

¶2530.17 **Enforcing Your Internal Grant Proposal Deadlines: What Works and What Doesn't**

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We all know sponsor deadlines govern research administration, but what about your own internal deadlines before proposals are submitted to those sponsors? Has your institution given up trying? We'll review some pros and cons of strictly enforcing internal guidelines and explore ways to encourage or require PI timeliness and compliance. We'll review how electronic research administration software may be able to help improve the situation. The goal is to learn new techniques to empower the Office of Sponsored Projects to enforce its own internal proposal review deadlines and increase compliance.

First, some background: in my prior life in research administration, I worked at two academic institutions with strict proposal review policies. As much as I loathed those deadlines at times, like when running several blocks uphill in San Francisco carrying paper forms for ink signatures, I saw their purpose. Universities vary widely, though, so I wanted to get the opinion of folks in the field.

I chatted with two Cayuse customers to see how they handle internal proposal review deadlines. These are front-line proposal specialists who work under tight sponsor deadlines and varying degrees of proposal volume. Here's what they had to say:

Case 1: Strong policy enforcement: review time creates higher quality.

At one large public university, their written policy is enforced and largely followed: a finalized, "submit-ready" proposal is due to the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) three business days before the sponsor deadline.

Last-minute proposals had been a real problem in the past, so now OSP actively educates their campus and principal investigators (PIs) via a newsletter and trainings to remind them of this deadline policy, especially before busy grant submission seasons. Newer faculty, researchers and postdocs need to be well-informed of the OSP proposal process and available resources. They have the support of department heads, who want to know if any PIs are late so they can follow up if necessary.

The strong policy enforcement is also due to a cultural change on campus: proposal funding rates are lower, so the shift is to higher quality, not quantity. The three-business-day policy allows OSP to do a proper review of proposals, thereby reducing errors and increasing the quality.

Case 2: Low policy enforcement: added stress yet surprising benefits.

At a medium-sized public university, internal proposal deadlines led to a lot of pushback from PIs. Now their OSP accepts proposals right up to the wire. The proposal specialist I chatted with mentioned some benefits to this approach:

- ◆ He didn't like saying no to PIs who missed an internal deadline
- ◆ Sometimes PIs find out about funding opportunities at the last minute, and he likes to be a facilitator when that happens

- ◆ PIs aren't afraid to approach OSP anymore, which builds a better relationship between them

That said, this "anything goes" approach has its drawbacks:

- ◆ The proposal specialist's job is stressful, and the work is hard
- ◆ There is often a "day-of" surprise factor
- ◆ This OSP is often only able to review the most necessary parts of the proposal, like the budget and campus policies

This OSP will still stop a proposal if they catch something like unapproved cost sharing in the budget.

The goal is research, not rules.

Regardless of how strictly internal proposal deadlines were enforced, each specialist that I talked to cited their OSP's desire to uphold one of their institution's core missions: to do research. This is why, in some cases, OSP was willing to bend their own rules in certain circumstances to allow for late-breaking proposals to be submitted. All agreed that their Cayuse electronic research administration systems were way more efficient than running across campus for paper and ink signatures!

Following the above two examples, I continued to discuss this topic with other customers, to learn and hopefully empower others to embrace internal deadlines anew (or to try them again). This led to a Group Discussion at the NCURA Annual Meeting in August of 2020, co-presented with my customer David Smelser, Assistant Director, Sponsored Programs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. No one solution works for everyone, but we hoped to generate discussion on things that do/have worked for others. The tips which follow below are based on what we discussed in that session.

Internal deadlines are an important way to reduce compliance risk.

Internal proposal deadlines allow your staff time to do proper review and produce higher quality proposals which also increases the chance of catching potential future risks such as cost-sharing, biohazardous materials, etc. Without proper internal deadlines, the OSP is often only able to review the most necessary parts of the proposal like the budget and campus policies. Last-minute proposals also strain OSP resources and divert attention away from those PI's whose proposals were filed on time, compounding the potential risk to both PI's and to your institution.

First off, do you have a policy in writing?

