

NIH & NSF *Funding Advisor*

The monthly guide to preparing and submitting optimal grant applications

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NIH & NSF Funding Advisor

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4 Tips for Composing a Better Application Cover Letter

Although not always required, NIH “strongly” recommends that you submit a cover letter with your grant application. And keep in mind that the agency likely will use it to help assign your proposal to the right study section.

To shorten the time between submission and review, NIH indicates that the information contained in cover letters adds to the overall efficiency of the assignment process.

“The big picture, is that a letter helps the people who are assigning your application get it to the right place at the right time,” says **Ann Clark, PhD**, director of NIH’s Center for Scientific Review (CSR) Division of Receipt and Referral (DRR).

“Individuals in DRR have the responsibility of reading and acting on the information provided in cover letters,” says **Megan Columbus**, program manager of NIH’s Electronic Receipt of Grant Applications and Agency Integration.

Here are some tips on what information you should include and how to add it.

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Study Section Insider

Research Collaboration: Opportunity or Peril?

by Christopher Francklyn, PhD

Like any project involving two or more people, collaborations are rich in potential benefits, but bring with them a set of attendant risks.

The most important advantage is that an effective partnership is simply the best way to bring multiple scientific approaches and perspectives to bear on a complex problem. When fully executed, a multi-pronged approach will increase the likelihood that:

1. reviewers will be more excited about the project, and
2. that the resulting discoveries will have a higher impact than those with a single approach.

With a strong and effective collaborator, you have access to another scientific mind to help you shape experiments, interpret data and validate/challenge your most provocative ideas. With more people and

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1. Requests

Use your letter to communicate requests to DRR and the Scientific Review Officer (SRO), who will set up your proposal's review. You can list one or more institutes or centers that you would like to consider your project, says Clark. "And, similarly, you can list one or more review groups that you would like to have your application reviewed by."

For example, a proposed project will focus on developing a new treatment for acute renal failure. In the cover letter, the PI should request the Pathobiology of Kidney Disease Study Section to review his proposal.

To determine which study section should review your application:

- Research CSR's Integrated Review Groups (IRGs) at <http://cms.csr.nih.gov/peerreviewmeetings/csringdescriptionnew/>. There is a list of 25 IRGs, along with descriptions of each, and links to study sections and rosters within the individual IRGs.
- Check which proposals NIH has funded through RePORTER at <http://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm>. "Not only can you see which institute those applications were assigned to, but if you drill down in those search results, you'll also be able to find which review groups they were assigned to," says Columbus.

DRR recommends that you follow a format when making requests in your cover letter, including the following:

- one request per line
- name of the institute(s) on a separate line, a dash and the acronym
- scientific review group(s) on a separate line, a dash and the acronym
- one or two sentences to explain each request.

Although the suggestions are helpful, Clark cautions you should not assume your proposal will go where you want. "There may be specific things about the application type you submit or the funding opportunity announcement that you use that preclude it from going where you request," she adds.

2. Identify your application

You should use your cover letter to tie important information to your grant proposal, such as:

- your name and institution
- application title
- funding opportunity you are applying for.

Here's why: Occasionally, an application gets loaded with the wrong or incomplete information, and noting in your letter what you intended to include is an excellent double-check, says Clark.

- Address it to DRR or to the Referral Officer.
- Review the guidelines for Completing PHS398 Components, Section 5.2 of SF424 (R&R) Application Guide for NIH and Other PHS Agencies (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/424/SF424_RR_Guide_General_Adobe_VerB.pdf), which outlines other information to include, as well as proper formatting:
 - Project title
 - Funding opportunity (PA or RFA) title of the NIH initiative
 - Request of an assignment to a particular awarding component or Scientific Review Group (SRG)
 - List of individuals (such as competitors) who should not review your proposal and why
 - Disciplines involved if multidisciplinary
 - For late applications, include specific information regarding the timing and nature that caused the delay

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- For changed/corrected proposals submitted after the submission date, explain the reason for the change/correction
- Explanation of any subaward budget components that are not active for all periods of the proposed grant
- Statement that you have attached any required agency approval documentation for the application type submitted, such as for those requesting \$500,000 or more.

