



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL  
OFFICE OF INVESTIGATIONS

## CLOSEOUT MEMORANDUM

Case Number: A11050036

Page 1 of 1

Our investigation determined that the Subject<sup>1</sup> acted to submit an NSF proposal<sup>2</sup> from his institution without the knowledge of the listed PI and coPI. NSF sent a letter of reprimand to the Subject, and to the Acting Provost of the institution.

This memo, the attached Report of Investigation, and the Deputy Director's letters constitute the case closeout. Accordingly, this case is closed.

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# National Science Foundation Office of Inspector General



## Report of Investigation Case Number A11050036

4 October 2012

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### **Executive Summary**

#### **Institution's inquiry and investigation concluded that:**

- The Subject inappropriately listed two scientists as PI and coPI on a proposal submitted to NSF of which the two scientists had no knowledge; and
- The Subject circumvented the Institution's standard proposal preparation and clearance process.

#### **The Institution:**

- Strengthened its controls for proposal preparation, clearance, and submission; and
- Issued a letter of caution to the Subject.

#### **OIG recommends that NSF:**

- Send a letter to the Subject and the Institution emphasizing the unacceptability of falsely listing two scientists as PI and coPI of a proposal;
- Add a diary note to the eJacket for this proposal noting that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal;
- Provide written notice to the specific reviewers for this proposal to inform them that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal; and
- Apprise the relevant NSF Program Officer that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal.

### Institution's Inquiry and Investigation

We received notice from the Director of a Sponsored Research Office (SRO) of an Institution<sup>1</sup> about an irregularity in their proposal submission process. The PI<sup>2</sup> and coPI<sup>3</sup> of an NSF proposal<sup>4</sup> received notice of the proposal's declination, but were apparently unaware that a proposal had been prepared and submitted to NSF bearing their names. The Institution's [REDACTED] conducted an inquiry, which prompted a subsequent full investigation by the Institution.

The [REDACTED] inquiry report was sent to the Faculty Council chair and to the Institution's President<sup>5</sup> and Provost;<sup>6</sup> we received a copy of the inquiry report<sup>7</sup> through the Institution's Inspector General's office.<sup>8</sup> The [REDACTED] interviewed individuals in the SRO, the PI, the coPI, and the Subject,<sup>9</sup> who was thought to have been involved in proposal preparation. During the inquiry, the [REDACTED] established that:

- 1) The Subject (with assistance from a few other individuals) conceived of a proposal in the area of cyber research, and used the names of the PI and coPI because of the need for "academic credentials" for leaders of an NSF proposal. The Subject's name does not appear anywhere within the proposal.
- 2) The Subject had very preliminary conversations with the PI about a proposal, but no such conversations with the coPI. Neither the PI nor the coPI was aware that a proposal had actually been submitted in their names until they received the letter of declination from NSF (the PI) or were contacted by the [REDACTED] (the coPI). The coPI's professional expertise was not relevant to the research proposed.
- 3) The Subject instructed a junior SRO staff member to create an NSF Fastlane account in the PI's name, and instructed SRO staff to submit the proposal with the AOR's signature. However, the AOR<sup>10</sup> was also unaware of the proposal submission, as she was out of her office the week that the Subject submitted the proposal.

1 [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] ) was similarly informed of the case.

3 [REDACTED]

4 [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The proposal is included at Tab 1. The proposal was declined for funding.

6 [REDACTED]

7 Tab 2.

8 Subsequently, we discussed the matter with an agent in the Institution's Inspector General office who indicated they planned to review the matter. Shortly thereafter, the agent informed us that they concluded the Subject was within his military authority to submit the proposal to NSF (phone conversation with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]).

[REDACTED] was described in the inquiry report as Acting Dean of the Graduate School of Engineering and Applied Science at the Institution. [REDACTED]

<sup>10</sup> The Authorized Organizational Representative (AOR) is [REDACTED].

4) The Institution's standard signature page (part of the usual submission process) was not completed for this proposal.

The [REDACTED] noted the Subject's actions were not in compliance with the Institution's proposal submission process and concluded that the professional reputations of the PI and coPI were harmed through the poor reviews of the proposal:

Both [the PI and coPI] have suffered material damage to their reputations, and [the organization] itself suffers discredit as a consequence of this act. This is not acceptable in an academic or professional environment, and appropriate action should be taken to make clear the gravity of the various parties' mistakes and misconduct.<sup>11</sup>

The [REDACTED] recognized the seriousness of the Subject's actions in this case, but made no specific recommendations for action regarding the Subject. The [REDACTED] recommended that the Institution's SRO revise procedures for proposal submission.

