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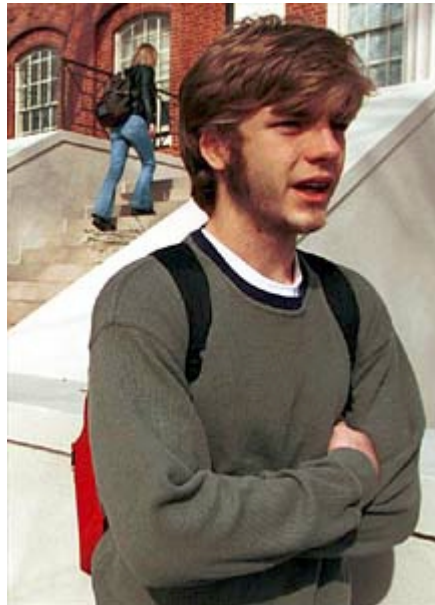
## Free-Tuition Program Transforms the University of Georgia

By DAVID FIRESTONE

**A**THERS, Ga., Feb. 1 — In about eight weeks, the calls from furious parents will start to accumulate on the desk of Michael F. Adams, the president of the University of Georgia, in what has recently become a painful annual ritual. Doesn't he know they are alumni, Bulldog boosters, season ticket holders, prodigious writers of checks? How could he possibly refuse to admit their child to their alma mater?

"You wouldn't want to hear the calls I get in April," Mr. Adams said this week. "Nobody likes having to deny admission to families with long-standing supporters. But we have to be upfront about what has happened here."

And so he has to tell them, not without a certain amount of pride, that the university has been transformed since their day. It is no longer the sleepy party school that would readily accept the offspring of any halfway prominent family in the state. Seemingly overnight, one of the South's largest public



Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times  
David Dougherty, a freshman, said a Hope Scholarship allowed him to attend the University of Georgia.

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universities has become enormously competitive, able to pick and choose from among the region's best high school seniors, insisting on test scores that would have been unimaginably high less than a decade ago.

The principal reason is a free tuition program used by almost every freshman at the university and paid for by proceeds from the Georgia lottery. Known as the Hope Scholarship, it pays for all tuition and fees at any state college or university for Georgia

Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times  
Adora Ozumba, a senior, said the university still has racial tensions.

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residents with at least a B average. Since it was enacted in 1993, it has proved a powerful financial incentive for the state's top students to bypass universities like Duke, Vanderbilt and North Carolina and remain in the state.

The average SAT score for incoming freshmen has increased to 1203 this year from 1086 in 1993, compared with the national average of 1019 now. For the first time, Georgia ranks in the top 20 public universities on lists like those compiled by U.S. News & World Report, equivalent to schools like Ohio State and Purdue.

"I couldn't get in anymore if I tried," said Nancy Freeman, a 1970 graduate who lives in Atlanta. "But we're about to put our fourth child through UGA on a Hope Scholarship, and we are just thrilled about it. The academic level has gone way beyond our expectations, and it was all free. For our kids, going there was a no-brainer." Current in-state tuition at the university is \$3,276 a year.

Merit-based scholarships like the Hope program are becoming increasingly popular around the country, now used in 13 states, but after seven years as the pioneer program of its kind, the Hope system in Georgia is yielding several lessons.

Though it has substantially improved the academic quality of the state's top colleges, it has not significantly increased the overall number of students going to college. Instead, it simply keeps more college-bound students in the state. It has not increased the number of minority students at an elite institution like Georgia, though it has allowed more minority students to attend college. And the pressure to to maintain the scholarship often prompts students to drop difficult courses, and to take a lighter course load.

Most starkly, the scholarships represent an enormous transfer of money — \$1.2 billion since 1993 — from lottery players, who tend to live in the poorest counties of the state, to 504,000 college

students, who come from the wealthiest counties. The program has become one of the most popular middle-class entitlements, and politicians who champion it are often rewarded at the ballot box.

