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FBI Special Agent Recommends Strategies To Secure Info From Economic Espionage

By Theresa Defino

While working on a master's degree at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., Ana Belen Montes was "recruited" to be a spy for the Cuban government, later carrying out her espionage over a 16-year period during which she was a Cuban analyst for the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.

Peter Lapp was the FBI agent who led the investigation and personally arrested Montes in 2001; she is serving a 25-year sentence arranged through a plea deal.

The fact that Montes "was spotted and then ultimately recruited by the Cubans on an academic campus, to me, validates the reason why the FBI needs to be engaged with the academic community and have an understanding of what they do and vice versa," said Lapp, a special agent and private sector coordinator in the FBI's Washington, D.C., field office.

Recently, NIH director Francis Collins warned organizations that they need to be concerned about "foreign influences," related mostly to possible sharing of confidential information obtained through peer review, receipt and lack of disclosure of foreign funding by NIH-supported researchers, and "diversion of intellectual property" (*RRC 9/18, p. 1*).

According to Lapp, the threat to universities is real and "two or three-fold." He cited the Montes example as evidence of "foreign intelligence services targeting students while they're young." In addition, U.S. adversaries want "a competitive advantage" and are "targeting research" to get it, he said.

Regardless of the country doing the recruiting, students are vulnerable as their thoughts and minds "are still being molded," Lapp said. As in Montes' case, these individuals are then placed on a path to work at the CIA, FBI, and other intelligence agencies, Lapp said, or within universities and other research institutions where they may try to conduct what he termed "economic espionage."

Speaking as part of the National Council of Entrepreneurial Tech Transfer's Countering Economic Espionage and Trade Secret Theft webinar, Lapp outlined "reasonable steps" that institutions should take to secure information, including procedures for when workers leave. He also discussed the role of the FBI, and the importance of contacting the agency's local offices before becoming a "victim."

In his remarks, Lapp explained that universities need to be concerned about the theft of trade secrets as well as economic espionage, and clarified the connection between the two.

As Lapp explained, "foreign intelligence is other countries, including us, trying to acquire intelligence from our adversaries to better advise the policy makers so that they can make decisions based on the intelligence."

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