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Ex-lawmaker waives tuition for supporter's family

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Year after year, state Rep. Robert Molaro doled out publicly funded scholarships to the family of a longtime political supporter, ultimately giving the four children more than \$94,000 in tuition.

The valuable scholarships came with just one legal requirement: that the students lived in Molaro's Southwest Side district.

The siblings signed notarized documents stating they did, while other public records indicate they lived with their mother in Oak Lawn, outside Molaro's district. Their father didn't live in the district either.

The Tribune's examination of awards to the family of longtime Molaro backer Phil Bruno comes amid Gov. Pat Quinn's calls to abolish the General Assembly Scholarship program, a century-old legislative perk long criticized for allowing lawmakers to pass out waivers like political plums.

Intended to give Illinois legislators a chance to ease the financial burden of a few college-bound constituents, the program instead has sent money to insiders. The Bruno family example also raises new questions about loose enforcement of eligibility requirements.

In recently vetoing a bill that would restrict the way the scholarships are distributed, Quinn said a total ban would be the only way to stop abuses. However, past attempts to end the program have died in the legislature.

Molaro, who retired from the General Assembly in December 2008, is now a state lobbyist in Springfield, where his eclectic clientele has ranged from suburban governments and labor unions to Hawthorne Race Course and animal welfare groups.

But in the four years before he left public office, Molaro waived nursing school tuition for Bruno's three daughters and gave Bruno's son a scholarship for summer school classes.

A former CTA supervisor who is now a real estate agent in Oak Lawn, Bruno was an early backer of the Molaro's political career. He donated about \$1,400 to the ex-lawmaker's campaign funds between 1994 and 2004.

In an interview with the Tribune, Bruno said he worked on Molaro campaigns dating back to the 1980s. Bruno's attorney also shares office space with Molaro's law firm.

But Bruno said his children received no favoritism and applied for the scholarships like anyone else.

"They were lucky to get them," he said.

The scholarship rules state that residency is defined by the address at which the student is registered to vote. Only one of the four Bruno siblings is registered in Molaro's district. One is registered in Oak Lawn, outside his district. Two weren't registered at all in Chicago or suburban Cook County.

Yet each time the children signed notarized documents for their awards, they listed their permanent addresses as houses in the district. Bruno said his children were eligible for the scholarships because they moved into their aunt's Southwest Side home after he and his wife divorced in 2002.

But court documents show his ex-wife, Hildegard Bruno, received custody of the children. She has lived in the same six-bedroom Oak Lawn home -- outside the district -- since 1985, according to multiple public records.

Three Bruno siblings also listed their mother's Oak Lawn home as their permanent address with their respective universities.

Two of the Bruno children who received the scholarships -- middle children, Erica and Frank -- said they sometimes lived with their aunt in Molaro's district. Bruno's ex-wife and other two children did not respond to requests for comment.

Molaro would not discuss the scholarships with the Tribune.

"I'd rather not comment until I do my own research and get all the facts," he said.

Legislators can award two four-year scholarships each year, which they can carve up any way they choose. Most divide them into eight one-year awards that waive tuition and fees at state schools.

In 2008, the lawmakers awarded 1,509 scholarships totaling \$12.5 million. The General Assembly does not allocate money for the scholarships, so universities already owed hundreds of millions of dollars by the state must cover the cost.

Phil Bruno's youngest daughter, Michelle, received a four-year waiver in 2008 -- the largest scholarship Molaro bestowed during his final year in office.

Though her relatives say she lived with her mother during high school, she listed her aunt's home in the city as her permanent address on the scholarship form. She was not registered to vote in Illinois, and her driver's license stated that she lived in Oak Lawn.

Michelle Bruno, 20, still has two years left on her scholarship.

Phil Bruno acknowledged that his children's driver's licenses list their mother's Oak Lawn home as their official residence, but he denied that it means they live there. Rather, he said they use the address to receive a lower rate on car insurance.

"We did it for a family discount on the insurance," he said. "That's all."

Records suggest that Molaro's office considered the awards more than just tuition waivers. Documents obtained by the Tribune show that Molaro aide Greg Swan had a series of caustic exchanges with **University of Illinois at Chicago** officials in which he flaunted the scholarship as he pressed them to admit one of the Bruno children into a competitive nursing school program.

