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Connections Between Campaign Donors and Scholarship Recipients Raise Suspicion

By KEVIN LEE

SPRINGFIELD - Lawmakers have awarded at least 197 tuition-free scholarships to relatives of campaign contributors, according to an investigation by *Illinois Statehouse News*.

Some lawmakers and good government groups have raised concerns that the scholarship program favors the politically connected.

The legislative scholarship program allows lawmakers to give eight public university students each year a tuition waiver to one of Illinois' state universities.

State law mandates that lawmakers nominate students who are of school age and reside in the lawmaker's district, but gives no other guidelines.

The lack of defined restrictions and oversight allow lawmakers opportunities to abuse the legislative scholarship program, according to David Morrison, deputy director of the nonpartisan Illinois Campaign for Political Reform.

"A lot of people aspire to go to college, a lot of parents worry about how to pay for college. And the notion that legislators can play favorites if they want based on shady criteria – that connects with people," he said.

Those who receive scholarships must sign a waiver that releases their names, addresses, universities, degree programs and amounts of tuition waived by the legislative scholarship.

Illinois Statehouse News cross-referenced this information with the Illinois State Board of Election's online database and counted instances where the last names and addresses of scholarship recipients and campaign contributors matched.

Some individuals had submitted regular campaign contributions before their relatives, usually sons and/or daughters, were awarded a scholarship.

In other cases, individuals contributed to a lawmaker after their sons or daughters had been awarded.

Legislative leaders

Between 2003 and 2008, lawmakers awarded 197 scholarships to people living in the same home with the same last name as someone who donated to that legislator's campaign. In more than 75 percent of these cases, lawmakers received contributions from in-house relatives within a year of awarding a scholarship.

In Karen Cicero's case, she contributed both before and after she received her scholarship. Cicero attended the University of Illinois, Chicago, with a focus in public administration.

Between 2001 and 2004, Cicero donated nine times for a total of \$2,500 to the 13th Ward Democratic Organization, of which House Speaker Michael Madigan is chairman and treasurer.

Records show Madigan awarded a one-year scholarship to Cicero in 2005.

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From 2005-2008, Cicero has made four donations to the 13th Ward Democratic Organization, for a total of \$3,400.

Cicero also received three scholarships from Sen. Louis Viverito between 2006 and 2008, though she vacated one of those scholarships.

Calls to Cicero were not returned.

Steve Brown, spokesman for Madigan, said individuals must write an essay outlining their need for a scholarship and that Madigan selects recipients himself.

When asked about Cicero, Brown dismissed notions that Madigan favors contributors or their relatives when nominating recipients.

"There have been dozens, maybe hundreds of scholarships handed out over the years and 1 percent, if that, may have contributed over the years. It is a matter of coincidence more than anything else. If someone wants to make something untoward out of that, that's certainly [his or her] right," he said.

State Rep. Bill Black, R-Danville, said lawmakers need to rethink the scholarship program and higher education funding in general.

"Why are we college aid officers?" he asked. "We can't give the money to the kids who actually need it, but we can go ahead and clout certain people... Let's put the millions in unpaid tuition and put it towards the Monetary Award Program."

The Monetary Award Program is a need-based state scholarship program.

In order to deflect suspicions of cronyism and conflicts of interest, some lawmakers have instituted committees to nominate scholarship recipients.

Among those using a committee is House Minority Leader Tom Cross. Records show the Plainfield Republican selected Anthony Griglione in 2005 for a scholarship to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Griglione's father, Mark, is president of the Board of Education for the Troy Community Consolidated School District. He and wife Janeen, donated once to Cross for \$500 in 2003. Since their son received a scholarship, they've donated eight times for a total of \$1,550.

Cross also selected Jennifer Relyea for a scholarship in 2006. Relyea's father, James, is a board member for the Troy Community Consolidated School District and served as a member of the Planning and Zoning Board for the Village of Shorewood.

The elder Relyea made a \$200 contribution to Cross in June 2006, before the nomination, and a \$200 contribution in June 2008.

Neither Griglione or Relyea returned calls for comment.

Cross' press spokesperson Sara Wojcicki said Cross uses an independent committee, but "makes the final decision after careful consideration and substantial reliance on the committee's recommendations."

He along with the majority of the legislature refused to say who serves on his selection committee.

