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News

Oh Governor, Where Art Thou?

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It's a striking contrast, to be sure.

Within 12 days of the *Chicago Tribune's* [initial article](#) about an admissions scandal at the University of Illinois, Gov. Pat Quinn was on the case. He signed an executive order creating a commission to investigate the now-infamous "clout" admissions list at Illinois' flagship Urbana-Champaign campus, and within two months Quinn joined the commission in urging all members of the university's board of trustees to resign. Quinn eventually replaced six of the trustees, including the chair, and in so doing effectively assured the [resignation](#) of Illinois President B. Joseph White.

Yet, when faculty members at Chicago State University urged Quinn in April to intervene in a presidential appointment they say smacked of cronyism, the governor took no formal action. And even now, as the beleaguered university faces a new series of [tough questions](#) from its accrediting agency, Quinn has allowed multiple vacancies to persist on Chicago State's oft-criticized governing board. In a letter, faculty [pleaded with Quinn](#) to fill the spots, but he hasn't done so. He said at a news conference Tuesday, however, that he [plans to fill the slots -- one now vacant for four years --](#) "within a month, probably less."

The differences between Illinois's and Chicago State's problems are significant, but critics charge that Chicago State's long-festering issues -- financial irregularities exposed in state audits, extremely low graduation rates and a notable lack of trust between faculty and trustees -- are more systemic.

"Governor Quinn focused so much energy on the University of Illinois last summer with [an issue] many people think was much more minor than what's going on at Chicago State," says Ann Kuzdale, a history professor at Chicago State.



Chicago State and Illinois are very different institutions in size, complexity and demographics. The Urbana-Champaign campus, a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities, is a nationally competitive research university that enrolls more than 43,000 students -- about 14 percent of whom are black or Hispanic. Chicago State serves fewer than 7,000 students on the city's South Side; it draws heavily from the city's metro area, and more than 90 percent of students at Chicago State are black or Hispanic.

Given the differences between the two institutions, it's easy for critics to charge that the governor and Legislature jumped quickly to right a rare public wrong at a prestigious campus, while turning a blind eye to a university that serves inner city students and draws headlines for mismanagement. Yan Searcy, chair of the Faculty Senate at Chicago State, is among those who see a problem with the differing responses.

"I utilize race as the last thing to suggest why there should be disparate treatment," says Searcy, who is black. "So all things being equal, it's very difficult to point to race. But if it's not race, it's class. And I've said this before, if race and class are not siblings, then they are first cousins living under the same roof."

Searcy was interested in the presidency himself, but says his criticism has always been about the process.

Inside Higher Ed contacted the governor's press office on numerous occasions about the governor's differing responses, but never received comment.

Christopher Mooney, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois's Springfield campus, says it's difficult to separate race

from any political decision in Illinois. But race and the politics of race are never simple, and how lawmakers and the governor reacted - or didn't react -- to Chicago State illustrate that complexity, he says. An intervention at Chicago State could be viewed as picking on a predominantly black institution, even if intervention is what some people on campus called for, Mooney says.

"The Chicago State thing is more of a slow drip [than the Illinois admissions scandal], and it is of interest mostly to people in the African American community," says Mooney, who works with the Institute of Government and Public Affairs in Springfield. "And it's a double-edged sword. On one hand, you can say [Chicago State] is ignored by the white power structure. On the other hand, it's also true that Democrats in the state really need the African American community to get nominations. And they don't want to appear to be attacking a black institution."

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Even Quinn's critics concede he's had a full plate. Quinn, who has struggled to address significant budget shortfalls, was appointed in January to replace impeached Gov. Rod Blagojevich, whose arrest renewed criticism of corruption and "pay to play" politics in Illinois.

Sen. Edward Maloney, a Democrat and alumnus of Chicago State, agrees that Quinn has had a full agenda. Even so, he says it is appropriate for faculty to question why the governor acted so forcefully at Illinois and not at Chicago State.

"I think the faculty have a legitimate point there, they really do," says Maloney, who chairs the Senate Higher Education Committee. "The [admissions] scandal was headline news because it's Champaign, and yet the problems related to the graduation and retention rate [at Chicago State] haven't gotten the look they should."

But Chicago State has to take some of the blame for its 13 percent graduation rate as well, Maloney says. During his time in the Senate, Maloney says he has pressed university officials to recruit beyond the Chicago Public Schools, reaching into nearby private institutions to find a crop of students with better academic credentials.

"I'm not against giving anybody an opportunity, I'm really not," Maloney says. "But I'm saying if the school is seriously interested in improving its image and improving its graduation rate, they are going to have to go beyond the kids that walk in the door there."

Chicago State officials have **called attention** to the fact that the widely used federal graduation rate is calculated by looking only at first-time, full-time freshmen, a population that represents just 6 percent of the university's total enrollment. That argument, however, has done little to quell criticism that students simply aren't getting degrees in the numbers they should.

