

Politicians, alumni seek admissions help, but universities rarely comply, experts say

Admissions season can be a tense time at selective universities, especially those in Texas, where politicians, alumni and others with influence regularly send letters or make calls - and sometimes threats - to ensure their applicant of choice gets in.

"Being a president of a university is sort of hand-to-hand combat, in the sense that you're always confronting individuals who went to school there, whose children go to school there, political figures - sometimes employees of the university, even - who have special requests," said Ray Bowen, a former Texas A&M University president.

But that doesn't mean university leaders must bow to the pressure.

Consultants who investigated admissions at the University of Texas at Austin found that President Bill Powers, on some occasions, stepped in to make sure favored students were admitted. This sort of intervention is extremely rare, according to national admissions association leaders, former university presidents and others interviewed last week.

The UT-Austin report could tarnish the reputation of Powers, the outgoing president, who is known nationally as a champion of affirmative action and a defender of academia against conservative pressure.

A similar controversy arose in the 1990s, when a Chronicle of Higher Education investigation found that A&M's Bowen intervened numerous times on behalf of special interests. State lawmakers in the past have pushed, and failed, to legally require universities to ignore those requests.

"The rich and influential do reach out and inquire," said Michael Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "But to take it to the next step, as they do at Texas - I would consider that highly unusual and I would say inappropriate."

A 107-page report released Feb. 11 detailed Powers stepping in at the behest of state lawmakers, regents and influential alumni to make sure certain applicants were accepted. It found that every year "a select handful" of UT applicants are admitted over the objections of the admissions office.

Under Powers, the files of as many as 300 applicants per year have been given one of several designations indicating they should be held for further consideration, mostly at the request of legislators or regents, the report by the Kroll consulting firm said.

In the aftermath of the review, UT System Chancellor Bill McRaven convened a committee of former UT leaders to examine UT-Austin admissions policy. State Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, has called for a state House committee to launch its own investigation.

Powers, who declined to comment for this article, admitted at a news conference that he has stepped into admissions decisions occasionally, saying his predecessors and leaders of other elite schools had done so as well. He stressed that his actions were in the university's best interest.

Powers' immediate predecessor, Larry Faulkner, who led the school from 1998 to 2006, said the pressure was certainly there, but he couldn't remember overruling admissions officers at the flagship. He said he met with them to collaborate on the best course of action.

"You would get people who would threaten to withhold gifts or things like that," Faulkner said. "The answer in every such case was, 'You've got to do what you've got to do, we're going to make our decision.' We, I think, never bowed to that."

Bowen, who intervened at least five times at A&M in 1995 and 1996, said the issue is more complicated than most people realize. The former president said certain major donors have "washed their hands of the university" because A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine is "notorious for not admitting anyone based on donations or political connections."

In his eight years as president of A&M, Bowen said, there were "maybe three or four cases" he felt were important enough to admit the student, but he would always draw a line if the applicant did not meet the university's academic standards.

"Imagine you're the president of a big university and you have a donor who annually supports 20 to 30 full scholarships for students - there are people like this - and then that person calls up and says, 'My great-grandson is applying to A&M, we'd appreciate any help you can give,' " Bowen said. "I think any human's going to look at that and say, 'This person will earn that special treatment.' "

"It's kind of a Wild West environment," he said.

But that shouldn't be the case, national admissions leaders said.

"To me, again, it's just the nature of the admissions process," Reilly said. "To be fair to your applicants, to the people who finance your institutions - certainly public institutions - I think you need to be very transparent about admissions decisions and the question of fairness."

The president of the Association of Chief Admissions Officers at Public Universities, Jim Cotter, who also heads admissions at Michigan State University, said in an email that he has heard from other admissions directors "very few times" in his 31-year career that they are "regularly overruled by outside influences."

"I speak from personal knowledge at Michigan State University, admission decisions are made within the Office of Admissions without influence from university leadership," Cotter said. "Of course there are many different constituents that contribute to a university's ultimate success. However, in the end, admission decisions (at MSU) are based on an individual applicant's academic credentials and the likelihood this information reflects that same student's future success."

In Austin, Powers, who plans to step down from his post in June, won't be punished, because he didn't break the school's policies or any state laws, McRaven said. But that doesn't mean the UT president won't take a hit to his reputation.

UT, which has been locked in a legal battle over its consideration of race in admissions, showed commitment to ethnic and racial diversity in several cases, the Kroll report said, but the fact that elite applicants benefited in other cases could cast the school in a new light.

"I think this tarnishes his reputation a great deal," said Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, a progressive think tank based in Washington, D.C.

"He's built up a lot of good will nationally, among academics and liberals, for standing up to a conservative governor, Rick Perry, and for defending affirmative action all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. But now these new revelations that he was involved in providing spaces at the university to the wealthy and well-connected diminishes that progressive reputation."