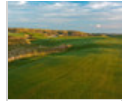


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COLLEGE FOOTBALL | Updated September 26, 2013, 1:50 p.m. ET

Declining Student Attendance Hits Georgia

At Campuses Across the Country, More Reasons Than Ever to Skip the Game

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By BEN COHEN



David Walter Banks for The Wall Street Journal

The Georgia student section on Saturday against North Texas.

Athens, Ga.

The scene at home football games here at the University of Georgia is almost perfect. The tailgate lots open at 7 a.m. Locals brag of the bar-per-capita rate. The only commodities in greater abundance than beer are the pro-Bulldogs buttons that sorority girls wear.

There's just one problem: Some students can't be bothered to come to the games.

Declining student attendance is an illness that has been spreading for years nationwide. But now it has hit the Southeastern Conference, home to college football's best teams and supposedly its most fervent fans, giving athletics officials reason to fret about future ticket sales and fundraising.

As it turns out, Georgia students left empty 39% of their designated sections of Sanford Stadium over the last four seasons, according to school records of student-ticket scans. Despite their allocation of about 18,000 seats, the number of students at

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between 2009 and 2012, when the Crimson Tide won three national championships. Alabama coach Nick Saban wrote a flattering letter last week in the student paper to recruit students back.

Georgia officials have been so concerned by student attendance that they reassigned 2,000 seats previously reserved for students to young alumni before this season. "It was a significant hole, and it was very noticeable," Georgia athletic director Greg McGarity said. "It was way too obvious."

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frat house, the bar or wherever) is gorgeous. The result is students are focusing on the few marquee games—like Saturday's matchup of No. 6 LSU and No. 9 Georgia—at the expense of others.

To study this shift in behavior, the SEC recently hired Now What, a New York market-research firm that will spend this season traveling to SEC stadiums, visiting fans watching at home to gather their opinions before presenting its findings after the regular season.



Enlarge Image

David Walter Banks for The Wall Street Journal

Fans watching the game at General Beauregard's, an Athens bar.

games between 2009 and 2012 never exceeded 15,000.

Winning isn't even necessarily a solution. The average student crowd to see last year's Georgia team—which finished the season ranked No. 5—was almost 6,000 short of maximum capacity. Even at Alabama, 32% of student seats went unused by students

The inscrutable behavior of 18-to-22-year-olds is actually understandable in this case: For students today, there are more reasons than ever to skip the game.

The cellular reception at the stadium is bad. The nonconference schedules these days are worse. And the high-definition broadcast at home (or at the

"We can't afford to lose a generation," said Mississippi State athletic director Scott Stricklin, a member of the SEC's committee on the game-day experience.

This worrisome dynamic was evident last Saturday, when Georgia hosted North Texas on a drizzly afternoon and one tailgating troupe near Sanford Stadium kept dry underneath tents. Lounging in lawn chairs, with a makeshift bar to their right and their

buffet and beer-pong tables behind them, students who said they had tickets to the game being played across the street instead were glued to two flat-screen TVs. "There are a ton of people who prefer this," said Sam Little, a junior at Georgia. "They can actually watch the game instead of deal with the crazy atmosphere."

Those students were far enough from the stadium to use their smartphones—which, they gripe, is virtually impossible inside. As the service is right now, many stadiums are such dead zones that "you can't text, Instagram or tweet," said Georgia senior Kim Baltenger.

Most schools are considering new stadium Wi-Fi networks that would cost anywhere between \$2 million and \$10 million, industry experts say. The need for this technology

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is greater in college than in the NFL, said Enterasys Networks chief executive Chris Crowell, whose company outfitted the New England Patriots' and Philadelphia Eagles' stadiums. The upload traffic at crowded events doubles that of downloads, he said, and the activity ratio is further skewed by younger crowds: Gillette Stadium's Wi-Fi network, installed in 2012, whizzed with its most upload data during a Taylor Swift concert this summer.

Some students also have better things to do than watch football. When asked if they agreed with the statement that they didn't have time to attend Tennessee's football games, undergraduates there averaged a response of 3.15 on a scale of 1 to 5, said Tennessee professor Robin Hardin, who surveyed 2,500 students for a report on their habits commissioned by the school's athletic department. (The depressing state of their team doesn't help matters.)

Student indifference is easy to spot at matchups they expect to be lopsided: 45% of the student seats went unused at Georgia's non-SEC games. In the Big Ten, Michigan's student section had wide swaths of empty rows before kickoff Sept. 14 against Akron, the week after a stirring home win over rival Notre Dame. At Ohio State, the student no-show rate hit 26% for a game last season against lowly UAB.

Once the students straggle in, schools struggle to keep them interested, a problem they attribute to the shorter attention spans of students today. Oregon devised a solution to slow its exodus: fast food. If the Ducks score 40 points, those who stay for the whole time earn a free "Jumbo Jack" hamburger from Jack in the Box. The team held up its end of the deal for three of its four conference games last year, when the reward was tacos.

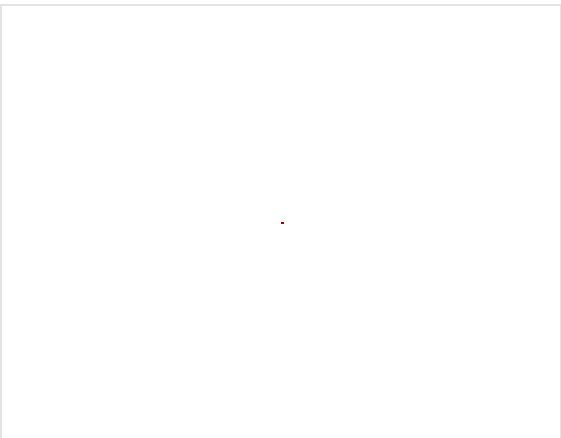
Around halftime of Georgia's game last week, students trickled onto the main drag here, most still wearing their wristband tickets from the stadium. Some were in search of beer—unlike some other conferences, whose members soak up beer revenue, the SEC has banned alcohol sales to the public in its stadiums. A short walk from the stadium yielded more bars than streets, plus the Georgia Theatre, a concert hall that shows Bulldogs games on its big screen, and a row of fraternity palaces.

"Big-screen TVs close to your own refrigerator are pretty compelling," Georgia president emeritus Michael Adams said.

One of the first to tackle the discord between football mania and student apathy, Georgia is encouraged by the early returns this season. The first home game on Sept. 7, a 4:30 p.m. kickoff against South Carolina, hit the sweet spot for student attendance. It drew 15,864 students, the most since at least 2009. Students are anticipating a similarly boisterous crowd against LSU. In fact, at the South Carolina game, there were so many students in Sanford Stadium that some struggled to find seats.

"I did get in," said Yates Webb, a Georgia senior, "but it took some pushing."

A version of this article appeared September 26, 2013, on page D5 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: College Football, Minus the Students.



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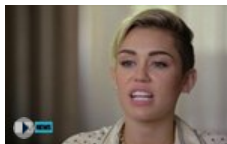
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