

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

EDITORIAL

U of I board should conduct UIS probe

It's time for the University of Illinois board of trustees to demand some answers from its Springfield campus about its handling of what appears to be some very serious misbehavior by two of its former coaches.

Nearly two years after allegations of sexual impropriety during a team trip led to the resignations of two University of Illinois Springfield softball coaches, the incident remains swathed in secrecy. Only after 18 months of repeated legal appeals by State Journal-Register reporter Bruce Rushton under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act did UIS — grudgingly and under subpoena from the Illinois Attorney General's Office — acknowledge that it had paid \$200,000 to a student who was a victim in the incident.

On Jan. 6, UIS released a March 23, 2009, letter to then-UIS Chancellor Richard Ringeisen from the campus legal counsel. The document released to the newspaper was redacted to almost comic proportions; it is literally a heading, a subject line and a mass of solid black where the body of the

letter has been crossed out in heavy marker.

The subject line, however, speaks to the possible severity of the incident: "Re: Sexual Assault and Battery by UIS Softball Coach."

Throughout this ordeal, UIS consistently has used protection of student privacy as its overriding reason for withholding all information about the incident. For the record — again — this newspaper never has sought the names of any victims.

We believe that in withholding virtually all information about this incident the university is potentially providing protection to those who don't deserve it and, in doing so, failing in its duty to ensure that other schools that might employ those at fault know why they left UIS.

At a time when the university should be sending the strongest message possible that its nascent athletic department will not tolerate this kind of improper behavior from its coaches, it is sending an altogether different signal: If you engage in these types of acts, you'll have to resign, sign a

statement that you are resigning voluntarily and move on to somewhere else.

For a school trying to build its athletic department into a strong and visible component of its campus, this is not the proper course of action. For that school's parent university — itself still recovering from last year's scandal over political clout and admissions — this should be an outrage.

The episode in question happened in mid-March 2009 during a trip to Florida by the UIS women's softball team. By March 23, coach Joseph F. Fisher and assistant Roy Kendrick Gilmore had resigned. On his resignation form, Fisher wrote "personal" as the reason for his departure. Gilmore cited "other opportunities." Though the resignation forms indicated that the departures were voluntary, Ringeisen reported to U of I trustees and then-President B. Joseph White that the coaches resigned at UIS' request.

"There was an incident involving the assistant coach and some women players on a recent softball trip to Florida that we simply cannot tolerate. Alcohol was involved

and the head coach had allowed it to be used," Ringeisen wrote in a March 23, 2009, memo to White and the trustees.

This explanation is a fairly striking contrast to the subject line on the March 23 letter: "Re: Sexual Assault and Battery by UIS Softball Coach."

The University of Illinois system deserves better. The public that supports this university deserves better. Schools who might unknowingly employ coaches with this in their past deserve better.

Ever since this newspaper began seeking information about this incident, UIS has acted as if it is accountable to no one; as if it had carte blanche for secrecy as long as it could invoke student privacy in some way. Ordered by the attorney general to turn over documents, it repeatedly found new legal provisions to hide behind. "Exemption shopping" is what the state's top public access attorney called it.

Last month, it became the first government body to which the attorney general had to issue a subpoena to obtain documents under the Freedom of Information

Act. Until then, the \$200,000 settlement itself had been kept secret. That's not the kind of "first" to which any public university should aspire.

Nor is it something the university board of trustees should tolerate.

Incidentally, the two softball coaches were not the only sudden departures from women's athletics programs at UIS in March 2009. On March 26, women's golf coach Jay Davis resigned. He had been placed on administrative leave with pay on March 4. No information has been released about that resignation, though The State Journal-Register continues to seek records through the Freedom of Information Act.

We believe the only body that can hold UIS to its duty as a public institution is the U of I board of trustees. We call on the board to conduct a thorough, public investigation of UIS' handling of these incidents. It's time to end the Springfield campus' long experiment in testing the state's open records laws. It's time to stop protecting those who may not merit that protection.