

Reversal of Fortune

April 20, 2012



Perhaps no argument made the case for changing NSF policy as clearly as what a heroic first-year graduate student had to suffer through last year. Lily Brown is in the clinical program at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), but her clinical status went undetected as her application made its way through the NSF review process in 2011. (To be clear, although the 2011 announcement did say that no student from a clinical program was eligible, another part of the announcement had enough ambiguity so that Lily was doing nothing improper in applying. In fact, this is how a few clinical students have received NSF funding from time to time over the past few years.) Lily's proposed research program was basic, NSF-relevant, and was reviewed as highly meritorious. She was awarded an NSF Fellowship.

Some weeks later, Lily was emailing an NSF official about a detail of her award, and the official noticed her email signature block said she was in the UCLA Clinical Program. The official pointed out that those in clinical programs are not eligible for the program. But unknown to NSF, Lily was at the same time also being admitted to the Learning and Behavior Program at UCLA. There was no change in her departmental requirements. It is just that, as often happens in cutting-edge clinical psychological science, a virtual dual PhD in Clinical and some other sub-discipline is required to address complicated research issues. Lily wrote back that she was a student in Clinical and a student in Learning and Memory. And APS wrote to NSF that Lily's status exemplified the exact reason clinical students should be allowed to apply.

"The same student," wrote APS Executive Director Alan Kraut, "whose application was funded by NSF at Time 1, was going to be unfunded by NSF at Time 2 based on her being in a clinical program (albeit one of the best clinical science programs in the country). Now we are at Time 3, and the student is technically now in an NSF-approved program [Learning and Memory], and so her funding will be left alone.

Same student, same application, same research program, same set of advisors, same training requirements. Ineligible if she continues to check the Clinical box, eligible if she checks the Learning and Behavior box."

The policy change was formally implemented in the 2012 GRFP announcement soon after.