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Area enrollments soaring, so some schools hit the brakes

By Lee Shearer | lee.shearer@onlineathens.com | Story updated at 11:32 pm on 9/24/2008



Tricia Spaulding/Staff

Christy Ansley, a sophomore from Canton, studies in the crowded Gainesville State College Oconee campus library Tuesday. The satellite school's enrollment has soared.

The University of Georgia's student body isn't growing as fast as it once was, but other area colleges are making up for it in the 21st century.

Enrollment on UGA's Athens campus stood at 33,129 in fall 2007 - about 6 percent more than the university's 2000 enrollment of 31,288.

But enrollment at newer Athens-area college campuses has ballooned, including at Gainesville State College's Oconee County campus and Piedmont College, whose Athens enrollment soon may be larger than Piedmont's main campus in Demorest.

Piedmont enrolled 498 students in Athens two years ago, but had 657 last year and 722 this fall, as the school added new undergraduate classes and moved to its new campus on the former Prince Avenue Baptist Church grounds.

Piedmont in Athens eventually could have twice the number of students now studying at the main campus in Demorest, said Mel Palmer, vice president for Piedmont's Athens campus.

"We think we could house 1,800 or 1,900" in the classroom, laboratory and office space at the Prince Avenue campus, Palmer said.

While Piedmont is looking to grow, another college relatively new to Athens has put the brakes on growth, at least for a while.

Gainesville State College, a two-year school, began a satellite campus in Athens with 218 students in 2001. By fall 2006, after Gainesville moved to a campus in Watkinsville, 2,461 students were enrolled -

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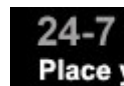
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too many students, college officials decided.

"That's just because of space, parking and safety," said Gainesville State College President Martha Nesbitt.

College officials cut enrollment back to about 2,104 last year, 2,166 this year.

"Our goal is 2,250 students. It's kind of a guessing game," Nesbitt said.

Other Athens-area colleges also have grown - Medical College of Georgia's School of Nursing at Athens by 30 percent and Athens Technical College (which enrolls vocational as well as college students) by 22 percent.

That growth reflects both national and Georgia trends. U.S. college enrollment increased by 17 percent to 20.5 million between 2000 and 2006, according to a recent U.S. Census Bureau report.

During the same six-year period, enrollment in Georgia's public colleges and universities rose from about 206,000 to 260,000, a 26 percent increase.

A combination of factors explain why the ranks of college students are growing so fast.

Georgia is one of the nation's fastest-growing states and has a relatively young population, so more and more seniors graduate from the state's high schools each year, said Mike Light, a spokesman for the state's network of technical colleges.

North Georgia communities, including the fast-growing corridor between Gainesville and Athens, have been at the front of that change, Nesbitt said.

And although the University of Georgia is in Athens, students from the Athens area who wanted to attend a public community college had nowhere to go until Gainesville College opened up shop here, she said.

"For many students, it's just too far to drive to Gainesville," Nesbitt said.

Gainesville also has established a reputation for having small classes and giving a lot of individual attention to students, she said.

"Students know they'll get a better start to college," she said.

Sheer growth in the state population also helps explain why Athens Tech is enrolling more students, Light said. But more and more high school graduates also are choosing technical training over college, he said.

A student who takes a two-year vocational course at a technical college may graduate to a \$45,000-a-year job, while a student from the same high school graduating class faces two more years of college before going into the workplace, Light said.

The state and national economic slump also may be driving up enrollment this year, said Piedmont College's Palmer.

When unemployment goes up and people lose jobs, many of them go back to school to get training for a new job or career, he said.



Athens' reputation as a college town also is pulling students here, college administrators say.

"We think a lot of people want to live in the Athens area," Palmer said.

Most students at Gainesville State's Watkinsville campus are from the Athens area, but a large minority come from elsewhere, mainly metro Atlanta, Nesbitt said.

"About a third are students from around the state who want to be in Athens," Nesbitt said. "Athens is a draw, no doubt about it."

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