

Report on Research Compliance Volume 19, Number 6. May 26, 2022 Common, Costly, Preventable? NSF OIG Finds Pearls in Review of 10 Years of Plagiarism Cases

By Theresa Defino

When Terry Magnuson resigned in April as research vice chancellor at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill after admitting to three instances of plagiarism in the resubmission of a funding application, he blamed his “mistake” on being “over-extended” performing his academic duties as well as running a genetics lab.^[1]

While Magnuson may be the most prominent investigator to get caught for this type of research misconduct—the other kinds are fabrication and falsification—his explanation wasn’t atypical, according to a new report by the National Science Foundation (NSF) Office of Inspector General (OIG) that reviewed 10 years of data. Nearly 30% of 137 individuals who were found to have committed plagiarism from 2007 to 2017 cited “time pressure” among their explanations, the *Observations from NSF Plagiarism Investigations and Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism* report shows.^{[2][3]}

The extensive report does more than provide insights into the who and the why of plagiarism; it offers sometimes surprising demographics and characteristics of the perpetrators. Then, using that data, it shows a path forward with strategies to help prevent plagiarism among high- and low-profile investigators. Although based on NSF cases, the recommendations are applicable to other federal awarding agencies and investigators. The plagiarism by Magnuson, who resigned as vice chancellor and agreed to a three-year supervisory plan, was in an application to NIH, specifically the National Cancer Institute.

Aliza Sacknovitz, senior investigative scientist in OIG’s Research Integrity and Administrative Investigations Division and author of the report, spoke extensively to RRC about the findings and the agency’s goals for the report. She also answered a question that may have arisen after OIG’s most recent semiannual report (SAR) to Congress was issued: For OIG and NSF, at least, there is *no* acceptable level of plagiarism.

While fabrication and falsification in research arguably do more damage than plagiarism—though they may bring equal shame on an institution and an investigator (if identified)—plagiarism is far more common, and perhaps more amenable to training and other institutional interventions to prevent and thwart it.

“For this review, we examined 134 plagiarism cases involving 137 subjects against whom NSF made findings of research misconduct for plagiarism,” the new report states. The individuals “were affiliated with 106 unique institutions and their acts of plagiarism occurred in 320 NSF proposals.”

For comparison, a 2017 SAR by NSF OIG to Congress showed that, during the same 10-year period reviewed in the new report, NSF made 30 findings of fabrication/falsification and five that were characterized as “multi,” meaning “an allegation of plagiarism and either fabrication or falsification.”^[4]

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