## E-Submissions Go From ”Not Good” To ”No Problem” for Vonda Smith

## By Bill Grigg

Vonda Smith Outside CSR's Offices

“My first reaction was, ‘This is not going to be good,’” Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) Vonda Smith recalled, a wry grin spreading across her face. “I wasn’t disappointed . . .”

Dr. Smith was one of 50 or so SRAs at NIH’s Center for Scientific Review to face an electronic baptism-by-fire when small business applicants were required, beginning Dec. 1, 2005, to submit grant application forms electronically using a new government-wide format. Other types of grants applications are being phased in now. The most numerous type of application, the R01, is scheduled to be electronic-only beginning Feb. 1, 2007.

**“I might have gone screaming from the building** if I had gotten my normal workload—anywhere from 60 to 115 applications, with 75 being the average,” Dr. Smith said, exaggerating a bit. Luckily, her study section got only 45 in that round.

Why the initial bumps in the road? “The Principal Investigators weren’t used to the process, the format had changed, additional information was required and each proposal now had to be in answer to a program announcement, which was new. No wonder the software at Grants.gov found lots of errors and informed applicants of everything from missing pages to absent signatures,” Dr. Smith said.

She herself found additional errors and missing information when the applications came to her: “Here I was mailing applications out to reviewers and, at the same time, I had to go back to applicants for information. There is no way to get the additional information into the original submission, so the additions and changes had to be e-mailed to reviewers or posted to IAR (internet assisted review). In that case, of course, the reviewers would have to be informed of where to find the additional information.” (NIH is trying to find a way to make it easier to integrate the late materials.)

Dr. Smith said reviewers complained to her, “‘I couldn’t find such-and-such in the new layout,’ or ‘It took me forever,’ or ‘Why did you change this?’ I expected the complaints because we SRAs had the same ones! Principal Investigators had gripes as well. And they seemed to want to document each and every one—in hopes of remedies. (NIH accepts such feedback at NIHElectronicSubmiss@mail.nih.gov and uses it to develop improvements.)

**“Almost miraculously,” by the second round, the problems disappeared,** Dr. Smith said, and, “best of all, the anger and complaints evaporated, for the most part,” Dr. Smith says, adding that people were getting used to, or perhaps reconciled to, the changes. “For the second round, in March, there were no late applications in my study section,” Dr. Smith found, “and I got 76 or so, about back to normal. “For the third round . . . they eliminated one back-and-forth approval

step between NIH, the PI, and the institutional official" she continued. "And things continued well. I got 80 or more applications. It was no problem."

In her new job as administrator of the chartered Enabling Bioanalytical and Biophysical Technologies Study Section, Dr. Smith will face other types of electronic submissions as they are phased in.

**Key Web Links for E-Submissions**

NIH's Electronic Submission Web site

Communications Presentations Including a Walk Through the SF424 Form

**She's optimistic that the process will continue to smooth out quickly.** "My biggest remaining concern is whether there is going to be enough bandwidth for all the volume that will result when all the submissions are electronic," Dr. Smith says. "They need to keep adding servers, servers, servers so that when the R01s come pouring in, the system doesn't crash."

The federal-wide Grants.gov, which handles applications from NIH whose volume is about equal to all other federal agencies combined, has indeed added servers since the December submissions. NIH has initiated training and outreach activities for thousands of institutional administrators, scientists and staff. We are also working on staggering deadlines for different types of grant applications, says Megan Columbus, NIH Program Manager for Electronic Submission of Grant Applications.

Megan is stressing to first-time users of Electronic Submission that they need to take the time to register early, get familiar with the process, download the latest application form and instructions, and review the assembled application before it is sent in. Dr. Smith agrees: "A lot of problems disappear when we all get prepared early and read the forms carefully." To applicants, she also advises, "Once you're finished, take the time to go over it all, proof it thoroughly and make sure all the necessary attachments are in fact attached."

## Expected Benefits

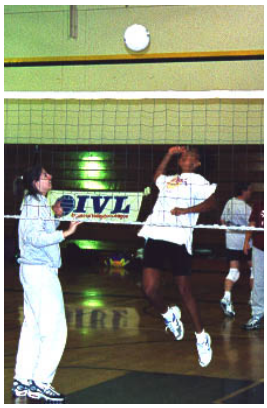
It isn't all bad, she reminds all who will listen, to have a standard, government-wide system that's pretty much the same for scientists no matter what agency they're applying to. Among the other potential benefits of electronic submission, Dr. Smith sees—

"Saving the time now taken to physically scan paper copies to create an electronic version . . . Cutting the cost of shredding and disposing of applications . . . Freeing space that has been used to store the paper applications . . . Providing a more uniform structure and layout of applications that may make them easier to critique . . .

"Perhaps this more uniform structure and layout will also make it easier for SRAs to do the administrative review—the jury is still out on that.

"For applicants, in the short run the process may be more tedious until the new form becomes more familiar but they will know in a shorter amount of time that their applications have been

accepted and assigned. Also, an applicant can log into his or her Commons account to check on the progress of their application more readily."




## Experience and Energy to Meet the Job

Dr. Smith hails from Mississippi, where she did her undergraduate work. She earned her Ph.D. in analytical chemistry at Emory University, in Atlanta, studying the molecular structure of cyclodextrins using spectral analysis. At Hewlett Packard in Palo Alto and its spin-off Agilent Technologies there, she performed spectral, chromatographic and electrophoretic analyses of biomolecules.

Young and athletic, she enjoyed California with its opportunities to play beach volleyball and softball, and to ski. "You're close to ocean, desert, mountains, the wine country, and the corporate structures in Silicon Valley are oriented toward a work/life balance and many companies sponsor teams," Dr. Smith says, "but it's an expensive place to live, I was feeling under-utilized at Agilent, and they were down-sizing."

Coming to CSR in the Washington metropolitan area, Vonda soon found its benefits and the pleasures of a diverse metropolitan area "where you have politics to keep you entertained." She soon joined co-ed flag football and softball teams here. Rounding out her activities, she's become a certified personal trainer, and works at it part-time. And she performs Middle Eastern dancing with a professional dance troupe—an activity that is very good for the abs.

Vonda Smith with Her Dance Troupe

At CSR, she said, her excitement has come from being a party to the shaping of diverse areas of medical science.

She went to a conference session on "New Frontiers" recently and found, she said, that "this doesn't seem so new!" She reflected that it was actually new to many scientists attending, but that she had already been privileged to spot the trends in her study section at CSR.