

Dear Campus Community,

For the 2021 review process for Chancellor Jones we conducted a comprehensive five-year review of his leadership of UIUC. This effort was led by Terry MacTaggart, Senior Consultant and Senior Fellow, at the Association of Governing Boards, who has extensive experience in conducting such reviews. The evaluation process involved an extensive set of interviews with members of the campus community as well as leaders of peer institutions. Dr. MacTaggart also reviewed key documents and initiatives undertaken over the past five years. He submitted a detailed and broad ranging report that I am sharing in its entirety.



# **April 15, 2021**

## **Report of a Comprehensive Assessment of Chancellor Robert J. Jones**

### **PREPARED BY**

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### **PREPARED FOR**

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

### **PERIOD**

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## Introduction

Board policies of the University of Illinois System stipulate that comprehensive assessments are scheduled during the fifth year of each chancellor's tenure. This is the report of such a comprehensive 360 assessment of Chancellor Robert J. Jones of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The University of Illinois System contracted with the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) to provide the review. AGB in turn proposed Dr. Terrence MacTaggart, an AGB Senior Fellow and former chancellor on several occasions, as the consultant. His biography is attached to this report. From January through March of 2021, Dr. MacTaggart reviewed materials and conducted over thirty confidential interviews focused on the Chancellor's performance to date and his potential for leadership going forward.

This report is organized under the following headings:

- Review Process
- Assessment Summary
- Illustrative Comments
- Popularity and Effectiveness
- Distinctive Strengths
- Signature Achievements
- Priorities for the Future

### I. Review Process

The review process featured discussions via Zoom with a broad range of stakeholders. Topics included the Chancellor's strengths as well as opportunities for growth; commentary from the Chancellor on his aspirations for the future of the University; and aspects of building an even stronger working relationship between the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Illinois System. All interviews were conducted in confidence meaning that no individual would be associated with their comments.

In pursuit of these objectives, the process followed these steps:

1. An initial conversation between Dr. MacTaggart and University of Illinois President Killeen
2. An initial conversation between Dr. MacTaggart and Chancellor Jones
3. Recommendations from the President and the Chancellor on persons to be interviewed
4. MacTaggart's review of materials related to the Chancellor's performance and communications
5. Over thirty virtual conducted largely in the month of March. Interviewees included the University of Illinois Board Chair, the Chancellor's leadership

6. team, faculty, staff, community leaders, and distinguished professional colleagues of the Chancellor outside of the University
7. A draft report for review by the Chancellor and the President for accuracy and comprehensiveness
8. A final report to the Chancellor and President

### *Interviews*

Most interviews began with an explanation of the purposes of the review, its confidential nature, and a request that each interviewee describe their position and relationship with the Chancellor. All interviews included discussions of the Chancellor's strengths, achievements, personal qualities, as well as recommendations for future growth and priorities for his attention in a post-pandemic environment. Interviewees were universally forthcoming, offered detailed examples to support their views, and focused on the Chancellor's leadership in the contexts of the multiple challenges he and the University face.

### *Materials reviewed*

In addition to the confidential interviews, MacTaggart reviewed several documents relevant to the Chancellor's performance including:

- Annual performance evaluation reports
- The Chancellor's mass mailings to the campus community
- The strategic plan
- Organizational charts and related documents
- University policies
- University of Illinois System and Board policies

## **II. Assessment Summary**

Chancellor Jones received very high marks from the vast majority of those interviewed. He is seen as exercising a calm, measured, well-informed and character-driven leadership style that serves the University of Illinois exceptionally well. Several long-term employees described Chancellor Jones as the most respected and effective Chancellor in their time at the University.

### *A time of disruption*

In addition to the predictable challenges confronting all higher education, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and its Chancellor face singular crises as well as especially intense versions of more common ones. These challenges, crises, conflicts, and disruptions included the uproar over rescinding the contract of a professor, a two-year budget impasse between the then Governor and the state legislature, outrage over racial injustices, ongoing conflicts among advocates for Israel or Palestine, deep disagreement over the name of the mascot for the famed

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University of Illinois athletic teams, and last but by no means least, the global pandemic only now appearing to recede.

