

UNVA students fear worst after raid

Foreigner number may force closure

By [Ben Wolfgang](#) - *The Washington Times* - Wednesday, August 3, 2011

Students at the University of Northern Virginia say they are increasingly worried the school will close its doors forever after a raid by federal officials last week, but university officials said Wednesday they're open for business and cooperating with investigators.

"UNVA does not intend to close at all," the university's attorney, [Shawn Whittaker](#), told The Washington Times. "[Federal officials] have told us that any evidence is sealed. We don't know exactly what the allegations are."

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement raided UNVA offices in Annandale on July 28 and seized computers, documents and other materials. While it's unclear exactly what prompted the investigation, some are speculating that the university, a for-profit institution that caters to Indian students, sought to enroll more foreigners on student visas than allowed by law.

More than a dozen students have emailed *The Times* in recent days expressing fear, shock and anger over the ordeal. If the school closes, they would have two options: transfer to another university or leave the country.

Despite the assurances of [Mr. Whittaker](#), students are preparing for the worst. On Friday, students will meet with the Indian ambassador in Washington. The meeting was organized by the [Telugu Association of North America](#), a nonprofit Indo-American organization.

“God forbid, if the university closed down, [the students] will ... lose their money, student visa status and have to start all over again,” [TANA](#) President [Prasad Thotakura](#) said.

[Mr. Thotakura](#) said he fears the school, which has an enrollment of about 2,300, will be forced to close after granting too many I-20 forms, the university-issued precursors to student visas.

But ICE spokeswoman Cori Bassett said Wednesday there is no specific number of I-20s a school can issue. Instead, schools can grant as many as they wish, provided they have the staff, facilities and resources to handle the students, she said.

Ms. Bassett also stressed that the school is only under review and could be cleared of wrongdoing. ICE, she added, cannot force the school to close.

While UNVA may go out of business if it can no longer admit Indian students — about 90 percent of the student body is Indian — that would be a financial reality confronting the university, not a decision by the federal government.

As for the investigation, [Mr. Whittaker](#) said he’s been told only that federal officials are looking into “fraud” at the school.

In a Wednesday letter to students obtained by *The Times*, he expressed confusion over the timing and motivation of the ICE raid.

“To date, UNVA still does not know what UNVA has allegedly done wrong,” the letter reads in part. “UNVA ... will do what it takes to defend itself and its students.”

After ICE agents raided California’s Tri-Valley University — which also serves a large number of Indian students — in January, [Mr. Whittaker](#) said, he contacted federal officials and asked whether UNVA was under investigation. He said officials told him no, but he now believes he was misled.

“ICE clearly was not truthful in its response,” he wrote in his letter to students.

Ms. Bassett would not comment on the specifics of the raid or what led to it.

Students said they're worried about the impact of the publicity surrounding the raid.

"I am not really sure if there will be any other school that will accept me with a background of recent issues from the school I am from," said Sushma Guthikonda, a 24-year old Indian student who is scheduled to finish his master's degree this fall. "Considering tuition fees with my budget, I really don't want to move to [another] university."

Several schools are already lining up to recruit Mr. Guthikonda and others. According to a statement from [TANA](#), representatives from the University of Southern Mississippi, Murray State University in Kentucky and Concord University in West Virginia will attend Friday's meeting and "answer students' questions in transferring ... if they are interested."