

Students who fled to Arkansas after storms now deciding to stay

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. Of the nearly 300 college students who fled the Gulf Coast and enrolled in 44 Arkansas colleges and universities in the wake of recent hurricanes, records show dozens are deciding to continue their education in the state.

Roxanne Nance, a freshman at Loyola University in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck, has enrolled at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville for the spring session. Nance's hometown is Waggaman, La.

Nance said she first saw the Arkansas campus as a temporary solution to her education dilemma, but now she doesn't want to go back to Loyola. She was one of 66 students who enrolled at Arkansas after Katrina on Aug. 29 and is one of a dozen who so far has decided to stay. Spring registration ends Jan. 23.

"I kept telling my mom, I'll be here for a few months," Nance said. "I got here and realized the people are so much more inviting. When I got here, it was like, Wow.

"On a personal, psychological and emotional level, I think I'm going to be happier here. I love being here. I wouldn't change it for the world."

Arkansas admissions director Dawn Medley said she thought Katrina-displaced students would return to their original colleges in January and is surprised some are staying.

"Were we expecting it? No. We were offering a port in the storm," Medley said. "But any time you offer assistance to students and they get to see you at your best, it's going to make an impression on them."

Two students have decided to remain at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, school spokesman Tommy Jackson said. UCA took 15 evacuated students in the fall. So far one student will stay at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock, but more solid figures won't be available until February, a spokeswoman said.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, about 18,000 students fled the Gulf Coast after Katrina, ending up at 1,017 institutions nationwide.

The state of Arkansas offered in-state tuition to evacuated students under an emergency arrangement. The state now says that it's up to individual institutions to decide if they will extend in-state tuition for another semester.

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