

Remarks about Admissions to Urbana Faculty Senate

President B. Joseph White

August 31, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I would like to make some remarks about the admissions problems and then hear your comments and questions.

First, we all regret that these problems occurred.

On August 12, I brought together a hundred University leaders from three campuses, including faculty governance, to begin the urgent work of admissions reform, both for remediation and prevention.

The Senate's Committee on Admissions called in its report of August 19 for faculty input to, among other things, "a code of conduct [for admissions] providing penalties for the circumvention of the specified policy."

This is exactly what is needed. It is what the Admissions Review Commission (the ARC) called building "firewalls" around admissions. The admissions process is sacred in the University. We must protect it.

Reforms will be implemented quickly so we can assure tens of thousands of applicants to our campuses this year that University of Illinois admissions processes are fair and transparent, with equal access for all.

This is the most important thing we can do to set things right and restore trust.

Also in its August 19 report, the Senate's Committee on Admissions said that its recommendations would be based on two principles: campus autonomy and shared governance. With regard to campus autonomy, the Committee said that in admissions: "...final responsibility for determining and following specific procedures lies at the campus level."

As president of the University, I am responsible for the institution. However, the distinction between overall and direct responsibility is important.

Admissions is a campus function. Former President Stukel made this point in his testimony to the ARC.

Three campuses report to me. To my knowledge, the problems that occurred on this campus, primarily in undergraduate and College of Law admissions, did not occur at the other two campuses. They did not occur in the Health Science colleges of UIC, including the College of Medicine, where demand for admission is high. These were Urbana admissions problems.

The ARC did criticize me for failing to exercise appropriate oversight of persons who reported directly to me. It also criticized my personal participation in admissions applications.

With regard to oversight, the admissions problems were an example of the fundamental conflict between campus autonomy and presidential responsibility for oversight. I did not know about Category I or admitting candidates who were noted as denials, a practice with which I disagree.

The ARC's report notes that from all accounts, White "was not a participant in the Category I meetings and was not regularly included in internal correspondence related to Category I." I assure you that had I known about the practices, I would have challenged them.

I did not know about directed admits to the College of Law or other practices related to College of Law admissions cited by the ARC. The report observes that, "President White, for example, met with a COL [College of Law] applicant at the request of a state representative, but did not direct Herman or Hurd to admit the applicant." I did not and would not direct the admission of any applicant – to the College of Law or anywhere on the University's three campuses.

With regard to oversight of Governmental Relations, the ARC's investigation revealed substantial staff involvement and advocacy in cases about which legislators had inquired or expressed interest. I believed that staff's involvement was limited to tracking cases and communicating with legislators. I was wrong.

With regard to my personal involvement, there were three instances cited by the ARC in its report.

In December 2005, I conveyed to the chancellor a message from the chair of the Board of Trustees that the Governor would like to see admitted two candidates for undergraduate admission. I did not know or recognize the name of either candidate. I said in my message to the chancellor that, "If not admitted, I need[d] to talk with [the chair] about how to handle the message before [the] denial letter goes out."

The second instance was a request I made to Governmental Relations to "watch" a candidate about whom former Governor Thompson had inquired. That's the extent of the story.

The third instance was an email message I sent the chancellor that an extended family member with an outstanding academic record had applied for undergraduate admission and I supported the application. The individual had top grades, superior test scores, and many advanced placement credits. I thought that if the person won admission to the University on the merits, it would be in the best interest of the University because the applicant was the kind we value. I would not have questioned a denial.

Let me conclude.

I know that everyone here, including me, has the best interests of the University at heart. Together, we have an obligation and opportunity to protect our admissions processes through reform. This will send a strong message to students, faculty, and administrators as well as alumni and the people of Illinois. The message is that the University of Illinois continues to stand for quality, integrity and fairness in all we do.

Thank you for your attention. I invite your comments and questions.