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Oops! Mistake causes Dozens Of Students To Lose Grants

By *Judith Earley*



National Science and Mathematics Access to Retaining Talent (SMART) Grants were created by Congress last winter to help colleges and universities graduate more students in high-demand fields such as physics, engineering, and some foreign languages. But something went horribly wrong this month on the campus of Utah State University.

One hundred fifty students who each thought they would be receiving a \$4,000 grant through the program found out the following week-by email no less-that they were not eligible after all. Why? Because the students had taken too many credit hours in order to qualify under the new program's definition of an academic year.

Congress intended for the SMART Grants to be available to juniors and seniors; but because these students had amassed more than 120 credits, they were deemed ineligible. Utah State awarded SMART Grants to 300 other students who fell under the strict eligibility guidelines.

This unfortunate situation is a textbook example of the problems with the SMART Grant program and its fraternal twin, the Academic Competitiveness Grants program for freshmen and sophomores. The two programs were hurriedly created by Congress with some lack of clarity, and the Education Department is still struggling to decipher the rules and successfully implement them.

"I imagine screw-ups like this are occurring on other campuses as well," Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, said in a report published on the Inside Higher Education website. "The law that created ACG/SMART Grants is very poorly drafted, and the department has unfortunately compounded the problems with some of its regulatory decisions."

Originally, 450 Utah State students were told that they had met the requirements for the \$4,000 grants; these requirements included a minimum 3.0 grade point average and a major in an eligible field. But it was only five days later that Utah State officials realized the mistake and had to break the news to 150 of those students that the number of academic credits they had completed put them beyond the number of total credits that eligible students can accumulate to be considered college seniors.

continued on back



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While many of the students were resigned to the confusion, others were understandably angry over having their expectations dashed. Most higher education officials and college lobbyists agree that Utah State is unlikely to be the only school with issues regarding the implementation of the SMART Grant program. A spokeswoman from the Department of Education said that officials were still investigating the Utah State situation to see if anything could be done to help the 150 students left out in the cold.