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OIG Details Missteps by Universities Handling Suspected Misconduct in NSF-Funded Research

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A principal investigator (PI) who was initially accused of one instance of plagiarism noted that he had similarly copied text into two other National Science Foundation (NSF) proposals as a way of explaining how he did citations in applications versus in publications. But, as the NSF Office of Inspector General described it, “the PI’s response to our inquiry did not dispel the allegation,” and OIG ultimately determined he had “knowingly committed plagiarism” in three proposals by inserting text from three sources.^[1]

But the PI’s university had itself found that he was “not culpable” for four instances of plagiarism because he “did not realize he needed to be as thorough with citations in a proposal as he did in a publication”—reasoning OIG called “inconsistent and contrary to NSF guidance.”

This is among five research misconduct cases that OIG concluded during the six-month period ending Sept. 30 that are now awaiting action by NSF. The fact that the university didn’t make a finding but that OIG said one was warranted is a common theme among the cases, which are described in broad outlines without identifying details in OIG’s most recent semiannual report (SAR) to Congress. In a half-dozen other cases, NSF made misconduct findings and imposed sanctions of up to three years against investigators.^[2]

Another theme—as this case also demonstrates—is that some universities are mishandling allegations of misconduct.

In the case involving citations, OIG explained that it received an allegation of one instance of plagiarism “in a single proposal,” but its investigation turned up three examples in the proposal. The PI told OIG “similar copied text appeared in two other proposals he submitted,” and OIG referred the case to the university. But in investigating four allegations, the university made no finding, accepting the PI’s explanation that he didn’t know the proper way to include citations. Believing the university had erred, OIG “conducted a full review of the allegations and evidence.”

OIG officials recommended NSF make a finding due to the fact that the PI “stated he understood plagiarism but did not exercise the same care with citations in a proposal as in a publication.”

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