Higher Satisfaction Among Applicants Who Also Reviewed Proposals

Insights from the 2021 Merit Review Survey

In fall 2021, the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) administered the Merit Review Survey, a biennial web-based survey of persons who submitted proposals (i.e., applicants) and/or reviewed proposals (i.e., reviewers) between October 1, 2018, and September 30, 2020. Over 66,000 people were invited to complete the survey, with responses from over 17,000 people.

The survey questions were designed to better understand critical elements of the merit review process, including perceptions of satisfaction. For example, one question asks respondents to respond to the statement, "I am satisfied with the NSF merit review process," with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Responses by applicants indicated that 54% agreed or strongly agreed they were satisfied with the merit review process.

Further examining a composite measure composed of multiple survey questions and considering demographic and other observable characteristics, regression estimates indicated the average overall applicant satisfaction rating was 65%. Additionally, satisfaction differed by applicants who submitted a proposal only versus those who also served as reviewers. Specifically, applicants who submitted a proposal only had a lower average satisfaction rating (62%), compared to applicants who submitted a proposal but also served as a reviewer (68%).

To learn more about the 2021 Merit Review Survey, review the Evaluation and Assessment Capability (EAC) report, Assessment of Stakeholder Experiences With NSF's Merit Review Process, published in October 2023.
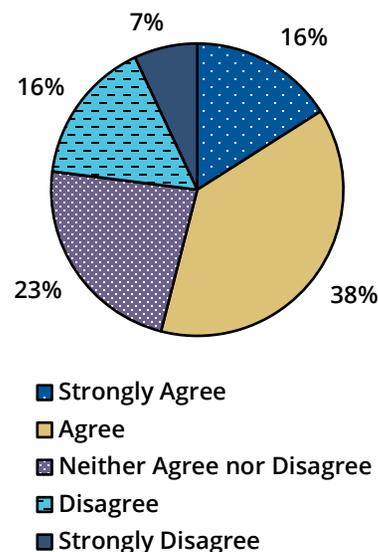
Applicant Satisfaction in the Merit Review Process, FY 2021

A) Responses on Satisfaction

7% / 16% / 16% / 23% / 38%

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

B) Estimates on Satisfaction by Applicant Experience

62% — Applicant Only
68% — Applicant, also Reviewed
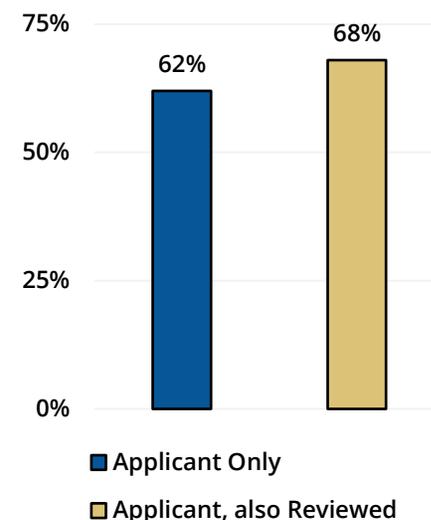
Note: In A), applicant satisfaction is based on responses to Q21E. In B), applicant satisfaction is estimated in a multiple regression of the applicant satisfaction composite variable that combined survey items Q18B, Q20A, Q20B, Q20C, Q20D, Q21A, Q21B, and Q21E; and controlled for the following characteristics: race and ethnicity, gender, disability status, NSF directorate/office, institution type, early career status, and NSF experience.

Source: Bowman, Marietta, Andrew Bryant, Richard Griffiths, Amanda Hare, Lyndsay Huey, James McCall, Jeffery Scanlon, and Breanna Wakar. 2023. *Assessment of Stakeholder Experiences With NSF's Merit Review Process: Findings From the 2021 Merit Review Survey*. Alexandria, VA: U.S. National Science Foundation.

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DATA SNAPSHOT