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By Theresa Defino

◆ **Hired under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA), staff referred to as IPAs assist the National Science Foundation (NSF) as temporary directors, advisors and leaders.** IPAs “bring fresh perspectives and innovative approaches to solving problems facing the federal government,” NSF’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) said in a recent audit. But whether NSF’s process for vetting IPAs is sufficient to ensure candidates meet all IPA program and NSF requirements wasn’t clear, OIG said. After reviewing 25 IPA assignments from 150 new IPA agreements that began in 2018 and 2019, auditors determined NSF “did not always ensure that IPA candidates met all program eligibility requirements or verify IPA’s salary and employment history,” nor did the agency revise its security and “suitability review process to address risks associated with foreign influence,” OIG said in a Jan. 9 report.

Decentralized processes led to problems, OIG said, adding, “there is no single office or individual [with] full visibility of the entire vetting process.” Auditors also discovered one instance where “NSF deviated from its process of basing [an] individual’s salary on that of the home institution, and the Office of the Director instead negotiated a salary of \$250,000 with the individual. The individual then provided false information about both the start date and salary at Institution B, which the individual reported as \$250,000. A senior official at Institution B also falsely stated that the individual’s “actual salary paid” was \$250,000, even though the position was unpaid.” Documentation showed the individual’s previous position was at “Institution A,” which “had not applied for the IPA program but was eligible to become an approved institution. However, the individual obtained an additional unpaid position at a different institution (Institution B) that had already been approved for the IPA program,” and “only appointed the individual to a research position to enable the individual to serve as an IPA at NSF.” OIG referred this case to the Department of Justice, which declined to prosecute. NSF accepted OIG’s five recommendations, including that it “update procedures to validate Intergovernmental Personnel Act candidates’ employment and salary at their home institutions, as well as any other information necessary to confirm eligibility for an Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignment,” “strengthen the vetting process for Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignees to address foreign influence-related issues” and “incorporate a step within the Intergovernmental Personnel Act assignee vetting process to identify and address harassment-related issues.” (1/19/23)

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