The program has clearly succeeded in one of its principal goals — keeping top students in the state. Its creator, Gov. Zell Miller (now a United States senator), campaigned on a belief that the brightest students were leaving the state and needed an incentive to stay. A new study by two University of Georgia economists found that the Hope program had increased enrollment by 10 percent at four-year public schools in the state, and by 20 percent at private schools, where the scholarship subsidizes students' tuition.

Since the Hope program began, the average SAT scores of college freshmen remaining in the state has increased by nearly 10 percent, putting Georgia freshmen at the same level as the national average for the first time beginning in 1998. The number of the brightest students staying in the state — those with SAT scores of at least 1500 out of a possible 1600 — has increased to 76 percent from 23 percent in 1993.

But the program has not expanded the overall number of students attending college, said Christopher Cornwell, one of the authors of the study, because it is based entirely on merit, not on need. Poor students who want to attend college can still rely on the federal Pell grants, while wealthier students, who probably would have attended college anyway, now do so free in Georgia.

"It's not too surprising that a merit scholarship like this one would tend to be given to students who would have gone to college anyway, particularly because higher educational achievement correlates to higher family income," Mr. Cornwell said. "The whole point was to improve the state's economy by getting the hardest-working students to stay here."

Last July, aware of the problem, the state expanded the program so that students who are eligible for both the Pell grants and the Hope scholarship can get both; previously, the scholarship was reduced by the amount of the grant.

The study found that the Hope program had increased the enrollment of black students at four-year public institutions around Georgia by 24 percent. Mr. Cornwell said those students were probably from families above the Pell income limits who would not have otherwise gone to college.

But those new black students are for the most part not going to the University of Georgia, the elite level of the state's public college system. Exactly 40 years after the university was desegregated, black enrollment remains stagnant at 6 percent, less than half the percentages at the Universities of Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina, and the numbers are expected to decrease next year.

The university is fighting a series of court decisions prohibiting it from using race as a factor in admissions and effectively gutting its affirmative action program. But Mr. Adams acknowledged that the rise of Hope scholarships had played a role.

"Hope has made it somewhat more difficult to recruit African-American students, because so many of them come from educational backgrounds where they have not been as well prepared as they could have been," Mr. Adams said. "Some of that is a vestige of the two-tier system of the 50's and 60's, but it means we will have to work harder at recruiting."

Black students say the dominance of the mostly white fraternity system on campus makes life uncomfortable for them and has discouraged high school seniors from applying. Adora Ozumba, a pre-med senior from Nigeria, said someone shouted a racial epithet at an outdoor gathering of black students a few days ago. Michael Anthony Thomas, a senior from Atlanta who was the first black editor of the student newspaper, said he sensed less diversity on campus now than when he first arrived, though he credited the administration with trying to improve the atmosphere.

"There are still too many students with a 1950's mentality here, like the ones who put a big Confederate flag up on the porch of their fraternity," he said. "You'd think that brighter students would mean there'd be more tolerance, but this is still Georgia."

But students white and black said the university was a more serious place than it used to be now that everyone must sustain a B average to maintain the free tuition. Faculty members say students are clearly more conscientious than in the past, if not necessarily better prepared.

"I'm seeing better writing than I used to, and a lot more concern about their grades," said Delmer D. Dunn, Regents professor of political science. "I feel more confident now in giving them more and requiring more." Some instructors say the scholarships have increased the pressure on them to inflate grades, although grades have also gone up because of a brighter student body.

About 60 percent of students at the university retain their scholarships after their freshman year, double the state rate. Both figures are expected to increase in future years now that the state has tightened the requirements for a scholarship in core high school courses, reducing the overall pool of scholarship students but improving the group's academic level.

Of more concern to the school at the moment is the number of students who are dropping courses halfway through the term if they anticipate earning a grade that would lower their average. The university's own strategic plan notes that undergraduates are taking

fewer credit hours per semester than they used to, a trend that is directly attributed to the scholarships and that students are perfectly willing to confirm.

"Everyone's always trying to keep their Hope," said Shannon McGhee, a junior from Alpharetta. "If they don't think they'll get a good grade, they drop the course. They figure, hey, if I don't keep it, I'm going to end up going home anyway."

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