

Policy Brief of a  
Working Group of



# State Financial Aid Policy Changes to Meet Louisiana's Postsecondary Education Attainment and Equity Goals

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## ABOUT THE ASHE RESEARCH TO PRACTICE PROJECT

The ASHE 2020 annual conference was scheduled to take place in New Orleans, Louisiana in November 2020. As part of the conference, ASHE President KerryAnn O’Meara launched the Research to Practice Project, a collaboration between ASHE and higher education associations and funding agencies. The goal of the project was to partner with New Orleans and Louisiana higher education institutions and organizations to address issues of local concern.

As the pandemic unfolded, the Research to Practice advisory board identified key issues of concern for Louisiana higher education stakeholders. Among these key issues were equity in decision-making related to faculty and staff employment decisions. A call for participation went to ASHE members, and a team of practitioners and researchers (the authors of this report) with interest in financial aid policy was convened. This group consulted with members of the ASHE Advisory Board as they created this report.

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# Executive Summary

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- The Louisiana Board of Regents (BoR) established the goal that 60% of adults in the state would attain a postsecondary education credential by 2030, which is above the current national average of 51.3%.
- Louisiana's postsecondary education attainment rate (including short-term credentials) as of 2020 is 47.3%. This places Louisiana's attainment rate at 39th out of 50 states (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Louisiana has the second highest proportion of Black/African American residents (32.8%) compared to all other states, but has the lowest postsecondary education attainment rate for Black/African Americans. Only 21.3% of Black/African American ages 25-64 have earned an associate degree or compared to the national average of 31.6%.
- Cuts in state funding for postsecondary education have contributed to these equity gaps. Louisiana ranks 49th out of 50 states in terms of the percent change in inflation-adjusted state funding per student between 2008 and 2018.
- Over one-third of Louisiana's state funding for post-secondary education goes to financial aid programs. The state dedicates the majority of its funding for financial aid to the merit-based TOPS programs. Analysis from the BoR found that TOPS recipients are increasingly white and come from middle- and upper-income families.

## **POLICY BRIEF RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Increase state appropriations for public colleges and universities, particularly for institutions that serve underrepresented student populations.
- Redistribute financial aid money from merit-based aid to need-based aid.
- Fund and expand the Five for Six scholarship program and Compete LA program.
- Support student financial needs beyond tuition that make attendance and completion possible.

# Introduction



In 2019, the Louisiana Board of Regents (BoR) established the goal of doubling the number of working adults with a “meaningful, market-relevant postsecondary credential” by 2030 (Board of Regents [BoR], 2018a). Achieving this goal requires that 60% of adults in the state attain a postsecondary credential, well above the current national average of 51.3% (Lumina Foundation, 2020). The BoR’s Master Plan in laying out these goals emphasized that equity must be a top priority, as meeting the state’s attainment goals depends on significant jumps in the number of credentials awarded to student populations that have often been underserved in postsecondary education, including students of color, foster youth, low-income students, first-generation college students, working adults, and adults out of the workforce.

The Master Plan identified college affordability as a key mechanism for reaching the state’s attainment and equity goals. According to the Master Plan, state appropriations as a percentage of total funding for postsecondary education dropped from approximately 70% to 30% between 2009 and 2019 (BoR, 2018a). Louisiana ranks 49th out of 50 states in terms of the percent change in inflation-adjusted state funding per student between 2008 and 2018 (Mitchell et al., 2018). The result has been increasing reliance on tuition revenue, resulting in rising prices for Louisiana’s students and families. In addition to rising tuition, addressing college affordability requires assistance with other costs, such as textbooks, transportation, housing, and childcare. The Master Plan suggests that changes to Louisiana’s approach to financial aid are necessary, particularly a stronger commitment to need-based financial aid.

The purpose of this policy brief is to examine Louisiana’s state financial aid policy in light of the state’s attainment and equity goals. It is our hope that state policymakers and others in a position to influence state policy can use this brief to inform policy decisions related to financial aid. In subsequent sections, we describe the attainment and equity landscape in Louisiana and explain the state financial aid policy context. We profile state financial aid policy ideas from four other states and end with policy recommendations. These recommendations emphasize that Louisiana needs to recommit to funding public postsecondary education institutions and better design its financial aid policy to meet students’ needs. These policy changes can help to increase the number of adults with a postsecondary credential and ensure that all populations in Louisiana enjoy the benefits of postsecondary education.



