Education Dean’s Fraud Teaches U. of Louisville a Hard Lesson

BY DAVID GLENN

At the end of 2005, Robert D. Felner was riding high. A well-paid dean at the University of Louisville, he had just secured a $964,000 earmarked grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create an elaborate research center to help Kentucky’s public schools.

The grant proposal, which Mr. Felner had labored over for months, made some impressive promises. Five Louisville faculty members would devote time to the center, and four other people would be hired. The advisory board would be led by Virginia G. Fox, Kentucky’s secretary of education.

On paper this all seemed plausible. From 1996 until 2003, Mr. Felner directed the University of Rhode Island’s education school, where he helped create a well-regarded statewide research center.

To put it mildly, Mr. Felner did not duplicate that feat at Louisville. By the spring of 2008, all but $96,000 of the grant had been spent, but none of the tasks listed in Mr. Felner’s proposal had been accomplished. Hundreds of thousands of surveys of students, teachers, and parents? School officials in Kentucky say they know of no such studies.

An advisory committee led by the Continued on Page A19

At Long Beach, Success Is Measured by Degrees

BY PAUL FAIX

LONG BEACH, CALIF.
The California State University campus here graduated 8,720 students last month. Each one got the opportunity to walk the stage, and F. King Alexander, the university’s president, shook every hand.

The confetti-strewn, three-day string of ceremonies is both exhilarating and exhilarating, he says. “It’s about to the point where it’s physically impossible to get it accomplished.”

And the logistical headaches may get worse: California State at Long Beach has more graduating a greater number of its 38,000 students its top priority.

The slogan “Graduation Begins Today” is everywhere on this campus, from banners to napkins in dining halls. The real novelty, however, is that Mr. Alexander says the university’s graduation rate is less important than the sheer number of students who graduate.

That’s blasphemy in a rankings-obsessed industry, where popular college guides reward high graduation rates. Lawmakers, too, have latched onto the statistic in evaluating universities.

Long Beach graduates 54 percent. Continued on Page A20

Coaches’ Contracts Are Fertile Ground for Conflict

BY LIBBY SANDERS AND PAUL FAIX

Billy Gillispie, like many college basketball coaches, was hired—and fired—in a hurry. But the contract negotiations that dragged on for nearly two years while he coached the University of Kentucky’s men’s basketball team showed little of the same urgency that defined his entrance and exit.

Mr. Gillispie worked for Kentucky under a memorandum of understanding, a legal document that he says served as his employment contract. But when the university fired him in late March, the murky details of the agreement left the university in a precarious position.

Mr. Gillispie sued in federal court late last month, claiming Kentucky owes him $66-million. The university has countersued, claiming the agreement was not valid.

The risky combination of big money and hastily written employment agreements can pose a major problem for colleges. In the intoxicating whirlwind of naming a name-brand coach, many of the safeguards used in high-level hit... Continued on Page A21
In California, a President Crusades to Shake More Hands at Graduation Time

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of its students in six years, up from 35 percent in 2001. While experts still the current rate is respectable for a regional public institution, Mr. Alexander says he could easily improve it to 90 percent by cherry-picking the most qualified students and directing the majority of the university's applications the university receives each year and accepting fewer nontraditional and local students.

"Your application pool goes up, there's a tendency to slack off and turn away all the academically challenged students," he says. But recruiting more exclusive would not help California, argues Mr. Alexander, who often says Long Beach contributes more to its region than an Ivy League institution would. The state university produces teachers, engineers, and nurses who stick around to work in the city of Long Beach, which, like the campus, has one of the nation's most ethnically diverse populations.

The university must also serve local students, 70,000 of whom attend schools within eight miles of the campus.

"The demand is an entirely different beast out here in California," says Mr. Alexander.

CAPS AND Gowns

The president is a snappy dresser and has a politician's smooth charisma. But Mr. Alexander, who was raised in the Southern U.S. and has a master's degree from the University of Florida, has also had some experience running with state members and students, who call him "King".

