

Science Advisory Board (SAB) Draft Report (01/13/14) to Assist
Meeting Deliberations -- Do Not Cite or Quote –
This draft is a work in progress, does not reflect consensus advice or
recommendations, has not been reviewed or approved by the chartered
SAB and does not represent EPA policy.

EPA-SAB-14-00X

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Subject: Concern about the future of the Science to Achieve Results (STAR) Fellowship
Program

Dear Administrator McCarthy:

The Science Advisory Board wishes to register strong concern about changes to and the possible demise of the STAR fellowship program, which has provided support since 1995 for graduate students pursuing advanced degrees in environmental science. As the Board and the National Research Council¹ have noted, the STAR fellowship program has made “important contribution to the nation’s effort to train and encourage promising students to obtain advanced degrees and pursue careers in environmentally related fields and to develop the next generation of environmental scientists.” Over the lifetime of the program, 1,681 graduate fellows have received support for their careers as environmental scientists and engineers. The program has been highly competitive and the only federal fellowship program designed exclusively for students pursuing advanced degrees in these fields.

The SAB has learned that EPA granted no new STAR fellowship awards in 2013, despite having received 1,387 applications for the program, and that the agency has not issued a STAR fellowship announcement for the 2014 academic year. The SAB understands that this interruption in the program resulted from a federal government effort to consolidate existing graduate education programs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) under the auspices of the National Science Foundation. At a recent SAB meeting, an EPA representative explained that this consolidation occurred in an effort to improve the delivery, impact, and visibility of STEM graduate education programs.

Because of the important role STAR fellowships play in training future environmental scientists and engineers whose research will help meet the agency’s mission, the SAB has several questions and concerns. When and how will the next graduate fellowships in environmental science and engineering be awarded? How will EPA’s mission-critical needs for future environmental scientists and engineers be taken into account by the National Science Foundation (NSF)? How will EPA and the NSF work together to improve the delivery, impact, and visibility of graduate programs in environmental science and engineering in the new consolidated program? How will EPA encourage the development of the new methods and science needed by the agency if the NSF program does not specifically support graduate fellowships in environmental science and engineering or does not support them at least at the level provided by the EPA STAR program?

¹ National Research Council, *The Measure of STAR: Review of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Science to Achieve Results (STAR) Research Grants Program Committee to Review EPA's Research Grants Program*, National Research Council. ISBN: 0-309-51672-2. Washington, Dc: The National Academies Press, 2003

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The SAB considers the STAR fellowship program to be an important component of the EPA extramural research program that has made the agency a leader in environmental science and research. Although a small program, it plays such a significant role in creating the future science and research needed by the EPA that we wanted to bring our concerns to your attention. We look forward to the agency's response to the questions and concerns in this letter.

Sincerely,

Dr. David T. Allen, Chair
Science Advisory Board

Enclosure

(1) Roster of SAB Members