# Louisiana Postsecondary Education Attainment and Equity Landscape



Louisiana's attainment rates are noticeably behind the national averages in most categories. In 2020, only 32.1% of working-age individuals (25-64 years old) had earned an associate degree or higher in Louisiana, which lags behind the national rate of 43.2% (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Further, only 25% of Louisiana residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33.9% of U.S. residents. Put simply, one in four Louisianans have at least a bachelor's degree, whereas one in three Americans have at least a bachelor's degree.

The one attainment measure where Louisiana is higher than the national average is short-term credentials, including certificates and certifications. Notably, Louisiana residents ages 25-64 earn short-term credentials at almost twice the rate of the U.S. population, 15.2% compared to 8.1% respectively. With the inclusion of workforce certificates (beginning in 2014) and certifications (in 2018), Louisiana's current postsecondary attainment rate is 47.3%. This places Louisiana's attainment rate at 39th out of 50 states (Lumina Foundation, 2020). The state of Louisiana has a goal of raising the postsecondary attainment rate to 60% by 2030. In order to accomplish this, Louisiana will need to continue to provide the current postsecondary opportunities, but also increase both the number of students enrolled in and graduating from institutions of postsecondary education.

Across every racial and ethnic category, Louisiana residents have lower postsecondary education attainment rates compared to the national averages (see Table 1). One of the

largest educational equity gaps in Louisiana is the postsecondary attainment rate for African Americans. Louisiana has the second highest proportion of African American residents (32.8%) compared to all other states, but has the lowest postsecondary attainment rate for African Americans. Only 21% of African Americans in Louisiana have earned at least an associate's degree, whereas 32% of African Americans in the nation have earned at least an associate's degree (Lumina Foundation, 2020). Postsecondary education attainment rates are also noticeably lower for American Indians and Asian/Pacific Islanders in Louisiana compared to the national average. Cuts in state funding have contributed to these equity gaps. Since 2008, state appropriations to postsecondary education have dropped by 55%, or around \$1 billion after adjusting for inflation (Adams, 2019). The Master Plan emphasizes that Louisiana must focus on addressing attainment gaps by race in order to address economic and social inequity.

**TABLE 1. Attainment Rates\* by Race/Ethnicity**

Race/Ethnicity	National Attainment Rate	Louisiana's Attainment Rate
Asian & Pacific Islander	63.8%	50.6%
White	47.9%	36.9%
Black	31.6%	21.3%
American Indian	24.6%	16.9%
Hispanic	24.5%	22.4%

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2020

\*Note: Percentage of residents, ages 25-64 with at least an associate degree.

With four systems of postsecondary education, including the nation's only historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) system, Louisiana is able to provide diverse college opportunities for its residents, as well as unique initiatives that seek to address postsecondary matriculation and completion. The Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) developed the *Five for Six Scholarship* program, which provides individuals without a high school diploma with a path towards college, a credential, and a high-wage, high-demand career. All 12 colleges comprising the LCTCS set aside 5% of tuition revenue to fund the cost of six college credit hours for students without a high school diploma. After students complete six credit hours, they become eligible to apply for federal financial aid. Importantly, students simultaneously continue to work towards their high school equivalency credential by passing the HiSET® (High School Equivalent Test). The tuition revenue set aside generates enough funds to support 600 students. Based on early evidence of success, LCTCS aims to expand the program statewide to reach 12,400 students, requiring \$12.4 million annually (LCTCS, 2019).

Another example of an initiative aimed at addressing attainment is the Compete LA program sponsored by the University of Louisiana System, designed for students who started college but did not complete their degree. Louisiana residents with some college credit who have been out of

“Across every racial and ethnic category, Louisiana residents have lower postsecondary education attainment rates compared to the national averages.”

college for at least two years are eligible. After submitting an application, students are matched with a personal coach who helps them choose a degree program and guides them through the re-enrollment process. The program also drops the price of tuition for these students by 45%, keeping tuition flat and charging no fees. Both of these initiatives have the potential to increase attainment rates and serve Louisianans, but they need additional resources to reach more people across the state.

# State Financial Aid Systems and Policy Context



Over one-third of Louisiana’s appropriations for postsecondary education go to financial aid programs. Louisiana is one of the top states when it comes to spending on financial aid per student (\$2,009 compared to a national average of \$808) (Laderman, 2019). Although Louisiana offers both merit- and need-based financial aid programs, the majority of funds for financial aid goes to the merit-based program called the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS). For example, in 2017-18, TOPS accounted for 25% of total state funds to postsecondary education. By contrast, the need-based financial program, the GO Grant, only accounted for 2% of state funds to postsecondary education (Adams, 2019; BoR, n.d.; LOSFA, 2020c). Louisiana has prioritized funding financial aid, awarding most money on the basis of merit instead of need.

