

COMMENT AND PERSPECTIVE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE DEAN, UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

May 20, 2014

The NIH recently announced a major change to the resubmission policy to allow unfunded proposals to be submitted as new A0 proposals. This change has the potential to significantly impact our grant submissions. Here, Melanie Cushion, PhD, senior associate dean for research, and Chris Lindsell, PhD, associate dean for clinical research, describe strategies to ensure your resubmissions are best placed for success and to limit unintended adverse consequences of the policy change.



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The New NIH A0 Submission Policy: What it means and recommendations for strategies going forward

Old policy

Only a single resubmission of a proposal was permitted. If the resubmission application was not funded, the application had to be substantially different in content and scope in order to be eligible for submission as a new application. This policy was implemented to reduce the backlog of incrementally improving applications that were gumming up the works. The policy was successful in that the number of grants awarded on first submission rose from about 27 percent in 2007 to almost 50 percent in 2011. In addition, the average time from submission to award was reduced to 56 weeks from a high of 93 weeks.

Why change?

All change can result in unintended consequences, and in this case the concerns are that finding substantially different (i.e., new) research directions can be quite difficult for early investigators, and that established investigators need to redirect the research focus of otherwise highly productive labs in order to submit future NIH applications. The ultimate outcome is decreased efficiency and productivity of our nation's biomedical research infrastructure.

What changed

The new policy still allows only a single resubmission of a proposal. But, ideas that were unsuccessful as a resubmission (A1) may now be submitted as a new grant application (A0) without having to substantially redesign the content and scope of the project. The A0 application will not require an Introduction to show how the application was changed in response to previous reviews. Reviewers will be instructed to review it as a new proposal even if they have seen it in prior cycles.

Likely immediate impact for submitters and reviewers

As with any change in NIH processes, it usually takes several review cycles for the system to reach a steady state. In the next few rounds, we expect the following:

- Increased volume of grants as investigators jump to recycle material.
- Decreased pay lines since there will be higher volume, and at least some proportion of the recycled material was initially not funded for a reason.
- Slow-down in processing times internally and externally.
- Increased burden on reviewers to review the bolus of submissions taking advantage of the change in policy.

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The Issue

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Positioning your application for success

There are several steps that you can take to maximize the success of applications that were previously unfunded that you would like to recycle:

- Make sure you address all of the reviewer's concerns. Although the revisions don't need to be described in an introduction, unless the concerns are addressed they will remain concerns in the new application.
- Make sure to add new data and publications showing continued productivity in the line of research.
- Make use of the CoM Study Section to get advice on integrating reviewer's comments into a new A0.
- It has probably been at least two years since the original approach was outlined; make sure that it remains the most appropriate direction given the evolution of your field.
- Don't resubmit proposals that were not favorably scored. In particular, proposals that were unscored twice are unlikely to be successful without a major redirection or significantly new and supportive preliminary findings.

Don't forget that your application is one of many that will be submitted under this new policy. This means that our grants management team will be working extra hard to process the increased volume. Make sure you keep your support team informed of your plans to submit, and stick to CoM timelines for submission. Good luck!

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*Based in part on discussions by Sally Rockey, Deputy Director for NIH Extramural Research, serving as the principal scientific leader and advisor to the NIH Director on the NIH extramural research program—
See more at: <http://nexus.od.nih.gov/all/2012/11/28/the-a2-resubmission-policy-continues-a-closer-look-at-recent-data/>.*

Dr. Cushion was recently appointed as the Chair of the NIH AIDS-Associated Opportunistic Infections and Cancer Study Section (AOIC) and will be able to report back to faculty on the submission process as it progresses.

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