September 2015

Factors Contributing to Faculty Research Misconduct

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INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that serious misconduct in academic research (e.g., data fabrication) is uncommon, whereas questionable research practices (e.g., courtesy authorship) occur on a fairly regular basis (Fanelli, 2009; John, Lowenstein, & Prelec, 2012). Yet limited research has been undertaken to understand why researchers engage in these behaviors (Martinson, Anderson, Crain, & DeVries, 2006; Mumford, Connelly, Murphy, Devenport, Antes, Brown, et al., 2009), in spite of the critical attention that misconduct cases bring from scientists, policymakers, and the public. As in other areas of human endeavor, understanding the complex causes of misconduct is critical in formulating appropriate prevention strategies or remedies.

This study was designed to explore the influences that drive faculty investigators when making the challenging ethical decisions that arise in the course of their research activities. Researchers shared their perceptions of what they would choose to do in certain circumstances, including those that involve high pressure (e.g., when evaluation for tenure is looming and publications are needed to ensure success). Other factors, such as the role of perceptions of organizational justice and external funding expectations, were also explored. In this study, for the first time, masters/comprehensive universities were targeted to allow comparisons with research-intensive institutions on possible differences in research cultures and environments. The study focuses on regular, full-time university faculty from four fields: biology, psychology, sociology, and social work, the latter of whom have not previously been studied in regard to ethics in research.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 4,556 faculty researchers from 107 universities in the U.S. were invited to participate in the study using a mixed-mode methodology involving postal mail and email, known as The Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2008). The universities were randomly selected from the Carnegie Endowment Classifications for research intensive and masters-large institutions, and then a differential proportion of the regular, full-time faculty from each of the four disciplines were randomly selected for the project (33% from the Biosciences, 50% from Psychology, & 100% from the Social Work & Sociology/Criminology departments). Contact information was drawn from university websites. Approximately 39% of the sample responded -31% returned paper surveys and an additional 7% completed the questionnaire on Qualtrics. After removing records with insufficient addresses, ineligible faculty members (e.g., retired professors, etc.), 6,708 data were available for 1,735 faculty respondents. About half of the respondents were from R1 universities (N=915, 53%), and half from Masters Large/Comprehensives (N=815, 47%).

RESULTS

Table 1. Perceived Probability of Misconduct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario/Vignette</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean %</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a. Agrees student can skip IRB approval for adding sample to study</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Quietly deletes suspicious data received from senior collaborator</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. Reneges on promise of student lead authorship</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. CFI: Encourages hiring of needed collaborator’s wife</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Overlooks collaborator’s potential overbilling for clinical services</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Writes peer review to personal advantage</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Perceived Likelihood of Detection & Sanctions by Vignette

REFERENCES


This research was supported by the Office of Research Integrity, Department of Health and Human Services, grant # ORIIR140009-01-00. Contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services or the Office of Research Integrity. The authors are also grateful to Director Mary Losch, Ph.D. and the staff of the UNI Center for Social and Behavioral Research for their efforts in administering the survey process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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