

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 15, Number 5. May 31, 2018 IRB Approval 'Irregularities' at Pitt Spark PI Debarment, \$132K Payment

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By Theresa Defino

In a rare, if not unique occurrence, a principal investigator (PI) at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) agreed to pay the U.S. government \$132,000 and be debarred for more than a year to settle allegations that he falsely claimed in award applications and progress reports that he had received institutional review board (IRB) approval for his research.

Over a 10-year period, Christian Schunn, Ph.D., a Pitt professor of psychology, submitted “false IRB approval” information on “multiple occasions” related to National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded research, the government contended in announcing the settlement with Schunn. The actions were alleged to be violations of the False Claims Act. However, Schunn did not admit to any wrongdoing, and his attorney downplayed the settlement in an email exchange with RRC.

Schunn’s attorney, Efrem Grail, told RRC he “is pleased to have resolved all allegations against him in order to focus on his teaching and scholarship, which has never been questioned.” He said Schunn is “in good standing” as both a professor and as senior scientist at Pitt’s Learning Research & Development Center.

Although Schunn was not identified by name, as OIG’s practice is to withhold identification of investigators and institutions involved, OIG’s March 2015 semi-annual report to Congress contains details that seem to match this situation.

“A PI at a Pennsylvania university fabricated a document showing his project’s required IRB approval, and submitted the fabricated document to NSF. The PI admitted he had fabricated the IRB approval and the university has initiated an investigation. In response (sic) to our recommendation, NSF suspended the award—with \$1,619,844 unexpended—pending conclusion of our investigation,” the March 2015 report explained in a section on “administrative investigation.” No subsequent semiannual reports have mentioned this situation.

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