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Evolution Major Vanishes From Approved Federal List

By CORNELIA DEAN
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Evolutionary biology has vanished from the list of acceptable fields of study for recipients of a federal education grant for low-income college students.

The Evolution Debate

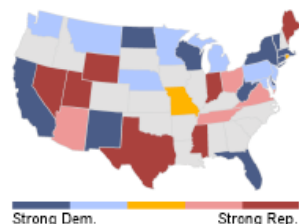
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The omission is inadvertent, said Katherine McLane, a spokeswoman for the Department of Education, which administers the grants. "There is no explanation for it being left off the list," Ms. McLane said. "It has always been an eligible major."

Another spokeswoman, Samara Yudof, said evolutionary biology would be restored to the list, but as of last night it was still missing.

If a major is not on the list, students in that major cannot get grants unless they declare another major, said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Mr. Nassirian said students seeking the grants went first to their college registrar, who determined whether they were full-time students majoring in an eligible field.

"If a field is missing, that student would not even get into the process," he said.

That the omission occurred at all is worrying scientists concerned about threats to the teaching of evolution.

One of them, Lawrence M. Krauss, a physicist at Case Western Reserve University, said he learned about it from someone at the Department of Education, who got in touch with him after [his essay](#) on the necessity of teaching evolution appeared in The New York Times on Aug. 15. Dr. Krauss would not name his source, who he said was concerned about being publicly identified as having drawn attention to the matter.

An article about the issue was posted Tuesday on the Web site of The Chronicle of Higher Education.

Dr. Krauss said the omission would be "of great concern" if evolutionary biology had been singled out for removal, or if the change had been made without consulting with experts on biology. The grants are awarded under the National Smart Grant program, established this year by Congress. (Smart stands for Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent.)

The program provides \$4,000 grants to third- or fourth-year, low-income students majoring in physical, life or computer sciences; mathematics; technology; engineering; or foreign languages deemed "critical" to national security.

The list of eligible majors (which is online at ifap.ed.gov/dpceletters/attachments/GENo6o6A.pdf) is drawn from the Education Department's "Classification of Instructional Programs," or CIP (pronounced "sip"), a voluminous and detailed classification of courses of study, arranged in a numbered system of sections and subsections.

Part 26, biological and biomedical sciences, has a number of sections, each of which has one or more

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subsections. Subsection 13 is ecology, evolution, systematics and population biology. This subsection itself has 10 sub-subsections. One of them is 26.1303 — evolutionary biology, “the scientific study of the genetic, developmental, functional, and morphological patterns and processes, and theoretical principles; and the emergence and mutation of organisms over time.”

Though references to evolution appear in listings of other fields of biological study, the evolutionary biology sub-subsection is missing from a list of “fields of study” on the National Smart Grant list — there is an empty space between line 26.1302 (marine biology and biological oceanography) and line 26.1304 (aquatic biology/limnology).

Students cannot simply list something else on an application form, said Mr. Nassirian of the registrars’ association. “Your declared major maps to a CIP code,” he said.

Mr. Nassirian said people at the Education Department had described the omission as “a clerical mistake.” But it is “odd,” he said, because applying the subject codes “is a fairly mechanical task. It is not supposed to be the subject of any kind of deliberation.”

“I am not at all certain that the omission of this particular major is unintentional,” he added. “But I have to take them at their word.”

Scientists who knew about the omission also said they found the clerical explanation unconvincing, given the furor over challenges by the religious right to the teaching of evolution in public schools. “It’s just awfully coincidental,” said Steven W. Rissing, an evolutionary biologist at [Ohio State University](#).

Jeremy Gunn, who directs the Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief at the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), said that if the change was not immediately reversed “we will certainly pursue this.”

Dr. Rissing said removing evolutionary biology from the list of acceptable majors would discourage students who needed the grants from pursuing the field, at a time when studies of how genes act and evolve are producing valuable insights into human health.

“This is not just some kind of nicety,” he said. “We are doing a terrible disservice to our students if this is yet another example of making sure science doesn’t offend anyone.”

Dr. Krauss of Case Western said he did not know what practical issues would arise from the omission of evolutionary biology from the list, given that students would still be eligible for grants if they declared a major in something else — biology, say.

“I am sure an enterprising student or program director could find a way to put themselves in another slot,” he said. “But why should they have to do that?”

Mr. Nassirian said he was not so sure. “Candidly, I don’t think most administrators know enough about this program” to help students overcome the apparent objection to evolutionary biology, he said. Undergraduates would be even less knowledgeable about the issue, he added.

Dr. Krauss said: “Removing that one major is not going to make the nation stupid, but if this really was removed, specifically removed, then I see it as part of a pattern to put ideology over knowledge. And, especially in the Department of Education, that should be abhorred.”

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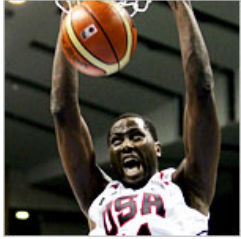
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