



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

## CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: I-20-0053-O

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A University informed us that it had completed an inquiry into possible plagiarism and data falsification. Multiple figures made by the Complainant appeared in two of the Subject's publications, on which she was not a co-author, with different labeling. At the conclusion of the inquiry, the Complainant, who was no longer at the University, withdrew her allegations and declined further cooperation with the University's investigation. Nevertheless, the University concluded an investigation was still warranted because both sets of figures could not be correct. We concurred and referred the investigation to the University.

The University found that the PI of the laboratory in which both the Complainant and Subject worked did not provide computers to those who worked in the laboratory, nor did he maintain a central repository for data or facilities for backing up data. Thus, everyone who worked in the PI's laboratory used their personal computer and was responsible for maintaining their data on their personal devices. As a result of this lax data management environment, the University could not locate the raw data for the figures in question because the Subject's computer was lost in an accident, and the original experimental data had been deleted from the experimental facility's computers due to age. The University also learned the Complainant's computer was the only one capable of running the software necessary for reducing the experimental data, so all the figures in question were created on the Complainant's computer. It was not possible, however, to determine whose data were used in the creation of those figures.

Given these circumstances, the University concluded it could not determine whether the Subject took the Complainant's data and mislabeled it, or vice versa. Therefore, it did not make a finding of research misconduct. It concluded the Subject, who was no longer at the University, had recklessly mishandled data by using the Complainant's computer, which was not under his control, to reduce and store data, and by not maintaining back-ups of his data. The combination of these actions resulted in the loss of the original data when his computer was lost in an accident. The University also recommended that data management practices be improved in the PI's laboratory.

We concur with the University that it is not possible to determine who may have appropriated and mislabeled whose data. However, we do not concur with the University that the Subject recklessly mishandled data. The Subject did not ignore or bypass established protocols. Instead, the Subject was working within the system (or lack thereof) established by the PI. Nevertheless, we sent the Subject a questionable research practices letter urging him to seek out proper training in data maintenance protocols since he did not receive such training in the PI's laboratory. We also sent the PI a similar letter urging him to improve data management practices in his laboratory.

This case is **closed** with no further action taken.