

A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF FACTORS RELATED TO THE RECEIPT AND
RETENTION OF TOPS SCHOLARSHIPS IN LOUISIANA

A Dissertation

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by
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As I began this new journey into the “world of academia”, I could relate to one of my childhood stories of the Wizard of Oz, where I, too, mimicked several of its characters. Did I have the heart to commit to the long road ahead that would produce so many hours of stress and obstacles? Did I possess the brains to do scholarly work? And, finally, could the Wizard help me find the courage to accept criticism from peers and to change some of my traditional thinking? I remember now the words of my first mentor, retired LSU Chancellor Emeritus William “Bud” Davis, as he introduced our class to the Ph.D. program by reminding us that this “would open the door to the academic elite and welcome us into the 1% Club (only 1% of Americans attain the Ph.D. degree)”. He introduced me to a new way of thinking about the value of education in the USA. Because of his encouragement and my past experience as a State Legislator, I entered the Ph.D. program in Higher Education at LSU. My journey began in January 2000 and has lasted nearly nine years. The Wizard obviously granted me my wishes of heart, brains, and courage to sustain me throughout this long journey. But, he also gave me lots of other help as well. Many have shared this road of professional growth with me to help get me to this point in my life. It is impossible to recognize and properly thank all of them at this time.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine disparities in the receipt and retention of the TOPS scholarship in Louisiana. Specifically, the study examined why some schools are more successful than others in preparing students for TOPS eligibility, what impact availability of quality core curriculum courses has on TOPS eligibility, the ways the State can improve eligibility for lower income students, and the reasons why many lose their awards.

The research utilized a sequential mixed methods QUAN/QUAL approach with multiple levels of analysis (school, cohort, and student). Matched pairs of outlier schools (one with a high rate of TOPS receipt and one with a low rate) were compared using quantitative and qualitative measurements and analyses to answer the research questions.

Major findings included: the equitability of access to the TOPS scholarship is questionable; some schools serving lower income students do a better job of TOPS preparation than others; most of Louisiana's high schools offer the required TOPS core curriculum courses, but some mostly rural and small schools lack the materials and instructors necessary to offer these courses; and the State needs to promote the TOPS Tech Award as a positive alternative for high school graduates.

Recommendations from the study include: the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) should ensure that schools clearly communicate the TOPS core course requirements to all students and parents on an annual basis starting at the middle school level. BESE needs to guarantee that all high schools can offer the required core courses. BESE and the agency overseeing financial aid should assist school districts in sponsoring regular ACT exam preparatory workshops. The TOPS Tech

Award requires more focus. The Board of Regents should encourage universities and colleges to provide both merit-based and need-based scholarships to deserving students.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO FACTORS RELATED TO THE RECEIPT AND RETENTION OF TOPS SCHOLARSHIPS

Like many typical Louisiana families, Donna and her parents had started saving what extra money they could manage to put aside during her growing years to hopefully one day send her to college. They realized early on that they weren't going to provide enough to meet Donna's college financial obligations, but the only thing available to Z High students like her was the prestigious Taylor Plan, a competitive scholarship awarded to the top 5% of each graduating class. In terms of reality, that equated to 10 out of her class of 200 graduates at Z High. Donna had studied really hard throughout her high school years and even managed to make a respectable ACT college entrance score of 24 to complement her grade point average (GPA) of 3.2. Unfortunately, neither was competitive enough to obtain one of those Taylor scholarships. To make matters worse, her family was over-qualified to receive federal financial aid support.

Luckily for Donna and thousands of others like her in 1997, Louisiana created a merit-based scholarship program for its high school graduates to pursue college at an affordable price by awarding those who qualify for the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS). Like other ambitious new scholarship programs, TOPS has suffered through growing pains, although a former Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education claims that its degree of success is among the best in the USA in terms of providing financial aid to post-secondary students (Savoie, 2004).

Donna started Nursing School at Southeastern Louisiana University but soon experienced her first problem with TOPS. Though she was awarded TOPS, official notification was never received by the university because of "miscommunications"

between the university, her high school, and the TOPS state office. Completely unprepared for this inconvenience, her parents had only one course of action: go to the bank, borrow the tuition amount, and fund Donna's college until the confusion could be unraveled, which unfortunately would not be until the next semester. Committed to her studies and dreams of becoming a nurse, Donna began college like so many before her, in debt. It was during that first semester away from home that Donna's world came crashing down upon her when she was notified of her father's sudden death from a massive heart attack. She could not function much less study that semester nor the next semester as well. TOPS officials assured her that they would take care of her needs the next semester, but Donna and her mother ran out of both funds and confidence in the program. Donna found another avenue to provide for her college studies. She enlisted in the U.S. Army, which paid her to attend college.

Meanwhile, several years later, another student Lacey would encounter a different type of experience with TOPS while attending OG High. Lacey attended a small, rural, north Louisiana school where most of the students came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including herself. Going to college was limited to those who could afford it. So, receiving TOPS was clearly a blessing. She was instructed from as early as her middle school years about the requirements needed to receive TOPS, including the necessary core courses, GPA, and ACT score. While in high school, she scheduled and successfully passed all her courses accumulating a 4-year 3.5 GPA. In fact, Lacey took all available Honors core courses. Yet, she did not receive a TOPS scholarship. After doing so well academically in high school, what could have prevented her from accomplishing her TOPS goal?

She easily met the core course requirements and necessary GPA, but like others who struggle to score well on standardized tests, Lacey made a composite 19 on her ACT test, one point shy of the TOPS requirement. She took the ACT exam three times, scoring an 18, 18, and 19. Though she qualified for the TOPS Tech Award, it would not help her since she planned to major in Kinesiology, which is only offered at the university level. Discouraged financially, but determined to attend college, Lacey enrolled at her own expense through a combination of student loans and work programs at a local university. Her biggest disappointment, however, is to witness numerous former classmates who took easier courses than her, who made much lower GPAs than her, who received TOPS because they scored the required ACT score, and then lost TOPS their first or second semesters in college while she continues to pay her own way. Lacey is now in her sixth semester in college and has never fallen below a 3.0 GPA in any semester. If TOPS is a “reward” for hard work and academic success, why hasn’t she received it? If she has obviously proven her ability to succeed in college, how can one point needed on a standardized exam leave her and others like her wondering why TOPS is not for them? Shouldn’t there be some period of adjustment or academic probation made available for those students like Lacey who prove themselves academically worthy within their first year of college studies to receive TOPS?

Why are so many Louisiana college students losing TOPS? Equally important, why are so many Louisiana high school graduates not being awarded TOPS? What can be done to assist students in scheduling required core courses to attain TOPS? What impact does low income or ethnicity have on who receives or retains TOPS? Is the current TOPS program functioning as intended? To answer these pressing questions, one must first examine the evolution of the TOPS program.

General Issues Related to TOPS in Louisiana

The Evolution of TOPS in Louisiana

Wallace (1989) looked at the vision of Louisiana philanthropist Patrick Taylor, “Father of the Taylor Plan” scholarship (the predecessor of TOPS) for educating the needy of Louisiana. Struck by the reality that Louisiana’s poorest students, though capable of learning at the college level, would never get a chance to go to college due to financial need, Taylor was determined to provide an incentive to open the college doors for them. He motivated state leaders by personally applying his wealth towards providing college tuition, books, living expenses, and a small stipend to those from the New Orleans area who would graduate high school with a B or higher average. Four hundred graduates received assistance to make their dreams come true in the first year (1989–1990).

According to the Patrick Taylor Foundation, Mr. Taylor traveled over 250,000 miles across Louisiana and other states and applied the right mix of political pressure to convince numerous state legislatures to create the Taylor Plan, which would supply free state college tuition for kids with satisfactory achievement test scores, a 2.5 GPA, and a family income below \$25,000 (Taylor Foundation, 1988). By promising all students that their hard work in school would guarantee them the chance to go to college, regardless of financial circumstances, the Taylor Plan would motivate students to perform at their very best from kindergarten on. So effective was his concept that eight other states besides Louisiana adopted his program. Subsequently, Taylor claimed that school attendance, test scores, and grades improved while school problems reduced in those states. This innovative funding plan set the stage for what has now become TOPS in Louisiana, helping more worthy students than Taylor ever dreamed.

In 1997, at the urging of Patrick Taylor, the Louisiana Legislature eliminated from its TOPS scholarship the original Taylor Plan eligibility requirement of \$25,000 or below family income (Shuler, 2000). Merit-based TOPS replaced the need-based Taylor Plan. Starting with the fall 1998 incoming college freshman class, Louisiana's TOPS program established four goals:

1. To provide financial incentives as a reward for good academic performance
2. To promote academic success by requiring completion of a rigorous high school curriculum
3. To keep Louisiana's best and brightest in the state to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities
4. To promote access to postsecondary educational opportunities

These goals can be achieved through the awarding of one of four types of TOPS scholarships: Honors, Performance, and Opportunity awards for academic pursuit at either two-year or four-year Louisiana colleges or Tech awards for those who pursue non-academic programs at Louisiana Technical colleges. Each is based upon a defined high school core curriculum, a minimum high school GPA on the core curriculum, and a minimum ACT composite score (see Table 2.2 in Chapter 2).¹ Each award carries its own value and duration determined by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) as detailed in Table 2.3. In order to maintain eligibility, TOPS recipients must be continuously enrolled as full-time students, earn 24 hours of credit at the end of each academic year, and maintain a minimum cumulative GPA as detailed in Table 2.4 (LOSFA, 2004).

Since 2002, the Louisiana Department of Education (LDE), LOSFA, and the Board of Regents (BOR) through the Student Transcript System (STS) and the Statewide Student Profile System (SSPS) have collected annual student level data for all Louisiana high school students from both public and private high schools to determine academic eligibility for TOPS as well as the effectiveness of student preparation. Regents present the data in the order that follows the students' progression through the enrollment process from preparation, to persistence, to graduation. Success in the core curriculum will increase the student's chances of achieving the required ACT score and demonstrate the student's potential for success at the postsecondary level. This is demonstrated in Table 2.5 and is based on data from the 2003 and 2004 high school graduating classes. These data indicate that students who take the core curriculum score significantly better on the ACT than those who take less than the core, and those who met TOPS requirements have the higher ACT average. There is recent evidence that more Louisiana high school students are taking the core courses and becoming TOPS eligible even though there are fewer graduates as detailed in Table 2.6.

The TOPS awards recipients of the 2003 college entering class illustrate an interesting summary as detailed in Table 2.7. These data indicate that of the 2003 entering class, the vast majority enrolled with an Opportunity TOPS Award at a public, four-year institution. Additional data provided by LOSFA indicate that since the inception of TOPS 9.6% more Louisiana full-time freshmen (FTF) have remained in Louisiana to attend college and 15.6% more have received TOPS as displayed in Table 2.8.

¹ Chapter 1 contains several references to data generated by LOSFA and presented in more detail in Chapter 2. The reader is encouraged to refer to these tables if he/she wants additional information regarding these trends in TOPS data.

Disparities in the Receipt of TOPS Scholarships

Many question if the original intent to reach Louisiana's most needy students is being accomplished with TOPS. Middle-income and relatively wealthy students receive most of the \$125 million a year that taxpayers spend on TOPS (Fender; April, 21, 2005). The richest fifth of Louisiana students get two-fifths of the scholarship annually. The poorest half of the state's population gets less than one-fourth of TOPS. The TOPS program is a big benefit to wealthy students who can already afford to attend college.

On the other hand, LOSFA (Guinn, 2003) suggests that too many of the state's poor do not qualify for TOPS for several reasons, including the following:

- Education officials blame poor public high school preparation with uncertified teachers.
- Guidance counselors blame the state for not providing poor schools with the necessary resources such as computer hardware, fine arts and foreign language teachers to meet TOPS core course requirements.
- Rural schools complain about not being able to provide enough core courses.
- Overwhelmed guidance counselors often are unable to disseminate TOPS scholarship information to meet state application deadlines.
- Students complain that many of their parents are uninterested in assisting them with the process.

With few exceptions, the schools in Louisiana that produce the fewest TOPS eligible students are poor and Black. Where over two-thirds of Louisiana's private high schools can boast of their graduates being awarded TOPS, less than half of the public schools can do the same. Poverty best defines who receives TOPS in Louisiana. Eighteen percent of Louisiana is wealthy; they receive 40% of TOPS awards. Thirty-one percent are middle-

income; they receive 67% of TOPS awards. Fifty-one percent of Louisiana is poor; they receive 23% of TOPS awards (Savoie, 2004). While the vast majority of TOPS recipients attend majority White colleges, only 1% of TOPS awards end up at the state's largest Historically Black University, Southern University (Fender, 2005). Many Black students miss out on TOPS because of low ACT scores and required foreign language courses (Reed, 2005). Nevertheless, every attempt by Black legislators and university officials to reduce the requirements to allow more minority awards has met with failure. Legislators cite an already over inflated budget and a lack of necessary funds to expand TOPS. Despite the availability of TOPS, the state recently received a grade of F for affordability in a recent study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education titled "Measuring Up" (See Appendix N). The report notes that poor and working-class families devote 14 percent of their income to pay for the costs of a four-year college education.

Issues in the Retention of TOPS Scholarships

Despite merit-based scholarships being awarded across the country, an alarming phenomenon exists with regard to these programs. A 2001 report to the Louisiana Board of Regents (BOR) acknowledged that many of these recipients are either quitting college within their first two semesters or losing their scholarships (Savoie, 2001). Making higher education available and accessible to Louisiana students isn't the real problem. Retaining them once they begin is. As J.S. (2001) suggests, "Admissions standards are not just about getting into college; they're about succeeding once you are there. It is extremely important that students be appropriately prepared so that they can succeed in college (p. 2)."

Even though the LDE Parish/High School Report of 2003 recorded that 89.9% of those eligible for TOPS enrolled at a public postsecondary institution, many are still losing the scholarship shortly after enrolling. LOSFA reports that nearly a third of those college students who start on TOPS lose the scholarship within a year (Fender; April 21, 2005). The good news is that more of Louisiana's students are choosing to remain in the state to attend school as detailed in Table 2.9. Unfortunately, this does not include many National Merit Scholars who continue to leave the state in large numbers. Nearly half attend out-of-state universities (Savoie, 2004).

During the past few years Louisiana has witnessed improvements in academics, yet the state currently ranks 49th in the country in higher education as reported by the (2008) National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (See Appendix N). The report ranked Louisiana among the poorest-performing states in high school preparation and completion. On the other hand, college officials note more high-quality students attending their schools, especially at Louisiana State University (LSU) and University of Louisiana (UL) colleges. LOSFA reported that retention rates for first-time freshmen were up from 64.8% in fall 1993 to 67.2% in fall 1998. Meanwhile, during this same period of time, remediation of these students fell from 49.7% to 45.3%. Persistence in postsecondary education is usually measured by the rate in which first time full-time students are retained to their second year. Prior to TOPS in 1998, that rate was 71.3%. By 2003, that rate had grown to 76%. Table 2.10 displays an overall trend of persistence of those with TOPS versus those without TOPS, clearly indicating that students who receive TOPS are retained in subsequent years at a much higher rate than non-TOPS recipients. The National Center supports this success through their recent findings (See Appendix N), giving Louisiana its highest scores in the area of completion. The study

concluded that the state has improved in awarding certificates and degrees relative to the number of students enrolled. Unfortunately, the majority of students take five to six years to graduate, and TOPS is only good for four years.

Though higher education officials are excited about the increase in TOPS recipients, they continue to question why a noticeable number of these same students are not retaining their awards. Data contained in Table 2.11 reflect this concern. Nationally, this same trend is also apparent where 25.9% of enrolling freshmen in 1997 did not return to college compared to 27% in 1994 (Sanders & Henson, 2000). As of this time, members of the BOR admit they are unable to draw any definitive conclusions from the data presented in Chapter 2 (Savoie, 2004). The reasons why this dissertation is necessary are to help clarify this TOPS data in a scholarly manner and hopefully assist higher education officials and state policymakers to improve the TOPS program for future students.

Tinto (1997) reminds us that many college entering freshmen start college with only a vague notion of why they have done so. TOPS rewards haven't necessarily caused students to study harder once enrolled in college. Many view the scholarship as a "free ride" or an inexpensive way to enjoy the college life. Because it's given to them, many don't take it seriously. Many opt out of challenging courses to protect their GPAs and end up taking the wrong courses or not enough hours to retain TOPS. As this dissertation progresses, the study will explore how this philosophy directly affects those who succeed versus those who fail or resign from college due to hardships.

Purpose Statement

As merit-based scholarships such as TOPS supplement former need-based financial aid programs, the doors of higher education institutions are opening for more graduating high school seniors through current access to available tuition-assistance college

education. Unfortunately, a significant number of these graduates are either not qualifying for these scholarships or terminating their financed educational paths barely after they have begun. Exploring why these phenomena (disparities in the receipt and retention of merit scholarships) exist is the focus of this mixed method, multiple-case study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Yin, 2003).

Further, this study will increase the knowledge of Louisiana's TOPS program by building on previous, though limited, research on the impact of race and socio-economic background on the rates of receipt and retention of this merit scholarship (Smothers, 2004 & Reed, 2005). This research has the potential to impact both legislative and higher education public policy regarding future actions towards improving access to TOPS. Since Louisiana currently budgets \$135 million annually to distribute TOPS to its recipients' choices of Louisiana public and private universities, community colleges, and technical colleges, many have a vested interest in how this public funding is serving the needs of the state and those who are its recipients. Equally, however, this research set out to determine why many who seek a college education in Louisiana are not receiving any of this money. As Louisiana continues to struggle economically, programs like TOPS provide the financial means for future generations to secure a productive future. Many young people who might otherwise not be able to attend college because of inadequate personal funds will be provided a postsecondary education.

In studying the current TOPS program, the researcher assumed similar characteristics exist as in the Reed study (2005):

1. Louisiana's high school students are aware of the TOPS scholarship and the requirements to obtain one.

2. Louisiana's high school students perceive there is a value to obtaining a TOPS scholarship and, consequently, work hard to meet the requirements.
3. Required core courses for TOPS eligibility are available in all Louisiana high schools.
4. All Louisiana high school students are adequately prepared to take the ACT exam, which is required to receive TOPS.

Research Questions

Yin (2003) suggests that defining the research questions is probably the most important step taken in a research study. This research study will explore and explain:

- 1) Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools (i.e., in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students)?
- 2) What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?
- 3) How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award?
- 4) What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose the scholarship after entering college?

Definitions of Terms Used

For the purpose of identification and understanding of key terms used throughout this research document, the following definitions by the author are provided.

Access: The ability of a student to attend college full-time immediately following high school graduation without excessive work and loan burdens.

Dependent student: College-bound students whose parents are responsible for their college expenses.

Grants: Grants are financial assistance that does not have to be repaid.

Independent student: College-bound students who are responsible for their own college expenses, without parental support.

Need-based scholarships: Scholarships awarded to students based on his/her demonstrated financial need, which is calculated through a review of family income and assets.

Race: Due to the low representation of other minority groups enrolled in Louisiana's high schools, race will be measured as White or Black students.

Receipt: Refers to the process and requirements needed to earn the TOPS award.

Retention: Refers to those students who have fulfilled the requirements to receive a TOPS scholarship but lost it after enrolling in a post secondary institution.

TOPS: TOPS (Taylor Opportunity Program for Students) is Louisiana's merit-based scholarship program.

TOPS student: A TOPS student is a Louisiana high school graduate who has been awarded TOPS after meeting the requirements for eligibility, which include a designated ACT composite score (currently 20), completion of a specific college-preparatory courses, and achievement of a certain high school grade point average.

Summary

Forty-three years ago, with the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the federal government set out to ensure all Americans the opportunity to attend a public college of their choice regardless of race or economic status. Despite these efforts, 23%

of minorities and low-income students attend institutions of higher education and continue to lag behind the 77% of middle and upper income level students (Heller, 2004). The Louisiana TOPS scholarship has attempted to narrow that gap. Legislators and policymakers continue to grapple with the success of the program while so many of its recipients continue to lose it and a noticeable percentage of minority students do not receive TOPS.

In a November 2004 report to the Louisiana Legislature, the Commissioner of Higher Education stated that TOPS had a markedly positive impact on the overall level of student preparation in high school as well as students' ability both to attend and to succeed in college. Table 2.12 indicates an average of 21% of entering Louisiana freshmen with TOPS graduate with their degrees within four years as compared to an average of 7% for non-TOPS students.

If TOPS appears to be such a positive influence on Louisiana's secondary and higher education, then why are many policymakers, educators, and students critical of the program? Despite its apparent successes thus far, TOPS has little or no value for many Louisiana high school and college students. While an increasing number of Louisiana high school graduates continue to receive TOPS awards, a considerable number also continue to lose the scholarship within their first two years. This research seeks to uncover the reasons for the low receipt and retention rates for TOPS for many of the state's students and to perhaps provide some tentative solutions for addressing these issues.

This research is not only needed, but also encouraged, by Louisiana higher education officials and educators who collectively seek to improve the TOPS program. Scholars need this research because minimal literature and studies about merit-based scholarships

currently exist and too many questions remain unanswered. This research will attempt to do just that.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Literature Review

Chapter 2 presents extensive research literature on this subject, while Chapter 3 explains the methods employed to scientifically measure and answer the research questions. Basing the research questions in this study on the existing literature will be challenging, since only two dissertations and small, but growing, numbers of quantitative reports from state offices currently exist. Other than the two dissertations on the subject of TOPS (Smothers, 2004 & Reed, 2005), very little literature addresses TOPS. There is an obvious need for qualitatively oriented studies that can explain why certain undesirable trends in the TOPS quantitative data exist and what can be done about that.

Chapter 2 is divided into the following six parts:

- 1) Introduction to the Literature Review,
- 2) Merit Scholarships,
- 3) Issues Related to the Receipt of Merit Scholarships and Minority Concerns,
- 4) Issues Related to the Retention of Merit Scholarships and Minority Concerns,
- 5) Further Details Regarding TOPS,
- 6) Summary

While little specific literature about TOPS exists, there is a significant amount of literature about the three general issues under investigation in this study: merit scholarships (of which TOPS is an example), minority concerns over the lack of merit-based scholarships within the Black population, and student retention, which has become a major concern of the TOPS program. These more general literature sources guided the development of the research questions. For example, reviewing literature related to

Georgia's Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) program (a predecessor of TOPS) revealed characteristics similar to those of TOPS and provided direction on how to approach the study of the TOPS scholarship.

The remainder of this chapter will examine four distinct areas of literature related to the research questions under investigation. The second section of review (following this introduction), Merit Scholarships, explores scholarly works that define the use of merit-based over need-based scholarships and the reasons for the rising popularity of these new scholarships as well as some of the concerns that have emerged as these programs have been implemented.

The third section of literature review, Receipt of Merit Scholarships and Minority Concerns, describes some of the pressing concerns and debate among Black educators, scholars, and policymakers over the lack of minority recipients of these merit-based scholarships. The literature questions the legitimacy of these programs in comparison to past need-based scholarships that realistically helped minorities attend college. The literature addresses the supposition of reducing academic standards to include more minorities in merit-based programs.

The fourth area of review, Retention of Merit Scholarships and Minority Concerns, is a crucial research strand since so many recipients forfeit their scholarships in the early stages of their postsecondary careers. Finding new methods to help college students retain their scholarships would ultimately enhance the cost-benefit ratio of programs such as TOPS. This has become a major concern of Louisiana lawmakers as they continue to grapple with the rising costs of participation and retention relevant to TOPS. Hopefully, this study will provide some answers to the retention problem faced by the state legislature and the BOR.

The fifth area of review, Further Details Regarding TOPS, presents 11 tables that detail recent trends in TOPS broken down by important categories. This helps set the stage for the research study that is proposed in this document.

Merit Scholarship Programs

Sanders and Henson (2000) reported in their study that nationwide college enrollment rate was 34% in 1986, as compared to 44% in 1996. These data indicate that more students are preparing for college than ever before. Greater expenses accompany these enrollment increases: high-tech equipment, more faculty members, higher costs for books and materials, larger dorms, labs, and classrooms, more expensive food service, and greater need for financial aid and merit scholarships. In 1996-97, institutional aid topped \$4 billion (Sanders & Henson, 2000). Overall, more states are turning away from need-based and toward merit-based scholarships as most states continue to increase their student aid. In the future, merit scholarships will be in even more demand and will become a device to shape the composition of incoming classes. Sanders and Henson (2000) conclude that the marketplace dictates that high school performance and standardized tests scores on the SAT/ACT will significantly drive the financial aid process.

Sanders and Henson (2000) predict that by the year 2010 taxpayers' support for funding college education, as an investment in human capital, will be as strong as it is today. The need for financial aid, including merit-based scholarships, will increase as will the predicted population of college students enrolled by the year 2010. Projections are that by then American college student enrollment will have topped 16,000,000. Sanders and Henson (2000) predict that the number of high school graduates will

increase 26% from the national class of 1996 (2.5 million) to that of year 2008 (3.2 million).

Merit-based scholarships have rapidly replaced need-based scholarships, primarily in the South. Sixteen merit-based scholarship programs now exist across the USA, which is a testament to the increasing popularity of these programs. All have experienced growing problems related to inadequate funding. Most attempts to tighten the application process have met with public disapproval, due to the public’s increased demand for financial aid for their college-bound students. Table 2.1 describes how these programs were created and funded.

