

The Scientist: NewsBlog:

NSF adopts new ethics rules

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Starting in 2010, all researchers applying for funding from the National Science Foundation will have to provide some evidence that they will educate their students and postdocs in the responsible and ethical conduct of research.

According to an [entry](#) that appeared in the Federal Register late last month, the NSF will require that "each institution that applies for financial assistance from the Foundation for science and engineering research or education describe in its grant proposal a plan to provide appropriate training and oversight in the responsible and ethical conduct of research to undergraduate students, graduate students, and postdoctoral researchers participating in the proposed research project."

Such broad ethics requirements are rare for federal science funding agencies. The National Institutes of Health, for example, mandates ethics training among recipients of training grants -- such as T32s and M32s -- but not for every grantee.

According to Rachelle Hollander, director of the center for engineering, ethics, and society at the National Academy of Engineering, the NSF's new requirements are welcome in a time when research misconduct has become all too common. "What has influenced this development is a concern that there continue to be pressures in the research environment that create ethical challenges," Hollander told *The Scientist*. She counted increasing competitiveness and a "close coupling of commerce and academia" as sources of these pressures. "It seems like those pressure will only grow in the coming years," she said. "It seems appropriate for federal agencies that support research to take those into account and also try to support projects that will provide resources and materials to address those challenges."

The new NSF rules, which will go into effect on January 4, 2010, do not require institutions to outline the particulars of the ethics training they will provide for grantees, but merely to indicate that the training will take place. "The language, as it is written now, doesn't require that training plans be included in proposals, but they could be requested by NSF," said John Galland, director of the division of education and integrity at the Office of Research Integrity (ORI). "When the applicant submits a proposal to NSF, the university must certify that it has a plan to provide [ethics] training."

Galland told *The Scientist* that his division at the ORI funds workshops, conferences, extramural research, and online educational resources on ethics training for institutions receiving Public Health Service (PHS) -- which includes the NIH -- funds. "We have been working hard in our division to assist institutions and faculty in developing that curriculum to the extent that we're able to." But there are not currently requirements analogous to the new NSF rules at funding institutions such as the NIH. Instead, Galland said, every one of the more than 4,000 US and foreign institutions that receives PHS funding must provide proof that it has policies and procedures for handling research misconduct.

Both Galland and his ORI colleague John Dahlberg, director of the office's division of investigative oversight, agree that the new NSF requirements may serve to decrease the instances of research misconduct in the future. "As you're making an investment in research, it's wise to also make an investment in the researchers who are performing that research," Galland said. "There may be fewer allegations of research misconduct."

But Dahlberg, who handles cases of research misconduct that are reported to the ORI, said that such fraud is not likely to disappear overnight. "There are still going to be bad actors," he said.

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