

NIH eRA eSubmission Items of Interest - August 16, 2010

When I received the second email from a user asking if they'd somehow been removed from our listserv, I knew it was time I checked in with you again. The eRA listservs are alive and well. In fact, you should have been receiving system alerts and updates from our communications team throughout the summer. It has, however, been a while since I've sent Items of Interest. You might want to grab some coffee this is a long one.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words...

... so an annotated picture must be even better! If you're a visual learner like myself, then you'll probably appreciate the new Annotated SF424 Application Forms available on the eSubmission Web site. The resource provides form and field tips aimed at helping applicants avoid common errors identified by eRA systems.

The SF424 (R&R) Application Guide, in combination with the text of the announcement to which you are applying, will always be the definitive source for electronic submission of grant application information at NIH, but sometimes it's just nice to have a quick and concise visual aid and this serves that purpose quite well. It is especially handy when used to do a final check of your application prior to submission. (Keep reading...)

Window Shut! Now What?

Correcting eRA-identified errors and warnings after the deadline will no longer be an option as of January 25, 2011 (see NOT-OD-10-123). With the debate behind us, let's look ahead at how to best deal with the decision.

First, let's talk about what hasn't changed.

- The "application viewing window" remains open! NIH will continue to provide applicants two business days following the receipt of an error-free application to view their assembled application image (just as a reviewer will see it) and verify it correctly reflects their submission prior to it moving forward to NIH staff for funding consideration. Many folks who provided feedback about the potential elimination of the error correction window mistakenly thought we were discontinuing the application viewing window so, this is an important point.
- Signing Officials can Reject an application image within the application viewing window and submit a Changed/Corrected application as long as it is still BEFORE the deadline and within the institution's policies. The application viewing window, however, is not a substitute for the error correction window which allowed applicants to correct eRA errors/warnings after the deadline. Changed/Corrected applications submitted AFTER the deadline to address system identified errors/warnings will no longer be accepted.
- We will continue to invoke contingency plans, as needed, to address large-scale system failures (e.g., Grants.gov or eRA Commons experiences significant downtime on a deadline date).

- We will continue to work with individual applicants that experience smaller-scale eRA verified system failures beyond their control on a case-by-case basis (of course, you need to do your part - see <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/ElectronicReceipt/support.htm#guidelines>), but if we've coded our system improperly or can't appropriately process a valid application, then we will work with you to get your application in. Don't forget, once the system issue is resolved, a prompt submission is expected. When there is a system issue verified by the eRA Help Desk, Changed/Corrected applications may be submitted after the due date and will be processed by the Division of Receipt and Referral (DRR) staff. The eRA Help Desk carefully tracks such applications and provides DRR with a list.
- We will continue to make allowances for severe weather or other disasters that result in the closure of institutions.
- We will continue to stress the importance of submitting early to allow time for unforeseen errors and warnings.

Now, about that last point...

We looked at a sample of ~45,000 applications received from January through the end of April to see which errors folks hit most frequently. There really weren't many surprises. OK, I was a bit surprised that the error that catches budget end dates that occur before budget start dates fired over 700 times and would love to hear from you if you have any insight into why that is happening. But, overall, the most frequent errors fell into a few familiar themes. Going through the final checks below will go a long way towards submitting error-free applications.

Checks Before Hitting Submit

1. Does the DUNS number on the SF424 (R&R) cover form match the DUNS used for Grants.gov & Commons registration?
2. Did you provide correct Type of Submission (box #1), Federal Identifier (box #4), and Type of Application (box #8) information on the SF424 (R&R) cover form? These three fields all work together be sure to follow the application guide instructions carefully.
3. Did you include the eRA Commons ID in the Credential field of the R&R Sr/Key Person Profile form for all PD/PIs? Including the eRA Commons ID for the PD/PIs is an NIH requirement and is critical to our ability to post errors, warnings and the assembled application image in eRA Commons. The credential field is not marked required on the federal-wide form since not all agencies that use the form need this field. NIH uses the Health and Human Services logo within the application guide to flag agency-specific instructions and clarifications for fields on federal-wide forms. Pay special attention to the HHS "birdie" or you may miss key NIH requirements.

4. If submitting a Multiple-PD/PI application, did you give all PIs the PD/PI role on the Sr/Key Person Profile form?

There are several roles on the form drop-down that are similar PD/PI, Co-PD/PI and Co-Investigator. Only the PD/PI role is recognized by NIH as the correct designation for all PIs on a multiple-PD/PI application. Using the correct designation allows the system to flag the application as multiple-PD/PI and facilitates appropriate handling of the application as it flows through review and other post-submission activities. Co-PD/PI or Co-Investigator roles hold no special meaning within NIH and should never be used with a multiple-PD/PI application. They are, however, valid roles on the form and you can use them for a single-PD/PI application. You may receive a Warning indicating the role is not appropriate for Multiple-PD/PI applications, but if Multiple-PD/PI was not your intent, then no action is necessary simply ignore the Warning.

5. Did you include Organization name for all Sr/Key listed on the R&R Sr/Key Person Profile form?

The Organization name for each Sr/Key is one element used to determine potential conflicts for review. For this reason, we require applicants to provide Organization information for ALL Sr/key entries. Again, this field is not marked required on the federal-wide forms. The Organization for the Contact PD/PI is pulled from the SF424 (R&R) cover, but you're on your own for the other Sr/Key entries and will want to double-check to ensure Organization is included.