Table 2.1: Details Regarding Merit-Based Scholarships: States, Award Programs, Year Established, and Funding Sources

State	Award Program	Year Instituted	Source of Funds
Alaska	University of Alaska Scholars Award	1999	Land Sales and Leases
Arkansas	Academic Challenge Scholarship (ACS)	1991	General Funds
Florida	Bright Futures Scholarship	1997	Lottery
Georgia	Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE)	1993	Lottery

Kentucky	Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES)	1999	Lottery
Louisiana	Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)	1997	General Funds and Tobacco Legal Settlement
Massachusetts	John and Abigail Adams Scholarship Program	2005	General Funds
Michigan	Michigan Merit Award Program (MEAP)	2000	Tobacco Legal Settlement
Mississippi	Mississippi Eminent Scholars Grant (MESG)	1996	General Funds
Missouri	Bright Flight Scholarship	1997	General Funds
Nevada	Millennium Scholarship	2000	Tobacco Legal Settlement
New Mexico	Lottery Success Scholarship	1997	Lottery

“(table continued)”

South Carolina	Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence (LIFE)	1998	General Funds
Tennessee	Education Lottery Scholarship Program	2004	Lottery
Washington	Promise Scholarship	1999	General Funds
West Virginia	Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence Scholarship (PROMISE)	2002	Lottery and Amusement Devices Taxes

Collectively, these states spend over \$700 million on these scholarship programs annually in support of over 300,000 college students (Selingo, 2001). Ten of the sixteen programs in Table 3.1 are over ten years old. Additionally, Alabama and Maryland are pushing for similar proposals to make college more affordable for their college students based on the HOPE model (Selingo, 2004).

Two major issues have arisen related to merit scholarships: (1) do these awards actually raise academic standards, or do they simply allow more mediocre students to receive a cheap education, and (2) are middle-class Americans increasingly demanding these costly scholarships and, if so, what may be the long-term result of that trend (Heller, 2002)? College leaders and lawmakers are further concerned that the awards

may be helping those least in need, namely high-achieving students from well-off families. To meet the needs of many lower income students, officials have reduced academic standards so they can take advantage of the programs.

Nationwide, few substantive changes have been made to merit-based scholarship programs once they are established. Like Louisiana, other states resist efforts to tighten eligibility for merit scholarships (Selingo, 1999). Following the renewal of Florida's \$120 million scholarship program, it was discovered that 10% of recipients at its public universities took remedial classes. Raising the required SAT score to assure that the brightest students receive the scholarships met with disapproval by Florida lawmakers representing minorities who traditionally score lower on the SAT. Likewise, other states have tried to tighten requirements because of funding shortages, but have met with similar resistance. In New Mexico, legislators attempted to skim lottery proceeds marked for K-12 public schools to transfer into their college scholarship program, an idea that failed (Selingo, 1999). In South Carolina, an attempt was made to lower the SAT requirement for its merit scholarship program to benefit more minority students. It too failed.

A 2000 report by the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs showed that 1998-1999 state spending on college student aid rose nationwide about 8.8% primarily due to the robust growth of merit-based scholarship programs. States spent about \$718 million in 1998-1999 on these scholarships, an increase of nearly \$115 million over the years of 1997-1998 (NASSAGAP, 2000). States who still distribute need-based scholarships and grants rely heavily upon federal dollars; whereas, states granting merit-based scholarships rely on funding generated by lotteries or tobacco settlements. Louisiana voters approved a measure in 1999 that sets aside a part of a \$4.6

billion tobacco settlement for a permanent fund to support TOPS. Of the \$4.6 billion settlement, \$1.2 billion is reserved exclusively for TOPS. Seventy percent of Louisiana voters approved the measure in a display of overwhelming support for the TOPS program (Gose, 1999).

A recently conducted national higher education study ranked Louisiana third among all states in providing access to its public colleges and universities (Dyer, 2001). The report concluded that Louisiana's college affordability is significantly below the national average, making Louisiana's colleges more accessible to lower and middle-income families. In a 2001 report to the BOR, the goals of higher education in Louisiana were expressed this way:

TOPS is about providing greater access through student success. This is not a plan designed to lock students out of the system, but to make clear expectations early on to ensure that students have the resources to meet their full potential (p. 6).

Critics (Dyer, 2001) have argued that TOPS was not assisting technical college students who traditionally score lower on the ACT than the original TOPS cut-off score of 19. Whereas over 36,000 four-year college students had received a TOPS scholarship by 1999, only 91 Louisiana technical college students had done so by that time (Dyer, 2001). To address this issue, the Louisiana Legislature approved a law reducing ACT scores to 17 for Tech TOPS scholarships, but did nothing for those attending community colleges. Subsequently, community college leaders also succeeded in reducing the required ACT scores for TOPS to assist primarily minority students who need financial assistance to attend their campuses, and who cannot meet the current academic or financial requirements of Louisiana's four-year institutions. Consequently, a wave of

academically unprepared college students and spiraling costs were the results (Shuler, 2001).

Issues Related to the Receipt of Merit Scholarships

Minority Concerns

One of the arguments against merit-based scholarships like Georgia's HOPE (Dee & Jackson, 1999) and Louisiana's TOPS is that they do little to address retention problems. The creation of the HOPE scholarship program came about after the voters of Georgia initiated a state lottery in 1992. It provides Georgia high school graduates who maintain a B average free tuition at the state's public colleges. In the 1996-1997 school year 124,000 eligible students were supplied with \$159 million for educational needs from the lottery proceeds. Because HOPE requires a student to maintain a B average, half of its scholars lose financial support after their freshmen year.

Dee and Jackson's (1999) study of attrition in the HOPE program determined that (1) no dramatic differences exist among HOPE recipients based on race or ethnicity, (2) there is a strong relationship between attrition and measures of student ability affected by socioeconomic background. Most HOPE recipients are White middle class to higher income students who are less in need of financial aid. Observable differences in retention of HOPE scholarships were not based on race but on student choice of course work. Critics of the HOPE program are quick to note that although significant increases in Black college enrollment has been evident in their state's four-year institutions, access has not increased in postsecondary education overall (Wright, 2001). Whereas four-year universities witnessed a 24% minority increase in enrollment over the first five years of HOPE, a 34% decrease was simultaneously observed in surrounding Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Though its recipients are more likely to be female, White, and attend Georgia's two major universities, HOPE doubled diverse student populations, primarily Blacks at Georgia campuses over the first ten years of its existence (Dee & Jackson, 1999). During that time, over \$333 million (primarily funded by Georgia's state lottery) has assisted 238,000 college students. Since 1997, HOPE has become a role model for other states as well as the basis for a proposed nationwide scholarship by former President Bill Clinton. Healy (1997) suggests that HOPE has funded half of the University of Georgia's undergraduates' tuition and fees, raised university admission standards, and retained the state's better students who traditionally attend out-of-state colleges. That number increased from 23% before HOPE to 76% since its creation (Healy, 1997).

Kim Hunter Reed (2005) discovered similar findings about Louisiana's TOPS program as she analyzed the clientele who received that scholarship. She determined that TOPS has a positive social construction for those who achieve the scholarship, but that usually equates to students from families who earn over \$60,000 income a year. Reed also concluded that TOPS had a negative initial impact on low-income student enrollment while the gap between White and Black participants is closing, becoming more race-neutral each year. As a result of her study, Reed recommended that the state of Louisiana invest significantly in need-based college financial assistance to its low-income students.

Professor Michael Olivas (1986) of the University of Houston suggests that, "Almost any need-based college scholarship program is going to help minority students in the post-secondary system. The problem is trying to get the necessary information to those students." This tends to hurt members of the Black and Hispanic populations more than anyone else because they are typically first generation college students within their families. Often minority students go to college without information needed to obtain

scholarships, because their families have no knowledge of the system and high school guidance counselors are unavailable to provide needed direction. Professor Olivas (1986) also reminded his readers that the costs of attending college often exceed the annual wages of many minority families. Additionally, students from lower income families have a hard time affording the start-up costs of college, which includes application fees, testing and transcript fees, and form preparation expenses before they ever receive scholarships. Colleges and universities need to do more to recruit minorities and lower income students by putting together financial packages and completing forms and applications for scholarships such as TOPS.

St. John, Andrieu, Oescher, and Starkey (1994) discovered that the largest increase in minority college student enrollment took place during the 1970s, but Black enrollment dropped beginning in 1992, according to an American Council on Education (ACE, 1993) report. In 1992, 80% Blacks and 64% Hispanics earned high school diplomas, but only 33% of these attended college, and only 12% received bachelor's degrees. Blacks graduated at less than half the rate of White students. High school graduation rates for Blacks improved by 30% over the last twenty years, but Black college entrance rates increased by just 18%. Further, only a 1% gain in bachelor's degrees for Blacks was recorded during that time period (ACE, 1993).

Dr. Clinita Ford (1994), Professor at Florida A&M and Director of the National Retention Center reported,

More than 2/3 of Black students and 60% of Hispanics entering Division I schools in 1987 dropped out before graduating. More personal and better-run retention programs are drastically needed on our campuses. Institutions waited so long to

do something about retention because there was nothing to push them into it (p. 3).

Dr. Ford (1994) continued, “Expectations have traditionally been so low, that minority students are expected to drop out at higher rates, but 50% of White students drop as well, which shows a general inclination of higher education institutions to accept inefficiency.”

Issues Related to the Retention of Merit Scholarships

Because student retention is one of the most challenging problems facing higher education today, universities have been looking at what they can do to improve areas of financial aid, motivation, student needs, study skills, and student satisfaction (factors that most affect retention). Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) were among the first to conduct empirical research on the subject of college student retention and what causes so many students to dropout. They examined the “freshman myth”, in which first year students typically anticipate more positives from the college environment than is subsequently realized. Study findings were similar for all institutions of higher education (e.g., small or large, public or private, community colleges, military academies, and Ivy League universities), regardless of location. It happens to all types of individuals (e.g., males and females, public or private high school grads, regardless of ACT/SAT scores). The most significant change in college life expectations occur during the first year of enrollment.

Factors affecting student comments regarding the freshman myth include:

1. Participation in campus activities or attainment of campus leadership positions
2. Academic performance in college
3. Frequency of change of major
4. Attrition rates

The results from Baker, et al. (1985) indicated that students expect more from a college than they see themselves actually receiving, and that they also expect more from themselves than they actually accomplish. Results also showed that the sooner campus officials/faculty engage with students the lower the attrition of undergraduate freshmen and sophomores.

DesJardins, Ahlberg, and McCall (1999) conducted a unique study that employed an economic technique known as event history modeling to pinpoint the critical times at which students are at risk of leaving college before degree completion. It assists education officials in developing more efficient intervention strategies to reach potential dropouts. It is a well-known fact that when a student leaves college before degree completion, costs are imposed upon society, the government, the college, and the student as documented in educational research literature (Cabrera, 1992).

Higher unemployment, greater dependency on government financial assistance, higher rates of incarceration, and anti-social behavior are all negative consequences attributable to the college dropout issue. High college dropout rates are considered by government oversight agencies and the general public to be a sign of institutional failure.

DesJardins, et al. (1999) looked at student persistence using the Spady/Tinto Student Integration Model (1971, 1988) and the Bean/Price Student Attrition Model (1983, 1977). They researched the predictive validity of pre-college variables related to student academic and institutional commitments, as well as the intent to remain enrolled or to depart from college. The goal of this longitudinal study conducted at the University of Minnesota starting in 1986 was to describe and explain a more exact timing of student departure from college. This empirical study examined the difference between a college dropout, who permanently leaves school and a stop-out, who leaves school but returns

after a semester or two. Research has shown students with disabilities, or whom live a farther distance away from home, are a higher risk to leave college before graduation. Pre-college variables such as ACT scores and high school rank percentile were also studied to determine their effect on student persistence. The results of the study showed that Asian students are least likely to dropout, followed in order by White students, Hispanics, and Blacks. Males are more likely to dropout than females, with or without financial assistance. Obviously, those with better grades persist longer. Scholarship-awarded students appear to dropout less but not by a significant number. The DesJardins, et al. (1999) study concluded there is no “general theory” of student departure from college.

Monitoring grades early in a student’s academic career appears to be an effective retention strategy according to the DesJardins (1999) research. Scholarships had little impact on freshmen retention, but the authors recommend more study be done in this area, since only one previous study (Moline, 1987) was conducted prior to 1999. As predictors of retention, the DesJardins, et al. (1999) study measured the following variables (similar to other studies), all of which have varying degrees of influence on college freshmen’s decisions to stay in school:

1. Student background characteristics of gender, race, ability, birth order, work experience, and marital status
2. Demographics of students’ families social class
3. Student activities and achievement in high school
4. College characteristics of size, cost, location, and heterogeneity of student body

5. Student college curricular and extracurricular experiences including contact with faculty, campus organizations, residence on-versus off-campus, numbers and types of courses pursued, academic majors, grades, and student relationships

Research findings from a Tinto study on student persistence within the classroom suggest that academic ability and achievements have positive effects on persistence; social influences by parents, peers, and teachers are significant; and undergraduates are more responsible for their own outcomes by individual attitude. Self-labels, or self-concept, assigned to students by themselves also affect retention. Normative expectations of parents, friends, and teachers affect students' decisions to leave or remain at a particular university (Tinto, 1997). Tinto discovered that obtaining what he called "social hopes", or making new friends, is the strongest reason many students give for attending college followed by academic hopes to achieve a career goal. Students had the least concern about finances, or having enough money to make it through college, which could partially explain why TOPS scholarships and other merit aid programs have difficulty retaining students in college.

Grades definitely predict persistence, as do commitment to obtaining a degree and loyalty to one's institution. Tinto (1997) suggests that memberships in external communities are crucial to departure decisions, particularly for commuter students. Though students often react according to the values, encouragement, and pressures of significant others (i.e., parents, friends, teachers), Tinto also found that it is personal commitment, (or the lack thereof), that erodes good intentions to remain in school. According to Bank, Biddle, and Slavings (1992) grades are associated with shifts in

intention to stay at a particular college. Obviously, lower grades are associated with a greater likelihood of departure.

Cambiano, Denny, and DeVore (2000) conducted a study to ascertain whether GPA, the American College Testing Score (ACT), gender, and age are predictors of college student retention at a mid-size, public, doctoral university in the central United States. The freshman class consisted of 2,499 students (52% males and 48% females). 55% of the population dropped out before obtaining an undergraduate degree. This research study concluded that high school GPAs and ACT scores are significant predictors of retention and that students over 20 years of age had a significant drop out rate during the first three semesters of enrollment. There was also a significant drop out rate for females who did not graduate by the fourth year.

There have been several studies of retention by prominent researchers in higher education. One leading researcher, Tinto (1997), stressed the importance of academic integration (academic performance) and social integration (participation in college life) in predicting retention in a university setting. Tinto asserted that departures from university settings in many cases are voluntary, rather than the result of academic difficulties. According to Tinto, “The absence of integration into the college or university community arises from two sources: incongruence and isolation.” He defines “incongruence” as a state in which individuals feel that they are at odds with the institution and “isolation” as a state in which students find themselves disconnected from the institution. Both of these are key factors that may lead students to drop out of their undergraduate programs. Past literature indicate that students drop out of universities for a variety of personal, social, and financial reasons. It is imperative for an institution to follow entering freshmen

throughout their academic career, to understand issues of retention and help students to remain in school (Baker et al, 1985).

Most of the students who remain in college have higher GPAs than the students who drop out. Kalsner (1991) suggests those students with low secondary school GPAs are at the greatest risk of attrition and are considered at-risk students for institutions. Kalsner's analysis supports the theory that the higher the high school GPAs of entering freshmen, the longer they stay on track toward graduation. Freshmen entering the university with a GPA of less than 2.5 were determined to be at-risk. Data also indicated that the higher the ACT score of entering freshman, the longer they remained on track toward a university degree.

Kalsner's (1991) literature review indicated that McNeely (1938) reported that the overall loss of students before graduation was 45 percent in 1937. The extremely high attrition rates during the freshman year underscore the difficulties students face in making the adjustment to college life and in patterns of matriculation. Over the past 70 years, attrition rates have been static: only about 40% of all students graduate from the college they enter as freshmen.

A review of the current literature on college attrition (Tinto, 1997) reveals four recurring themes:

- 1) uncertainty both about what to expect from college and its rewards;
- 2) transition/adjustment problems;
- 3) financial difficulties; and
- 4) academic under preparation.

A poor choice of college is the primary cause of departure for at least 20% of those who transfer (Tinto, 1997). Three out of four entering freshmen experience some form of

uncertainty about their career choice (Baker et al, 1985). College counselors ranked “indecision about major/career goals” among the top three causes of dropout. The research does suggest that the higher one’s occupational or educational goals, the greater the likelihood of degree completion (Tinto, 1997). Parental values and attitudes toward higher education also play an important role in students’ commitment to degree completion. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may feel no peer pressure to attend college and have relatively fewer educated people with whom to identify.

The availability of grants appears to be significantly related to student persistence. Students who received grants in their first year of study were more likely to remain enrolled than students without grants, according to 1991 data (Cabrera, 1992). Specifically, 90 percent of students who received a grant during the first year of college were still enrolled in the second semester.

Another study by the Council for School Performance (Towns, 1997) reports that Georgia students are motivated by the possibility of receiving a HOPE scholarship to learn more, improve grades, and finish school. The recipients are more likely to stay in college and have higher grades than average. Georgia officials credit HOPE with improving retention and graduation rates at both secondary and college levels as well as providing new opportunities to nontraditional students such as single parents, older students, and working mothers to complete their studies

Allen’s (1999) research suggests that student retention is often based upon goal commitment. Goal commitment is usually based upon four constructs: motivation, student background, academic performance, and persistence. “Desire” may be a significant missing link for marginal performers (Allen, 1999). After conducting this empirical study, Allen suggested an on-going concern on the part of the scholarly

community is that little research had been done in the areas of motivation and persistence as factors of student retention. The study targeted the dropout rates of various ethnic groups and established a ranking consistent with previous studies, that being highest in order of retention: Asian, White, Hispanic, Black, and Native American. Because student retention is one of the most challenging problems facing higher education today, universities have been looking at what they can do to improve the areas of financial aid, student goals and needs, motivation, study skills, and student satisfaction (factors that most affect retention).

Tinto (1997) suggests that colleges should provide students with time for and help in thinking through the kinds of majors and careers that they are suited for. Career counseling and mentoring relationships should be initiated during the freshman year and should continue throughout the college experience. The greater students are involved or integrated in the life of a college, the greater the likelihood they will persist. The more contact a student has with faculty and knowledge acquisition, the better the chances are that he/she will persist in school. Tinto's (1997) longitudinal survey and qualitative case study measured the significant impact that shared learning communities and support peer groups have on bridging the academic-social divide and their role in the retention of students. Nevertheless, little additional research has been conducted on the effect the classroom as a collaborative learning community has on student persistence.

Manzo (1994) and Reed (2005) argued that overall persistence rates discrepancies between minorities and Whites were primarily due to differences in their academic preparedness, rather than differences in socioeconomic backgrounds. On the other hand, Nora and Cabrera (1996) reported that lower academic preparedness does not have a greater effect on minorities than it does Whites: ill-prepared students tend to drop out,

regardless of ethnicity. Contrary to Tinto's (1997) findings that minorities drop out more because of being less prepared academically in high school than Whites, Allen (1999) discovered that in fact no such significant difference exists between minorities and Whites. Thus, the relationship between lower persistence rates and minority student status is contradictory.

Having a retention steering or advisory committee is another integral aspect of promoting retention, especially for minority students (Okun, Benin, & Williams, 1996). According to their study on staying in college (Okun et al, 1996), the strategies used most often by institutions to overcome retention problems were:

- the creation of positions dedicated to handling retention activities on campus;
- the recognition of the need for additional funding sources
- the establishment of mentor programs for minority students – programs which have helped minorities see successful students and staff who can show them a path to success, and which give them the confidence and support they need;
- the development of a reporting system for identification and tracking so that institutions can have accurate data, and data processing capabilities, on the different facets of their programs.

Manzo (1994) concluded that students with no prior family college background would struggle on their own upon entering college for the first time. This conclusion came from a report on minority retention rates during college, particularly with regard to those students from a lower-income background. However, contrary to this assertion, Dillard University of New Orleans, a predominantly Black University, reported that only 33 of 1,500 entering freshmen failed in 2001 class (Dyer, 2001). Officials at Dillard insist that the reason for such a low percentage of failure among first year students is

because of the success of its freshmen year weekly tracking program where all are assigned to labs for subjects they find difficult.

Further Details Regarding TOPS

The TOPS scholarship was introduced in Chapter 1 in general, while the following section provides more details, especially regarding recent trends in the quantitative data associated with the program. While quantitative data are very valuable, they do not capture the specific processes associated with participating in the TOPS program from the students' perspective. The research proposed in this document will provide qualitative, process-oriented information that will help program administrators and others understand what is actually happening with regard to the receipt and retention of TOPS scholarships.

A Noel-Levitz Master Plan Study (Savoie, 2001), reported the following facts about Louisiana's population:

1. 63% of recent high school grads are White, 27% are Black, 2% are Asian Americans, Hispanics are 2%, and American Indians are at 1%.
2. 28,452 or 77% of incoming college freshmen expressed a need for financial aid.
3. Tuition has remained stable for the past three years averaging \$1,340 per year at two-year colleges compared to \$2,192 per year at four-year universities.
4. Minority students account for 36.7% of enrollment at public colleges.

The ACT scores and GPAs required in Louisiana to receive the TOPS scholarships are lower than many other states' requirements. Whereas most states that award scholarships require a 21 or higher ACT and a B or higher average, Louisiana only

required a 19 ACT and a C average when it started². More recently, that required ACT score has increased to 20 and is expected to again increase to a 21 beginning in 2009. Because of faulty initial estimations, the number of projected recipients grew from 15,000 to 26,000 students in 1999. A 2001 LOSFA report to the Legislature claimed that their office was not properly staffed to perform the in-depth research essential to generate accurate projections for complex programs such as TOPS. Louisiana's TOPS scholarship funding skyrocketed from an original \$36.2 million in 1997 to \$123.7 million in 2005.

Where Louisiana's TOPS recipients attend college upon graduation also impacts their academic preparation in high school. LSU, the most prominent recipient of state funding, has maintained an annual average of 13,500 TOPS students over the past three-year cycle. Ranked second is UL-Lafayette with an annual average number of 4,000 TOPS recipients during that same period of time. Southern University and Grambling University, the state's public HBCUs, on the other hand, annually award approximately 1% of their enrolling freshmen with a TOPS scholarship.

Because of its enormous popularity among voters, Louisiana officials have expanded the TOPS program to include other populations (e.g., those home schooled and attending technical and community colleges) rather than refining or reducing it. Legislators are currently looking at ways to "tweak" the program since its costs have snowballed out of control. Possible solutions include raising academic standards and/or capping the income level for applicants, neither of which has received a favorable response from constituents who have become increasingly dependent on TOPS.

Newspaper editors (2000 Daily Advertiser) have called for sweeping changes in

² As noted later in this section, the minimum ACT score was increased from 19 to 20 and the minimum GPA was changed from 2.0 to 2.5 in 2000.

TOPS scholarship requirements in order for the program to be salvaged. They caution that without needed changes, TOPS will become unaffordable to the state. Suggested changes include more accountability from recipients such as requiring them to pay back scholarships if they drop out or fail to take enough courses. Another would cap the award at current tuition levels, causing students and their families to pay any tuition increases in the future.

Louisiana's Office of Student Financial Assistance (Guinn, 2001) reported that of 23,290 Louisiana college students who received TOPS during 1998-99, 6,218 or 28% failed to retain their scholarships. TOPS program administrators indicate that 41% of students lost their scholarships because they didn't complete enough courses during the school year (a minimal requirement of 24 semester credit hours during an academic year). Academic counselors on college campuses should do more to make sure that students are totally aware of the ramifications of dropping courses. Another 22.6% of the students did not meet the GPA required to retain their scholarships. Interestingly, 55% of the students who lost TOPS stayed in school based on data reported in January 2001 (Dyer, 2001). 10,817 TOPS students from the graduating classes of 1997-99 forfeited their scholarships for reasons previously mentioned. Of the 43,147 eligible TOPS students in 2004, 26,833 are renewals while 16,314 are recent high school graduates.

TOPS awards are presented in one of four ways (i.e., Tech, Opportunity, Performance, and Honors). The TOPS Opportunity Award is presented to graduating high school seniors who obtain an accumulative GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale as well as an ACT score of 20 or better. Of those students receiving this award in 1998, only 63.7% met the academic requirements to retain the award for their second year of college. The second TOPS award, the Performance Award, is granted to those graduating high school

seniors who have acquired an accumulative GPA of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale with an ACT score of 23 or better. Of this group, 90.2% of the recipients met the academic requirements to retain their awards for a second year of college. The third TOPS award, the Honors Award, is presented to high school graduating seniors with an accumulative GPA of 3.5 on a 4.0 scale with an ACT score of 27 or better. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the 1998 recipients met the academic requirements to retain their award for an additional year of college (Guinn, 2001). A fourth TOPS award, the Tech Award, was added in 1999 to encourage and reward high school graduates with an accumulative GPA of 2.5 on a 4.0 scale and an ACT score of 17 or better who wanted to attend community and technical colleges.

A 2001 updated report to the Louisiana Legislature disclosed that 10,817 TOPS recipients from the high school graduating classes of 1997, 1998, and 1999 had forfeited their awards, including 2,536 students who failed to maintain the required 2.5 minimum GPA as college students (Wales, 2001). As of academic year 2000-2001, 35,262 students attending Louisiana colleges were doing so through the TOPS program. The overwhelming majority (7,430) of those students who lost their TOPS scholarship over this three-year analyzed period were due to failure to complete the required 24 credit hours of studies within their first academic year.

