

# Biting the hand that feeds

When money is being handed out by an institution, it is all too easy for the potential recipients to fall into a complacency regarding the application procedure. After all, it is their money, so they can award it however they wish, right? Besides, if I complain, I will get placed on a secret blacklist and the only pile my application will see the top of is the circular file, so why rock the boat? Then again, are they living up to their public image? Are their mouths assessing the applicants one way while their hands reshuffle the applications outside of the public earshot?



It is time for this rat to lodge a formal protest against the rules of the race. I am going to centre on two sets of awards given out by NSERC (the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada): the NSERC University Undergraduate Research Awards and the NSERC Postgraduate Scholarships. If you are not directly concerned with these awards, I would recommend reading on anyway; you may find reasons to think about the procedures of the awards for which you are eligible.



According to the NSERC Scholarships and Fellowships Guide (1986-1987), the objective of the undergrad research award is "... to stimulate the interest of undergraduate students in research ..." and thus "... encourage these students to undertake graduate studies." (p.5). "The university will assess ... each application on the basis of the student's academic record and research aptitude ..." (p.6). This is quite a noble undertaking. NSERC obviously realises that marks largely reflect the memorisation ability of a student (as well as how smoothly and conveniently the student's private life runs) and that pitifully few course grades indicate independent research potential. There is apparently a chance that potentially ingenious researchers who have problems with rote memorisation will get the funding they deserve. Think again, folks!

According to Dr. Warwick Kimmins (Chair of the Biology Department), academic grades are the only selection criterion once the applications leave the department. As Dr. Kimmins put it, a student with a 95% average could propose to study the effects of Christmas on the reindeer population and will receive an award. The selection committee doesn't even look at the research proposal. So much for promoting research potential! The awards are mainly promoting memorisation ability via assessing only marks. In the process they also weed out such undesirables as people with at least one term of bad health or (and Lord forbid these people get into research) those from not-so-well-to-do backgrounds who had to fritter away their school nights working to support themselves.

"Students who are candidates for undergraduate professional degrees in the health sciences ... are not eligible to hold these awards." (p.5, NSERC guide).



This rule is apparently intended to prevent wasting funds on A' students who are only after the summer research awards for the money and do not intend to pursue a career in research. Nice promise, but then reality comes knocking. I can remember an incident involving a student (name and address withheld to protect the guilty) who applied for and received a summer NSERC and shortly thereafter was accepted into medical school. She spent her entire summer complaining about how bored she was with her "irrelevant" work, not exactly showing what I would call a stimulated research interest. According to Dr. Kimmins, the names of those who have applied to professional schools are held as confidential information; therefore such a rule depends on the honesty of the applicants. What kind of public posturing is it to have a safeguard rule which has no check?

For those who have the qualifications (read marks) or the intestinal fortitude to have survived the dark cloud of undergrad granting procedures without deciding to opt out to join the blue collar workforce or a chemical dependance treatment programme, there is indeed a silver lining. It's a bit tarnished, but at least it is silver.

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