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Two charged in Bishop State student loan theft: \$6,501

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By **GARRY MITCHELL**
The Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. (AP) — A prosecutor announced the first two arrests Thursday in an investigation of student financial aid at a junior college in Mobile and predicted more arrests will follow.

Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson Jr. revealed the arrests at the same time Dr. Yvonne Kennedy, president of Bishop State Community College, and her supporters were attending a meeting of the State Board of Education in nearby Bay Minette. The board oversees Alabama's two-year colleges.

When asked by reporters about possibly resigning, Kennedy said it would be "premature" because the investigation isn't complete.

At a news conference in Mobile, Tyson said Marlene Annette French, 34, and Robert Mansfield Horn, 32, carried out a "scam against Bishop State" by claiming \$6,501 in federal student aid between September 2003 and February 2006.

French, who worked in the college's financial aid office in Mobile, was booked into the Mobile Metro Jail early Thursday. Horn was arrested Wednesday night. Both are charged with first-degree theft by deception, a felony that could bring up to 10 years in prison.

French is accused of filing false paperwork for federal Pell Grants in Horn's name, even though Horn was not a student at Bishop State. Horn cashed six checks totaling \$6,501, Tyson said.

Tyson, a Democratic candidate for state attorney general and a former state school board member, said the investigation is ongoing.

"These are just the first two. I do think there are going to be more," Tyson said at a news conference. He said he was not prepared to say how widespread the loan fraud could be.

He said Kennedy pledged cooperation in the probe.

Kennedy, a Democrat in the Alabama House of Representatives, attended a state school board meeting Thursday at Faulkner State Community College following reports that at least two board members sought her resignation.

However, the board took no action on Kennedy.

She said she respects the opinion of the board members but said she is "not really prepared to go there," when asked about resigning from her alma mater.

She said the arrests showed that the investigation has "reached another level" and is "moving on to closure."

Charlotte Powe, an office administration instructor; Emma Perkins, an alumni affairs secretary; and French, who had worked for Bishop State since 1992, have been on paid leave during the probe.

In a previous story, the Press-Register in Mobile reported that Pearlie Mae French, the grandmother of Marlene French and an amputee, was listed as taking legal transcription, medical transcription and office

procedures from Powe, besides getting credit for varsity basketball, varsity baseball and varsity softball.

Powe is also listed as Pearlie Mae French's academic adviser.

Pearlie Mae French died in March at age 77, during the spring semester, the fourth term in which college records show she was enrolled.

Powe also is shown teaching the same three classes, plus advanced word processing to Darlene Austin, Marlene French's mother, the newspaper reported.

Tyson said he didn't know what systems were in place at Bishop State to detect fraud. He said if a "bad person" is in charge of the system it isn't going to work.

"French was working the system to her advantage," Tyson said.

Tyson said the state's two-year college system is in a crisis, but "we're going to get through it."

The Bishop State investigation is not the only one being conducted in the two-year college system.

A joint federal and state probe involves the foundation at the Alabama Fire College at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa. Former state Rep. Bryant Melton, D-Tuscaloosa, pleaded guilty after admitting he funneled state legislative grants to the fire college foundation and then used the money to pay gambling debts.

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