Tumultuous Presidential Search

The flashpoints in a long debate over the future of Chicago State occurred over the spring and summer, when the search for a new permanent president went into full swing. At the time, the university was under the interim leadership of Frank Pogue, former president of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. Pogue had replaced Elnora Daniel, whose lavish spending on a Caribbean getaway and other questionable items were cited in a damning state audit of Chicago State. When Pogue arrived at the university in 2008, he says he found

Chicago State **lacked any concrete budgeting system**, and it was little wonder that there had been financial problems.

With the troubles of the Daniel presidency still not far behind it, Chicago State began its search for a new leader. But it wasn't long before that process deteriorated. A Presidential Search Advisory Committee, which included student and faculty representation, quickly found itself isolated from the process -- feeling the trustees had usurped complete control. Interviews were conducted and finalists whittled down without the committee's input, and eventually 13 of the 15 members of the committee -- including the university's provost -- resigned from the panel in protest.



Following the committee resignations, the university's Faculty Senate unanimously voted to condemn the search process and expressed "no confidence" in the board. In their April 21 **letter** to Quinn, they pleaded for the governor to remove all board members, and to stop the flawed process in its tracks.

"Your immediate action to enjoin the Board of Trustees from hiring a president is of the utmost importance to the campus committee," wrote Searcy and Devi Potluri, the Senate's vice president. "Your response on this request would be the most decisive response possible to empower the university to accomplish its mission and serve the citizens of the State of Illinois."

Quinn, who seven weeks later would begin serious intervention at the University of Illinois, didn't respond to the Faculty Senate's requests. Unhindered by Springfield, the board ultimately hired Wayne Watson, then-chancellor of the City Colleges of Chicago. Watson, who had received a "no confidence" vote of his own from City Colleges faculty in 2005, was perceived by critics as a political insider selected through an opaque process. When the board announced his selection, [audience members booed](#).

Not everyone believes, however, that it was the place of the governor or Legislature to intervene when called upon by Chicago State faculty to do so. Sen. Donne Trotter, a Democrat and Chicago State alumnus, says it would have been irresponsible to reboot the presidential search process when it was in its final stages.

"Open this whole thing up for another whole year, leaving this rudderless ship? No, we couldn't do that," says Trotter, who had supported the presidential candidacy of Carol Adams, another finalist who serves as the secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services.

Even after Watson's appointment, however, the "ship" has remained "rudderless" for longer than most anticipated. Watson was expected to start as president August 1, but state rules forbade him from collecting pension from his City Colleges position if he took another higher education post within 60 days of retiring from his chancellor's position. To ensure that Watson would get his pension, trustees [changed his appointment date](#) to today -- October 1. As a result, the university was without any president for four months, from the day Pogue left -- June 30 -- till today.

Watson, who declined to be interviewed for this article, said that before today he was acting as a "volunteer" on the campus -- learning the ropes without performing official functions.

'With All Deliberate Speed'

While faculty petitioned Quinn to remove all Chicago State trustees -- as he sought to do in Illinois -- the governor could have stopped short of such drastic measures and still added new voices to the board during the tumultuous presidential search. Indeed, the governor could have put new people in four of the eight seats on the board just by filling vacancies and replacing one member whose term expired in January 2007.

Erma Brooks-Williams, associate president for the Board of Trustees and governmental affairs, says the university has been in touch with the governor's office about the vacancies.

"We encourage the governor to appoint the three additional members," she says. "I spoke with the governor, and he said that's one of his number one priorities, last Friday. We realize he's only been in there for eight months. He has a lot of other priorities, especially budget deficits to deal with. Obviously small boards are not the priority."

Making small boards a big priority, however, might have gone a long way toward easing tensions on the campus during the presidential search, Pogue said.

"I do know the faculty at that time, [along] with students, organized the university Senate and alumni association. [And they] were all appealing to the governor," recalled Pogue, who stepped down three months ago. "Some would say get rid of the board. But I think most people felt it would be fair to at least review the [presidential search] process and set up some way, similar to Illinois, to review the process. That of course was not done, and I think that probably added to some of the tension because people didn't see anyone responding to their requests."

As interim president, Pogue had his share of disagreements with Rev. Leon Finney, chairman of the board, and Pogue says he left the presidency convinced that the "composition of the board" needed to be altered.

"My hope, of course, will be that when the new president steps into office that he will have an opportunity to work with the faculty and with the students," Pogue says. "But I still think there is a need to pay attention to the composition of the board, and that is clearly my view. I'm not saying attention has not been given since I left, but what I am saying is at the time the request was made to pay attention to what was happening, attention could have been given to the board, and its composition and its commitment to the institution."

Finney could not be reached for comment.

When the *Chicago Tribune* asked the governor's office this week about filling the vacancies, a spokesman said "the governor's senior staff has been working with all deliberate speed" to fill the spots. The use of the term "all deliberate speed" has raised some eyebrows at Chicago State. The same term was employed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation case, which didn't result in speedy desegregation in part because of the court's vaguely described timeline for implementation.

In an e-mail to faculty members Monday, Searcy took umbrage with the employment of the infamous phrase from *Brown*.

"The language and inaction of the Governor's office leads some to think of another Civil Rights era phrase -- benign neglect," he wrote. "There is nothing benign about neglect."

— **Jack Stripling**

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