DEPARTMENT OF CONTRACTS & GRANTS

YOUR PARTNER IN RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

NewsFlash!

Below is a wonderful reminder about the importance of reviewing a proposal for compliance with the Funding Opportunity. Our new systems, including Cayuse, are a great resource at identifying some errors and warnings, but a review by a trained Research Administrator is even more important. Please take advantage of DCG's Enhanced Proposal Review for assuring a thorough review of your proposal prior to submission. For proposals received three business days in advance of the sponsor's deadline, the Enhanced Review will include:

- Comparing the proposal to the sponsors' guidelines
- Reviewing font type and size
- Reviewing margins
- Reviewing page limits for sections and proposal
- Reviewing completeness for inclusion of all required sections
- Conducting a non-technical review of proposal for grammatical and spelling errors
- Verifying budget calculations, rates and cost-sharing
- Verifying institutional information (e.g., DUNS, contact information, etc.)
- Checking and clearing errors generated by Grants.gov and/or Sponsor's proposal submission system
- Verifying KC proposal
- Verifying regulatory reviews (e.g., human/animal subjects, conflict of interest)

A thorough review by a trained Research Administrator will ensure submission of complete and accurate proposals that have the best chance possible of success in the sponsor review process.

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Eyeballs Catch Stuff Systems Don't

People have eyeballs. Systems typically don't have eyeballs. People interpret situations and circumstances to make decisions. Systems take actions based on clearly defined rules. Why is this important? When checking application compliance against documented business rules, some checks can be easily automated and others are best left to actual people with eyeballs and cognition.

We talk a lot about showstopper errors identified by eRA systems that can prevent your application from moving on to our division of receipt and referral for NIH processing. We don't often talk about the manual checks done by our staff once your application gets to them.

Here is some of the stuff our staff look for…

- Does the topic of the application fit NIH's mission?

- Is the applicant eligible to apply?
  For example, if applying to the AREA (R15) program do the applicant organization and PI meet the eligibility requirements specific to that program?

- Does the application include all critical sections?
  Our systems can tell if you attached a pdf document in a certain spot in the application, but can't assess the content of that attachment. We've received all sorts of "unintended" attachments over the years from our own application guide instructions to a great recipe for cranberry margaritas (true story). To be fair, the recipe makes excellent margaritas (I'll be making them again this holiday season), but it was a poor substitute for a research strategy.

- Does the application include information in inappropriate places to get around page limits?
  We refer to the use of appendices and other non-page limited application sections to augment information in page limited sections as "overstuffing" your application (NOT-OD-11-080, NOT-OD-07-018). Your specific aims, research strategy, abstract, biosketches and other application attachments have page limits for a reason – to provide a fair and level playing field to convey information. We take that "fairness" thing pretty seriously around here.

- Was the application submitted on-time?
  Unlike many agencies, NIH does not shut down the ability to submit to a funding opportunity announcement at 5:01 pm on a due date. We keep the submission door open and assess the circumstances of "late" submissions on a case-by-case basis. Staff check your cover letter submitted with your application for documented circumstances allowed under our late policy. They check to see if the application falls under our continuous submission policy. They also check to see if you ran into any system issues along the way and appropriately notified the eRA service desk to document them.

- Do you already have an application with essentially the same content under review?
  Even under our latest submission rules which allow you to submit the same application again, you can't have overlapping applications under review at the same time (NOT-OD-14-074).

- Does your application adhere to FOA-specific instructions in Section IV – Application and Submission Information?
  Instructions in this section are often not systematically enforced, since they are exceptions from our general guidance. So, don't rely on system checks to catch page limits and missing attachments documented in this section.

- If reference letters apply, were the correct number of reference letters received by the due date?

- Did you follow font and margin guidelines documented in the application guide when preparing all your attachments?

- If requesting over $500K in direct costs in any budget period, did you have institute permission to submit?

- If human embryonic stem cells are indicated, were all restrictions for their use met?

Although you may not have seen this particular list of checks before, I doubt there are a lot of surprises. The real takeaway here is that system checks are great (*begin shameless plug – The Validate Application feature in ASSIST is awesome! – end shameless plug),* but they are not the whole story when it comes to assessing whether an application meets all the conditions to be accepted for review and funding consideration.

When submitting your application, don't just think about getting through our systems. Stop to think how your application will hold up to the scrutiny of someone with eyeballs.