

The Washington State Supreme Court recently ruled that the State's law mandating "full access to information concerning the conduct of government at every level" requires State universities in Washington to make public on request research grant proposals even if they haven't been funded. Researchers and officials at the University of Washington predict that the ruling will have disastrously negative effects on research. The State Supreme Court's ruling is the result of a suit brought by an animal rights group in an effort to force the University of Washington to release details of an unfunded research proposal designed to study self abusive behavior in monkeys to find clues in connection with similar behavior in autistic children. The project, which would have isolated some monkeys at birth, didn't get a high enough score to be funded by the National Institute of Health, and never took place.

(POINT OF INFORMATION) Research grant proposals to federal agencies, while written and designed by individual researchers at a university, are sponsored by the university. Submission of a research grant proposal to a federal funding agency always must be reviewed and signed off on by a responsible university official.

Does the ruling of the Washington State Supreme Court violate the moral rights of researchers in public universities in the State of Washington? If so, why? If not, why not? (reported in Science 12/9/94)

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The State Supreme Court's decision does not violate the moral rights of researchers. Scientific research is one of the principal missions of the University of Washington. For this reason the public, which funds that research is entitled to detailed information about it. There are many good reasons not to compel researchers to disclose publicly their work in preparation of research grant proposals. Once completed, however, and signed off on by a responsible university official, the public has a right to examine them. Whether or not a proposal eventually wins funding is not critical in this connection.

Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, 1995

© Robert Ladenson, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995