

Closeout for M96080028

On August 24, 1996, OIG received a letter from the complainant¹ alleging possible misconduct on the part of two university administrators, a Dean² and an Associate Provost.³ The allegation was that the university administrators acted in bad faith with NSF when they allowed a proposal⁴ to be submitted that required the use of facilities they knew were to be destroyed and subsequently accepted the NSF award without modifying it to reflect this knowledge. The complainant also alleged that the Dean and Provost then coerced the project's PIs to submit a progress report that hid this fact.

The crux of the complainant's allegation concerned a laboratory in the PIs' department. Before the submission of this proposal, the department held several planning meetings, attended by administrators and faculty, to discuss the best approach, requirements, etc. for improving a laboratory course and the associated lab equipment. After the award was made by NSF to the university, it announced to the faculty its intention of destroying the building housing the lab and equipment and also ruled out the possibility of relocating the equipment elsewhere on campus. During another meeting, when the role of the equipment to the project was restated to the Dean and Associate Provost, the administrators allegedly suggested that the PIs write their NSF progress report with a new focus that would not draw attention to the loss of the lab and equipment. Allegedly, when the PIs expressed unease and said that they should return the award money to NSF, the Associate Provost "heatedly stated" that any overhead money the university lost would come out of the operating budget of the PIs' department. The Dean also allegedly said that the staff person hired to run the lab and modify the equipment would have to be terminated, that individual's 1-yr contract notwithstanding.

OIG reviewed the award jacket and noted that the award was focused on improving the educational environment and structure of an introductory science course. As part of the award, the PIs wanted to incorporate new technology with existing equipment to improve data collection. A primary goal of the proposal was to take advantage of computers in classrooms to improve the way material is presented to the students.

The proposal implied that the students would use the modified equipment to acquire their own understanding of how the data were collected. It was not apparent, however, that the proposed modification of the equipment, or the

¹ (footnote redacted).

² (footnote redacted).

³ (footnote redacted).

⁴ (footnote redacted).

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equipment itself, was absolutely necessary for the data analysis that, ostensibly, was the focus of the proposal. In fact, the PIs made allowances for conditions where data collection by the students might not be possible; in these instances they would use other data collected previously and proposed to build up a bank of data. OIG observed that the proposal also stated that once the students were familiar with where the data came from, there would be no need to restrict the students' analysis to data taken by them in the lab. The PIs suggested that the faculty involved in research could share their own research data with the class. In addition, the PIs suggested that they could obtain data from a variety of sources that the students would analyze on the lab computers.

In the first year's progress report, the PIs wrote that they had originally intended to obtain and use data from a variety of sources in addition to their newly modified equipment. They stated that although it was no longer possible to use the facilities at the university this was not a problem because most of the critical thinking in the laboratories the PIs developed would arise in the analysis of the data, and in the exercises utilizing the analyzed data. The PIs carefully considered their options and realized that the original intent of the proposal could still be carried out in full. They also found that decreasing the hardware requirements made their work even more widely available to the community and more transportable (a goal of the original proposal). Thus, the program manager⁵ was made fully aware that they no longer had access to the former building, including the original equipment, and how that would influence their NSF funded activities.

The program manager told OIG that the change in the direction of the award was minor. He said, in agreement with the statements by the PIs, that the students benefited by having a wide variety of data available to them for analysis. He said that data collection was only a minor part of the proposal. The absence of the lab and equipment described in the proposal, in his opinion, would not have affected the final funding decision. The program manager, who had the option to discontinue funding the project if he believed that the original goals of the proposal were not being met, concluded that the loss of the lab facilities was not detrimental to the completion of the project.

OIG concluded that the closing of the laboratory and loss of laboratory equipment did not have a significant (negative) effect on the proposed research. Because the PIs wrote in their progress report that the laboratory was no longer available to them, we concluded that there was no substance to the allegation that they hid this information from NSF. We did not determine whether the PIs had been pressured by their administrators, but concluded that the PIs, dealing with whatever pressure their administrators may have put on them, upheld their partnership with NSF by providing an accurate progress report.

⁵ (footnote redacted).

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This inquiry is closed and no further action will be taken on this case.

cc: AIG-Oversight, IG