BY MICHAEL GORMLEY
Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo is now investigating whether top college athletic departments nationwide — including those at the University of Kansas, Auburn University, Ohio University and Texas Christian University — steered athletes and other students to education lenders in exchange for kickbacks.

Cuomo said Wednesday that he served 39 universities with subpoenas and requests for documents about deals between athletic departments and Student Financial Services Inc., which operates as University Financial Services. He said he's looking at how team names, mascots and colors were used to suggest the company was the college's preferred lender.

"Students trust their university's athletic departments because so much of campus life
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at Division I schools centers around supporting the home team," said Cuomo. "To betray this trust by promoting loans in exchange for money is a serious issue, especially when Division I schools already generate tremendous revenue from their student athletes."

Jim Marchiony, associate athletic director at Kansas, said no one from the New York attorney general's office ever contacted the university. He also said the athletic department did not have a direct relationship with University Financial Services.

"Kansas athletics does not give out the names of current or former student-athletes to UFS, and we do not receive a penny from UFS based on how many students or student-athletes apply for student loans with UFS," Marchiony said.

"The sponsorship deal that UFS has is exactly like dozens of other sponsorships — like the local grocery store or the local car dealer or the local hotel — and all of these are with our rights holder, not with us," he added.

Cuomo began the investigation as an outgrowth of his national probe of student loan providers and college administrators, which he said uncovered a pattern of favoritism for lenders who provided kickbacks, "revenue sharing" plans, and trips and other gifts in exchange for designations as recommended lenders. Sometimes the colleges provided campus employees to staff telephone banks for lenders drumming up business.

Cuomo's findings led to state and national reforms.

"Today's action is an important new step as we continue to examine the unethical conflicts that pervade the student loan industry," Cuomo said.

Ohio University spokeswoman Sally Linder said the school received a subpoena and will cooperate with Cuomo, as it did immediately respond to requests for comment. The loan company couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

Cuomo's investigation has resulted in settlements and reforms with 12 lenders — including Nelnet Inc., Citibank, Sallie Mae, JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America — and several colleges, with $13.7 million in payments made to a national education fund to help high school students and their families more wisely and safely apply for student loans.

Cuomo has said the U.S. Department of Education has had weak oversight of the student loan industry, a view supported Wednesday in a report by the investigative arm of Congress.

The Education Department is supposed to make sure banks that participate in the federal student loan program aren't giving schools or school officials anything of value in exchange for getting business at a particular school.

But the department has not sought out cases of improper conduct, according to the report by the Government Accountability Office. It found the department primarily responds to complaints, and doesn't even do a particularly good job of tracking those.

During the past 20 years, the department has brought cases against only two lenders, according to the report. More often, department officials have written letters to lenders asking them to stop acting improperly.

The department recently issued proposed regulations to try to limit abuses by lenders. Those could become effective next year.
GETTING AN OFFICIAL ‘YES’

Unmarried gay or straight couples are eligible to register, which will help them get some benefits.

By DAVID KLEPPER
The Star’s Topeka correspondent

LAWRENCE | Don’t expect a fancy cake or an open-bar reception.

But today will nonetheless be a special one for some Lawrence couples set to add their names to the city’s domestic partnership registry, the first such registry in Kansas.

Several couples are planning to gather at City Hall this morning to tie the pseudo-knot.

“Although it’s a very small step, it’s an important step that shows that our community values our relationship,” said Mike Silverman, who will register with his partner of 10 years, Dave Greenbaum.

To Silverman and Greenbaum, today’s ceremony is not about celebrating their commitment. They did that with a Jewish marriage ceremony in 1999.

“Today is about legal recognition. ‘The thing people remember is the ceremony, not the trip to the courthouse,’ Silverman said. ‘This is essentially our trip to the courthouse.’

The idea behind the registry is to...
give unmarried couples official status and help them receive benefits — such as insurance — should their employers extend benefits to domestic partners.

Gay and straight couples are eligible, so long as they are both city residents, are 18 or older, share a common residence, and enjoy a "relationship of mutual interdependence." Registration costs $75.

Janet Horner and her partner Michael Eravi plan to register their relationship for two reasons: to send a message about discrimination and to qualify for benefits.

Under the registry, Eravi, an independent contractor, will be eligible to receive benefits from Horner's employer.

"I find it atrocious that they (gays and lesbians) are denied rights that I get simply because I'm a heterosexual," said Horner, who works for a Lawrence manufacturing company. "But it's not just about homosexuals. This affects us, too."

Lawrence's liberal leanings have once again put it at odds with some conservative state lawmakers. They say the registry amounts to an end-run around the state's same-sex marriage ban, overwhelmingly approved by voters in 2005.

Rep. Lance Kinzer, an Olathe Republican, sponsored legislation this year to outlaw municipal domestic registries.

Like laws regarding child custody and divorce, Kinzer said, marriage law should remain a state issue. Otherwise, he said, there could be a confusing mosaic of city and county marriage rules.

"It's a bad precedent," he said.

Kinzer has more basic concerns, too, saying legal recognition of domestic partnerships "fundamentally undermines traditional values."

He said he hopes to get the legislation before lawmakers next year for an early vote. If the bill passes, it would eliminate the Lawrence registry.

Lawrence Mayor Sue Hack said she was proud of Lawrence for taking a stand on the issue, which she said is one of civil rights. She noted that Lawrence's progressive roots go back to its founding by abolitionists.

"We have stood strong for things that we believe in, and I believe this is one of those things," she said.

Some advocates say the Lawrence registry may make the city more attractive to companies looking to settle in Kansas. Hack said that while that would be nice, it was not the reason the City Commission approved the registry.

Some 53 percent of Fortune 500 companies now offer some level of domestic partner benefits.

But a big Lawrence employer — the University of Kansas — won't; it follows state rules that grant benefits only to married couples.

Though the registry is a first for Kansas, many other communities throughout the country have had similar laws on the books for years.

Kansas City started its registry in 2003; 175 couples are now listed.

The types of registries and partnerships vary widely from near-marriage to the largely symbolic.

Massachusetts offers gay couples marriage licenses. Other Northeastern states offer civil unions that come with many of the rights of marriage.

California has a statewide registry that grants same-sex partners many rights married couples enjoy, such as the right to make medical decisions for the other, some tax breaks and eligibility for employer benefits.

Cook County, Ill., has a domestic partner registry, but only for same-sex partners. While the Kansas City registry is free, in Lawrence it will cost couples $75.

In many states, the laws must be careful to avoid conflicts with constitutional bans on same-sex marriage, according to Samuel Marcosson, a law professor at the University of Louisville who has studied domestic partnership law.

Lawrence asked Kansas Attorney General Paul Morrison whether he thought the domestic partnership registry would violate Kansas ban. Morrison said no.

"It sounds like what Lawrence is doing is largely symbolic," Marquisson said. "In order to be a true marriage substitute, you have to offer something close to all the benefits of marriage. Simply offering some sort of recognition to a relationship doesn't do that."

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