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Emory University Sent False Data To Rankings Groups For More Than A Decade: Report



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Alamy

Prestigious Emory University intentionally misreported student data to rankings magazines for more than a decade, the Atlanta school disclosed Friday, adding its high-profile name to a growing list of institutions caught up in scandals over rankings pressure.

As far back as 2000, Emory's admissions and institutional research offices overstated SAT and ACT scores by reporting the higher average tallies of admitted students, rather than those enrolled, as is required, president Jim Wagner announced in a letter to the university community. Those figures were reported to organizations including college rankers, the most prominent of which is US News & World Report.

The investigation also found similar misrepresentations related to students' class rank. Emory may also have excluded scores from the bottom 10 percent of students.

"It's very unfortunate that leaders at educational institutions have to succumb to these kinds of pressures to improve rank," said Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy, a group that works to reduce competitive pressures in admissions. "They don't need to do this. It baffles me. We expect integrity from our higher educational institutions. If we can't trust them then who can we trust?"

Wagner said two unidentified former Emory admissions deans and the leadership of its institutional research office were aware of the practices. The university began investigating in May after John Latting, who was named dean of admission last year after serving at Johns Hopkins University, noticed discrepancies. None of those involved in the misreporting still work at Emory, but citing personnel matters, the university declined to name them or say if any had been fired.

The report found no involvement by Wagner or other deans. Emory launched an internal investigation with help from an outside law firm and announced a series of new internal controls over data reporting.

"Emory has not been well-served by representatives of the university in this history of misreporting," Wagner said. "I am deeply disappointed. Indeed, anyone who cares about Emory's reputation for excellence in all things must regret this news."

Jean Jordan, who served as dean of admissions from 2007 to 2011, did not immediately return a phone message seeking comment. Daniel Walls, whom Jordan succeeded in 2007, when he was named associate vice provost for enrollment management, is listed as a retiree in Emory's phone directory, but the number is disconnected. He is also listed on the counseling staff of a local private school but could not be reached.

Emory is the latest school caught up in what many educators consider a destructive race to move up in the US News rankings. But this latest case is arguably the most prominent yet and will only increase speculation that such practices are widespread in higher education. Emory was ranked 20th in the latest edition of the magazine's list of "America's Best Colleges."

Earlier this year, a senior administrator at Claremont McKenna College in California resigned after acknowledging he falsified college entrance exam scores for years to rankings publications. However, a report released by the college in April found attempts to fudge the rankings weren't to blame; rather the report concluded the practice came because of a disagreement with the president on admissions strategy.

Still, the list of schools appearing to lose their moral compass under rankings pressure is growing. Because the rankings rely largely on self-reported data, education experts believe many more will eventually be caught.

In 2008, Baylor University was criticized for its brief practice of paying already admitted students to retake the SATs in what was considered a transparent ploy to boost its average scores. Clemson University attracted attention when an official there said the school was manipulating class sizes and giving rival schools low marks in the rankings' reputational survey as part of its efforts to move up.

Law schools, meanwhile, face growing criticism for fudging job placement data they report to rankings magazines to make it look like their graduates are doing better in the market.

"We deplore the long-standing misreporting which Emory made public today, but we're encouraged that the university disclosed it," said U.S. News & World Report's editor, Brian Kelly, in an emailed statement. "We appreciate the university's commitment to fixing its data process."

Kelly said the magazine did not believe the misreported data would have changed Emory's No. 20 rankings the last two years, and would have had a negligible effect in prior years.

Still, the discrepancies were not trivial. For instance, Emory had previously reported 87 percent of its 2010 cohort – as measured by the middle 50 percent of students – came from the top 10 percent of their high school class. In fact the figure was 75 percent. The SAT range for that group was reported as between 1310 and 1500; the correctly reported scores were between 1270 and 1460.

Online: http://news.emory.edu/stories/2012/08/upress_data_review_statement/index.html