Dealing with admissions as a new RIO

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My background...

• Professor of Molecular Biology & Biochemistry since 2001, focus on immunology, particularly in the central nervous system.

• Previously served prior RIO on an inquiry committee. Also, served as Ad Hoc RIO on an assessment.

• Became Associate Vice Chancellor for Research Engagement in Jan. 2017. Also became RIO at that time.

• Maintain an active research program and do some teaching. Pluses and minuses...

• Have handled several RM cases since starting as RIO, collaborating with Jill Kay, UCI’s Director of Research Policy.

• Have not directly experienced an admission of guilt yet. So why am I talking to you about admissions?
My perspective: what a new RIO should be thinking about regarding admissions...

• Be prepared!

• At least in our experience, admissions are rare.
• Understand not just the complaint, but the general tenor of the interactions in the lab, the role of the respondent, complainant, etc. Context matters.
• Admissions are often complicated by other peripheral issues (e.g. lapse of judgement, “honest mistakes,” severe emotional stress, cultural differences, etc).
• Ensure that admission is not made through coercion.
My perspective: what a new RIO should be thinking about regarding admissions...

• What is the institution’s policy regarding admissions? Who needs to know? Does the admission need to be provided in writing and to what detail? Does the respondent need to be “sworn in?” When should general counsel be involved?

• Does an admission mean that the case can be closed and reported to ORI/OIG and/or local officials? If not, what are the next steps?
Why are admissions important?

• May help to establish evidence supporting the veracity of allegations.

• May uncover unknown problems (e.g. may expand the scope, identify additional respondents, etc).

• May remove suspicion from other respondents.

• May help to correct the scientific record.
A salient example... Luk Van Parijs, Ph.D.

- Ph.D. work under Abul Abbas (Harvard/BWH).
- Postdoc for David Baltimore (MIT/Caltech).
- Assistant and then Associate Professor (MIT).
- Successfully funded by multiple NIH R01 awards.
- Concerns regarding FACS data brought by members of laboratory who were unable to reproduce results published in several manuscripts and grant applications (August 2004).

*Nature volume 438*, page 7 (03 November 2005)
A salient example... Luk Van Parijs, Ph.D.

New Scientist, Oct.28, 2005
A salient example... Luk Van Parijs, Ph.D.


• Ultimately, Dr. Van Parijs admitted to data fabrication and falsification with MIT officials.

• Lab staff cleared of any wrongdoing.

• Caltech concludes RM, requires corrections/retractions of 4 research publications (March 2007).

• Fined $61K, 400 hours community service but no jail sentence (2011).

• Still not clear that the research record completely corrected.
When do admissions occur?
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• At any time during the process (assessment, inquiry, investigation).

• When there is incontrovertible evidence (e.g. word by word plagiarism, video/forensic evidence, etc).

• When the respondent becomes exhausted by the process.

• When the respondent moves from the institution, perhaps to a new job elsewhere, or simply drops out of a research career.

• Other examples?
Potential traps...

• Respondent makes a verbal admission but fails to provide it in writing.

• Respondent reduces the scope in the written admission from that provided in an oral admission.

• Cultural or power/status imbalances may lead to admissions from individuals that might not be fully culpable.

• Promising or entering into a negotiated settlement without fully assessing scope.
Potential traps...

• Failing to continue the process, ensuring that the scope of RM has been fully uncovered.

• Failing to contact general counsel to discuss the legal requirements for an admission.

• Failing to quickly report to ORI, OIG, local officials.

• Failing to provide sufficient detail to ORI, OIG or local officials in written admission.

• Others?