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Two former officials at FAMU face theft charges

Sean Rossman, Tallahassee Democrat 12:21 a.m. EDT March 13, 2014



(Photo: Leon County Jail)

Former Florida A&M University dean of students Henry Kirby and Student Government Association coordinator Morris Hawkins stole money from a university fund that paid for students to attend FAMU

football games, according to a Florida Department of Law Enforcement investigation.

Kirby, 60, told FDLE and FAMU police investigators he took \$2,000 from the fund. Hawkins, 40, who was scrutinized for questionable bookkeeping of the SGA budget in 2011, admitted to stealing at least \$7,500 and receiving more than \$6,000 in reimbursement costs that he paid for with university money.

Warrants for their arrests were issued Tuesday and both turned themselves in Wednesday, according to FDLE. Hawkins faces three counts of grand theft and 11 counts of fraudulent claims.

Kirby, who started at FAMU in 1980, faces a charge of grand theft. He was placed on paid administrative leave Jan. 10 and retired Feb. 5, according to a FAMU spokeswoman. Hawkins was also placed on administrative leave and is no longer with the university.

Kirby was released from the Leon County Jail on his own recognizance Wednesday afternoon, according to court records. Hawkins posted bail Wednesday evening.

FDLE says in 2009 Hawkins opened an unauthorized account for collecting money for \$90 Rattler Express trips, which included hotel, ticket and transportation packages for students to attend three to four away FAMU football games each year.

Investigators found numerous charges and withdrawals to the account that were not FAMU or SGA related, including almost \$32,000 in cash withdrawals, according to court documents.

Hawkins told authorities in November that he and Kirby would both “steal” between \$2,000 and \$3,000 from the fund at the end of each of the trips or “sometime prior to the end of the university semester,” according to court documents. The rest would be deposited into an authorized university account or spent on SGA activities.

Kirby told investigators in December that he took \$2,000 once, “for his own personal use” but was unable to recall what he did with the money, according to court documents.

Hawkins not only withdrew cash from the account but spent hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars on personal expenses including a hotel stay in Memphis for a friend's wedding and a Carnival cruise, according to court documents. On 11 other occasions, Hawkins used the card for university expenses then filed for reimbursements of those expenses. He would then deposit the reimbursement checks in a personal account, according to court documents.

In controlled calls set up by law enforcement, Kirby, who has a law degree from Florida State University, according to his attorney Tim Jansen, "provided guidance to Hawkins regarding the manner in which he could potentially deflect law enforcement inquiries pertaining to the student trips and the funds collected," according to court documents. During one call, Kirby offered to give Hawkins up to \$60,000 to help pay for costs he might incur as a result of the investigation and his arrest.

Jansen said Kirby is dealing with "significant medical issues" but that he and his client have been cooperating with authorities throughout the investigation.

"It seems like Mr. Hawkins obviously has a reason to implicate others," Jansen said.

Hawkins admitted to deleting cash deposits made by Hawkins and Kirby after each trip, according to court documents. Authorities were able to dig up the deleted documents, which showed Hawkins collected a minimum of \$57,519 in 2010 and 2011. No documents could be recovered from 2008 and 2009.

Concerns of sketchy bookkeeping practices were raised by SGA members in the fall semester of 2011, when student government members discovered their budget differed from the one that was approved by the university.

A "Financial Standings Report" released in the fall semester of 2011 noted that the official budget exceeded the budget circulated and used by SGA members at student senate meetings by \$750,000. There appeared to be no accounting of how any revenue from Rattler Express trips was spent or that it was being deposited.

The discrepancies launched an internal audit by the university and prompted the FDLE investigation.

Hawkins, who was charged with coordinating the SGA budget, provided a written response explaining the apparent inconsistencies at the time. The university would not release the report, citing their effort to protect the ongoing investigation.

In 2011, Hawkins denied any wrongdoing.

“Everything I did was straight and OK,” he said.

The university issued a statement Wednesday:

“We will continue to ensure that all employees with the responsibility to implement our business processes do so in a manner consistent with the university’s existing policies and we will take appropriate action when necessary. The university will have no further comment.”

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