amfAR

Grant Application Review Process and Guidelines

amfAR receives hundreds of proposals each year from researchers around the world and funds the highest quality projects. In evaluating these proposals, amfAR employs a peer review process modeled closely on those used by other major scientific research institutions, including the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The scientific peer review process ensures the quality and relevance of research activities and helps maintain the scientific objectivity and credibility of amfAR's grant-making programs. Starting with the June 2025 cycle, amfAR implemented a revised review process designed to streamline scoring and enhance the quality of feedback provided to applicants.

1. Review Committee

Each application is evaluated by three external scientific reviewers and amfAR's Vice President and Director of Research. This committee ensures a balanced and expert assessment of every proposal.

1.1. External reviewers

- Submit preliminary written evaluations
- Present and discuss assigned applications during the review session
- May revise their scores following the discussion

1.2. amfAR Vice President and Director of Research

- Reads and evaluates all applications
- Moderates and contributes to the discussion during the review session, ensuring all perspectives are considered
- Finalizes the overall impact score for each application

2. Step-by-Step Review Process

2.1. Preliminary review

- Reviewers independently assess and score each application on 5 different criteria using a whole number 1–9 NIH-style scale, where 1 indicates exceptional merit and 9 indicates significant weaknesses. Scores and written comments are submitted using the amfAR online portal. A weighted average of the 5 scores will result in a final score that will be used to guide the discussion during the review session. For Target and Horizon grants, special emphasis is placed on the *Innovation* and *Significance* criteria; for Krim fellowships, emphasis is placed on the *Investigator* criterion[1].
- A day prior to the review session, reviewers will be able to read other reviewers' scores and comments

[1] Refer to Section 4, Scoring System and Criteria

Please note: The use of generative AI is prohibited when reviewing grant applications and writing review comments.

2.2. Review session

- amfAR staff presents the reviewers' single scores and weighted average[2]
- The presenting reviewer opens the discussion by summarizing the application's general focus and highlights its strengths and weaknesses
- The application is discussed by the review committee at large. Reviewers may then adjust their criterion scores. Applications with an average weighted score above 5 may be triaged at this stage.

2.3. Post-review scoring and ranking

- Based on the discussion and revised evaluations, amfAR finalizes a single overall impact score for each application
- External reviewers may update their overall comments on amfAR's online portal. These overall final comments will be shared anonymously with the applicants, together with the application's overall impact score. Applications are then ranked by this score, and the top-ranked proposals are selected for funding upon final approval by amfAR's Board of Trustees.
- Applications that receive an overall impact score <2 but are not funded qualify for re-submission and review in the following cycle. Submission of a new Synopsis (for Target grants) or LOI (for Krim fellowships) won't be required.

3. Feedback to Applicants

- All applicants receive an evaluation summary, reporting individual scores for each criterion and general feedback from the reviewers
- No additional information on individual scores or review rationale will be provided beyond this summary

4. Scoring System and Criteria

4.1. Scoring scale:

- amfAR uses the NIH-style 1–9 scoring system for all grant mechanisms:

SCORING SYSTEM		
1 2	**Exceptional**	The application is outstanding and meets or exceeds all expectations for this criterion, with minimal to no weaknesses.
3 4	**Excellent**	The application is strong, with some minor weaknesses that slightly reduce its overall impact or feasibility.
5 6	**Good**	The application is solid but moderate weaknesses are present, reducing confidence in the proposed approach or impact.
7 8	**Satisfactory**	The application is adequate but has significant weaknesses that limit its likelihood of success or overall value.
9	**Does not meet the criterion**	The application fails to meet the minimum expectations for the criterion, with major flaws or deficiencies that require substantial revision.

Table 1: 9-point scoring scale used to evaluate all amfAR grant proposals.

[2] Refer to table showing weighted scores in Section 4, Scoring System and Criteria. In the online reviewer portal, the reviewers will only enter single scores and comments. A weighted average of the scores won't be immediately visualized but can be easily calculated using the weighting factors in Table 4 and Table 5.

4.2. Weighting of criteria

- Although reviewers provide a score for each individual criterion, not all criteria contribute equally to the final score. For certain mechanisms, amfAR places greater weight on selected criteria when computing the weighted average. This helps ensure alignment with amfAR's strategic priorities.
- Each criterion is assigned a weighting factor that reflects its relative importance for the specific grant mechanism
- The final score is calculated by computing the weighted average of the five individual scores

4.2.1. Target and Horizon grants

- Target and Horizon (formerly known as "ARCHE grant") grants applications are evaluated based on the following criteria: *Investigator, Significance, Innovation, Approach, and Environment*.

