CLOSEOUT FOR M96050015

On May 9,1996, OIG received a call, which was followed by a package, from the complainant.[1] The package consisted of e-mail correspondence, primarily with the NSF program director.[2] The complainant explained that she had submitted an application on FastLane, an electronic submission forum operated by NSF. She followed her electronic submission with requests to her professors to submit letters of recommendations to NSF on her behalf. After she did not receive an award, she contacted the institution[3] that contracted with NSF to manage their Graduate Fellowship applications to request a copy of the panel review sheet. She learned that her application had not been reviewed. In a follow-up conversation with the institution, the complainant said they informed her that her application was on the test server. The test server is a NSF on-line site similar to FastLane that allowed an applicant to practice with the various application forms. The subject said the institution told her that the program director would review her application.

The complainant wrote to the program director to inquire about the review of her application. The program director informed the complainant that the circumstances of her case, not her application, were reviewed. The program director wrote that there were three warnings that appeared on her computer screen that she should have seen to indicate that she was using the test server, not FastLane. The program director advised her that her recommendation letters arrived, but it was not unusual for supplementary materials to arrive without an application and that NSF did not pursue these instances. The program director informed the complainant that her case was given careful deliberation, but that in "fairness to all applicants, we conclude that it would not be reasonable to provide a special review of your application" as this would create an "extreme departure from our established procedures." The program director added NSF would be happy to assist her in the preparation of an application for next year. The complainant insisted that she did not use the test site, would not have missed those warnings, and that she did not appreciate being blamed for NSF's mistake. Unfortunately, the complainant admitted that her university no longer had computer archives of users of the FastLane server from the time in question to prove her case.

OIG spoke with the NSF's program manager of FastLane[4] who explained that there have been warnings in place on the test server's graduate fellowship page since its inception in July 1995. She indicated that there had only been one instance of someone submitting to the test server. She was not aware of any method, e.g., keystrokes or mouse-clicks, that allowed

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[1] (footnote redacted).
[2] (footnote redacted).
[3] (footnote redacted).
[4] (footnote redacted).

one to transfer to the test server from FastLane unintentionally, apart from accidentally clicking on the test server's link.

OIG went to both the FastLane and test server sites. The test server did have several warnings, in big letters, at the top of each of the first few pages. It is improbable that one would be able to create a new application without seeing them. However, if one did manage to get beyond the warnings and create a new application, one could then save that page's internet address and return to that page to edit, compose, and submit a proposal without seeing further warnings. The internet address of the test server was given, and a link provided to take one there, on one of the FastLane introductory pages with the suggestion that the applicant may go to the test server to review working prototypes.

OIG concluded that the complainant must have inadvertently submitted her proposal on the test server. OIG found no evidence that the program director performed improperly. The program director offered the complainant encouragement to reapply this year and offered to transfer the necessary supplementary materials from her application of last year. The complainant has agreed to do so.

This inquiry is closed and no further action will be taken on this case.

cc: Staff Scientist, Deputy AIG-Oversight, AIG-Oversight, IG