

Colleagues:

I'm writing to call your attention to nationwide concern about the ability of grants.gov, the federal IT portal through which we are required to submit all proposals to a variety of sponsor agencies, to handle the load over the next few months. I'm attaching a recent article from the Washington Post underscoring that many different institutions are encountering very serious problems. I've also heard from colleagues at other UC campuses that they have had recent examples of missed proposal submission deadlines due to failures of grants.gov. As the portal is run by one federal agency on behalf of many others, the sponsor is not necessarily sympathetic to a missed deadline.

We are particularly concerned because the portal is expected to be exceptionally busy over the next few months due to federal stimulus funding opportunities. There are several such submission deadlines for NIH, for example, in the next few weeks and months, for programs where I know UCSC faculty intend to propose.

Of course we will do everything we can to facilitate timely submission of proposals to the sponsor agency, but obviously the performance of grants.gov is completely beyond our control. Please be advised that at least for the next few months, we simply cannot guarantee successful submission of proposals that reach OSP in a fully complete, ready to submit form less than "three" working days prior to the sponsor agency submission deadline.

Washington Post, March 11, 2009

Stimulus Applications Could Overwhelm Grants.gov

By Sarah Cohen

The first federal casualty of the stimulus bill was identified by the Office of Management and Budget this week when OMB director Peter Orszag told agency heads to plan for a possible meltdown of the government's main grantmaking portal.

A review of its capacity revealed a "significant risk of failure," Orszag warned. A memo sent to agencies said that Grants.gov, a site where nonprofits and local governments can search federal programs and apply for more than 1,000 competitive grants from 22 agencies, is already straining under the weight of recent growth. With an expected 60 percent increase in volume because of last month's \$787 billion stimulus bill, the system could just break, Orszag said.

Programs getting large boosts in grant spending under the bill include broadband Internet access, medical research and education construction. The risk was identified as part of OMB's review of major systems needed to get the stimulus money out quickly.

The expected major surge in applications will likely take a while to emerge, as agencies begin writing their instructions to applicants and settle on conditions and priorities for the grants. So far, only grant monies sent to state and local governments using formulas have been allocated.

But already the system is slowing down, frustrating would-be grantees trying to meet application deadlines and instead getting error messages. "Grants.gov continues to experience system slowness due to the high volume of users," the site's program management office told readers of the Grants.gov blog Tuesday.

"Think we all need to go to our congressmen and senators and do more than 'shake some trees,'" wrote one anonymous commenter in response. "The system can not support the activity. It's as basic as that.... Not until we all scream and shout will we get action. If I am told one more time to 'call the help desk,' I think I'll go crazy!"

In preparation for the surge, the Department of Health and Human Services, which runs the portal, recently added more storage space for the system and is working on other modernization efforts, Orszag said in a written statement. But Orszag nonetheless ordered all of the agencies to make alternative plans in case Grants.gov can't handle the load by next week.