

Report on Research Compliance Volume 19, Number 8. July 28, 2022 In New Report, NSF OIG Shares Details on Misbehaving Investigators, Retraction Fight

By Theresa Defino

A lecturer stole others' remarks and passed them off as his own, yet called his actions "an honest error." An investigator copied parts of a funding application he was reviewing for the National Science Foundation (NSF) into his own award bid, later falsely blaming his "collaborators" for the plagiarism.

And then there is the odd case of a post-graduate student who, five years after receiving an NSF-funded Ph.D., apparently was moved by a guilty conscience to disclose his history of falsifying data in posters, publications and in his own dissertation—leading to the Ph.D. being rescinded.

These three are among five investigations of research misconduct—defined as fabrication, falsification or plagiarism—the NSF Office of Inspector General (OIG) completed and presented to NSF for action during the first half of fiscal year (FY) 2022.^[1] In two of the five, OIG is recommending debarment.

Overall, during the period from Oct. 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, nine investigators supported by NSF were debarred or agreed to voluntarily exclude themselves from government programs for misdeeds ranging from embezzlement to mail and wire fraud.

Additionally, NSF made five findings of research misconduct in previously investigated cases, but only one involved debarment; in a second case of note, NSF was unsuccessful in its push for a retraction.^[2] As is its practice, NSF's OIG details its investigative, audit and other oversight activities in semiannual reports (SARs) to Congress.

Most of OIG's actions take the form of recommendations to NSF, which has the final say in imposing sanctions. SARs also include NSF decisions, as the agency does not release them independently. Highlighted are any criminal or civil cases that are resolved during a reporting period.

Research integrity officers, who need to both try to prevent and investigate research misconduct, can learn valuable lessons from studying SARs, which provide glimpses into the sometimes audacious, unethical and improper behaviors troubled investigators may engage in. SARs also reveal a range of sanctions universities themselves impose, and discuss flaws OIG may find in a university's investigation.

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