

Legislative scholarships tarnish General Assembly

By Jim Nowlan

Small beer is by definition weak and trivial, but if you drink enough of it, I suppose you can get in trouble. So it is with Illinois legislative scholarships. They are a small deal in the larger scheme of things, but over time abuses of the program by a few lawmakers have contributed to the woeful status of the legislature in the public's view.

Each representative and senator may grant two four-year full-tuition scholarships each year to any of the public universities in the state.

Lawmakers are allowed to divide each scholarship into four one-year scholarships, so a maximum of eight scholarships can be granted each year.

The program is not widely known, and so there is a bias from the get-go, with some families aware of the program through word of mouth or acquaintance with the legislators.

To avoid charges of favoritism, many legislators have created citizen committees that review all applications and make recommendations on the basis of scholarship, need and maybe other factors. All of this is commendable but certainly no guarantee that a few lawmakers won't take advantage of the system.

Over the years, for example, some legislators have granted scholarships to their children, to relatives, to campaign contributors and to students who live far outside their own districts (now awardees must live in the legislator's district). In the past, some

legislators have even traded scholarships, granting them to the children of one another's children.

Recently, newspapers across the state have been lambasting the program because of reports in the Chicago Sun-Times that Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Chicago) avoided the must-live-in-district requirement. The senator apparently awarded five scholarships to unrelated students, all of whom listed the same address inside Sandoval's district, which was the home of a politically-connected party worker.

Another legislator has apparently awarded a scholarship to the child of one of his secretaries, and yet another made awards to campaign workers.

Nobody pays for the tuition awards. The universities simply have to eat the costs of the students by absorbing them onto their campuses as if they did not cost the universities anything.

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission is the major state program for awarding tuition aid to Illinois students, strictly on the basis of need. The legislature appropriates about \$400 million each year for this purpose, which is not enough to provide assistance to all who qualify, but that is a story for another day.

When I was a legislator, I came in for criticism for my award of a scholarship, although I didn't learn about the criticism until years later. I had no committee for screening applicants, and I received few inquiries. Most came from families of the few who knew about the legislative scholarships.

One of the applicants came from a young man who had been rejected for admission by the University of Illinois; his family was comfortably fixed and had

contributed a modest amount, I think it was \$50, to my campaign (this was before the days of expensive election contests).

In addition to the tuition support, a legislative scholarship then guaranteed the student admission to the public university to which he was applying. I don't know if that is still the case.

Anyway, the young man and his family convinced me that he indeed did qualify for admission and that he was being wronged by the university, so I awarded him the scholarship. I don't recall having had any other requests for that scholarship.

[Instead, I should have created a committee, publicized the availability of the scholarships widely and made the award on the basis of the committee's recommendation. But that was before the development of such commendable committees, as I recall.]

Years later, I heard a close friend and supporter of mine tell another friend how she had earlier defended me among those who had become aware of the scholarship to the son of the comfortable family. I felt low as a guttersnipe. It would have been better if there had been no scholarship program.

According to the 2011 annual survey by the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University, only 11 percent of respondents gave the state legislature "good" or better ratings, with five times as many rating the lawmaking branch as "poor" or "very poor."

Gov. Quinn would like to end the program. The program may help some students, and legislators certainly see political benefits for themselves, yet the costs to the

legislature's standing in the public eye are not worth it. There will always be a few bad apples who spoil it for all.