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EDUCATION

UNC's vice chancellor for research cited for plagiarizing in federal grant application

BY KATE MURPHY
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Terry Magnuson, UNC-Chapel Hill's vice chancellor for research, oversees the university's $1 billion research enterprise. *UNC Chapel Hill*

UNC-Chapel Hill's vice chancellor for research plagiarized in a federal grant application for cancer research, according to a report from the federal Office of Research Integrity published Tuesday.

Terry Magnuson engaged in research misconduct by "intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly" plagiarizing text from three online articles and one published paper in his grant application to the National Cancer Institute and the National Institutes of Health last March, as first reported by The Chronicle of Higher Education. The university conducted an assessment with further analysis by the Office of Research Integrity, according to the report.

As vice chancellor, Magnuson oversees UNC's $1 billion research enterprise. His office sets strategic priorities, manages proposals, identifies funding opportunities, develops research teams and manages issues of compliance, ethics and conflicts of interest.

The Office of Research Integrity is a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that detects, investigates and penalizes scientists engaging in research misconduct across several federal offices and agencies, including the NIH, CDC and FDA. The office defines research misconduct as "fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results."

Terry Magnuson, UNC-Chapel Hill's vice chancellor for research, oversees the university's $1 billion research enterprise. *UNC Chapel Hill*

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'TERRY IS A TOP-NOTCH SCIENTIST'

Magnuson is the Kay M. & Van L. Weatherspoon Eminent Distinguished Professor of Genetics in the UNC School of Medicine and the founding chair of the UNC Department of Genetics. He was appointed to be vice chancellor in 2016 and reappointed in 2021 for another five-year term after an administrative review.

"Terry is a top-notch scientist who possesses strength, compassion and goodness that permeates the research ecosystem at Carolina. Notably, under Terry's leadership, Carolina's research enterprise has grown each year and now exceeds more than $1 billion in research awards and spending annually," the review committee wrote at the time of his reappointment.

Magnuson could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

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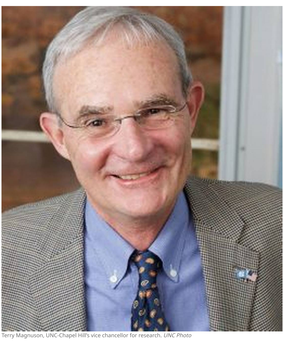
But, he admitted to the allegations and entered into a voluntary settlement agreement, according to the report.



Terry Magnuson, UNC-Chapel Hill's vice chancellor for research. *UNC Photo*

'UNC-CHAPEL HILL HAS HIGH PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS'

He agreed to have his research supervised for the next two years and to get approval from the office of research integrity before participating in any projects supported by the U.S. Public Health Service. Magnuson will also have to submit his grant applications to the vice dean for research in UNC's School of Medicine beforehand to "check for plagiarism and ensure compliance with acceptable scientific practice for citation of prior work."

"UNC-Chapel Hill has high professional expectations for the integrity of all research activities carried out by our faculty, staff and students," Beth Keith, associate vice chancellor for university communications, said in an emailed statement.

"The University follows a federally mandated policy regarding research misconduct, and we hold anyone involved in research activity at the University to that standard," Keith said. "We will continue to follow the standards and processes set forth by the Office of Research Integrity and our research sponsors."

UNC FACULTY CONCERNED

UNC Faculty Chair Mimi Chapman has been fielding phone calls and emails from concerned faculty across the university since the news broke. Some professors expected Magnuson to step down from his position, she said in an email to faculty Thursday.

"As a faculty, we believe that this situation has the potential to taint our own scholarship and gives the impression that some members of our community are 'untouchable' while for others such a situation would be a career-ender," Chapman said.

She said she's been waiting for an announcement that hasn't come.

The university has not answered questions about when Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz, former Provost Bob Blouin or other UNC administrators learned of the research misconduct or who and what office at the university conducted the assessment, as noted in the report.

Chapman doesn't know what's going on behind the scenes, she said, but asked that Guskiewicz and Provost Chris Clemens "resolve this situation in the interests of the institution and out of respect to this faculty with all deliberate speed."

In an interview, Chapman clarified that there has been no vote about this issue and this is not a direct demand that he resign from his administrative position.

She said her colleagues think very highly of Magnuson, but to have someone in a public role as the head of research at a university in this situation raises questions and is tainting their reputation.

"The symbolism of it is just something that feels untenable to the people that I'm hearing from," Chapman said.

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Kate Murphy covers higher education for The News & Observer. Previously, she covered higher education for the Cincinnati Enquirer on the investigative and enterprise team and USA Today Network. Her work has won state awards in Ohio and Kentucky and she was recently named a 2019 Education Writers Association finalist for digital storytelling.

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