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College of Law Student Profile Data Inquiry Complete

Assistant dean resigns; report recommends enhanced data controls, and steps to continue to emphasize culture of integrity and ethical conduct

URBANA—The University of Illinois today issued a final report upon the conclusion of its investigation into inaccurate class profile data shared by the College of Law. The report concluded that the intentional inaccuracies were limited to six of the 10 years reviewed, that a single individual was solely responsible for these inaccuracies, and that the college lacked adequate controls to prevent, deter and detect such actions.

In addition to its findings, the report included a set of eight recommendations, including correction of the erroneous data, implementation of “best practice” processes and controls that include data monitoring, auditing and segregation of duties as well as steps to ensure a continued University culture of integrity and ethical conduct. During the course of the investigation, the college’s assistant dean of admissions was placed on administrative leave and subsequently resigned.

The investigation found that admissions decisions, including scholarship awards, appear to have been made based on the true data originally provided by the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC), the national admissions data clearinghouse. And it doesn’t appear that any students whose data were changed had any knowledge of those changes. In other words, there is no information indicating that changes to individual Law School Admission Test (LSAT) scores or the grade point average (GPA) of any students affected any admissions decisions on particular applicants to the College of Law. The 114-page report (www.uillinois.edu/our/news/2011/Law) is the culmination of an investigation that began Aug. 26 after the University Ethics Office was alerted to potential discrepancies in student profile data—median LSATs and GPAs—for the current College of Law Class of 2014 that had been posted on the college website and disseminated in emails.

Following preliminary confirmation of the discrepancies by the ethics office, the Office of University Counsel informed University President Michael J. Hogan, the Chancellor of the Urbana-Champaign campus and College of Law leadership. At Hogan’s directive, the University engaged independent outside legal counsel and forensic data analysts to assist in the inquiry. The primary investigative team consisted of the law firm Jones Day, operating under the direction of

Theodore Chung, and data analysis firm Duff & Phelps, operating under the direction of Margaret Daley. The report was prepared by Jones Day and Duff & Phelps under the direction of Donna McNeely, the University's ethics officer, and Scott Rice, the chief legal counsel for the University's Urbana-Champaign campus.

Hogan directed that the scope of the inquiry be expanded to include 10 years of data and that it go beyond median LSAT and GPA statistics to include the college's acceptance rates, financial aid and scholarships, bar exam passage rates, and career placement data.

The investigative team spent two months conducting interviews, forensic data analyses and review of approximately 125,000 documents. The work included exhaustive comparisons of data from LSAC and the internal data reported by the law school.

"The report is detailed, thorough, and rigorous, and demonstrates how seriously the University and campus took the initial allegation," Hogan said. "We are committed to the reliability of data and to a culture of transparency and integrity."

"The campus has already begun to implement the recommendations in this report," said Phyllis Wise, vice president of the University of Illinois and chancellor of the Urbana-Champaign campus. "Additionally, we will work with each of our colleges to ensure that appropriate checks and safeguards are in place to help ensure that all current and future data are accurate, complete and verifiable."

The investigation determined that "the College reported and/or publicly disseminated inaccurate LSAT and GPA statistics with respect to the class of 2008 and the classes of 2010 through 2014."

In four of the years, these inaccuracies were based on changes to the LSAT scores or GPAs of individual students that were received by the college from LSAC. In two of the years, no individual data were changed, however, the class LSAT statistics reported by the college differed from the data maintained by LSAC. In all six years, statistics reported by the college were higher than the LSAT and/or GPA values supported by the true student data. College profiles of the classes of 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2009 contained no such inaccuracies.

The investigation also revealed that "the college reported and/or publicly disseminated inaccurate acceptance rate data with respect to four classes—the classes of 2008, 2012, 2013, and 2014," according to the report. "With the exception of 2008, these inaccuracies are attributable to both over-counting the number of applicants and under-counting the number of admissions offers for these classes."

The investigative report concluded that Paul Pless, the college's former assistant dean for admissions and financial aid, "knowingly and intentionally" miscalculated key data. The admissions dean was placed on administrative leave Sept. 7 and resigned from the University last week. Over his seven-year tenure, Pless had the responsibility for reporting this data, and the college showed steady, and occasionally dramatic, improvement in the main factors used to

gauge the academic credentials of a law school class. According to the report, data analyses and the investigative records indicate that data discrepancies were not random or the result of inadvertent errors.

“Numbers were altered specifically, and often just slightly, to meet recruitment goals and ranking targets indicating an attempt to demonstrate that the College of Law brought in an even more highly credentialed class,” said Margaret Daley of Duff & Phelps.

The investigation found no information indicating that, prior to the commencement of the investigation, any person other than Pless knew that erroneous profile data had been reported or disseminated by the college.

The University publicly disclosed the matter Sept. 9 and subsequently released corrected profile data for the class of 2014 and for the classes of 2011, 2012, and 2013. It has kept the American Bar Association (ABA), the accrediting organization for law schools, informed of developments and fully cooperated with the ABA, which appointed fact finders who visited campus for its own investigation. The University will continue to cooperate with the ABA as it concludes its investigation and reviews the University's report. The report was submitted to the ABA today.

The University also has been in contact with the rankings staff of *U.S. News & World Report*.

According to the investigative report, there is no evidence of intentional misreporting in any of the other areas examined in the inquiry--financial aid and scholarships, bar passage rates and career placement data.

“On behalf of the University of Illinois College of Law, I wish to apologize to the legal-academic community, our University, our alumni, and our students, who are among this nation’s most talented and dedicated future lawyers,” said Bruce Smith, Dean of the College. “The investigation has concluded that a single individual – no longer employed by the college – was responsible for these inaccuracies. The college takes seriously the issue of data integrity and intends to implement the report’s recommendations promptly and comprehensively. As the report properly recognizes, the College of Law remains one of the nation’s premier law schools. We are confident that we will justify that assessment with data that are accurate, transparent, and unimpeachable.”

The key recommendations among the eight made in the report are the following:

- The college’s dean should promptly correct all erroneous data, conduct a comprehensive review of control procedures, and implement “best practices” for staffing and operations of the admissions office.
- The college should implement “robust” internal monitoring and audit functions “to ensure that internal controls are functioning properly and that all data reported ... are accurate and supported,” and should review whether “any other data for which a

discernible risk of miscalculation or misreporting exists.”

- The U of I and the college should embrace the opportunity to champion reforms that would be a model for heightened transparency, avoid placing undue emphasis on any particular data or factor in the admissions process, and continue to reinforce a culture of and commitment to openness and integrity.

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The University of Illinois is a world leader in research and discovery, the largest educational institution in the state with more than 79,000 students, 24,000 faculty and staff, and campuses in Urbana-Champaign, Chicago and Springfield. The U of I awards more than 19,000 undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees annually.