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After Investigation Finds 'Mismanagement' UT Austin Suspends PI, Repays NSF \$1.3M

By Theresa Defino

A University of Texas at Austin principal investigator (PI) who, in the words of the National Science Foundation Office of Inspector General (OIG), “generally mismanaged funds” from four NSF awards, was suspended for a year without pay, among other sanctions, but he apparently kept his job, RRC has learned.

For its part, UT Austin repaid NSF \$1,336,625.20, which was the full amount of the PI’s awards at issue; the PI also made some contribution toward the repayment. Details of the repayment and disciplinary actions, which occurred sometime last fall, have not previously been public. RRC inquired about the situation after seeing a mention of it in OIG’s most recent semiannual report to Congress, which covers the period from Oct. 1, 2020, to March 31.^[1]

RRC was able to piece together some facts about the mismanagement through documents OIG provided in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, but the identity of the PI remains unknown. UT Austin gave RRC limited answers to questions about the situation. Still, the scenario provides a rare look into how at least one university punished but yet still retained an arguably troubled PI, and the repercussions for the institution.

OIG provided RRC with a closeout memorandum for case number 1-20-0073-O, which contains no identifying details but which OIG said concerns the UT Austin situation. It also sent RRC a copy of a partially redacted, single-page letter that UT Austin’s Office of Sponsored Projects sent to OIG. The sender’s name, for example, is redacted, as are the award numbers and the name of the PI. The letter was sent sometime in 2020; the month and date were redacted.

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