

COGR June Membership Meeting

Session: Foreign Influence on Research: Handling Cross Cutting Issues

June 11, 2020, 1:45 p.m.

CASE STUDY:

- Big U. previously received letters from NIH about other faculty members with undisclosed funding that it had to investigate. As a result of those investigations, it put improved processes and training in place. As part of its improvements, Big U. updated its annual conflict of interest disclosure form to include a question regarding any additional appointments at institutions other than Big U.
- Prof. Smith of Big U. University (a state flagship public institution) attends a department meeting at which Big U.'s COI Office gives a short presentation on foreign influence. Prof. Smith has an honorary appointment at a non-U.S. university and "realizes" it was never disclosed to Big U.'s COI Office. Prof. Smith receives both NIH and NSF funding.
- Prof. Smith logs into Big U.'s conflict of interest system and updates the disclosure form to disclose the honorary appointment. In the form, Prof. Smith describes a longstanding research collaboration with a colleague ("Collaborator") at Unrestricted University (UU) in China. They have been collaborating and coauthoring papers for years, without any direct funding or remuneration to Prof. Smith. However, in the past year, in recognition of the value of this collaboration, UU awarded Prof. Smith an honorary professorship and provided Prof. Smith with a lab at UU and funding for two research assistants there. This action was completely unsolicited by either Prof. Smith or Collaborator. Collaborator sends an email to Prof. Smith advising of UU's generosity, along with an attachment written in Chinese. Collaborator asks Prof. Smith to sign and send the attachment back so that the research assistants can start working. Prof. Smith thinks the attachment document is "just a formality," signs it, and sends it back without getting it translated.
- The COI Office asks Prof. Smith for any documents relating to the arrangement with UU. Prof. Smith sends the email from Collaborator and the signed attachment. The COI Office gets the attachment translated and finds that it is an employment contract for Prof. Smith to work full-time for UU for 6 months of the year for a salary of \$200,000 and a housing allowance. The contract also states that UU will own all rights to any intellectual property Prof. Smith is an inventor on while working for UU. The COI office decides to investigate further.
- The student newspaper becomes aware of the investigation and publishes an article about Prof. Smith's "undisclosed employment" with UU. A state legislator sees the article and calls Big U's president to ask why Big U's still doesn't know what its faculty are doing even though it said it improved its processes.