

NSF's Perp Walk for Plagiarism

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A few weeks ago, NSF's Office of Inspector General (OIG) published its 46-page [semiannual report](#) detailing its search for fraud and research misconduct in the agency's \$7 billion annual investment in some 35,000 research and education grants. The report identifies the poster child for fraud, abuse, and research misconduct punishable as criminal conduct by fine and jail or both as the Small Business Innovation Research program, a focus area of OIG investigations.

However, of most interest to research offices that assist faculty in the writing of NSF proposals is the agency's very determined and persistent effort to ferret out plagiarism in all its manifestations using commercial software to scan proposals. Plagiarism identified by this software may range from pirated research text stolen from another proposal and presented as the "author's" own to failure to properly use quotation marks in direct or paraphrased quotes and attributions.

Unlike the SBIR investigations, it doesn't appear that any PI has yet gone to jail for the failure to use quotation marks properly when citing the work of others, but the penalties for plagiarism are stiff nonetheless. These include multi-year debarment from submitting proposals to NSF followed by multi-year institutional certifications and assurances that a proposal submitted by a debarred PI is free of plagiarism and meets institutional standards on plagiarism, as well as a long-term prohibition from serving as an NSF reviewer. While this may not be as bad as having to sing the "*Folsom Prison Blues*," being investigated and found guilty of research misconduct related to plagiarism can be a career-ending outcome for any researcher, particularly tenure-track faculty who may not fully understand either the institutional standards or NSF standards related to responsible conduct of research in the plagiarism domain.

NSF clearly takes plagiarism very seriously, stating in the current [semi-annual report](#) (March 2015): "We analyzed over 8,000 proposals awarded by NSF in FY 2011 for evidence of plagiarism, and investigated those which appeared serious. We opened 34 plagiarism investigations, ten of which have resulted in NSF making findings of research misconduct. So far, we have recovered \$357,602 in federal funds from these investigations."

"As part of a proactive review," the report elaborates, "we analyzed these 8,000 proposals awarded by NSF in FY 2011 for evidence of plagiarism. We processed these proposals using commercial plagiarism software, and ranked them by the amount of apparently-copied text. We determined that many proposals contained some amount of copied text, but opened cases only on the more apparently serious violations that might constitute research misconduct. We opened 34 plagiarism investigations, ten of which have resulted in NSF making findings of research misconduct. From these cases we have recovered \$357,602 in federal funds to date. We issued questionable research practice letters in six cases in which the copying was considered plagiarism, but did not rise to the level of research misconduct. Ten cases are still pending. One of the pending plagiarism investigations uncovered significant financial issues, and is being pursued for possible civil/criminal prosecution. Overall, less than one half of one

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percent of the funded proposals contained enough plagiarism to constitute research misconduct. **This percentage is less than the results from our earlier proactive reviews which included declined proposals.**

The following examples are quotes taken from the OIG report that offer instructive advice for PI's on issues related to plagiarism as research misconduct in the research narrative. Note that if you assist PIs in the writing and editing of the research narrative or present workshops on grant writing for faculty at your institution, the below examples of plagiarism in NSF proposals and the consequences are important to include in your presentation. Furthermore, while the below examples are specific to NSF, the point is generic to any research funding agency—**don't plagiarize!**

“PI Plagiarizes from Former Colleagues in NSF Proposal

A PI at a Pennsylvania university plagiarized a significant amount of material from a colleague's declined proposal submitted to another agency into her own NSF proposal. The university declined to conduct an investigation because it did not have a research misconduct policy. The PI admitted to us that she knowingly plagiarized material from a former advisor and another colleague, ***blaming time constraints and inexperience in proposal writing***. We concluded that the PI committed plagiarism and recommended that NSF debar her for one year, require certifications and assurances for three years after the debarment, and bar her from participating as a peer reviewer, advisor, or consultant for NSF.”

“Texas Professor Claims Wrong Version of Proposal Submitted to NSF

Our investigation determined that a Texas PI plagiarized in two NSF proposals. The PI told us he mistakenly submitted a version of the proposal in which he used placeholders for copied text, and that proper citations and references were present in a “final” version. The “final” version that he provided showed changes only to the text which we had originally identified, suggesting that the final version was created after we contacted the PI. The PI's university determined that plagiarism also existed in a proposal submitted by the PI to another agency. **Because the proposals were used as support in his tenure package, the university dismissed the professor.** We recommended that NSF require certifications and assurances for three years, and a concurrent prohibition from service to NSF as a reviewer, consultant, or advisor.”

“Professor Copies Portions of His Proposal's Proposed Research Plan

A professor at a Virginia university submitted two NSF proposals containing plagiarism. One of the proposals contained copied text in the research plan taken from another researcher's proposal. The professor told us that his citation was adequate, and that he “had no intention of taking the author's technical idea or copying his writing without giving him full credit.” The university investigation concluded the professor plagiarized and that his actions represented a pattern of plagiarism. **It required him to submit all of his proposals, papers, and manuscripts for plagiarism review for five years.** We concurred with the university's conclusions and recommended that NSF require the professor to provide certifications and assurances for two years, and require he certify compliance with the university-imposed requirements.”