

Grants.gov – A Primer for Boston College Principal Investigators

Last year, OSP wrote an article for the inaugural edition of its newsletter, [OSPNews](#), in which we described the Federal government's move to e-commerce for grant related activities. The transition of grant applications from paper-based proposals to electronic submission through a single federal portal, "[Grants.gov](#)," is underway.

Grants.gov will be the single point of receipt for all grant applications to the 26 Federal grant making agencies and will replace agency specific proposal submission systems, most notably the NSF Fastlane system. Boston College will submit applications electronically through the Grants.gov portal, and these applications will be forwarded to respective Federal agencies. Over the past several months, BC has processed an increasing number of its proposals via Grants.gov.

The Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has instructed all of the grants-making agencies to post 75% of their grant applications to Grants.gov by the end of 2007. A major milestone will come February 5, 2007 when the National Institutes of Health (NIH) will require all applications for single investigator grants (R01) to be submitted electronically to Grants.gov. In the near future, **all** grant applications to federal agencies will be submitted to Grants.gov and paper proposals will no longer be accepted by the Federal government.

In preparation for the February 5th deadline, OSP has compiled the following **frequently asked questions** and **tips for successful submission** to Grants.gov. Our goal is to ensure that all proposals are submitted successfully with a minimum of problems. However, we will need everyone's cooperation as we move into the world of electronic research administration.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do I need to register with Grants.gov?

Individual users **do not** have to register with Grants.gov. OSP has completed the institutional registration process necessary to properly transmit proposals to Grants.gov. Some Federal agencies, including NIH, NSF, and NASA require parallel registration by both the institution and the PI on their agency specific site. If you are planning to apply to any of these agencies and have not registered in their systems, please contact the OSP representative working with you on your proposal.

What software will I need to complete my application?

To access and complete Grants.gov applications, you will have to download **PureEdge Viewer**. This program *does not currently interface with Macintosh, Linux, or Unix operating systems*. If you do not have access to a PC, there are several less-than-ideal solutions to choose from:

- Use PC-emulation software:
 - Grants.gov and NIH have partnered to make a [Citrix server](#) available to their constituents
 - You may also choose to use your own PC-emulation software to download the PureEdge Viewer.
- Download IBM's Mac-compatible alternative to PureEdge, the [Workplace Forms Viewer](#). Sadly, the current release is only a primitive version and has significant limitations.

- Rely on your department: As the proposal narrative and other integral proposal documents such as the abstract and biosketches can be converted to PDF on any machine, send these files to your departmental administrator. He or she can assist you with downloading the PureEdge forms, uploading the attachments and completing the PureEdge data fields from a compatible platform.

Though PDF attachments are not always required by the varying agencies, OSP suggests that all attachments be created or scanned into this format to reduce the risk of transmission corruption. Boston College has a license for **Adobe Acrobat**, a PDF creation software program. Talk to your TC about installing this software on your computer if you don't already have it. In order to view attachments to PureEdge applications, **Internet Explorer** must be set as your default browser.

Please note: Grants.gov is transitioning from the PureEdge Viewer to an Adobe product. It is expected that by fall of 2007, Grants.gov applications will be platform independent.

How do I submit my application?

Only Authorized Organizational Representatives (AORs) in the Office for Sponsored Programs can submit proposals on behalf of the institution to Grants.gov. Route your **final and complete** proposal to the OSP representative working with you on your proposal. Though email is frequently successful, larger applications should be routed to OSP on a CD or memory stick to ensure their timely arrival.

Proposal submission is now an iterative process of submission > error correction > resubmission, and the time needed to review and submit electronic proposals is longer than with paper proposals. In order to ensure that proposals are submitted and validated with no errors by the deadline, **OSP encourages PIs to submit the complete proposal to our office five days prior to the deadline.** While it has been BC's longstanding policy to require proposals three days in advance of the deadline, we had greater flexibility with paper based proposals and have allowed PIs to submit proposals to OSP, frequently on the day before the deadline. While we understand the need to give PIs as much time as possible to prepare their proposals, our recent experiences have made it clear that the risk of missing a deadline is too great when proposals are submitted last minute.

It can take two to three days to correct errors and resubmit an application successfully. Grants.gov is a very unforgiving system: data errors (such as incorrect DUNS number), network and system overloads, and other technical problems can result in applications being rejected. Agency imposed rigorous validation rules are causing a high incidence of errors in proposal submissions. Agencies which have been willing to accept paper applications with minor errors will no longer have this flexibility with proposals submitted electronically.

Where do I go for help?

