

Report on Research Compliance Volume 17, Number 7. June 25, 2020 Institutions Pushing Back Against Removing PIs From Awards, Despite Harassment Findings

By Theresa Defino

In the first six months of this year, NIH removed 24 individuals from its peer review panels, and at least 14 researchers lost their status as principal investigators (PIs) on awards, due to allegations or findings related to sexual harassment and other misconduct such as bullying and creating an unsafe research environment.

But the numbers could potentially be higher, because NIH is encountering resistance from institutions that insist a sanctioned investigator can still be a PI. In fact, some are essentially telling NIH their actions are sufficient and to “leave us alone,” according to Carrie Wolinetz, one of the top NIH officials charged with rooting out sexual and other types of harassment among NIH awardee institutions.

Wolinetz made her comments as part of an update from the Working Group on Changing the Culture to End Sexual Harassment, which she co-chairs, on NIH’s efforts since December to implement the groups’ recommendations.^[1] (See related story for working group member Angela Rasmussen’s reactions to NIH’s “slow” progress and her thoughts on other efforts it needs to undertake.)^[2]

Speaking during the Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) meeting, Wolinetz, also associate director for science policy and acting chief of staff to NIH Director Francis Collins, said institutions are willing to remove PIs from supervisory positions and teaching duties and impose other restrictions as a result of harassment issues.

“But we don’t think you should do anything to the grant” a PI had, institutions have said to NIH, according to Wolinetz. This has happened with “a number of institutions,” she said, and reflects a practice known as “protecting the rainmakers.”

Wolinetz said at the ACD meeting last month that she wanted to share NIH’s concern over this “to spark discussion” and because it is something the research enterprise “needs to grapple [with].”

Institutions are taking this position even though they acknowledge “it is not safe for [the PI] to supervise people or train graduate students or post-docs,” said Wolinetz. “In our view, that’s not really in keeping with the focus on safe environments that we’ve really been trying to promote under the leadership of the ACD.” If the PI can’t be trusted around others, “there might be an issue with trust for public dollars” and with the person’s ability to meet other terms of the award, she said.

Little Response to Concern

The pushback from institutions “does seem to support this perception, which we heard about a lot through the work of the ACD working group and continue to hear, that institutions are protecting their rainmakers; essentially, that funded PIs are protected even if they’re compromising the safety of the research environment,” Wolinetz said.

No solutions to this issue were raised at the ACD meeting, although Collins and working group co-chair Francis Cuss said they shared Wolinetz’s concerns.

“I'm really rather disappointed, but not surprised, that the institutions are beginning to adapt to the new reality” of NIH pushing them to act on sexual harassment, said Cuss, a retired research executive formerly with Bristol-Myers Squibb. He added that “certainly some members of the working group who had experience with this warned us this would happen.”

Working group members “had a very large debate” about whether NIH should take action against an institution in such instances and “more teeth” should be added to its policies and requirements, he said.

“There’s some effort maybe now to try to game the system and limit the requirements to actually take a firm action that’s needed,” Collins acknowledged. “We think we’re making progress, but it took us, I’m afraid, a long time to get into this difficult place. It’s turning out that it is not that easy to change the culture, but...we’re really serious about changing the culture for the women in science so that there’s an opportunity for the diversity that we know is correlated with scientific productivity to flourish and not to be in some way intimidated or set off in the corner.”

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