterion Descriptions. It is extremely important that there is alignment between the rating assigned and the comments provided – **the comments will be used later as feedback to the applicants.**

Although an application may contain many strengths and weaknesses, Reviewers should focus only on those that are most significant. **It is not required to comment on every aspect of the criteria.**

Using the question prompts from the previous section, Reviewers can draft comments that reflect their cursory review. If a Reviewer is concerned that they did not understand something in the application, they should not presume to know what the applicant meant to say or tried to say. Instead, the Reviewer should assess the application based on what they did understand; anything that is unclear should be addressed during the Panel Discussion Call or noted as unclear in the draft IRF.

IRFs **SHOULD NOT** include:

- ◆ Suggestions or recommendations for improvement
- ◆ Inflammatory comments
- ◆ References to page numbers
- ◆ References to other panel members
- ◆ Comparisons to other applicants or applications
- ◆ Copied and pasted text from the application
- ◆ Summary statements in lieu of an assessment

High-Quality IRFs **SHOULD**:

- ◆ Only include comments that address Selection Criteria
- ◆ Reflect writing that is clear and concise
- ◆ Ensure comments do not contradict each other
- ◆ Ensure comments are aligned with and support the rating selection for each criterion
- ◆ Be free of spelling and grammar errors
- ◆ Contain no inflammatory language

Similarly, Reviewers should exercise caution about how they reference information that was in another part of the application. Because applicants may include information in another section that speaks directly to a specific criterion, Reviewers should note that the information was addressed in another section (within the page limit) and it should be considered. Reviewers **should not**, however, comment on the applicant’s budget or Performance Measures.

For additional guidance on providing high-quality feedback, please see **Reviewer Tips: Writing Meaningful Comments & Sentence Starters** on the Reviewer Resource Webpage.

4.3.3 When does a Strength or Weakness become Significant?

A strength becomes significant when it shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of and the ability to address a key issue in program implementation or management.

A weakness becomes significant when a criterion is not addressed at all or is addressed poorly, causing concern about the applicant’s ability to successfully implement the proposed project.

Do not focus on generating a particular number of comments or on providing a comment for every criterion. The quality of the comments is much more important than the quantity.

4.4 Participating in Panel Discussion Calls

After the individual review of a group of applications are complete, the panel will convene via conference call to discuss each application within that group. The purpose of the Panel Discussion Call is to share thoughts about the application’s quality, creating a forum that often generates further clarity and insight. Reviewers are asked to engage in discussion and consider the assessments and findings of

fellow panel members. The discussion should cover each of the Selection Criteria and should explore the points of agreement and disagreement amongst Reviewers. While consensus is not a requirement, Reviewers should strive to come to a common understanding of the application’s quality. It is also common, and perfectly valid, for a Reviewer to adjust their initial assessment after hearing from other panel members – listening to and benefiting from multiple perspectives is the added value of the Panel Discussion Call.

After the completion of the Panel Discussion Call, Reviewers should revise and finalize their IRFs to reflect any changes to their original assessment. Revised IRFs should be sent to the Panel Coordinator, who will then provide it to the POL. The POL will review the comments and provide feedback, if applicable.

Additionally at this time, the Panel Coordinator will complete a Panel Coordinator Notes form for each application reviewed. The Panel Coordinator Notes provides an opportunity to capture noteworthy discussion, points of agreement and disagreement, the identification of bias, and any issues that were not considered in the Panel Discussion Call but about which CNCS should be made aware.

4.4.1 Tips for Productive Panel Discussion Calls

All panel members should be present and engaged during the Panel Discussion Calls. Panel members should expect the discussion to last approximately 30-45 minutes per application.

Panel Discussion Calls should focus on the comments, assessments, and ratings that resulted from the individual assessments. The calls should be well-rounded and focused on the quality of the application based on the Selection Criteria—the **discussion should not revolve solely around the areas where panel members provided differing ratings.**

Reviewers may agree, disagree, clarify individual assessments and misunderstandings, and ask questions while collectively discussing an application. Preparedness, tact, patience, and active participation are ways that Reviewers can assist in the process of assessing applications, and in making panel discussions meaningful.

