To: Members of the Higher Education Finance and Policy Conference Committee

Subject: Concerns Regarding Appropriations to the University of Minnesota's Research and Innovation Office (RIO) in HF2431

Date: May 7, 2025

Dear Chairpersons and Committee Members,

I am writing to express serious concerns about the proposed appropriations to the University of Minnesota's Research and Innovation Office (RIO) as outlined in HF2431. Recent developments have raised questions about the University's commitment to research integrity and the effective oversight of public funds.

Background on Recent Allegations

According to a recent investigation by KSTP, Dr. Sayan Biswas, an assistant professor in the University's College of Science and Engineering, admitted to fabricating research data related to a federally funded project aimed at reducing pollution from fracking operations. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) subsequently canceled a grant worth over $2 million, citing shortcomings in the University's process for addressing research misconduct.

Notably, the University was reportedly aware of allegations against Dr. Biswas as early as 2023 but failed to take timely action. Furthermore, multiple requests for interviews with University officials, including those in leadership positions within RIO, were declined, raising concerns about transparency and accountability.

Implications for Public Trust and Funding

The University's handling of this case suggests a troubling "culture of noncompliance," as described by former U of M Board of Regents member Michael Hsu. Such a culture undermines public trust and raises questions about the stewardship of taxpayer dollars allocated to research initiatives.

Recommendations

In light of these concerns, I urge the Committee to consider the following actions:

1. Conditional Appropriations: Tie future funding to the implementation of robust oversight mechanisms within RIO to ensure research integrity.

2. Independent Audit: Commission an independent audit of RIO's processes for handling research misconduct allegations to identify and address systemic issues.

3. Enhanced Transparency: Require RIO to publicly report on the outcomes of misconduct investigations and the steps taken to prevent future occurrences.

4. Legislative Oversight: Establish a legislative oversight committee to monitor the use of state funds in University research projects and ensure compliance with ethical standards.

Conclusion

The University of Minnesota plays a vital role in advancing research and innovation. However, maintaining public trust requires a steadfast commitment to transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. I respectfully request that the Committee take these concerns into account when deliberating on HF2431 and consider implementing measures to ensure the responsible use of public funds.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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