

News from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS)¹

LEARNING THE SYSTEM: CHANGES PENDING IN PEER REVIEW AND AROUND THE NIH

Occasionally this column highlights resources that exist within the NIH world wide web site (<http://www.nih.gov/>). The NIH web site is so large that it is often difficult to know where to seek information that you do not access routinely. For example, did you know that at the URL <http://www.csr.nih.gov/review/peerrev.htm> you can find a straightforward description of what happens to your research grant application after it is received at the NIH? This site has links to appropriate sources of more detailed information, and is an excellent "tour of the system" for first-time (and even experienced) applicants. Another useful URL is <http://www.csr.nih.gov/events.htm>, where you can find listings of current news, events, meetings, panels, and new staff hired at the Center for Scientific Review (CSR).

One particularly useful URL is for the newsletter that appears each review cycle, Peer Review Notes, found at <http://www.csr.nih.gov/prnotes/prnotes.htm>. It was designed originally to inform NIH consultants and staff, but it is also a valuable source of information for anyone on new developments related to NIH grant application review policies and procedures. The issue for February, 1999 has updates regarding the substantial progress of two subcommittees of the CSR Advisory Committee: the Panel on Scientific Boundaries for Review, and the Working Group on Review of Bioengineering and Technology and Instrumentation Development Research. This issue of Peer Review Notes also deals with the first phase of integration of the reviews of behavioral and social sciences applications. Additionally, it informs the reader of two Special Emphasis Panels (SEPs) that have recently been formed to review clinically-oriented grant applications, the Clinical Cardiovascular Sciences SEP and the Clinical Oncology SEP. It has information on the electronic research administration system. It discusses the review process as conducted within CSR and contrasts that process to reviews conducted at the various NIH institutes. Finally, it has statistics on peer review at the NIH.

In the past year, back issues of Peer Review Notes have dealt with the Director's priorities identified upon joining the CSR. There were six priority areas, identified through outreach to the extramural research community: (1) study section organization and distribution of scientific areas for review; (2) reviewer quality and study section composition; (3) perception that segments of the community are specifically disadvantaged; (4) speed and consistency of the receipt, referral and review process; (5) responsiveness to NIH funding Institutes and Centers; and (6) enhanced function of SRAs. Progress made in each of these areas is described. Other topics have included changes in policies for support of new investigators, and new career awards in clinical research. It is well worth watching

the Peer Review Notes and checking the site once each round, or every three to four months.

There is one new policy that is worth highlighting in detail here, since it will affect a large proportion of potential applicants. That is the implementation of "Modular Research Grants" at the NIH. Following is a summary of the new guidelines and instructions taken, appropriately enough, from the February 1999 issue of Peer Review Notes. There is an embedded link to the original announcement in the NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts:

"NIH officially announced implementation of modular research grants in the December 18 issue of the *NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts*. The main feature of this concept is that grant applications will request direct costs in \$25,000 modules, without budgetary detail for individual categories. A single dollar figure for total direct costs is to be given for each year of the project as well as for the entire project, with no routine escalation for future years. In addition to these budgetary changes, information on Other Support should not be submitted with the application, but only if requested after initial review and if an award is likely. Biosketches should be expanded to include past and current related research activities of key personnel, and a narrative justification should be provided for personnel, any consortium or subcontract arrangements, and any changes in the number of modules from year to year. Further details about modular research grants, including sample Biosketches and Budgets, can be obtained from the Modular Grants Web site at <http://www.nih.gov/grants/funding/modular/modular.htm>.

"Modular grant application procedures will apply to all unsolicited and solicited competing individual research project grants (R01), small grants (R03), Academic Research Enhancement Awards (R15), exploratory/development grants (R21), Small Business Technology Transfer Phase I grants (R41), and Small Business Innovation Research Phase I grants (R43) that request direct costs up to \$250,000 per year. Projects requesting more than \$250,000 in any one year will be subject to the traditional application procedures, although solicited applications (i.e., RFAs) above \$250,000 may be modular at the discretion of the Institute issuing the RFA. The modular procedures will be effective beginning with the April 1999 receipt dates for small business applications, with the May 25, 1999 receipt date for Academic Research Enhancement Awards, and with the June 1, 1999 receipt date for individual research project grant, small grant, and exploratory/developmental grant applications.

Regarding implications of modular procedures for reviewers, it is anticipated that the absence of budget detail will enable reviewers to focus on the science aspects of the proposal. Narrative justifications will continue to provide information regarding the roles and percent efforts of the key personnel, and regarding any variations in the number of modules per year. Based on their knowledge and experience regarding the estimated cost for the Specific Aims proposed, reviewers should be able to confirm the appropriateness of

¹ Future topics for this column: how to publicize your science, and your suggestions.

the number of modules requested, or to recommend a change in the number of modules.

NIH welcomes comments on the experiences and concerns of investigators, reviewers, applicant organizations and staff. Comments on modular grant procedures may be addressed to modulargrants@nih.gov.”

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³ The URL for the NIGMS web site is: <http://www.nih.gov/nigms/>