3. Communicate conflict of interest

You should also include information regarding a conflict of interest, or a potential conflict. Armed with that insight from the beginning, the SRO will be able to take steps to avoid that circumstance.

For example, you request a specific study section to review your proposal. But the roster indicates that a direct competitor, a former mentor or a former student is a member of that study section. To request the exclusion of a reviewer:

- List the individual.
- Provide a brief description of why the person should not review your project.

4. Convey reasons for a late application

If you will submit your proposal *after* the posted due date, you must include a cover letter with an explanation. “If it’s a situation where you believe that the policy would allow you to be late because of your service on a review committee or there’s been some extraordinary circumstances, those things should be described,” says Clark.

For example, a member of a PI’s immediate family was rushed to the hospital suffering from an acute illness. This caused a delay in the timely submission of the PI’s application. In the letter:

- Describe the timing of the event that caused the delay.
- Indicate the nature of the event.
- No other documentation is expected.

Less is better when detailing the event. “A very brief description is usually sufficient. If more information is required, it can be asked for. But basically, just a reasonable description of the situation is required,” says Clark.

“The cover letter is viewed by DRR staff who will assign your grant application, and also the SRO who will set up your proposal’s review. But other NIH staff do not have access to it, and neither do the reviewers,” Clark says. ■

Research Collaboration continued from p. 34

a broader technical arsenal, you will be able to try multiple approaches simultaneously, and thereby increase the tempo of discovery. For an early stage investigator, collaborating with a more established lab — potentially at a more prestigious institution — could increase your odds of completing the proposed aims, thereby laying the groundwork for a successful renewal. Lastly, a stimulating partnership is an outstanding opportunity to expand your knowledge base and grow as a scholar.

Naturally, there are no guarantees that this joint undertaking will be successful because collaborations can also involve pitfalls, traps and potential risks. The most important: by working with another PI, you will

have to surrender at least some control over the project’s scientific direction. PIs tend to view themselves as the captains of the vessels that are individual labs, with ultimate responsibility for their program’s direction, success and/or failure.

In a full collaboration where each PI has a hand on the wheel, the questions of direction, purpose, and allocation of emphasis and resources loom large. In addition to being confident of your own personal goals, strengths and weaknesses, you must also be able to make similarly clear judgments about your partner(s). Do you know what is inside or outside their “comfort zone”?

Partnerships also have to be balanced regarding the degree of the participants’ motivation. If the project represents a major effort for one party, but a tertiary interest for the other, than the first may become disappointed if the pace of work falls short of expectations.

Alternatively, one PI can be relatively inexperienced, with the second being well established and/or possessing a significant reputation. In this situation, there may be a very unequal power relationship, leaving the junior

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scientist open to potential exploitation by the more senior member. Under the worse case, this could lead to perceptions by outsiders that the junior investigator is in a subservient/support role rather than as the program's driver and initiator. This can have disastrous consequences for the junior scientist's funding, promotion and tenure.

Effective communication increases the likelihood of success

The best way to increase your chances of a productive interaction is by communicating effectively with your collaborator(s) and addressing beforehand any likely major issues in scientific partnerships. Sometimes generating a "memorandum of understanding (MOU)" that describes how you will collectively address these concerns is helpful. Such a document can be excellent planning, especially if you will submit a multiple-PI grant application where the Leadership Plan is a required component. This key section details the roles and responsibilities for the different PIs, and how disputes will be resolved.

In any collaboration, regardless of the nature of the science or technology involved, there are always some inherent issues you should consider:

Scope: Is there general agreement about the nature of the scientific problem you are trying to solve, and the types of approaches that are most suited to it? Have you clearly indicated which labs will have responsibility for which areas? Do you have a mechanism for handling disagreements about direction?

Final Authority, PI responsibility and authorship: In grant applications, deciding whether there will be one PI with additional collaborators or two co-principal investigators is essential. Under the former, the singular PI has the last word, and in the latter, your leadership plan will discuss how you will resolve disputes. For publications, addressing issues like corresponding author and sequence well in advance of writing the paper is similarly useful, so that there are no misunderstandings later on.

