

# Report Calls on All U. of Illinois Trustees to Resign

Ashley C. Killough

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After spending nearly two months investigating an admissions scandal laced with political favoritism at the University of Illinois, a state-appointed panel issued its final report on Thursday, calling for the resignation of all members of the Board of Trustees, an overhaul of the admissions process, and new ethics policies for the board.

The situation, experts say, is a classic case study of questions that arise when governing boards and administrators abuse their entrusted powers, not only with the public but with one another.

The Illinois report, prepared by an Admissions Review Commission appointed by Gov. Pat Quinn, says that since 2005, about 800 applicants with ties to trustees, politicians, and donors received preferential consideration for admission. The applicants' names were flagged on an internal list known as "Category 1," or the "clout list," and were funneled through a pipeline supported by their well-connected sponsors.

It's unclear how many of those students would have earned a spot on their own, but their acceptance rate was higher than average. For 2008-9, about 77 percent of Category 1 applicants were accepted, compared with 69 percent of other applicants.

After the Chicago Tribune exposed the practice in May, the issue snowballed into a highly public dispute. Records show that all of the trustees, with the exception of Edward L. McMillan, who joined the board in May, passed along "inquiries" to admissions officials about applicants on the clout list. Two of the trustees, including Board Chairman Niranjana S. Shah, have resigned in the last month.

The university system's president, B. Joseph White, and the chancellor of its flagship campus at Urbana-Champaign, Richard Herman, were criticized in the report, but it did not call for their resignations.

In a news conference after the panel's final meeting on Thursday, Mr. White said he strongly approved the report and embraced its recommendations.

"Now that we know the problems, our job is to fix the problems," Mr. White said, adding that his goal is to make the university a national leader in admissions integrity. He announced that he will convene a meeting on August 12 in Urbana to outline admissions reforms, which include erecting a "fire wall" around the process to block out inquiries from prominent citizens.

"This has been a painful but, in my view, necessary chapter in the history of our 142-year-old institution," he said. "What's important is to know those problems and understand them in detail so we can fix them."

## Political Pull

The Admissions Review Commission looked at 9,000 pages of documents, interviewed more than 40 people, and conducted 12 public hearings this summer.

While some university officials justified the Category 1 list as a means of increasing diversity on the campus, the commission found that a vast majority of the special-consideration applicants were Caucasian. Of the 33 applicants who were admitted last year despite being initially denied by the university, over a third came from affluent areas in Illinois.

The university's governmental-relations office was found responsible for 40 to 50 percent of Category 1 inquiries, while administrators and trustees were each responsible for 20 percent. The university's foundation, alumni offices, and college deans made up the rest. Half of this year's Category 1 applicants have ties to state lawmakers, the report said.

"I think a great number of administrators were frustrated with the practices going on, but they were unwilling or unable to do anything about it," Bernard M. Judge, a member of the investigative panel, said in an interview. "Since the chancellor played an obvious role in it, and he's their boss, I guess they felt constrained."

The commission came down heavily on Chancellor Herman, who oversaw the clout list, and Mr. White, who had a lesser role in the process but still forwarded requests for applicants endorsed by politicians and other prominent figures. The Chicago Tribune reported that those figures included former Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, the nationally syndicated columnist George Will, and a former president of the Chicago Board of Education, Gery J. Chico. Others whom the report faulted for meddling with applications were Heidi Hurd, former dean of the College of Law, and Larry DeBrock, dean of the College of Business.

The report made no mention of Linda P.B. Katehi, former provost at the Urbana-Champaign campus and now incoming chancellor of the University of California at Davis. Her appointment has drawn fire from some politicians in California, who have raised questions about her role in the admissions controversy.

The commission recommended that Illinois's governor, Pat Quinn, a Democrat, replace the trustees with a new board that will seriously review the actions of Mr. White, Mr. Herman, and other administrators, and enforce ethics policies that prevent similar conduct from recurring.

"We've got a governor who's a real straight guy. He's not going to allow these abuses to go on," Mr. Judge said. "Legislators aren't going to make phone calls anymore because nobody's going to answer the phone."

## Best Practices for Board Selection

In a letter to Abner Mikva, chairman of the commission, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges presented best practices for board selection. With the vast majority of public-university boards being appointed by governors, it's too often the case, the letter says, that trustees are chosen only because of personal or political connections with the governor.

Should the governor decide to start clean with a new board of trustees, the effects on the university would be “overcomable,” said Richard Novak, senior vice president of the Richard T. Ingram Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

There would be some institutional-memory loss and pressure on system staff, he said, but if the governor tapped the right people, they could easily catch up to speed.

But how to keep politics out of membership selection is the \$64,000 question, Mr. Novak said. “You can never get all the politics out of it.”

He suggests nonpartisan screening committees that would vet potential appointees and make merit-based recommendations to the governor. A handful of states, such as Minnesota, Virginia, Massachusetts, and Hawaii, have adopted that approach.

It’s fair, he says, for governors to meet with new trustees and talk from the beginning about their expectations and agendas in higher-education policy. “But that’s very different from a governor saying there are special favors involved down the road.”

Once on the board, trustees often forget they have collective power only, not individual power, says Mr. Novak. “It’s a gavel-to-gavel authority. When the meeting is over, it’s over,” he said. “Action only takes place in the boardroom.”