Any one or two of these challenges would have daunted a less able chancellor. The fact that Robert Jones received such widespread and justified acclaim from representatives of most of the Illinois academic community speaks to his sure-footedness in addressing conflicts. He navigates with great skill those conflicts involving parties who show little to no interest in a resolution other than on their own terms. He resolves conflicts when it is within his power to do so. In all instances, he operates with a measured pace featuring respect for the parties involved, transparency, and even-handedness. He would be an adept leader in any season, but clearly, Chancellor Jones is the leader for this season of disruption and division.

### III. Illustrative Comments

All the following are exact quotes or near paraphrases taken from the more than thirty individual interviews and one group conversation. There were virtually no significant negative comments regarding his performance to date. Several interviewees suggested priorities deserving his attention going forward. A summary of those recommendations appears in the final section of this report.

- We are tremendously proud of Robert's leadership in response to the COVID-19 Crisis
- He leads us in doing what a land-grant university should do...helping people
- He takes the University seriously, but doesn't let his ego get in the way
- Robert is easily the best Chancellor in my fifteen years at the University
- I am now confident in our future based on his performance
- I knew we would be OK with Robert in charge
- A calming presence
- He reaffirms good process, shows patience, and operates with high integrity and values
- When he speaks extemporaneously, it comes from the heart
- He brings excellence to the outward facing part of his job, and amazingly to the inward focused part as well
- He has built a strong, high functioning, empowered team
- As a thirty-year member of the faculty, I am proud to see Robert representing our university
- He is masterful in emotionally charged situations
- Perfectly suited to lead in this time and place

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### III. Illustrative Comments, continued

- As an accomplished researcher in the sciences, he brings a lot of credibility to the table
- After his very few missteps, he says “I won’t make that mistake again”
- It hurts my heart to see the abuse coming his way in emails, but he rises above all that
- He shows resilience, grace, and class
- He displays both high IQ and EQ, who could ask for more?
- We experienced a convulsive lost decade prior to Robert
- No one is going to rush him into a premature move
- I hope we keep him for another five years
- The University has good work to do post-COVID, and I know Robert will lead us forward.

### IV. Popularity and Effectiveness

Robert Jones is very popular as the very positive comments indicate. This acclaim is even more impressive since much of it comes from academics prone by training and inclination to be highly critical.

To get anything important done, university chancellors need to enjoy the confidence of their board and at least implicit measures of approval from the academic community. Popular presidents are not necessarily effective ones. What sets Chancellor Jones apart is that he is *both* held in very high regard by all those with whom I spoke (I take these individuals to be generally representative of the university community at large) and highly effective at his job of leading this great research university in a highly disruptive era.

To be sure, there are naysayers among the thousands of stakeholders who surround the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. But those who work most closely with and can observe his performance at close quarters endorse his leadership. They regard him with affection, respect, and confidence that the University is in good hands now and going forward.

### V. Distinctive Strengths

Chancellor Jones’ knowledge derived from executive experience with major land grant and research universities provides a solid foundation for his leadership. He knows both the business and the culture of this large and complicated organization.

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His accomplishments as a well-respected researcher in his discipline justify the respect of top faculty members. In Minnesota, he held senior administrative responsibility as Vice President not only for the Twin Cities campus, but for other universities in the Minnesota system as well as Extension, the Agricultural Experiment Stations, information technology and human resources. This is the business of higher education writ large. As president of the University at Albany within the State University of New York System, he became versed in the work of the chief executive of a growing public research university. These experiences at highly regarded research universities confirm Chancellor Jones' hands-on expertise in the business and culture of substantial universities. In addition to this experience base, three features stand out as Chancellor Jones' distinctive strengths: character, crisis leadership, and the ability to motivate others to do their best.

