

After you  
click "Submit"...

# Interrogating Aspects of the Grants.gov Agency Process



By Roger Wood

## Federal Landscape

Federal regulations require all agencies to post their funding opportunities in Grants.gov and encourage adoption of Grants.gov for application submission where practical. Agency-specific systems such as FastLane or NSPIRES can provide quality results for the owning agency and may be user-friendly for regular users. However, developing and maintaining expertise across an increasing array of such systems, each with its own distinct credentials, approaches, and nuances, is unsustainable for organizations and research administrators with complex portfolios.

While the development of Grants.gov has not been without its problems, on the whole it is a significant and positive step consistent with the goals of President Obama's 2011 Executive Order 13571 – Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service – and toward reducing administrative burden, which is the key principle underlying the Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP).

## FDP – A Forum for Discussion

The process of electronic submission through Grants.gov engenders new questions for research administrators. Some key questions were presented to a panel of experts representing various federal agencies at the January 2014 FDP meeting in Washington, DC. Among the topics discussed were

**Summary** This article is based on a panel discussion at the Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP) January, 2014 meeting. The focus of the panel was to understand Grants.gov and agency processing of proposals submitted through Grants.gov using either Adobe forms or system-to-system (S2S). The panel conclusion included the following:

After processing by Grants .gov, S2S and Adobe forms applications are indistinguishable to agency personnel.

After transfer into FastLane or NSPIRES, applications via Grants.gov are indistinguishable from applications submitted directly to those portals.

Agencies other than NIH, NSF and NASA generally do not have the resources to provide post-submission document review capability for applicants.

Less grant-intensive agencies can establish cross-agency relationships to capitalize on important features available from agencies such as NIH or NSF.

Proposal development, review and submission are integral aspects of pre-award research administration. As research administrators, we are aware of, and have varying degrees of understanding of, the agency review processes leading to an award, and are intimately involved in post-award administration activities. Over the past decade, the US Federal Government has been building and enhancing its capacity for electronic proposal submission. FastLane and NSPIRES represent early agency-specific approaches by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) respectively; Grants.gov was created to consolidate the find and apply functions across all federal agencies.

outcome differences when using Adobe forms *vs.* system-to-system submission technologies; how agencies interact with Grants.gov; how Grants.gov submissions interact with existing agency systems; and the relationship between the content that is submitted and the product made available to agency reviewers.

## Adobe Forms & System-to-System Submission Technologies

Proposals for some or all opportunities from most agencies can be submitted electronically through Grants.gov using their provided *Adobe forms packages*. Agency representatives construct proposal packages reflecting general agency requirements and the unique needs of particular opportunities by combining various OMB-approved forms. Each forms package includes a cover page from the SF424 family as well as other standard or agency-specific forms available in the Grants.gov

electronic forms library. Many agencies have additional forms that must be retrieved from their websites, completed, and submitted as attachments to the Grants.gov package. Generally, though not always, attachments are required to be submitted as PDF documents.

Many institutions have implemented solutions allowing them to submit Grants.gov proposals using *system-to-system* (S2S) technology instead

# NCURA PATHWAYS

## Volunteer Pathways

NCURA has identified three distinct volunteer pathways for its members to get involved – presenter, leadership and volunteer at the regional and/or national level. “Pathways” is intended to inspire and inform members on how to engage NCURA as a volunteer in any or all of these opportunities. To get involved visit <http://collaborate.ncura.edu/VolunteerOpportunities>



### Cathy Snyder's Journey

As a member of NCURA since 1997, I have been fortunate to participate in many different capacities resulting in increased

knowledge and friendships. I was totally overwhelmed at my first annual meeting due to the sheer size and expertise surrounding me. And to top it off, my future boss, Jerry Fife, was in the band, “Soul Source and the No Cost Extensions”, that played on Tuesday night. While they were awesome, I wasn’t quite sure what to think of this shirtless singer that wore a leather vest and tattoos! It was quite different from my very conservative world and all I could think was, “He’s going to be my boss?” But it wasn’t long before I realized what a great boss, mentor, and supporter he is (and his tattoos were fake!). He continuously encouraged me and provided me with opportunities within NCURA. As other relationships developed, my participation in NCURA grew. The benefits I receive from participating far outweigh the contributions. You can do it, too! Find a mentor! Get involved! Let’s support research....together!

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Jerry Fife belts out his best China Grove!

of using Grants.gov’s provided Adobe forms packages. While the details of each S2S system approach vary, ultimately, they mimic the functionality of the Adobe forms packages but in ways that provide enhanced features, are more user-friendly, and eliminate the need for redundant data entry of proposal information into institutional research management systems. S2S system solutions must adhere to and support the same Grants.gov and agency requirements applicable to Adobe forms submissions.

## Agency Retrieval of Submissions from Grants.gov

Agencies retrieve submissions from Grants.gov electronically. They can retrieve an XML data file and/or a set of PDF pages comprising all the forms in their opportunity package as well as any attachments that were included with each submission. From Grants.gov forward, there is essentially no difference between applications created and submitted using Adobe forms *vs.* those managed using S2S systems. Agency staff and reviewers generally are unable to distinguish how the application was submitted to Grants.gov, according to Ed Calimag (Grants.gov) and various agency representatives.

Where agencies have direct submission portals, such as FastLane or NSPIRES, once an application package is retrieved from Grants.gov, it is inserted into the agency system and becomes indistinguishable, to staff and reviewers, from applications submitted directly via the agency website, according to Erin Nielson (NSF) and Paul Brundage (NASA).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) systematically retrieves the XML data file and electronically migrates form data directly into the NIH Commons and back-end databases. NIH builds its own PDF pages and automatically generates the grant image file that is available for review through the NIH Commons by investigators, administrators and ultimately, NIH staff and scientific reviewers. NSF has a similar process.

Most other agencies combine the PDF pages provided by Grants.gov with attachments to build a final proposal package that is used internally for review. Most agencies do not have systems in place that allow investigators or administrators to review the final product that will be provided to agency staff and peer reviewers.

## Opportunity for Continued Improvement

For agencies where research is an important, but not primary, agency function, this is a problem without a ready solution. Agency representatives, such as Bronnda Harrison of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), recognize the problem and understand the institutional prerogative to confirm that the review package accurately reflects their intended submission, however budgetary limitations preclude EPA and many other agencies from building systems to address that need.

Consolidation of services across agencies may be able to provide enhanced outcomes for these agencies and their applicants in the future. The USDA/National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) program is in the early stages of exploring a possible consolidation of services with NIH that would result in NIFA applications being processed and available to researchers and institutions through the Commons, according to Jason Hitchcock (NIFA). ■



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