Resources and personnel: A significant counterpart to your joint scientific strategy is your funding strategy. Clearly, no science is possible without money, and you will need to think through whether one or multiple grants will support the project. Should all the grants have the same lead PI, or can you divide up the responsibilities? Will all of the supply and equipment money rest in one account or several? Should each

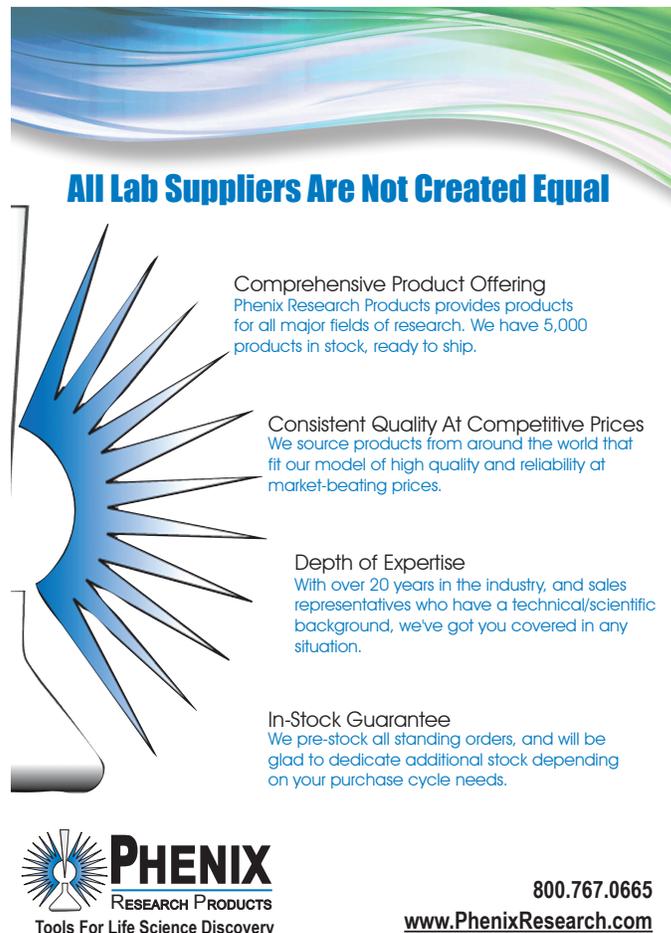
post-doc, grad student and staff member be the sole responsibility of a single PI, or should some be jointly supervised? If you and your collaborator are in different departments there may be indirect cost return considerations. NIH allows PIs a lot of discretion in how you address these issues.

Intellectual property: If your work is truly novel, there are some aspects that your institution will want to protect with potential downstream income and revenue. You will need to plan how you will allocate these.

Scientific communication: In today's email driven world, there is the tendency to equate "around the corner" with "around the world." Collaborations between scientists who are in the same institution have a very different flavor than those between scientists located halfway around the world.

Those where face-to-face contact is frequent and spontaneous can be somewhat easier to manage than those with colleagues in other countries. When collaborators are close by, they operate under a common institutional context, and there is less chance of an inadvertent email message that sends an inappropriate message. When working with scientists from other countries, you have to be sensitive to subtle cultural nuances. For both types of collaborations,

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clearly planning how often you will interact through joint lab meetings, phone teleconferences or visits is always helpful.

New grant mechanisms encourage multi-PI applications

NIH's Office of Extramural Research has a new webpage (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/multi_PI/) that clearly outlines the agency's policies toward multi-investigator applications. It includes a link to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) concerning multi-PI applications, which indicate the following:

1. These projects are meant to supplement, but not replace, traditional single investigator helmed projects.
2. NIH expects all involved PIs to contribute a similar degree of expertise and involvement, with all being accountable to ensure that the research

is conducted responsibly. The agency discourages the use of "figurehead" PIs.

3. Multi-PI applications can be submitted for many of the traditional investigator initiated mechanisms (such as RO1, R21, R15, etc.), but not for Training/Career Development awards or Pioneer Awards, which are investigator specific.

Currently, multiple-PI applications work best when both are at the same institution. When the PIs are at different institutions, one program has to operate as a subcontract, which is actually disadvantageous to the PIs.