"When Swan told the director that the college should have known that (the student) had received a GA scholarship, the director told him that the college only knows what the applicant provides," the documents state. "Swan contends that (the student) should have received preferential treatment."

The student was admitted to the program the following year.

Logs maintained by university lobbyists indicate that Phil Bruno planned to attend a meeting with Swan, his daughter and the nursing school director, but Bruno told the Tribune he did not remember involving Molaro's office in the matter.

Bruno's daughter Melissa received the family's first scholarship in 2004 and listed her aunt's address as proof of eligibility.

She registered to vote in August 2005, using her mother's Oak Lawn address and voted there as recently as 2008, according to public records. She was awarded a tuition waiver for the third consecutive year in 2006, when she signed a notarized scholarship form saying she lived at her aunt's home on Nashville Avenue.

Her sister Erica received tuition waivers beginning in 2006, public records show. In different years, she listed her address as either her aunt's house or a Menard Avenue two-flat co-owned by her father in Molaro's district.

Unlike her siblings, Erica Bruno registered to vote in Molaro's district before receiving the scholarship. She also listed her aunt's home as her permanent residence with UIC, where she received her nursing degree this spring.

Reached at her mother's Oak Lawn home last month, Erica Bruno said she "sometimes" spends the night at her aunt's house because it is close to her part-time job and because she helps out with her elderly grandmother who lives nearby.

"I don't know what I would have done without the scholarship," she said. "I probably would have had to work 40 hours a week and gone into a big debt with student loans. It would have been really hard."

Her brother, Frank, who attends Washington University in St. Louis, took summer courses at UIC in 2007 after Molaro gave him a scholarship worth \$2,500.

Though Frank Bruno listed his mother's house as his permanent address with the Chicago campus, scholarship documents give his father's two-flat on Menard as his official residence. He is not registered to vote in Illinois, according to the state.

Frank Bruno, now 21, told the Tribune he "sometimes" lives with his aunt when he's home on break. He would not elaborate why he listed the Menard address on his scholarship form if he lived with his aunt.

Erica Bruno, who graduated with honors last month, could not explain the incongruities in her family's statements. But she said that she hopes the scholarship program survives the governor's calls to abolish it.

"They're so beneficial to people who want to go to college and can't find the money," she said. "It has helped out a lot of people, including myself."

Jodi S. Cohen, Ray Long and Todd Lighty contributed to this report.

— Stacy St. Clair and John Chase

New U of I president's salary unrealistic

By the H&R Editorial Staff | Posted: Tuesday, June 1, 2010 5:00 am

Talk about your bad timing.

At the same meeting the University of Illinois Board of Trustees voted to raise tuition for new students by 9.5 percent, it approved a \$620,000-a-year contract for the school's new president.

It's worse than bad timing, actually. The contract decision shows a board that apparently is unaware of the economic pressures facing the state and more important, students and their parents.

In many ways, the tuition increase was expected. The state of Illinois is \$375 million behind in payments to the university. The university has taken some cost-cutting measures, including the buyout of about 600 employees, and there are moves to consolidate departments and undertake other savings steps.

Also, because of the state's law guaranteeing students the same tuition for four years, increases often are greater because the university has to look to the future.

Still, tuition at the University of Illinois main campus in Urbana-Campaign will increase to \$10,366 a year. That has to be a concern for many students and families.

The salary package approved for incoming President Michael Hogan is a little harder to comprehend. Hogan formerly was the president at the University of Connecticut.

Hogan's salary is about \$170,000 more than outgoing President Stanley Ikenberry was paid in the last year. That's an increase of nearly 40 percent for the president's position.

Ikenberry said Hogan's salary would put him in the middle of the pack for Big Ten presidents. The range is from \$442,000 at Wisconsin to \$1.58 million at Ohio State.

That sort of "keeping up the Joneses" type of thinking is dangerous, especially in tough economic times.

The real question the board of trustees should have considered is whether the new salary will make a difference at the university. Is there any evidence, for example, that the University of Wisconsin is an inferior institution of higher learning because it pays its president the lowest amount in the Big Ten? Or is Ohio State vastly superior because its president earns more than \$1.5 million?

