

Illegal students few, say colleges; Skeptic: 'Maybe none of the illegal students say they're illegal.'; Some still checking; UGA expects none.

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Body

Several of Georgia's public colleges say fewer than five illegal immigrants took classes on their campuses last year.

The State Board of Regents directed its 35 colleges and universities to make sure all students from out of state, including those from out of the country, are paying out-of-state tuition. Through this process, colleges are learning how many students are undocumented.

Georgia State University told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that it enrolled 19 undocumented students in 2009 -- fewer than one-tenth of 1 percent of its total enrollment of 30,427. But Georgia Tech officials said they enrolled fewer than five, and the University of West Georgia said only three attended last fall. Augusta State University had just one --- although he has since received an appropriate visa. Southern Polytechnic State University reported no undocumented students for the fall and one for the summer semester, and the Medical College of Georgia said it had none.

Many of the colleges --- including Kennesaw State University, University of Georgia and Georgia Perimeter --- are still working on their audits.

"We have not completed our review as yet, but we are not aware that we have any undocumented aliens enrolled for the past year," UGA spokesman Tom Jackson said.

UGA is the state's largest public campus with nearly 35,000 students. Jackson said the school expects to have very few, if any, undocumented students.

Sen. Don Balfour (R-Snellville), who recently joined 13 other state senators in urging the Board of Regents to bar illegal immigrants, questioned the numbers.

"It's interesting for UGA to say they don't think they have any when a smaller college like Georgia State says they had 19," Balfour said. "If UGA is saying they have none maybe they need to look a little deeper. Maybe none of the illegal students are saying they're illegal."

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College officials **said** the **students** they have identified as **illegal** were charged the correct tuition rate and didn't receive any scholarships or awards reserved for legal U.S. or Georgia citizens. It is not **illegal** for undocumented **students** to attend Georgia's schools, but they must pay the out-of-state rate, which is about three times as expensive.

Tim Renick, chief enrollment officer at Georgia State, stressed that the **college** doesn't necessarily know the legal status of undocumented **students**. Instead they are classified as undocumented **students** precisely because they failed to provide appropriate documentation.

Admission applications require **students** to answer questions about their citizenship status, although the applications do not specifically ask whether the **student** is in the country illegally. Renick **said** Georgia State asks all non-U.S. citizens for documentation.

If, after repeated efforts, **students** don't provide the information, they are listed as "undocumented" and charged out-of-state tuition rates, he **said**.

While part of the verification process relies on information provided by **students**, Georgia State President Mark Becker **said** most of these **students** tell the truth on the applications. **Students** who lie can be expelled, Becker **said**.

Of Georgia State's 19 undocumented **students**, seven are from Asia, five are from North America (Canada and Mexico), four are from Africa, two are from Latin and South America and one is from Europe, officials **said**.

Colleges have until August to complete their reviews, which were ordered by Chancellor Erroll Davis and the Board of Regents after it was disclosed that Kennesaw had awarded in-state tuition to an undocumented **student**.

Jerry Gonzalez, executive director of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, **said** there has been a "heavy tinge of racism" in the debate over **illegal** immigration, with much of it directed at Latinos and Mexicans.

While the University System of Georgia has focused on whether undocumented **students** are being charged the right tuition, there's a larger public debate over whether these **students** should be allowed to attend. Some lawmakers plan to introduce legislation barring **illegal** immigrants from all public **colleges** --- a position supported by some gubernatorial candidates.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement **said** federal law does not bar **illegal** immigrants from attending public **colleges**. In a 2008 letter, its most recent federal guideline on the issue, the agency wrote, "individual states must decide for themselves whether or not to admit **illegal** aliens into their public post-secondary institutions."

Most states follow the policy used in Georgia. Eleven states extended in-state tuition benefits to **illegal** immigrants, while South Carolina has barred these **students** altogether.

Balfour **said** undocumented **students** at Georgia Tech took slots away from U.S. citizens.

"This is a competitive institution that turns **students** away," Balfour **said**.

Gonzalez **said** the **students** earned their spots through a competitive process.

"**They're** not taking spots away," Gonzalez **said**. "They earned them by excelling in school. They are among the brightest we've educated in Georgia."

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