

Report on Research Compliance Volume 20, Number 5. April 27, 2023 When It Comes to Misconduct, Fellows Appeared Uninformed, Unwilling, Hesitant to Report Suspicions

By Theresa Defino

Do you know what research misconduct is, and would you report it if you suspected it?

These deceptively simple questions reflect two pillars of research integrity: recognizing fabrication, falsification and plagiarism (and other untoward practices) and holding those who commit such acts accountable.

Yet more than 200 recipients of National Science Foundation (NSF) graduate research fellowships gave such troubling answers to these and other questions via an anonymous online survey that the authors of a paper deemed them “astonishingly uninformed” and in need of better training that uses real-world examples of unallowable behaviors.

Previous research has “contended that the ultimate responsibility to uncover misconduct rests on individual scientists, and indeed, whistleblowers have been the most common way prominent research fraud cases came to light,” the authors wrote. Yet only 30.7% of 244 fellows surveyed in 2019 said they would report a researcher suspected of misconduct; 60.7% (148) didn’t know if they would.

Additionally, when asked if they had heard of research misconduct in their field in the past five years, across the board, 63% of fellows said they had not, triggering the authors’ “astonishingly uninformed” comment.

The open-access paper, “NSF Fellows’ perceptions about incentives, research misconduct, and scientific integrity in STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] academia,” was published April 7 in *Nature Scientific Reports*.^[1] It was authored by Siddhartha Roy and Marc A. Edwards. Roy, formerly with the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Virginia Tech, where Edwards is a distinguished professor, is an environmental engineer and research associate at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Water Institute.

Their paper “provides the first ever snapshot of perceptions about academic cheating and research misconduct amongst [a] high-performing group of researchers,” wrote Roy and Edwards, adding “relatively little data” exists about this group and their thoughts on these subjects.

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