Hogan undoubtedly comes to the university with high credentials, and he has already been president of a large university. He has the right to ask for the salary that he feels he deserves.

But critics are right to point out that when the university, its students and their parents are doing all they can to save money, a huge contract for the president sends the wrong message.

The board of trustees could have taken a different route. They could have set a reasonable upper limit on the president's salary. If Hogan did not want to accept that salary, we're sure there were other more-than-qualified candidates who were waiting in the wings.

The board most likely regrets that the tuition decision and the president's salary decision occurred at the same meeting.

But the timing isn't the problem. The problem is ignoring the reality of economic conditions and agreeing to an inflated salary for the president's position.

Need sacrifices to boost budget

After reading the Connecticut newspaper editorial on new **University of Illinois** president that was reprinted in The News-Gazette, I wonder why in the world the UI would want to hire him.

It is a disgrace that he, the coaches, athletic director and governor are making such big bucks and raising tuition.

Julia Rietz, the state's attorney for Champaign County, is giving back to the state one month's salary, and she is to be commended for her wonderful, caring act.

How about Mike Hogan, Ron Zook, Bruce Weber, Ron Guenther and Gov. Pat Quinn doing the same thing?

All the people in Champaign-Urbana who make big money should do the same thing. That would help our state's financial situation tremendously.

I am sure that Hogan is not aware that there are so many poor families in Champaign County who depend on food banks to be able to feed their children. How about people stepping up and doing the right thing? It will be interesting to see who will make the first move.

PHYLLIS SMITH
Urbana

University heads toward a greener future

BY RAISSA ROCHA
STAFF WRITER

With the release of the Office of Sustainability's Illinois Climate Action Plan (iCAP) on May 15, the University pledged to take steps toward carbon neutrality, less energy use and overall improved sustainability in the future. Among these are projects that will not only help save the environment but some dollars as well.

As part of the University's signing of the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment in 2008, the plan calls for carbon neutrality by 2050, which refers to net zero carbon emissions. It also demands a reduction in building energy use of 40 percent by 2025, officials said in a press release.

One of the commitments outlined in the iCAP is the elimination of coal use at Abbott Power Plant by 2017. Amy Allen, president of Student for Environmental Concerns and former Illini Media employee, said a report revealed that continuing to burn coal at Abbott Power Plant would require millions in maintenance and renovations in order to remain operational and within compliance of the Clean Air Act.

A transition to more natural gas and less coal could save money, she said.

Tom Abram, sustainability coordinator for Facilities and Services, said in addition to energy reduction, the plan calls for a "significant increase in renewable energy usage." In the iCAP, the University pledges to use renewable energy generation systems to supply at least 5 percent of its electrical needs by 2015 and 25 percent by 2025.

He said that several of the planned proj-

ects for renewable energy systems include the installation of a utility scale wind turbine and biomass pilot plant near the College of Veterinary Medicine by 2011. The plan also calls for two more wind turbines afterward, if feasible.

"We'll also be looking at additional solar photovoltaic systems. We will explore biomass possibilities at the existing Abbott Power Plant and what modifications will need to occur to ramp it up in the coming years," Abram said.

Officials said other projected goals include implementing a campus bicycling master plan and requiring that all new buildings and major renovations meet the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Gold Standards by 2011.

Abram said that in the long term, the projects outlined in the plan have positive financial benefits.

"Our Retrocommissioning team, which drastically reduces energy consumption in campus buildings, has saved millions of dollars in the few years of their existence," he said. "Although many of these projects have a significant first cost, there are funds available for these types of projects and creative financing can allow us to leverage these benefits from year one."

Even though the University has committed to these goals, the plan is still not well known, Allen said.

"We're (Students for Environmental Concerns) glad that the University set these strong goals," Allen said. "We want to make sure that as many people are aware of it as possible to hold the University accountable to a fiscally, socially, and environmentally responsible future."



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University president contracts

Here is the full text of selected contracts of Illinois public university presidents.