Based on the inquiry, the Institution initiated a full investigation of actions resulting in submission of the NSF proposal.<sup>12</sup> The investigation confirmed the primacy of the Subject's involvement in preparation of the NSF proposal, and delineated the secondary involvement of others assigned to prepare first drafts of the proposal. The report described poor judgments made by the Subject in a rushed proposal preparation process, inaccurate assumptions about proper procedures made by other individuals involved in creation of this proposal, and failure to follow established SRO procedures for proposal submission. The investigation determined that the proposal draft was written by another individual under direct orders from the Subject. The Subject edited the draft only slightly. The investigation concluded that the most egregious action by the Subject was his decision to "administratively assign" the PI and coPI to the proposal without consulting with them.<sup>13</sup>

Specifically, the investigation report stated:

The rushed timeline was self-imposed in spite of the opportunity to submit six months later and the recommendation by those experienced in competitive proposal writing against attempting to submit a proposal until the next opportunity in February 2011. This was primarily based on [the Subject's] convincing overconfidence, his assumed germane qualifications and experience, and his determination to prove the academics wrong.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [REDACTED] Report, page 2 (Tab 2).

<sup>12</sup> A copy of the investigation report is attached at Tab 3. This investigation was not completed in response to a referral from NSF OIG.

<sup>13</sup> The investigation report stated that the Subject undertook his actions as "Acting Dean." However, the report also established that the Subject did not officially hold this position at the time. The actual Dean and actual Acting Dean were both unaware of the proposal at the time.

<sup>14</sup> [REDACTED] Investigation Report, Enclosure (1), Item 3 (Tab 3).

In response to the investigation, the Institution issued a “non-punitive Letter of Caution” to the Subject in February 2012 “to clarify what [he] did inappropriately and admonished him not to repeat.”<sup>15</sup> However, this letter did not become part of the Subject’s personnel file at the Institution.

The investigation report and cover letter transmitting the Institution’s investigation report to NSF express concern about the reputation of the listed PI and coPI on the declined proposal, as well as for the reputation of the Institution. The report’s cover letter from the Institution’s Chief of Staff stated: “We would request that the reviewers of [the NSF proposal] be informed of the true authors, that neither [the PI nor the coPI] was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal, and that the proposal was not reflective of their usual excellent standards.”<sup>16</sup>

### **OIG Analysis**

By submitting this proposal to NSF, the Subject undermined a basic assumption of the NSF merit review process – that the proposal was prepared and submitted by the listed PI and coPI with appropriate research expertise. The true genesis of this proposal, and its preparation bereft of contributions from the PI and the coPI, and were not disclosed to NSF program officers and reviewers. Although this proposal was declined, not only was effort expended to review a proposal probably unqualified for review, but the academic reputations of the PI and coPI were potentially harmed.

The Grant Proposal Guide states that “[a]uthors other than the PI (or any coPI) should be named and acknowledged.”<sup>17</sup> Here the Subject and another individual under the Subject’s supervision were the true authors of the proposal. However, neither name was mentioned in the proposal submitted to NSF. For the foregoing reasons, NSF should act to protect the integrity of the proposal submission and merit review process. In this situation, neither the PI nor the coPI was involved with the proposal preparation or submission, and they were unaware that the proposal had been submitted with their names. The quality of the proposal was poor, as noted in the ratings from the merit review, and resulted in potential negative harm to the reputations of the listed PI and coPI.

The Institution has reviewed its internal policies dealing with procedures for proposal submission. The Institution’s report noted that if procedures already in place had been followed, the proposal would not have been submitted. It also noted that the Institution has strengthened internal controls regarding proposal submission since this NSF proposal was submitted.

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<sup>15</sup> [REDACTED] Investigation Report, Enclosure (3), Item 6 (Tab 3).

<sup>16</sup> Cover letter to the [REDACTED] Investigation Report.

<sup>17</sup> Grant Proposal Guide, 10-01, Chapter 1, Section D.3

### **OIG Recommendations**

We recommend that NSF:

- Send a letter to the Subject and the Institution emphasizing the unacceptability of falsely listing two scientists as PI and coPI of a proposal;
- Add a diary note to the electronic jacket for this proposal noting that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal;
- Provide written notice to the specific reviewers<sup>18</sup> for this proposal that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal; and
- Apprise the relevant NSF Program Officer that neither the PI nor the coPI was involved in the preparation or submission of the proposal.

