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'Birthers' claim Obama applied to college as a foreigner

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We might have spoken too soon.

On Monday, we wrote that “birther” conspiracies about President Obama had mostly been laid to rest when the White House released his long-form Hawaiian birth certificate last April, but that some detractors are focusing on his college transcripts, hoping to prove Obama is not as smart as he seems.

But it turns out there's a subset of Americans (and we have heard from many of them) who fervently wish to read President Obama's college transcripts for a different reason. It's not because they give a rip about his grades, or his intelligence, but because when he applied to Occidental College, located in the Los Angeles suburb of Eagle Rock, they allege that he claimed to be a foreign student and may have received some sort of special benefit as a result.

According to the urban myth-debunking website, Snopes.com, it appears this rumor got started in 2009, when a fake story – it went out disguised as an Associated Press item – made the rounds.

The story – unleashed on April Fool's Day – claimed that a group called “Americans for Freedom of Information” had released copies of Obama's “transcripts” from Occidental College, where he spent his freshman year before transferring to Columbia University.

According to the fake story, “the transcript indicated that Obama, under the name Barry Soetoro, received financial aid as a foreign student from Indonesia as an undergraduate at the school” and also that he applied and received a Fulbright scholarship for foreign students. (Soetoro was the last name of Obama's Indonesian stepfather, with whom he lived in Indonesia from 1967 to 1971.)

And, the fake story said, the transcript was released by Occidental “in compliance with a court order.”

None of it was true.

Occidental has no record of a “Barry Soetoro” ever attending, nor was there ever any such court order, said Jim Tranquada, Occidental College's communications director, who personally answers the inquiries, demands and pleas of people looking for proof that the president is not who he claims to be.

“I continue to get inquiries as to whether this information is correct,” Tranquada said Tuesday. “The number of inquiries dropped off in 2010 and 2011, but now the number has picked up again, of course, because it's an election year. It keeps us busy.”

Like all institutions, the school's disclosures about students are tightly governed by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Those who inquire of Occidental about the record of the president will learn that Barack Obama attended Occidental from the fall of 1979 to the spring of 1981 before transferring to Columbia, and did not declare a major. And that's about it.

“FERPA, passed in 1974, requires a written, signed release from a current student or alumnus to release transcripts and other student records,” Tranquada said. “To date, we have not yet received such authorization from the president.”

So who, exactly, has access to the president's record at Occidental?

“The hard file for the president is under lock and key,” Tranquada said. The decision to protect the file from unauthorized eyes was made in 2008 by Occidental Registrar Victor Eggito, Tranquada said, not at the behest of Obama or his campaign.

It may be time-consuming for Occidental officials to respond to queries, but the school has definitely gotten a boost from its association with the 44th president.

Its visibility has increased, and a certain prestige has accrued to the institution. Obama has attributed his decision to go into public life to his time at Occidental, Tranquada said.

“He still cites his favorite college class as one he took with Roger Boesche, a political science professor who is still teaching here at Oxy.”

As for those birthers, they may cite Donald Trump as their favorite champion. On Tuesday, in an antagonistic interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Trump, a high-profile supporter of GOP presumptive presidential nominee Mitt Romney, continued to allege that questions linger about Obama's birthplace, finally prompting Blitzer to say, “You're beginning to sound a little ridiculous.”

robin.abcarian@latimes.com