

'Errors in judgment' but 'no criminal wrongdoing' in St. John's probe

Catholic News Service | Aug. 27, 2013
Jamaica, N.Y.

An independent investigation by St. John's University found "no criminal wrongdoing" on the part of its recently retired president, but "errors in judgment" by top university officials over financial conflicts of interest and lack of disclosure to the school's board of trustees.

Vincentian Fr. Donald J. Harrington retired at the end of July after 24 years at the helm of the university. Robert Wile, the university's senior vice president of institutional advancement and athletics and Harrington's chief of staff, also resigned earlier in the summer. Both had been the focus of the internal probe.

The investigation was authorized by the St. John's board of trustees following the trial of Cecilia Chang, a former St. John's dean and chief fundraiser, who had been on trial for defrauding the university and forcing international students to do personal work for her. The trial ended when Chang committed suicide the day after she took the witness stand in her own defense.

Chang's actions and financial dealings by Chang, Harrington and Wile were brought to light in a series of articles in *New York* magazine.

In an Aug. 23 message to St. John's alumni, board of trustees chairman Peter D'Angelo said the errors in judgment by Harrington and Wile "led to conflicts of interest and failures to fully disclose those conflicts to the board of trustees."

"These included a real estate transaction involving Father Harrington and Mr. Wile; a short-term loan by a former member of the board of trustees to Father Harrington and Mr. Wile in connection with that real estate transaction; and a personal loan made by a university vendor to Mr. Wile," D'Angelo said. None of these transactions, he added, did financial harm to the university.

According to the investigation, "no one in university management was aware of Cecilia Chang's intricate fraud scheme," D'Angelo said. "Her fraud was facilitated by the failure to require strict compliance by Chang with the university's financial controls. In addition, various university personnel accepted personal gifts from Cecilia Chang, which created the appearance of conflicts of interest. Where appropriate, the recipients of those gifts have voluntarily agreed to make restitution to the university."

D'Angelo told alumni, "Following the disclosure of Cecilia Chang's crimes, a number of measures were immediately implemented to expand the university's internal controls and enhance its policies."

The board of trustees has also directed the investigator and the university's general counsel to make "additional recommendations to ensure that St. John's has the controls, policies and practices to foster and maintain the highest ethical standards across the university. The board of trustees will review these policies on an annual basis to ensure that we are following best practices at all times," D'Angelo said.

The investigation was led by Frank Wohl, an attorney in private practice with more than 40 years of experience, including a stint as a former federal prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, dealing in both civil and criminal cases.

The university has hired Vincentian Fr. Joseph Levesque as an interim president. He was past president of Niagara University and [began his tenure at St. John's on Aug. 1](#) [1].*

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that the president's position at St. John's was vacant.



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