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MITRE: Risk Approach May Thwart Foreign Threats, Better Federal Info, Support Essential

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“I don’t want to be on the front page of the paper with my best researcher being dragged off in handcuffs. It doesn’t look good for our university,” a senior university administrator said. “Funding has gotten harder to get in the U.S. and it became easier to get from foreign sources in some cases,” said a principal investigator (PI). “So what’s driving this is the challenges in the U.S. research environment.”

These two comments are tucked inside a new study by The MITRE Corporation, *Improper Influence in Federally Funded Fundamental Research*,^[1] which captures the fears, challenges and possible solutions related to ensuring that collaborations with non-United States investigators and institutions are legal and proper. The administrator and PIs were among the 160 researchers as well as representatives of 19 universities and eight U.S. agencies whom MITRE officials interviewed last summer for the report.

In recent years, institutions have grappled with thwarting possible foreign alliances PIs may have that pose threats to intellectual property and other fruits of research. But their efforts, they say, have been hampered by a lack of useable information from agencies and other government sources—circumstances borne out in the MITRE study. Furthermore, they have struggled to take thoughtful actions that don’t inappropriately target acceptable—and hard won—arrangements.

In June, Michael Lauer, NIH deputy director for extramural research, reported that the agency was investigating nearly 400 researchers over possible inappropriate or undeclared foreign support.^[2]

At the same time, there have been a number of high-profile cases of criminal charges against investigators,^[3] and institutions have also paid a price. In December 2019, Van Andel Research Institute paid \$5.5 million to settle False Claims Act allegations related to two former researchers’ undisclosed support from China; half was restitution, and the balance was penalties.^[4]

MITRE’s study addresses these issues within the context of the federally funded fundamental research enterprise, what MITRE calls F3RE. It also refers to efforts that can be made as causes of action (COAs).

The study highlighted “areas of consensus among stakeholders about the nature and potential negative impacts of improper foreign government influence activities identified to-date,” but also documented “different perspectives about the effectiveness of existing and planned efforts to mitigate risks.”

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