NIH is clearly looking for ways of leveraging the investigator-initiated research enterprise to tackle complex, multi-faceted problems that require the simultaneous application of several experts. In the current push to gain more traction on new therapies to complex human diseases, multi-PI projects will become increasingly important. ■

Avoid Depleting Your Time Buffer as You Head Toward the "Drop Dead" Date

NIH recommends that you submit your grant application *one month before* the actual deadline, known informally as the "drop dead" date. This will give you time between grant completion and submission to tie up any loose ends and ensure your grant is well-written. But issues can crop up that could cause that one-month buffer to tick away, one day at a time.

Here are five areas where you may run into delays and strategies for staying ahead.

1. Review and approval requirements

As part of the administrative review process, your Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) or Office of Sponsored Research (OSR) and your department have standard procedures in place for submitting a grant.

For example, some institutions require a colleague to sign off before submitting an application. Also, your department chair will have to sign off. "That signature may be a rubber stamp, but there may be departments where it isn't. And the chairman wants to actually look at your proposal and may want input or may withhold approval if he doesn't think it meets muster," says **David Konkell**, PhD, co-director of the Office of Edito-

rial and Communications Services at the University of Texas at Galveston.

"A delay can be caused by something as simple as somebody in the administration who's on vacation," says **Barbara Floersch**, director of The Grantsmanship Center in Los Angeles. Without time built into your master time line, your buffer will be reduced. To stay ahead:

- Cultivate a relationship, early in the process, with your institution's Pre-Award Specialist or Grant Officer.
- Ask well in advance of submitting your application *what* information your OSP will require.
- Ask how much time your OSP needs to review your application.
- Review the submission guidelines on your institution's OSP website.

2. Your budget

"The OSP will be looking at the 'front pages' of the application separate from the science. They just want to make sure that all the budgetary bells and whistles are correct," says Konkell.

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The OSP will scrutinize the numbers associated with cost sharing. “For example, the PI might not have proposed to put as much salary support onto the grant as the effort that he or she indicated,” Konkel says. “That’s a huge red flag at most institutions.” To avoid this:

- Take advantage of your institution’s offered budget development training opportunities.
- Begin working on your budget early in the process.
- Identify potential budgetary conflicts and correct them before submitting it to your OSP.

The business or finance office will take a close look at the salaries you plan to pay your personnel. For example, “They will often check to make sure that if you’re proposing to pay a post-doc, that your budget is in line with the NIH salary scale,” says Konkel.

- Compare your figure with the NIH scale found on the Office of Extramural Research website (www.grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-10-047.html). *Note: NOT-OD-10-047 shows 2010 figures. To date, 2011 figures have not been released.*
- Obtain an established salary scale for additional personnel from your Human Resources department.
- Check with your institution’s Pre-Award Specialist to determine if you can submit a draft application to the OSP. Some universities will allow this, provided you submit a final draft of your application’s scientific section at a later date.

3. Colleague review

Asking a peer to review your application could lead to an unforeseen delay because she takes longer than you expect to return feedback. Rather than wading through the entire proposal, Konkel suggests asking the peer to review just a section. “Write a good Specific Aims page, and give that to your colleague at least two months ahead of time,” he advises.

For example, after reviewing the *entire* application, the colleague gives feedback you don’t want to hear, such as, “Your proposal has poorly focused aims.” “The PI probably presented the aims without obvious linkage between them, either in the way it was written or in the discussion of the expected results and interpretation,” says Konkel. At this point, the PI’s completed most of the proposal, but it’s now going to need major surgery. To catch flaws in the beginning and save time in the long run:

- Write your Specific Aims first.
- Have the aims reviewed early in the process.

Floersch recommends having someone who is *unfamiliar* with your research read your application. “They’re going to find those holes that you, and even your colleagues, can’t because you all are so well versed in it.”

4. NIH updates

Keeping abreast of NIH changes and announcements is a challenge for the time-strapped PI. Nonetheless, you are responsible for the changes, says Konkel, and knowing about them as they occur. “When the faculty members first become aware of this problem is when it steps up and bites them, usually during administrative review,” he adds.