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May 30, 2010

How Transfers Are Changing Northern Michigan U.'s Enrollment Equation

By Eric Hoover

Doug Turnbull needed time to figure things out. After graduating from high school, in 2005, he enrolled at Kalamazoo College, in Michigan, but his grades there cost him his baseball scholarship. "I wasn't quite focused enough," he says.

After one year, Mr. Turnbull dropped out and got into carpentry, enrolling part time at a community college. Although he liked working with his hands, his parents urged him to pursue a degree that would help him find a different kind of job. "The body fails," his father told him. "You can't do carpentry forever."

So after spending several semesters at two community colleges, Mr. Turnbull transferred to Northern Michigan University this past winter. He has decided to major in English and become a teacher.

Mr. Turnbull is one of a growing number of transfer students at Northern Michigan, which, like many institutions throughout the nation, has seen its admissions equation change because of shifting demographics and a tough economy. This year the university increased its enrollment target for transfers and lowered its target for freshman applicants.

"Before, there was solid predictability for freshmen," says Gerri Daniels, the university's director of admissions. "Over the last couple of summers, we saw that dissolving, and we started seeing that we were going to have fewer freshmen."

For this fall, Northern Michigan reduced its freshman-enrollment goal to 1,800—80 fewer than last year—and raised its transfer-enrollment goal to 480, up from 430. Ms. Daniels expects that the university will end up with well over 500 transfers, however. After all, 524 transfer students enrolled last fall, nearly 100 more than the university had expected.

So far transfer applications for the fall are up 16 percent over last year. A majority of those applications come from students who are not far removed from high school: More than 80 percent of the university's transfers are 21 or younger. Last year there was an even split between students who had started at two-year colleges and those who had transferred from other four-year colleges.

"As the economy has worsened, we've heard from more students that they want to start college closer to home and save some money," Ms. Daniels says. "The writing's on the wall here, so we decided we needed to do some things to be attractive to students who are already looking at transfer early on."

Northern Michigan has long considered transfer outreach a priority, but over the last year the university has done even more to engage such students. The admissions office revamped its Web site,

creating a more-robust information page for prospective transfer applicants. It improved and clarified its transfer-of-credit agreements and policies. It established a focus group of transfer students to determine what the university might do better. And it stepped up outreach to veterans and current members of the military.

Recently, Northern Michigan also expanded its scholarships for transfer students. Previously the university offered them two tiers of awards for academic performance; now it offers five, with scholarships ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 a year.

"We recognized a gap," says Kevin Stulz, associate director of admissions at Northern Michigan. "There were transfer students who had been working very hard, but if they didn't have a 3.5 grade-point average, they didn't get a scholarship. We wanted to be able to recognize a student who had a 3.0, who might be working full time, with a family."

The university's admissions staff has also done more to engage high-school students who might be considering the possibility of enrolling at another college before transferring to Northern Michigan. "We're telling students, 'You're not the only one in this boat. You may not have a direct path here, but here's how we'll help you,'" Ms. Daniels says. "We really hadn't talked to high-school seniors like that before unless they asked us."

This summer the university plans to hold a gathering for accepted applicants who have decided to enroll at a community college instead, perhaps for financial reasons. The admissions staff has also developed a strategy for maintaining better contact with accepted students who enrolled elsewhere. Admissions counselors who recruit freshmen will now refer particular applicants to one of the office's two transfer-admissions counselors, who will follow up to ask if those students are still interested in Northern Michigan.

"On both sides, there's a lot of time invested, and we don't want that time to be wasted," Mr. Stulz says. "So we might ask them, 'How did your first semester go?' We'll say, 'A year from now, if we can still be of service to you. ...'"

Mr. Stulz, who has worked with transfer students since 1998, says recruitment of this population boils down to one-on-one relationships. "There's really no one-size-fits-all approach," he says. "They all have unique stories, and their courses may be all over the place, so you've got to spend time with them on the phone, on e-mail, or when they come in. This consumer is savvier than a freshman."

Mr. Turnbull, who just finished his first semester, was impressed when the admissions office helped get him in touch with the head of the English department. The ensuing conversation made him feel wanted.

That was important for Mr. Turnbull, who says transferring presents students with a paradox. "I feel like I'm getting to the finish line," he says, "but also like I'm just getting started."