



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: I-20-0055-O

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We received an allegation that a PI had published NSF-funded research that was either fabricated or falsified. The complainant included multiple papers, along with correspondence in the literature questioning the legitimacy of the PI's results. We referred the allegation to the PI's home institution (University), which conducted an inquiry under its policy.

The University Committee (Committee) reviewed the PI's data; assessed the complainant's model, which purportedly showed the data were fabricated; interviewed former students who worked in the PI's lab; and reviewed correspondence between the PI and a journal editor (Editor), as the editor was aware of the allegations and had asked the PI to address them. It concluded there was no fabrication or falsification. Nevertheless, it noted problems with the PI's research claims, particularly related to a lack of quantification of variability, compounded by a lack of error bars. In reviewing the correspondence between the PI and Editor, the Committee was concerned about the Editor's identification of three errors in one paper. The Committee noted the editor requested that the PI submit a correction, but he refused because he considered the errors trivial or manifest to any expert. The Committee concluded the PI's claim to the editor that he received permission from all authors to include them as co-authors on the paper to be false. The Committee concluded the PI's failure to a) use error bars appropriately; b) correct errors in a published paper; and c) obtain permission from all authors to include them as co-authors on the paper were detrimental research practices.

In response to the Committee's report, the PI claimed he was a victim of competitors out for profit or someone with a grudge. He blamed the Committee for wasting his time. He disputed that the journal editor asked him to submit a correction. He said he was not presented with evidence that he did not obtain consent from his co-authors and, regardless, they were free to remove their names if they chose to do so. He asked the University to identify the complainants and take action against them for making unsubstantiated allegations.

We asked the University for the evidence supporting the disputed conclusions. The University provided the correspondence with the Editor that confirmed the Editor asked the PI on multiple occasions to submit a correction, and the PI refused to do so. The University also provided the Committee's correspondence with two co-authors who both clearly stated they had not given consent to be included as authors and were not aware of the paper. One asked for his name to be removed from the paper.

We concur with the University that the PI's actions do not rise to the level of research misconduct and are accurately characterized as detrimental research practices. We sent the PI a letter admonishing him for these practices and for seeking retribution against the complainants, and advising him to ensure his research is accurately presented in the literature. This case is closed with no further action taken.