4.5 Completing the Closeout Process

After all review materials are final, Review Participants will complete their individual closeouts. A closeout is complete when Panel Coordinators ensure that all IRFs meet the requirements of the **Review Product Checklist**. Additionally, the following are of closeout activities:

- ◆ Confirming that Reviewers have submitted all required materials
- ◆ Completing a final review of the IRFs
- ◆ Submitting all Panel Coordinator Notes

Helpful Tips on How to be an Effective Panel Member:

- ◆ Review and be familiar with the Notice, the Selection Criteria, the Review (Scoring) Rubric, Criterion Descriptions, and other relevant documents.
- ◆ Allow the Panel Coordinator to lead; recognize the importance of the Panel Coordinator role and respect it.
- ◆ Have both the application and completed IRF ready for each discussion.
- ◆ Ask others to explain or clarify their positions and be an active listener.
- ◆ Do not be afraid to ask questions.
- ◆ Focus on the content of what is being said and not the person saying it.
- ◆ Participate actively in the discussion, using supporting evidence from the application to emphasize points.
- ◆ Be receptive to opposing viewpoints and put emotions aside.
- ◆ Answer other panel members’ questions and challenges cordially and diplomatically.
- ◆ Expect to revisit the IRFs and make revisions on several occasions before finalizing the review product.

- ◆ Labeling all final review products according to the required naming convention
- ◆ Submitting all final review products to the GARP Liaison
- ◆ Completing and submitting the 2015 AmeriCorps External Review Process Evaluation – CNCS will provide the URL for the evaluation form after the completion of the review.

4.6 Confirmation and Honorarium

After the review period, CNCS will confirm that each Review Participant has satisfactorily completed the requirements of the review as stated in the Participation Agreement. Honoraria checks will be paid electronically to each Review Participant via direct deposit within 30 days of confirmation. Please consult the Participation Agreement, and the information covered in the Orientation Sessions, for conditions that may prevent a Review Participant from receiving part or all of their honorarium.

**Thank you for being a Review Participant in
the 2015 AmeriCorps External Review!**

5.0 Supplement for Panel Coordinators

All Panel Coordinators are responsible for reading the entire 2015 AmeriCorps External Review Handbook and completing the required orientation sessions. It is also important to carefully read the Selection Criteria as laid out in the 2015 AmeriCorps *Notice*. Understanding these criteria is critical to being able to provide guidance to panel members and to ensure that the Selection Criteria are adequately considered and discussed in the review. To be an effective Panel Coordinator, one must be knowledgeable not only about the AmeriCorps review process, but also about the Reviewers' role and activities.

5.1 Overview of the Panel Coordinator Role

The Panel Coordinator plays a key role in the successful implementation of the External Review, particularly with ensuring the timely delivery of quality review products to CNCS. Key aspects of the Panel Coordinator's role in the review process include:

- ◆ managing the panel's activities in order to meet the review schedule
- ◆ serving as the primary contact between panel members and CNCS Staff Liaisons
- ◆ facilitating Panel Discussion Calls and fostering a climate of respect within the panel
- ◆ providing the panel with constructive and effective guidance in both the review process and the technical aspects of the review
- ◆ ensuring Reviewers adequately address the Selection Criteria in their IRFs and Panel Discussion Calls
- ◆ Providing timely and consistent feedback to Reviewers on the quality of their review forms
- ◆ Compiling the review results (comments, ratings) at varying times during the review to inform the panel and CNCS Staff of the review panel's progress
- ◆ Completing Panel Coordinator Notes to document any issues with the review of each application

Key Changes from 2014:

- ◆ The **Applicant Feedback Summary and Justification of Evidence Level & Quality Form** were eliminated
- ◆ All feedback – from both the PC and POL – will be incorporated into the electronic IRF.

To begin your role as Panel Coordinator, carefully review, initial, sign, and submit the **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form** and the **Participation Agreement for Panel Coordinators** provided on the Reviewer Resource Webpage. It is important that expectations and responsibilities are clear, and any questions regarding your role as Panel Coordinator are clarified before the review begins. Please direct any and all questions to PeerReviewers@cns.gov at any point during the review. Emails to this address are received by GARP support staff and every effort is made to respond within one business day.