The university's governing board and system leaders back the graduation crusade, but Mr. Alexander in his driving force. During his three and a half years on the job, he has made more the university's overarching strategic goal, in each people need a reminder, pictures of commencement ceremonies hang on the walls of many offices on the campus.

Mr. Alexander says his graduation push is in line with President Obama's recent call for the nation to claim the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020, a measure by which the United States continues to lose ground to other developed countries.

It's a challenging goal, and California is ground zero. The state's number of high school graduates increased by 30 percent in the past decade. And a growing proportion of the students in the pipeline need remedial help, experts say. Even worse, the state's budget woes will mean less money for an already cash-strapped system. Long Beach, for example, admitted 200 fewer students this year than last.

Charles B. Reed, chancellor of the California State system, praises Long Beach for its success in helping more students graduate. But he would also like to see the university's graduation rate top 70 percent.

To make that happen, however, Mr. Reed says, California's high schools must provide more help. College preparation has slipped in schools, which says he teaches "algebra lies" rather than serious math.

"It all starts with getting students prepared at the K-12 level," says Mr. Reed.

But both Cal State and Long Beach officials say they must continue to accept lower-middle-income students, who are more likely to need extra help to graduate. At Long Beach, 35 percent of students are Pell Grant-eligible, and 40 percent take remedial classes in mathematics or English.

"It's our responsibility as part of the public schools to get them ready," says Mr. Alexander.

The university's president, Mr. Alexander, dispenses handshakes all around.
enough experience. But five years later, most profes-
sors at Murray State were sad to see him leave
for Long Beach. They praised his leadership.
As a professor at the University of Illinois,
Mr. Alexander fought higher-education finance
and law. He is not shy about numbers, or in his
criticism of the Washington establishment's
focus on research universities. He says the
American Council on Education has been inef-
ficient in advocating for universities like Long
Beach, supporting the status quo instead.
Terry W. Hurtle, senior vice president for
government and public affairs at the council,
says that balancing the interests of all of the
nation's colleges is a challenge, but that "col-
lege access and success for low- and middle-
income students at all types of schools has
long been—and will continue to be—ACE's
central policy objective."
Mr. Alexander's name appeal has grown of-
late, and some in higher education peg him as
a rising star. He has spoken at national gath-
erings and published opinion pieces. But his
strong words probably won't help him get a job
running an elite research university. For now
his sole mission appears to be graduating more
students from Long Beach.
He speaks to all new freshmen, transfer stu-
dents, and their parents during welcome cere-
monies in the Walter Pyramid, the iconic, blue
structure that is the university's sports arena. In
every speech he hammers home his key mes-
sage: Students can't afford not to graduate.
Those who drop out, he tells them, make only
a little more than high-school graduates do.
"They've never had less economic opportuni-
ties than they do today if they drop out," he says.
If they stick around to pick up a diploma and
shake his hand, they could someday be
making $85,000 a year.

While Preparing for the Future, Sleep Can Wait
A working student goes from a four-year college to a community college and back again to fulfill his dream

BY STEVEN BISHONG

The short nights are over for Ron
Makau, at least for now.
For two years, the 25-year-old has
been a full-time student at Montgomery Col-
lege. He filled his weekly planner with other
obligations, too. He was a full-time manager
at a supermarket; a part-time unpaid intern at
the Library of Congress; and an uncle, taking
his nephews recently to see X-Men Origins:
Wolverine.
Mr. Makau slept just five hours a night to
do it all, and he did it all by choice—in pre-
paration for a career in law, which he believes
will be equally demanding. Almost as much
as the future, he was driven by the past: an
aborted attempt at a four-year college.
He is one of a growing number of students
who "swirl" among institutions, attending
multiple colleges and universities to earn a
single bachelor's degree. Now, after amass-
ing 85 credits in two years at Montgomery, a
two-year college in Maryland, Mr. Makau
is moving away for a new honors program in
legal studies at the City College of New York.
His costs will mostly be covered by a fellow-
ship through the program, which is support-
ed by the Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher &
Flom law firm.
"I'm going to be a full-time student," says
Mr. Makau. "Period."