

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 19, Number 4. March 24, 2022

### Vice Chancellor Blames Pressure for Plagiarism; Resigns After Faculty Pushed for Accountability

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By Theresa Defino

Terry Magnuson, the long-time research vice chancellor at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, described his three instances of plagiarism inserted in a National Cancer Institute (NCI) award application as a “mistake” that occurred when he failed to correct text he previously entered as a “placeholder.” He knew time was short to address reviewer comments, Magnuson said, but didn’t want to let his lab staff down by not completing the resubmission.

Ultimately, disappointment of Magnuson wouldn’t just rest with his lab members but with UNC’s faculty. After the plagiarized text was found—discovered, RRC has learned, during NIH’s peer review process—and a misconduct finding announced by the HHS Office of Research Integrity (ORI), Magnuson, a geneticist, resigned.

But he didn’t step down until after a call by UNC faculty chair Mimi Chapman, who publicly asked why he had remained in his position days after the finding had been issued.<sup>[1]</sup> A day after his resignation was announced, Magnuson issued a lengthy statement explaining what happened and why he was resigning.<sup>[2]</sup> He did not apologize and blamed his schedule for the plagiarism. In an interview with RRC, Chapman raised questions about how UNC handled the situation and said it offered a different lesson than the one Magnuson described.

Plagiarism, along with fabrication and falsification, constitutes the type of violation defined as research misconduct under HHS regulations. ORI’s announcement about Magnuson said he had admitted to the misconduct and agreed to a supervisory plan for 22 months.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to the fact that Magnuson may be the highest-ranking official charged with ensuring research integrity who has been found guilty of misconduct, the case is striking because Magnuson was still in the job at the time of the announcement, and, as noted, remained so for several days. The case also drew attention because the finding marked ORI’s first since September 2021.

According to ORI’s notice, Magnuson inserted plagiarized text from three online articles and one published paper into several sections of an NCI grant application, “Genome-wide dynamics of chromatin modifiers,” submitted March 1, 2021. He settled voluntarily with ORI effective Feb. 25 of this year, but ORI did not announce the agreement until March 8.

Under HHS regulations, organizations faced with an allegation of misconduct are generally required to undertake a two-step process: a limited inquiry followed by a more extensive investigation, ending with a finding and sanctions if there is a misconduct determination (or no finding and the matter is dropped at the institutional level). Even if NIH receives the complaint, it is still the institution’s job to investigate.

However, ORI told RRC that under 42 C.F.R. § 93.316, “an institution can close their proceeding during any stage on the basis that the respondent admitted guilt once ORI is notified and concurs.” This is the case here, according to an ORI spokesperson.

RRC also tried to learn the source of the allegation and how the plagiarism was found. “The allegation came from

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NIH, during peer review of the respondent's R01 grant application," an ORI spokesperson said, referring to Magnuson. "The institution conducted an assessment, questioned the respondent, who then admitted to the misconduct, and the institution notified ORI." Any information on how "would compromise the confidentiality afforded to the complainant," the spokesperson said.

## Plagiarism Was in Resubmission

Magnuson did not respond to questions and requests for comment emailed to him in the period following the misconduct finding nor return a phone message from RRC. In his March 11 statement posted online, Magnuson said, in part:

As you may know, when I took on the responsibilities of vice chancellor for research, I continued to serve as the PI [principal investigator] of my lab in the Department of Genetics. I am deeply committed to the research my lab does and scientifically interacting with my incredible colleagues. I also felt this involvement would allow me to stay in touch with the day-to-day issues that affect our researchers as they go about their jobs. While the perspective it provided me was at times extremely useful – particularly in helping me understand the practical challenges of running lab operations during the pandemic – taking on both roles overextended my time.

I first submitted the proposal to NCI in 2019 and it was reviewed favorably. In March 2020, just as the pandemic was hitting the nation and the University, I learned that the proposal scored well and was near the fundable range. Time passed, and after about six months, I got word there wasn't funding available for it, so I let it drop in the face of the pandemic. The University and the world had much more pressing issues to deal with at that point. But my lab and students felt the project was worthwhile and urged me to resubmit. So, with a short timeline before the deadline for resubmittal in 2021, I picked the proposal back up and began to address some of the comments I had received to resubmit. I felt a responsibility to my lab and did not want to let them down by not pursuing what had been a well-scored, fundable proposal.

But you cannot write a grant spending 30 minutes writing and then shifting to deal with the daily crises and responsibilities of a senior leadership position in the university, only to get back to the grant when you find another 30 minutes free.

Magnuson said he was stepping down because he, as vice chancellor for research, and the office "must always be above reproach." He said he had "accepted responsibility for what occurred," and called the supervisory plan or "discipline" from ORI "appropriate." He added that he hoped his situation "serves as [a] teachable moment for us all," or as he put it, "wake-up call to PI's that they should not be trying to write proposals that demand concentrated and focused attention if one is under the burden of pressing administrative duties, and they should rigorously screen those proposals before submission, especially if multiple people are contributing."