## **A Precarious Place for Presidents**

Mr. White, who says he plans to continue leading the university, offered one piece of advice to fellow presidents: “Stay the heck out of admissions.”

Rita Bornstein, president emerita of Rollins College, would agree. “A president is between a rock and a hard place,” she said. “The board is a president’s most important constituency because it has the authority to fire that person. Presidents are very sensitive to that.”

Ms. Bornstein says the pressure presidents face from outside requests is pervasive. During the hearings, some trustees in Illinois argued that they were unaware they were doing anything wrong. Some seemed to assume such power was a “perk” of the job, the Chicago Tribune reported. “Legislators and board members and others have this feeling that they deserve extra consideration,” Ms. Bornstein said.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, says that while the issue in Illinois was “deplorable,” it offers a lesson in what she says is a larger issue of the affliction that seems to beset university governance in general.

“There tends to be some confusion in higher education. There’s a culture that focuses more on particular interests or university interests, where it should be on the public interest,” she said. “That was clearly lost here, not only for the trustees but for the administration, as well.”

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# U. of Illinois President Resigns in Wake of Admissions Scandal

Kathryn Masterson  
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The admissions scandal at the University of Illinois claimed its highest-ranking victim on Wednesday, when B. Joseph White, president of the three-campus system, announced he was resigning, effective December 31.

Mr. White denied that he ever used pressure to influence the admission of well-connected applicants, and he said he was stepping aside to let the new Board of Trustees select the university's leader.

In a letter to the trustees, Mr. White, who holds a Ph.D. in business administration, said he was committed to the university and would remain as a faculty member. He also wrote that he would forgo a retention bonus that he would have been eligible for in February.

The university said in a news release that the retention bonus would have been worth \$475,000. It also said that Mr. White would continue to help raise money for the university's \$2.25-billion capital campaign.

Christopher G. Kennedy, who was appointed to the Board of Trustees this month and is its chairman, wrote in a response to Mr. White that his resignation did not imply he was at fault for the admissions problems investigated this summer by a state-appointed review commission. "My colleagues on the board and I appreciate that your resignation is motivated by serving the university's best interests and is not intended to create any presumption of wrongdoing by you concerning the subjects investigated by the governor's Admissions Review Commission," he wrote.

The board will appoint an interim president in the next few weeks, Mr. Kennedy said, and will begin a search for a new president, with the goal of having the new leader in place by the start of the next academic year.

## Investigation and Repercussions

Mr. White, who has led the Illinois system since 2005, has been enmeshed for months in the scandal that followed the revelation of a "clout list" of applicants who received special consideration in admissions decisions because of their ties to trustees, donors, or politicians. A report released last month by the commission criticized Mr. White and Richard Herman, chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The report came down more heavily on Mr. Herman, who oversaw the clout list, but also faulted Mr. White for having a role in the process.

The review panel, which was created by Gov. Pat Quinn, recommended a complete overhaul of the admissions process and the resignation of all members of the Board of Trustees. Over the past month, Governor Quinn, a Democrat, has appointed six new trustees, including Mr. Kennedy, and reappointed one who stepped down.

The governor said neither he nor the board's chairman had asked for Mr. White's resignation. At a news conference Wednesday morning, Mr. Quinn said the university's reputation had been paramount for Mr. White, and he commended the departing president for taking action to move the university forward.

"I think President White is doing what's best for the university, and the people of Illinois are grateful to him," Mr. Quinn said.

## **A 'High-Integrity Leader'**

Mr. White's decision to resign was a turnaround from the position he took after the Admissions Review Commission's report was released on August 6. He said then that he wanted to help fix the problems and make the University of Illinois a national leader in admissions integrity.

Last week, the faculty at the system's flagship campus sent him a message that it did not believe he was the right person for that job. The faculty Senate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign approved a nonbinding resolution calling for the removal of Mr. White and Mr. Herman.

In his resignation letter, Mr. White included a statement he had made to the faculty Senate, in which he said he had worked to insulate the university from external pressures in an intensely political environment. "The notion that I would submit to pressure—or apply pressure—for admissions or anything else in order to please the high and mighty is dead wrong," he said. "I came to Illinois in 2005 a fiercely independent person and high-integrity leader. I still am."

Mr. Herman took a different approach with the faculty Senate, delivering a remorseful apology for failing to stop a system of political favoritism. He said he had considered resigning in order to avoid more public scorn, but decided he would rather stay on and continue to serve the university.

Even with his apology, Mr. Herman may not be in the clear. The Board of Trustees has announced it would review the performance of top university officials.

The clout system, which gave a "Category I" designation to applicants with ties to trustees and other influential people, was exposed by the Chicago Tribune last May and snowballed over the summer into a highly public dispute. Earlier this month, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution to eliminate the "Category I" designation, to establish written criteria for admissions, and to create a "fire wall" to insulate the admissions process from outside interference.

The scandal has been a case study in governing boards and administrators overstepping their powers, experts say, and may lead other institutions to reconsider how they handle admissions.

"It will probably force some public universities that have allowed personal pressures and influences to factor into their admissions decisions to re-evaluate the practice," Graham B. Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, said in an interview on Wednesday.

Brad Wolverton contributed to this report.

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