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Lawmakers Stay In Background Of U. Of Ill. Scandal

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (AP) — The uproar over the admissions policy at the University of Illinois has focused mainly on campus officials, but state lawmakers pulled the majority of strings that set off the crisis over money and political influence.

Few of them seem interested in talking about it — so far, only one of the nine asked to testify by the commission investigating the situation is set to appear. And the man running the panel says he'll keep his focus on the university.

But one expert says legislators shouldn't kid themselves, and they should know their calls and e-mails on behalf of students placed undue pressure on the university — particularly given Illinois' "what's in it for me?" political culture.

"A call from a legislator carries clout," said Kent Redfield, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois, Springfield and longtime observer of Illinois politics.

The university has been at the center of a storm since the Chicago Tribune reported in May that the school maintains a list of politically connected applicants known as Category I, and that some underqualified members of the list have been admitted under pressure from former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, university trustees and others.

Gov. Pat Quinn created the Illinois Admissions Review Commission to investigate the admissions of politically connected students to the university's flagship campus in Urbana-Champaign.

Records released by the school show that most of those making inquiries on behalf of applicants are members of the Illinois General Assembly. House Speaker Mike Madigan's name appears on the list at least 40 times over five years, the most of any lawmaker. With him are dozens of House and Senate members.

Madigan was asked to testify before the commission but doesn't believe he needs to and will not, his spokesman Steve Brown said.

"I think he was just responding to constituent requests," Brown said of Madigan's inquiries. "That's what legislators do on a vast variety of topics day in and day out."

Several other lawmakers who made multiple inquiries about Category I students did not respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

Dozens of university faculty, in recent letters to the Chicago Tribune and The (Champaign) News-Gazette, questioned why lawmakers have so far escaped scrutiny.

At least one member of the commission, former Chicago Sun-Times reporter Maribeth Vander Weele, believes legislators need to explain whether they knew their questions set off scrambling by university officials from President Joseph White and Chancellor Richard Herman on down.

"We'd like to hear whether they were aware whether their contacts were causing such a stir among admissions officials, and pressure," said Vander Weele, who now owns the corporate fraud investigations firm Vander Weele Group.

"I'd also like to know whether any of them ever questioned whether there was a line in the sand they couldn't cross," she added, "or whether this was just a part of the political culture and perfectly acceptable."

Vander Weele also said at least some university officials seemed all too willing to bow to pressure from politicians.

The man running the commission, former state representative, congressman and federal judge Abner Mikva, believes that rather than any pressure by lawmakers, the university officials' willingness to consider applicants' political connections is the source of trouble.

"The problem is that if the university doesn't push back, there is a problem," said Mikva, who said he wrote his own letters of recommendation for university applicants while a member of the General Assembly. "In Illinois, it appears that the university hasn't been doing much pushing back."

But the fact that a high degree of political pressure is accepted in Illinois makes it unrealistic to expect university officials to resist entirely, Redfield said. That's something some politicians and others close to the situation don't seem to get, he said.

"You've almost seen in some statements that, well, the university didn't have to respond, they didn't have to yield to pressure," Redfield said. "I think that indicates a lack of understanding what the real problem is."

Rep. Mike Boland, an East Moline Democrat and member of the legislature's higher education committee who has called for university trustees involved in the admissions flap to resign, is the only lawmaker who is so far scheduled to testify. Boland, who doesn't appear on the Category I documents released by the university, believes his colleagues share the blame for the admissions scandal.

"Everybody that was involved in this was at fault," said Boland, who is scheduled to address the commission Tuesday in Chicago. "Personally, I think it would have been common sense not to try to push somebody who wasn't qualified."

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