



OFFICE OF INTERNAL AUDIT

CONFIDENTIAL

REPORT

**University of Florida
College of Engineering
Dept. of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Alleged Destruction of Data and
Use of Unapproved Communication Platforms**

Investigation Report

INV-21-07

April 7, 2021

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
OFFICE OF INTERNAL AUDIT

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INVESTIGATION REPORT
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COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING
DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRICAL AND COMPUTER ENGINEERING
ALLEGED DESTRUCTION OF DATA AND
USE OF UNAPPROVED COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

APRIL 7, 2021



Office of the President
Office of Internal Audit

720 SW 2nd Ave, Suite 260
PO Box 113025
Gainesville, FL 32601-3025
352-392-1391

April 7, 2021

MEMORANDUM

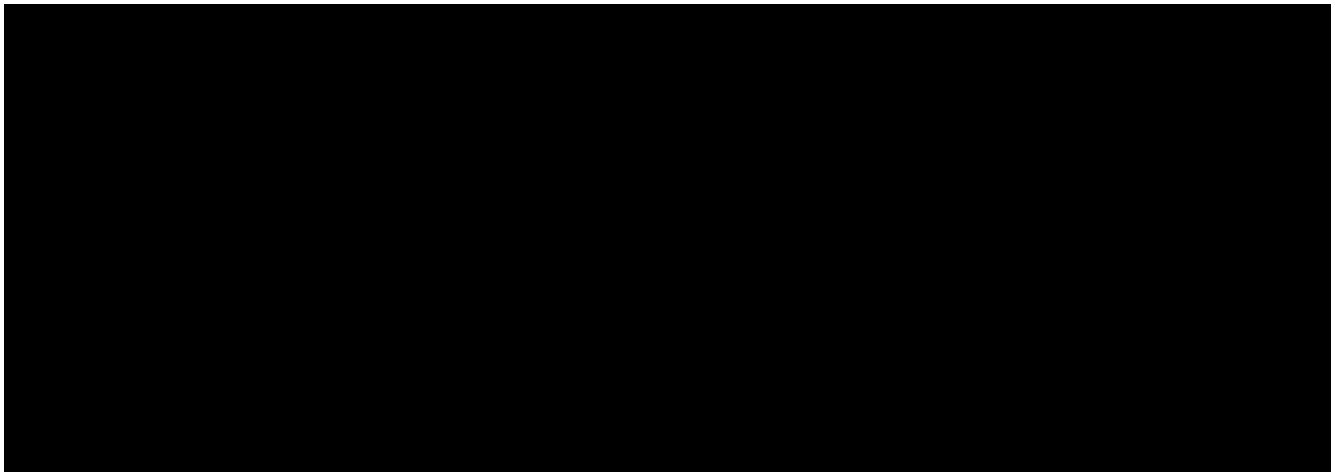
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TO: David Norton
Vice President of Research

Cammy Abernathy
Dean, College of Engineering

FROM: Dhanesh Raniga 
Chief Audit Executive

SUBJECT: Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Alleged Destruction of Data and Use of Unapproved Communication Platforms –
INV-21-07



INVESTIGATIVE SUMMARY

The OIA investigated the allegations that Dr. Tao Li (1) deleted files and destroyed data in Dropbox, a file hosting service provided by Dropbox Inc., that may have been pertinent to University investigations in violation of instructions by University officials, and lied to RI about his use of Dropbox to share documents with students; and (2) regularly used non-approved communication

platforms in his research and work activities. As Dr. Li has been under investigation by RI previously, many of the records that would be pertinent to our review were previously obtained by RI, and we leveraged this information to initiate the review. We [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] requested access to their files, including email captures, WeChat transcriptions, and transcripts of previous interviews held with Dr. Li. These records formed the basis for our investigation and are included as exhibits, where necessary, to corroborate findings and conclusions. On February 26, 2021, we interviewed Dr. Li in relation to our observations from the review of records and emails.

Based upon the review of records and the subsequent interview of Dr. Li, we have concluded that there is MERIT FOUND in the allegation that Dr. Li deleted files and destroyed data from Dropbox, in violation of instructions by University officials that were University work-related and possibly relevant to the RI investigation and lied about his use of Dropbox to share files with his students. The timing of the select Dropbox file deletions in June/July 2019, combined with the volume of files, the descriptions of the deleted files provided by Dropbox, and Dr. Li's lack of cooperation in restoring the files on August 3, 2019, corroborate the merit found determination. While Dr. Li stated that he did not use Dropbox for work-related files, he linked his stated personal Dropbox account to his GatorLink account, making a professional and work-related connection between the account and his University work.

During a [REDACTED] meeting on July 3, 2019, with RI, Dr. Li stated that he did not use Dropbox to share files or data with his students, but in his interview with the OIA, he stated that he did use Dropbox to share files between himself and students. Additionally, two of the deleted folders were clearly referenced as shared folders with former students. The volume of the deletions from the Dropbox account, combined with the fact that two folders were student-shared folders and a third folder's title specifically referenced the National Science Foundation, a significant sponsor of Dr. Li, invalidates his assertion that all files deleted from the Dropbox were personal. This corroborative evidence, which was obtained through our analysis of records, is sufficient to substantiate our conclusion of merit found for the first allegation.

Based upon the review of records and the subsequent interview of Dr. Li, we have concluded that there is MERIT FOUND in the allegation that Dr. Li regularly used non-approved communication platforms in his research and work activities. The UFIT Electronic Mail policy states that "*All employees of the University of Florida must use a university provided or approved electronic mail service when conducting University business via electronic mail*" and that University of Florida business must be conducted using an assigned ufl.edu email address. Based upon our review of translated WeChat messages provided by RI, Dr. Li frequently communicated with his student, Huixiang Chen, using an unauthorized and unapproved communication platform (WeChat) about work-related matters. WeChat is a non-encrypted social networking application for mobile devices that provides messaging and calling services to users. WeChat is recognized for its ability to facilitate communication internationally between users and is not an approved communication platform for

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conducting official University of Florida business or transferring research information, data or documents.

Similarly, the review revealed that Dr. Li was forwarding emails from his GatorLink email account to a 163 email account, and he was responding from that 163 email account to the originators, an action that renders future responses to the original messages undiscoverable by the University. 163 Mail is not an authorized or approved communication platform for conducting official University of Florida business or transferring research information, data or documents.