5.2 Preparing for the 2015 AmeriCorps Grant Application Review

5.2.1 Panel Coordinator Timeline

The **Timeline & Milestones** document on the Reviewer Resource Webpage provides a complete snapshot of the key review tasks and their targeted dates. The External Review process, excluding the one week training period, spans 15 calendar days. Panel Coordinators should use this timeline as a guideline for establishing their panel's schedule, completing tasks, and staying on target for the review closeout on **Tuesday, February 17th**. While following this timeline is preferable, Panel Coordinators should also use their discretion to tailor their panel's schedule to best accommodate the panel members' needs. If the panel's schedule is delayed for any reason during the review, the Panel Coordinator must contact their GARP Liaison and alert them of the situation. Panel Coordinators should be proactive in

keeping the panel on task and should work with their GARP Liaison to deliver pertinent information in a timely manner.

5.2.2 Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest

Even though Panel Coordinators do not assess the AmeriCorps applications directly, they are still subject to the confidentiality and conflict of interest considerations outlined in the **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form**.

As soon as the Panel Coordinator’s assigned applications are available in eGrants, they should access and examine each of the assigned applications for potential conflicts. If the Panel Coordinator suspects a conflict or has a question, they should contact CNCS immediately and let the staff determine whether a conflict does indeed exist. If CNCS determines that there is a conflict, CNCS staff will provide the Panel Coordinator with the appropriate guidance. Panel Coordinators must review and submit the **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form**, as instructed, no later than **Monday, February 2nd**.

The **Confidentiality & Conflict of Interest Form** should be completed whether the Panel Coordinator has or has not identified a potential conflict. Signing the form represents an understanding of the responsibilities regarding confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and adhering to the guidelines if a potential conflict of interest is identified at any point during the review.

5.2.3 Panel Introduction Call

The Panel Coordinator’s role in the Panel Introduction Call is to organize and lead the panel to prepare for the review. **This call should take place within 24 hours of receiving panel assignments.** It is important to contact the assigned Reviewers and establish the review schedule as soon as possible. Panel Coordinators are assigned a panel of three Reviewers with varying experience and levels of expertise. Once the contact information for panel members is available, Panel Coordinators should reach out to introduce themselves and initiate the planning process for the Panel Introduction Call and subsequent Panel Discussion Calls. The following are suggested agenda topics for the Panel Introduction Call:

- ◆ Allow each Reviewer to give their background and level of experience with external reviews
- ◆ Establish optimal means of communication for each Reviewer: preferred email address, phone number, etc.
- ◆ Review the expectations and schedule
- ◆ Work together to set the dates and times of the Panel Discussion Calls
- ◆ Consider the time zones for each panel member and establish general “ideal times” for availability and responsiveness
- ◆ Encourage maximum flexibility and a commitment to the review schedule and needs
- ◆ Ensure everyone is reading the applications in the order indicated in the Panel Assignment email

Panel Coordinator Tips: Panel Intro Guidance will be provided to Panel Coordinators via email

5.3 Setting up the Panel for Success

Ensuring that Reviewers complete work on time

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Create group agreements that include completing the work on time

- ◆ Ensure all Reviewers voice their opinions when creating shared group agreements, expectations, and the schedule. If there are differing expectations, this is the best time to address the standards and expectations of the review.
- ◆ Monitor and check in with panel members via email
- ◆ Send out updates of information and reminders of milestones to which the group agreed – e.g., *“Remember, by the end of today, everyone should have read their first three applications and written at least one Individual Reviewer Form!”*
- ◆ As a group, create a realistic schedule for completion that attempts to consider everyone’s needs
- ◆ Remind Reviewers to keep their agreed upon schedule handy, and refer to it frequently
- ◆ Remind Reviewers of their time commitment and encourage them to set aside or otherwise minimize potential distractions (e.g., postpone activities that can be done at another time)
- ◆ Check in periodically to see if the agreed upon schedule is still realistic and achievable
- ◆ Adjust the schedule, as needed, to maximize the panel’s overall performance

Interventions:

