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In the Lab, Embracing Compliance, Openness Foster Research Integrity

By Theresa Defino

Institutions may try to drill into their investigators (or, more likely, require them to complete a few online training programs) the importance of not engaging in data fabrication, plagiarism or other actions that threaten research integrity.

But it is believed that the day-to-day practices in the research lab, under the tutelage of a leader who “models professionalism and integrity,” provide a foundation that fosters good practices, as does an open environment that welcomes admissions of problems or mistakes by members of the research team.

In confessing to misconduct, it is not uncommon for individuals to say they were driven by the pressure to provide expected results and felt they would have lost too much if they admitted a failing. Lab practices and related strategies can also help ensure rigor and reproducibility of research, two issues of growing concern to NIH and other funding agencies.

To learn about the practices that support rigorous research and compliance in labs, a trio of researchers from the University of Washington in St. Louis (WUSTL) recently went straight to the source, interviewing more than 50 established investigators, who they termed “exemplars,” with a reputation for both high-quality science and integrity who were nominated by their peers and vetted by an external panel of researchers. They produced two related papers based on the responses.

“The lab management practices of ‘Research Exemplars’ that foster research rigor and regulatory compliance: A qualitative study of successful principal investigators,” was published April 24, 2019, in *PLOS ONE*. The second paper, “Leading for research excellence and integrity: A qualitative investigation of the relationship-building practices of exemplary principal investigators,” was published in the May 19 issue of *Accountability in Research*.

The papers were authored by Alison Antes, Ashley Kuykendall, at the time a WUSTL School of Medicine research assistant, and James M. DuBois. Antes is an assistant professor and assistant director of the Bioethics Research Center in the Division of General Medical Sciences in the WUSTL School of Medicine. DuBois, a professor of medical ethics and professionalism, and professor of psychology, is the center’s director. Both are also instructors for the center’s Professionalism & Integrity in Research program, which seeks to retrain principal investigators (PIs) who may have been accused of research misconduct. DuBois, the program director, founded the initiative with funding from the HHS Office of Research Integrity.

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