



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: I-16-0059-O

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NSF OIG received an allegation from a University that a former graduate student (Subject) falsified data contained in published articles that acknowledged NSF and/or NIH funding. The University conducted an inquiry and determined an investigation was warranted into the Subject, his Ph.D. advisor (Advisor), and the Advisor's colleague (Researcher).

The University's investigation concluded that the Advisor and Researcher committed "reckless research misconduct through lax oversight, careless management of research projects, insufficient data retention, and willful ignorance of poor laboratory practices." It found that they exhibited a "systemic lack of oversight, guidance, and training," noted that, in addition to the Subject, "other trainees also falsified data, although not intentionally," and found evidence suggestive of "a larger problem in the laboratory." It also found numerous concerns regarding the Advisor's laboratory practices, including violations of NSF data retention rules, and inaccurate system setups.

Regarding the Subject, the University investigation concluded that the Subject intentionally committed research misconduct through image falsification and plagiarism. Its conclusion was primarily based on the Subject's non-NSF funded thesis and not the publications acknowledging NSF support, because, for the co-authored publications, it was unable to determine the responsible party or determined the act to be honest error.

The University took actions against the Subject, Advisor, and Researcher, and required that they retract or correct the published articles. The University also terminated the NSF and HHS awards on which the Advisor was named PI or Co-PI, resulting in the termination of one NSF award with \$280,000 of unspent funds that NSF could put to better use.

We reviewed the University's investigation reports. We determined that the actions of the Advisor and Researcher did not support a recommendation of research misconduct, per our regulation. We further determined that the University's actions addressed our concerns about the Advisor's laboratory practices and oversight, and adequately protected the research community. Lastly, we determined that the Subject's acts did not rise to the level of research misconduct, based on the limited NSF nexus and the Advisor's and Researcher's systemic questionable laboratory practices, which called the Subject's culpability into question.

Accordingly, this case is closed and no further action will be taken.