For instance, using outdated figures for a postdoctoral salary could cause a major problem within your budget if new figures are released and you’re unaware of them. “If you’re close to the maximum allowable for the grant mechanism that you’re using, then updating post-doc salary requirements can throw you over. And the whole budget may have to be reworked,” says Konkel. To keep on top of NIH announcements:

- Subscribe to NIH’s Weekly Funding Opportunities and Notices. NIH Guide announcements are combined onto one page with links to Program Announcements, Requests for Applications and Notices. You can subscribe to the Table of Contents at www.grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/listserv.htm.
- Check the current, weekly list at www.grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/WeeklyIndex.cfm.
- Read alerts sent by your OSP. The emails will often contain important points of an NIH announcement and a link to the information.

5. The lab

PIs may end up in a time crunch waiting for results from experiments because they want to include them as preliminary data in the application.

For example, “Previously, a PI would say, ‘I’ll stop a month ahead of time, submit the grant, and then I’ll pick up the experiments. If something important happens, I’ll simply send it in as supplemental data.’ That’s no longer the case,” says Konkel. This issue is becoming increasingly more important because NIH no longer accepts supplemental data for most grants.

Therefore, when possible, target end dates for experiments approximately one month before submitting your application to NIH. ■

Adding Information: What You Can — and Can't — Include During the Post-Submission Process

You may add certain information to your submitted NIH grant application, even though it's sitting in the eRA Commons database waiting for review. But there are restrictions on what you can add, guidelines on how to add it, and a deadline you should be aware of.

There are limits

NIH policy allows you to submit new material up to 30 calendar days *before* the peer review meeting. But only that which is the result of “unforeseen administrative issues” is acceptable. This includes:

- **Relocation information.** “If you accept a position at a new institution, you can write a letter notifying NIH of the status of your appointment. You may also send a letter if you accept a new position at your current facility,” says **Susan Marriott**, PhD, professor in the Department of Molecular Virology and Microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine.
- **Issues from natural disasters.** For example, flooding or a tornado damages the lab where you plan to conduct your research. You can alert NIH that adjustments to your application are required.
- **Letters of support.** If you decide to change key personnel and add a collaborator, you may submit a letter of support from that person.
- **Biographical Sketch changes.** If an investigator suddenly leaves or you hire new lab personnel, then you can make alterations to Biographical Sketches.
- **Articles.** “This is probably the most common one,” says Marriott. “They’re the publications that were in press, or submitted, when you turned in the application. If the article is accepted, you want to let NIH know about that.”
- **Budget revisions.** For example, if you require the same piece of equipment in overlapping grants and one of the grants is funded, you can submit a budget revision removing that particular piece of equipment from the proposed budget.

Rules for acceptance

The Scientific Review Officer (SRO) will determine whether your information will be included with your application. “They may not accept everything that’s sent. It’s at their discretion, but they’ll add it if they think it’s reasonable information,” says Marriott.

Post-submission materials NIH will not accept include:

- support letters that are not a result of a key personnel change
- updated Research Strategy or Specific Aims pages
- late-breaking research findings.

These guidelines will apply to all unsolicited, investigator-initiated applications. There are exceptions, however, for certain Funding Opportunity Announcements, training grants and Requests for Applications (RFAs).

Follow 5 steps

There are essentially five steps to the post-submission process.

1. Contact your institution’s Sponsored Programs Office or Sponsored Research Office. “Having someone who works with proposals all the time look over your information is helpful,” says **Barbara Sheehan**, director of Sponsored Research and Programs at Arcadia University. “These individuals will be able to spot a red flag and advise you on how to correct it before submitting the information.”

2. Secure the NIH-required signature from the signing official at your institution. NIH won’t accept anything that you send without it. For instance, obtain evidence, such as a letter, stating that the signing official concurs with your decision to send in the post-submission material(s).

3. Follow NIH guidelines for the pages you’re altering. For example, updates or changes to a Biosketch or a budget will require an NIH-provided form page. If a form page is not needed, however, agency guidelines indicate you must limit each letter or explanation to one page. Also remember to follow NIH policy for presenting your new materials, including:

- margins
- paper size
- font size.

4. Prepare a description of the items you’re submitting. If you’re sending data, as an exception to one of the grant mechanisms listed above, Marriott suggests the following:

- Design a concise table or graph to represent the data.
- Succinctly describe the experiment’s design, results and conclusions.
- Indicate the significance to the proposal.
- Note results that will add to the proposal’s innovative nature.