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<sup>18</sup> This proposal was reviewed by *ad hoc* reviewers and there was no panel review or discussion of its merits.

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
4201 WILSON BOULEVARD  
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22230



OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

MAR 21 2013

**VIA CERTIFIED MAIL/RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED**

[REDACTED]

*Re: Letter of Reprimand*

Dear [REDACTED]:

In 2010, the [REDACTED] submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation ("NSF" or the "Foundation") entitled, [REDACTED]. The individuals identified as PI and coPI on this proposal received notice from NSF of the proposal's declination, but were apparently unaware that a proposal had been prepared and submitted to NSF bearing their names. An investigation conducted by [REDACTED] revealed that you prepared the proposal, and used the names of the PI and coPI without their knowledge. In addition, you instructed a junior staff member in [REDACTED] Sponsored Research Office to submit the proposal with the Authorized Organizational Representative's ("AOR") signature, without the AOR's knowledge.

By submitting this proposal to NSF, you undermined a fundamental assumption of the Foundation's merit review process – that the proposal was prepared and submitted by the listed PI and coPI with appropriate research expertise. The NSF program officers and reviewers assigned to this proposal were unaware of its true genesis, including the fact that the individuals identified as PI and coPI had no involvement in the preparation of the proposal. Although this proposal was declined, a tremendous amount of time and effort was expended in reviewing it, despite the fact that it might have very well been unqualified for review. Moreover, your actions potentially harmed the academic reputations of the PI and coPI.

I am issuing this letter of reprimand to you in order to emphasize the unacceptability of your conduct with respect to this proposal. Please be advised that any future misconduct of this nature may result in administrative actions on the part of NSF, including, but not limited to, government-wide debarment.



Should you have any questions about the foregoing, please do not hesitate to contact [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED], Assistant General Counsel, at (703) 292-5054.

Sincerely,

*Cora B. Marrett*

Cora B. Marrett  
Deputy Director

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
4201 WILSON BOULEVARD  
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22230



OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR

MAR 21 2013

VIA CERTIFIED MAIL/RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

Re: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]:

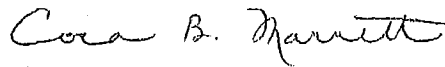
In 2010, the [REDACTED] submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation ("NSF" or the "Foundation") entitled, [REDACTED]. The individuals identified as PI and coPI on this proposal received notice from NSF of the proposal's declination, but were apparently unaware that a proposal had been prepared and submitted to NSF bearing their names. An investigation conducted by [REDACTED] revealed that [REDACTED], prepared the proposal and used the names of the PI and coPI without their knowledge. In addition, [REDACTED] instructed a junior staff member in [REDACTED] Sponsored Research Office to submit the proposal with the Authorized Organizational Representative's ("AOR") signature, without the AOR's knowledge.

By submitting this proposal to NSF, [REDACTED] undermined a fundamental assumption of the Foundation's merit review process – that the proposal was prepared and submitted by the listed PI and coPI with appropriate research expertise. The NSF program officers and reviewers assigned to this proposal were unaware of its true genesis, including the fact that the individuals identified as PI and coPI had no involvement in the preparation of the proposal. Although this proposal was declined, a tremendous amount of time and effort was expended in reviewing it, despite the fact that it might have very well been unqualified for review. Moreover, [REDACTED] actions potentially harmed the academic reputations of the PI and coPI.

I am writing to convey the seriousness of [REDACTED] breach of conduct and to underscore the importance of [REDACTED], as a sponsoring research organization, upholding its obligations in connection to proposals submitted for merit review to NSF. I understand that, in light of this incident, [REDACTED] has strengthened internal controls regarding proposal submission. NSF appreciates this action on the part of [REDACTED], and hopes that it continues to take the necessary steps to ensure that the proposals it submits are genuine. Given [REDACTED] breach of conduct and his disregard for the potential harm to his colleagues and the merit review enterprise, NSF hopes that [REDACTED] actions are recorded in his official file.

Should you have any questions about the foregoing, please do not hesitate to contact [REDACTED], Assistant General Counsel, at (703) 292-5054.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cora B. Marrett".

Cora B. Marrett  
Deputy Director