## MERIT-BASED AID: TOPS

Louisiana’s merit-based financial aid program, known as TOPS, was originally designed to help Louisiana’s poorest families, but the income requirement was removed in 1998. Since then, the number of recipients and the state’s expenditures on the program has increased. The state has spent about \$3.29 billion funding TOPS with annual expenditures slightly more than \$300 million (BoR, 2019). According to the BoR (2018b), TOPS has “four goals that are generally accepted: 1) promote academic success by requiring completion of a rigorous high school core curriculum; 2) provide financial incentives as a reward for good academic performance; 3) keep Louisiana’s best and brightest in the State to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities and become productive member of Louisi-

ana’s workforce; 4) and promote access to and success in postsecondary education” (p. 7).

Eligibility requirements for TOPS include completion of a high school core curriculum consisting of 19 defined units, minimum grade point average (GPA) in core courses, and a minimum ACT composite score (see Table 2). There are four levels of awards, and although an option, the TOPS Tech award is underutilized (BoR, 2019). Recipients of the TOPS Opportunity award receive a base amount that is set by the administering agency for a student at a particular institution during the 2016-2017 academic year unless increased by Act of the Legislature; however, recipients of the TOPS Performance and TOPS Honors award receive



**TABLE 2. TOPS Eligibility Criteria and Award Components, 2018**

Award	Core Units	Core GPA	ACT Composite	Duration
Tech	19 or 21 Tech Jump Start Core	2.5	17	2 years or 4 semesters
Opportunity	19	2.5	20	4 years or 8 semesters
Performance	19	3.0	23	4 years or 8 semesters
Honors	19	3.0	27	4 years or 8 semesters

Source: LOSFA website – TOPS Brochures & Flyers

an additional annual stipend of \$400 and \$800, respectively (LOSFA, 2020a). The TOPS Tech award was created with the sole intention of promoting a skilled workforce in Louisiana. In an effort to increase participation, students graduating high school 2017 and after can use TOPS Tech awards to pursue an associate’s degree or other vocational or technical education certificate/diploma for up to two years (LOSFA, 2020b).

In the 2017-2018 school year, TOPS provided \$292.2 million in fully-paid tuition for nearly 50,000 recipients (Adams, 2019). There are two main contributing factors of the increasing cost of TOPS. First, is the considerable rise in tuition and fees at the institutions of postsecondary education within the state, which stems from dramatic decreases in state funding. Second, is the increased number of students receiving the award (BoR, 2018b). In light of decreasing states revenues, Louisiana cannot sustain these increases over a long period of time. Another issue with TOPS is that BoR analysis shows it increasingly benefits white, middle- and upper-income students. According to the BoR (2018b), “Since 2008, the number of TOPS recipients from households with incomes of \$150,000 increased by 57.1%” (p. 16). Therefore, financial aid money is going to students who may not need it to access or complete college.

### NEED-BASED AID: GO GRANT

In 2007, Louisiana established a need-based financial aid program, the GO Grant, to support nontraditional and low- to moderate-income students with the cost of attendance to a post-secondary institution (LOSFA, 2020c). The eligibility requirements for the GO Grant are that students be a Louisiana resident, file a FASFA, receive a Federal Pell grant, have remaining financial need after deducting Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) and all federal/state/institutional grant or scholarship aid (“gift aid”) from stu-

“Although Louisiana offers both merit- and need-based financial aid programs, the majority of funds for financial aid goes to the merit-based program called the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS).”

dent’s Cost of Attendance (COA), and enroll in an eligible Louisiana institution on at least a half-time basis. Students are eligible to receive a GO Grant in subsequent semesters if the renewal requirements are met and funding is available. The award amounts range from a minimum of \$300 to a maximum of \$3,000, depending upon the institution’s allocation of GO Grant funding and packaging policy, and may vary each academic year (LOSFA, 2020c).

Since 2011-2012, allocations for the GO Grant have remained around \$26 million annually, with small fluctuations. As of 2020-2021 allocations have increased to \$29.4 million (LOSFA, 2020c). Since inception (2007-2008 through 2019-2020), the GO Grant has provided funds to 321,819 students totalling almost \$331.2 million (LOSFA, 2020d). State investment in the need-based GO Grant pale in comparison to spending on TOPS.

