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BILINGUAL CENTER DIRECTOR QUILTS IN FRAUD PROBE

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Maria Garcia Underwood, who was the \$90,740-a-year director of Bilingual/ESL Education Technical Assistance Center (BETAC) at Hunter College resigned after the State Inspector General found she falsified travel vouchers and used a business debit card to buy restaurant dinners, limousine service, cosmetics and to deliver poinsettias to her home, bilking her employer out of more than \$3,500. Inspector General Kristine Hamann has referred the findings to the New York County District Attorney for prosecution.

Underwood, 45, supervised three BETAC staffers and was on the payroll of the Research Foundation of City University (RFCUNY), which issued her debit card, called a purchasing card.

A joint investigation with the Inspector General and RFCUNY began in July, 2007, after the Inspector General got a complaint about Underwood's spending. The probe uncovered a pattern of fraud, which saw Underwood doctoring receipts for a trip she never took and writing off personal luxuries as educational conference items. They included:

- A \$1,738 tab to RFCUNY for a 2005 bilingual educators' conference in Phoenix, which Underwood never attended. She later created a fake hotel bill for a room (No. 668) that the Phoenix Hyatt said didn't exist.
- About \$720 in bills that Underwood claimed were gift bag enclosures for the 2006 Hispanic Youth Leadership Conference in Albany. In fact, evidence points to her buying an eye exam, frames and lenses at Bronx Eye Care (\$441) and \$279 in cosmetics at Nordstrom.
- Roughly \$610 in meals, \$348 of it at Salvatore's of SOHO in the Bronx.
- More than \$1,000 in Miles Limo car service fees.

- A \$212 invoice to have seven poinsettias delivered to her house. She claimed they were for a conference on “Exploring ‘Dropout’ Among Latino Students.”

Underwood faces charges of grand larceny, false filings, and the creation of false business records, the State Inspector General said.

“This case is a reminder to all employees who do business with the state that falsifying expenses is a crime,” State Inspector General Kristine Hamann said. “Ms. Underwood violated the public when she abused the system for personal gain. Her deceit is odds with the thousands of state employees who file proper expense reports.”

Underwood came to work for RFCUNY in 2003 and was named BETAC director in 2004. BETACs are sponsored by the state Education Department’s Office of Bilingual Education, with 14 centers statewide. They offer professional assistance to bilingual educators and teachers of English as a Second Language.

For more information, contact Kate Gurnett of the State Inspector General’s Office at (518) 474-1010. The Inspector General’s report is available on the IG’s website: www.ig.state.ny.us.