

# Research Misconduct

## Federal agencies handle fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism allegations differently, but all take claims seriously

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On June 28, [REDACTED], a research professor at the University of Vermont, was [sentenced to serve 366 days in jail for fabricating and falsifying a decade's worth of data on aging, menopause, and obesity.](#)

[REDACTED]'s jail term marks the first time an academic scientist has been [incarcerated for research misconduct](#)

[REDACTED] has admitted to using fraudulent data in 10 scientific papers and in 17 grant applications, which resulted in nearly \$3 million in federal grant awards. In addition to his jail time, [REDACTED] is barred from applying for or receiving federal funding for life, has to correct the literature, and has to repay the government nearly \$200,000.

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[REDACTED], [University of Houston](#). An investigation conducted by the University found that Ms. [REDACTED], a former Master's degree student in the Department of Biochemical and Biophysical Sciences, falsified and fabricated data in research on the biochemical basis of rhythmic behaviors, supported by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Ms. [REDACTED] admitted to the investigation committee that she had altered the data in her notebooks and fabricated data in a number of instances. A hearing conducted by the University upheld the investigative findings of scientific misconduct. The ORI concurred in the University's findings, and Ms. [REDACTED] has been [debarred from eligibility for and involvement in Federal grants and contracts for a three-year period beginning May 18, 1993.](#) Ms. [REDACTED] has also been required to provide special certification for the accuracy and reliability of any PHS research fellowship application or contract proposal for a three-year period beginning December 1, 1992. The falsified and fabricated data did not appear in any scientific publications.

← a graduate student who can't get paid by grant funding for 3 years is a lot of time for a grad student

## following excerpts from:

NSF Investigations and Findings.

<http://www.nsf.gov/oig/pubs.jsp>

Reports for March 2008, September 2007, and March 2007.

### 1. *PI Repeatedly Falsifies Grant Project Reports*

OIG Investigations received a referral from our Office of Audit regarding material inaccuracies in a final report project for an NSF grant awarded to a university in Pennsylvania. The purpose of the grant was to facilitate collaboration between the PI and a foreign scientist. The NSF program manager told us he rejected the PI's final report because the **foreign scientist told him (1) he did not know he was listed on the PI's grant as a collaborator; and (2) he had not even heard from the PI, much less collaborated with him.**

The PI then submitted a revised final report which did not list the foreign scientist as a collaborator. When we first interviewed the PI, he insisted he collaborated with the foreign scientist, but he was unable to produce any evidence of collaboration. The PI asserted that he made an attempt to collaborate with the foreign scientist **through the foreign scientist's supervisor**, but due to restrictions on foreign travel after 9/11/2001, the foreign scientist was unable to visit. **The foreign scientist said the person the PI indicated had never been his supervisor.** and that person also did not recall receiving an invitation from the PI.

Because the PI made false statements to NSF in the final project reports and his statement to us, we referred the matter to the Department of Justice. It declined to prosecute in lieu of administrative action by NSF. The PI's home institution returned \$6,720, the funds designated as Participant Support, and **prohibited the PI from serving as PI or co-PI on any federal grant. We recommended the Director debar the PI for 3 years. A final decision is pending.**

### 2. *Professor Reviews Proposal for NSF, Then Plagiarizes From It Into His Own Proposal*

Our inquiry into a significant allegation of plagiarism confirmed that **a proposal by a professor at an Oregon university contained extensive sections of text and multiple figures duplicated from an earlier proposal that NSF had asked the professor to review.** After the professor did not respond to our request for an explanation, we referred the investigation to the university.

The university investigation revealed that the professor kept a copy of the NSF proposal that he had been asked to review, and then re-used text and figures from that proposal in his own proposal, without permission and without attribution. The professor claimed that he did not recognize that the text and figures were not his own, and that his actions were unintentional. However, the university concluded that his actions were intentional, violated academic standards of scholarship, and that his plagiarism was therefore an act of research misconduct. **The university prohibited the subject from submitting external proposals for 3 years, required 2 years of subsequent official prior review of any external proposals submitted,** and placed a letter of reprimand in the professor's personnel file.

We agreed with the university's conclusions. Based on our recommendations, NSF: made a finding of research misconduct; sent a letter of reprimand to the professor; proposed that the professor be debarred from receiving federal funds for a period of 3 years; required that a responsible official submit assurances to NSF OIG for a period of 3 years after debarment; prohibited the professor, for a period of 3 years, from serving as a peer reviewer of proposals; and required that the professor provide certification to NSF OIG that he has attended an ethics training class

### **3. *PI Copied Significant Text, Tries to Blame Post-Doc***

We investigated an allegation of plagiarism in a proposal submitted from a New Mexico university. We found significant text and two figures copied from multiple sources, with copied material in nearly every section of the proposal. The proposal listed a PI and two co-PIs, all from different universities. We wrote each subject asking for an explanation and the two co-PIs responded saying the PI was responsible for the copied text.

In telephone discussions with the PI, he claimed that his former post-doctoral researcher prepared most of the material for a report submitted to a state agency. He said he incorporated material from that document into his proposal without checking whether it was properly referenced.

At that point, we referred the matter to the subject's university for investigation. The university committee contacted the post-doc, who refuted the subject's claims and admitted only limited writing, amounting to one paragraph and material incorporated from one co-PI's paper (which included one figure). The committee decided not to dwell on the details of who wrote the text, but recognized that **the subject, as the signatory to the NSF proposal, is responsible for the material contained in it and, accordingly, committed plagiarism.**

The committee recommended the following sanctions: for 1 year, the subject is prohibited from submitting proposals as the sole PI (he must name a collaborator from the university as PI); for 3 years, the subject's proposals must be reviewed by two senior researchers before submission to a sponsor; and the subject must instruct new faculty members enrolled in the university's PI certification course on the seriousness of plagiarism and on the techniques to check their work. These recommendations were accepted by the university adjudicator as well as the subject.

We reviewed two of the subject's prior NSF proposals for plagiarism, one submitted before our inquiry began and one afterward. The proposal submitted before our inquiry began had smaller amounts of text copied from several sources. We concluded there was evidence of a pattern of plagiarism. We recommended that NSF: send the subject a letter of reprimand informing him NSF is making a finding of research misconduct; debar him for 1 year; require him to submit assurances by a responsible official of the University that any proposals he submits do not contain plagiarized, falsified, or fabricated material for 3 years require certifications from the subject for 3 years that all documents he submits to NSF are either his original work or are properly cited; and require the subject to take an ethics course and provide a copy of the training materials to us. A decision regarding this matter is pending.

From: <http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/obas/index.html>

On Being a Scientist: Responsible Conduct in Research From Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy from the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine (1995)

## A CASE OF PLAGIARISM

May is a second year graduate student preparing the written portion of her qualifying exam. She incorporates whole sentences and paragraphs verbatim from several published papers. She does not use quotation marks, but the sources are suggested by statements like “(see ... for more details).” The faculty on the qualifying exam committee note inconsistencies in the writing styles of different paragraphs of the text and check the sources, uncovering **May’s plagiarism**.

After discussion with the faculty, May’s plagiarism is brought to the attention of the dean of the graduate school, whose responsibility it is to review such incidents. The graduate school regulation state that “plagiarism, that is, the failure in a dissertation, essay or other written exercise to acknowledge ideas, research or language taken from other” is specifically prohibited. The dean **expels** May from the program with the stipulation that she can reapply for the next academic year.