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Misconduct Tales: 'Similarity Index,' Years of Faked Data, Plagiarized Proposals, No Quotes

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As the National Science Foundation (NSF) and NIH both work to encourage (or mandate) data sharing, where falsified or fabricated data ends up and ensuring all of it is retracted and removed is likely to become a greater concern than a simple retraction of a paper in the event of research misconduct.

But as the NSF Office of Inspector General (OIG) recently discovered, even getting a retraction may not be simple. In its most recent report to Congress, OIG is recommending NSF impose sanctions against a professor who committed research misconduct yet refused to allow a retraction, even when ordered by his university.

The professor and his graduate student are among the half-dozen for whom OIG is recommending sanctions, such as training and proof of data integrity via certifications, for research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. Their cases are included in OIG's semiannual report (SAR) covering the second half of fiscal year 2021, which ended Sept. 30.^[1] NSF has not yet taken action in these cases.

OIG also reported that NSF collected more than \$2.5 million from universities and a firm for financial mismanagement and other errors (and crimes) by investigators.^[2] A future issue of RRC will explore OIG and NSF actions over the full fiscal year.

As is its tradition and in contrast to findings of misconduct in Public Health Service-funded studies issued by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI), the SAR identifies neither investigators nor institutions, nor offers any possibly identifying details, such as the type of research at issue. ORI findings of misconduct, which contain names and specifics, are published on its website and in the *Federal Register*.

The pair were accused together of "misrepresent[ing] data in a publication and deposit[ing] the data in a genetic sequence database." However, as OIG described it, "the university investigated [their actions] separately."

As OIG explained, "the investigation committee determined that the graduate student committed research misconduct, engaged in reckless acts of data falsification, and violated the student conduct code. The graduate student knowingly drew conclusions that were not supported by the experimental results and submitted those data in a manuscript for publication and to a public database."

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