- ◆ Remind the group of the agreed upon schedule, emphasizing that the reasoning behind pacing themselves is to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed and ensuring that each application has received the fairest quality review from the panel
- ◆ *Next step:* speak with each Reviewer individually to see how to help them get their work done on time; provide a head’s up to the GARP Liaison
- ◆ *Final action:* remind each Reviewer that Panel Coordinators need to notify the GARP Liaison if the work is not completed satisfactorily by the deadline

Ensuring that the Individual Review Forms are quality products

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Create group agreements that include preparing thoughtful and thorough IRFs
- ◆ Review the Selection Criteria by which each application should be assessed
- ◆ Remind Reviewers to use their available resources, such as the **Reviewer Tips: Writing Meaningful Comments & Sentence Starters** and **Sample Individual Reviewer Form**, to create high-quality comments

Interventions:

- ◆ Panel members should not read each other’s IRFs; the Panel Discussion Call is the only forum in which Reviewers’ assessments should be collectively discussed
- ◆ *Next step:* speak with the Reviewers individually and go through specific areas of improvement for the IRF

Ensuring Reviewer responsiveness to phone calls and/or emails

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Confirm Reviewers’ preferred contact information
- ◆ Establish agreements on availability and “ideal times”
 - Recognize varying time zones
 - Establish general hours of group availability
 - Identify specific instances of unavailability and/or conflicting obligations
- ◆ (Re)Iterate that most communication will be via email
- ◆ Talk with panels to establish a response time norm – e.g., all emails will be responded to within eight hours, including weekends
- ◆ Set a precedence of asking Reviewers to “reply to confirm” that they have received an email
- ◆ Respond promptly when contacted by Reviewers

Interventions:

- ◆ If a Reviewer is non-responsive to one means of contact, try an alternative format – e.g., if first contact was through email, try the phone
- ◆ *Next step:* Alert your GARP Liaison if a Reviewer has been non-responsive after multiple attempts of contact

Ensuring that Reviewers have read the *Notice* and other review materials

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Emphasize the need for familiarity with the *Notice* and review materials to effectively assess the content of the applications – the Reviewer Resource Webpage, as well as this Handbook, provide specific instructions on what documents should be read first and what should be used as tools when assessing the Selection Criteria
- ◆ Revisit the roles, responsibilities, and Selection Criteria – utilize the Review (Scoring) Rubric and Criterion Descriptions to enhance understanding

Interventions:

- ◆ If you are concerned about a Reviewer’s familiarity and/or understanding of the *Notice*, Selection Criteria, etc., speak to them individually, potentially highlighting a comment that was made in contradiction with the materials
- ◆ *Next step:* Offer to review the point of misunderstanding together
- ◆ *Final step:* Alert your GARP Liaison of the issue

Creating equal “air” time for all Reviewers in the Panel Discussion Call

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Begin discussion on the general aspects of the application, then move towards the specifics
- ◆ Encourage a structured, objective discussion of the content
- ◆ Take note of how each Reviewer reacts to conflict or disagreements
- ◆ Work to include the entire panel in the discussion for 100% participation
- ◆ At the outset of each discussion, remind the panel of the group agreements
- ◆ Set the tone during the first discussion; communicate your facilitation style and the expectations for participation—call on each Reviewer to state their opinions
- ◆ Verbally acknowledge that different work styles may participate differently, all must have an equal opportunity and equal contribution to the discussion

Interventions:

- ◆ Step in when group members are not able to keep each other engaged. Structure and lead the discussion so that each Reviewer takes a turn to state their comments on the application
- ◆ Actively engage Reviewers who seem withdrawn; learn how they would like to contribute
- ◆ Step in when the group is not able to maintain balanced participation
- ◆ Facilitate the conversation flow as needed – e.g., gently deflect a dominating person’s input by allowing others to speak

Preventing difficult interactions among panel member(s) due to personality conflicts

*****Panel Coordinators should document any instance of this in the Panel Coordinator Notes*****

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Address the application’s significant strengths or weaknesses more than the Reviewer’s opinions
- ◆ Ask Reviewers to provide specific references within the application to encourage objectivity
- ◆ Keep the discussions moving – If a point of strong disagreement occurs, encourage productive discussion about the Selection Criteria; move to another point once the various assessments have been stated

