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# NSF Award Mismanagement, Publication Ban Among Costly Actions by Researchers

By Theresa Defino

During the second half of fiscal year 2021, which ended Sept. 30, the National Science Foundation (NSF) collected more than $2.5 million from six universities and a spinoff firm for a panoply of (sometimes alleged) mistakes and misdeeds. In four cases, NSF has either debarred the investigator involved or has been recommended to do so by OIG.

The paybacks and settlements are broadly outlined in the most recent semiannual report (SAR) to Congress of NSF actions and Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigations.[1] The report spans from April 1 to Sept. 30, 2021, and also includes six cases for which OIG is recommending NSF make findings of misconduct.[2]

As is its practice, OIG does not reveal the names of investigators or institutions. To learn more, *RRC* has filed Freedom of Information Act requests and will report additional details if they become available.

## Violations, Destroyed Research Draw Reprimand

OIG also reported that it issued a letter of reprimand to a principal investigator (PI) despite infractions leading to the destruction of her research and a payout to NSF. This case is part of OIG's administrative investigations.

"Our office investigates a variety of allegations that are not pursued as criminal or civil matters or do not meet the strict definition of research misconduct. These cases, which are resolved administratively, include allegations such as misallocation of grant funds, violations of human and animal subjects' regulations, violations of peer review confidentiality, conflicts of interest, or employee misconduct," OIG explained.

At some time during the period from Oct. 1, 2019, to March 31, 2020, a university suspended the PI's research "after her university's Institutional Review Board determined there was serious, continuing noncompliance with regulations governing research with human subjects." She apparently did not obtain "proper informed consent" and improperly collected "human and animal biospecimens from a foreign country."[3]

The university took the seemingly rare step of destroying the PI's "affected research data and biospecimens" and then identified "costs associated with the collection and analysis of the destroyed samples."

Costs spanned two NSF awards—$300,000 from a closed award and more than $50,000 from an award that was active at the time. All told, the university repaid NSF $370,000, which included "almost $20,000 in other unallowable costs."

During the period covered by the new report, "the university concluded its investigation of the PI's misconduct and determined that the inadequate administration of the NSF-funded research stemmed from the PI's unintentional errors regarding applicable regulations," OIG said. The university "implemented additional oversight of the PI's research."

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OIG said it "concurred" with the university's conclusions and actions. For its part, OIG "sent the PI a warning letter emphasizing PI responsibilities regarding human subject and vertebrate animal use protocols, and accurate and timely reporting." It did not recommend NSF impose any sanctions against her.

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