

'I can't do what I really want to do'; Denied in-state tuition rates, illegal immigrants are dropping out of college or scaling back.

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Body

Blanca's shift at the carpet mill was always made easier by her other job: college student. Even as she cut carpet, the Dalton High grad could envision handling a microscope in a forensic crime lab.

But that day looks more distant now for Blanca, 19, who has dropped out of Dalton State College one year into her criminal justice studies. Blanca, whose parents brought her into the country illegally from Mexico City when she was 8 years old, is among the dozens of illegal immigrants who have quit college or gone part-time this semester because they no longer qualify for in-state tuition in Georgia.

"I can't do what I really want to do," said Blanca, who asked that her last name be withheld because of the stigma that comes with being an illegal immigrant. "There's a wall there I can't tear down."

Up until July, university presidents in Georgia could grant out-of-state tuition "waivers" to students in the country illegally, allowing them to pay in-state rates. But Georgia's new immigration statute directed the Board of Regents to make sure they were in compliance with all federal laws. The regents' attorney concluded that lower tuition constitutes a benefit barred for illegal immigrants, even if they went to high school in Georgia.

Exactly how many students have been affected by Georgia's new policy remains unclear. The university system doesn't track students based on immigration status.

At Dalton State, at least 19 illegal immigrants have dropped out, and 21 have scaled back to part-time, said President James Burran, who has traditionally given waivers to 40 students who entered the country illegally. He reasoned that they had become part of the fabric of the northwest Georgia community whose carpet mills have relied on cheap labor coming from Latin America. "We're obligated to follow the law and the policies of the Board of Regents," Burran said, "so that's what we're doing."

The issue has deeply divided states, with 10 allowing in-state tuition for illegal immigrants and others rejecting the idea. One side says Georgia should continue to educate some of its best and brightest while federal lawmakers try to overhaul an immigration system that everyone agrees is broken. Others counter that it makes no sense to subsidize the education of students who can't work legally in the state anyway.

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Dalton **State** sophomore Jan Gonzales said it's also not fair to make U.S. citizens like her pay more than anyone here illegally. Gonzales, who moved into Georgia last year, was charged the **out-of-state rate** normally assessed to newcomers during their first year. When she found **out** some **illegal immigrants** were paying roughly a quarter what she was, Gonzales threatened to sue.

After an attorney contacted the **state** on her behalf, Gonzales was reimbursed the \$2,500 difference between the **out-of-state** (\$3,500) and **in-state** (\$1,000) **rates**. "**I** personally don't mind if they're going here," Gonzales said. "As long as **I**m treated equally, **I**m happy."

While Georgia's policy shift has been felt most at smaller schools, students at the **state**'s higher-profile universities also are feeling the pinch, said Imelda Hernandez Cruz, executive director of the Celia & Marcos Scholarship Fund.

The fund gives \$6,000 scholarships to students without legal residency, but that money is no longer enough to keep many **in** school full-time. A few have transferred from four-year institutions such as Georgia **State** to less expensive, two-year ones, such as Georgia Perimeter **College**, Hernandez Cruz said. At least six students have had to **scale back** to one class, Cruz said.

"They all **want** to finish school one way or another," she said, "even if it means taking one class at a time."

Marco, a former Cross Keys High valedictorian whose GPA is nearly 4.0 at Georgia Tech, thought his engineering dreams would be derailed, too, with **tuition** quadrupling to more than \$20,000. But an anonymous benefactor has stepped forward to help Marco, whose story was featured **in** The Atlanta Journal-Constitution **in** May.

Back in Dalton, no deep-pocketed donors have surfaced, said Javier Lara, executive director of the Latin American Community Alliance. So last Sunday, volunteers with the nonprofit joined students and their families **in** asking the community for help. They ran masking tape along downtown Dalton streets, asked passersby to donate their quarters and stuck them to the tape. The fund-raiser, which brought **in** more than \$1,000, was called "Cora-ton," a play off "cora," Spanish slang for "quarter."

The idea was to let the community know that the students **want** to continue their educations, even if it means taking classes **in** smaller chunks, one quarter at time.

Blanca needed special permission to leave the carpet mill so she could attend. She's taken a second job and is now working 80 hours a week to save for **college**.

Graphic

Photo: RICH ADDICKS / Staff An anonymous benefactor made it possible for Marco, who didn't **want** his last name used, to continue his engineering studies at Georgia Tech. Most students don't have that option./ImageData*

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