

Political ties, scholarships dovetail

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CHAMPAIGN Two years ago, state Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington gave a state medical school scholarship worth almost \$24,000 to the daughter of a man who has donated thousands of dollars to him.

There is, by law, nothing wrong with that. And it isn't uncommon.

Relatives of donors and students with political ties show up frequently among the recipients of a \$12.5 million General Assembly scholarship program, a perk that lets state lawmakers give away the equivalent of two four-year scholarships at state-run universities each year, with the sole requirement that the recipient live in the lawmaker's district.

An Associated Press analysis of General Assembly scholarships and state political contribution records found that between 2004 and 2009, at least 41 scholarships went to relatives of someone who gave money to the lawmaker awarding the perk.

Lawmakers handed out at least 42 more to relatives of other people with political ties -- donors to other politicians, lobbyists, party officials and others.

The state doesn't pay for the scholarships, leaving universities to pick up the tab -- \$12.5 million in 2008 for 1,509 scholarships, an average of almost \$8,300 each, according to the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

Brady, like most lawmakers who agreed to talk about the scholarships, said his winners are chosen by a committee, made up mainly of educators, that he picks. Brady, a Republican candidate for governor, said committee members don't know applicants' names. But longtime observers of Illinois' culture of political influence say that's beside the point.

"When you engage in behavior that has the appearance of conflict of interest, whether it does or not, that just reinforces people's cynicism," said Kent Redfield, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield.