

Grants.gov and Electronic Submission: Lessons Learned

Why Grants.gov?

Federal grant-making agencies continue to look for opportunities to streamline grant processing systems. One significant change implemented in 2006 was Grants.gov, which handles applications for all 26 federal grant-making agencies. Since implementation, this single portal has constantly worked to improve its usability; however, there are some small “bugs” that continue to be worked out.

This article will focus on several specific areas of concern in the electronic submission of National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposals which have come up repeatedly. After working through several submission cycles, we are able to outline common lessons learned about Grants.gov. In addition to this, a list of helpful websites for reference is at the end of this article.

Multiple Systems Involved

Since grants.gov is the portal for all federal agencies, each agency can and does have a system of their own once the proposal is successfully submitted through Grants.gov.

- NIH still uses its eRA Commons system in connection with proposal submissions. The PI submits the proposal through Grants.gov. If there are no errors, the proposal is then retrieved by Commons and goes through a validation process that is specific to the NIH.
- Faculty members need to understand that their proposals have not actually been submitted to NIH until they shows up in the Commons system. This can take a few business days.
- The PI is required to have an eRA Commons account username and password, and the PI credential information on the Senior/Key Person Profile component must match the Commons user profile.
- Electronic submissions through grants.gov currently require a specific application called PureEdge. In May of 2007, Grants.gov will begin a transition to an Adobe-based format.

Time-Intensive Learning Curve

Learning about the Grants.gov submission process as well as becoming familiar with the SF 424 (R&R) forms does take some time and patience.

Without question, administrators need to convince their faculty members to start the process as early as possible. Becoming familiar with the system and new forms does require a substantial amount of time up-front. A faculty member who waits until the week of the deadline will likely become frustrated and not successfully submit his or her proposal for that particular review cycle.

The instructions for the SF424 (R&R forms) and Grants.gov include more than 200 pages. Although everyone involved in the process should have a copy (or at least have the link to the instructions saved in their “favorites” folder) for reference while working on a submission, it is unrealistic to expect faculty members to sit down and read them cover-to-cover. Administrators must stress the importance of attending informational and training sessions provided by the university. In the off-chance that the university does not offer training sessions, contacting colleagues at nearby institutions which do have training would be a helpful beginning point. Many universities post training materials on their websites and the grants.gov site itself has many tools available for training. This chapter includes a short list of helpful websites where training and information can be found.

Proposal Rejection Due to Errors

With paper submissions, a PI might have small errors in the format of the proposal, but the proposal could still be submitted. This is not the case with Grants.gov. Something as minor as using “et al” in citations will hold up, if not outright reject, submission of a proposal. In this case, the PI must fix the error and resubmit. Since the system stops checking the proposal at the point of the first error, there may be a second error caught once the PI resubmits. This can happen numerous times, obviously increasing the length of time it will take to have the proposal submitted successfully. Faculty members need to be aware of this and need to understand that it is unwise to submit proposals to the sponsored programs office on the deadline day. The goal should be to get the proposal routed several days before the deadline, so that there is sufficient time to fix any errors.

It is also worth noting that error messages are not consistent, although this is being addressed by the Grants.gov personnel. For example, it is possible to have one application that contains a summary of less than 30 lines receive an error message. Another proposal, also with less than 30 lines of text for the summary, could get just a warning (proposals with warnings will still be submitted successfully, unlike those with errors). A third proposal, this one with more than 30 lines of text in the summary, could be accepted without any warning or error at all. Faculty members should know that these types of inconsistencies exist, and that the best thing to do in such a situation is to contact the Grants.gov Help Desk at support@grants.gov or (800) 518-4726.

PIs need to be aware that information which is required by Grants.gov will be indicated by yellow highlighting. However, non-mandatory fields for Grants.gov may be required by NIH. Overlooking such fields will eventually cause errors in submission.

The following are some commonly overlooked requirements:

- All attachments must be in PDF form.
- The science, or research plan, portion still has a page-limit even though the sections are now uploaded separately. The key is to first draft the science as one document to be sure the page limit has not been exceeded and then to separate the sections.
- Resubmissions require a Federal Identifier, which is the previous submission’s grant number. The format to use is “CA123456” without any identifier such as “1R21” before it.
- Subsequent budget periods do not contain auto-filled information for names and dollar amounts.
- If the Funding Opportunity Announcement has been updated since the PI began working on the proposal, he or she will need to download the new application kit and fill in the information again.

Final Thoughts

Faculty members who pay attention to the above points will find that they can significantly cut down the number of errors and the length of time involved in submitting their proposals through Grants.gov. Grants.gov should be considered a work-in-process and is being updated routinely. Becoming familiar with the system (the good and the bad), as well as staying up-to-date on changes, will go a long way in reducing stress, frustration, and anxiety for everyone involved in proposal submissions.

Online Resources

- [Grants.gov/](https://www.grants.gov/)
- era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt (home page)
- era.nih.gov/electronicreceipt/training.htm (page contains all of the training tools a faculty member needs to learn the new submission process, from creating an eRA Commons account to finding a Funding Opportunity Announcement, filling out an application, and finally to submitting the proposal)
- era.nih.gov/electronicreceipt/faq.htm (frequently asked questions for all areas of the process)

Authors

Angela L. Steltzer, JD, Senior Research Administrator
Ansley Lemons, Research Project Coordinator
Department of Medicine
Emory University School of Medicine