Rank-in-file lawmakers

* Between 2005 and 2007, state Rep. Brandon Phelps, D-Norris City, awarded waivers for three tuition-free years to a Southern Illinois University medical student and the son of a major campaign contributor. The contributor, optometrist Gregg Eubanks, has contributed \$5,450 to Phelps' campaign from 2004 to 2008.

* State Rep. Mike Boland, D-East Moline, has also been generous to a relative of a campaign contributor (see link). Between 2004 and 2005, real estate agent Barbara Suehl made nine donations worth almost \$16,000 to Boland. Boland awarded Suehl's daughter, Alleyne, four tuition-free years from 2005 to 2008 at Western Illinois University and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

* In 2005, state Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, received a campaign contribution from J.D. Stelle worth \$10,000. Two years

later, Brady awarded a scholarship to Stelle's daughter, Lacey, to study medicine at the Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. J.D. Stelle donated another \$250 in 2008 and \$1,000 in 2009. Brady said in documents voluntarily given to ISN (see link on FOIAs) that he institutes a nominating committee to choose recipients.

* State Sen. Louis Viverito, D-Burbank, waived tuition in 2007 and 2008 for Hector Cesario's daughter, Maria, a student at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Cesario and Viverito are both members of the Stickney Township Board. Since 1999, the elder Cesario has contributed \$4,250 to Viverito's personal campaign fund. Cesario has also contributed \$7,900 to the Stickney Township Regular Democratic Organization, a political committee whose only listed candidate is Viverito.

State Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, awarded a one-year scholarship in 2005 to Jacqueline Salesky to attend the UIUC.

According to Jacqueline's mother Maureen, the Salesky family did not know Lauzen prior to Jacqueline receiving the scholarship. The Salesky family contributed \$250 to Lauzen in both August 2005 and January 2006.

"There is absolutely no connection between those two or those three events," said Lauzen, who said he has participated in the scholarship program for 17 years. "I can assure you that there is no connection between the awarding of scholarships and contributions. We run an absolute squeaky-clean office and have for 17 years at enormous personal cost to my family."

Records show the Saleskys have not made a contribution from their Geneva home to any political figure since the January 2006 contribution.

Maureen said that Jacqueline's academic record, athletic ability and willingness to volunteer for worthwhile causes as a whole merited selection. She denied a political exchange of campaign contributions for scholarships took place.

"If that was the case, I have two more kids and I'd still be donating if that is what I was concerned about or if that is what I thought would work," she said.

Maureen added that Jacqueline applied unsuccessfully for the scholarship in 2006.

Future of the Program

Charles N. Wheeler, III, director of the public affairs program at the University of Illinois, Springfield, said lawmakers can protect themselves from suspicion by using independent committees and using objective guidelines to nominate scholarship recipients.

"If I as a legislator put this in somebody else's hands, I have a perfectly defensible method of selecting students, without cronyism, clout or conflicts of interest," he said.

Brown, spokesman for Madigan, said the House Speaker is prepared to vote for the abolishment of the scholarship program.

"But he recognizes that there are a number of legislators who think this is a valuable supplement to helping students in their district before college," he said. "He's confident that they in many cases can make as good a decision as a committee or some group bureaucrats in an office somewhere."

When they return in January 2010, lawmakers will consider a new bill proposed by Black to abolish General Assembly scholarships. His is one of several bills proposing the elimination of the scholarships.

He said that getting rid of the program is the most effective method to eliminate distrust of lawmakers and their nomination procedures.

"Perception in this business is reality," he said. "And if people perceive that that process may not be as fair and above-board as they think it should be, then you're always going to get somebody calling a reporter every two or three years and saying, 'My kid is smarter than his kid. I'm poorer than they are. How come didn't my kid get a tuition waiver from Sen. Bigfoot and my didn't?'"

If passed, Black's proposed law would prohibit lawmakers from awarding or renewing any more scholarships after July 1, 2011.

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Public universities would honor all scholarships awarded before July 1, 2011 until their terms expired.

Morrison believes lawmakers may not seriously consider reforming the scholarship program because the state faces a bevy of ethics reform issues.

"The scholarship fund is another fire that just keeps routinely coming up and whether the General Assembly is going to say this is a fire that we're going to address ...that's a prioritizing system that they're going to have to work out," he said. "But there are so many fires right now that there's almost nowhere to sit without catching your pants.

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