- For programmatic concerns, contact the **NIH Program Officer** identified in the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).
- For general questions about the Grants.gov process or application submission and with problems related to preparing the proposal, contact the **OSP representative** working with you on your proposal for advice first. We will be happy to liaise with the necessary Federal offices to pursue issues which cannot be resolved locally.
- The **eRA Commons Help Desk** is available for issues relating to application validation and post submission functionality.
- The **Grants.gov Contact Center** can assist us with technical difficulties, including PureEdge software and form navigation problems.
- For clarification of NIH funding opportunity and application guidelines **NIH's Grants Info** is available during normal business hours.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SUBMISSION TO NIH:

Start early! The new process requires close coordination between investigators and grants administrators. Notify OSP and your departmental administrator of your intent to apply and share with them the funding opportunity number. When downloading the application, you can choose to receive e-mail notices of any updates made to the funding opportunity.

Read instructions carefully! No two Funding Opportunity Announcements are identical, and each application is specific to that FOA. General opportunities, called “Parent Announcements” have been posted to capture unsolicited, investigator-initiated applications.

Include your Commons PI User ID in the “Credential, e.g. agency login” field on the Senior/Key Person Profile(s) component. Omitting this field is one of the most common errors made by applicants. The field is not marked as required on the application form, but is required by NIH as indicated in the application instructions in the [SF424 \(R&R\) Application Guide](#).

Do not submit both modular and detailed budgets. Some applications will list both the modular and detailed budget components as “optional.” This is to allow the appropriate component to be chosen. Choose one or the other, not both.

The DUNS number provided for the applicant organization (Boston College) must match the DUNS on file with NIH and Grants.gov. Boston College’s [institutional profile](#), available on OSP’s website, lists BC’s DUNS, EIN, Human Subjects Assurance number and much of the other data you will need in completing your proposal. Check your eRA Commons profile to make sure you are affiliated with Boston College.

Use only whole numbers on the budget pages. Round calculations DOWN to the nearest dollar and check your math. Use current [fringe benefit and F&A rates](#) when calculating your budget. Budget totals on the cover page must match the totals calculated in the budget pages.

Only a **single user** can work on a Grants.gov application at one time, unlike in other systems, such as NSF’s Fastlane. Be careful to use the most current version of your application file when making changes and corrections.

Double-check your attachments.

- NIH accepts attachments only in PDF or PureEdge format – *do not* submit attachments in other formats such as Microsoft Word, Word Perfect, etc.
- Disable all security features in the PDF documents – these may prevent NIH from opening or processing the document.
- Use scanned documents only when electronic conversion to PDF is impossible. Check that scanned documents are legible, and when possible, apply the proper Optical Character Recognition (OCR) process.
- Do not include header or footer information in the attachments; these will be system-generated in the assembled application.
- Be sure that as a single document, your research plan will not exceed the page limits provided in the guidelines for the program. When validations for page limits are applied, NIH makes allowances for the white space generated by separating the text for creating and uploading attachments.

Assure that the FINAL application submitted to OSP (at least **five days in advance of the deadline** for an error-free, on-time submission to NIH) includes a completed [Proposal Transmittal Form](#) and [Conflict of Interest Disclosure](#). Print and route your proposal narrative, budget, and budget justification with the Transmittal Form for easier review and approval by your chair and Dean.

CAREFULLY review the application image on NIH eRA Commons! This is your only opportunity to view the proposal as the reviewers will receive it. The two day window in which you can reject the application includes all weekdays, even holidays.

Fix errors to complete the submission process. If your application had errors and did not make it through Grants.gov or eRA Commons validations, you must correct the error(s) and submit a changed/corrected application to Grants.gov before your application can proceed further.

- On the first page of the SF424 (R&R) application form, check the Changed/Corrected application box in the Type of Submission field. Once that box is checked, box 4, the Federal Identifier, becomes a required field. If you are submitting a new application enter "NA" in this field. For a continuation, revision, or renewal application, enter the assigned proposal or award number (e.g., CA123456).
- If the submission deadline has passed, include a cover letter with an explanation of why the application is late. The cover letter must be in PDF format and must be attached to the PHS Cover Letter file, located in the 'Optional Documents' section of the grant application.

We intend to keep the BC research community informed of any evolutions to the Grants.gov system or process. If you have any questions or concerns about the requirements of Grants.gov proposal submissions, please contact Anna Dore (anna.dore@bc.edu) at 2-8259 or Susan Hoban (susan.hoban@bc.edu) at 2-3061. We look forward to working with you on your next proposal.