Interventions:

- ◆ Acknowledge the issue and provide guidance
- ◆ Remind panel members to focus on what is stated in the application
- ◆ Use humor, if appropriate, to break tension; encourage humor from others
- ◆ Talk with the Reviewers(s) privately and ask if something is bothering them – let the Reviewer express their feelings and inquire how they would like to handle moving forward
- ◆ Remind the panel to do what is best for the sake of the applicant

Preventing bias

Panel Coordinators should document any instance of this in the Panel Coordinator Notes

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Reiterate Reviewer roles and responsibilities
- ◆ Remind each panel member about their responsibility to give each application a fair and objective review
- ◆ Encourage Reviewers to only focus on the information in the application; not to consider outside information or allow their personal feelings to cloud their objectivity

Interventions:

- ◆ Remind the group as a whole that there is that fine line between relying on their expertise/personal experiences and allowing that to influence their assessment of the application
- ◆ Reviewers should be encouraged to “step back” and assess the point of discussion from a different perspective
- ◆ Ask Reviewers to provide evidence to substantiate their point
- ◆ Use the Review (Scoring) Rubric and Criterion Descriptions to align conjecture
- ◆ Use humor, when appropriate, to bring about awareness of bias

A Panel Coordinator’s responsibility is to the panel as a whole. If one panel member’s needs are taking away from the panel as a whole, seek help from CNCS staff.

Assisting Reviewers who appear to struggle with technology

Setting up for success:

- ◆ Check in regularly with panel members both as a group and individually
- ◆ Monitor their progress when using the electronic IRF
- ◆ Ask: “How can I assist you?”

Interventions:

- ◆ Set up a time to work individually with that panel member
- ◆ Contact the GARP Liaison

5.4 Coordinating the Panel

The Panel Coordinator has the unique task of remotely orchestrating and monitoring panel activities and individuals’ activities, often across multiple times zones. Panel Coordinators are expected to maintain regular communication with all panel members, as well as the CNCS Staff Liaisons. This high level of coordination requires active responsiveness, maximum flexibility, and a strong commitment to the review timeline.

5.4.1 Interacting with the Program Officer Liaison

The Program Officer Liaison (POL) is the Panel Coordinator’s resource for programmatic (AmeriCorps specific) inquiries. Panel Coordinators should have a brief conversation, or check-in, with their panel

prior to the first Panel Discussion Call to solicit any preliminary questions about the Selection Criteria or information presented in the applications. Programmatic questions can be directed to the POL for further clarification and explanation at any point during the review.

POLs will also review each of the Reviewers' IRFs. POLs will review and provide feedback (if applicable) on the revised IRFs submitted after the Panel Discussion Calls. On the second tab of the electronic IRF, POLs will complete their feedback (if applicable) and initial that the comments have been reviewed. **POLs will only look at each IRF once.** The Quality Indicators, against which the POL will review the Reviewers' comments, are also included on the second tab.

Panel Coordinators are encouraged to initiate or request a meeting with their POL (alone, or on the panel's behalf) if they are receiving multiple questions from the panelists about particular criteria, or the same application. A POL may proactively check-in with Panel Coordinators during the actual review.

All correspondence with the POL should be sent to: AmeriCorpsPOL@cns.gov. Please include your panel number in the subject line and cc your GARP Liaison on all communications.

5.4.2 Facilitating the Panel Discussion Calls

Reviewers participate in Panel Discussion Calls for each assigned application to share thoughts and discuss their assessments. The Panel Coordinator's role is to help prepare the Reviewers for the discussions and to facilitate the discourse.

For each application reviewed, the Panel Coordinator will guide the panel through discussions about the application's quality, as well as the significant strengths and weaknesses identified by the Reviewers. Reviewers may take notes, and offer their thoughts and opinions through the course of discussion, then adjust their comments and ratings accordingly.

