

We regret to inform you

I woke up and groggily checked my phone—my morning routine. When I saw the email, I instantly became alert. It was from the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program (NSF-GRFP), which offers a coveted award: 3 years of relatively generous funding and a healthy dose of prestige. My hopes were high. The previous year, when I applied as an undergraduate student with little mentoring, I had received an honorable mention. Now I was a first-year Ph.D. student, with a publication and a university fellowship to my name. The six people I had asked for input about my application—two of them actual reviewers for the fellowship—had given me positive feedback. I felt the key to career success was within my grasp.

Winning an NSF-GRFP award or another high-profile fellowship can be a career-changer for anyone. For someone like me—a member of an underrepresented racial minority group, from Puerto Rico, enrolled at a non-elite institution—a prestigious fellowship would be particularly beneficial, I thought, helping me establish my credentials and build a reputation. My heart was set on winning it.

Being superstitious about opening important emails on my phone, I rushed out of bed to my computer. My eyes scanned for the magical phrase. Instead, I found the dreaded one: “We regret to inform you.”

I closed my computer and tried to go on with my scheduled day of lab work, but I couldn’t get my mind off the disappointing news. Maybe my hypotheses were too vague or my experiments too broad. One reviewer questioned why I had selected Puerto Rico as my research site given that I had chosen to leave the island for my doctorate; I wished I had explained that none of the universities there offer Ph.D.s in my discipline of environmental microbiology. A few days later, I received another blow: My Ford Foundation fellowship application had also been rejected.

I believed my mask had been removed; the impostor was caught. My life and ideas were uninteresting, I thought, and I only got my university fellowship—an award for students from underrepresented groups—because of my race. I doubted my future potential.

It took a while to turn myself around. But a conversation with a mentor got me thinking about other opportunities that come more often and go overlooked: smaller fellowships, such as those offered by universities, local governments, and professional associations. I had largely ignored



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these, as many do. But maybe I was passing up opportunities. Although lower-profile awards may not look quite as impressive on a CV, applying gives you a chance to improve your grantsmanship skills. And in a smaller competition, you may have a better shot at winning, which would help build your funding record and deliver a confidence boost.

So, I switched my focus to less well-known fellowships, looking broadly and keeping an open mind. I asked friends, looked at faculty members’ CVs, and searched Twitter. A conversation with an engineering student friend introduced me to a fellowship that I never would have heard of in my biology circles. I found a way to highlight the engineering components of my work and got the award—my first external

research funding. It doesn’t have the name recognition of some fellowships, but it has nonetheless offered a great development opportunity. In addition to providing a year of funding, it allowed me to work at a national laboratory for a summer and opened the door for future collaborations.

Now in my third year of graduate school, I still apply to some prestigious fellowships. Why not? The only way to guarantee you won’t be chosen is to not submit an application. And when the winners of the major awards are announced, prompting the inevitable flood of “I GOT THE FELLOWSHIP!” messages on social media, of course I am happy for them—it’s a huge accomplishment. But, I no longer see these prestigious fellowships as the only option, and that has been a great refuge. ■

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