Table 2.2 summarizes the four types of TOPS scholarships available to Louisiana's high school graduates and the requirements needed to obtain each. The Honors, Performance, and Opportunity Scholarships are granted to eligible university and college students, while the Tech Award is presented to eligible community college and vocational-technical college students. To attend a four-year university on TOPS, a student must possess a minimum 20 ACT and have successfully completed at least 16 ½

college preparatory core courses in high school, while to attend either a two-year community college or technical college requires a minimum 17 ACT and the same preparatory core course completion. (See Appendix F for more details).

Table 2.2: TOPS Eligibility Awards and Criteria

AWARD	CURRICULUM	CORE GPA	ACT
Honors	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	3.50	27
Performance	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	3.50	23
Opportunity	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	2.50	20
Tech	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	2.50	17

Note. These requirements were established and are administered by LOSFA. It is expected that the core units will increase to 17.5 next year as will the Opportunity Award ACT score to 21.

Table 2.3 illustrates how the higher the GPA and ACT scores are, the greater the value that each scholarship has. Whereas all four provide tuition to the students, three of the four are available for a period up to four years, and the highest two awards include stipends as well. Each award carries its own value and duration determined by LOSFA as detailed in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: TOPS Awards with Value and Duration

AWARD	VALUE	DURATION
Honors	Tuition +\$800 Stipend	4 Years

Performance	Tuition +\$400 Stipend	4 Years
Opportunity	Tuition	4 Years
Tech	Tuition	2 Years

Note. These awards, timeframes, and values were established and are administered by LOSFA (2005 TOPS Bulletin).

Table 2.4 displays the GPA needed to remain eligible to retain each award. In order to maintain eligibility, TOPS recipients must be continuously enrolled as full-time students, earn 24 hours of credit at the end of each academic year, and maintain a minimum GPA as seen in Table 2.4. While Opportunity and Tech Awards GPAs remain the same as the original requirement, the Honors and Performance Awards GPAs are lowered from a 3.5 high school GPA to a college GPA of 3.0 (TOPS Bulletin, 2005).

Table 2.4: Minimum GPA Required to Maintain TOPS Scholarships

AWARD	MINIMUM GPA
Honors	3.00
Performance	3.00
Opportunity	2.50
Tech	2.50

Note. These awards and required GPAs were established by the 1998 Louisiana Legislature through Act 1202.

Table 2.5 displays a comparison between graduates of Louisiana’s high schools over a two-year period of time (2003, 2004) and the extent to which TOPS has resulted in improved scores and success in college.

Table 2.5: A Two-Year Comparison of ACT Average Scores of High School Graduates

All 2003 Graduates	19.6	All 2004 Graduates	19.8
--------------------	------	--------------------	------

Graduates with Less than Core Requirements	16.2	Graduates with Less than Core Requirements	16.5
Graduates with Core Requirements	21.1	Graduates with Core Requirements	21.7
Graduates who Met TOPS Requirements	23.8	Graduates who Met TOPS Requirements	23.8

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Savoie, 2004). All numbers in this table are average ACT scores for the relevant group.

These data indicate that (1) students who take the core curriculum score significantly better on the ACT than those who take less than the core, and (2) students who met TOPS requirements have the highest ACT averages.

There is recent evidence that more Louisiana high school students took the core courses and became TOPS eligible in 2004 than 2003 even though there were fewer graduates as demonstrated in Table 2.6.

Table 2.6: A Two-Year Comparison of TOPS Eligible Students in Louisiana

All 2003 Graduates	45,226	All 2004 Graduates	44,569
With TOPS Core (Percent of Total)	25,546 (56.5%)	With TOPS Core (Percent of Total)	26,111 (58.6%)
Eligible for TOPS (Percent of Total)	14,797 (32.7%)	Eligible for TOPS (Percent of Total)	14,961 (33.6%)

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Savoie, 2004).

Table 2.7 displays percentages of Louisiana high school graduates from 2003 who received specific TOPS awards, as well as the types of universities or colleges they selected to attend. A sizeable majority of TOPS recipients (88%) choose to attend a public four-year university. Most recipients (68%) receive the TOPS Opportunity Award.

Table 2.7: Percentage of 2003 TOPS Recipients by Awards and Institutions Attended

TOPS AWARD	RECIPIENTS
Honors Award	13%
Performance Award	18%
Opportunity Award	68%
Tech Award	1%
INSTITUTION TYPE	RECIPIENTS ATTEND
Public 4-year	88%
Public 2-year	6%
Private	6%

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Savoie, 2004)

Table 2.8 displays the positive effect TOPS has had on the number of full-time college freshmen entering Louisiana institutions of higher education since its inception in 1998 through the first six years of the program. A longitudinal comparison is also made between total full-time freshmen in Louisiana and those attending on TOPS.

Table 2.8: Size of Full-Time Freshmen Cohorts in Louisiana Institutions of Higher Education since the Origin of the TOPS Program, 1998-2003

ENTERING FALL COLLEGE FRESHMEN	FTF COHORT	LOUISIANA FTF (Percent of Cohort)	TOPS FTF (Percent of Louisiana FTF)
1998	27,202	25,074 (92%)	10,610 (42.3%)
1999	25,681	23,804 (92.7%)	10,376 (43.5%)
2000	26,495	24,384 (92%)	11,137 (45.6%)
2001	26,758	24,398 (91%)	11,607 (47.6%)
2002	27,307	24,972 (91.4%)	11,913 (47.7%)
2003	29,828	26,685 (89.4%)	12,270 (46%)

Note. LOSFA reported these statistics to BOR in 2004 noting that the requirements for TOPS had changed since 1998 – the minimum ACT increased from 19 to 20 and the minimum GPA changed from overall GPA to core course GPA (Savoie, 2004).

Table 2.9: Number of Louisiana High School Graduates Going to Institutions of Higher Education since the Origin of the TOPS Program

ENTERING CLASS	# LEAVING LOUISIANA	% STAYING
1994	3,182	85%
1996	3,177	86.8%

1998	2,952	89.8%
2000	3,020	92%
2002	2,753	91%

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Guinn, 2003). LOSFA reported a 13.5% decrease in student departure since 1994.

Table 2.10 examines the retention of TOPS and non-TOPS students over the 1998-2002 period of time. The data clearly indicate that students receiving TOPS are retained in subsequent years at a much higher rate (over 75%) than non-TOPS recipients (less than 50%). Nonetheless, data in Table 2.10 also indicate that between 22-24% of students who earn TOPS are not retained in their fourth year of college.

Table 2.10: A Comparison of TOPS vs. Non-TOPS Student Retention Rates

ENTERING FALL FRESHMEN CLASS	% RETAINED					
	2 nd YEAR		3 rd YEAR		4 th YEAR	
	TOPS	NON- TOPS	TOPS	NON- TOPS	TOPS	NON- TOPS
1998	88%	62%	80%	48%	76%	41%
1999	88%	62%	82%	50%	77%	44%
2000	88%	64%	82%	53%	78%	47%
2001	87%	65%	82%	54%	-	-
2002	89%	66%	-	-	-	-

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Guinn, 2003). Data from LOSFA were available only through the 2002 entering class.

Table 2.11 compares two entering college freshmen classes (2002, 2003) in Louisiana and the reasons for students' dismissal from school, which are similar to the reasons for losing TOPS. Most students either fail due to poor GPAs or resign due to an insufficient number of credit hours completed.

Table 2.11: Reasons for College Student Academic Cancellation of TOPS in Louisiana (Students Entering Fall 2002, 2003)

ENTERING FALL	SUSPENDED FOR INADEQUATE GPA	CANCELLED FOR INSUFFICIENT NUMBER OF HOURS	CANCELLED FOR OTHER REASONS	TOTAL
2002	20.4%	13.8%	2.3%	36.5%
2003	17.2%	12.1%	2.1%	31.4%

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Savoie, 2004).

Table 2.12 indicates that an average of 21% of students entering Louisiana colleges as freshmen with the TOPS scholarship graduate within four years as compared to an average of 7% for non-TOPS students. An even larger percentage of TOPS students (48%) graduate after five years in college than do non-TOPS students (16%). These data clearly indicate that students with TOPS succeed at a much higher rate than do non-TOPS students.

Table 2.12: A Comparison of Graduation Rates of Louisiana College Students

ENTERING FALL COLLEGE FRESHMEN	% GRADUATING WITHIN			
	4 Years		5 Years	
	TOPS	Non-TOPS	TOPS	Non-TOPS

1998	20%	6%	47%	15%
1999	22%	7%	48%	16%
2000	21%	8%	-	-

Note. The data from this table were compiled by LOSFA and reported to the BOR (Wales, 2001).

Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature related to the expansion of merit-based scholarships throughout the United States, with a particular emphasis on the TOPS program in Louisiana. It also examined the evolution of financial aid programs like need-based and merit-based scholarships and explained the impact each program has had on college students' success rates in the USA. Numerous factors related to the receipt and retention of merit scholarships (e.g., minority concerns, grant availability, student failure and success) were also addressed. The research literature suggests that there is a need for further research, especially of a qualitative nature, regarding the benefits and costs of merit-based scholarships, since they are a popular and expanding phenomenon in higher education upon which more and more students (and their parents) are becoming dependent.

A large percentage of Louisiana's college-bound students are participants in TOPS and, like Georgia's HOPE, it has become one of the nation's premier scholarship programs. Research conducted on state-funded merit-based scholarships reflects a strong correlation between scholarship recipients and family income. Previous studies conclude that children from middle-income and high-income families tend to receive merit awards much more than do those from lower-income families (Heller, 2002 and Smothers, 2004). In fact, research conducted on state-funded merit-based scholarship programs shows that minority students are less likely to receive these types of scholarships than are White students (Heller, 2002; Cornwell and Mustard, 2002; Smothers, 2004; and Reed, 2005).

Though there is a substantial amount of quantitative TOPS data, as displayed throughout Chapter 2, scholarly work is limited to two dissertations and various government studies. There is an obvious need for qualitatively oriented studies that can explain why certain undesirable trends in the TOPS quantitative data exist and what can be done about that.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Reasons for Conducting the Study

This chapter outlines the methods used to conduct this mixed methods research study. The research questions guided both quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Research questions, research design, sampling, instruments, data collection, data analysis, and inference quality of the study are addressed in turn in this chapter.

In 1997, Louisiana created a merit-based scholarship program for its high school graduates to pursue college at an affordable price by awarding those who qualify the TOPS (Taylor Opportunity Program for Students). Despite the fact that more merit-based scholarships are being granted to more students than ever before, several disturbing phenomena persist. Many high school students are not meeting the scholarship's academic core course requirements, receiving TOPS but then quitting college within their first or second year, or forfeiting the scholarship because of under achievement (BOR, 2004). Approximately one-third of TOPS recipients are losing the scholarship within the first year of enrollment in college (see Table 2.11, page 47). Finding ways of improving TOPS is the focus of the current study, including increasing student eligibility, making receipt of the scholarships more equitable, and retaining more students on TOPS

Though college enrollments are at an all-time high, researchers estimate that nearly 30% of all incoming freshmen nationwide drop out before completing their first year of study (e.g., Brawer, 1996; Cabrera, Amaury & Casteneda, 1992; Kalsner, 1991; Kramer, 1993; Olivas, 1986; Sanders & Henson, 2000; Tinto, 1997). As stated in Chapter 1, a 2000 study by Sanders and Henson indicated that 27% of Louisiana college freshmen withdrew from their college studies during the first year. Exploring why this

phenomenon persists in a state with a merit-based scholarship program was one of the purposes of this study.

More quantitative and qualitative data should become available as the BOR and university based scholars conduct future research studies regarding what is happening with TOPS and who is benefiting from it. Despite this, neither the public nor the academic world will know the answers to why these events are occurring unless someone conducts in-depth qualitative interviews with those who have experienced difficulties in both the receipt and retention of TOPS. This dissertation addressed those issues extensively using the voices of students who have either never received TOPS or lost it while in college.

Little prior qualitative research has been officially or personally conducted addressing issues related to TOPS, and only two scholars have tried to empirically examine ways of improving the program or addressing some of the underlying concerns noted in this research proposal. This study, though limited to four diverse Louisiana high schools, may provide the impetus for a series of meaningful TOPS related research projects on a statewide basis. The state could obviously benefit from hearing the voices of concerned students and parents affected by the current limitations of TOPS. Equally significant, this research uncovered some of the answers and solutions Louisiana education officials are seeking about how to improve TOPS.

To advance this research, a 2004 pilot study was conducted using a local school district and high school to investigate the impact of TOPS on its graduates. As a new teacher there, the researcher had no prior knowledge of the characteristics of the school population, or any past experience with the students interviewed. What was discovered convinced the researcher that he was on the right track toward understanding factors

related to studying and improving TOPS. (As noted later in this chapter, he also pilot tested a student questionnaire at this school).

Research Questions

Yin (2003) suggests that defining the research questions is probably the most important step to be taken in a research study. This study explored the following research questions (previously noted in Chapter 1):

- 1) Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools (i.e., in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students)?
- 2) What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?
- 3) How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOP Tech Award?
- 4) What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose the scholarship after entering college?

All four of the research questions were answered using both quantitative and qualitative data obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and data furnished by BOR, LDE, and LOSFA. Table 3.4, presented later in this chapter, cross-lists the research questions with data sources. To obtain data that would effectively answer the research questions, the Student and Administrator (Elite) Questionnaires contained guided questions listed later in the Chapter 3 Instruments section.

Research Design

Undertaking such a mixed methods study was not easy, especially since very little research currently exist on either merit-based scholarships or TOPS. Other than the

Smothers (2004) and Reed (2005) dissertations, no theoretical or philosophical models regarding access to TOPS exist. Since the target population was restricted to Louisiana citizens who have had experience with TOPS, the researcher also chose to incorporate the work of Rossi (1993) regarding the assessment of new state public policy programs. By definition, Rossi's "planned vs. actual" approach design compares the actual performance of public programs with the planned performance as it benefits society over a given period of time.

The research design that is used to answer these questions can be best described as a study in which there are two matched pairs of outlier schools (high rate of receipt of TOPS scholarships, low rate of receipt of TOPS scholarships). This design, and the sampling procedure used to select the outlier schools, is described later in this chapter.

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) contend that a mixed method study (including both quantitative and qualitative methods) often results in the most accurate and complete assessment of research questions, especially those from educational and evaluation contexts. Johnson and Turner (2003) recommend six key methods of data collection used in mixed methods studies: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, tests, observations, and secondary data. The proposed study employed questionnaires, interviews, and secondary data (archival information from the BOR, LOSFA, and other sources). These data collection sources were used to unveil strengths and weaknesses of the TOPS program (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

The design of this research is a sequential mixed methods with multiple levels of analysis as described in Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) and Yin (2003). A sequential mixed methods QUAN/QUAL model design is appropriate for this research study in which inferences were based on both sources of data. The first phase of the study

involves the collection of archival quantitative data (e.g., the tables presented in Chapter 2) to better understand the diversity that exists among TOPS recipients and the conditions that affect the awarding of TOPS. .

The second and third phases of the study utilized qualitative data to provide information for all four research questions described above. This study used both elite and administrative interviewing (Dexter, 1970) of TOPS officials, school personnel such as guidance counselors, principals, and a parish superintendent of schools, and educational policymakers in phase two of the study as well as selected interviewing of numerous students who had either a positive or negative experience with TOPS in phase three of the study. The three phases of study include the following:

Phase 1 – archival quantitative data

Phase 2 – qualitative elite interviews

Phase 3 – quantitative and qualitative data

An appropriate case study design with identified units of analysis was required to answer the research questions. The Yin (2003) typology of case study designs served as the model from which to select the case study design. Table 3.1 presents educational examples of Yin’s four types of case study designs. The most appropriate design for answering research questions would be a Yin Type 4 multiple-case, multiple unit of analysis design as seen in a case study protocol (See Appendix D). The multiple cases are the four schools in the study. The multiple embedded units of analysis are the students in the three cohorts that are embedded within the schools.

Table 3.1: Examples from Educational Research of Yin’s Four Types of Case Study Designs

Dimensions of Contrast	Single Case Designs	Multiple Case Designs
Single Unit or Level of	TYPE 1	TYPE 3

Analysis (Holistic Case Studies)	A Study of One School with an Emphasis on the School as the Sole Unit of Analysis	A Study of Multiple Schools with an Emphasis on the School as the Sole Unit of Analysis
Multiple Units or Levels of Analysis (Embedded Case Studies)	TYPE 2 A Study of One School with an Emphasis on Both the School and the Students as the Units of Analysis	TYPE 4 A Study of Multiple Schools with an Emphasis on Both the School and the Students as the Units of Analysis

Note: It was impossible to construct the case studies because of missing student questionnaires and interview data.

This study compared three separate but continuous years of data from four different school populations, which come from three distinct regions of northeast, central, and southwest Louisiana. Each of these distinct regions in Louisiana includes a high proportion of lower socioeconomic status students. Other than one south Louisiana parish, each school district is listed in Louisiana’s Public School Funding (MFP) as among the poorest in the state. One would imagine that the high schools in these districts fare poorly in academics because of their poverty. However, in each set of matched pairs, there is at least one academically successful high school. See Table 3.2 for details related to the Yin Type 4 design proposed for this study.

Table 3.2: Multiple-Case, Multiple-Embedded Units of Analysis Design Used in the Current Study

School Level OG High vs. M High	School Level O High vs. N High
Embedded Unit of Analysis 1 Students in the 2004-2005 Class	Embedded Unit of Analysis 1 Students in the 2004-2005 Class

<p style="text-align: center;">Embedded Unit of Analysis 2 Students in the 2005-2006 Class</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Embedded Unit of Analysis 2 Students in the 2005-2006 Class</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Embedded Unit of Analysis 3 Students in the 2006-2007 Class</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Embedded Unit of Analysis 3 Students in the 2006-2007 Class</p>

Note: Participants were promised anonymity as part of their consent to take part in the study. Therefore, school names throughout are pseudonyms.

Initially, case studies were to be constructed, but due to a lack of cooperation by certain participants, the data required to generate the case studies were unavailable. Thus, the methodology and research design were forced to adapt to the data that were available. Consequently, case studies were eliminated from the study while comparative and descriptive surveys and data analysis were the primary methods for answering the research questions.

Sampling

Accessible Populations

This study used a variety of purposive sampling strategies. The population for this study was all Louisiana school districts, high schools, and high school graduates from three cohorts. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) defined the accessible population as “all the members of a set of people, events, or objects who feasibly can be included in the researcher’s sample” (p. 753). For the purposes of this study, the accessible populations are high schools (and students who graduated from those schools during SY 2004-2005, 2005-2006, 2006-2007) that (1) have a high percentage of low-socioeconomic students

and (2) have differential success rates in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility. Specifically, the accessible population of high schools consists of pairs of schools within the same or contiguous districts, one of which has a higher rate of participation in the TOPS program than the other. It is important to note here that all elite and student participants' true names as well as the names of the sample schools and school districts have been changed to ensure and protect confidentiality of identities of those who volunteered to be a part of the sample population of this study. Throughout this document, they will be referred to with initials only.

The remainder of this section details the process whereby school districts, schools, and individual students were selected for this study.

Selection of Targeted School Districts

School districts were selected through consultation with other interested educators based on data that were obtained from the Louisiana BOR (2004), LDE (2006-2007), and LOSFA (2004-2007). These data included recent TOPS data regarding individual college TOPS payments, success/failure rates, application procedures, high school course requirements, school district and individual school TOPS rankings, school district poverty levels, and types of scholarships and rewards.

As noted above, two matched pairs of outlier schools (one with a high rate of participation in the TOPS program, one with a low rate of participation in the TOPS program) were chosen for study. The schools with the high rate of participation in the TOPS program are referred to as positive outliers throughout this document, while the schools with the lower rate of participation in the TOPS program are referred to as the negative outliers. The decision to examine two pairs of schools in contiguous districts was based on the resources (time and money) available to conduct the study, plus the

prerequisite condition that the sample must include geographically diverse areas of the state.

The researcher evaluated a wide variety of TOPS data seeking districts that contained high schools with high and low rates of student participation in TOPS. Patton (2002, p.243) referred to this type of outlier sampling as intensity sampling (information rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely). The final sample of districts included two parishes from north Louisiana and two parishes from south Louisiana (See Table 3.3 for details).

Before describing the final set of districts and schools, a note should be made about an additional sampling procedure that had to be abandoned. Initially the researcher wanted to include outlier schools with exceptionally low TOPS participation rates due to the richness of the information that such extreme cases (Patton, 2002, p. 243) might bring to the study. Two such schools were selected, but the guidance counselors at both schools, after initially favoring the project, stopped cooperating with the researcher. In fact, the guidance counselor at one of the schools abruptly resigned from the school, and the school then burned down, making it unavailable for further study. Anecdotal evidence regarding these two schools is included in Chapter 4 regarding certain research questions. (See Table 3.4 later in this chapter for more information on how data from these schools were included in the study.)

G school district is located in a rural parish in the north central part of the state. A 2004 Higher Education report ranked it as the poorest school district in Louisiana and also as having the eighth lowest local tax base in the state. However, it ranks 50th in TOPS awards in SY 2003-2004 with 26.6% of its graduates eligible for TOPS. The district ranks 27th in the state with a District Performance Score (DPS) of 86.1 and

average ACT score of 19.2. (See Table 3.3 for details on the statistics and schools included in this study). Again, it is important to note that all participants and schools were promised anonymity as part of their consent to take part in the study. All names are abbreviated or substituted with pseudonyms throughout the document to ensure confidentiality.

WC school district is the 3rd highest poverty area in the state and has the fifth lowest local tax revenue base. Despite extremely low funding, the school district had 32.5% of its graduates eligible for TOPS in SY 2003-2004. The district ranks 11th in the state with a DPS of 98.2 and average ACT score of 19.4.

L school district is located in southwest Louisiana in one of the state's fastest growing urban areas and has become home to many of Louisiana's displaced victims of Hurricanes Katrina, Ike, and Gustav as well as home to the state's second largest public university. The school district population is primarily White (59.8%), but the district ranks 40th in poverty making it an average financially stable one. Almost 60% of the parish's graduates receive TOPS scholarships, primarily to private school students. About 37% of public school graduates were eligible to receive TOPS in SY 2003-2004. The district ranks 20th in the state with a DPS of 92.3 and average ACT score of 21.

SL school district is also located in rural southwest Louisiana. The 2004 Higher Education Report concluded that the school District ranked 45th with 28.2% of its graduates eligible for a TOPS award. The parish also ranks as one of the highest poverty areas in the state with 76% of its students entitled to reduced-price or free lunches. A 2008 report showed a significant improvement for the district in all academic areas. The district now ranks 29th in the state with a DPS of 85.4 and average ACT score of 19.3. It

has increased from a label of Academic Decline to Academic Excellence and continues to show progress.

Table 3.3 lists data specific to the state rankings of each school district and specific schools selected for this study as noted in the following manner:

- a – refers to column 1
- b – refers to column 2
- c – refers to column 3
- d – refers to columns 4-5 and 9-10
- e – refers to column 6
- f – refers to columns 7-8
- g – refers to column 11

Table 3.3: Selected Louisiana District/School Data

District	Rank in Poverty and Percent Free/Reduced Lunch Students ^a	Percent TOPS Eligible 2003-2004 Average ^b	District Performance Score (DPS) 2006-2007 Label ^c and Rank ^c	2004 ACT Scores ^d	2007 ACT Scores ^d
District 1	(1)		86.1		
G	61.6	26.6	Two Stars (27)	18.3	19.2

“(table continued)”

District 2 WC	(3) 72.5	32.5	98.2 Two Stars (11)	20	19.4
District 3 L	(40) 50.7	37.4	92.3 Two Stars (20)	20.4	21
District 4 SL	(26) 75.9	28.2	85.4 Two Stars (29)	18.7	19.3

Table 3.3 (continued)

Schools Size Classification	Percent Black ^e	Percent TOPS Eligible 2003-2004 Average ^b	Percent TOPS Eligible 2006- 2007 Average ^f	2004 ACT Scores ^d	2007 ACT Scores ^d	School Performance Score (SPS) 2006-2007 and Academic
M High A (183)	11.6	27.3	23	17.8	18.3	76.7 One Star School In Decline

“(table continued)”

OG High A (250)	18.5	40.5	48.9	20	18.9	90.0 Two Stars Minimum Academic Growth
N High AAAA (1,055)	86.3	11.0	27.1	17.4	17.5	55.1 One Star School In Decline
O High AAAA (995)	86.5	18.5	43.2	18.8	19.3	80.5 Two Stars Exemplary Academic Growth

^a Rank in Poverty and Percentage Black were calculated using existing data available through the 2004-2005 LDE Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) Distribution Plan as determined by both the Legislature and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). The poverty calculation and rank are based on a combination of required state and local funding needed per pupil for each of Louisiana's 69 school districts due to a lack of local revenue over a two-year period (2004-2005). The black student percentage is based on the 2004-2005 Elementary/Secondary school year enrollment (grades K-12) as reported by the LDE.

^b Percent TOPS Eligible was calculated by averaging two years (2003 and 2004) of data reported by LOSFA to the BOR in their 2004 report to the Legislature. The figures were based on the percentage of all public and private school students who have successfully completed required high school core courses needed to become TOPS eligible from selected parishes/school districts and individual schools during school years 2002-2003 and 2003-2004. The calculation was determined by dividing the number of graduates with TOPS core courses by the total number of graduates from each parish/school district during the two-year period.

