



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

## CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: I-18-0075-O

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We received notification from a University that it was investigating an allegation of research misconduct. Specifically, an NSF-funded post-doctoral fellow (the Postdoc) allegedly added toxic material to a graduate student's (the Student) experiment that he knew would destroy the Student's cells and cultures. The University's definition of research misconduct includes this action, while the NSF definition does not.

The University placed a video camera in the laboratory in which the Postdoc and the Student conducted their research. It recorded two incidents of the Postdoc sabotaging the Student's experiment. During the investigation committee's interview of the Postdoc, he admitted that he added toxic material to the Student's experiment knowing it would destroy it, and he did so at least three times. The Postdoc said he did so as a preemptive action to prevent alleged contamination from spreading from the Student's experiment to his. The Postdoc and Student typically used different incubators to do their work. When asked by the investigation committee (the Committee), the Postdoc could not explain whether this supposed contamination could spread from the Student's experiment to his experiment. The Committee repeatedly asked the Postdoc why he did not inform anyone of his concerns before taking action, but he could not provide an explanation other than to say he had previously voiced a concern about the Student's contamination with the lab director (the PI on the NSF grant), who took no action.

The Committee noted the facts in this matter are largely undisputed and recommend a finding of research misconduct for the Postdoc's sabotage of the Student's experiment. Based on the video recordings and the Postdoc's admissions, the Committee concluded the Postdoc's actions demonstrated a pattern of inappropriate behavior and were taken deliberately.

The University made a finding of research misconduct against the Postdoc. It prohibited him from any future affiliation with the University. It required the Postdoc's employment record with the University to show that a finding of research misconduct was made against the Postdoc, and the University would only confirm dates of employment, unless it was asked for a letter of reference, in which case, it would note the finding in the letter.

We concurred with the University that the Postdoc purposefully destroyed the Student's experiments. The Postdoc's actions do not fall under NSF's definition of research misconduct. However, we concluded the Subject's actions were harmful to the Student, the NSF PI, and are counter to how NSF should expect recipients of its funding to conduct science. We therefore recommended NSF debar the Postdoc as lacking present responsibility. NSF disagreed and declined to take any action. This case is closed with no further action taken.