

Study reveals falsification issues in higher education hiring processes

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Two researchers in WVU's Eberly College of Arts and Sciences examined whether and how frequently researchers misrepresent their research accomplishments when applying for faculty jobs. Credit: Brian Persinger/West Virginia University

When concerns are expressed about distrust in science, they often focus

on whether the public trusts research findings.

A new study from West Virginia University, however, explores a different dimension of trust.

Two researchers in WVU's Eberly College of Arts and Sciences examined whether and how frequently researchers misrepresent their research accomplishments when applying for faculty jobs.

The research team, led by Associate Professor of Political Science Trisha Phillips and Department of Sociology and Anthropology chair Lynne Cossman, collected all vitae submitted for faculty positions at a large research university for one year. The institution was intentionally unidentified to maintain confidentiality.

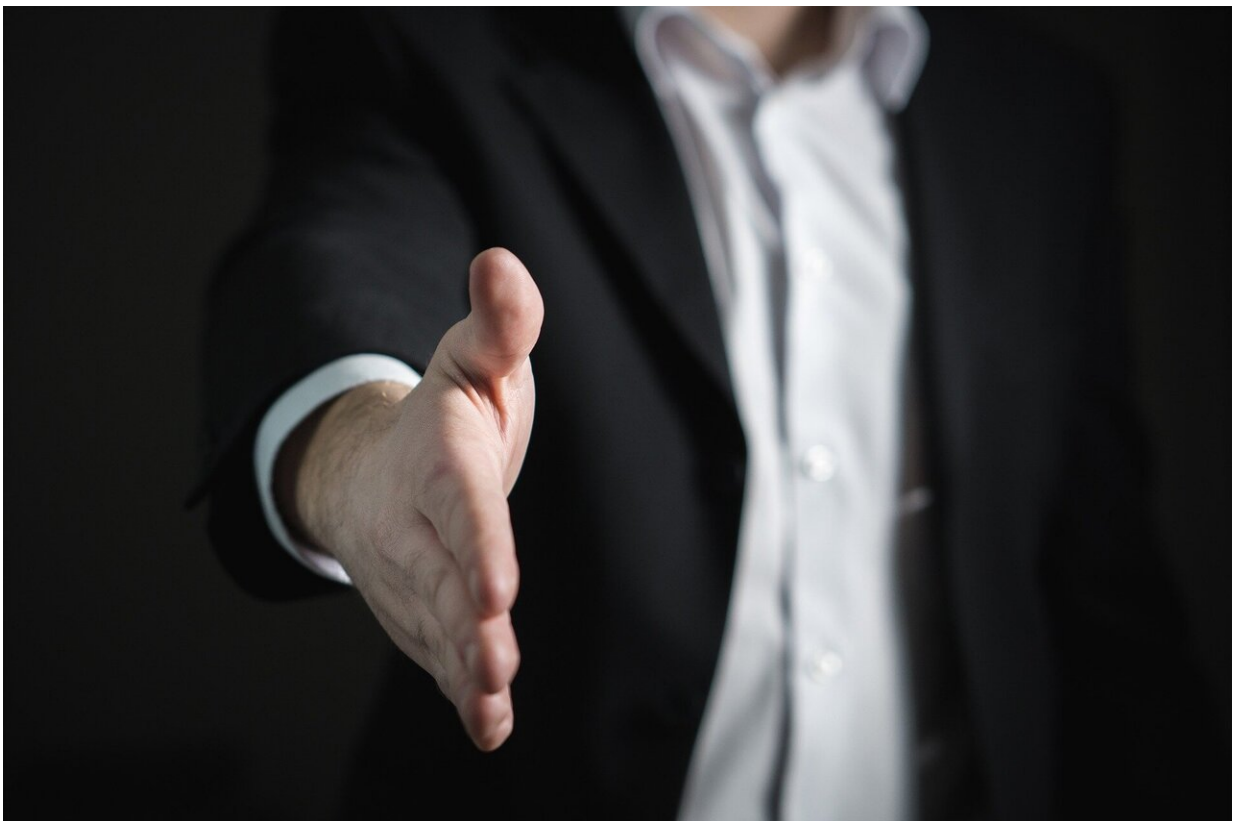
After reviewing a 10 percent sample for accuracy, they discovered that of the 180 applicants whose vitae were analyzed, 141, or 78 percent, claimed to have at least one publication. Of these applicants with publications, 79, or 56 percent, listed at least one publication that was unverifiable or inaccurate in a self-promoting way.

"We were initially trying to determine whether and how frequently people were lying. You can't truly know that without intent," Phillips said. "So, we looked for other indicators. We considered any inaccuracies that were not self-promoting to just be accidents. We found 27 of those mistakes. But in the end, we found that more than half of the inaccuracies were self-promoting. That's nowhere near as equal as it needs to be to think that there is no lying going on."

The falsifications were not limited to any particular disciplines or subject areas.

"People often think that the integrity of the person will translate into the

integrity of the profession or the integrity of the field. It's important to show that a number of the problems that affect business and industry and other non-academic disciplines may also be a problem in higher education," Phillips said. "In being aware that higher education may have misconduct, we shouldn't assume that we are any better than what our non-academic peers might be experiencing. We always need to be vigilant."



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The research team was motivated by several cases of high-profile professional misrepresentation in higher education as well as in their

own experiences serving on hiring committees.

"These high-profile cases of professional misrepresentation in academia generate news, but they do not reveal the frequency or severity of the problem," Phillips said. "Instead, they raise concerns about the truthfulness of academic vitae and questions about how often academics falsify their credentials and accomplishments when applying for jobs."

Because this study reflects the vitae of applicants at one institution, the research team aspires to replicate the study at more colleges and universities in the future.

"We have to keep in mind that this study was done at a single institution, so it could just be a problem there. However, it's not like all the applicants graduated from that institution," Cossman said. "The sample of applicants included recent Ph.D. grads from institutions located all over the nation and world applying for all different kinds of tenure-track jobs at that institution."

Phillips and Cossman hope the findings can inform recommendations for [journal editors](#), graduate student advisers and human resources offices. One idea is making the publication process more consistent.

"Journal editors need to be careful about how they communicate with authors about where their manuscript is in the process. What does it mean to be accepted versus forthcoming versus in print versus published?" Cossman said. "In larger conversations, I've realized those terms mean different things in different disciplines and that the timeframes can vary. We need to identify those inconsistencies and discuss them rather than letting graduate students and new faculty figure it out on their own."

Ultimately, the researchers aspire to change the culture of the academic

hiring process.

"It's important because there's something about the culture of faculty in [higher education](#) that is encouraging this behavior or implicitly influencing it in some way. We need to find this type of misconduct when it's happening. We need to be aware that it might be happening, look for it, find it and address it," Phillips said. "But we also need to think long and hard about why it's happening and look at the upstream factors that are influencing culture and these decisions to engage in this type of behavior. We hope our findings will start a larger discussion in academia in general about what we should all be more aware of and more vigilant in doing."

More information: Trisha Phillips et al, Assessing Trustworthiness in Research: A Pilot Study on CV Verification, *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1556264619857843](#)

Provided by West Virginia University

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