Panel Coordinators are also responsible for identifying significant rating variances among panelists and to document any noteworthy discrepancies or talking-points from the discussion. To help mitigate rating variances:

- ◆ Panel Coordinators will be provided with an Excel spreadsheet that allows them to view and cross-compare the ratings for each criterion on each IRF completed by the Reviewers. This will help Panel Coordinators to easily identify variances and help inform the course of discussion.
- ◆ Panel Coordinators should focus on the instances where ratings have a variance of two or more rating levels. For example: one Reviewer could select "Exceeds the criterion" while the other selects "Does not meet the criterion." On the 4-point scale, "Exceeds the criterion" is the highest rating and "Does not meet criterion" is the lowest. This variance would be flagged for additional discussion.
- ◆ When a variance for a criterion is identified, Panel Coordinators should ensure that the Reviewers have a common understanding of the actual criterion and how it relates to the Review (Scoring) Rubric and Criterion Descriptions. It is also important to make sure that the Reviewers have not overlooked any information in the application that would have impacted their assessment. Evidence from the application should be used when discussing the Reviewers' selection for the criterion in question.
- ◆ Reviewers have the opportunity to modify their rating as a result of the discussions; however, Reviewers are not required to come to consensus if they still do not agree.
- ◆ In cases where significant discrepancies remain in the final Reviewer ratings, these applications may continue through a separate quality control review.

5.4.3 Expectations for the Panel Discussion Calls

Panel Coordinators must monitor and guide the Reviewers to ensure engaging discussions that reflect the panel’s assessment of each assigned application. Both points of agreement and disagreement should be considered in the panel discussion. Most importantly, all discussions should focus on the Selection Criteria and how they relate to the application.

Reaching consensus or agreement on comments and ratings is not the purpose of the panel discussion. Reviewers should discuss their ratings and assessments in full consideration of other opinions and experience levels without the pressure of aligning their results. Based on the discussion, Reviewers will need to return to their IRFs to revise (if necessary) and finalize their assessments to reflect their final opinion.

As the Panel Coordinator, the panel discussions should focus on the Selection Criteria, Review (Scoring) Rubric, and Criterion Descriptions. It is important to constructively communicate observations and expectations, while encouraging panel members to do the same. The expectation is a smooth, timely, and organized discussion that results in an objective assessment of the application.

Reviewers may agree, disagree, clarify individual assessments and misunderstandings, and ask questions while collectively discussing an application. Reviewers may have the same rating for a particular criterion, but arrived at that assessment through a different rationale and thought process. It is, therefore, important to encourage discussion among panel members to understand how the significant strengths and weaknesses of an application were identified and then considered.

The diversity of panel members’ expertise and backgrounds also lends itself valuable to the Panel Discussion Calls. However, it is important to keep in mind that the discussion should extend beyond *areas of disagreement or differing ratings*.

CNCS does not provide specific requirements for the Panel Discussion Calls, and the following are offered only as suggestions:

- ◆ Utilize online scheduling tools, such as Doodle or ScheduleOnce, to coordinate schedules
- ◆ Provide an agenda prior to the call and begin the call by reviewing the agenda to ensure everyone has the same expectations
- ◆ Begin the discussion of the application by providing a summary of the proposed project
- ◆ Identify a specific order for each Reviewer to summarize their individual assessment
- ◆ Specify time limits for each Reviewer and/or each application

REMEMBER: Facilitating panel discussions from a distance, via telephone, has some unique challenges. Some of these challenges include: background noise (or conversely, muted phones, and sparse participation), competing distractions (driving, multi-tasking, or other persons nearby), not being able to observe body language, technology barriers, and possible confusion about scheduled times due to time zone differences. Panel Coordinators need to pay close attention to human dynamics and signals from the panel members to facilitate effectively, and be extra rigorous in ensuring that panel communications are clear and understood by all.

5.4.4 Providing Feedback on the Individual Reviewer Form

Two primary aspects of the Panel Coordinator’s role are to monitor Reviewers’ progress and to guide Reviewers to produce high-quality IRFs. The IRF documents a Reviewer’s assessment of an application and serves as the foundation for applicant feedback. Often, there is a direct correlation between the quality of the IRF and the roadblocks encountered in completing the remainder of the review process for the panel as a whole. As Reviewers begin completing their IRFs, Panel Coordinators review and provide constructive feedback on their assessments.

