

## FGCU students to legislators: Give undocumented Florida residents in-state tuition rates

By MARYANN BATLLE

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Two waitress jobs and pure grit are what Faviola Vargas is counting on to help her attend Florida Gulf Coast University in the fall.

The 22-year-old from Mexico is saving money to enroll in one class — just one — because as an undocumented immigrant she has to pay out-of-state tuition and that is all she can afford.

“It’s like a little push of the start of my future. It’s just the beginning of a lot of things that I need to work on and sacrifice for my family and my future,” said Vargas, who graduated from Golden Gate High School in 2010.

But a pair of companion bills making their way through the state Legislature could allow her and potentially thousands of other undocumented youth in Florida pay in-state tuition rates.

The bills, HB 851 and SB 1400, would make undocumented students who attend high school in Florida eligible for an in-state tuition waiver. HB 851 requires four consecutive years of high school in the state and SB 1400 currently requires three.

Neither bill would make undocumented immigrants eligible for financial aid.

In March, HB 851 passed the House 81 to 33.

Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen, R-Fort Myers, whose district includes FGCU, was the lone House member of Lee County’s legislative delegation to vote in its favor. Rep. Carlos Trujillo, R-Miami, was the only House member from Collier’s delegation to support it.

Last week, FGCU’s student senate unanimously passed a resolution in support of in-state tuition, becoming the third public university in Florida to do so. The University of Florida and the University of South Florida have passed similar resolutions.

“I think it is not a political issue. It is an educational, social justice and economical issue to allow these students to have equal tuition and equal opportunities as everyone else,” said Andres Machado, FGCU Student Government Director of Student Life.

FGCU’s resolution is meant to push state lawmakers and Gov. Rick Scott to approve

the change, according to advocates.

“It’s a symbolic win because we have the support of our community and one of (its) universities, even if it’s just the students,” Vargas said.

Nicola Foote, professor of Latin American History at FGCU, said the university’s faculty senate is about to do the same as its student counterpart.

“So far, there’s been overwhelming support,” Foote said. “Our mission as a faculty is to educate and to reach out to all the communities in Southwest Florida, and that includes everyone.”

FGCU President Wilson Bradshaw told the Daily News in a prepared statement that he supports proposed legislation that extends in-state tuition rates to students who attended four years and graduated from a Florida high school.

Undergraduate tuition rates per credit hour at FGCU are about four times higher for nonresident students than for Florida residents.

With some exceptions, an undergraduate Florida resident can expect to pay \$203.94 per credit hour this fall, according to the university’s Office of the Bursar website. Under the same scenario, an undergraduate nonresident would pay \$838.73 per credit hour.

Rep. Ray Rodrigues, R-Estero, vice chair of the Higher Education and Workforce Subcommittee, said he voted yes on the bill when it went through his committee because it included provisions that would grant in-state tuition to eligible U.S. military veterans.

Rodrigues reversed his support because he was able to vote for a separate in-state tuition bill for veterans, known as the “Florida G.I. Bill,” which the governor signed into law Monday.

Another issue that changed Rodrigues’ mind was the failure of a reciprocity amendment to HB 851 that would have granted in-state tuition to U.S. students from states that allow the same for Florida students.

“I was not comfortable extending a benefit to noncitizens that we don’t extend to citizens,” Rodrigues said.

SB 1400 is expected to be debated in the Senate Judiciary Committee today. Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, is a member of that committee.

In what some are calling a “flip-flop,” Scott said he will support the idea as long as it is combined with his own proposal to place limits on how much state universities can raise tuition each year. That provision is included in SB 1400.

Vargas, an immigration reform activist, and other Southwest Florida youth who would benefit from in-state tuition changes are expected to travel to Tallahassee this week to

lobby state lawmakers and the governor.

“We’re (undocumented immigrants) willing to pay for our school at a fair rate. At least if we could have it as a resident has it, that’s a huge difference,” Vargas said.

It will be her first trip to the state’s capital, and it is one she takes with her 15-year-old sister’s future in mind.

“I’m also here for her,” Vargas said.

\_The Associated Press contributed to this report

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