SCIENTIFIC WORK FORCE

NSF Restores Data on Minority Ph.D.s

It's not often a federal research agency does a U-turn after getting complaints from its constituents. But last week, the National Science Foundation (NSF) did—to the surprise and pleasure of groups working to increase the number of minorities in science and engineering.

Each year, NSF conducts a Survey of Earned Doctorates, asking newly minted Ph.D.s to provide a wealth of information on their educational history and career plans. The results can be broken down by field and by race, ethnicity, and gender (REG). In 2007, citing new federal privacy rules, NSF's statistical branch decided to suppress a considerable amount of information about underrepresented minorities (in particular, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans). Staffers feared that savvy data miners could make use of the small numbers reported in some subcategories—one Hispanic received a doctoral degree in astronomy in 2006, for example—to identify individuals.

Under its revised rule, any subcategory with fewer than six degree recipients went unreported. In practice, however, many more categories were also blanked out because NSF was concerned that the missing numbers could be calculated by a process of elimination. NSF also banned the use of zero, arguing that even a null set conveyed information—the absence of minorities in that category—that potentially compromised NSF's promise of anonymity to participants.

The news took some months to trickle down to researchers, institutions, and professional societies that use the data, including organizations running projects funded by NSF aimed at fostering broader participation in science and engineering. By last spring, however, they were bewildered and outraged. There were even rumors that sinister motives were at

work. "Without evidence of underrepresentation, some people might wonder whether such programs are needed," notes Shirley McBay, president of the Quality Education for Minorities (QEM) Network.

Taken aback by the vociferous criticism, NSF asked QEM to hold a series of meetings that gave the community a chance to vent its anger and to suggest alternatives. (NSF had offered three options, which were universally panned.) Last week, McBay reported the results of those meetings to NSF's Committee on Equal Opportunities in Science and Engineering, an advisory body for issues affecting underrepresented minorities. Committee members also voiced their unhappiness with the changes and questioned why they were necessary.

That's when NSF announced it had had a change of heart. Lynda Carlson, head of NSF's Science Resources Statistics (SRS) division, followed McBay to the podium and shocked her audience by declaring that NSF was rescinding almost all of the new policy. From now on, only fields that award fewer than 25 total doctorates each year will be subject to any data suppression. That is likely to affect about 4% of the 280 subfields reported in the survey, estimates SRS's Mary Frase. (In those instances, subfields will be combined until the minimum is reached.) In all other cases, results will be reported by race, ethnicity, and gender, even if the result is zero in some categories.

"We listened," Carlson explained after the meeting. "We didn't realize the extent to which people are using the REG tables. We can't do everything the community wanted. But we've tried to meet as many of their needs as possible." McBay says she's pleased that SRS "heard the concerns expressed … and has reconsidered its approach."   **–JEFFREY MERVIS**

A select group. An NSF survey will reinstate data on the small number of minorities earning doctoral degrees.

*Science*Insider

From the *Science* Policy Blog

This past week has been a mixed bag for science and its proponents. There have been some big winners, some big losers, and a bunch of folks who don't know where they stand. Here's a roundup from *Science*'s policy blog, *Science*Insider:

As a divided Congress has shown, you can't pass a nearly trillion dollar stimulus bill and keep everyone happy. The same goes for the **2009 U.S. budget**, which is stingy when it comes to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), but kind to the National Science Foundation and positively munificent to the Department of Energy. The hefty stimulus itself has also proved divisive. Senator Arlen Specter (R–PA) is being hailed as a hero for his successful effort to keep $10 billion of the stimulus money for NIH. Meanwhile, other congressional supporters of science, such as Representative Vern Ehlers (R–MI), voted against the bill, claiming it was not good public policy.

In **non-U.S. news**, environmentalists are praising a proposed treaty to reduce mercury pollution. Among the 140 countries on board is India, though its science minister says the Asian nation has a lot of catching up to do when it comes to investing in science. Also catching heat is Japan, which the head of a green nongovernmental organization criticizes for not showing leadership on environmental issues.

And finally, a tale of **two viruses**. International health officials last week sought to reassure antsy staff of foreign embassies in Beijing that the recent spate of fatalities in China from the H5N1 strain of avian influenza is no cause for alarm. But they also noted that H5N1 remains as deadly and unpredictable as ever. And a different type of virus—this one of the computer variety—plagued, of all things, the International Meeting on Emerging Diseases and Surveillance. The good news: In contrast to many of the pathogens discussed at the conference, antiviral treatment is available for this one.

For the full postings and more, go to **blogs.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider**.

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