

CLOSEOUT FOR M97030009

OIG received a copy of a letter sent by a former graduate student to his university's vice provost for research.¹ In his letter, the student alleged that his academic progress had been wrongfully impeded by his first and second advisors.² We received additional information from the student, and upon request the university provided its records pertaining to its handling of the allegations.³

Because the actions ascribed by the student to the first advisor did not relate in any way to NSF funding, we did not evaluate them. He alleged that the second advisor impeded his progress as a graduate student by (1) not allowing him to proceed in meeting certain curricular requirements based on unreasonable demands for research results; (2) not agreeing that certain research results should be written up for publication; and (3) creating a hostile work environment for him after he ended a brief (one-month) romantic/sexual relationship.

The university did not explicitly address the first allegation, pertaining to the second advisor disagreeing with the student regarding whether his accomplishments in the laboratory reflected adequate progress toward meeting departmental academic requirements. However, in academic research environments judgements of this nature are typically left to the discretion of research advisors. The student's unsubstantiated allegation in this case is not sufficient to warrant our attempting to determine whether the second advisor exceeded the scope of her discretion.

The university formed a committee⁴ to evaluate which of the issues raised by the student "could possibly fall within the definition of 'scientific misconduct.'"⁵ The committee concluded that the "issue of publishing research data in a timely fashion was not felt to be an issue of scientific misconduct, but, rather, an issue where different

¹ [REDACTED] was a graduate student at the [REDACTED]. His letter dated 21 January 1997 was addressed to the Vice Provost for Research at [REDACTED], [REDACTED].

² Drs. [REDACTED] (the first advisor) and [REDACTED] (the second advisor) were with the Department of [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED]. The first advisor was not a P.I. for any NSF awards; NIH funded the award under which the student was paid. The second advisor was PI on NSF grant [REDACTED], which was awarded [REDACTED], expired [REDACTED], and totaled \$[REDACTED].

³ We issued a subpoena to the university to facilitate provision of the student's academic records.

⁴ The "[REDACTED]."

⁵ Final Report of the committee, dated 20 March 1997, at 2.

laboratories publish at different rates, and the vote was unanimous that there were no issues of scientific misconduct against" the second advisor.⁶ We agree with this conclusion.

The university office responsible for handling harassment/discrimination complaints⁷ addressed the third allegation. It found that although the second advisor had participated in a brief intimate relationship with the student, the evidence did not support a conclusion that her conduct following the affair constituted a hostile work environment. The office determined that the second advisor's action violated the university's sexual harassment policy, which prohibits all romantic/sexual relationships between students and their instructors.⁸ In our view, the office's conclusions about the facts are reasonable, and the second advisor's actions could not be considered misconduct in science.

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

cc: Integrity, IG

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ The [REDACTED].

⁸ The only sanction imposed was a formal reprimand by the university's executive dean.