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Prairie State College plagued by accusations of nepotism, secret ballot

By [Angie Leventis Lourgos](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

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Faculty cried nepotism when Prairie State College created a temporary administrative position for the board chairwoman's stepfather about a year ago. Now the two-year college has hired the same relative for another new \$80,000-a-year post, this one with no expiration date.

Neither job was posted. There was no search committee or field of other candidates. And fallout from the most recent appointment has resulted in a bizarre chain of infighting, a walkout protest and subsequent secret ballot on the board that governs the Chicago Heights public college with a nearly \$50 million annual budget.

"It left a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths," said Student Government Association President Addison Jackson. "There was no open process. It gives the look of inappropriateness at the top level of the school."

Board Chairwoman Jacqueline Agee defended the hire of her stepfather, Leo Alexander, for the new assistant director of human resources post, saying a formal search was not required. While the south suburban board's policy says members cannot "advocate or influence employment" of family, step relationships are not explicitly listed as relatives.

"This has been rehashed and rehashed, and it doesn't violate any policies," said Agee, who did not vote on her stepfather's appointment in December. She voted in favor of his first Prairie State job in November 2011. She is running for re-election in April.

Trustee Brunetta Hill-Corley said she wasn't worried about the family relationship because Alexander was competent to do the job. Alexander declined to comment.

"In any institution or political arena, there's going to be some family members hired," she said. "Look at the Daleys, at the city of Chicago. Look at the Madigans. Look at (Cook County Assessor Joe) Berrios."

Craig Mulling, a Prairie State professor of social sciences, said the recent events were particularly alarming because the board had been chastised previously by education experts for meddling in personnel decisions.

The Higher Learning Commission in a 2008 evaluation warned trustees and the former board chairman to stay away from an operational role and that over-involvement in personnel decisions was "harmful to the institution."

The board has not changed its policy on hiring friends and family. But last month it tightened a separate anti-nepotism policy that covers only faculty and staff.

"I think this was retaliatory," said Trustee Wendell Mosby, arguing that the move was a power play to discourage faculty who spoke out against the stepfather's hiring.

Mosby walked out in protest when the item was discussed at the October meeting, leaving the board one member shy of the quorum needed to vote.

The board passed the policy in December — and also took an unorthodox vote on whether to censure Mosby for his walkout.

Rather than taking a traditional roll-call vote, each trustee was given a slip of paper and instructed to write "aye" or "nay" as to whether Mosby should be punished. Trustee Kathleen Doyle asked the board's attorney if the process violated the Illinois Open Meetings Act. Doyle said she was told it was legal.

Three trustees — including Doyle — and about a half-dozen audience members described the process as a secret ballot because the way each trustee voted was not announced.

"Secret ballot, closed ballot, however you want to say it," Hill-Corley said. "No names."

The process violates the law, said Maryam Judar, an open government expert and community lawyer with the Citizen Advocacy Center in Elmhurst.

"That would be in contravention of the Open Meetings Act, which requires that votes be taken in public and not in secret," Judar said. "That includes being able to ascribe the votes to particular board members."

Board attorney Holly Tomchey defended the way the vote was taken.

"The vote was not conducted by secret ballot, but by written ballots which were each recorded," Tomchey said in a written statement. "The vote of the board was recorded as required by the Open Meetings Act."

Tomchey said the vote was 5-3 in favor of Mosby's censure, which stripped him of his travel budget for conferences. Agee referred all questions regarding the Open Meetings Act to the board attorney.

"This is not an area of the law that I practice. I am not going to comment as an expert on that," said Agee, a lawyer who specializes in municipal law, according to Prairie State's website.

Some faculty members expressed fear that questionable hiring practices and board skirmishes could dissuade talented faculty applicants and erode the quality of education for Prairie State's 12,000 students.

"It's intimidating to people who feel the need to speak out," said John Flannigan, English professor and president of the faculty union. "It also makes the college look petty and ridiculous."

Social sciences professor Mulling said: "We care about the quality of the classroom. We've got to hold on to that. We don't want to become yet another organization of Cook County that's the byproduct of ... corruption."

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