Closeout Memorandum for M98100031

On October 14, 1998, a Program Officer (PO)[1] told us she had been informed of an incident that should be brought to our attention. She told us the subject's[2] research activities included his taking students to a remote field site for education and research. While at a remote site, he allegedly used his NSF grant funds[3] to facilitate the sexual harassment of several of his female students.

The PO had received anonymous telephone calls alleging the subject had coerced students to undress and join him in a sauna while he was also undressed. The PO was told that the subject had made the sauna participation mandatory by telling the students their grades and project performance depended on it. It was alleged that some students had been touched inappropriately while in the sauna. It was also alleged that the subject had purchased alcoholic beverages for underage students.

We learned the subject's Department Chair[4] knew of the allegations and had looked into them. However, the Chair told us the inquiry began to involve different components of the university, and he referred it to a university-wide administrative office to be handled by that office's Investigator.[5] We discussed the matter with University administrators, who agreed to carry out an investigation into the allegations, and we deferred our investigation until they had concluded their efforts.

During the investigation, the subject left the University. Although the Investigator completed evidence gathering, which included interviewing the students and the subject, the University did not make formal factual findings because the subject did not participate in a evidential hearing. The Investigator learned that the subject had been in a sauna at the remote field site with several of his students (two female, one male) and his wife while everyone was undressed, but that no inappropriate touching or discussions took place. The Investigator also learned the students were not coerced into joining the subject in the sauna or into removing their clothing. The Investigator confirmed that students visited bars and drank alcoholic beverages, but there was no evidence indicating the subject had purchased the alcohol consumed by underage students.

The Provost's cover letter to the investigation report stated the evidence collected by the Investigator indicated that the subject "at times used markedly poor judgement," and that the University "does not condone the type of

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[1] (footnote redacted).
[2] (footnote redacted).
[3] (footnote redacted).
[4] (footnote redacted).
[5] (footnote redacted).

behavior reflected in the investigation report." The University did not believe the allegations raised questions of misconduct in science, but rather questions of the subject's professional behavior.

After the investigation, the subject provided additional information related to: the process of the investigation, the environment in his department at the University, student evaluations, uncooperative students at the field site, and past site research with students. He believed those issues may have contributed to why allegations were made and how the University handled the investigation. He did not deny the facts from the investigation report, but he thought senior members of his (former) department encouraged students to embellish or exaggerate aspects of events. He agreed that, in hindsight, he might have handled a few situations differently, but, overall, he was proud of his record of taking inexperienced students to difficult environments and bringing them home safely.

Based on the information discussed above, we conclude that while the subject's actions raised questions about his professional judgement and his mentorship responsibilities, they are not misconduct in science. We recommended that the subject's Program Officer emphasize to the subject the importance NSF places on education, the integration of education in research, and mentorship responsibilities, and point out how his actions are inconsistent with NSF's goal of encouraging women to participate in science and engineering. This inquiry is closed and no further action will be taken on this case.

cc: Investigations, IG