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Hanna Gray Fellowship Random Tips and Opinions

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Intro: Hey y'all. I get asked quite a bit about the Hanna Gray fellowship. I'm always happy to help, but I have found it's best to just write up everything I can think of (in no particular order) about applying for the fellowship. If you still have questions, feel free to ask! If you make it to the semi-finals, definitely reach out again.

Also, please note that much of the application process is changing! Requirements, formatting, eligibility, etc. Some of the things I saw below may no longer apply to your funding cycle.

I wish everyone the best of luck.

1. I **really** didn't think I had a chance. Purdue University (postdoc) and Rice University (PhD) don't jump off the page like the Ivy leagues. In addition, I'm with a new lab here at Purdue and was also with a new lab during my PhD. Both of my PI's are rising leaders, but definitely not established and widely known. However, here's what I did know: I published well during my PhD, had a few fellowships under my belt, and my postdoc project is totally badass. This gives me hope that the Hanna Gray review process doesn't solely just look at whether you're from an elite institution and well-known PI.
2. Unfortunately, I have no idea why I was chosen. As some of you already know, you don't get feedback on your application. All HHMI says is that you are selected or not. No reasoning.
3. There is also a semifinal round. They shortlist a few dozen people, and invite them to HHMI headquarters. You have ~12 min to give the best talk of your life followed by questions from a panel of reviewers. No feedback. No one-on-one interviews.
4. I say #2-3 just to emphasize that the fellowship is sort of a black box. Me and others can only guess at why some people were given the award and others were not
5. The application really isn't too bad. It's fairly short. I really think everyone should apply, especially if you are already writing up a research proposal for other awards
6. You **MUST** know which lab you will be joining for your postdoc. The PI submits some kind of letter saying that they are letting you join the lab.
7. You **DO NOT** need to have started your postdoc to win the award. During the semifinalist round, I was only 3 weeks into my postdoc. Several people had not started their postdocs and some were not even finished with their PhDs (there is a deadline by which you must have a PhD, though)
8. I **DO** think it's essential that the postdoc PI be heavily involved in edits and helping you refine the proposal (this was one of the major benefits of working with a new PI)
9. I think it needs to be clear (even from those completely outside your field) that your postdoc project has the potential to have a significant impact on the field. This isn't an NIH-style proposal, such as the K99. There's little to no prelim data required. One potential method is to think of a NIH-style project, then take it several steps further in terms of goals and ambition. I personally really tried to picture the future of my field and how my work will advance the field. How am I going to be a leader in the next decade? Where is the field going? Then I wrote a proposal that fit that vision
10. HHMI also says they invest in "people not projects." I tried really hard to make my personal statement stand out and not be generic. I tried to give them a picture of who I am as a person beyond just a scientist
11. They are investing in people they think have a high probability of becoming faculty...but no where do they make you write up a long-term research vision, etc. Your proposal is only for the postdoc phase, but I would try to work in tidbits of this vision throughout your application. How has your PhD work prepared you? How will your postdoc work stand out? How has each of these molded your long-term vision? Does your application sound like somebody who already has the capability to be a PI?
12. In my opinion, a well-communicated proposal is nearly as important as the research quality. I think HHMI heavily considers whether you are able to communicate science...I think they see this as a strong skill that all their HHMI investigators have. Clear writing. Clean, pretty figures. This is a consistent theme I see across the fellows.
13. Be sure your letter writers are aware of the competitiveness of HHMI and the standard that they require (many of my letter writers are engineers so they're not as familiar with HHMI)

14. The other fellows I've met are great people. I cold emailed a few while I was applying. They were all very responsive...definitely reach out to someone in your field if you think it might help!
15. BE YOURSELF. Put your full self in the application. Make the research stand out, but also make yourself stand out as well. How does your application form a journey that is memorable to the reviewers?