# Promising Ideas from Other States to Increase Attainment and Equity



Most states have at least one financial aid program, and many offer multiple programs targeting specific populations or priorities. According to Baker et al. (2020), in fiscal year 2018, states spent over \$12 billion on financial aid. Gurantz and Bettinger (2019) reported that states increased the amount of money they allocate to need-based and merit-based aid programs by 83% between 2002 and 2012. In 2017-18, about 4.2 million state-level grant awards were made representing about \$11.9 billion in need-based and merit-based grant aid. Of the grant money awarded in 2017-18, about 75% was need-based (National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs, 2018). Given that the purchasing power of the federal Pell Grant has decreased as tuition and other college expenses continue to climb, states have made serious investments in aid programs to achieve attainment and equity goals. However, the effectiveness of aid programs in accomplishing these goals often hinges on program design (Snyder et al., 2016).

States must decide how to allocate scarce resources for financial aid and how much money to give to need- versus merit-based programs. Research shows that awarding money based on need is more effective at increasing the enrollment and persistence of low-income students (Kim, 2012). The Education Commission of the States convened leaders in aid policy and developed four principles for re-designing state aid programs to optimize states' limited resources. These principles include: 1) designing programs around students and their needs; 2) aligning clearly defined intent and measurable education and workforce goals; 3) providing support when it can have the greatest impact on

enrollment and persistence decisions; and 4) being broadly inclusive of all students' educational pathways (Pingel et al., 2018). We asked a range of state aid experts which states had successful aid programs, and Texas, Indiana, Washington, and California were frequently mentioned. It is beneficial to examine these states' approaches in part because they offer robust need-based financial aid and independent evaluations have demonstrated positive results. As follows, they present examples that Louisiana could follow. These states have similar or better postsecondary education attainment rates while spending less per student on financial aid. We briefly describe each of these states' approaches below.



### TEXAS

Texas offers a need-based grant known as the Toward EXcellence, Access, and Success (TEXAS) Grant for undergraduate students. To qualify, students must be a Texas resident, enrolled in their first bachelor's degree program, and have financial need as determined by their institution. Applicants must also apply for available state and federal aid, and their nine-month expected family contribution (EFC) must not exceed \$5,609. Transfer students and discharged military students are eligible to receive TEXAS Grants. Students must be enrolled at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, opening the award to applicable part-time students. In order to renew their award, students must demonstrate financial need and meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP), among other requirements. TEXAS Grants may be associated with increased student persistence, as research has found that the program reduces student loans and increases students' chances of retention and persistence (THECB, 2017).



### INDIANA

Indiana provides several need-based scholarships for Indiana residents, including the 21st Century Scholarship, an early college promise program that provides four years of paid tuition at any of the state's eligible colleges or universities (Indiana Commission on Higher Education, 2020); the Frank O'Bannon Grant, Indiana's largest need-based financial aid program (State of Indiana, 2020b); the Adult Student Grant, a need-based grant that is part of the state's You Can. Go. Back program, designed to help adult learners return to postsecondary education (State of Indiana, 2020a); and the Workforce Ready Grant, a component of the state's Next Level Jobs program, designed to extend access to postsecondary education and job training for Indiana residents (State of Indiana, 2020c) enrolled in the following high-value programs include: advanced manufacturing; building and construction; health sciences; IT and business services; and transportation and logistics (State of Indiana, 2020d).



### WASHINGTON

Washington has 10 different state aid programs, which it collectively calls its "opportunity pathways." All but one of these programs is considered need-based aid. Included among these programs are targeted grants for students who were in foster care or homeless without parents and students who intend to become teachers. The College Bound Scholarship is an early commitment program in which students whose family income equals or is less than a certain amount sign up in middle school to fulfill a scholarship pledge. The Washington College Grant is considered one of the most generous state aid programs in the country. Through this program, eligible students from a family of four making around \$50,000 or less per year would receive a full tuition award. Partial grants are available for families making up to the state's median family income, around \$97,000 per year. The only merit-based program in the state is the American Indian Endowed Scholarship, which helps students with close ties to a Washington American Indian community with scholarship awards between \$500 and \$2,000. A 2012 evaluation of the Washington College Grant (then called the State Need Grant) found some evidence that the grant was associated with increased enrollment persistence and degree completion for undergraduate students in public colleges and universities, especially for students with the greatest financial need (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2014).



### CALIFORNIA

According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), California ranks in the top ten for the amount of grant aid awarded per student (Cook et al., 2019). The main state aid program is the Cal Grant, which provides eligible students grants to attend the University of California, California State University, California Community College, or qualifying independent and career colleges. PPIC reported that Cal Grant recipients increased by 65% between 2008 and 2016, and spending on this program more than doubled to account for tuition increases from the Great Recession of 2008. There are three Cal Grant programs with different eligibility requirements and benefits. Grants generally provide assistance for tuition, in some cases covering four years of tuition at public colleges and universities, but they do not usually cover non-tuition expenses like books and transportation. Gurantz and Bettinger (2018) found that the Cal Grant had positive long-term impacts on obtaining both bachelor's and graduate degrees. In addition to the Cal Grant, California runs a scholarship for students from middle-class families, as well as a grant for students who are or were in foster care and are pursuing career and technical training.