^c District Performance Score (DPS) Label and Rank were calculated using one year of data and all four LEAP 21/GEE 21 tests collected from all 69 school districts, though limited to five specific districts in this study. The data represent one school year (2006-2007), compiling and numerically ranking school districts from highest to lowest scores. The highest possible DPS label is Five Stars, which no school district has yet to attain. Currently, the highest DPS in Louisiana is Three Stars and a 111.3 score. The lowest DPS is a score of 50.5. The state average DPS score is 87.4 and a label of Two Stars. This data and ACT scores were obtained from the LDE 2007 Accountability Report

“(table continued)”

- ^d . The 2004 and 2007 District and School ACT scores were obtained from the LDE 2004 and 2007 Accountability Reports.
- ^e Percent Black Students in each individual school was calculated using the 2004-2005 Elementary/Secondary school year enrollment (grades K-12) as determined by the LDE.
- ^f Percent TOPS Eligible for each individual school was calculated by averaging two years (2006 and 2007) of data reported by LOSFA to the BOR. The figures were based on the percentage of all public school graduates who have successfully completed required high school core courses needed to become TOPS eligible from selected high schools during school years 2005-2006 and 2006-2007. The calculation was determined by dividing the number of graduates with TOPS core courses by the total number of graduates from each individual school during the two-year period. The 2006-2007 TOPS data were provided by LOSFA.
- ^g School Performance Score (SPS) and Growth and Performance Labels were calculated using two years of data (2005-2006 and 2006-2007) obtained by the LDE. The two-year average of all four LEAP 21/GEE 21 tests scores from seven selected high schools is listed here using a combination of the 2006 Baseline SPS and the 2007 Growth SPS. A desirable SPS Growth is one that is higher than the previous year. Growth labels range from a high of Exemplary Academic Growth to a low of School In Decline. Performance labels range from a high of Five Stars (rare in Louisiana) to a low of Academically Unacceptable (which could force the state to either take over the management of the school or close the school). The desired SPS score for each school is 100.0 with progressively higher scores each year. This data were obtained from the LDE 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 Accountability Reports.

Selection of Individual High Schools

It should be noted that when the study began in SY 2003- 2004 school-level data were somewhat different from data reported in SY 2006- 2007. Relevant data from both years are included in Table 3.3. Participants were promised anonymity as part of their consent to take part in this study. Therefore, for the remainder of this study, all participants' names will be abbreviated.

M High School, located in a rural parish in central Louisiana, is at the lower end of students with TOPS eligibility. When this research began in SY 2003- 2004, 27.3% of M High graduates were eligible to receive TOPS. In SY 2006- 2007 that number fell to only 23%. The ACT average score in 2004 was 17.8 and increased slightly to 18.3 in 2007. This small school's population only graduates a handful of college-bound students

who mostly attend either Northwestern State or LSU-A universities. 88.4% of the senior class is White, 11.6% are Black.

OG High School, the largest school in a northeast Louisiana parish, is a remarkable site. Though extremely poor, 48.9% of OG's SY 2006- 2007 senior class (of 50 students) was eligible to receive TOPS. Graduates mostly attend UL-Monroe, La. Tech, Grambling, and LSU. In SY 2003- 2004, 40.5% of its graduates were eligible to receive TOPS. The ACT average score in 2004 was 20 but dropped to 18.9 in 2007. 86% of the senior class are White, 14% are Black.

N High, a predominantly inner city, Black school, is located in the southern section of the state. Its student population is 86.3% Black, 13% White, and 1% Hispanic. Only 19 of 171 (11.1%) members of the senior class of SY 2003-2004 were eligible to receive TOPS scholarships, but that number has recently more than doubled to 27.1% in SY 2006-2007. The average ACT score in 2004 was 17.4 and virtually remains stagnant at 17.5 in 2007. Its graduates mostly attend college at UL-Lafayette, Southern, LSU, SLCC, and LTC.

O High, a combined inner city and rural predominantly lower-socioeconomic Black school, is also located in the southern part of the state. Though ranked academically unacceptable in SY 2003-2004, it has made a remarkable turnaround over the past two years and has achieved the rank of Exemplary Academic Growth increasing its SPS score from 70.9 in SY 2003-2004 to 80.5 in SY 2006-2007. O High also more than doubled its number of students eligible for TOPS from 18.5% in SY 2003- 2004 to 43.2% in 2007. The average ACT score in 2004 was 18.8 and that rose to 19.3 in 2007. Its student population is 86.5 % Black, 12.5% White, and 1% Hispanic. Most of its graduates attend UL-Lafayette, Southern, LSU, LSU-E, SLCC, and LTC.

The researcher originally attempted to study LP High School of rural northeast Louisiana, one of the poorest school districts in the state. The school is 100% Black, and only 7.5% of its graduates were eligible for TOPS in 2004. The number of students eligible for TOPS did not increase significantly (9%) in SY 2006-2007. Regrettably, school officials refused to participate in the study. Likewise, SHC High of rural southeast Louisiana, another extremely poor school district, unexpectedly burned to the ground during the study and the official who initially cooperated with the researcher has since terminated her employment. Circumstances prohibited any meaningful continuance of research at this location. This 99% Black school ranks last in Louisiana in the percentage of its graduates who receive TOPS (4%).

Selection of TOPS Officials and Individual Students

Elite interviewing of TOPS experts constitutes a qualitative sample. Just as important, these experts' answers to the administrator questionnaire (Appendix B-2) helped shape the data collection and answer research questions one, three and four. These participants were promised anonymity as part of their consent to take part in the study. Therefore, individual names throughout are pseudonyms. Among the TOPS officials interviewed were the following:

1. State Representative CM (author of the law that created TOPS)
2. State Senator NG (author of alternative TOPS bill)
3. Dr. JW (former university chancellor and contributor of TOPS)
4. Dr. EJS (Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education)
5. Dr. JC (Chief of Staff, Governor's Office and former Assistant Commissioner of Higher Education)

6. Dr. KHR (Vice-President of the University of Louisiana System and author of TOPS dissertation)
7. TH (Deputy Commissioner, Board of Regents)
8. Dr. KD (LSU Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and TOPS Analyst for the BOR)
9. JG (retired Executive Director of LOSFA and TOPS Administrator)
10. MA (Executive Director of LOSFA and TOPS Administrator)
11. GW (LOSFA TOPS Public Information Director)

In addition to the elite sampling, in-depth interviews were conducted with school administrators that produced rich qualitative data and some of the most interesting findings of this research. Among those educators were the following:

1. MN (SL School Superintendent)
2. Dr. RJ (O High School Principal)
3. WH (L Parish Supervisor of Enrollment)
4. TB (G High School Guidance Counselor)
5. TB (OG High School Guidance Counselor)
6. SC (SM High School Guidance Counselor)
7. CM (former SHC High School Guidance Counselor)
8. CS (O High School Guidance Counselor)
9. JS (LP High School Guidance Counselor)
10. ST (M High School Guidance Counselor)

The researcher initially intended to include five participants from each of three cohorts of the four selected schools for participation in a survey study, followed by an interview. Unfortunately, the study fell short of its goal as described here and in more

detail in Chapter 4. The participants were selected with the assistance of high school counselors and TOPS officials. The sampling process for the individual students included the following steps:

1. A list of graduates from each of the targeted years of study from each school was obtained.
2. With the assistance of school and LOSFA officials, it was determined who received TOPS awards versus who did not from each class.
3. Questionnaires were sent to 625 students initially with a follow up of 275 later. Using local phone directories and available school records, home phone numbers of prospective participants in the interviews were obtained, and they were contacted.
4. Participants signed a consent form (Appendix A) to be interviewed
5. Student Questionnaires (Appendix B-1) were administered to participants who agreed to be interviewed using extensive open-ended questioning.

Sampling of the individual students involved stratified purposive sampling using graduates who were either awarded TOPS or never received TOPS from each targeted high school representing the years of 2004-2005, 2005-2006, and 2006-2007. From the initial mail out of 600 students, only 46 students responded. After a second mail out to 300 more students, only three additional responses were obtained. Of the 49 students who completed the questionnaires, twenty-seven individuals answered phone calls and agreed to be interviewed. Many of the initial and follow-up phone calls were either unanswered or not returned.

Based on TOPS data obtained from LOSFA (2005-2007) and stratified sampling of the selected schools in this study, the sample population reflected a diversity of males and

females, Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, though the overwhelming demographics of these schools are either Blacks or Whites.

Instruments

According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), questionnaires are one of the most effective methods of collecting quantitative data. To further explore the phenomena of this study, in-depth follow-up interviews (Lincoln & Denzin, 2004) will supply qualitative data. The TOPS Effectiveness Questionnaire (Smothers, 2004) was the original instrument used to research TOPS, and this study's questionnaires reflected similar concerns plus fresh ideas. The research study utilized the following instruments:

A Student Questionnaire Related to Experiences with the TOPS Program mostly quantitative with a limited number of open-ended qualitative items (see Appendix B-1) as follows:

1. Did you earn TOPS? If not, why (i.e., GPA, ACT, core courses)?
2. Do you still have TOPS? If not, why (i.e., GPA, course load)?
3. How did TOPS influence your studies in high school?
4. How was your experience with the TOPS application process?
5. What recommendations would you make to improve TOPS?

The Likert-scale quantitative items found in the questionnaire measured the students' opinions about TOPS as listed below using a scale of 1-5 ranging from answers of Highly Favorable or Strongly Agree to Highly Unfavorable or Strongly Disagree:

1. The state has sufficiently educated Louisiana citizens about TOPS.
2. I was aware of the TOPS awards' criteria and the various awards before graduating high school.

3. I was aware of the required TOPS core curriculum before starting high school.
4. I was aware of TOPS because of my high school guidance counselor.
5. The criteria to receive TOPS are too difficult.
6. The TOPS award was a major factor in my decision to attend a Louisiana college.
7. TOPS directly influenced my academic performance and study habits in high school.

B. Administrator Questionnaire Related to Experiences with the TOPS Program – qualitative and open-ended (see Appendix B-2):

1. What is your current title or position and how long have you been such?
2. Describe your duties with TOPS.
3. What do you believe are the goals of TOPS?
4. Do you believe these goals have been achieved?
5. How has TOPS impacted high school education?
6. How has TOPS influenced access to higher education?
7. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be raised? Why?
8. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be lowered? Why?
9. What are TOPS strengths?
10. What are the weaknesses of the TOPS program?
11. Are the citizens (educators, students, parents, etc.) sufficiently informed about the TOPS program? If not, what should be done to improve communications?

12. Are the existing TOPS core curriculum requirements sufficient to prepare all students to receive the scholarship? If not, what should be done to do so?
 13. Do all Louisiana students have access to required core courses and other academic requirements to receive TOPS? If not, why?
 14. Is there an ethnic or socioeconomic group of students who are receiving TOPS more than others? If so, please describe.
 15. Is there an ethnic or socioeconomic group of students who are receiving TOPS less than others? If so, please describe.
 16. What needs to be done for more students to receive the TOPS scholarship?
 17. Is there an ethnic or socioeconomic group of students who are losing TOPS more than others? If so, please describe.
 18. What are reasons why students lose TOPS once enrolled in Louisiana colleges?
 19. What needs to be done for more TOPS recipients to retain their scholarships?
 20. Can you recommend any improvements to the TOPS program?
- C. Site Visits and Observations – QUAN + QUAL. Observations and interviews from LP, SHC, G, OG, M, and O High Schools are included in appropriate sections of Chapter 4.
- D. 2005-2007 TOPS Data – QUAN
- E. Interviews and Field Notes – QUAL

Table 3.4 cross-lists each research question with the instruments, documents, and other data sources that related to those questions.

Table 3.4: Research Questions Cross-Listed with Data Sources

Research Question	Data Sources
(1) Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools in terms of the socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students?	Student Questionnaire + Interviews Administrator and Elite Questionnaire + Site Visits 2005-2007 TOPS Data
(2) What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?	Student Questionnaire + Interviews Site Visits Administrator and Student Interviews and Field Notes 2005-2007 TOPS Data Interviews from LP High and SHC High
(3) How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award?	Administrator and Elite Questionnaire + Interviews and Field Notes 2005-2007 TOPS Data 2005-2006 Louisiana Poverty Index Interviews from LP High and SHC High
(4) What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients resign from college after receiving TOPS?	Student Questionnaire Administrator and Elite Questionnaire + Interviews and Field Notes 2004 TOPS Retention/Persistence Report 2004 Z High School Pilot Study Findings and Data Interviews from LP High and SHC High

The Student Questionnaire Related to Experiences with the TOPS Program was developed as a part of a pilot study conducted at a local high school in 2004 (see Appendix O) and revised after reviewing the Smothers' (2004) instrument. Even though the two high schools from LP and SHC withdrew from the study in its infancy, nonetheless, the guidance counselors participated in interviews that produced interesting observations, valuable criticisms of the TOPS requirements, and worthy recommendations for improving the program on behalf of underachieving and poor

schools. Their responses were most beneficial in answering Research Questions #2-#4. Because of a lack of information from the Student Questionnaires regarding Research Question #4, previously collected qualitative data from a 2004 pilot study of Z High School graduates about the retention problem were included.

Since current BOR and LOSFA data suggest an underutilization of the TOPS Tech Award, Research Question #3 was amended to study ways the state could aggressively promote this category of TOPS, especially towards lower-income and under-achieving ACT applicants. To meet the current and future needs of Louisiana's growing economy, the state is studying ways to encourage more high school students to pursue career opportunities and skills taught at Louisiana's technical colleges. To meet these needs, the state is currently looking at a dual-tracking system with credits allowed simultaneously at both high schools and technical colleges. There is continuous discussion by both BESE and BOR about the possibility of developing area high schools for college-bound students and other high schools for technically skilled and trained students who graduate directly into the workforce. Currently, Lafayette Parish School Board and Louisiana Technical College are collaborating on the possibility of creating such a school in Lafayette (Advertiser, December 14, 2008). This would increase both the necessity for and value of the TOPS Tech Award. It would also improve the caliber of workers Louisiana prepares.

Data from the Student Questionnaire compared demographic characteristics of TOPS recipients such as the variables of gender, race, age, educational status, residency, income, GPA, and ACT score. Data also included the perceptions of TOPS recipients towards TOPS before and after entering college as well as TOPS influence on high

school and college studies. Listed below are the definitions of the variables used to answer the research questions of the study.

TOPS – defined as awarded the scholarship or not.

ACT Composite Score – the numeric score earned on the ACT Student Assessment, designed to measure high school students’ general educational development and ability to complete college-level work (ACT, 2004). Currently, TOPS requires an ACT composite score of 20.

Grade Point Average – refers to the numeric value on a 4.0 scale of degree of success on grades earned in high school courses. Currently, TOPS requires a minimum grade point average of 2.5 upon graduating from high school.

TOPS Core Courses – defined as the required college preparatory courses successfully completed in high school to receive TOPS. Currently, 16.5 units of core courses are required in high school by TOPS.

Family Income – levels of household personal income that include: less than \$15,000; \$15,000-\$25,000; \$25,001-\$35,000; \$35,001-\$45,000; \$45,001-\$55,000; \$55,001-\$65,000; \$65,001-\$75,000; and over \$75,000.

Race – a variable that indicates whether the student is White, Black, Hispanic, or Asian American. Research conducted on merit-based scholarships indicates that a disproportionate percentage of these awards are received by Whites and Asian Americans as compared to Blacks and Hispanics (Heller, 2002; Smothers, 2004; & Reed, 2005).

Gender – refers to males and females examined through this study.

Parent(s) Education – defined as the highest level of completion of formal education obtained by the parent(s) of the sampled population including the

following categories: high school; associate degree; bachelor’s degree; graduate or professional degree.

Age – the range of ages from 17-23 of the students sampled in this study.

College Attended – refers to the current higher institutions in Louisiana attended by those who responded to the study. Since TOPS is limited only to Louisiana college students, only public and private post-secondary schools were included.

These colleges are listed below in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Louisiana Public and Private Colleges and Universities

Four-Year Public Universities	Four-Year Private Universities	Two-Year Community Colleges	Technical Colleges
Grambling	Centenary	Bossier C.C.	(40 Campuses throughout Louisiana)
Louisiana Tech	Dillard	Baton Rouge C.C.	
LSU-BR	Holy Cross College	Delgado C.C.	
LSU-Alexandria	Louisiana College	Delta C.C.	
LSU-Eunice	Loyola	Elaine Nunez C.C.	
LSU-Shreveport	Tulane	River Parishes C.C.	
McNeese	Xavier	SLCC	
Nicholls		SOWELA C.C.	
Northwestern			
Southeastern			
Southern-BR			
Southern-NO			
Southern-Shreveport			
UL-Lafayette			

UL-Monroe			
UNO			

Several of the questions from the Student Questionnaire were coded using a Likert-type scale of 1-5 corresponding with one as “low priority” to five as “high priority”. As mentioned earlier, the instrument was administered to individual students measuring their responses on a range from “Strongly Agree or Highly Favorable” to “Strongly Disagree or Highly Unfavorable”. A parallel questionnaire was administered to state higher education and individual school officials to determine their opinions of the TOPS program as well.

The open-ended Administrator’s Questionnaire determined the effectiveness of TOPS core courses in preparing students to receive and retain TOPS. Both questionnaires explored possible ways to improve the TOPS program. Additional data used to compare the surveys included TOPS Core Curriculum Requirements (Appendix E), 2005-2007 TOPS Awards, 2004 TOPS Report to the Legislature, 2006-2007 Louisiana Public School Funding (MFP), 2004 TOPS Retention/Persistence Report (Appendix G), and 2006-2007 Louisiana Poverty Index.

Data Collection

The first phase involved collecting and reviewing valuable archived TOPS data from both LOSFA and the BOR. This was done after personally meeting with TOPS officials at the BOR and LDE. Following is a list of the archived data that were collected (documentation of pertinent data is also attached in the Appendices section):

1. Act 1202 (2001) of the Louisiana Legislature
2. SB 424 (2004) by State Senator NG

3. SB 473 (2004) by State Senator JD
4. HB 1247 (2004) by Representative GB
5. HCR 150 (2008) by Representative NM
6. 2004 Louisiana Board of Regents Report on the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)
7. 2004 Louisiana Board of Regents Student Retention/Persistence Report
8. 2007 LDE Parish/High School Report
9. 2006-2007 LDE State Public School Fund – Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) Equalization Distribution
10. 2005-2007 Louisiana Office of Student Financial Aid TOPS Report
11. Louisiana Census 2000 Poverty Profile

After analyzing information from these documents, rankings and percentages of TOPS recipients by school districts and individual schools were established as found in Chapters 2 and 3. Using the 2005-2006 MFP and 2000 Louisiana Census Poverty Profile, school districts income levels were classified and ranked. Using the 2005-2007 TOPS Report to the Legislature and BOR and the 2007 LDE Parish/High School Report, academic standings of Louisiana's high schools were determined. This information helped establish the target population of the study and guided the researcher in the selection of schools.

Collecting some of the archived data was an obstacle due to federal and state confidentiality laws, which protect student identity. Determining who has received and lost TOPS was not easy. In fact, without the assistance of two parish school superintendents and local high school guidance counselors, the research might not have been possible. Upon contacting both LOSFA and the BOR in the Office of Higher

Education, a request for personal information was denied, other than fiscal documentation. Eventually, after conferring with the leadership of LOSFA, additional information listing the recipients of TOPS was provided. As a former Assistant Commissioner of Higher Education personally expressed in May 2004, “Security for student privacy is of the utmost importance, even though your research could be meritorious”.

The state has assisted, however, by providing the researcher recent TOPS data regarding individual college TOPS payments, success/failure rates, application procedures, high school course requirements, school district and individual school TOPS rankings, school district poverty levels, and types of scholarships and rewards (see Chapter 2 Tables) as well as pertinent TOPS legislation (See Appendix H).

Phase two involved mailing the Administrator Questionnaire (see Appendix B-2) to TOPS officials who were personally interviewed. Phase three included obtaining sample populations from selected school districts and the development and mailing of the Student Questionnaire (see Appendix B-1).

Study Participants

After approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), all of the participants were sent the consent form to be signed (located in Appendix A). Upon obtaining necessary signatures, data collection proceeded.

Participants (students, TOPS officials, and school administrators) were contacted both through a personal letter and phone calls describing the study (see Appendix C). The introductory letter was designed using methods suggested by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) to increase response rate. The letter outlined the purpose of the research, a time frame for returning the questionnaire, assurance of confidentiality, and information on informed

consent. The consent form (see Appendix A) included detailed instructions for completion of the instrument and a return postage envelope for return of both the consent form and the questionnaire.

The procedure for collecting the questionnaire and interview data from the students was detailed earlier in this chapter in the section on “Selection of TOPS Officials and Individual Students.” Problems with the student response rates were also discussed there and in Chapter 4. These problems included the fact that 39 of 49 (79.6%) student responses contained mostly positive data, whereas, only 10 of 49 (20.4%) were from students who had a negative reaction to TOPS. This is an issue because one purpose of the study was to document negative experiences with TOPS. Other data sources were used to provide details on student difficulties with TOPS.

Most qualitative interviews were conducted by telephone due to geographic distances between the researcher and participants. Most questions had been determined a priori while some were determined after initial analysis of the quantitative data. Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed. Initial discussions with school officials were conducted in person at each of their school sites. A standardized open-ended interview approach was used for this study. Patton (2002) suggests that this method allows for the data to be organized for easier analysis and increases the ease of comparison, since participants answer the same questions. Though this format facilitated easier data analysis, it limited the flexibility of questions asked by the interviewer

The quantitative data included the formal questionnaire and the qualitative data came from direct interviews through field visits to seven high schools and seven school districts. By triangulating the data, thicker descriptions of the opinions of the participants

were documented. These data sources resulted in a database of field notes, questionnaires, and narratives from field participants.

Data Analysis

Various analytical approaches employed to gather the collected data are discussed in this section. Comparisons were made between high scoring and low scoring school districts as well as between high scoring and low scoring individual schools within these districts. Table 3.6 cross-lists the research questions and the data analyses (qualitative and quantitative) that were used to answer those questions.

Table 3.6: Research Questions Cross-Listed with Data Sources

Research Question	Quantitative Data Analysis (Units of Analysis)	Qualitative Data Analysis (Units of Analysis)
(1) Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools in terms of the socioeconomic status/ethnicity of students?	Student Questionnaire 2005-2007 TOPS Data (LDE, BOR, LOSFA) (High Schools)	Administrator, Student, and Elite Questionnaires Site Visits Interview/Field Notes (Individual Students, TOPS Officials, and Guidance Counselors)
(2) What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?	Student Questionnaire 2002-2005 TOPS Data (LDE, BOR, LOSFA) (High Schools)	Administrator and Student Questionnaires Site Visits/Persistent Observation Interview/Field Notes from LP High and SHC High (Individual Students, Guidance Counselors)
(3) How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially for the TOPS Tech Award?	2005-2007 TOPS Data 2005-2007 Louisiana Poverty Index (Individual Students)	Administrator, Student, and Elite Questionnaires Interview/Field Notes from LP High and SHC High (Individual Students, Guidance Counselors)

“(table continued)”

(4) What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients resign from college after receiving TOPS?	Student Questionnaire 2004 TOPS Retention/Persistence Report (Individual Students)	Administrator Questionnaire Interview/Field Notes from LP High and SHC High (Individual Students, TOPS Officials)
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Qualitative data analysis consisted of descriptive analyses of the responses to the various questionnaire items administered to the respondents. Qualitative data analysis consisted of thematic analyses of the open-ended items on the questionnaire and other data sources. More details are provided in Chapter 4.

Determining Inference Quality

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) define inference quality in quantitative terms of design validity and internal and external validities. In other words, do the instruments correctly measure the variables being researched? The validity or quality of data and information should be evaluated before inferences and conclusions are made regarding relationships between these variables (Tashakkori & Teddlie, p.94). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced a qualitative definition of inference quality to persuade readers that the findings of an inquiry are worth critical review. They called it “trustworthiness”.

Methods used to determine the trustworthiness of research included:

- 1). Prolonged engagement – spending adequate time in the field to build trust, learn the culture, and test for misinformation
- 2). Triangulation – comparing an ongoing study with previously conducted research on a subject. For this method, the Smothers (2004) and Reed (2005) TOPS research findings were utilized.

- 4). Peer debriefing – allowing an unengaged peer to evaluate and probe the findings for further clarification
- 5). Member checks – asking members of the sample population to review data and interpretations of the investigator for accuracy. (See Chapters 4 and 5).

CHAPTER 4

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Overview of Chapter 4

The study design included both qualitative and quantitative data, a mixed methods model. The qualitative data were collected through content analysis of both an elite/administrator questionnaire and student questionnaire, newspaper coverage of TOPS, and interviews with key TOPS experts and former graduates of the 2005-2007 classes of four distinct Louisiana high schools. Emerging themes were coded and categorized to identify the composition of the target population and their individual experiences with the TOPS program. Triangulation of the data sources strengthened the research design and validity of the findings.

This chapter provides the results from a mixed method study of Louisiana's merit-based TOPS scholarship. The chapter includes an overview of the study using demographics and characteristics of the sample population, descriptive statistics, and data analyses used to answer each of the research questions. The chapter includes both the quantitative and qualitative findings from three groups of individuals: three-year cohort of high school graduate classes of 2005-2007 who enrolled in Louisiana's four-year public and private universities, community colleges, and technical colleges; elite TOPS officials and policymakers; and TOPS administrators (guidance counselors, principal, Superintendents, etc.).

As discussed in the previous chapters, the purpose of this research study was to review and access the current TOPS Scholarship program for the following reasons:

1. To determine why some high schools in Louisiana are more successful in

preparing students to receive TOPS.