So you know some of the key reasons for implementing an internal proposal deadline--now what? Double-check: do you already have one in some obscure, overlooked place? If not, write a new one! Make it something that's enforceable. Try to tactfully elicit the support of department heads, who will want to know if any PIs are late so they can follow up if necessary. Example of a very simple policy:

Five (5) business days before the sponsor deadline, the proposal budget and any internal approvals (Chair/Dean) must be submitted to the central OSP for review.

Electronic Research Administration (eRA) system tips to improve compliance.

For starters, clearly state your policy on your OSP website and in your eRA system on the appropriate start/landing page(s). Use your eRA system's in-app messaging options (if applicable) to alert your campus users of special closures, holiday hours, deadlines, etc. View the Draft or Unsubmitted status "bucket" in your eRA system to preview what PI's are working on; sort by deadline dates, and take a proactive step to reach out if possible if the sponsor deadline is within 1-2 weeks.

Use the data reports from your eRA system to stay ahead of potential deadline violators. Run reports on the proposals that are in your eRA system to evaluate where they are in the routing/approval process. Focus on proposals that are waiting for PI certification or departmental approval (e.g., Chair, Dean). Contact those people with an email or phone reminder until/unless they approve. Automate this outreach process, if possible. At the University of Tennessee Knoxville, this has been very helpful to keep things moving, reducing department proposal approval turnaround from 4 days to 2.

In your eRA system, daily in the morning: view proposals in the software status known as "Dept Routing in Process" or similar and assign Proposal Specialists, which then allows them to be alerted when the proposal arrives at OSP, saving time. Your eRA system should be set to allow the OSP (or PI) to upload final non-budget attachments (e.g., the research plan or "science") to the proposal record after routing/approval. This way the PI's are not holding onto their proposals unnecessarily instead of routing them for internal approvals.

Review your proposal data after submission to evaluate those departments who had slower turnaround time and talk to their Deans or Assoc Deans about those who are lagging behind. Consider sharing a report out to the Deans on the overall approval metrics. Reporting on approval process metrics will also highlight champions who are in compliance and timely.

Add your policy to your email signature (example below is David's) with a link to the policy:

**** Please be advised of OSP's five (5) business day deadline for proposal submissions. Proposals that do not meet this deadline may be submitted to the sponsor with limited to no review. In such cases, the PI will be responsible for actions taken by the sponsor for non-compliance. Also, there may be delays in accepting awards and establishing accounts resulting from these proposals. ****

We all have seemingly shorter attention spans these days and may be tuning out excessive email text, but adding your policy to your emails should get it noticed, immediately and/or over time.

Education and Outreach

It's important to train young researchers so they develop good habits early! Newer faculty, researchers and postdocs need to be well-informed of the OSP proposal process and available resources. Actively educate your campus and PIs via newsletters to remind them of your deadline policy, especially before busy grant submit-

sion seasons. Host quarterly or semi-annual welcome sessions for new researchers, faculty, postdocs, etc., to let them know who you are and what your review process is. Note: NIH K-series Early Career grant proposals contain many reference letters which often take weeks to get from faculty advisors, mentors, Chairs, etc. Advise these applicants that they will need extra time in the process and should notify OSP at least a month in advance of the sponsor deadline.

How to communicate in this year of COVID pandemic and remote working?

In our NCURA session, we talked quite a bit about the added challenges we're all facing this year in the COVID pandemic. Most researchers, faculty, and campus OSP staff are all working at home, remotely, changing how everyone interacts, and when. For OSP office staff, set your personal office hours and posting them on your website, in your eRA system, and in your emails. Consider making yourself available via cell phone text messages (note office hours above!) to keep in contact with PI's who are actively submitting proposals to remind them of pending approvals, deadlines, next steps, etc.

To replace the impromptu hall chats and office visits now that you're remote working, try hosting a weekly "drop-in" hour online on Friday mornings and afternoons via Zoom, Microsoft Team, etc. Promote your drop-in hour in your newsletter and campus social media. Posting updates to your Academic Senate listserv is a good way to get faculty's attention about special hours, events, upcoming proposal opportunities, etc.

Bottom line: use your electronic research administration systems and regular campus PI outreach to boost internal deadline compliance, improve proposal quality and reduce risk.

About the Author

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