SCORING CRITERIA for Target and Horizon grants
Investigator
The applicant and their team demonstrate outstanding potential to conduct the proposed project. They have a proven track record of impactful research and the ability to execute the proposed experiments.
Significance
The proposed project addresses a pressing and clearly articulated gap in HIV/AIDS research, with the potential to create groundbreaking advancements. The outcomes may significantly influence future research directions and/or clinical practice or fostering long-term benefits for affected populations.
Innovation
The application introduces a highly original and transformative concept, methodology, or technology that challenges existing paradigms. The approach offers novel perspectives or solutions that hold substantial promise for accelerating research outcomes or improving patient care.
Approach
The research plan is meticulously designed, with clearly defined objectives, robust methodologies, and appropriate analyses that leave no aspect of the study to chance. Contingency plans address potential challenges, ensuring the study is resilient to unforeseen issues. Ethical considerations are fully addressed, with clear compliance with all relevant standards.
Environment
The scientific and institutional environment provides all necessary resources, facilities, and expertise to ensure the project's success.

Table 2: Scoring criteria applied to Target and Horizon grants.

- When assigning a score for the *Significance* and *Innovation* criteria, the reviewers are requested to evaluate the project's impact to the field, placing particular emphasis on:
    - *Significance*: Whether the proposed research addresses an important and unmet scientific or clinical need within the field of HIV and/or related biomedical disciplines; the extent to which the project, if successful, would contribute to advancing knowledge, guiding future research directions, or altering current paradigms.
    - *Innovation*: The degree to which the application challenges current concepts, approaches, or technologies; whether novel hypotheses, methodologies, or analytical frameworks are introduced; the potential for the project to open new avenues of research or offer original insights not currently addressed by existing studies.

Criterion	Assigned Score	Weighting Factor	Weighted Score
Investigator	2	1	2
Significance	2	2	4
Innovation	2	2	4
Approach	3	1	3
Environment	1	1	1
Average:	**2**		**2.8**

Table 3: Table illustrating weighting factors for each criterion. Example assigned scores are shown. Simple and weighted averages are highlighted in green and blue, respectively.

4.2.2. Mathilde Krim Fellowships in Biomedical Research applications

- Krim fellowships are evaluated based on the following criteria: *Investigator, Significance, Innovation, Approach, and Mentorship & Environment*.

SCORING CRITERIA for Krim fellowship applications
Investigator
The applicant demonstrates outstanding potential for an independent research career. They have 1) a proven track record of impactful research, 2) the ability to execute the proposed project, and 3) a well-defined trajectory toward independence, by proposing a line of research sufficiently distinct from the mentor's own research.
Significance
The proposed project addresses a pressing and clearly articulated gap in HIV/AIDS research, with the potential to create groundbreaking advancements. The outcomes may significantly influence future research directions and/or clinical practice or fostering long-term benefits for affected populations.
Innovation
The application introduces a highly original and transformative concept, methodology, or technology that challenges existing paradigms. The approach offers novel perspectives or solutions that hold substantial promise for accelerating research outcomes or improving patient care.
Approach
The research plan is meticulously designed, with clearly defined objectives, robust methodologies, and appropriate analyses that leave no aspect of the study to chance. Contingency plans address potential challenges, ensuring the study is resilient to unforeseen issues. Ethical considerations are fully addressed, with clear compliance with all relevant standards.
Mentorship & Environment
The mentor is a distinguished scientist with a strong track record of successful mentorship. The scientific and institutional environment provides all necessary resources, facilities, and expertise to ensure the project's success.

Table 4: Scoring criteria applied to Krim fellowships.

- When assigning a score for the *Investigator* criterion, the reviewers are requested to evaluate whether the applicant demonstrates not only 1) a proven track record of impactful research and 2) the ability to execute the proposed project, but also 3) a well-defined trajectory toward independence, specifically, by proposing a line of research that is at least partially distinct from their mentor's. This score should also reflect how the reviewer perceives the applicant's likelihood to secure an independent research position within 30 months from the beginning of the performance period (or 6-months from the end of the 2-year performance period).
- The goal of the Krim fellowships is to support postdoctoral researchers as they transition toward independent careers. While it's natural for postdocs to build upon their mentor's work, amfAR expects applicants to show how their proposal positions them to develop a distinct and independent research program over time.

Criterion	Assigned Score	Weighting Factor	Weighted Score
Investigator	2	2	4
Significance	2	1	2
Innovation	2	1	2
Approach	3	1	3
Mentorship & Environment	1	1	1
Average:	**2**		**2.4**

Table 5: Table illustrating weighting factors for each criterion. Example assigned scores are shown. Simple and weighted averages are highlighted in green and blue, respectively.

5. Conflict of Interest Policy

A Conflict of Interest (COI) exists when a reviewer (or their close family member) has a professional or financial interest that does, or could be construed to, bias their assessment of an application.

COIs include, but aren't limited to, the following situations, when a reviewer or a close family member (now or in the past year):

1. Collaborates with the applicant
2. Subcontracts or consults with the applicant
3. Works at the same institution[3] as the applicant

[3] Institutions that are part of a large system are considered separate if they are operationally and financially independent of each other. For example, UCSF and UCLA are considered separate institutions.