2. To capture the feelings of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences and the impact core courses had on their eligibility for TOPS.
3. To determine the extent to which administrators, policy makers, and students believe that TOPS can be improved, especially towards the needs of lower income students and promoting the TOPS Tech Award.
4. To explore reasons why many TOPS recipients lose the award after entering college.

Chapter 4 is divided into eight sections:

Responses Generated from Various Data Sources

Quantitative Demographic Information Describing the Student Sample

Qualitative Data Sources

Description of Qualitative Data Sources

Analysis of Qualitative Data Sources

Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #4 and Associated Issues

Emerging Themes

Access

Quality of High School Curriculum and Core Courses

Section One, Responses Generated from Various Data Sources, discusses the various attempts to communicate with the numerous sources that provided the data and comments necessary to answer each of the research questions. Section Two lists the various demographic descriptors of the sample population to determine if there were significant differences among those variables. It contains summaries and comparisons of the demographic characteristics of the participants surveyed through the Student Questionnaire. Student (class) level data and school level data were analyzed using multiple cross-matched tables and percentages obtained from a Likert Scale of 1-5 from comments to each question. Section Three presents information regarding the qualitative sources and their analyses. In-depth interviews provided the qualitative data necessary to answer all four of the research questions. Sections Four through Seven displayed and discussed the quantitative and qualitative findings of Research Questions #1-#4. Finally, Section Eight described any emerging themes discovered through the research.

Responses Generated from Various Data Sources

Quite a bit of time was spent conducting a series of personal and phone interviews during the summer and fall of 2008 regarding the TOPS program from the perspective of several TOPS experts and officials as well as randomly selected former high school graduates who had applied for TOPS. As the researcher canvassed the state of Louisiana for the second time, he gathered data through written questionnaires from TOPS

authorities from numerous places scattered across Louisiana. High school guidance counselors, principals, several parents, state TOPS officials from LOSFA and BOR, a former university chancellor, an individual with a Ph. D. who had conducted research on TOPS, the State Representative who authored and created the TOPS Program, and the State Senator who tried to amend the program were all interviewed. These responses are summarized in the qualitative sections throughout this chapter.

There were some problems in collecting the data from the guidance counselors, which were unanticipated. Several of the guidance counselors agreed to assist with personal lists of sample interviews to be conducted and to place personal introductory phone calls to former students who would then be contacted. Three of the critical site contacts (N High, LP High, and SHC High) did not answer phone calls, e-mails, and other attempts to further contact them. All other counselors were cooperative, supportive, and engaged in the project. Just as supportive was the LOSFA office, which agreed to provide a list of possible sample populations of each site under study. This assisted greatly with key contacts at each site. In-depth interviews were conducted with former high school graduates from each site.

An initial mail out of student questionnaires was sent to 625 randomly selected graduates from the three-year cohort (2005-2007) from the four high schools under study (OG High, M High, O High, and N High). It should be noted that of the initial mail out, about half of those contacted were randomly selected 2005-2007 TOPS recipients from a list provided by LOSFA. The other half were students who did not receive TOPS during those three years from the selected schools as provided by either the counselors or Superintendents of each school.

The results from the first mail out were disappointing: only 46 (7.4%) graduates responded to the first Student Questionnaire mail out. Since an overwhelming percentage of first responses were from TOPS recipients, a second follow up mail out of 275 questionnaires was sent to those who did not receive TOPS. Phone calls were made encouraging school counselors to contact the non-responding students in order to secure a higher response rate. Fewer (3), or 1.1%, responded the second time. In total, only 49 out of 900 participants responded for a net return of 5.4%. Tables 4.1A and 4.1B display and specifically describe the responses from each high school's graduates resulting from each attempted mail out.

Table 4.1A: First Questionnaire Mail Out

SCHOOL	QUESTIONNAIRES MAILED	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
N High	300	12	4%
O High	200	17	8.5%
OG High	75	14	18.7%
M High	50	3	6%
Total	625	46	7.4%

Table 4.1B: Second Questionnaire Mail Out

SCHOOL	QUESTIONNAIRES MAILED	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
N High	100	2	2%
O High	100	0	0%
OG High	35	1	2.9%
M High	40	0	0%
Total	275	3	1.1%

Table 4.1C summarizes the total responses from each of the four schools after two combined attempts.

Table 4.1C: Combined Total Responses from Two Mail Outs of Questionnaires

SCHOOLS	QUESTIONNAIRES MAILED	RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
N High	400	14	3.5%
O High	300	17	5.7%
OG High	110	15	13.6%
M High	90	3	3.3%
Total	900	49	5.4%

It is obvious that only a small percent of responses were obtained. Of the 49 Student Questionnaire responses, 39 (79.6%) were of a positive nature about the TOPS program. The other 10 responses (20.4%) contained somewhat negative comments. The sample for the student part of the study is, therefore, a volunteer sample (e.g., Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), the limitations of which are discussed in Chapter 5.

As detailed later in this chapter in the ‘Qualitative Data Sources’ Section, 27 of the 49 respondents granted personal interviews. Of the 27 interviews, 8 (29.6%) were from N High graduates; 8 (29.6%) were from O High; 10 (37%) were from OG High; and only 1 (3.7%) came from M High.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were incorporated to answer the following research questions of the study:

1. Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools (i.e., in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students)?
2. What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?
3. How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award?
4. What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose the scholarship after entering college?

Quantitative Demographic Information Describing the Student Sample

Student demographic data are important to understanding the general characteristics of the sample that is in this study and the overall population of students receiving TOPS in the state of Louisiana. The demographic data for this study were collected using a thirty-question survey instrument entitled Student Questionnaire (see Appendix B-1) that was sent to the 900 graduates of a three-year cohort (2005-2007) from four different high schools scattered throughout the state. Of course, the responses summarized in this section are based on the 49 individuals who responded to the survey.

This Student Questionnaire was patterned after the Smothers' (2004) instrument to measure student perceptions of TOPS. The instrument utilized a five point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using information on the sample population from the BOR, LDE, and LOSFA databases.

The demographic data measured the following nine traits: 1) gender, 2) race, 3) age, 4) family income, 5) level of parent(s) education, 6) grade point average (GPA), 7) ACT score, 8) student employment, and 9) involvement in extracurricular activities.

Comparisons of all respondents were made based on school versus school and graduate class versus graduate class. It should be noted here that earlier research conducted by Smothers (2004) and Reed (2005) concluded that even though race has been found to have no significant impact on who receives TOPS, nonetheless, research does show that a much larger percentage of TOPS scholarships are awarded annually to White students than minority students (as well as to middle-income to upper-income students versus lower-income students).

Preceding each table is the corresponding survey question listed from the Student Questionnaire and the Administrator Questionnaire used to retrieve the data. Expanded tables summarizing in more detail the responses from various participants in the study are found in Appendix K (Extended Tables of Demographic Information), Appendix L (Extended Qualitative Student Results), and Appendix M (Extended Qualitative Elite Results). These expanded tables include a breakdown by cohort groups (2005, 2006, 2007).

Gender

Data obtained from the Reed (2005) study showed that in 2001, most college freshmen in Louisiana were females (8,333 or 57.4%) compared to males (6,187 or 42.6%). This reflects a national trend of increased female enrollment in four-year universities and colleges in the USA over the past two decades. The sample in this study mirrors the Reed study in that of the respondents, 29 or 59.2% were female while 20 or 40.8% were male. Table 4.2 lists the gender of former high school graduates in this study by year and by high school. Respondents were mostly female in each school other than M High (where there were only three respondents).

Table 4.2: Respondents by Gender – Survey Question #1

School	Male	Female	Total
OG High	6 (40%)	9 (60%)	15
M High	3 (100%)	0	3
O High	5 (29.4%)	12 (70.6%)	17
N High	6 (42.9%)	8 (57.1%)	14
Total	20 (40.8%)	29 (59.2%)	49

Race

The Smothers (2004) and Reed (2005) studies concluded that White females (57.2%) are more likely to receive TOPS than White males (42.8%), as well as Black females (64.8%) compared to Black males (35.2%). Consistent with those findings, the sample for this study had 61.2% White recipients, 34.7% Black recipients, and 4.1% Hispanic recipients. Of interest, two of the paired schools (OG High and M High) are predominantly White, while the other two paired schools (N High and O High) are primarily Black.

Though most of the population from which the sample was drawn attended the two primarily Black schools, most of the respondents to the survey are White. Refer to Table 4.3 for the racial breakdown of the respondents for each school.

Table 4.3: Respondents by Race – Survey Question #2

School	Black	White	Hispanic	Total
OG High	1 (6.7%)	14 (93.3%)	0	15
M High	0	3 (100%)	0	3

“(table continued)”

O High	7 (41.2%)	9 (52.9%)	1 (5.9%)	17
N High	9 (64.3%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	14
Total	17 (34.7%)	30 (61.2%)	2 (4.1%)	49

Current TOPS data furnished by LOSFA reveals that 83% of TOPS awards go to White students compared to 11% of Blacks, with the remaining 6% of awards split between Asian Americans and Hispanics. As reported by LOSFA and the Reed (2005) study, White college student enrollment has steadily increased since the inception of TOPS from 8,500 (66.4%) in 1997 to 12,500 (69.3%) in 2007. On the other hand, Black college student enrollment has actually declined during that time from 3,500 (27.5%) to 3,579 (24.6%) while other minority student enrollment has remained the same 780 (6.1%) to 882 (6.1%).

The TOPS scholarship appears to have had a positive effect on one group. Although Whites make up 69% of college enrollment, they receive 83% of TOPS awards. On the other hand, Blacks make up 25% of college enrollment but receive only 11% of the TOPS awards.

Age

Another trait used to describe the typical TOPS recipient was his/her age. In the sample for this study, age ranged from 18-23. Of the three graduate cohort groups measured, the 2007 group registered the most responses even though they were the youngest in age (see Appendix K for details on the cohort breakdown). . Table 4.4 below lists the range of ages recorded from each school's respondents. The average age of those students studied was 20.

Table 4.4: Respondents by Age – Survey Question #3

OG High	M High	O High	N High
18 (0)	18 (1)	18 (0)	18 (2)
19 (5)	19 (0)	19 (7)	19 (6)
20 (3)	20 (1)	20 (5)	20(4)
21 (1)	21 (0)	21 (5)	21 (2)
22 (4)	22 (1)	22 (0)	22 (0)
23 (1)	23 (1)	23 (0)	23 (0)

Family Income

TOPS began in 1998 as a method of both rewarding achieving students and making college more available to lower-income students. Initially, the state required only a \$35 million appropriation in the 1998 state budget to meet the needs of those who qualified. As TOPS became more popular as a means of attending college for Louisiana’s high school graduates, the state’s budget allotted for TOPS grew proportionately until reaching the current obligation of \$125 million. TOPS became a ‘lifesaver’ as a way for thousands of Louisiana families to send their children to college. Even though the award is meant to serve as a merit-based scholarship, recognizing academic accomplishment, it has replaced former traditional need-based financial aid. While many lower-income families do receive TOPS, ironically, families with income above \$50,000 receive the most scholarships (Reed, 2005). Income does play a significant role in who receives TOPS. Only one-third of TOPS recipients are from lower income families.

Table 4.5 displays the various family income groups that comprise the sample for this study by school attended. Like the results from the Smothers and Reed studies, the median income for the sample in this study was around \$50,000.

Table 4.5: Respondents by Family Income – Survey Question #4

Schools	Above \$75,000	\$65,001-\$75,000	\$55,001-\$65,000	\$45,001-\$55,000	\$35,001-\$45,000	\$25,001-\$35,000	\$15,001-\$25,000	Under \$15,000
OG High	3 (20%)	4 (26.7%)	0	1 (6.7%)	0	1 (6.7%)	4 (26.7%)	2 (13.3%)
M High	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0	0	0	0	0	0
O High	4 (23.5)	0	2 (11.8%)	0	0	1 (5.9%)	6 (35.3%)	4 (23.5%)
N High	6 (42.9%)	1 (7.1%)	0	2 (14.3%)	0	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	0
Total	15 (31%)	6 (12%)	2 (4%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	6 (12%)	11 (23%)	6 (12%)

On average, the family income of the respondents in this study measured well above what is considered lower income. Though both OG High and M High are located in an extremely poor area of the state, their respondents in this study did not reflect that poverty. The median annual family income for M High was above \$75,000 compared to that of OG High at \$50,000. N High’s respondents’ median annual family income was measured at \$60,000 compared to that of O High at a median of around \$25,000.

The study’s sample as a group displayed interesting findings on family income. Thirty-one percent made above \$75,000; 12% made between \$65,000-\$75,000; 4% made

between \$55,000-\$65,000; 6% made between \$45,000-\$55,000; no families made between \$35,000-\$45,000; 12% made between \$25,000-\$35,000; 23% made between \$15,000-\$25,000; and 12% made below \$15,000. The majority of respondents' annual family incomes were \$50,000 or above. Interestingly, the two largest groups of TOPS recipients in this study were those above \$75,000 (30%) and those below \$25,000 (35%). This finding indicates that even though the respondents from this study live in mostly lower income school districts, the majority of them came from a family who could probably afford to send their children to college (i.e., they made over \$50,000 annually).

Parent(s) Educational Level

Smothers (2004) and other researchers contend that the level of one's parent's education has a direct and significant impact on the degree of a child's educational success. Whereas Smothers' study showed an average educational level of parents to be at the bachelor's degree or above, the modal parent educational level from this study's sample was that of a high school graduate. Table 4.6 below displays the educational level of the parents of the respondents in this study. The categories range from High School Student to High School Graduate to Associate Degree to Bachelor's Degree to Graduate/Professional Degree.

Table 4.6: Respondents by Level of Parental Education – Survey Question #5

Schools Most Common Educational Level	High School Student	High School Graduate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Graduate/Professional Degree
OG High	1	5	1	6	2
Bachelor's Degree	(6.7%)	(33.3%)	(6.7%)	(40%)	(13.3%)

“(table continued)”

M High High School Graduate	0 (0%)	2 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (33.3%)
O High High School Graduate	3 (17.6%)	10 (58.9%)	0 (0%)	4 (23.5%)	0 (0%)
N High Bachelor's Degree	0 (0%)	5 (35.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (42.9%)	3 (21.4%)
Collective Average High School Graduate	4 (8.2%)	22 (44.9%)	1 (2%)	16 (32.7%)	6 (12.2%)

Interestingly, each pair of matched schools had differences in parental level of education, even though each school is located in a lower to middle income area. The most common level of parental education at OG High, considered the positive outlier school in the study, was Bachelor's Degree (40%), even though this is one of the poorest areas in Louisiana. The most common level of parental education at M High, considered the negative outlier school in the study, was High School Graduate (66.7%).

The other matched pair of schools demonstrated even more interesting results. The most common level of parental education at O High, considered the positive outlier school in the study, was High School Graduate (58.9%). Meanwhile, the most common level of parental education at N High, considered the negative outlier school and the lowest academically ranked school in the study, was Bachelor's Degree (42.9%). It should be noted that an additional 21.4% of N's parents received either Graduate or

Professional Degrees. Yet, of all four schools studied, their students ranked significantly lower in ACT scores, GPAs, and percentage of TOPS awards.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Past research has shown that the way students are prepared academically for future education and the degree to which they apply themselves in the classroom during high school will have a significant impact on their postsecondary careers. The high school GPA of future students is a valid determinant and strong predictor of college success. In order for one to obtain TOPS, a rigorous curriculum of college preparatory core courses, often honors courses, must be scheduled and successfully passed by each student. The TOPS program requires a minimum high school grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 to receive the award. The Reed (2005) study demonstrates that the GPAs for college-bound students have increased since the program started in 1997 despite requirements for taking more challenging courses. Data also showed that more Louisiana high school students are taking the required core courses each year in order to receive TOPS. As a group, TOPS participants averaged a 3.48 GPA.

Again, the responses of the students from the three cohorts of the four schools showed interesting similarities. As a total group the 49 respondents' GPAs averaged as follows:

1. Category 3.5-4.0 GPA – 25 out of 48 – 52%
2. Category 3.0-3.49 GPA – 21 out of 48 – 43.8%
3. Category 2.5-2.99 GPA – 0 out of 48 – 0%
4. Category 2.0-2.49 GPA – 2 out of 48 – 4.2%

Table 4.7 displays the GPA averages for respondents from each of the four schools.

The results from each of the matched pairs are very similar.

Table 4.7: Respondents by Grade Point Average (GPA) – Survey Question #11

School GPA 3-Year Average	2.0-2.49 GPA	2.5-2.99 GPA	3.0-3.49 GPA	3.5-4.0 GPA
OG High 3.58 GPA	0	0	5 (33.3%)	10 (66.7%)
M High 3.58 GPA	0	0	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)
O High 3.41 GPA	0	0	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)
N High 3.34 GPA	2 (15.4%)	0	5 (38.5%)	6 (46.1%)
Collective Average 3.48 GPA	2 (4.2%)	0	21 (43.8%)	25 (52%)

ACT Scores

The TOPS program requires that one must attain an ACT composite score of 20 to receive a Basic Opportunity Scholarship to a four-year university in Louisiana. It should be noted here that the state is currently debating the possibility of raising that score to 21, though some state policy makers like members of the Legislative Black Caucus unsuccessfully attempted during the 2004 Legislative Session to reduce the required ACT score to 19. To obtain the more prestigious Performance Scholarship, one must make a composite score on the ACT exam of 23. The highest award, the Honors Scholarship, requires a composite score on the ACT of at least 27. Finally, for those students going to either a state community college or technical college, the Tech Scholarship requires a minimum ACT composite score of 17.

Has the concept of the TOPS awards had a significant effect on Louisiana high school students' ACT performance? The findings from the Reed (2005) study suggest the program has had a large impact. In 1997 before TOPS began, 38.5 % of Louisiana's high school students scored below 19 on the ACT exam. Since TOPS began in 1997, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of scores below 19 to only 30.1% in 2001. In 1997, those students who scored between 19-25 on the ACT exam numbered 48.1%. In 2001, that number grew to 57.1%. Just as interesting, however, the higher ACT score categories either remained stagnant or actually decreased. In 1997, the category of Louisiana ACT scores between 26-29 was 10.6% compared to 10.5% in 2001. Meanwhile, the highest category of ACT scores (above 30) actually showed a steady decline from 2.9% in 1997 to 2.2% in 2001.

Whereas the Reed (2005) study found that the majority of TOPS recipients in Louisiana scored somewhere between 20-25 on the ACT exam, the sample from the current study made an average ACT score of 23 during the 2005-2007 period. Table 4.8 displays the ACT score data for each school and collectively.

Table 4.8: Respondents by ACT Score – Survey Question #12

High School Average ACT	16-19 ACT	20-23 ACT	24-27 ACT	28-31 ACT	Above 31 ACT
OG High 23 ACT	2 (13.3%)	7 (46.7%)	4 (26.7%)	2 (13.3%)	0
M High 26 ACT	0	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)
O High 22 ACT	6 (35.3%)	5 (29.4%)	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)	2 (11.8%)
N High 20 ACT	4 (30.8%)	7 ((53.8%)	2 (15.4%)	0	0

Collective Average	12 (25%)	20 (41.7%)	10 (20.8%)	3 (6.3%)	3 (6.3%)
23 ACT					

The research data showed very little difference in ACT scores between the three-year cohorts of each school except in the case of O High. (Refer to Appendix K for details). At O High, there was a significant increase from an average ACT of 21 in years 2005 and 2006 to that of 24 in 2007.

Because the ACT scores in Table 4.8 were gathered mainly from TOPS recipients, since they constituted over 80% of the sample response, it is obvious that each school's average ACT scores would measure at least a 20 (the required TOPS score). Though the combined average ACT scores for the four schools registered at 23, there was some variance across the schools. For example, the two matched north Louisiana lower income schools fared better in average ACT scores than the two matched southern schools. (Again, refer to Appendix K for more details).

Outside Influences

In this section, outside factors were examined to determine what influence, if any, they had on assisting or detracting students from their academic goals during their high school years. Among these factors that were measured were extracurricular activities and part-time employment during school days. Extracurricular activities were defined as traditional sports, clubs, band, chorus, debate and speech team, dance team, cheerleading, etc. Part-time work was defined as 10-20 work hours after school each week. When questioned, none of the respondents indicated that either their school activities or work interfered with their studies or significantly impacted their GPA or ACT scores. If anything, they indicated that both extracurricular activities and work taught them a sense

of discipline, responsibility, and leadership. Table 4.9 indicates the degree to which respondents from each school engaged in extracurricular activities as well as the percentage of participation in such activities overall.

Table 4.9: Respondents Involved in Extracurricular Activities – Survey Question #13

School 3-Year Average	Participant	Non-Participant
OG High 93%	14 (93.3%)	1 (6.7%)
M High 100%	3 (100%)	0
O High 88.2%	15 (88.2%)	2 (11.8%)
N High 92.9%	13 (92.9%)	1 (7.1%)
Collective Average 91.8%	45 (91.8%)	4 (8.2%)

As can be observed in Table 4.9, an overwhelming percentage of the respondents were involved in high school activities of some kind at each school and in each cohort. The overall average for the group of respondents was 91.8% (45 out of 49) participation in extracurricular activities during their high school years.

Because most students who live in the four surveyed school districts are either from lower-or middle-income families, many of them were forced to work while in high school to assist their parents in maintaining household expenses. Despite this additional burden on their study time, most respondents indicated that part-time work did not affect their

studies. Table 4.10 shows the degree to which respondents were involved in part-time employment during their high school years in each school and across all the schools.

Table 4.10: Respondents Employed during High School – Survey Question #14

School 3-Year Average	Employed Part-time	Not Employed
OG High 46.7% Employed	7 (46.7%)	8 (53.3%)
M High 33.3% Employed	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)
O High 76.5% Employed	13 (76.5%)	4 (23.5%)
N High 57.1% Employed	8 (57.1%)	6 (42.9%)
Collective Average 59.2% Employed	29 (59.2%)	20 (40.8%)

Out of the 49 respondents from all four schools, 29 (59.2%) of the students worked part-time while in high school. This comes as no surprise since the areas surveyed represent some of the lowest incomes in Louisiana. While most respondents indicated that they felt working while in school did not affect their grades or studies, it is interesting to note that when comparing the two pairs of matched high schools, data reflected the opposite.

Most respondents from the two north Louisiana high schools indicated that they were not employed while in school at OG High (53.3%) and M High (66.7%). Coincidentally, these respondents also ranked higher in GPA and ACT scores than did the students from the other matched pair of high schools who were employed while in school for the most

part: O High (76.5%) and N High (57.1%). The ACT and GPA scores of the respondents from the southern part of the state were noticeably lower than the students from the northern part of the state.

Colleges Attended

Where students attended college may or may not have an effect on their studies, but working towards receiving TOPS did. Whether they received TOPS or not, all 49 respondents attended some type of postsecondary school. Those public and private schools in Louisiana were listed in Table 3.5. Of the 49 respondents in the study, 48 decided to stay in Louisiana while only one chose to go out of state. That one graduate from M High, who also happened to score the highest on his ACT (35) out of all 49 respondents, decided to attend MIT on a full academic scholarship offered by that university. Of the 48 who remained in state, 43 received one of the four types of TOPS scholarships as shown below, though four of those recipients eventually forfeited their awards.

1. 4 out of 49 respondents (8.2%) received the TOPS Honors Award.
2. 12 out of 49 respondents (24.5%) received the TOPS Performance Award.
3. 24 out of 49 respondents (49%) received the TOPS Opportunity Award, though four of those interviewed would eventually lose it.
4. 4 out of 49 respondents (8.2%) received the TOPS Tech Award.
5. 5 out of 49 respondents (10.2%) never received TOPS.

Table 4.11 below displays the postsecondary schools selected by most of the sample population to attend. Most TOPS recipients chose to attend a state-funded public school, though two respondents chose to attend the same Louisiana private university.

Table 4.11: Postsecondary Institutions Attended by Respondents – Survey Question #16

OG High	M High	O High	N High
LSU (4)	MIT (1)	LSU (4)	LSU (3)
UL-Monroe (10)	La. Tech (1)	UL-Lafayette (4)	UL-Lafayette (7)
Northwestern La (1).	Northwestern La. (1)	Northwestern La. (2)	Southern (1)
		La. Tech (1)	La. Tech (1)
		Xavier (1)	Xavier (1)
		LSU-E (2)	Lafayette Technical College (1)
		McNeese (1)	
		Southern (1)	
		T.H. Harris (1) Technical College	

The description of a typical TOPS recipient, as seen in Table 4.12 below, is very similar for the matched pairs of schools with a few peculiar findings in each of the four schools.