### *Character*

His peers, subordinates, and colleagues at Illinois and across the country repeatedly use words like authenticity, integrity, courage, perseverance, humility, competitiveness, and decency to describe his character. If personality is what genetics and early experiences give us, character is what we choose to develop in our selves. Robert Jones is regarded by those who work most closely with him as a leader with immense strength of character. As one commentator put it, "what you see is what you get with Robert, and that is very good."

### *Crisis leadership*

Most university presidents in this country receive high marks for their performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Illinois is viewed as above even those for its management of the pandemic and its nationally recognized contributions to its remediation. Robert Jones and his colleagues at the University of Illinois deserve great credit for this important work.

What is even more striking about his performance is his ability to manage and lead the University through multiple, serious additional crises. As noted in an earlier section of this report, several disruptions not of his making confronted him from his earliest days in Illinois. These range from the two-year state budget impasse to racial and ethnic conflicts, to disputes over the naming of the mascot and myriad less well publicized disturbances. Through all these, the Chancellor receives praise for his calm demeanor, scrupulous review of the details and contexts before acting, his impartiality amid conflict and his display of respect even when some of the parties lack civility.

*Motivating others*

Chancellor Jones demonstrates the ability to motivate others to perform at their highest levels. No one individual or small group can be credited with accomplishing all that the University of Illinois achieves in education, research, as well as public health and other services for the people of Illinois. The Chancellor is ready to trust his subordinates, but as several interviewees said, it is a trust that must be earned through solid, reliable performance. He holds people accountable. When a reprimand is in order, it is delivered clearly but without acrimony or meanness. Illinois veterans and newcomers alike seem to share a desire to meet the high expectations he sets for them and the University. As one said, "I try to do my very best because I know he expects it, and he has my back."

**VI. Signature Achievements**

Chancellor Jones most important achievement during this time of unprecedented challenge has been his overall leadership of the University. He exuded the leadership virtues of wisdom, confidence, and empathy. As one respondent said, I knew we would be OK with Robert in charge. In addition to his presence, two especially important achievements deserve note in this review. The first is fundraising success and the second progress in advancing the cause of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

*Fundraising*

At his writing, the University's most ambitious comprehensive campaign is above goal. The target was \$2.250 Billion. The current amount is 101.4% of that goal, or \$2.283 Billion. This achievement is even more remarkable considering the COVID-19 impact on the state, national and global economy. The campaign avoided a hint of desperation philanthropy, a tactic and necessity for many other institutions. Instead, it focused on the fundamentals of excellence at Illinois' land grant university. Its priorities were support for student and faculty excellence, groundbreaking and interdisciplinary research and investments in plant and facilities key to a top-tier institution.

*Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*

Chancellor Jones is and has been for his entire career a champion of all the features of making universities and indeed our society more diverse, fair, and inclusive. His leadership has proven to be especially timely considering repeated incidents of police violence; race, gender and identity bias and discrimination; and the disruptions caused by white supremacists and other extremist groups. Chancellor

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Jones' presence and advocacy has contributed to a spirit of civility during a fraught environment. One of his signature initiatives, the Illinois Commitment, helps all low-income families. Under this program, Illinois students from low-income families receive scholarships and grants to cover eight semester worth of education and campus fees (six semesters for transfer students.) This initiative is making the difference in the lives and prospects of students who might otherwise miss out on the transforming effects of a University of Illinois education.

## **VII. Priorities for the Future**

The final topic in most of the interviews is “what would you recommend Chancellor Jones give his attention to as the University moves beyond COVID-19?” Many encouraged him to continue his current path of dealing with the many challenges surrounding the University and the state, with no specific suggestions for change. Of those who offered concrete suggestions, the most common were to give renewed attention to advancing the reputation of the University, to devote greater attention to the University's signature strengths and take steps to increase internal collaboration by further reducing siloes.

