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OIG Report Highlights Misconduct Cases, Repayments to NSF for Salary 'Overlaps'

By Theresa Defino

A professor inserted a plagiarized research statement from a job seeker's resume into a National Science Foundation (NSF) proposal. That was the allegation that came to the NSF Office of Inspector General (OIG), and it turned out to be only the tip of the iceberg.

After OIG investigators "identified substantive copied text and figures from multiple sources, including the research statement, in the proposal," his university "discovered plagiarism in 16 additional proposals to 5 federal agencies, including 7 more NSF proposals."^[1] Ultimately, the university concluded the professor "intentionally committed 341 acts of plagiarism, including 147 acts in NSF proposals, totaling 808 lines of text and 45 figures."

This case is the sole completed research misconduct investigation awaiting NSF action that is described in OIG's new semiannual report to Congress which, per policy, does not identify investigator or institution names. The report reflects NSF and OIG enforcement and investigative activities for the second half of fiscal year (FY) 2023, which ended Sept. 30. NSF made one finding of research misconduct and suspended two awards due to allegations of misconduct.

The report also reveals that NSF received the lion's share of \$1.9 million in award repayment and penalties that Stanford University made governmentwide following a False Claims Act settlement stemming from a lack of disclosure of foreign affiliations. OIG also highlighted its recent efforts to address sexual harassment at NSF's Antarctic research stations.

University Enhanced RCR Training

In the pending research misconduct case, OIG is recommending that NSF debar the professor for three years, along with other more routine sanctions, such as submitting assurances and certifications confirming the integrity of any future work on NSF-funded projects. But he already faced numerous repercussions, including the loss of his job.

"The university terminated the professor's employment effective the end of the 2024 academic year and removed all his research responsibilities for the rest of his university appointment," OIG reported. "The university also voluntarily developed required RCR [responsible conduct of research] training for faculty and staff, a new course for graduate students, and a mentoring series for all faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, the professor's college is now requiring its faculty, staff, and students to attend Best Practices for Research Excellence workshops."

For its part, OIG "also found a small amount of plagiarism in a proposal not identified in the university investigation." In addition to the debarment, OIG is recommending a three-year ban on serving as an NSF reviewer or consultant and a "mentoring plan with annual certifications."

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