

Closeout for M97090028

In late September 1997, OIG received a telephone call from the complainant¹ alleging that NSF's WebCASPAR system required information that she considered to be an invasion of privacy. The complainant said that new users were required to provide their name and e-mail address before they were permitted access to the WebCASPAR data files. We treated this case as an oversight matter, not as an allegation of misconduct in science.

WebCASPAR (Web-based Computer-Aided Science Policy And Research) is an NSF data base system containing information on academic science and engineering resources. By accessing the site (<http://caspar.nsf.gov>), OIG confirmed that new users were required to enter their names, e-mail addresses, and choose passwords before they were able to access the data base. This information was stored so that future use did not require entering that information again.

We interviewed NSF's program manager² (PM) responsible for WebCASPAR to discuss the complainant's concern. He said NSF wanted that information because it allowed it to statistically determine what percentage of users was from academia, the government, or the private sector. NSF also compiles statistics on which data are accessed most often to determine if any of that data should be "canned," i.e., made a general feature that is more easily accessed. Even though WebCASPAR was designed to provide a useful service to the public, the PM said that he was sensitive to the government creating a negative impression in some users by requiring identifying information before any data were provided. He said he would change the requirement that users enter their names and e-mail addresses to an option. Our recent visit to the site confirmed this change had been implemented and an anonymous user login is now permitted.

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

cc: Legal, AIG-Oversight, IG

¹ (name redacted). Her professional affiliation, if any, is unknown.

² (footnote redacted).