Table 4.12: Descriptive Characteristics of the Typical Respondent of the Study

OG High	M High	O High	N High
Race	Race	Race	Race
93.3% White	100% White	52.9% White	64.3% Black
Gender	Gender	Gender	Gender
60% Female	100% Male	58.3% Female	57.1% Female
Median Age	Median Age	Median Age	Median Age
20	22	20	19
Median Family	Median Family	Median Family	Median Family

Income \$50,000	Income Above \$75,000	Income \$25,000	Income \$60,000
Parent(s) Education Level College Graduate	Parent(s) Education Level High School Graduate	Parent(s) Education Level High School Graduate	Parent(s) Education Level College Graduate
GPA Average – 3.58 3.5-4.0 (66.7%)	GPA Average – 3.58 3.5-4.0 (66.7%)	GPA Average – 3.41 3.5-4.0 (41.2%)	GPA Average – 3.34 3.5-4.0 (46.2%)
ACT Average – 23	ACT Average – 26	ACT Average – 22	ACT Average – 20
Extracurricular Activities 93.3%	Extracurricular Activities 100%	Extracurricular Activities 88.2%	Extracurricular Activities 92.9%
Part-time Work 46.7%	Part-time Work 33.3%	Part-time Work 76.5%	Part-time Work 57.1%
TOPS Earned 14/15 Honors – 2 Performance – 4 TOPS Lost – 1 (ACT) Not Received - 1	TOPS Earned 3/3 Honors – 1 Performance – 1 TOPS Lost – 1 (ACT) Not Received – 0	TOPS Earned 15/17 Honors – 3 Performance – 3 TOPS Lost – 1 (ACT) Not Received - 3	TOPS Earned 12/13 Honors – 0 Performance – 2 TOPS Lost – 1 (ACT) Not Received – 2

Strangely, though M High graduates are considered the lower- achieving school in the matched pair, the sample in this study actually equaled or excelled on most of the descriptive characteristics that were measured. Again, it must be noted that only a few respondents from one year of graduates participated in the study from M High, thereby skewing the data provided by that one site. Their parents' level of education was higher

(College Graduates) than those from OG High (High School Graduates). M High respondents' family income averaged above \$75,000 compared to OG High's family income of \$50,000. Race, gender, income, age, GPA, and ACT were not factors in TOPS reception at these two locations

Meanwhile, when comparing the matched pair of O High and N High, the respondents again demonstrated little differences, with only a few peculiarities. N High, considered the lower-achieving school of the pair, actually equaled or surpassed its matched school of O High on most of the characteristics. Though the school's average GPA and ACT scores were the lowest in this study, N High's respondents' parents level of education and family income (College Graduate, \$60,000) were both higher than those of O High's respondents (High School Graduates, \$25,000). Again, race, gender, income, age, and GPA were not major factors in TOPS receipt between this matched pair. However, ACT scores (average of 20) had some impact on TOPS receipt at N High.

To summarize the demographic analysis, most of the 49 respondents (43 or 87.8%) received TOPS compared to only a few respondents (6 or 12.2%) who never received the award. Most of the respondents indicated that they had been fully informed by both the State and their high school guidance counselors of what was required by them to receive the TOPS award as well as the criteria and core courses needed to succeed. Also, a large majority of the respondents indicated that TOPS was a major influence in their decisions to study harder in high school and to attend college in Louisiana. Finally, most respondents to the study indicated that neither the criteria nor academic requirements of TOPS (other than the ACT requirement, which will be further discussed later in the Qualitative Section) were excessively difficult to succeed. Though involvement in extracurricular activities did not cause a negative impact on grades or ACT scores, part-

time employment did impact the grades and ACT scores of a significant number of respondents.

Qualitative Data Sources

Description of the Qualitative Data Sources

The qualitative section of this study involved two distinct groups of elite and administrator interviews mixed with interviews conducted with students that directly addressed research questions one through four. According to Dexter (1970), elite interviewing is the best approach to use when interacting with individuals who view themselves as the experts on the issue being researched. According to Dexter, experts are individuals who are usually well informed about a topic or issue because of their direct experiences or research knowledge. Through purposive sampling, sixteen individuals who played a significant role in the administration, policy development, or evaluation of the TOPS program were selected (See Table 4.13). That esteemed group of TOPS officials included LOSFA, BOR, legislators, Governor Staff, a university chancellor, a parish superintendent, and numerous school guidance counselors.

After identifying the principal data collection techniques (in-depth semi-structured elite interviews) and the sixteen expert individuals, the researcher began the data collection process. The scheduling of the interviews was one of the most difficult tasks to complete. Dexter (1970) points out that being flexible around the schedules of elite interviewees is a necessity on the part of the interviewer. In scheduling the interviews, participants were to select the location and time of the interview. At the start of each interview, the research was introduced as a genuine attempt to evaluate the TOPS program and the impact that it has had on the citizenry in the state of Louisiana.

The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain data pertinent to all four of the research questions to determine the impact TOPS has had on the level of high school education in Louisiana and the impact the program has had on the lives of students, particularly those from lower incomes. Finally, interviews were used to gather information on the retention problems associated with TOPS. To conduct these interviews and gather authoritative comments, a specific survey instrument entitled Administrator’s Questionnaire (see Appendix B-2) was given to each participant before the interview began.

In this study, elite interviews provided an in-depth look at the overall goals of the TOPS scholarship program. Additionally, interviews provided many different perspectives and possible solutions to some of the identified problems with the program. One of the strengths of this study was its reliance on the voices of the “experts” to identify certain aspects of TOPS that may not be familiar to the readers. The experts’ comments were most helpful and encouraging in the development of this research, as well as providing critical data needed to answer and explain the research questions.

Table 4.13: TOPS Elite Expert Officials and Administrators Interviewed

Name	Title/Position	Organization
Representative CM	Former State Representative and Author of HB 2154 (TOPS)	Louisiana House of Representatives
Senator NG	State Senator and Author of SB	Louisiana State Senate
Dr. JW	Chancellor Emeritus, Professor and TOPS Contributor	LSU
Dr. EJS	Commissioner of Higher Education	Board of Regents

“(table continued)”

Dr. KD	Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Sr. Policy TOPS Analyst	LSU Board of Regents
TH	Deputy Commissioner	Board of Regents
JG	Former Executive Director	LOSFA
MA	Executive Director	LOSFA
GW	Public Information Director	LOSFA
MN	Superintendent of Schools	SL Parish Schools
TB	Guidance Counselor	G High School
TB	Guidance Counselor	OG High School
CM	Guidance Counselor	SHC High School
CS	Guidance Counselor	O High School
ST	Guidance Counselor	M High School
Dr. JC	Former Chief of Staff Former Deputy Commissioner	Governor's Office Board of Regents
Dr. KHR	Former Press Secretary Vice President	Governor's Office University of Louisiana System

Analysis of Qualitative Data Sources

Administrative and elite questionnaires were simultaneously distributed to all experts and students before interview sessions. Field notes were kept, consisting of descriptions and analyses. This approach proved to be beneficial when transcribing the interview data. During the interviews, general and specific views about the TOPS program were discussed with the participants. Experts were also asked to discuss their direct involvement with TOPS and what role, if any, they played in the development of the

TOPS program. Experts and students were asked to recount what issues and problems they have seen arise since the inception of the TOPS program or since the onset of their particular involvement with the program.

In the analysis phase, passages from the interview documents were coded and used to identify key ideas and concepts to compare the statements and interpretations of the various participants. Several themes emerged from a thorough review of the existing literature on state merit-based programs and from rereading each interview several times. Those emerging themes are discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.

Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

The following section contains data relevant to Research Question #1: Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools (i.e., in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students)? The phrase ‘and associated issues’ in the section heading indicates that responses to questions indirectly related to answering Research Question #1 are included here. These responses provide a context for understanding the more direct questions related to Research Question #1. This is the most appropriate place to include these responses.

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

Data collected from the Student Questionnaire came from items #15 and #24-#30. A Likert type scale of 1-5 possible responses ranged from either “Strongly Agree or Highly Favorable” to “Strongly Disagree or Poor”. Question #15 measured each graduate’s opinion of the degree to which he/she felt his/her high school academically prepared him/her for college. Question #15 offered the following possible choices: 1- Highly

Favorable, 2- Somewhat Favorable, 3 – Average, 4 – Fair, and 5 – Poor. Those responses are displayed in Table 4.14 below.

Table 4.14: Survey Question #15 - What is your opinion of your high school academic preparation for college?

School	Highly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Average	Favorable	Poor
OG High Response: Somewhat to Highly Favorable	4 (26.7%)	4 (26.7%)	4 (26.7%)	2 (13.3%)	1 (6.7%)
M High Response: Average	0	0	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0
O High Response: Highly Favorable	8 (47.1%)	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (5.9%)
N High Response: Average	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	6 (42.9%)	2 (14.3%)	1 (7.1%)
Collective Response: Highly Favorable	16 (32.7%)	9 (18.4%)	14 (28.6%)	7 (14.3%)	3 (6.1%)

The data from Table 4.14 demonstrate that the most frequently chosen response regarding high school academic preparation for college was ‘highly favorable’ (32.7 of the responses), although the average opinions of each school’s respondents varied. Interestingly, the respondents from the positive outlier schools in each matched pair of schools (OG High and O High) responded that their educational preparation while in high school were highly favorable while the responses from the negative outlier schools’ (M High and N High) indicated that their academic preparation had been average at best.

The Student Questionnaire, similar to the Smothers' instrument (2004), included seven survey items to measure the respondents' level of familiarity with various aspects of the TOPS Program. Items #24-30 measured each respondent's opinion of TOPS based on a Likert scale of 1-5 consisting of the following: 1 – Strongly Agree, 2 – Agree, 3- No Opinion, 4 – Disagree, and 5 – Strongly Disagree. These variables were measured to establish the impact TOPS, required core courses, and TOPS officials had on each respondent's high school education as a means of answering Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. Tables 4.15-4.16, 4.18-4.21, and 4.23 display opinions regarding the TOPS Program based upon these items.

Responses to Items #24 and #25 in Tables 4.15 and 4.16 are relevant to answering Research Question #1. The data from Table 4.15 indicate that the largest group of respondents (49%) agreed that the State sufficiently educated them about TOPS. After that group, the next highest response came from the respondents (26.5%) who strongly agreed that the State sufficiently educated them about TOPS. Most of the graduates in each of the three cohorts at all four schools agreed with this item. (See details on cohort responses in Appendix K.) Collectively, over 75% of all respondents felt positive about the State's communications to them about TOPS. Only 22.5% of respondents disagreed with this item.

Table 4.15: Survey Item #24 - The State has sufficiently educated Louisiana citizens about TOPS

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	4 (26.7%)	9 (60%)	0	2 (13.3%)	0
M High	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0	0	0
O High	4 (23.5%)	9 (52.9%)	0	3 (17.6%)	1 (5.9%)
N High	4 (28.6%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)
Collective Agree	13 (26.5%)	24 (49%)	1 (2%)	9 (18.4%)	2 (4.1%)

Although some of the respondents claimed during their personal interviews that the reason they didn't receive TOPS was because of poor communications between their high school counselors and themselves regarding which courses to take for TOPS and how to apply for the scholarship, the data in Table 4.16 strongly suggest that most respondents (81.7%) were fully aware of the TOPS process because of their high school guidance counselors. In fact, only 18.3% of the respondents claimed otherwise. Again, because most of the respondents were TOPS recipients, this percentage was expected.

Table 4.16: Survey Item # 27 - I was aware of TOPS because of my high school guidance counselor

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	10 (66.7%)	5 (33.3%)	0	0	0
M High	1(33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)	0
O High	6 (35.3%)	6 (35.3%)	0	3 (17.6%)	2 (11.8%)
N High	7 (50%)	4 (28.6%)	0	3 (21.4%)	0
Collective Response: Strongly Agree	24 (49%)	16 (32.7%)	0	7 (14.2%)	2 (4.1%)

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #1 and Associated Issues

Tables 4.17, 4.22, 4.24, and 4.25 provide the qualitative data used to answer all four research questions from responses gathered through survey items #31-34 of the Student Questionnaire and items #1-#14 of the Administrator's Questionnaire. Table 4.17, items #1-3 and #7-9 below, list the rich text and comments obtained from selected elite interviews conducted with specific experts associated with Research Question #1: Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools?

Table 4.17: Qualitative Results from the Administrator Questionnaire.
Items #1-3 and #7-9

1. What do you believe are the goals of TOPS?
<p>CM: “To raise the expectations for academic achievement for our kids.”</p> <p>KD: “To encourage more high school graduates to stay in Louisiana for school, and to provide access to higher education to more high school graduates.”</p> <p>MN: “To afford students the opportunity to receive financial assistance as a reward for successfully completing prescribed course work.”</p> <p>ST: “To award students with a scholarship for their academic achievement.”</p> <p>CM: “To allow college or technical college bound students to receive a tuition-free education.”</p> <p>SC: “I believe that TOPS was implemented to assist students who are academically capable but not necessarily financially capable of reaching college. I also believe that it was a tool used to entice students to take high school more seriously, because of the big financial pay off.”</p> <p>TB: “I believe that the totals of the TOPS program are as follows: To help with the expense of college for Louisiana students. To help high school students take classes that will prepare them for college.”</p> <p>TB: “To encourage students to continue education beyond high school.”</p>

Table 4.17 (continued)
Item #2

2. Do you believe these goals are being achieved?
<p>Though half the experts felt the goals are being achieved, the other half felt that only some of the goals had been achieved. One guidance counselor had these remarks:</p>

SC: "I believe that in regards to assisting students who are academically capable that TOPS has made a difference. Unfortunately, the universities continue to increase their activity fee, which is very disappointing and discouraging to low- income students. "In regards to students taking high school more seriously, I don't know that that has happened. I believe that we have many students in this day and age who believe they are doing good work when they are only doing the minimum to get by in class. We have failed our children somewhere along the way with our expectations."

Table 4.17 (continued)
Item #3

3. How has TOPS impacted high school education?

CM: "More students are taking core curriculum courses, (i.e, chemistry, 4 math courses)."

JW: "Many more students enrolled in vigorous courses, those taking the core have much higher test scores. More student and parent time invested in academic preparation. Better discipline in schools."

KD: "It has helped defined a core curriculum, and encouraged schools to offer the core classes."

MN: "Provided an incentive for at-risk students and has assisted high school curriculum to increase rigor."

ST: "More students are taking core curriculum classes and they try harder to maintain good GPA. Also more students are deciding to go to college earlier."

CM: "It has allowed more students to attend college without seeking loans to attend Louisiana colleges."

SC: “Regardless of a student’s grades or achievement from first grade through high school, I feel that we have too many parents who are pushing their students to take the TOPS core curriculum. We have far too many students who are simply not academically capable of taking Algebra II and/or Chemistry who are choosing to take these courses because of TOPS. That in and of itself is not the big problem, because these students usually do end up passing these courses (just barely). The real problem as I see it is that these students are not looking outside of the scope of college and are missing out on the wonderful opportunities that could be waiting for them at technical colleges are specialty programs throughout the state.”

TB: “TOPS curriculum has required the student to take more stringent classes that will help them better prepare for college.”

TB: “It has affected some students to raise their GPA. Others feel it is too hard.”

Manzo (1994) and Reed (2005) argued that overall persistence rates discrepancies between minorities and Whites were primarily due to differences in their academic preparedness, rather than differences in socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 4.17 (continued)
Item #7

7. What are TOPS strengths?

CM: “Motivates students to achieve. Provides monetary rewards for working hard in high school.”

JW: “Students feel they have earned TOPS; motivation of students, teachers and parents, TOPS makes it clear that certain high schools or whole parishes are not up to standards.”

<p>KD: “Challenge; Access; Motivation to succeed (to keep TOPS complete 24 hours/year; meet the GPA).”</p> <p>MN: “Prescribed curriculum encourages students to schedule advanced coursework and financial opportunities.”</p> <p>ST: “More students are taking the core courses than before.”</p> <p>CM: “It allow students to attend college without having to worry about paying basic loans.”</p> <p>SC: “I think that TOPS does a great job getting the information out to high school counselors who can then give the information to our students.”</p> <p>TB: “The core courses prepare the student for college.”</p> <p>TB: “Four years of paid tuition.”</p>
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Table 4.17 (continued)
Item #8

<p>8. What are the weaknesses of the TOPS program?</p> <p>CM: “Some schools do not offer all core courses.”</p> <p>JW: “Not sufficiently promoted in some school and parishes; students who want to go to college are not given the help required to qualify.”</p> <p>MN: “Not enough emphasis on the “Tech” endorsements.”</p> <p>ST: “Availability of certain courses at small schools.”</p> <p>CM: “A lot of people don’t know about the requirements to receive TOPS.”</p> <p>SC: “I think TOPS and high school systems do a terrible job in making the students aware of and promoting the TOPS Tech award. With so much emphasis on the amount of money available for students receiving TOPS, receiving TOPS Tech is a</p>

let down to the students. I also feel, as I stated in an earlier answer, that I believe we have some students who really should not be looking at college at all because they are not going to make the grade. These students unfortunately are so focused on taking the courses (not necessarily doing well in the courses) that they miss out on other opportunities that are right in front of their faces. Students are made to think by society that college is where you need to be and that community colleges and technical colleges are less than. I think guidance counselors make the effort to let the students know about all of the opportunities available to them, but I sometimes feel we are hitting our heads against a wall.”

TB: “The ACT score of 20 is hard for some students that do not test well on standardized test. The student may be capable of studying and putting forth the effort it takes to be successful, yet cannot make the score on the ACT.”

TB: “The ability of small schools to offer required courses and the cost of the ACT if taken repeatedly. The required GPAs in that not all schools have the same standards.”

Table 4.17 (continued)
Item #9

9. Are the citizens (educators, students, parents, etc.) sufficiently informed about the TOPS program? ___ If not, what should be done to improve communications?

While the experts split with their opinions on this question, several had this to say:

CM: “Yes. Could improve T.V. coverage on the program. Also, use weekly papers throughout the state.”

JW: “No. See above; TOPS and success in later life should be a subject of discussion

in high schools on frequent basis.”

CM: “No. More workshops that target parents and teachers in the school system.”

SC: “Yes. I believe that if a parent today is not aware of the TOPS program that parent is not truly involved with his/her student or the school system.”

TB: “Yes, for those of them that want to obtain knowledge to help their students.”

TB: “Yes and no. The two school systems I have worked in talk TOPS at every opportunity.”

In summary, why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than others? Table 4.14 described student opinion as ranging from favorable to highly favorable (51%) regarding their high school academic preparation for college. These opinions were especially favorable for the students at positive outlier schools compared to the ratings by the students at the negative outlier schools. This is an important finding because it indicates that students from schools with a high rate of participation in the TOPS program (positive outliers) had more favorable opinions about their high school academic preparation for college than did those from schools with a low rate of participation in the TOPS program (negative outliers). More successful high school academic preparation is linked with a higher rate of participation in the TOPS program, and vice versa.

In Table 4.15, students rated the state as having sufficiently educated citizens about TOPS with 75.5% of those surveyed ranging from agreeing to strongly agreeing as compared to 22.5% of students disagreeing. Table 4.16 results showed that 82% of students surveyed believe they were aware of TOPS because of their high school

counselors compared to 18% of students who disagreed. These data support the interpretation that high school counselors are crucial to the success of TOPS.

Table 4.17 presented the qualitative responses of TOPS experts on their feelings towards the program and its preparation of Louisiana's high school students. Many believe the goals of TOPS include raising the academic achievements of Louisiana's students, to reward academic success, and to afford students more access to higher education with financial assistance. Experts were split on whether these goals have been achieved. Many believe TOPS has caused many Louisiana high school students to take more rigorous core courses, to work and study harder to raise their GPA, and to attend college where some may not been able to before TOPS was created. Many interviewed experts remarked that though TOPS motivates and rewards students, there exist several problems with the program. Many schools do a poor job of promoting the scholarship and adequately informing students and parents about the program. Some schools do not offer the required core courses or correspondence to take the courses. The TOPS Tech Award is not promoted well to students desiring an alternative career tract. Many argue that the TOPS standards, especially the ACT requirement, are discouraging to students who do not score well on standardized exams. Some students and parents blame school principals and guidance counselors for not promoting TOPS as the reason for not receiving TOPS. Others believe the State needs to do a better job of promoting TOPS through public workshops offered on a local basis throughout the state.

Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

The following section contains data relevant to Research Question #2: What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?

The phrase ‘and associated issues’ in the section heading indicates that responses to questions indirectly related to answering Research Question #2 are included here. These responses provide a context for understanding the more direct questions related to Research Question #2. This is the most appropriate place to include these responses.

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

Tables 4.18-4.21 provided the quantitative data necessary to answer Research Question #2: What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?

Table 4.18: Survey Item #25 - I was aware of the TOPS awards’ criteria and the various awards before graduating high school

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)	0	0	0
M High	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0	0	0
O High	10 (58.8%)	4 (23.5%)	0	3 (17.6%)	0
N High	7 (50%)	6 (42.9%)	0	0	1 (7.1%)
Collective Response: Strongly Agree	29 (59.2%)	16 (32.7%)	0	3 (6.1%)	1 (2%)

The data from Table 4.18 clearly show that an overwhelming number of the total respondents (91.7%) were aware of the required TOPS criteria and types of awards they would receive if they met that criteria before graduation. Each cohort at each school strongly agreed with this item (See Appendix K for more details). The largest group, 59.2%, strongly agreed with the survey item while 32.7% of the respondents agreed. Only 8.1% of the graduates disagreed with the item.

Table 4.19: Survey Item #26 - I was aware of required TOPS core curriculum before starting high school

School	Strongly	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly
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	Agree				Disagree
OG High	4 (26.7%)	11 (73.3%)	0	0	0
M High	2 (66.7%)	0	0	1 (33.3%)	0
O High	4 (23.5%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (5.9%)	9 (52.9%)	1 (5.9%)
N High	2 (14.3%)	7 (50%)	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	1 (7.1%)
Collective Response: Agree	12 (24.5%)	20 (40.8%)	2 (4.1%)	13 (26.5%)	2 (4.1%)

Though most of the respondents of this study (65.3%) agreed that they were aware before starting high school of the required TOPS core curriculum courses they would need to pass, still 34.7% were unaware. Several respondents claimed this was one of the reasons why they did not receive TOPS.

It must be noted here during site visits to both SHC High and LP High, the researcher discovered that neither school offered some of the required TOPS courses, such as foreign language or computer skills, since neither personnel nor equipment were available at either school. Additionally, although these same courses were offered by the State through correspondence, most of the students at the two schools did not own or have access to computers necessary to take advantage of this. Had these schools fully participated in this study as initially planned, their data would have yielded very different results. This is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

Table 4.20: Survey Item #28 - The criteria to receive TOPS are too difficult

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	0	3 (20%)	0	7 (46.7%)	5 (33.3%)
M High	0	0	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)
O High	0	0	0	12 (70.6%)	5 (29.4%)
N High	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	3 (21.4%)	4 (28.6%)	4 (28.6%)
Collective Response: Disagree	1 (2%)	5 (10.2%)	4 (8.2%)	23 (46.9%)	16 (32.7%)

Current LOSFA data indicate that 45% of most high school graduates in Louisiana receive TOPS annually. Data contained in Table 4.20 indicate that nearly 80% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the criteria to obtain TOPS are too difficult. Thus, nearly 80% of all the respondents in this study felt the criteria to receive TOPS is reasonable. Again, it should be noted that the overwhelming number (79.6%) of respondents in this study were TOPS recipients. Unfortunately, there were only a few (around 20%) of the sample in this study who never received TOPS. One can only imagine what their comments and data would have added to this research, especially with regard to this item.

Table 4.21: Survey Item #30 - TOPS directly influenced my academic performance and study habits in high school

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	3 (20%)	9 (60%)	0	2 (13.3%)	1 (6.7%)
M High	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)	0	0
O High	3 (17.6%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (23.5%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.9%)
N High	5 (35.7%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	2 (14.3%)
Collective Response: Agree	12 (24.5%)	18 (36.7%)	7 (14.3%)	8 (16.3%)	4 (8.2%)

Realizing that if they studied and worked hard while in high school, students would then earn a TOPS Award to pay much of their college educational expenses, most respondents (61.2% in Table 4.21) agreed that TOPS had a significant influence on their study habits and grades. Interestingly, however, nearly 39% of respondents in the study (most of whom had received TOPS) acknowledged that TOPS had no influence on how they performed academically in high school.

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #2 and Associated Issues

Tables 4.22A and 4.22B provided the qualitative data to answer Research Question #2 (What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?) utilizing responses to both the Student Questionnaire, item #31 and the Administrator Questionnaire, items #5-6 and #10-11 as seen below.

Based on data presented in Table 4.22A, most respondents believe that the thought of receiving TOPS to attend college motivated them to study harder and take more challenging core courses. Interestingly, a noticeable percentage (9 out of 49 respondents, or 18.4%) remarked that TOPS played no significant role in their high school performance.

Table 4.22A: Qualitative Comments from the Student Questionnaire

31. How did TOPS influence your studies in high school?
12 Respondents – It made me study harder.
10 Respondents - I needed TOPS to go to college.
9 Respondents - It made me take higher-level courses.
9 Respondents – It played no role in my high school performance.
8 Respondents - It made me want to receive good grades.
5 Respondents - It gave me something to strive for or do better.
5 Respondents - It influenced me to score higher on the ACT.
2 Respondents – I was more aware of college and the scholarship.
2 Respondents - I did not want to burden my parents with the expenses of a college education, nor did I want to work every semester.
1 Respondent - It helped me make the decision to stay in Louisiana to attend college.

1 Respondent - It made me aware of how unqualified our high school math teachers were.

The opinions of the TOPS experts in Table 4.22B, item #5 regarding raising the requirements to receive TOPS are enlightening in that 78% (7 of 9 respondents) felt that the requirements should remain the same as currently exist. At a time when the Legislature continues to study the need for raising the requirements, it is noteworthy that those who routinely administer the program differ with many policymakers. Their concerns include the additional pressure placed on smaller schools and students who already struggle to meet current requirements. They see this as a way to reduce the current number of recipients.

