

Tip line a valuable deterrent, OSU says

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Ohio State University investigators found wrongdoing in 19 cases -- from employees who brought dogs to work to ones who stole thousands of dollars -- thanks to an anonymous tip line started in the spring of 2006.

Although the university investigated 107 other tips that turned out to be unsubstantiated or that officials believe did not violate the law or school policy, the program is worth its \$38,000-a-year cost, said Bill Shkurti, senior vice president for business and finance.

"It's probably more an investment in time than in money" that deters "that small, tiny subset of university employees" who might be tempted to break the rules, Shkurti said.

One tip led to the prosecution of five OSU parking-lot attendants for theft in office. They are accused of pocketing parking receipts that might total thousands of dollars, university Assistant Police Chief Rick Amweg said.

An investigation into another tip found that the teenage daughter of an employee at the OSU Extension in Lorain County had used her position as treasurer of a 4-H program to misspend money. She was prosecuted and repaid \$6,070, Amweg said. The employee was fired.

In a third case, an employee of the Industrial, Interior and Visual Communication Design Department was fired and prosecuted for using a university credit card to run up almost \$20,000 in unauthorized personal expenditures.

And it was a tip to the hot line that uncovered that former OSU Treasurer Jim Nichols had overstated how much money endowment-fund investments made in 2004 and 2005 in the annual "Cornerstones" report to donors. He inflated the fund's performance by 1.5 percentage points in 2005 and 1.2 percentage points for 2004.

Nichols retired while on paid leave amid Ohio State's probe. He now is being investigated by the Ohio Ethics Commission for other irregularities that surfaced as a result of the tip.

Shkurti doubts that the allegations about Nichols would have surfaced if not for the anonymity of the tip line, because many employees are reluctant to take on high-ranking officials, he said.

Other substantiated tips include:

- A group of radiology employees at University Hospital East made fun of black neighborhoods as crime-ridden in chalkboard drawings. They were given diversity training.
- A volunteer coach of the OSU women's rugby club provided alcohol to team members. The coach was fired.
- A nurse posted a sign in a public area of the Richard M. Ross Heart Hospital telling employees: "Make sure you are billing for everything you can." The document was deemed to be "a reminder" and was moved to an area where it couldn't be viewed by patients who might be offended by it.
- A Fisher College of Business employee had sexually explicit material on his university computer. The employee was reprimanded.

OSU has contracted with EthicsPoint to collect tips over the telephone and Internet until February 2009. EthicsPoint forwards the information to various university officials for investigation.

Allan Silverman, immediate past chairman of the OSU Faculty Council, said professors initially were cool to the tip-line idea but it hasn't been much of an issue because few allegations have been directed at faculty members.

"I think it's fair to say that there was a lot of concern, almost consternation, when this was initially discussed," Silverman said. "Generally, we would wish there were greater attention applied to figuring the cost-effectiveness of various programs."

Professors also worried that people could anonymously lodge false complaints against employees, but "I'm not sure that they couldn't do that before," Silverman said.

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