THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF IMMUNOLOGISTS

September 22, 2015

Response of the American Association of Immunologists (AAI) to the NIH Request for Information: Strategies for Simplifying NIH's Grant Application Instructions

(http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-15-134.html)

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1. The specific information most important to you in the current NIH application guides, missing information that would be helpful and information that could be eliminated.

The American Association of Immunologists (AAI), the largest professional association of immunologists in the world, representing more than 7,700 basic and clinical immunologists, appreciates this opportunity to submit comments to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) "Request for Information (RFI): Strategies for Simplifying NIH's Grant Application Instructions." Clear and concise communication during the grant application process is important to enhancing the applicant's chance for success and to reducing burden on both applicants and administrators. AAI therefore recommends the following modifications to the current application instructions.

For principal investigators (PIs), who compose the Research Plan portion of grant applications, the most important pieces of information are page number limits, due dates, and types of proposals that would exclude the application from consideration. Applicants would greatly benefit from the simplification of grant instructions and the inclusion of a brief checklist of all information and/or forms that must be incorporated in the grant application. Because most institutions employ administrators to navigate the submission of the application once the proposal has been written, many of the 253 pages of the general SF424 Application Guide are not applicable to the PIs. Therefore, it would be helpful if the document's voluminous information were broken down into separate sections targeted at 1) the PIs, and 2) the administrators.

2. Your current access to application instructions including sources used and how they are located (e.g. Grants.gov, NIH Grants website, FAQs, NIH Application Guide, help desk, web searches, and others).

No response.

3. The most useful and most challenging aspects of the current application instructions.

The most challenging aspects of the current application instructions are the amount and clarity of information. Because the instructions apply to all Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs), it is often difficult to determine whether there are additions or exceptions for a particular FOA.

4. Insights and suggestions on how the information in the NIH application instructions could be presented more effectively, including future updates to the instructions.

It would be very useful to have an "at-a-glance" instruction set that provides a brief overview/timeline of the application process and a checklist of needed application materials.

In addition, when filling out information for the application, investigators would find it useful if there were mouse-over definitions of terms with which they may be unfamiliar. This feature would provide the needed information without imposing the burden of searching through the instructions for definitions.

NIH should also consider including in the application instructions a section of useful information. This summary would instruct investigators on matters that should be completed prior to submitting the application (e.g. communicating with the PI's program officer), and would include an overview of the grants process. Importantly, NIH should include more details regarding the designation of a secondary institution (dual assignment) and the need to consult with each institute's program officer.

5. Feedback on what sections are the most important to use in printed copy, as well as suggestions on how to customize a print function for application instructions (i.e. one full version, individual sections, etc.). This can include ideas for either a PDF or web version.

PIs should have the option of selecting and printing only sections that are pertinent to their immediate needs.

6. Feedback on proposed approaches to presenting NIH application instructions (described in background) and other ideas that NIH should consider.

The proposed "application wizard" that allows customization of the instructions would be useful and would help clarify the application process. This "wizard" function would ideally allow the user to print only selected information as well. An interactive HTML version of the application guide would be unlikely to improve significantly upon the current guide as there would still be an excess of information available without a direct way to find the desired information.