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- Use a bullet-point format.
- Include the grant number and title.

Sheehan also stresses the importance of providing the right amount of information. “Provide only what is requested or needed. If your description contains too much, you could be opening a door to questions,” she says.

5. Send the post-submission material to the SRO.

NIH prefers that you send the information electronically as a PDF attachment. You should include:

- a note to the SRO with a brief description of your attachment
- one or two sentences about why you are submitting it
- the grant number and title
- all post-submission materials in one email.

If the SRO accepts your submission, it will be uploaded to eRA Commons (<https://commons.era.nih.gov/commons/>). You’ll be able to find it by checking the “Additions for Review” section of your application. ■

How to Locate an NIH/NSF PO Using the Web

One step on the road to a funded project is finding the right NIH or NSF Program Officer (PO) who will guide you through the proposal development process. But searching for a PO on either agency’s vast website can consume valuable time, if you don’t know where to look.

Here are some tips on navigating the NIH and NSF websites, and finding the PO of the funding opportunity that best suits your project.

Finding a PO at NSF

If you’re going to seek NSF funding, think of the overall structure of the agency’s website as that of a university. “NSF has divisions, which are the equivalent of colleges at most universities. Inside the colleges you have directorates. And the Program Directors and POs are like professors,” says **Susan Finger**, PhD, professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Carnegie Mellon University. “Once you know that it’s organized like a university, you shouldn’t have that much trouble navigating it,” she adds.

Begin your search for a PO on NSF’s home page at www.nsf.gov, which includes funding opportunities, upcoming due dates and program areas.

A PI whose research focuses on developing an algorithm for certain types of Building Information Models, for example, would select the Engineering link. It appears in the drop down menu in Program Areas, located on the left side of the page.

“The categories on the left track to our different directorates. If you choose engineering from the list, it will take you to a menu that has engineering organizations, www.nsf.gov/dir/index.jsp?org=ENG. They are each of the divisions within engineering,” says **Maria Zacharias**, acting head of Media and Public Information in the Office of Legislative and Public Affairs at NSF.

There are six divisions within the NSF Engineering Directorate. “Once you get to the division level, there will be one or maybe two that your work fits into,” says Zacharias.

Using the example from above, the PI would select the Civil, Mechanical and Manufacturing Innovation (CMMI) link for his project.

- It will connect to the CMMI homepage: www.nsf.gov/div/index.jsp?div=CMMI. This page will display programs and funding opportunities within that division.
- The PI would then click on the Civil Infrastructure Systems (CIS) program link: www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=13352&org=CMMI&from=home.

“Once you click on a program, the first thing you see is the contact name, email address and phone number of the PO,” says Zacharias. NSF also names contacts in its Program Solicitations.

What happens if you get the wrong PO at NSF? Most likely, Finger says, you’ll be referred to the right person. “For example, if you started talking to a PO in Cyberinfrastructure about research in designing sensor networks for monitoring bridges, he might suggest that you also talk to the one in CIS in engineering because they also fund this area,” she adds.

Finding a PO at NIH

For NIH, you should start with the most appropriate institute or center. For instance, begin your search from the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Grant Cycle page at <http://funding.niaid.nih.gov/researchfunding/grant/cycle/pages/part00.aspx#c>:

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- Scroll down to the Contact Staff for Help section.
- Select one of the divisions that meshes with your research from the box on the right side of the page.

For example, if your project focuses on developing a new hay fever treatment, you would select the Division of Allergy, Immunology, and Transplantation (DAIT) link. It will connect to the Finding People page at <http://niaid.nih.gov/about/findingpeople/pages/dait.aspx>. This page lists the names and contact information for the division’s director, associate directors and chiefs.

To locate a list of POs within DAIT:

- Scroll to the bottom of the page, and click on the HHS Employee Directory.
- From this page (<http://directory.psc.gov/employee.htm>), select the second drop down box next to Agency and click “NIH.”
- Enter the search term “program officer” in the Job Title section and click “Do Search.”

It will return an alphabetical list of POs within NIH and its various divisions. Clicking on a name will bring up the PO’s contact information including phone number, email address and fax number. ■

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