

Report on Research Compliance Volume 16, Number 7. July 01, 2019 Research Misconduct Twist: False Data Came From Phantom Colleague at Fictitious Meeting

By Theresa Defino

From October of 2018 until the end of March, the National Science Foundation Office of Inspector General (OIG) reported just one finding of research misconduct, a record low for cases in which investigators are alleged to have committed fabrication, falsification or plagiarism in NSF applications or agency-funded work.

To cut to the chase, the university terminated the individual referred to as a professor after he admitted that he never got data from a colleague he met at a conference, in fact, never even went to a conference and there was no other colleague. He also backed off an early claim that graduate students were responsible for the two fabrications and one falsification in his research. OIG is recommending a five-year debarment and other sanctions; NSF has not issued its decision.

Details about the case against this professor and other principal investigators (PIs) are contained in OIG's recent semiannual report to Congress, along with a roundup of audit findings and other administrative actions (RRC will discuss the rest of the SAR in an upcoming issue). NSF OIG's SARs are required reading for research integrity officers and others with oversight of NSF funds—more so than SARs issued by other agencies across the government.

That's because NSF OIG's SARs contain the only acknowledgement of research misconduct investigations and outcomes of research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification, plagiarism and questionable research practices that occur in NSF-funded research or misdeeds among its own workers. The SARs do not identify the PI by name, sometimes not even revealing the gender nor the affiliated institution, and provide few specifics about cases—even those adjudicated in court with convictions and sentences.

In contrast, misconduct in HHS-supported research is publicly reported by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) as each settlement is reached or a sanction imposed shortly after the action occurs. ORI also names names and, when applicable, even cites the title of published papers that are retracted as a result of its findings.

For each misconduct finding by OIG, NSF adjudicates the case—either accepting or disagreeing with the assessment and imposing sanctions as applicable. It does not always confirm an OIG finding or require the same remedial or corrective actions that OIG recommends; when they differ, typically NSF's sanctions are less severe.

The lone new finding, against the now-terminated professor, involved a series of explanations for allegations that he had “altered a figure in a manuscript to show a desired result rather than the experimental result obtained by his graduate students.” According to OIG, the university's investigation committee (IC) found no evidence to support his explanation that he had simply made a correction “because his students had not properly analyzed the experimental data.” The committee uncovered two more allegations. “In both instances, graduate students alleged the professor gave them questionable data of unknown origin,” OIG said.

This document is only available to subscribers. Please log in or purchase access.

[Purchase Login](#)
