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'Tragic Sequence of Mistakes, Errors: 'Tales of Misconduct in NSF Research

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In the last fiscal year (FY), the National Science Foundation (NSF) imposed sanctions in 11 cases of research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism. Just three cases involved plagiarism, the lowest number in at least 12 years, according to data presented in the NSF Office of Inspector General's (OIG) new semiannual report to Congress, issued Nov. 30.

Until this year, plagiarism has typically made up the bulk of NSF findings, which result from investigations and recommendations conducted by OIG. In addition to misconduct cases, the new report provides a summary of findings for audits completed from April 1, 2016, to Sept. 30. OIG routinely publishes these audits when they are completed but does not do so with misconduct cases, which makes semiannual reports required reading for those overseeing compliance with NSF-funded research and applications for funding.

Hints as to what kinds of misconduct may be going on in NSF-funded research, in proposals and other areas of OIG's jurisdiction are found only in semiannual reports or, rarely, when presented in testimony before Congress or in other public forums. Even then, NSF does not share any details that would identify either the investigator or the affiliated institution or small business engaged in misconduct. The cases actually contain less details than in the past. OIG used to describe the region of the country where errant investigators were based; geographic information has now been stripped from the report.

Although often revealing, OIG's mentions of misconduct cases in its semiannual reports are high-level summaries generally a few paragraphs in length. The reports typically provide a listing of both cases it recently forwarded to NSF for a finding and those for which NSF took action during the reporting period.

In contrast, HHS's Office of Research Integrity (ORI) publishes research misconduct findings in the *Federal Register* and on its website, providing investigator and institution names, and specific details of each instance where data or images were plagiarized, falsified or fabricated and where they occurred. When appropriate, publication dates are provided, for example, as well as whether the finding resulted in a retraction. HHS OIG is not involved in misconduct cases, except when they coincidentally may lead to criminal or civil investigations.

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