Table 4.22B: Qualitative Comments from the Administrator Questionnaire Items #5-6 and #10-11

5. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be raised? _____ Why? _____
CM: "No. It will automatically be raised with the increase of ACT scores."
JW: "The core should be strengthened. Agriculture should be taken out of science courses and so on."
KD: "No. Have the core curriculum raised to match the high school redesign curriculum."
MN: "No"
ST: "No. Recently, an additional science, math class has been added to core curriculum."
CM: "No. The requirements are at a achievable level."
SC: "Yes. I have always felt that the GPA of a 2.50 should have been higher. I do

not believe that most students who graduate from high school with a 2.50 have the study habits necessary to be successful in college.”

TB: “No. The core curriculum are classes they need to take, and if any more were added, the little schools would not be able to provide the classes needed for the TOPS program.”

TB: “No. The 17 1/2 credits required for the class of 2008 is a good foundation.”

In the same way that most experts interviewed in this study are not in favor of raising the TOPS requirements, they also do not want to lower them either as seen in Table 4.22, item six below. They believe the current requirements challenge the students to reach for an attainable goal and improve academically.

Table 4.22B (continued)
Item #6

6. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be lowered? ___ Why? _____
CM: “No. We need to raise the bar not lower it.
JW: “No.”
KD: “No. Students need a challenge to aspire to. TOPS is not tough; need-based aid will help those who cannot make it but still have a chance at college.”
MN: “No.”
ST: “No. The students need the courses in the core curriculum in order to be prepared for college.”
CM: “No. The scholarship should have some sort of academic stipulations to keep it competitive.”
SC: “No. I think the core curriculum has improved with the addition of the new credit in science and/or math. I already believe that the GPA is too low.”

TB: "No. The core courses are necessary for the success of the students in college."

TB: "Sort of. The TOPS tech award requirements are absurd, (example, Business English, Fine Arts, Chemistry, etc.). Why do they need Chemistry?"

Table 4.22B (continued)
Item #10

10. Are the existing TOPS core curriculum requirements sufficient to prepare all students to receive the scholarship? ___ If not, what should be done to do so?

CM: "Yes. ACT tutoring is important."

JW: "No. Limit the courses. Math, English, Social Studies, Science, Foreign Language to college preparation and at least 17 1/2 units."

KD: "To receive the scholarship, yes."

MN: "Yes."

ST: "Yes."

CM: "Yes."

SC: "I think the core curriculum requirements are sufficient, but that does not mean a student will be prepared for college or to receive the scholarship. There is so much more to college than being able to pass some classes. Even if a student is capable of passing the courses to earn the GPA required of 2.50, in many cases that student does not have the study habits required for college. This is true of students who make even higher GPA's." I think that the state should mandate a course that teaches study habits, as well as career awareness and opportunities for success after high school (i.e. programs available). Many schools teach a course entitled "Education for Careers", but that course needs to be for an entire year, be worth one credit, and encompass the

other items mentioned—not just career information.”

TB: “Yes.”

TB: “Yes.”

Table 4.22B (continued)
Item #11

11. Do all Louisiana students have access to required core courses and other academic requirements to receive TOPS? ____ If not, why? _____

CM: “Yes.” Some are on line.”

JW: “No. Parishes refuse to provide the courses.”

KD: “Yes, if not in their school, then by correspondence or through compressed video courses.”

MN: “Yes.”

ST: “Yes. I teach at a small rural school and my students are able to take all required courses. Students can take courses by LVS or by correspondence.”

CM: “No.”

SC: “I am sure not all Louisiana students have access to the required core courses. I know that St. Martin Parish high schools have had all courses in place for the TOPS core almost since the first year of the program. The only course that might not have been in place the very first year was Fine Arts Survey. I could not answer the question of why some students might not have access to required core courses.”

TB: “I feel that students of smaller schools have more difficulty in obtaining the classes than larger schools. However, these students can take the classes by Virtual School or correspondence courses.”

TB: “No. Smaller parishes and schools are unable to offer all the courses or staff.”

The responses from Table 4.22B, item #11 vary with regard to perceptions of the accessibility of TOPS core courses. School counselors from smaller rural schools in north Louisiana admit their schools are not fully equipped to administer TOPS. On the other hand, most high school administrators across the state responded positively as did college officials.

In summary, what impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS? Table 4.18 reported that 92% of students surveyed agree that they were fully aware of TOPS awards criteria and the various types of awards before graduating from high school while only 8% disagreed. In Table 4.19, 65% of students surveyed responded that they were fully aware of the TOPS core curriculum before they started high school compared to 35% of students who remained unaware of TOPS until they entered high school. Results from Table 4.20 indicated that a large number of students surveyed (80%) believe that the criteria needed to receive TOPS is not difficult as compared to 20% of those surveyed who felt the criteria is too difficult. Again, that number is probably inaccurate because very few of the respondents had not received TOPS. TOPS core courses did have a significant influence on student academic performance and study habits in the opinions of 61% of the respondents surveyed (Table 4.21) as compared to the opinions of 24.5% of students who responded that TOPS had no impact on their academic routine.

Table 4.22A listed the qualitative remarks of students surveyed about their experience with TOPS core courses. Most stated that TOPS made them study more, schedule harder courses, improve their grades, and help them attend college. Several said that TOPS played no role in their academic preparation during high school. In Table 22B, TOPS administrators described the TOPS program as working adequately with no need to

change its current core standards. However, several experts did remark that there existed across the state a need to improve both communications with the public as well as access to core courses, particularly in rural areas.

Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

The following section contains data relevant to Research Question #3: How can the State improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award?

The phrase ‘and associated issues’ in the section heading indicates that responses to questions indirectly related to answering Research Question #3 are included here. These responses provide a context for understanding the more direct questions related to Research Question #3. This is the most appropriate place to include these responses.

Quantitative Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

Table 4.23 below presents quantitative data that addressed Research Question #3: How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award? Most of the responses to that question are discussed later in this chapter.

Table 4.23: The TOPS award was a major factor in my decision to attend a Louisiana college – Survey Item #29

School	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
OG High	8 (53.3%)	3 (20%)	1 (6.7%)	3 (20%)	0
M High	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)	0	0
O High	7 (41.2%)	2 (11.8%)	3 (17.6%)	5 (29.4%)	0
N High	8 (57.1%)	1 (7.1%)	0	5 (35.7%)	0
Collective Response: Strongly Agree	24 (49%)	6 (12.2%)	6 (12.2%)	13 (24.5%)	0

As discussed earlier in this document, more Louisiana students have chosen to attend college since TOPS began because the program has made college more affordable. Table 4.23 indicates to what degree this statement is true for the three cohorts of the four high schools examined in this study. Forty-nine percent (49%) of the respondents strongly agreed that TOPS helped shape their decisions to attend a Louisiana college. Only 24.5% of the respondents stated that TOPS was not a major factor in their decision to attend a Louisiana college.

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #3 and Associated Issues

Tables 4.24A and 4.24B provided the qualitative data to answer Research Question #3: How can the State improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award? Both the Student Questionnaire, item #33 and the Administrator Questionnaire, items #4, #12 and #14 as seen below were used to obtain data.

Table 4.24A: Qualitative Results from the Administrator Questionnaire: Items #4, #12, and #14

4. How has TOPS influenced access to higher education?
CM: “Admission standards have to be raised at almost every college in our state.”
JW: “Increased number of students prepared for college; increased college success rate; increased percentage of A students attending college and many more ways.”
KD: “Students are more likely to complete the core curriculum, since they have a good chance at access.”
MN: “Increased enrollment for students who may not have been afforded the financial opportunities otherwise.”
ST: “Many students that did not get at least a 20 on ACT would not have been able to

afford college unless they took out student loans.”

CM: “It has allowed more students to attend college.”

SC: “I believe that many of the students who received TOPS would have gone to college without it through student loans, Pell Grants and college work study. I do believe however that it has allowed students who have received it to not be as stressed because of financial matters which allows them to be more academically productive.”

TB: “The TOPS program has helped in providing the lower socioeconomic students the hope and opportunity to attend college.”

TB: “It has made college obtainable economically for some.”

Most TOPS authorities believe the scholarship program has made college more accessible to the ordinary student and has motivated students to try harder in school. They also believe the program has the potential to help those most in need of college financial assistance. College officials have witnessed an increase in college enrollment.

Table 4.24A (continued)
Item #12

12. What needs to be done for more students to receive the TOPS scholarship?

CM: “Quality teaching and a motivated learner.”

JW: “Promote the program and improve instructions for parishes like St. Helena, East Feliciana provide additional capital.”

KD: “Careful advising and monitoring, from the eighth grade, for both students and parents.”

MN: “More publicity to insure parental involvement.”

CM: “Guidance Counselors and educators in the school systems need to assure early-

on that students are adhering to the TOPS requirements and checking to make sure the required courses are available at their schools but if not find a way for students to take those courses.”

SC: “I think we should be concerned with more students earning the TOPS Tech award than the TOPS scholarship. But if you want more students to receive the TOPS scholarship, the state and school systems need to start doing a better job showing students the connection between being successful in school and in the outside world in reference to ethic, attendance, etc.”

TB: “I would like to see the grade point average of the students figured in with the ACT score so that the poor standardized test takers could make up for their poor testing skills.”

TB: “TOPS Tech requirements must be re-evaluated. The TOPS requirements need to be more static and not have the change of the week. When I speak to students, I always say, “As of today...”

Tops officials believe that TOPS needs to be better promoted throughout the state. Some think the ACT score weighs too heavily in the decision regarding who receives the award and that the GPA should count more. Most believe the program needs to be more consistent. Many argue that there should be much more emphasis on the TOPS Tech Award.

Table 4.24A (continued)
Item #14

14. Can you recommend any improvements to the TOPS program?

“(table continued)”

CM: “We need to encourage more students to consider Technical and 2-year college training. No reduction in requirements. Communicate that opportunities are available to those who work hard.”

JW: “I do this every legislative session.”

KD: “Have the core curriculum reflect the new high school redesigned Core-4 curriculum. Promote TOPS Tech as a viable option – more students should take advantage of it, particularly those interested in the trades.”

MN: “More emphasis on “Tech” endorsements through high School Career/Technical curriculum.”

ST: “I think it is a good program because it challenges the students to take upper level courses to better their education. I do not know of any improvements that need to be made.”

CM: “TOPS needs to have more informative workshops for the public and schedule a parish wide workshop so that all educators in the school system can know exactly what TOPS is and what the requirements are for students.”

SC: “I think the program overall is a good program. The main issue I have is that I think that we need to start putting some emphasis on the TOPS Tech award.”

TB: “At the high school level, the only recommendation I have is to consider the grade point average along with the ACT score.”

TB: “Rename the Tech requirements, make allowances for small schools, fund voluntary ACT workshops, and once enrolled in college, assign mentors.”

In summary, how can the State improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award? Most students

(61.2%) that were surveyed in Table 4.23 acknowledged that the availability of TOPS was the major factor in their decision to attend college in Louisiana compared to 24.5% of respondents who admitted TOPS was not a factor in their attending college. To determine how the State could improve the program and what accomplishments TOPS had already secured, experts furnished interesting comments as seen in Table 4.24A. Those successes included raising college admission standards, increased college student enrollment and graduation rates, and allowing more students to attend college at little expense (especially students from lower socioeconomic levels). Their recommendations for continued growth of the program included continue promoting and monitoring TOPS statewide, encourage better guidance counseling by high school administrators, offer more area TOPS and ACT prep workshops, give more weight to a student's GPA over the ACT to receive the award, and do a better job of aggressively promoting the TOPS Tech Award as a positive alternative.

Though somewhat different in their views, students surveyed in Table 4.24B (See Appendix L) made recommendations that were similar to those in Table 4.24A. Collectively, the respondents offered critical advice to TOPS officials, policymakers, and school personnel on how to improve the program. Their voices were perhaps the most interesting and necessary to answer the research questions and to validate this research. The full text of student comments can be seen in Table 4.24B in Appendix L. To summarize, the following advice and the frequency of each response given by the interviewed students include:

1. Have high school counselors visit middle schools to begin promoting TOPS at that level rather than starting once students attend high school (8 responses).
2. Better prepare students for college (6 responses).

3. Offer and attend local ACT preparation workshops to students (6 responses).
4. Lower the ACT required score (5 responses).
5. Base the award more on a student's GPA instead of ACT score (5 responses).
6. Make the award equal to total college tuition and fees (4 responses).
7. Begin studying hard at the start of high school each of the four years to maintain a high GPA (3 responses).
8. Extend the scholarship to include summer school semesters and more than four years if necessary to complete the undergraduate degree (3 responses).
9. Increase the annual award to reflect increased GPA while in college (3 responses).

Qualitative Results Related to Research Question #4

The following section contains data relevant to Research Question #4: What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose the scholarship after entering college?

Tables 4.25A and 4.25B provided the qualitative data to answer Research Question #4:

What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose TOPS after entering college? The Student Questionnaire, item #32 and the Administrator Questionnaire, item #13 were both used to collect the data.

Table 4.25A: Qualitative Results from the Administrator Questionnaire: Item #13

13. What needs to be done for more TOPS recipients to retain their scholarships?
CM: "More pre-college counseling so they understand they must complete 24 hours per year."
JW: "Make the appeals process better known."
KD: "Students need to stay aware of implications of their choices. TOPS is not an entitlement, but a scholarship to win and the maintain."

MN: “Develop an incremental schedule for disbursement of funds with freshmen to be reserved for later payments.”

CM: “Students need to take those higher level courses in high school that will prepare them for college level courses.”

SC: “This goes back to the fact I believe students who probably should not be in college actually earn TOPS but cannot retain it because of extremely poor study habits.” “On the other hand, maybe we should look at students being able to start college a little later. The more mature a student is the more successful he/she will be. Many students are far too immature to give it 100%. Some students choose to go to work for a few years and then go to college, but TOPS is only good for a specific period of time after graduation.” “Maybe once a student begins and is not totally successful and realizes that they are not ready, they could take a break from school and continue at a later point in their life without the fear of losing TOPS altogether.”

TB: “I do not know. I only work with students that are trying to obtain TOPS out of high school.”

In summary, what are the reasons why many TOPS recipients lose TOPS after entering college and what can be done to increase retention of the award? This question was answered using strictly qualitative responses from the two questionnaires. The comments from Table 4.25A (Elite Interviews) and Table 4.25B found in Appendix L (Student Interviews) answer both parts of the question since why students lose TOPS also serves as how they can retain TOPS. TOPS experts note in Table 4.25A a need for more pre-college counseling about TOPS retention requirements, necessity for better and more mature decisions by recipients, better understanding of the appeals process, scheduling

more college prep courses during high school, developing better study habits, allowing recipients to voluntarily postpone college and their TOPS awards to work a while and to emotionally mature and prepare for college.

Students surveyed in Table 4.25B had similar comments as the experts in Table 4.25A. Their recommendations included encouraging high school graduates to develop some maturity before starting college and TOPS, lowering the college GPA standard to maintain the award, clarifying the annual application process, and improving communications between recipients, the college, and the State. The students also suggested that high schools should teach more critical thinking skills and research projects and should inform students about the retention requirements for TOPS.

Emerging Themes

Access

Consistent with the research literature, access to higher education in the state of Louisiana was a dominant theme for the administrators, legislators and policy makers who were interviewed. Dr. S was very passionate about the topic of “access” and spent a considerable amount of his interview talking about how Louisiana has addressed its access goals through the master plan. Dr. S stated:

“The Louisiana Master Plan for Higher Education, while it is explicit in talking about increasing opportunities, it is also implicit in a lot of the strategies which may or may not be obvious. In fact, we have three specific goals that address increasing opportunity for student access to success. Some specific objectives to increase participation are kind of broad. One goal is to increase enrollment by 2% by the year 2007. Now that may not sound like a lot, but it’s in the face of a 6% decline in the number of high school graduates. So you can’t get there unless you have a larger proportion of your high school

graduates who go on the post secondary opportunities, because we do not have a growing population like most states do. In fact, we're the only state in the south that is projected to have a decline in the number of high school graduates. We must make sure that from a structural standpoint that there is access, but then not only access but the quality or the ability to prepare for success once you get there. If you want to go to a four-year school, you've got to do it. You have a set of criteria for TOPS; you've got a set of criteria for admissions."

Dr. S continued, "TOPS also provides a financial incentive, instead of just being admitted. Then we work to make sure that students would have access to those courses. Up until just a few years ago, not every high school offered those core courses, and now all but a few do. Those who don't are in rural northeast Louisiana. But, we've got all of the courses available free, online, or in a variety of delivery modes, either on the Internet or interactive audio/video. So we've got all that, and it's all based on ACT standards for transition so every course has what ACT says it's supposed to have and any high school could access it to make it available for students so there should be no question about access to the courses."

During a September 21, 2008 interview, a former chancellor Dr. JW had this to say about access to higher education in Louisiana:

I started as a Prop 48 Committee Chair for NCAA academic standards. We wanted to establish standards for admissions to LSU, and in order to do that, there had to be uniform standards that applied to all student athletes. Pat Taylor was on the LSU Board of Supervisors from 1982-1988 and helped fight the 171/2 units core curriculum admission requirement. Taylor conceived a plan to pay tuition for students who

completed the core with a required GPA and ACT score in 1988. He passed this scholarship program now known as the Taylor Opportunity Program for students through the Legislature in 1989. 50% of Louisiana students qualify for financial aid, 25% qualify for Pell Grants. From 1930-1950, Huey Long made sure kids could go to college. Because Taylor had been poor as a child, he pushed for a need-based scholarship, which students had to earn. The higher standards required to receive TOPS have forced all kids to do better. HOPE was not the first merit scholarship, TOPS was. Wyoming has the best scholarship program in the nation. It is funded through excess oil revenue endowments and contains a need-based component added on. I pushed the Pelican Promise at LSU for all needy students because student loans are not protected by bankruptcy. Louisiana needs a mixed need/merit based award.

In an August 6, 2007 interview, former LOSFA Executive Director JG described his feelings about access to financial aid to attend college in Louisiana this way:

All schools are supposed to offer core courses or options. Without this, the students' chances are marginal. Many who are attending college should be receiving the Tech Award instead. Even many who lose TOPS stay in college. TOPS has to start with K-12 with appropriate core teaching.

MA, current LOSFA Executive Director, supported those earlier comments and supplied her own important observation,

Only 10% of entering freshmen at Southern have TOPS. It goes back to home life preparation and K-12 academic preparation. Quality of

education has to improve first. Why not pursue the Tech Award more aggressively?

During an August 8, 2008 meeting, Representative CM, the author of the TOPS legislation remarked:

TOPS, with core curriculum, is one of the reasons universities moved to select admissions. Kids who don't take core courses in high school don't last in college. That's why we organized a community college system. Over 50% of the entering college freshman classes were failing or dropping out. TOPSs was designed to attract those who could survive and graduate college. Need-based scholarships should be restricted to community and technical colleges. TOPS has always been an incentive program for average to better students. That's why we included the two upper level categories of the scholarship. We knew that if we changed that count in front of students, they would do even better. We wanted to make the kids earn it. We need to identify the barriers of TOPS and why kids aren't getting it. Is it work ethics, guidance counselors, or parents? We need to do a better job of motivating high school students instead of accepting the attitude of pursuing the easier tract or road. We need to quit pointing fingers at the lack of success in our students and require our students to hold themselves accountable for success or failure. We cannot allow merit-based aid to become a waste of taxpayer dollars. TOPS went from \$6 million in 1997 to currently \$125 million. Governor Mike Foster deserves the credit for funding TOPS and making it what it is."

Quality of High School Curriculum and Core Courses

Research Question #2 examined the advantages of the state's core course curriculum needed to obtain TOPS. Several TOPS experts and authorities believe that this is at the heart of the program's success. Others, including many students, parents, and high school personnel believe otherwise.

“Taking a challenging, college preparatory curriculum is critical to students' success,” said Representative CM. “I encourage all parents, teachers, and academic officials to emphasize the importance of being prepared to succeed in higher education to Louisiana's young people.” As the debate continues among higher education leaders in the state of Louisiana and indeed the nation, a closer look must be taken at how state merit aid is impacting the academic climate and curricula at the secondary education level. Because eligibility for merit aid scholarships is contingent on a high level of academic performance in high school, one might expect such a program to influence the effort expanded by students in high school. In light of the financial rewards available, it is also conceivable to expect parents to offer encouragement to their high school children beyond the normal level of parental support. More importantly, parents are expected to hold the public school systems accountable for providing the type quality education needed to take advantage of such awards.

A majority of the interviewees for this research also agree that the successful completion of an identified core curriculum will result in immediate improvements in the types of students that are produced to go on to post-secondary institutions. Because of its requirements, TOPS promotes the completion of a core curriculum.

Dr. JS is in support of all students participating in a rigorous high school core curriculum and remarked:

More students are taking college preparatory curriculum. We have data to verify that students who have taken the core curriculum do much better than those who didn't. TOPS recipients have better retention rates. The fact that it has a time limit on it probably has impacted graduate rates for students trying to maintain TOPS, and know that it runs out after a certain period of time.

The majority of students interviewed responded that TOPS indeed influenced their scheduling of core courses (see answers to student survey question #31).

Dr. JC, former Chief of Staff for the Governor's Office, believes that because of TOPS, discussions are being held at all levels that ultimately reinforce the importance in participating in a core curriculum. He stated in the Smothers' (2004) Study:

There has always been a TOPS core, and what the Master Plan has done, by identifying the Regents core, which for the time being is the exact same as the TOPS core, is reinforced the need, if you're going to go to a four year institution, regardless of if you're a TOPS recipient or not, you need to be prepared. I think it has helped to reinforce, I think it's caused there to be discussion not only at the student level, but at the teacher level, the counselor level and the school board level, that college preparation is important for ultimate success. There's one thing to get into college, it's another thing to graduate from college. And, every study, obviously, that we've looked at shows that the number one indicator for potential college success is the difficulty or the level of preparation, the vigor or the curriculum the student took in high school.

Dr. C's comments further validate what researchers argue about the importance of all students participating in a rigorous core curriculum. He further expressed the importance of a core curriculum in the following statement:

I think that the existence of a TOPS core is important, and that in the early phases of the TOPS program, there could have been a better identification of the core. I think that there needs to be an evaluation and that's one of the things that's being done right now...looking at the courses that have been identified as the TOPS core courses in terms of whether or not they deem the taking of those, regardless of whether you have TOPS or not leads to a better propensity for success in the post secondary education environment. It is imperative that we determine the eligibility for not only their standard high school GPA but for core GPA. Nationally, the discussion of achievement gaps between identifiable demographic populations, be they rural, be they ethnic, be they gender, be they whatever, has become a serious, serious focus. We need a rigorous core curriculum; everyone needs a rigorous core to be potentially successful.

TOPS Tech Award

Throughout discussions during both elite and student interviews, one type of TOPS Award kept emerging, the TOPS Tech Award. Lawmakers, college officials, TOPS administrators, guidance counselors, and students all commented on the need to promote it to students who decide that the work arena is more appealing than college. Many of those interviewed mentioned that students are well aware of college-bound TOPS scholarships but are almost oblivious of the Tech Award. As mentioned earlier, the Legislature has actually considered eliminating it because so few of the awards are used.

The experts insist that the TOPS Award could encourage more students to take more challenging courses that would ultimately improve their knowledge and work skills, producing a more prepared and desirable future employee/employer. The Lafayette Parish School Board is considering forming a partnership with Louisiana Technical College to experiment with a pilot study creating the new Lafayette Tech High School they are starting in Fall 2009 (Advertiser, 2008). This new alternative dual enrollment high school concept will focus on job skills and the TOPS Tech Award to support future workers' postsecondary goals. The TOPS Tech Award was the one topic that none of the sample population or elite respondents had any disagreement. The State and its high schools need to promote the Tech Award with as much enthusiasm and vigor as they do the other TOPS "College" Awards. Students and experts believe there needs to be motivation for the Tech Award as not only an option for those who do not score high enough to receive one of the other scholarships, but as a desirable goal for future skilled, technical workers.

One of the high school counselors, SC, believes that the TOPS Tech Award is very much unheralded:

I think TOPS and high school systems do a terrible job in making the students aware of and promoting the TOPS Tech award. With so much emphasis on the amount of money available for students receiving TOPS, TOPS Tech is a let down to the students. I also feel, as I stated in an earlier answer, that I believe we have some students who really should not be looking at college at all because they are not going to make the grade. These students unfortunately are so focused on taking the courses (not necessarily doing well in the courses) that they miss out on other

opportunities that are right in front of their faces. Students are made to think by society that college is where you need to be and that community colleges and technical colleges are less than.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF RESULTS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Results

Chapter 5 presents the major findings and limitations of the study as well as further recommendations for future research. The purpose of this study was to assess the Louisiana TOPS program to determine the extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana, to determine demographically what students are receiving TOPS, and to collect perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences.

The study design included both qualitative and quantitative data, a mixed methods model. The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis of responses to the elite/administrator questionnaire and student questionnaire, newspaper coverage of TOPS, and interviews with key TOPS experts and former graduates of 2005-2007 classes of four distinct Louisiana high schools. Emerging themes from the qualitative data were used to provide answers to the four research questions.

The remainder of this section will summarize answers to the four research questions using results presented in Chapter 4 plus information gleaned from other sources (e.g., the research literature) during the course of conducting the study.

Question 1: Why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools (i.e., in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity of their students)?

One of the conclusions from the responses to the Student Questionnaire is that the majority of the respondents could be characterized in terms of certain socioeconomic characteristics. The recipients of TOPS from this sample were mostly White females, on average 20 years old, came from families whose highest level of education was high school graduation, and whose annual income was \$50,000 or more.

