

NSF Research Security Training Module 4: International Collaboration QRG

Objective: by the end of this training, you should be able to describe the importance of principled international collaboration, uphold the core research integrity values, and navigate conflicts between principled collaboration and research security.

International collaboration is important because it allows U.S. and other scientists to:

- Access facilities and assets that are not available domestically.
- Share the burden of global challenges such as climate change or pandemics.
- Increase productivity and the creation of new knowledge.
- Mutually strengthen national research enterprises.
- Promote economic growth and development through new scientific breakthroughs.
- Navigate and adapt in diverse and unfamiliar settings.
- Strengthen understanding and diplomatic relationships between nations.

How to find collaborators:

- Take advantage of existing collaborative environments
- Scientific conferences
- Keep up with departmental or institutional colleagues
- Department or program may have processes for hosting international colleagues
- Institution may be part of research network or partnership between institutions.

Core Values

The core values can help you evaluate collaborations objectively and identify malign actors. When working with scientists from other countries, they should be following all the core values below. If they are not, it could be a sign that the collaboration is problematic.

- **Openness and transparency** – all data from the research, as well as all information relevant to decisions and scientific conclusions, must be available to other scientists so the results can be reproduced. Be especially vigilant about requests from foreign collaborators to keep data or results confidential.
- **Accountability and honesty** – report all funding sources and international collaborations. Contributions from all parties need to be credited appropriately. Also provide an explanation and justification of activities to the science community.
- **Impartiality and objectivity** – scientists must conduct their work without bias or preconceived notions and remain objective by not allowing their personal beliefs, preferences, or external influences interfere, so results are based on evidence alone.
- **Freedom of inquiry** – allows individual scientists to decide on the research project and an appropriate line of investigation without interference from non-specialist or non-academic authorities.
- **Respect** – cultivates an inclusive environment and is important because research

talent that feels unappreciated is more susceptible to malign foreign influence.

- **Reciprocity** – in international collaborations, reciprocity ensures a mutual exchange of resources, knowledge, and opportunities. A lack of reciprocity is a big red flag.
- **Merit-based competition** – ensures that the most promising ideas rise to the forefront, regardless of their origin. Personal relationships cannot interfere.

If a foreign collaboration deviates from any of these values, or requests that you deviate from them, that's an indication that a foreign adversary may be exercising malign influence.

How to distinguish between legitimate and malign foreign talent programs

No legitimate science program would do any of the following:

- Require you to deceive or keep information from your home institution.
- Pressure you into transferring existing research and knowledge to a foreign entity.
- Ask you to replicate your U.S.-funded work for a foreign entity.
- Direct you to award any patents associated with your U.S.-funded research to a foreign entity.
- Try to entice you to relocate to a foreign country or offer you excessive compensation or a high position well above your current rank.
- Set up a quid pro quo relationship where you provide knowledge, data, or findings in return for personal gain like money, prestige, or other non-scientific benefits.

Malign foreign talent programs will try to take advantage of you by making rosy promises. Look out for offers that sound too good to be true and do your due diligence to ensure foreign collaborators are legitimate. However, don't be so worried about malign programs that you write off foreign collaboration completely. If you are ever unsure or need help making the decision to collaborate or not, reach out to colleagues or administrators to help you.

Importance of disclosure

The best way to avoid any problems like a conflict of interest is through disclosure to your home institution. You are free to take on work outside of your job, but you must disclose it. When you're forthright about your outside activities, you give your home institution the ability to identify any conflicts, like conflict of interest or conflict of commitment, and to advise you as to the right course of action.

Balancing the risks and benefits of international collaboration

There are risks involved when collaborating internationally since you could accidentally work with a malign foreign talent program that wants to steal your work for themselves. However, there are so many benefits to international collaboration that make it worth pursuing. Be open to international collaboration but also be aware of signs to look out for. Before agreeing to collaborate, look for any red flags outlined in this module. Don't throw away a potential collaboration just because you have to do some due diligence.