The Farahi Syndrome

Dawood Farahi. By now we would hope most residents of Union County, as well as all of your senators, assemblymen and local representatives, are well aware of this man. He has been the president of Kean University since 2003, earned $293,000 a year in that time, and helped increase the school’s debt from $48 million to over $350 million. In addition, he has been under continuous fire for allegedly falsifying his credentials. But we would like to make sure that everyone understands the bigger, and likely more widespread problem.

Last week, we published an article detailing the many resumes Farahi has used since 1982. And, if nothing else, they show an utter lack of organization and a complete inattention to details. Dates, titles, places, and years don’t match anywhere. On paper, Farahi does not appear to even know when he earned his masters degree, or where he was when it happened. Perhaps he’s not even aware that Kean owes $357 million, or that the student-to-teacher ratio is horrendous. Maybe he’s not aware that the faculty has been shrinking, the student population has been growing, and the graduation rate has been dismal. After all, he doesn’t seem to correctly recall anything else that happened in his life.

But last week, Farahi did at least acknowledge the errors in an interview with the Star-Ledger, but he failed to accept blame for documents tracing his own personal life. “I did not create the data sheet,” Farahi said in the article, blaming staff members for the errors.

But Farahi is just one person. He is just the current front man that gives a name to the problem. He is the local face of what has become a systemic failure in the governance of state higher education. The Farahi syndrome is likely widespread, and opens every state college and university to its symptoms: abuse and political patronage.

The Board of Trustees at Kean University, headed by current chair Ada Morell, is responsible for the hiring, and any potential firing, of Farahi. The board is also empowered to increase the school’s debt. But they are in no way required to punish Farahi for allegedly lying. They could simply wag a finger and say, “Bad job!” to their president, and nobody can stop them. There is no law in place requiring them to take action. In fact, at this point, we are almost expecting them to do nothing. And if they were to fire Farahi, his contract stipulates that he would receive one year’s salary as compensation. But at least he would lose the $12,000 he gets yearly toward a car and gas. If the allegations against Farahi by the Kean Federation of Teachers prove to be true, the board should take legal action to recoup money Farahi received under false pretenses, or fraud. But again, they are in no way required to, and no one expects they will.

And while the board of trustees is a large part of the problem at Kean, again, it is only a small piece of what is an entire statewide problem.

In June 1994, the Higher Education Restructuring Act signed into law by Republican Gov. Christine Todd Whitman took away the New Jersey Department of Higher Education and replaced it with a more informal structure. Under the looser and less structured Commission of Higher Education, all authority was given to individual autonomous boards of trustees. Before this, the state carefully watched the board of trustees and how debt accrued at state institutions.

The board of trustees of any state school is appointed by the governor, but is voted on by the state Senate. And with the senate’s consent needed for anyone to be appointed, senators like Raymond Lesniak, who represents Union, can essentially choose, through a process of delaying a vote, any appointee to the Ke$an board of trustees. And under the current laws, he can use them to curry favor as he sees fit, with no repercussions. It’s perfectly legal. It’s also perfectly legal for former Gov. James McGreevey to teach an ethics course to increase his pension pay-

No experience required for this jam

Seven or eight years ago, on Hickory Drive in Maplewood, a man named Ford met a guy named Tim at a big, multi-family barbecue. As the general chaos and cacophony of children and dogs swirled around them, they began talking and learned that, lo and behold, they had nothing in common — except that they both liked to play music. Ford ran home to get his guitar and Tim his banjo, a baton. They sat down on the piano inside and, within minutes, the low-grade, disembodied hysteria of the barbecue ceased.

Michael Steiner, the host, remembers, “The kids stopped run-