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Severance, new UC job for aide in pay scandal

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The University of California's governing Board of Regents, struggling last week to avert drastic state budget cuts and forestall tuition increases, approved a \$100,202 severance package for Linda Williams, a close aide to former UC President Robert Dynes and a figure in the university's 2005 salary scandal.

The severance is being paid to Williams several months after she left her job in the UC Office of the President in Oakland and took a higher-paying position on May 1 a few miles away at the UC Berkeley campus.

Her payout was granted last Thursday - one day after the regents spent hours discussing and decrying Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal for \$65.5 million in midyear UC budget cuts.

Linda Morris Williams - no relation to UC Berkeley film Professor Linda Williams - is one of 155 former employees of the UC president's office to receive severance payments under a voluntary termination program designed to shrink the office's payroll this year.

Williams and 15 others who took the buyout were re-employed at new jobs within UC's 10-campus system.

By the rules

Under the program's rules, severance pay of \$100,000 or higher requires approval by the regents. Williams' case appears to be the only payout exceeding that figure.

"This is an outrage," said state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, a frequent critic of the university's executive pay practices. "I will call on the UC regents to return that money. This is the public's money.

"They tax the students to extract every nickel and dime out of their pockets in order for them to pay a severance package for someone to move across the hallway," Romero said "I would question whether this is legal, and if it is legal, I would call on them to change their rules. This is wrong. How do we primp and pamper the UC's top executives for changing offices?"

University officials defended Williams' severance pay, saying that she was offered the same deal as other employees in the president's office. The program, adopted by the regents, does not require employees to repay or forgo their severance if they are rehired within the UC system.

Regents Chairman Richard Blum said the university system had an obligation to pay Williams the fee.

"Whatever agreements were made in the past, there are a number of ones we are clearly uncomfortable with," Blum said. "I don't know the merits of the case, but on the surface it's worrisome. ... It was done under a different administration."

Brad Hayward, a spokesman for the UC Office of the President, said, "Ms. Williams was subject to the same terms as others. ... This was an effort to reduce the (office's) staffing and budget ... and minimize the need for layoffs. The goal was to downsize the central administrative operations."

Hayward said 155 employees participated in the severance program and "our estimate is that, on an ongoing basis, that will save about \$5 million a year in spending. ... The program put no pre-conditions on where people went afterward."

Veteran employee

Williams, who has worked for the UC system for about 20 years, became a member of Dynes' inner circle when he served as chancellor of UC San Diego. She moved to Oakland as a senior adviser once Dynes assumed the UC presidency in 2003.

A scandal erupted in 2005 when The Chronicle reported that millions of dollars in bonuses and extra compensation had been paid to UC executives without public disclosure or approval from the Board of Regents and appeared to violate standing policies. Williams was among those for whom Dynes made exceptions in granting perks they were not normally entitled to.

For instance, Williams received a \$44,467 relocation allowance, apparently in violation of university policy. This was in addition to reimbursing her up to \$12,000 of actual costs for the move from San Diego to Oakland.

To entice Williams and a colleague to join Dynes at the UC system's Oakland headquarters, Dynes also made an exception to policy by allowing the two to receive low-interest home loans. The subsidized mortgage loans are normally available only to senior managers and faculty, according to UC's Web site. Williams received a loan of \$832,500.

Williams, whose salary under Dynes was \$190,625 in the 2006-07 fiscal year, now makes \$200,400 as associate chancellor of UC Berkeley, where she is in charge of government-community relations and such things as a whistle-blower program, emergency response and public

records requests.

"I know that when you look at it from the outside, it looks like a sweetheart deal - until you look at the timeline and sequence of events," said UC Berkeley spokesman Dan Mogulof. "I think she's clearly entitled to every penny. What she did was consistent with the spirit and letter of the program."

Said she didn't know of job

Williams said in a written statement provided to The Chronicle by Mogulof that she was unaware that a potential job would open up for her at the UC chancellor's office when she applied for the "voluntary separation program (VSP)" in January 2008.

"At the time of my VSP application the Associate Chancellor position on the Berkeley campus was not open and therefore played no role whatsoever in my decision making," Williams wrote. "Having said that, I was thrilled when the opportunity arose to join the Berkeley team, and I am very grateful that I am able to continue my career in service to the university and the people of California."

Romero cried foul.

"We're tired of all these corporate scandals in the UC system," Romero said. "This sounds like a clear handout from the students' pockets to the executives' pockets at a time when many students' families are facing unemployment and foreclosures. If the UC can hand out these severances at a whim, then they shouldn't be asking for bailouts."

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