A Panel Coordinator's primary focus when reviewing and providing feedback is to ensure that Reviewers have:

- ◆ comments that reflect the *significant* strengths and weaknesses of an application
- ◆ comments that address the Selection Criteria
- ◆ selected ratings that are supported by the significant strengths and weaknesses
- ◆ are consistent with the CNCS standards of quality and completion.

Panel Coordinators are not expected to make edits to the IRFs, but to provide specific comments and constructive feedback on what improvements are needed. The most important task is to help Reviewers understand the IRF and what is expected in the level of quality.

Reviewers will complete the draft IRFs and email them to the Panel Coordinator. Panel Coordinators can input their feedback in the appropriate comment boxes on the second tab of the electronic IRF. After the Reviewer submits the revised the IRF, and the feedback has been addressed appropriately, the Panel Coordinator can initial the proper box and send the form to the POL for additional review.

If a panel member is not completing their reviews as scheduled, Panel Coordinators should contact that Reviewer to understand what the problems are, and to ensure that they can get back on schedule. If this issue reoccurs, the GARP Liaison should be made aware of the efforts and the possible lack of compliance from that Reviewer. This proactive guidance will prevent major challenges for everyone (especially the panel) as the review advances.

5.4.5 Completing the Panel Coordinator Notes

After each Panel Discussion Call, the Panel Coordinator must complete a Panel Coordinator Notes form for each application reviewed. The Panel Coordinator Notes provides an opportunity to capture noteworthy discussion, points of agreement and disagreement, the identification of bias, and any issues that were not considered in the Panel Discussion Call but about which CNCS should be made aware.

Though considered a final review product, Panel Coordinator Notes are not shared with entities outside of CNCS. The Panel Coordinator Notes are used to inform internal processes, as well as make sure panel members are serving effectively in their roles. If a Panel Coordinator is concerned about capturing a specific occurrence in writing, please contact your GARP Liaison.

**Thank you for being a Review Participant
in the 2015 AmeriCorps External Review!**

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

AmeriCorps

On the whole, a network of three programs—AmeriCorps VISTA, AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), and AmeriCorps State and National—which support nearly 75,000 Americans in service to meet critical needs in the six priority Focus Areas of: Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, Healthy Futures, and Veterans and Military Families; as well as Capacity Building. For the purpose of this grant review, all AmeriCorps references pertain to the AmeriCorps State and National program.

Bias

Bias is a preference or inclination that may inhibit impartial judgment or objectivity. One's bias is not limited to a negative judgment, or dislike of an application; it is more often found in favor, or an unfounded positive preference of an applicant or an aspect of an application.

Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a situation in which conflict exists between one's private interest and official responsibilities. Such competing interests can make it difficult for a Reviewer to fulfill their duties impartially. CNCS considers both actual and perceived conflicts of interest in the interest of fairness to applicants, and preserving the integrity of the review process.

CNCS Staff Liaison

Used when referring to both the GARP Liaison and POLs together.

Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS)

A federal agency that engages more than 5 million Americans in service through programs like Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund; and leads President Obama's national call to service initiative, United We Serve. For the purpose of this review, CNCS is the agency that is responsible for the respective grant competition.

Focus Area(s)

In order to carry out Congress' intent and to maximize the impact of investment in national service, CNCS has the following Focus Areas for the 2015 AmeriCorps State & National grant competition:

Disaster Services: Grant activities will provide support to increase the preparedness of individuals for disasters, improve individuals' readiness to respond to disasters, help individuals recover from disasters, and/or help individuals mitigate disasters. Grantees also have the ability to respond to national disasters under CNCS cooperative agreements and FEMA mission assignments.

Economic Opportunity: Grants will provide support and/or facilitate access to services and resources that contribute to the improved economic well-being and security of economically disadvantaged people; help economically disadvantaged people, including youth identified in My Brother's Keeper to have improved access to services that enhance financial literacy; transition into or remain in safe, healthy, affordable housing; and/or have improved employability leading to increased success in becoming employed.