It is not clear why Magnuson mentioned "multiple people." No other individuals are named in the misconduct finding. For its part, UNC also did not answer any questions posed by RRC. "We are not able to discuss confidential personnel matters regarding individual cases of policy violations due to privacy laws, but the University continues to follow the standards and processes set forth by the Office of Research Integrity and our

research sponsors,” officials said in a statement on March 18.

As noted, Magnuson didn’t resign for several days. On March 10, two days after the finding, Chapman, chair of the faculty, Frank A. Daniels Distinguished Professor for Human Service Policy Information and associate dean for Doctoral Education School of Social Work, sent a message to “all faculty and other members of the campus community” that she wrote was sent “this afternoon.”

## **‘Confidence’ in Leaders Essential**

Chapman wrote that she had been hearing from faculty members campus wide who were “concerned that Vice Chancellor Magnuson has not stepped down from his position. As a faculty, we believe that this situation has the potential to taint our own scholarship and gives the impression that some members of our community are ‘untouchable’ while for others such a situation would be a career-ender. Every hour, I have been hoping that an announcement would come so that I would not have to make this statement,” she said, asking that UNC’s chancellor and provost “resolve this situation in the interests of the institution and out of respect to this faculty with all deliberate speed.” She said the faculty was “heavy hearted” at hearing the misconduct finding but added that “our constituencies must have confidence in us, and we must have confidence in those who lead our research enterprise.”

Kevin M. Guskiewicz, UNC chancellor, and Christopher Clemens, provost and chief academic officer, said in a statement posted online that they had accepted Magnuson’s resignation that day.<sup>[4]</sup> “The University has a very specific role it must play in these matters, and it followed its federally mandated policy regarding research misconduct,” they said. “Terry accepts responsibility for his mistake and will share more with you about his experience tomorrow,” referring to Magnuson’s March 11 statement.

Asked if she had concerns about how long it took UNC to act, Chapman said much remains unknown. “We know more about what the timeline was last week, but we don’t really know what happened before then,” she said in the March 16 call to RRC. “Who was notified when, what choices were made at various points along the way? I just don’t have any sense of that. That hasn’t come out.”

Although there were a “couple” of people who opposed Chapman’s call for Magnuson to resign, saying it was “too harsh a sanction for him,” the “majority have appreciated the statement,” Chapman said. “There have been texts and tweets and phone calls and emails saying, ‘Thank you for making that statement.’”

Magnuson is the Kay M. & Van L. Weatherspoon eminent distinguished professor of genetics and founding chair of the department of genetics. In his online post, Magnuson said that he “will return to my lab and role as faculty in the School of Medicine. I will continue to serve as PI on my grants and continue to submit proposals to advance the science in my lab and my field. The School of Medicine will monitor my work per the outcome of the investigation.”

Chapman had no comment on whether Magnuson should face more repercussions beyond losing the vice chancellor slot. She also addressed Magnuson’s “teachable moment” that awards should not be hurriedly written and that screening before submission should occur.

“I think [this situation] may be instructive in thinking about juggling administrative and faculty roles and how people do that,” Chapman told RRC. “As I understand it, this position was structured where he’s the vice chancellor for research and spending 40% time on that and 60% of his time in the lab, or some similar balance.”

But “being the vice chancellor for research for a \$4 billion research endeavor of this campus is probably a full-time job,” she said. “And, so, it just seems to me that that piece needs to be rethought.” Chapman said this sort of

change might need to be made by the UNC administration and trustees.

But, at least for now, a person with a similar background is stepping in for Magnuson.

Guskiewicz and Clemens announced that following Magnuson's last day of March 11, the interim vice chancellor for research is Penny Gordon-Larsen, associate dean for research at the Gillings School of Global Public Health and Carla Smith Chamblee distinguished professor of global nutrition. "In her current role, Gordon-Larsen leads the Gillings School's \$200 million research enterprise and is a leading nutritional science researcher. We thank her for her willingness to step in to ensure a smooth transition," they said.

Contact Chapman at [mimi@email.unc.edu](mailto:mimi@email.unc.edu).

**1** Mimi V. Chapman, "Message from the Chair about research integrity," Office of Faculty Governance, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, March 10, 2022, <https://unc.live/3topdZW>.

**2** Terry Magnuson, "Message to Campus and a Word of Thanks," Vice Chancellor for Research, UNC Research Home, March 11, 2022, March 11, 2022, <https://unc.live/3tmayyr>.

**3** "Case Summary: Magnuson, Terry," HHS Office of Research Integrity, March 8, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3IqUnWd>.

**4** Kevin M. Guskiewicz and Christopher Clemens, "A message about Terry Magnuson, vice chancellor for research," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, March 10, 2022, <https://unc.live/3wk8uJQ>.

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