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Influential Texans helped underqualified students get into UT

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AUSTIN — Dozens of highly influential Texans — including lawmakers, millionaire donors and university regents — helped underqualified students get into the University of Texas, often by writing to UT officials, records show.

Among those who wrote directly to then-President Bill Powers and then-Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa, bypassing the admissions office, were famed golfer and UT grad Ben Crenshaw, former UT regent H. Scott Caven Jr., Austin lawyer Roy Minton and Sens. Kevin Eltife and Carlos Uresti, records obtained by *The Dallas Morning News* show.

Dozens of other famous Texans, many of them UT alumni, also helped tip the scales. They include House Speaker Joe Straus, former U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, former Regents Jess Hay and Tom Hicks, former chairman of the state University Coordinating Board Larry Temple and former UT quarterback Randy McEachern.

Admissions help

Highlights of recommendation letters for UT students who were admitted despite failing to meet the university's standards:

A letter sent by W.A. "Tex" Moncrief Jr., a prolific UT donor who is a former regent:

██████████ asked me to write a letter of recommendation in his behalf (see attached). I do not know this young man or anything about his qualifications, but I do know ██████████ parents and I know his grandparents very well. ██████████ is certainly from a very fine and highly respected ██████████ family.

In this letter, lawyer Stephen Ballantyne addresses UT President Bill Powers by his first name — and mentions Powers' wife, too.

I do hope special consideration can be given to this outstanding young woman. I look forward to seeing you and Kim on Thursday.

SOURCES: University of Texas at Austin; Dallas Morning News research

Tom Hicks, a former chairman of the state University Coordinating Board, writes on behalf of an applicant whose grandparents are major UT donors:

██████████ is an exceptional young man, smart, driven, and totally committed to becoming a Longhorn.

His grandparents, ██████████ and ██████████, have been longtime generous supporters of UT-Austin. I have known them well for nearly 40 years.

██████████ mother and father, ██████████ are active younger leaders in the Dallas community.

Former UT quarterback Randy McEachern and his wife offered support for a student in 2011:

We have known ██████████ all of her life, have spent time with her, and have watched her grow into a smart, hard-working, committed young lady with a delightful sense of humor. She is well-liked and respected by her peers. She really is mature beyond her age and possesses the perseverance that it will take to succeed at The University.

Staff Graphic

The letters surfaced through an outside investigation into the admissions process, known as the Kroll report. The investigation highlighted 73 students from 2009 to 2014 who entered the state's premier campus despite relatively low high school grade averages (less than 2.9 on the 4.0 scale) and SAT scores of less than 1100. Such marks would usually have precluded their admission.

The copies of letters obtained by *The News* under the state's open records law do not identify specific students.

In a written statement Monday, UT spokesman J.B. Bird said the university is committed to a "fair and transparent admissions process."

"Chancellor [Bill] McRaven plans to present a proposal for system-wide admissions practices, based on the work of a distinguished committee of former university leaders and informed by past admissions reviews, including the Kroll report," Bird said. "We look forward to implementing his proposals."

Flashpoint for regents

The Kroll report found that the students were admitted by Powers, and it suggested that political or personal connections may have influenced the decisions.

The admissions issue and suggestions of favoritism have become a flashpoint on the UT governing board. Regent Wallace Hall of Dallas has relentlessly questioned the administration and pushed for the ouster of Powers, who stepped down in June.

Powers has defended his role in the admissions process.

"In every case, I acted in what I believed was the best interest of the university," Powers said when the Kroll report was released in February. He was unavailable for comment Monday.

Hall declined to comment Monday on the admissions.

While the Kroll report said UT should adopt admissions policies that "are perceived as fair and transparent," it also noted Powers did not break any laws or UT System rules in his actions.

UT, under state law, automatically admits all students who graduate in the top 7 percent of their high school class. For others, UT weighs academic achievements, SAT scores, special accomplishments, essays, socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic background and letters of recommendation.

In 2014, more than 38,000 students applied to UT-Austin. Less than half were offered a spot, and 7,285 were enrolled.

In the records obtained Monday, more than 250 letters were written on behalf of the 73 students highlighted in the Kroll report. They came from lawmakers, wealthy business people, donors, UT advisers, former UT athletes and other people close to the university. Also included were letters from high school guidance counselors and teachers.

Straus' letters

House Speaker Straus wrote twice to the director of the admissions office on behalf of family friends — in November 2012 and for a different student in February 2013. Later in 2013, Straus directed a committee to investigate Hall, who had doggedly been pursuing investigations into UT operations.

“I know [the student] well as our families are close friends,” Straus wrote in the 2012 letter. She “is a multi-generation Longhorn legacy, dating back to 1924.”

Straus spokesman Jason Embry said the speaker was clear that he did not intend to wield undue influence.

“Speaker Straus was happy to advocate for his constituents but, as he told President Powers in writing, he did not want or expect special treatment for any students,” Embry said. “The speaker felt UT officials were best qualified to make judgments about which students deserved admissions.”

Hutchison, who is now president of the UT alumni association, said that as a senator and now in private practice, she would write letters of recommendations for any constituent or friend who asked.

“Some I recommended got in, and some didn’t. And some I didn’t know whether they did or didn’t. So I never thought it was out of line, but I didn’t write that many,” she said.

Hutchison said the Kroll report identified 73 students over five years who wouldn’t have made the cut without help from Powers and important backers. She pointed out that represented only about 15 students a year in classes of around 7,000 students.

The report indicated that new slots were created for those 10 to 15 students, so their admissions didn’t displace anyone, Hutchison said.

“It was add-on of about 10 who in the president’s judgment had extenuating circumstances, whether it was a connection, or a different achievement, or who could add diversity, geographic as well as racial,” Hutchison said. “So I don’t think that is out of line at all. ... I’ve been astonished at all the negativity when I think our system is very fair and open.”

All university presidents across the nation make such judgment calls, she said.

“They have to balance the student body and have support from people who care about the university,” Hutchison said.

Children of friends

The letters released Monday often cite that the applicants were the children of family friends.

Eltife, R-Tyler, said that the letter he wrote in 2009 directly to Powers was on behalf of a constituent. He's written hundreds of letters for constituents trying to get into UT and other state and private universities, the senator said.

The student is "hardworking, loyal and successful," Eltife wrote in the letter, which he addressed to "Bill."

Letters of recommendation from private citizens sometimes did not dwell on an applicant's qualities.

"I do not know this young man or anything about his qualifications, but I do know [the student's] parents and I know his grandparents very well," wrote W.A. "Tex" Moncrief, the Fort Worth millionaire oilman. The student "is certainly from a very fine and highly respected family."

Moncrief has given at least \$25 million to UT-Austin, according to the university's website.

Hicks, the Dallas multimillionaire who once owned the Texas Rangers and Dallas Stars, is a former UT regent and brother to current UT regent Steve Hicks. Tom Hicks wrote to the office of admissions in 2011 on behalf of an applicant whose grandparents "have been longtime generous supporters of UT-Austin."

Others in the trove of letters include wealthy businessman and university benefactor Red McCombs, UT women's athletic director Christine Plonsky and Austin advertising executive Roy Spence, whose firm came up with the UT slogan, "We're Texas."

Among other lawmakers who wrote letters were Sens. Rodney Ellis, Judith Zaffirini, Mike Jackson and Eddie Lucio Jr.; former Rep. Veronica Gonzales, now an administrator at UT-Pan American; Rep. Ryan Guillen; and the chief of staff for Rep. Rob Orr.

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