The San Francisco district attorney's office is investigating the embezzlement of up to $4.5 million from an accounting office at the University of California at San Francisco, the Chronicle learned last night. Sources said the theft may involve more than one university employee, but the probe is focusing on a clerical worker who is on leave.

The scheme was discovered during internal audits and apparently spans five years. Dan Addario, chief investigator for the San Francisco district attorney's office said, “It's not a solo thing. There are other people involved.”

The embezzlement apparently involves a shell game in an accounting center that made use of both checks and cash. Checks taken in for things like parking or store sales were stolen one day and exchanged the next day for cash in an attempt to obscure losses from auditors.

The source said it was “a scandal” that it took so long to uncover the losses. “I can't comment at all,” said UC auditor Patrick Reed.