

Office of the Dean
McCormick School of Engineering & Applied Science
Northwestern University
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Effort Reporting Guidelines for Faculty

As a recipient of federal funds for sponsored research, Northwestern University (NU) is required to comply with federal effort certification regulations. The University fulfills this responsibility through its Effort Reporting System (ERS). Quarterly effort reporting is required of faculty and staff engaged in sponsored activities. The guidelines below were created to assist in filling out the effort reports.

Step 1: When you receive an email notification from your department Business Administrator (BA) and/or the Effort Reporting System (ERS) that your effort report is ready to be reviewed and certified, proceed to the ERS web site (<https://ersweb.itcs.northwestern.edu/GenericERS>). Log in using your NU netid and password.

Step 2: Click on the pending certification link (an integer in the table that appears) in the “STATUS/MY TO DO” box. Usually, it will just be for the “Current Period,” which is the quarter just completed. (If pending certifications exist for prior periods, you should also review/complete those.)

Step 3: Click on your name to link to the certification for your effort.

Step 4: For SPONSORED ACCOUNTS, review the far-left column (“Plan”) which indicates the time commitment indicated in the original proposal. (If the number indicated as the “Plan” does not seem correct, contact your department’s Research Administrator.) Also, review the “Payroll %” column, which reflects the percent of your salary charged to that sponsored account for the quarter. Note that “Cost Sharing %” reflects the difference between the “Payroll %” and “Plan.” (This difference reflects the amount of effort you contributed to the project in excess of what the project was actually charged—the resulting % is defined as cost sharing.) Finally, distribute your effort to the individual accounts in the far-right “Certified Effort %” column. For each account, this number should reflect your actual effort; it typically matches or exceeds the “Plan.” (Note: Clicking on the chartstring in the “Sponsored Accounts” column brings up a description of the sponsored account.) For research-active faculty in McCormick, it is common that the effort on Sponsored Accounts totals 30%-60%, though this might be as low as 0% or as high as 75%. *It is very important to accurately reflect effort in this section.* Effort certified on sponsored research is a commonly reviewed by external audit agencies.

Step 5: Effort that cannot be attributed to a sponsored account is reflected in the lower part of the table under “Non-Sponsored Accounts.” Typically, this effort includes teaching, undergraduate advising, administrative duties, committee work, non-sponsored research, proposal writing, etc. The Grand Total of effort, sponsored and non-sponsored, must always equal 100%.

Step 6: Click “Proceed” at the bottom of the page. If any errors or warnings appear, contact your department’s Research Administrator. If you have already done this, click “Continue.”

Step 7: On the next page that appears, you are asked to distribute the “Non-Sponsored” activity among various tasks. Use reasonable estimates. The total effort distributed in the categories below must equal the total “Non-Sponsored” effort indicated on the line just above the gray table in which effort is entered.

- **INSTRUCTION:** If you have taught a course during the quarter, estimate the fraction of your total effort dedicated to course preparation and teaching. This category also includes undergraduate advising. Typically, instruction would be 20%-40% of your total effort per course for quarters in which you teach and 0-10% (advising, course preparation) in non-teaching quarters.
- **DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH:** This is effort on research that cannot be attributed to a sponsored account (advising graduate students on non-sponsored research, attending conferences not directly related to a sponsored project, etc.). This would be the remainder of your total effort after accounting for sponsored research, instruction, and administration (below).
- **ADMINISTRATION:** This is effort spent on departmental or University affairs including proposal writing, committees, student recruitment, etc. For most faculty, this would be 5%-15% of total effort. For department chairs, associate chairs, directors of graduate studies, and other positions with administrative responsibility or proposal writing, this would be a larger percentage (15%-50%) of total effort.
- **OTHER CATEGORIES:** The other categories listed in the table (Other Institutional Activity, NU-funded NMH/NMFF Activity, NMFF Activity, and Industry-Sponsored Clinical Trials) are rarely used by McCormick faculty.

Step 8: Click “Proceed” to review the values that were entered. To revise any values, click “Return” at the bottom of the page. Otherwise, click “Certify” to finalize the Effort Report.

Step 9: Click “Exit Form” or “Next Form,” if there are more persons for whom to certify effort.

Step 10: Continue by certifying effort for graduate students, postdocs, or other personnel. This is typically more straightforward since all their effort often can be attributed to a single sponsored project and their non-sponsored activity often is zero. Repeat steps 3-9 as appropriate.

Questions regarding effort reporting should be directed to the departmental business administrator or departmental research administrator.

Frequently asked questions:

Q. Should I wait for my payroll to go through before I certify effort?

A. If your payroll was submitted in advance of the quarter, you should see it reflected in the effort form. If you are submitting a late payroll request, the effort must be certified first in order to receive payroll approval. **Keep in mind that the payroll charges should be driven by the time you spend on the project and not the other way around.** If you are expecting a late summer salary request to go through, please reflect that effort in your summer quarter certification.

Q. A grad student or postdoc's effort was entered incorrectly. Should I wait for the correction to go through before I certify the effort?

A. A certified effort form is needed in order to process a late payroll request. You should certify based on the correct effort and payroll, after confirming with the BA that the payroll request is in progress.

Q. When is it okay to commit and certify a lower percentage than what I promised the sponsor?

A. You can generally reduce your effort by up to less than 25% of what was proposed (e.g. from 10% to >8%) without sponsor permission. Also, your effort can vary by quarter (e.g. a 0% certification in Fall and 20% certification in Winter means you're still on track to meet a 10% academic year commitment). Finally, you can generally rebudget effort between summer and academic year. Please let your RA know if you plan to make any of these changes. **However, one cannot certify effort lower than the level of payroll received from the project. The percentage of effort certification must always be equal to or greater than the value of the salary charged to the project.**

Q. When is it okay to commit and certify a higher percentage than what I promised the sponsor?

A. It is almost always okay to do more work on a project than you originally promised; in fact, a sponsor would probably be pleased to hear this! If you will be recovering salary to match the additional effort, make sure that additional salary does not violate any sponsor restrictions and that you have enough funds to support this unplanned expense.

Q. I have guaranteed salary. Is it okay for me to certify effort higher than the level of payroll I receive from the project (e.g. 10% effort but 5% payroll) during the academic year?

A. Generally, yes. McCormick will absorb the extra cost of your sponsored project work during the academic year. One notable exception is if you are being paid on a fixed-price contract. Check with your Research Administrator if you're not sure.

Q. What about during summer?

A. During the summer, McCormick doesn't provide a guaranteed salary. Therefore, sponsored effort must match sponsored payroll unless you secure additional non-sponsored funding from which to cost-share your time (e.g. start-up funds, released funds, and other discretionary funding).

Q. Something about this effort form doesn't look correct. Should I certify right away to meet the deadline and fix it later?

A. Retroactively "correcting" effort certification is not recommended nor is it generally allowed. Doing so jeopardizes the integrity of your certifications and payroll charges. Auditors often then ask, "Which certification is the correct one?" Therefore, please do not certify your effort unless you are sure it is correct. If you have any questions at all, please contact your RA before certifying.