

U.S.

Missed Pickup Means a Missed Opportunity for 30 Seeking a Fellowship

By DEAN E. MURPHY FEB. 5, 2004

A missed courier pickup, an honest clerk and an unyielding federal bureaucracy have conspired to deny 30 college students here the chance to compete for a prestigious Fulbright research grant.

"It seems surreal to me," said Mary Ann Mason, dean of the graduate division at the University of California, Berkeley. "It is an unnecessary, foolish, tragic incident."

The students, all enrolled in doctoral studies, got the news on Tuesday night from the university's chancellor, Robert M. Berdahl, that their applications were disqualified because they were late. Dr. Berdahl had earlier flown to Washington in a failed bid to persuade education officials in the Bush administration to change their minds.

"For these students to lose out on the opportunity to compete for the Fulbright award in this way is outrageous," Dr. Berdahl said. "No one could have imagined the Department of Education could have reacted the way it did."

The department, which administers the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship Program, rejected the applications because they were not mailed by the Oct. 20 deadline, according to a letter to Dr. Berdahl from Sally L.

Stroup, an assistant secretary of education.

On that day, the applications were in an envelope at the university's Sproul Hall for pickup by Federal Express. But the courier did not come until the next morning because of a "software glitch," said Sandra Munoz, a FedEx spokeswoman.

The company provided the university with two letters acknowledging the mix-up and accepting blame for the late delivery. It also backdated the shipment's air bill to reflect the intended Oct. 20 pickup date.

"We realize how serious this is, and the inconvenience we are causing everyone," Ms. Munoz said. "We certainly apologize."

Late in the day on Oct. 20, an employee with the university's graduate division sent an explanation by e-mail to the Education Department, which told the university to send the applications with the explanation from FedEx, university officials said.

For months, the university officials assumed the problem had been worked out. But the e-mail exchange, Dr. Mason said, came back to haunt them. It was cited last month by lawyers for the department as grounds for rejecting the applications, she said. Since the air bill had been backdated, the correspondence was apparently the only evidence that the applications had not been sent on time.

"The final terrible remark of the lawyers was, 'If you hadn't e-mailed Washington, we would have let it go because we wouldn't have known there was a problem,'" Dr. Mason said.

The implicit message, she said, was, "Honesty is not the best policy."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Education did not respond to several telephone messages seeking comment. In a statement released Wednesday, Assistant Secretary Stroup defended the decision.

"Although we are very sorry for UC Berkeley's graduate students who had hopes of Fulbright-Hays doctoral fellowships, the facts are indisputable: UC Berkeley was negligent in failing to mail its application on time, despite the fact that for years the

university has applied for this program each fall," she said.

"When it became apparent that Federal Express would not arrive in time, a simple trip to the post office would have ensured that the university's application met the deadline," she said. "Sixty other institutions met the application deadline."

Last year, 15 of the 30 applicants from Berkeley were awarded Fulbright fellowships, ranging from \$20,000 to \$64,000.

In retrospect, the officials said, it would have been prudent to take the package to a nearby FedEx office or the post office, but no one had envisioned a delivery error would have such consequences. Now, officials are looking to FedEx to bring about some sort of happy ending.

Dr. Mason said lawyers for the university were "talking with FedEx about sharing some responsibility." She said one idea was that FedEx would provide some doctoral research grant money.

Ms. Munoz said FedEx was eager to resolve the situation.

"Obviously," she said, "our goal is always 100 percent customer satisfaction."

Jason Seawright, one of the applicants, said that while he would appreciate any help, it would be hard for any other grant to match the résumé-building force of a Fulbright.

"In addition to the money, this is something that opens doors in your career," he said. "Right, I'll put that on my résumé: the FedEx fellowship."