

Illegal immigrants get a shot at college with scholarships

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Body

In an unprecedented move, Georgia State University officials have granted four **illegal immigrants**, all top graduates of area high schools, full-tuition **scholarships** this year.

In the past year and a half, at least one other local university and one local organization quietly began granting similar **scholarships**, all of which have been funded by the Goizueta Foundation, a private, Atlanta-based charity that has donated millions of dollars to increase the number of Hispanics in **college**.

While some state universities have been waiving certain fees for high-achieving, undocumented students for several years, **scholarships** for **illegal immigrants** are uncommon, students, administrators and guidance counselors say --- but they're not without controversy.

"It's just one more goody that we're giving to people who come here illegally and manage to stay for awhile," said Jane Russell, director of Georgians for Immigration Reduction, which advocates for stricter enforcement of immigration laws. "If foundations like Goizueta are so concerned about these people, why don't they help them attend **college** in their own countries?"

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An estimated 65,000 undocumented **immigrants** graduate from U.S. high schools every year, including roughly 1,500 in Georgia, according to the Urban Institute, a Washington-based research group that studies immigration issues. Public schools have long educated these students; a 1982 Supreme Court ruling held they have a right to a free education.

However, for many of these students, high school was the end. Misinformed guidance counselors or admissions directors told them **college** was not possible. **College** applications requesting Social Security numbers served as a further deterrent.

Financial barrier

In the fall of 2000, University System of Georgia officials informed admissions directors that undocumented students can, in fact, attend state **colleges** if they meet academic requirements and graduated from or attended a state high school.

Still, for many of these students, a financial barrier exists: Some **colleges** charge them out-of-state tuition, even if they've lived in Georgia for years.

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For families subsisting on the hourly pay of a drywall installer, nanny, painter or fast-food worker, the difference in cost can be insurmountable. At Georgia State, full time, out-of-state students will pay \$6,772 in tuition and fees this semester, more than three times the \$1,960 in-state pupils pay.

Because of their immigration status, these students cannot apply for government grants or low-cost loans, and most private ***scholarships*** require recipients to be citizens or permanent residents. So ***college*** costs are higher, but options for financial assistance are fewer.

"There are resources available, but they're limited resources," said Tracy Kay, a 12th-grade counselor at Gwinnett County's Meadowcreek High School who has worked with undocumented students. "They're not the same as for the average student."

One undocumented student, who graduated from Norcross High School with a 3.5 grade-point average, worried that her goal of a university degree might never materialize. "I remember senior year in the back of my head I thought: So, I made these good grades, and I might not be able to go to ***college***," said the young woman, who asked that her name not be used out of fear of being discovered by immigration agents.

Now 19 and a sophomore at Georgia State, the native of Venezuela found help in the form of an out-of-state tuition waiver, which allowed her to pay the more manageable in-state prices. In recent years, state universities have increasingly used those waivers for undocumented pupils, but such waivers are limited to 2 percent of the student body.

"If you really want to do it, you can do it," said the student, who dreams of teaching at Beaver Ridge Elementary in Norcross, the school she attended as a child. "They're not going to advertise it, the schools. It's not something they advertise: 'We take in ***illegal*** students.' You just have to keep knocking on doors."

Her younger sister, a freshman at Georgia State, is a Goizueta ***scholarship*** recipient.

New issue for Georgia

Maritza Licameli, director of the Georgia Outreach Project for the San Francisco-based Hispanic ***Scholarship*** Fund is always looking for organizations that will finance ***scholarships*** for these students.

"Many corporations, they do not feel comfortable with funding undocumented students," she said. "I think it's because there's a lot of misunderstanding and it's a fairly new issue here in Georgia."

Recognizing that many Hispanic students are undocumented, the Goizueta Foundation is one of the few organizations that ensures its ***scholarships*** do not exclude those who have come here illegally. Citizenship and Social Security numbers are not required.

The charity's founder, the late chairman of the Coca-Cola Company, Roberto Goizueta, immigrated to the United States from Cuba and became a naturalized citizen.

Last spring, a \$1.7 million Goizueta grant allowed the Hispanic ***Scholarship*** Fund to provide 50 Georgia students, including 14 ***illegal immigrants***, with \$5,000 ***scholarships*** renewable for up to four years. Kennesaw State University, which received \$1 million from Goizueta, has five undocumented students on ***scholarship***.

Georgia State received \$1.5 million to establish its Hispanic outreach efforts. This year, seven freshman, including the four undocumented students, are attending on full, four-year ***scholarships***.

"There's going to be a lot of controversy, I think," said Alicia Fosse, Georgia State's Hispanic recruitment and retention coordinator. "But we're talking about students [whose] potential is so great, that it's a pity for us not to do something."

Attempts to give undocumented students relief on steep tuitions have swept through more than two dozen statehouses in recent years. Seven states --- California, Illinois, Oklahoma, New York, Texas, Utah and Washington

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--- now allow undocumented students who have graduated from high schools in their respective states to pay in-state prices. This past summer, Gov. Sonny Perdue told a meeting of Hispanic reporters he was open to discussing a similar initiative here.

Advocates for the policies were encouraged by President Bush's recent proposal to allow undocumented workers to obtain legal, if temporary, status. They hope the president's stance bodes well for a federal bill that would grant undocumented students in-state tuition and a chance to apply for legal status.

"We have a generation of kids that grew up here --- who came in the '80s or '90s --- and now are coming into adulthood, the age where they are ready for college," said Josh Bernstein, a senior policy analyst with the National Immigration Law Center in Washington. "More and more people are recognizing that this is a problem."

D.A. King, founder of the American Resistance Foundation, another local group seeking tougher enforcement of immigration laws, said he's sympathetic to the plight of these students. But, he said, schools should not be aiding illegal immigrants.

"We are flouting our laws," he said, "and overlooking the fact that there are criminals in our midst that are getting what American citizens are hoping for."

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