6. Did you include all required attachments?

Often attachments are conditionally required based on how an applicant fills out specific questions. Here are a couple of examples:

7. Answering 'Yes' to the Human Subjects question on the R&R Other Project Information form makes the attachments in the Human Subjects section of the PHS 398 Research Plan required. Similarly, if you answer 'Yes' to the Vertebrate Animals question, then the Vertebrate Animals attachment is required.

8. If you have more than one entry on the R&R Sr/Key Person Profile form with the role of "PD/PI," then the Multiple PD/PI Leadership Plan attachment on the PHS 398 Research Plan form is required.

9. Are all your attachments in PDF format?

Grants.gov will allow other document formats, but PDF is an NIH requirement. Use simple PDF-formatted files for ALL attachments. See PDF Guidelines.

10. Did you follow the page limits specified in the FOA and application guide?

11. Did you include effort > 0 for all Sr/Key listed on the R&R Budget form?

It is not necessary to list every person from the R&R Sr/Key Person Profile form in the Sr/Key section of the R&R budget form. For the entries you do list, however, you must provide measurable effort using the Calendar Months OR a combination of Academic

and Summer Month categories. Too little effort information (i.e., blanks or zeros in all three month categories) or too much information (i.e., providing non-zero values in Calendar Months and any other month category) will result in an error.

12. Did you follow all special instructions noted in Section IV. Application and Submission Information of the announcement?

The eRA validations will catch many, but not all, submission requirements. FOA-specific requirements are not typically system-enforced. Applications that do not comply with the instructions may be delayed or not accepted for review.

Even if you diligently go through the checks above, **PLEASE SUBMIT EARLY!** NIH is tightening the rules regarding post-submission materials (see NOT-OD-10-115), and it is more important than ever to make sure your application is correct at time of submission. eSubmission validations actually help you to submit an application that complies with instructions and catch missing information needed for review. Submitting early provides the opportunity to make necessary application adjustments and submit a Changed/Corrected application for the same deadline. The alternative would be to submit an application for a deadline, find out after the fact that you were not in compliance with the requirements and have to submit again for the next deadline (if there is one).

The NIH eSubmission Team is also doing its part to prepare for the elimination of the error correction window, including:

- Changing the validation text of many messages to make them more user friendly and to be more specific in the actions needed to address warnings/errors.
- Updating the application guide instructions with additional information to help avoid warnings/errors.
- Looking for opportunities to downgrade errors to warnings if missing information is not critical for processing or review. For example, we currently give an error when the Contact Email address on the SF424 (R&R) cover is not included on the application (another case of a federal-wide form field that is required by NIH, but not marked required.) We will be downgrading this Error to a Warning by the end of November. We still encourage you to provide this information (we use it as the contact for follow-up after submission and grants management specialists use this address for exchanges prior to award). If it is not provided, we will substitute the Authorized Organization Representative (AOR) email and let you know we have done so with a Warning. Yippee!
- Streamlining announcements to more easily identify requirements that differ from the general application instructions. Remember, when FOA instructions and the application guide instructions differ, the FOA instructions should be followed.

It will take a little while for us all to adjust to electronic submission of grant applications without the “error correction window” safety net. I personally look forward to being able to answer the question “When is the submission deadline?” without a lengthy discussion

of caveats, exceptions and scenarios ... “It is 5 p.m. local time of the submitting institution on the deadline date listed in the FOA next question, please.”

Rejecting Submissions

You’ve submitted your error-free application days before the deadline and, after carefully checking your assembled application image in eRA Commons, you find something you would like to correct. Let’s explore some of the most common questions about “Rejecting” applications...

1. Does NIH have a policy against Rejecting applications prior to a deadline?

No. Although NIH does not have a policy against corrective submissions before the deadline, some institutions, especially those that submit many applications for a single deadline, may have their own rules in this area in order to meet the deadline for all applications.

2. Who has the authority to Reject an application?

Any of the submitting institution’s Signing Officials (SOs) can access the application and Reject it within the application viewing window. Principal Investigators will get a notification when the action has taken place.

3. What happens if I accidentally Reject the wrong application?

Once an application is Rejected, the action cannot be reversed. If prior to the deadline, the application that was Rejected by mistake can be submitted again as a Changed/Corrected application. NIH does not consider having an application Rejected by mistake sufficient cause to allow a late submission for that applicant.

4. Should I Reject my application before submitting a Changed/Corrected application?

The short answer is YES. It is always safer to only have one application “in play” at a time. Although the system will often simply overwrite your previous submission, there are circumstances when it will not. Ever wonder how the eRA system knows how to link up multiple submission attempts for the same application? We use the organization, PD/PI’s eRA Commons Username, and the project title from your application to link submissions within the same review cycle. If you change any of those values (e.g., project title) and submit a Changed/Corrected application without first Rejecting the previous application image, then you are left with two (basically duplicate) applications that will move forward to NIH staff once their application viewing windows elapse. It is simpler to Reject an application up front, then to officially withdraw a duplicate application later.

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