

Profile in Courage, or So She Says

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I love after-the-fact, self serving accounts of courage, strength, integrity, and resolve. But let's be honest – doesn't everybody?

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Ex-UI law dean says she 'pushed back' against influence

By Julie Wurth

A former law dean at the University of Illinois said she inherited a "well-greased, well-oiled" system for admitting students with political clout when she became dean in 2002, and did her best to "push back."

But members of a state panel who questioned Heidi Hurd on Wednesday appeared skeptical, asking why she didn't do more to change the system for admitting "special interest" applicants pushed by trustees on behalf of powerful politicians, including ousted Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

"The former governor of this state, the chair of your board of trustees, the chancellor of your university forced you to admit a student into the law school that you otherwise would not have accepted. You paint a picture of an abuse of power. Is that correct?" asked commissioner Zaldwaynaka Scott.

"I certainly thought so," Hurd acknowledged.

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Earlier testimony from Paul Pless, assistant law dean for admissions, indicated that, over four years, the university forced the College of Law to admit 24 politically connected students who wouldn't have been accepted otherwise. During that time, about 900 students were admitted overall.

Hurd opened her testimony Wednesday with a prepared statement saying that during her tenure, the College of Law "never took a student who was not qualified to study law or to enter the profession."

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Hurd said when she arrived at the law school, decisions on "special interest" admissions at various UI colleges were made by three administrators at the campus level – then-Provost Richard Herman, Associate Provost Steve Schomberg and Richard Schoell, executive director of the Office of Governmental Relations.

The following year, according to her testimony, Hurd got more involved, to protect the law school's efforts to boost its academic profile.

"I elbowed my way into the process," she said. Based on the 2002 admissions, she said, "It was clear I was going to have to push back at every turn."

During her first year, she said, half the students on the clout-influenced law school list were admitted; in her last year as dean, 2006-07, none were, she said.