Education: Grants will provide support and/or facilitate access to services and resources that contribute to improved educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged children; improved school readiness for economically disadvantaged young children; improved educational and behavioral outcomes of students in low-achieving elementary, middle, and high schools; and/or support economically disadvantaged students prepare for success in post-secondary educational institutions.

Environmental Stewardship: Grants will provide support for increased individual behavioral change leading to increased energy efficiency, renewable energy use, and ecosystem improvements particularly for economically disadvantaged households and communities. Grant activities will decrease energy and water consumption; improve at-risk ecosystems; increase behavioral changes that lead directly to decreased energy and water consumption or improved at-risk ecosystems; and/or increase green training opportunities that may lead to decreased energy and water consumption or improved at-risk ecosystems.

Healthy Futures: Grants will provide support for activities that will improve access to primary and preventive health care for communities served by CNCS-supported programs; increase seniors' ability to remain in their own homes with the same or improved quality of life for as long as possible; and/or increase physical activity and improve nutrition in youth with the purpose of reducing childhood obesity.

Veterans and Military Families: Grants will positively impact the quality of life of veterans and improve military family strength; increase the number of veterans, military service members, and their families served by CNCS-supported programs; and/or increase the number of veterans and military family members engaged in service through CNCS-supported programs.

eGrants

The CNCS web-based online grants management system for all grant-related administration. Reviewers will use eGrants for ¹downloading applications, and ²entering their respective banking information in order to receive the honorarium.

Grant Review Application Process (GARP) Liaison

Primary contact for process-related guidance and logistical support. For the purpose of this review, the GARP Liaison is essentially the Panel Coordinator's personal review assistant that ensures that they are connected, responsive, and prepared with all of the proper resources to complete the review.

Individual Reviewer Form (IRF)

The form designed to document a Reviewer's assessment of an application through ratings and comments that identify significant strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the Selection Criteria. The IRF is the primary and most important review product.

Post-Review Quality Control (PRQC)

The review process that occurs after the External Review has concluded to reassess applications that were subject to panel anomalies such as a wide variance in Reviewer ratings, identified instances of bias, etc. This process is designed to ensure that each application receives a fair review and is not disadvantaged from any issues that the panel may have experienced. PRQC Reviewers are selected from the original Review Participants that had good performance results and high-quality IRFs, to review a separate set of applications.

Reviewer

Reviewers assess applications according to the published Selection Criteria. Primary responsibilities include: reading and assessing applications, participating in Panel Discussion Calls, and producing high-quality IRFs. Reviewers interact primarily with Panel Coordinators, and are expected to be readily available and responsive to their Panel Coordinator's requests.

Review Participant

Used when referring to both the External Reviewers and Panel Coordinators together.

Review Rubric

The document that provides the metrics for how each Criterion should be rated. The available ratings are below —and each selected Rating should align with the comments that are provided for a particular section in the IRF.

4-point Rating scale

- Exceeds the criterion
- Meets the criterion
- Partially meets the criterion
- Does not meet the criterion

Panel Coordinator (PC)

Panel Coordinators guide, support, and monitor the work of the Reviewers assigned to their panel; manage panel logistics; provide feedback to Reviewers on their IRFs; and facilitate the Panel Discussion Calls. The Panel Coordinator works in several capacities to ensure that Reviewers complete a thorough, non-biased review that aligns with the Selection Criteria.

Panel Coordinators also serve as the first point of contact by both their Reviewers and CNCS staff regarding any concerns or relay information. Essentially, Panel Coordinators act as the primary liaison between CNCS staff and the panel.

Program Officer Liaison (POL)

Provides CNCS programmatic expertise and guidance.

Appendix B: Links to Additional Reference Materials

2015 AmeriCorps State & National Application Instructions

http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2015_AmeriCorps_State_and_National_NOFO_Application_Instructions_FINAL_1.pdf

2015 AmeriCorps State & National Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity

http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2015_AmeriCorps_Notice_NOFO_final_0.pdf

CNCS

www.nationalservice.gov.

FY 2015 AmeriCorps State & National Grant Competition Reviewer Resource Webpage

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/AmeriCorpsReviewerPageFY15>

eGrants

<https://egrants.cns.gov/espan/main/login.jsp>