### *A reputation for excellence*

The University is highly ranked across the board and several programs are near the top in their respective categories. Interviewees suggested, however, that it is not as highly ranked as it deserves to be. This presents a conundrum: it is nearly impossible in contemporary higher education to rise in stature without seeking higher rankings. To be sure, ‘chasing the rankings’ is a fool's errand since the criteria shift annually and superior performance should speak for itself. However, perceptions are relevant factors in attracting the best students as well as top faculty and donor support. Charting a path to approaching then joining the ranks of the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley would be worthy aspirations going forward.

### *Signature programs*

The University offers very high-quality programs. Engineering and others would legitimately be considered truly exceptional in comparison with national and global peers. The Carle Illinois College of Medicine apparently has the potential to develop into an international star recognized for cross-disciplinary innovation. Several of those interviewed urged the Chancellor to engage in the complex task of sustaining quality where it exists and singling out a few stars for additional attention and resources.

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### *Reducing siloes*

Every comprehensive research university is composed of departments, colleges, schools, institutes, and other units operating in varying degrees of isolation from one another and with different levels of administrative duplication. Faculty and staff at most in most of these organizations complain that siloes cause dysfunction. At the same time, they recognize that excellence and a large measure of independence go hand in hand. Moving to a central or shared service administrative model can reduce the unnecessary costs of duplication, though that transformation is a major undertaking that results in at least as many failures as successes. One interviewee recommended that the Chancellor commission a task group to study the problems of isolation and duplication and make recommendations for further progress.

### **Summary**

The near universal judgement of the senior leaders, faculty, and staff members, as well as observers outside the University is that Illinois is extraordinarily fortunate to have Robert Jones at the helm especially during this turbulent time. His character, skill in leading through crises and emergencies and ability to inspire trust and high performance among those who report to him or otherwise work with him are signature strengths. They also believe that he enjoys the political capital and skill to move the University forward on the three strategic directions noted above. In the estimation of the who work closely with him, as well as this reviewer, Chancellor Jones belongs at the top of the top rank of public research university leaders.

Respectfully submitted,

Terrence MacTaggart

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## MacTaggart Bio

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Terry MacTaggart is an experienced leader and scholar in higher education. His consulting and research work focuses on higher education leadership, presidential assessment and development, strategy and policy, board development, and issues of shared governance. He has served as a faculty member and administrator at several public and independent colleges and universities where he has led or participated in multiple institutional turnarounds. He has held the Chancellor's position at the University of Wisconsin Superior, at the Minnesota State University System and on two occasions at the University of Maine System.

He has served as a consultant and/or facilitator of leadership retreats for numerous colleges, universities, and systems. His clients include major research universities, urban and metropolitan universities, distinguished independent institutions, regional comprehensives as well as international colleges and universities in Europe, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific Rim, minority serving institutions, nontraditional colleges, community colleges and proprietary schools.

He has served as Chair of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). He has led multiple visiting teams for several regional accrediting associations. He has served as a Fulbright Scholar to Thailand and to Vietnam as an expert on accreditation and quality assurance.

His research and publications focus on governance, improving relations between institutions and the public, and restoring institutional competitiveness. His most recent books are the forthcoming *Assessing and Developing College and University Presidents: An Enterprise Leadership Approach* and *Crisis Leadership: A Guide for Boards and Presidents*, both published in the summer of 2020. In 2017 he published *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Presidency: A Call to Enterprise Leadership* (AGB Press). His best-selling book is titled *Leading Change: How Boards and Presidents Work Together to Build Exceptional Institutions*, published by the Association of Governing Boards Press in 2011. In 2007, he published *Academic Turnarounds: Restoring Growth and Vitality to Challenged American Colleges and Universities*. He has authored numerous articles on presidential and board evaluation, high performance standards for boards, presidential search, and strategies for a highly competitive environment.

His academic credentials include a doctorate and master's degree in Literature from Saint Louis University, an MBA, and two honorary doctorates. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa