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Community colleges required to allow illegal immigrants 7:25 AM

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SALISBURY, N.C. -- For years, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College has welcomed illegal immigrants as students. Now, a mandate from North Carolina's community college system requires that all campuses do the same, effective immediately.

"We are more about being accessible and offering opportunity than being exclusive," said Jeff Lowrance, college relations director for Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

David Sullivan, the state's top lawyer for the community college system, uncovered a legal opinion dating back to 1997, which he believes supports the new rule that allowing undocumented students enrollment is a state regulation.

Up until now, community colleges had the option of whether to allow illegal immigrants to enroll.

"Workers in our area need these precious spots in the community college system for retraining," said Bill Graham, a Republican gubernatorial candidate. "It is critical that we have priorities set so that workers born here, that are citizens, have the opportunity to engage in retraining in the community college system."

Community colleges don't have enrollment caps. The argument that an illegal immigrant will take a spot away from the campus attendance numbers in favor of legal citizens is not accurate.

However, classroom space is limited. First-come, first-serve course enrollment could make it possible for an undocumented student to squeeze out someone who signs up for a class too late.

"When we have a situation where a particular class section is full, that triggers for us to take action to create another class section," said Lowrance.

There are no guarantees, and that bothers Graham.

"There's not unlimited enrollment in many of these technical and new technology areas that many of our citizens need retraining in," Graham said.

Out of 58 schools in the North Carolina's community college system, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College was one of 37 campuses already allowing undocumented immigrants to become students.

As of Wednesday, about 340 out of 270,000 students are undocumented immigrants, according to state figures.