

Cash-for-grades scandal found at two colleges

Students paid to have scores changed at Contra Costa schools

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After months of repeated denials, community college leaders acknowledged Tuesday that the Diablo Valley College cash-for-grades scandal also had affected transcripts from Los Medanos College in Pittsburg.

Up to eight Los Medanos students may have paid to have their grades altered from computers at the DVC campus in Pleasant Hill, said Helen Benjamin, chancellor of the three-college Contra Costa Community College District. Dozens of students on the two campuses are believed to have paid as much as \$600 per improved grade.

Benjamin said the Los Medanos connection was discovered recently. But another administrator told the Times employees have known of the Pittsburg students' involvement since soon after the plot was uncovered in January 2006.

Benjamin said she could not explain the discrepancy. "I only know what's in the press release," she said, referring to a written statement released by her office Tuesday.

The revelation of the Los Medanos connection raises further questions about how grades were managed in the college district. More than 100 people across the district, including students, were authorized to change grades on any of the district campuses, about 10 times the number of employees who would normally be authorized at comparably sized institutions.

District leaders have since cut the number to 11 employees.

Benjamin on Tuesday also confirmed a Times report that some students had been cleared of wrongdoing. At least 20 students properly obtained new grades, she said, and at least eight more may be cleared.

Nearly 60 current and former students did not respond to DVC letters asking for more information, although some letters were sent to incorrect addresses. Those students will have until June 15 to respond to a second letter before the college takes further action, Benjamin said.

District leaders will discipline current students who participated in the scheme, which affected hundreds of grades, she said. The college will send corrected transcripts to schools where the participating students transferred, and some degrees may be revoked.

Some students suspected of leading or participating in the scheme transferred to four-year universities, including University of California campuses in Berkeley and San Diego, while at least one man ended up at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, where he was a senior this quarter.

Four current and former DVC students suspected by administrators of leading the scheme did not return phone calls or could not be reached Tuesday.

Last month, a day after the Times reported that the college had investigated 84 students and more than 400 grade changes, the school turned over the results of its investigation to Contra Costa County prosecutors. Criminal charges are expected in a month or so, prosecutors said.

Because the one-year statute of limitations for misdemeanors has passed, only more serious felony charges are possible. Prosecutors have declined to say how many charges could be filed and whether the grade changes are misdemeanors or felonies.

District police, who spent 15 months investigating, did the best they could to finish quickly, said Charles Gibson, chief of the college district police department. The short-staffed department has only one detective, Gibson said, and the detective was out with a back injury for several months during the investigation.

"The wheels of justice turn slowly," he said. "It wasn't because we didn't care. It wasn't because of incompetence."

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