

Report on Research Compliance Volume 20, Number 3. February 23, 2023

Misconduct Spurs NSF Debarments; OIG Highlights Prevention Efforts

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A graduate student working on projects supported by two federal agencies added doctored images in years of progress reports. A professor submitted multiple proposals to the National Science Foundation (NSF) containing text purloined from materials he received in confidence as a reviewer. A postdoctoral researcher passed off fabricated and falsified data as “original work.”

NSF has proposed debarment of the three for research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification or plagiarism, but decisions are not final due to an appeals process, according to NSF’s Office of Inspector General (OIG).

The agency finalized lesser sanctions for three additional investigators for similar instances of research misconduct, and debarred another three for other misdeeds, according to OIG’s most recent semiannual report to Congress (these will be discussed in a future issue of *RRC*).^[1] OIG itself does not issue findings or impose punishments but makes recommendations to NSF. OIG, in turn, issues twice yearly reports summarizing NSF’s decisions. Generally—and as reflected in the report—NSF follows OIG’s lead.

OIG Doesn’t Identify Investigators, Institutions

When a debarment is for research misconduct, NSF gives the individual “an opportunity to appeal,” OIG officials explained in an email to *RRC*. “We report NSF’s actions as of the end of the [reporting period]. If the appeal period had not yet ended, or if the action was not finalized for another reason...we would report the action as ‘proposed.’”

Debarred individuals cannot participate in federally supported programs or receive U.S. funding for research and other purposes. Aside from criminal or civil prosecution and financial penalties, debarment is the most serious sanction the government can impose for research misconduct.

As is its practice, OIG did not disclose the identities of individuals (or their institutions) accused or found guilty of wrongdoing in the new report, which covers the period ending Sept. 30. In some cases, it also did not identify a gender for the person. This lack of detail contrasts with misconduct findings made by the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) in studies supported by NIH and other HHS agencies. ORI, which publishes individuals’ names and the university, company or other entity that employed them on its website and in the *Federal Register*, recently gained a new director.^[2]

The proposed debarments, which range from one-to-three years, are among sanctions NSF imposed in a total of six research misconduct cases NSF resolved in the last half of fiscal year 2022.

The graduate student would receive the longest debarment of the three if NSF finalizes its proposed action—three years.

As OIG explained, the student was an NSF graduate research fellow working on both NSF and NIH-funded research. “The student allegedly rotated and cropped images and used identical images to represent different

results,” and the person’s “university investigated and concluded that the student intentionally committed fabrication and falsification.” The university imposed a series of sanctions and “reported the matter” to ORI. It does not appear ORI has made a finding in this case but without a name this can’t be confirmed.

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