**TABLE 3. Financial Aid Metrics for Louisiana and Comparison States**

State	State Attainment Rate	Public Financial Aid per FTE	Financial Aid as a % of State Funding	% Public College Revenue from Tuition	Need-Based Aid Awarded (millions)	Non need-Based Aid Awarded (millions)
Texas	47.1%	\$277	3.5%	42%	\$932	--
Indiana	48.5%	\$1149	18.7%	62%	\$344	\$9
Washington	59.4%	\$1145	15.4%	42%	\$347	\$13
California	51.1%	\$971	10.7%	21%	\$2204	\$2
Louisiana	47.3%	\$2009	34.7%	48%	\$26	\$294

Sources: Lumina Foundation, 2020; Laderman, 2019; NASSGAP, 2018

“Louisiana’s comparative challenges with respect to attainment could be addressed by following the lead of these states and directing more resources to need-based financial aid.”

As Table 3 shows, one theme evident in these states’ approaches is an emphasis on need-based aid. The marquee state aid programs in Washington, Texas, and California are all need-based. The need-based grants in Washington and California are notable for covering full tuition for some students. All these states spend significantly more per student on need-based aid compared to Louisiana. Another theme is that these states have specific programs to support targeted populations, some of which have been underserved in postsecondary education. Indiana, for example, has a scholarship specifically for adult learners returning to postsecondary education. Washington and California both have programs to support foster youth or students experiencing homelessness. Louisiana’s comparative challenges with respect to attainment could be addressed by following the lead of these states and directing more resources to need-based financial aid.



# Recommendations for State Policy

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Meeting Louisiana’s postsecondary education attainment and equity goals requires critical examination of its approaches to financial aid to ensure resources are being optimized. The BoR’s Master Plan noted that decreased state funding for postsecondary education in Louisiana has meant that students and their families bear a greater burden when it comes to paying for postsecondary education, meaning more people need financial aid. Moreover, the Master Plan reported that while the merit-based TOPS program is “generous” because it exceeds the average for state-based aid within the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), the need-based GO grant is less than half the SREB average.

In short, Louisiana has cut its appropriations to postsecondary education institutions while spending money on a merit-based scholarship program that benefits white, affluent students. If Louisiana is going to meet its attainment and equity goals, it must redesign its state financial aid policy. We offer the following recommendations to help better align the state’s financial aid policy and its goals:

- **Increase state appropriations for public colleges and universities**, particularly the institutions that serve student populations that have been marginalized in postsecondary education, such as community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and regional public universities. This will help to keep tuition low and reduce the financial burden placed on students and their families. It will also ensure these institutions have sufficient resources to serve students well and increase persistence rates.
- **Redistribute financial aid money from merit-based aid to need-based aid.** Research finds that merit-based programs disproportionately benefit students who would attend college regardless of receiving aid (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Lowry, 2019). In Louisiana, Lowry (2019) demonstrated that “financial aid enhances access by economically disadvantaged students, with the effects of need-based aid being larger and more robust than those of aid based at least in part on merit” (p. 44). As the master plan noted, the state “must demonstrate a stronger commitment to the need-based aid program, GO Grants” (p. 27).
- **Fund and expand the Five for Six scholarship program and Compete LA program** as a starting point to reach more individuals who did not complete high school and adult learners who left college without completing a degree. Achieving higher attainment in Louisiana will require serving more than just students attending postsecondary education directly after high school. An analysis by Crockett et al. (2011) found that increasing GO Grants from \$2,000 to \$4,000, setting a target of meeting 55% of students’ need with aid, and reducing or eliminating GO Grants for students with total gift assistance higher than 55% would significantly increase retention rates without drastically increasing expenditures on the program.
- **Support student financial needs beyond tuition that make attendance and completion possible.** Louisiana’s current approach to state financial aid policy focuses on assistance for tuition, but tuition represents just a fraction of the total costs associated with pursuing postsecondary education. Meeting attainment and equity goals will require funding programs that support students’ other needs, including healthcare, childcare, transportation, and more. The CUNY Accelerated Study in Associates Program (ASAP) program is one potential model that provides students with a tuition waiver, as well as free textbooks and a prepaid card to cover transportation costs. Several evaluations have demonstrated the benefits of this approach on graduation rates (e.g., Scrivener et al., 2015).

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