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Academy head's false credential draws scrutiny Grant filings listed leader's nonexistent doctorate

By Todd Wallack - June 5, 2013

Federal investigators plan to examine whether the chief executive of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences violated any laws by inflating her academic credentials as part of efforts to win more than \$1 million in government grants over the past decade.

The Globe reported Tuesday that Leslie Berlowitz, the longtime chief of the Cambridge honorary society, falsely claimed to have a doctorate from New York University on at least two grant applications with the National Endowment for the Humanities. Berlowitz also misstated her work history at the school, according to university records and copies of the grant applications.

On Tuesday, the endowment released a third grant application, from 2012, that also contains the nonexistent doctorate and other misinformation. The endowment, a federal agency that is one of the country's largest funders of cultural programs, gave the academy \$1.2 million to fund fellowships for scholars and other programs based on the requests.

"The possibility that false information was included in grant applications from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is a matter of serious concern for the agency," said Carole M. Watson, the endowment's deputy chairwoman.

Watson said she asked the agency's inspector general, who is charged with investigating fraud, to investigate the Globe's report that the academy misstated information on grant applications. Making false statements on such applications could violate two federal laws.

Attorney General Martha Coakley, who is charged with overseeing charities in Massachusetts, declined to say Tuesday whether she planned to examine Berlowitz's pay, which the Globe found to be higher than the salary of most college presidents.

A spokesman for Berlowitz, who has often clashed with employees in her 17-year tenure, blamed her staff for incorrect information in a statement Tuesday, even though Berlowitz signed some of the submissions and is known for being a micromanager who insists on seeing every document that leaves the academy.

"President Berlowitz, who reviewed only the substantive content of the applications, was unaware of the mistakes," academy spokesman Ray Howell said in the statement. "President Berlowitz takes full responsibility for the error, and the academy is working to correct the information with relevant funding agencies."

Howell said Tuesday that Berlowitz's official resume does not contain the inaccurate information, but would not respond when asked whether it had been recently corrected. A former employee said he saw the claim that Berlowitz received a doctorate in English listed on her resume in the academy's computer system a few months ago. And the academy refused to provide a copy of her resume to the Globe last month, instead pointing a reporter to her Wikipedia entry created by her public relations staff member that was vague about what degrees she received.

In addition, a draft of an advance obituary prepared for her staff a few years ago also said she held a doctorate. And an employment ad for the academy repeatedly refers to her as "Dr. Berlowitz."

Howell also declined to say when the academy first started using documents saying that Berlowitz had a doctorate and how many grants it applied for with the misinformation. Federal records show the academy also received grants from the Department of Energy and the National Science Foundation, in addition to funding from many charitable foundations.

The false statements prompted at least one academy member to call for Berlowitz to step down, even though he credits her with being an effective fund-raiser who helped expand the academy's programs over the years.

"Although over the years Leslie Berlowitz has done wonderful things for the academy, I think, given the situation, the time has come for her to resign," said Peter Stansky, an emeritus history professor at Stanford University and past member of the academy board.

The controversy is particularly striking since the academy, located on 5 acres of wooded grounds near Harvard University, was founded during the American Revolution largely to celebrate scholarly achievements. Over the years, it has inducted thousands of accomplished researchers, artists, and leaders. Its atrium is filled with letters from members, including George Washington, Julia Child, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Some credit Berlowitz with shaking up the once-sleepy institution when she became chief executive in 1996, increasing the fund-raising and launching new initiatives, such as additional fellowships. But she was nearly fired a year after she took over because of complaints about her micromanagement and mistreatment of staff, often yelling at them in front of co-workers. Some workers have quit or were fired after days on the job.

In addition, the Globe reported Tuesday that her pay has mushroomed over the years. Berlowitz earned nearly \$598,000 in total compensation in the fiscal year ending March 2012, more than most college presidents and triple the pay for some comparable organizations in the Northeast. She also frequently travels first class, dines on meals prepared by the academy's caterer, and requires staff to chauffeur her between the office and her apartment building along the Charles River in Cambridge, according to former board members and employees.

Coakley's spokesman, Brad Puffer, said that Coakley's office is in the midst of "conducting a comprehensive review of executive compensation at charitable organizations across the Commonwealth."

Including false information in federal grant applications, meanwhile, could potentially violate two separate statutes.

Watson, the endowment's deputy chairman, noted "it is a crime for anyone to knowingly and willfully make a materially false, fictitious, or fraudulent statement" to the US government under what is commonly called the False Statements Act. In some cases, the statute could carry a penalty of five years in prison.

In addition, the government frequently seeks compensation against contractors for submitting bills based on false information, something called the False Claims Act.

But the laws apply only if the government can prove the misstatements were "material," said Shlomo Katz, an attorney specializing in government contracts with Brown Rudnick LLP in Washington, D.C. In this case, it would depend on how critical the doctoral degree and other misstatements were to winning the grants, said Katz, noting that he does not know enough details about the case to draw any conclusions.

Neal Lane, a professor at Rice University and a member of the academy board, declined to comment on the resume issue. The five other outside board members could not be reached for comment.