



# NSF OIG CORNER

## Rooting Out Research Misconduct

By Aliza I. Sacknovitz

### Have you seen the headlines?

“Professor Falsified and Fabricated Figures, Blamed Students, and Invented Colleague” “Graduate Student Falsified Examples to Support Her Conclusions” “Researcher Falsified Data in Multiple Publications.” These are just a few examples of research misconduct cases we’ve described in our Semiannual Reports to Congress. In the last issue of NSF OIG Corner, we gave an overview of our role as auditors and investigators. In this article, we’ll go more in depth about one of our missions—investigating research misconduct.

### What is research misconduct exactly?

NSF’s policy (45 CFR 689) defines research misconduct as “fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing or performing research funded by NSF, reviewing research proposals submitted to NSF, or in reporting research results funded by NSF.” A finding of research misconduct requires proof by a preponderance of evidence that the act is a significant departure from accepted practices of the relevant research community and that the act be committed intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly.

### Who investigates research misconduct?

Our Division of Research Integrity and Administrative Investigations (RIAI) conducts administrative investigations of research misconduct related to NSF programs, personnel misconduct within NSF, and whistleblower retaliation. We are the only OIG that employs Ph.D. investigators to address research misconduct allegations. (NIH’s Office of Research Integrity also employs Ph.Ds. to investigate research misconduct, but they’re a part of HHS’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health.)

### How do you find out about research misconduct, and how do you investigate it?

Anyone can report research misconduct to us through our hotline. NSF program officers are required to report allegations to us, and NSF award recipients must inform us if they initiate a research misconduct investigation. We also conduct proactive reviews of funded and unfunded proposals. From FYs 2009 to 2018, we received 841 research misconduct allegations and conducted 683 investigations, resulting in 161 research misconduct findings made by NSF.

Once we receive an allegation, we initiate an inquiry to determine whether it has enough substance to warrant an investigation. For example, we may send the subject of the allegation a letter requesting an explanation and supporting evidence. We usually don’t contact the subject’s institution at this phase. If there is enough substance to proceed, we open a formal investigation. Research misconduct allegations can, and often do, close at the inquiry stage.

Investigations involve collecting and reviewing facts, assessing the elements required for a research misconduct finding, and determining

whether research misconduct occurred. We generally refer research misconduct investigations, along with any evidence we obtained during our inquiry, to the subject’s institution. We also provide procedural guidance to the investigation committee and encourage the institution to consult with its general counsel and follow its own research misconduct policies as it conducts the investigation. Once the institution completes its investigation, it sends us a report. We review the report for accuracy and completeness and decide whether to accept its conclusions. We may accept an institution’s report in whole or in part, request additional information, or initiate our own independent investigation.

We close a case if we conclude that research misconduct did not occur. If we conclude research misconduct did occur, we write our own report that includes recommended actions for NSF management. NSF ultimately decides whether a research misconduct finding is made. We post research misconduct case closeouts on our website and report cases and outcomes in our Semiannual Reports to Congress.

### Where can I find additional information?

Information about RIAI: <https://nsf.gov/oig/office-inv/administrative.jsp>.

Case closeouts: <https://nsf.gov/oig/case-closeout>.

Semiannual Reports to Congress: [www.nsf.gov/oig/reports](http://www.nsf.gov/oig/reports).

### How can I report research misconduct or other forms of fraud, waste, abuse, or whistleblower reprisal?

- **Online report:** [www.nsf.gov/oig/report-fraud/form.jsp](http://www.nsf.gov/oig/report-fraud/form.jsp)
- **Anonymous Hotline:** 1.800.428.2189
- **Email:** [oig@nsf.gov](mailto:oig@nsf.gov)
- **Mail:** 2415 Eisenhower Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22314  
ATTN: OIG HOTLINE

Have a question or an idea for NSF OIG’s Corner?

Please contact us at  
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