These characteristics are consistent with those of the population of TOPS students for the entire state. This overall population is disproportionately White, as discussed in Chapter 4. LOSFA reports indicate that 83% of TOPS awards go to White students compared to only 11% of TOPS that go to Blacks, with the remaining 6% of awards split between Asian Americans and Hispanics. While Whites make up 69% of college enrollment in the state, they receive 83% of TOPS awards. On the other hand, while Blacks make up 25% of the college enrollment in the state, they receive only 11% of TOPS awards. The group that receives the most TOPS scholarship comes from families with income above \$50,000 (Reed, 2005). Only one-third of TOPS recipients are lower income.

Few of the students interviewed in the study considered poverty to be a factor in their obtaining or retaining TOPS. On the other hand, the counselors at LP High and SHC High absolutely blamed their students' poor performances and lack of TOPS interest or success directly on their level of poverty.

Given this background information, why are some schools more successful in preparing their students for TOPS eligibility than other comparable schools? Table 4.14 indicated that 51% of the respondents in the sample had favorable to highly favorable opinions regarding their high school academic preparation for college. Interestingly, the respondents from the negative outlier schools in each matched pair of schools (M High

and N High) responded that their educational preparation while in high school had been average at best while the responses from the positive outlier schools (OG High and O High) indicated highly favorable opinions regarding their academic preparation in high school.

This is an important finding because it indicates that students from schools with a low participation rate in the TOPS program had less favorable opinions about their high school academic preparation for college than did those from schools with a high participation rate in the TOPS program. More successful high school academic preparation is linked with a higher rate of participation in the TOPS program, and vice versa, even when schools are matched in terms of the socioeconomic backgrounds of their students, as they were in this study. Since all the schools in the study sample had high poverty rates, this indicates that some schools in the state are better able to prepare their lower-socioeconomic status students for college and that those students also have a higher participation rate in TOPS.

What are these successful schools serving students with high poverty rates doing that other schools are not? Anecdotal evidence picked up throughout the study indicates that the successful schools provided constant information and promotion of the scholarship program to concerned students and parents, and in turn, these parents and students demanded the highest quality educational experiences possible. Regardless of socioeconomic level, personal pride and commitment to succeed on the part of the students and school personnel are the most important attributes in attaining TOPS. OG High and O High certainly proved this.

Manzo (1994) and Reed (2005) argued that overall persistence rate discrepancies between minorities and Whites were primarily due to differences in their academic

preparedness, rather than differences in socioeconomic backgrounds. As Sanders and Henson (2000) suggest, the marketplace demands improvement of high school performance. One of the goals of TOPS is to do just that.

When greater commitment and more aggressive guidance counseling were observed during the study, the percentage of TOPS recipients was also higher. Guidance Counselor SC remarked, “I believe that TOPS was implemented to assist students who are academically capable but not necessarily financially capable of reaching college. I also believe that it was a tool used to entice students to take high school more seriously, because of the big financial pay off.” Data from Table 4.22A show that 22 out of 49 respondents agreed with Mrs. SC’s observations. As former Executive Director of LOSFA JG stated earlier, “To improve TOPS for all students, there has to firstly be a commitment towards academic excellence at home, with each student, and in each school. The State cannot do it alone.”

Question 2: What impact does the availability and quality of TOPS core curriculum courses have on student eligibility for TOPS?

Students who pursue the TOPS scholarship are required to take certain core courses and maintain a minimum GPA and ACT score in order to secure TOPS. If schools are unable to offer the required courses because of lack of sufficient personnel, equipment, or funding, correspondence courses are made available. At the four sample schools, this was not a problem. All courses are offered, and most interviewees remarked that they had little difficulty meeting all TOPS requirements, though several encountered some academic difficulty due to their ACT scores.

In some cases certain schools have the ability to offer required core courses and the equipment and facilities to do so (i.e., foreign language instructors, Advanced Math and

Calculus instructors, parental support, available school and home computers to access correspondence courses) while others lack required materials or teachers due to shortage of funds or availability of certified instructors. However, in the case of LP High in rural northeast Louisiana, the counselor stated that the major reasons so few of her graduates receive TOPS is because their school doesn't offer foreign language and Advance Math due to the absence of any certified instructors. As a poor area of the state and as a struggling school, they have severe difficulty in attracting necessary teachers. Most of her students lack both computers and skills to use them on their own.

The comments of the guidance counselor at SHC High in rural southeast Louisiana duplicated those made by the counselor of LP High, except the condition of her students was worse. There were few computers at her school and even fewer in the students' homes. The majority of the students have parents who barely graduated from high school to go to work either in the agricultural fields or lumber and paper mill industries that support the community. In summary, college isn't a priority or reality in these communities. Complacency and reluctance to change are key problems.

ST, Guidance Counselor of M High, has concerns for her TOPS students,

TOPS is an ongoing process. Because my students now see that they have a chance to go to college, they are taking more and more core courses these days and trying really hard to pass them as well as maintain a good GPA. The criteria to obtain TOPS don't need to be raised. Our kids are just starting to get used to taking these courses even though some of our smaller schools can't offer certain required core courses because neither certified teachers or correspondence exist, even though our small rural school does offer them.

TB of OG High believes TOPS officials need to reconsider GPA and ACT scores as determinants to receive the award. As she observed, “This past year, I had two graduates who had taken and passed all needed core courses with a GPA of 3.0, but neither was awarded TOPS Opportunity to go to college because one had an ACT score of 16; the other had a 19 ACT.”

As numerous TOPS officials and high school guidance counselors have observed, the core curriculum has made the students more aware of their ability to work harder, to improve their academic knowledge, to set higher personal goals that are attainable, and to be rewarded in the process. On the other hand, students must have the opportunity to take the core courses to meet the State’s requirements. Schools like LP High and SHC High must be able to offer these courses or provide an acceptable alternative. As Counselor TB remarked, “I’m afraid for our poor, little rural schools who don’t currently have the means or funds to offer TOPS core courses.”

Counselor SC summarized the impact of core courses:

I think the core curriculum requirements are sufficient, but that does not mean a student will be prepared for college or to receive the scholarship.

There is so much more to college than being able to pass some classes. In many cases students do not have the study habits required for college.

This is true of students who make even higher GPA’s. I think that the state should mandate a course that teaches study habits.

Question 3: How can the state improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets, especially towards the TOPS Tech Award?

An important conclusion from the study is that contrary to previous research findings, lower-income and minority students can and do compete with other students from middle

and upper incomes (or from the majority race) when it comes to receiving TOPS. Previous studies (Heller, 2000; Smothers, 2004; Reed, 2005) of state-funded merit-based scholarships indicated that awards like TOPS primarily benefit middle to upper-income college students who come from families that annually earn \$60,000 or more. This is not surprising since past research (Heller, 2002; Smothers, 2004; Reed, 2005) also demonstrates a correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement.

An examination of two of the schools in the study indicated that OG High and O High are at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. Yet, OG students maintain high GPAs and have one of the highest percentages of TOPS recipients from their graduating classes (49%) in the state. Meanwhile, O High, a predominately (86.5%) Black high school, produced an impressive academic turnaround by substantially raising both their GPAs and ACT over the past five years as well as increasing their TOPS reception percentage from 18.5% in 2003 to 43.2% in 2007. The school improved its SPS rating from Academically Unacceptable (One Star) to currently Exemplary Academic Growth (Two Stars). In fact, of the 49 respondents to the Student Questionnaire, only three students scored above a 31 on their ACT. Two of those students were Black and attended O High. Additionally, three other students in the study sample scored above 28 on their ACT, and one of those was Black. Even though the participants in the study were mostly White (30 out of 49, 61.2%) compared to Blacks (17 out of 49, 34.7%), an equal number of Whites and Blacks made impressive ACT scores. Three Blacks scored 28 or higher compared to three Whites who scored the same. This study proved that the gap between races regarding TOPS reception is constantly narrowing, as initially reported by Reed (2005).

Based on these results, one could ask a couple of intriguing questions: Is TOPS changing academic behavior among Louisiana's high school students and the choices

they make regarding TOPS eligibility? What will be the long-term effect of TOPS on access to college for lower-income students, especially among minorities who currently receive a disproportionately small share of the scholarships? Among the respondents in this study, 53% (26/49) of the TOPS recipients came from families who earn over \$50,000 a year compared to 47% (23/49) of the recipients whose families earned wages considered lower-income. Four years ago, the number of statewide lower-income TOPS recipients was significantly lower (15%) as reported by Reed (2005) than the percentage reported in this study.

The sample of respondents in this study volunteered to participate and is not comparable to the statewide population. Nevertheless, the responses of the students in poverty in this study indicated that TOPS is having a positive and significant effect in certain areas in the state on lower socioeconomic students' attitudes regarding access to and attendance in college. The more the State invests in human capital by making postsecondary education available to needy students, the more these students will become productive citizens of Louisiana and reduce the state's poverty level, which is perennially among the highest in the USA.

Again, in his report to the BOR (2001), Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education JS remarked,

TOPS is about providing greater access through student success. This is not a plan designed to lock students out of the system, but to make clear expectations early on to ensure that students have the resources to meet their full potential.

Unfortunately, a recent document entitled, "Measuring Up 2008: The National Report Card on Higher Education", observed that Louisiana received a failing grade

when it came to college affordability, despite the efforts of TOPS. The article states that higher education has become less affordable for students and their families, especially for poor and working-class families who must devote 14% of their income to pay for costs at public 4-year colleges. The report (see Appendix R) concludes by acknowledging that financial aid to low-income students is low in the state.

One of the school counselors who represented one of the lowest achieving schools in the study, CM, gave this suggestion:

TOPS needs to have more informative workshops for the public and schedule a parish wide workshop so that all educators in the school system can know exactly what TOPS is and what the requirements are for students.

Perhaps one student from a lower socioeconomic background said it best,

We were made aware of TOPS courses starting in 8th grade. They should stress ACT scores earlier on. My ACT score did not reflect my abilities as a student. I graduated from high school with honors while taking all Honors classes. Throughout college I maintained 3.0 GPA. Counselors could have spent more time preparing us for college. TOPS officials should interview worthy students to decide who gets TOPS, not just use GPA and ACT scores.

Comments from the author of TOPS, the former chancellor who helped shape TOPS, LOSFA and Higher Education officials, and the students themselves, indicate that they regard TOPS as a pretty fair program offered to and pursued by most of Louisiana's high school students. Are there some who have fallen through the cracks of eligibility? The answer from the TOPS elites and administrators is an emphatic "Yes!" Can more be

done to reward those deserving students, especially from lower income brackets? Again, the answer from the elites and administrators is “Yes!” and they provided some suggestions regarding how to do that, which are summarized in the remainder of this section.

Respondents to the Administrator Questionnaire made the following suggestions concerning how the State could improve TOPS eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets:

1. The State could allow students who scored one to two points below the ACT requirement a one to two semester probationary period during which they would have to maintain a 3.0 GPA.
2. The State should aggressively promote the TOPS TECH scholarships, especially in those areas of Louisiana where working force needs are likely to increase in the near future.
3. The State could reduce the requirements for receiving the TOPS TECH scholarships.
4. Districts and schools could more closely monitor the performance of students as they progress through high school in terms of their continued eligibility for TOPS.
5. Guidance counselors should do everything possible to ensure that their students have access to core courses.
6. The State should provide more workshops on TOPS for parents and teachers.
7. The State and Districts should fund more voluntary ACT preparation courses.

The rest of this section presents some more specific comments that the TOPS elites and administrators made regarding these general suggestions for improving TOPS

eligibility rates among students in lower income brackets. Several of the elite TOPS officials and students interviewed made the point that some students who lacked the ACT requirement by 1-2 points have enrolled and successfully maintained a 3.0 GPA while attending a college of their choice. If TOPS is to be a reward for accomplishment, shouldn't these students be placed on a probationary period of 1-2 semesters and after proving their ability be rewarded TOPS for the remainder of their college careers under the same rules as those out of high school?

Another theme that the elite experts and administrators collectively shared was a need to aggressively promote the TOPS Tech Award within our high schools that are developing our future workforce. Few students are taking advantage of the TOPS Tech Award and the state is seriously contemplating eliminating this award. Even though most agree that the requirements to attain and then retain TOPS scholarships are reasonable and fair, they all echo the sentiment that probationary status for those who are "late bloomers" and academically unprepared, but show a compelling desire and commitment, should be given a second chance since their success is Louisiana's ultimate success. They also agree that the State and all school districts need to communicate better with each other, concerned parents and students, and provide whatever necessary for poor districts, schools, and students to obtain TOPS (including funding).

Counselor CM evaluated TOPS this way,

I believe TOPS has allowed some students to attend college without seeking loans, but a lot of people don't know about the requirements to receive TOPS. More workshops that target parents and teachers in the school system are needed to improve communications on TOPS as for what core courses are needed to receive TOPS. Guidance counselors and

educators in the system need to assure early on that students are adhering to TOPS requirements by making sure that core courses are available at their schools. If not, we need to find a way for students to take these courses.

TB, who has counseled at two different high schools located on opposite sides of the state, reflected on her TOPS experience:

Smaller parishes and schools are unable to offer all the courses due to financial difficulties. TOPS Tech requirements must be reevaluated.

They need to be more static and not have the change of the week. For the purpose of who is being prepared for this award, the requirements need to be lowered, not raised. Allowances need to be made for small schools.

The state needs to fund more voluntary ACT workshops.

Interestingly, even a Higher Education scholar, Dr. KD of the BOR, suggested these revisions to the program: “Have the TOPS core curriculum reflect the new high school redesign core curriculum. Promote TOPS Tech as a viable option, particularly to those interested in the trades.”

Question 4: What are the reasons why many TOPS recipients resign from college?

A brief summary of the literature on student persistence and retention is provided here as background information on what was discovered in the current study. Dr. Clinita Ford (1994), Professor at Florida A&M and Director of the National Retention Center, has stated that, “More personal and better-run retention programs are drastically needed on our campuses.” Research by DesJardins (1999) has demonstrated that students with financial difficulties, disabilities, or who live a farther distance away from home, are at a higher risk to leave college before graduation. Pre-college variables such as ACT scores

and high school rank percentile were also studied to determine their effect on student persistence. Obviously, those with better grades persist longer. Scholarship-awarded students appear to dropout less, but not by a significant number. The DesJardins, et al. (1999) study concluded there is no “general theory” of student departure from college. Monitoring grades early in a student’s academic career appears to be an effective retention strategy according to the DesJardins (1999) research.

Past literature indicate that students drop out of universities for a variety of personal, social, and financial reasons. It is imperative for an institution to follow entering freshmen throughout their academic career, to understand issues of retention and to help students to remain in school. Research findings from a Tinto study on student persistence within the classroom suggest that academic ability and achievement have positive effects on persistence; social influences by parents, peers, and teachers are significant; and undergraduates are more responsible for their own outcomes by individual attitude. Normative expectations of parents, friends, and teachers affect students’ decisions to leave or remain at a particular university (Tinto, 1997). So, what reasons did Louisiana TOPS recipients give for leaving college and forfeiting TOPS?

Unfortunately, few responses regarding TOPS retention emerged from the four targeted schools in the study. Those who did respond stated that their major difficulties were maintaining the required college GPA and semester credit hours. Reasons given included not going to class regularly or studying as needed, poor grades and academic performance, reduced semester credit hours, personal illness, job requirements, lack of emotional maturity, lack of academic preparation, and miscommunication between the student and the State and college.

Due to this lack of data, the researcher decided to report results from a 2004 pilot study that he conducted at a local high school. This study involved a three-year cohort (2000-2002) of TOPS recipients who had lost their scholarships and the reasons that they gave for this happening. (See Appendix O for more details).

Based on the results from 46 responses to the questionnaire and subsequent personal interviews, seven themes emerged from this pilot study:

- 1) Seven respondents said that they lost TOPS because of dropping below the required college semester class hours.
- 2) Six respondents stated that their awards were lost due to academic failure (poor grades).
- 3) Five respondents said they lost TOPS because of poor academic preparation at their high school.
- 4) Two respondents said they lost TOPS because of dropping out of school to enter the military (but couldn't understand why they couldn't get it back once out of the military).
- 5) Two respondents stated that they lost TOPS because they withdrew from school to pursue a career or marry.
- 6) Two recipients said they lost it because they withdrew to have a baby.
- 7) Two recipients stated they lost TOPS due to personal hardships (family death and serious illness).

It should be noted that these TOPS students were among the early recipients of the program and that the State has subsequently developed a TOPS Commission to review students with extraordinary circumstances for losing TOPS and to grant extensions where applicable.

A concerned parent from the pilot study advised, “My son lost TOPS his first year of college because he was not prepared for the curriculum. As a parent I was not sufficiently educated about what was required to maintain TOPS. They should have a probation period in the first year for those who don’t receive it but display proof of accomplishment on their own.”

Another student made this comment:

Core courses didn’t really prepare me for college; there were no mid terms or finals. They just prepared me for LEAP and TOPS. I lost TOPS because I slipped below 3.0. I still have the basic TOPS since I have a 2.8 GPA. High school didn’t teach critical thinking and research papers, I had to learn on my own.

Representative CM, the “Father of the TOPS program”, made the following comments regarding higher education retention rates:

We need to continue raising the expectations for academic achievement for our kids, not lower it. Admittedly, some schools do not offer all the required core courses. This needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Also, we need to offer more ACT tutoring and continue improving the quality of teaching. We also need to encourage more students to consider technical and 2-year colleges as a good and positive alternative and push as often as possible the Tech Award as an economical tool.

As with previous studies, there were certainly limitations and challenges in the process of conducting this research. Two types of limitations are discussed in this section: limitations of the program itself and limitations of the study.

Limitations of the TOPS Program

1. Required core courses are not available in every school, especially in poor rural areas of northeast and southeast Louisiana. Correspondence courses or computers are not always accessible as an alternative. Consequently, the students in those schools struggle to receive TOPS.
2. The TOPS program has become so politically popular with the public and colleges and universities in Louisiana that it is almost impossible to make changes to the scholarship to assist those who are really in need. To make matters worse, the State is currently experiencing mandated budget cuts and constraints in Higher Education. So, the chances of increasing TOPS merit-based funding or providing sufficient need-based financial aid anytime soon is remote.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study did not measure the degree of instruction provided by certified or non-certified teachers and the effect on student achievement.
2. The study did not examine the effect of the ACT as an assessment of student knowledge, even though it is a major requirement to receive TOPS.
3. Though supportive, government agencies and selected schools provided limited data to the researcher due to confidentiality regulations.
4. Contact information was limited to four high schools across Louisiana. Other schools refused to cooperate after initial site visitations.
5. Three major hurricanes occurred during the study, which created chaos and the loss of critical data sources.

6. One of the most interesting selected schools was destroyed by arsonists, thereby eliminating its graduates from further participation in the study due to lost records.
7. Whereas the study attempted to measure both positive and negative experiences of the TOPS program, a disproportionate percentage of positive (80%) to negative (20%) comments were retrieved. In fact, despite two attempts to contact hundreds of students statewide who either never received TOPS or lost it in college, very few responded. With a total response rate of 5.4%, and that being primarily positive, an obvious sample bias naturally occurred. Consequently, the researcher did not have the data necessary (from student responses) to examine what he wanted to originally. Although the obtained sample was adequate to collect some important and interesting data, a larger response rate would have generated much richer data leading to more comprehensive and valid conclusions.
8. At selected schools whose TOPS participation was among the lowest in Louisiana that there was little or no interest in participating in the study by school counselors. The study identified key informants who could have made a major contribution to the research but refused to participate because of apathy and negativism. Further field study in under-achieving schools is necessary. The study sites were so widespread across the state that it made travel extremely hard and costly. Such travel was necessary to communicate effectively with the sample population and experts.
9. There was a major shortage of data from those who have not received TOPS or who lost it during college. These individuals responded in very small

numbers, 10 out of 900 (1.1%). That small sample size limited and skewed the depth and diversity of research findings. More conclusive research is needed to provide a clearer picture of what is really happening with students who either do not receive TOPS or do not retain it.

Recommendations

The recommendations listed in this section were provided from several sources including elite participants (LOSFA, BOR, current and former Legislators), Parish School Superintendents, guidance counselors, TOPS students, and the researcher. Many of these respondents shared similar views, as well as unique ideas on ways to improve TOPS. The one thread they shared, however, is that they all wished to see TOPS improved.

Implications for Policy

1. BESE should ensure that professional educators (guidance counselors, principals, and teachers) in all schools clearly communicate the TOPS requirements of core courses, ACT score and GPA to all students and parents on a regular basis beginning at the middle school level rather than during high school. School officials should re-emphasize the TOPS requirements at freshman orientation each year.
2. BESE should improve the education of guidance counselors and teachers regarding the TOPS program in order to assist them in helping interested students with the process. In his 2001 report to the BOR, LOSFA Executive Director JG stated that 41% of TOPS recipients who had lost the scholarship had done so because they were unaware of the ramifications of dropping below the required semester

hours. JG suggested then to the BOR that they should strongly consider requiring college counselors to meet regularly with TOPS recipients to make them aware of changing TOPS requirements.

3. BESE needs to guarantee that every high school has all the necessary resources to offer all required core courses. This does not currently exist across the state.
4. Legislators should strongly consider lowering the required ACT score to 19 to reach more borderline students, especially from lower-income groups. Giving more students a chance to attend college won't hurt the State but certainly could help the students to become productive, which will ultimately help the State by generating a better educated and higher skilled future work. At least two guidance counselors in this study (TB and ST) support that concept based on personal experiences with former students. This proposal was also introduced during the 2004 Legislative Session through HB 1247 by Rep. Gary Beard of Baton Rouge (see Appendix J). Though the House Bill never left the Education Committee, many members of the Legislature, especially from the Black Caucus, feel it should be reconsidered. Obviously, the idea has merit, but the main problem with the concept is its cost. LOSFA estimates that by lowering the ACT score to accommodate more students, the additional cost would be approximately \$9.5 million.
5. BESE and LOSFA should require and assist local school districts to sponsor regular ACT exam preparatory courses and workshops.

Schools should offer practice tests as often as possible. Interestingly, this suggestion was echoed by Rep. CM, the author of the TOPS legislation and several education officials, such as Superintendent MN of SL Parish School Board and guidance counselor TB.

6. Legislators and LOSFA should base the TOPS awards more upon the student's GPA and work ethic while in high school and college rather than on the ACT. Too many good students are missing out on the "reward" for academic performance like Lacy in the opening vignette due to poor standardized testing skills. Yet, those same students consistently work hard to succeed in college at their own expense, often out-performing many TOPS recipients. They, too, should be recognized, encouraged, and awarded by the BOR for their performance. This recommendation was offered by numerous TOPS students and school counselors TB and SC.
7. LOSFA needs to ensure that all awards are received by colleges for students before each semester begins, thereby reducing financial hardships that many TOPS recipients needlessly experience.
8. Research shows that Louisiana currently ranks 49th, far below the national average, in both income and job preparation. A logical solution for these perennial problems is for the BOR, BESE, and local school districts to vigorously and aggressively promote the TOPS Tech Award for many of Louisiana's high school students who seek a positive alternative to college. This would increase enrollment in both the Technical Colleges and Community Colleges, improving and

increasing job skills needed to enter the workforce. This recommendation was a consensus suggestion by almost everyone interviewed in the study

9. The State needs to monitor Lafayette Parish School Board's pilot study partnership with Louisiana Technical College as a pilot study with the new Lafayette Tech High School they are starting Fall 2009 as reported in Chapter 4. This new alternative dual enrollment high school concept focuses on the TOPS Tech Award and the job skills it provides to support future workers' postsecondary goals. Dual enrollment has long been discussed and debated among the BESE and BOR members as an alternative to current education structure in Louisiana high schools. If the pilot study is successful, the State should consider expanding it statewide.
10. If a student does not qualify for TOPS upon high school graduation but then during his first year of college maintains the necessary GPA to retain TOPS, the BOR should award that student the scholarship for three years as long as he/she continues to meet academic requirements. This concept was presented to the 2004 Legislative Session as SCR 5 by Sen. Honey and more so in SB 424 by Sen. Nick Gautreaux of Abbeville. SCR 5 (See Appendix I) died in committee and SB 424 did not become law, but it did pass the Senate by a 28-7 vote. Though many, including BOR and LOSFA officials, agree that this measure is fair to students who don't do well on the ACT but do exceptional work once in college, the issue of money caused the bill's defeat. BOR and

LOSFA predict that this change would cost the State an additional \$500,000 a year.

11. Parents and students need sufficient and better communications about the student's TOPS award from the State and the colleges on a regular basis while the recipient is in college.
12. Legislators and the BOR should cover all required college academic fees through TOPS, not just partial amounts as the awards currently provide. When a college increases its academic fees, the Legislature should equally increase the amount of the TOPS awards. As reported by LOSFA, several high school counselors, and numerous students, TOPS does not cover all academic tuition costs. Thus, students are forced to find the necessary funds to attend school. No current cost estimate exists if the State implements this policy change.
13. TOPS currently pays for a maximum of (8) semesters, but research shows that most Louisiana college students take between 5-6 years to graduate because so many of them have to work to stay in school. Since they cannot schedule more classes each semester, due to work obligations, they graduate later than the traditional four years. LOSFA data found in Table 2.12 indicates that only 21% of TOPS recipients graduate in a 4-year period; whereas, an additional 48% need one more school year to complete their studies. Legislators and the BOR should extend the TOPS scholarship eligibility an additional year to provide for those who must work as well as attend school and consequently need longer to complete their degrees. Some higher education

officials, high school counselors, and students support the concept of allowing TOPS recipients to postpone their awards until they are ready to enter college (after working or starting a family or other experiences). Interestingly, the Tuition Assistance Program, which preceded TOPS in 1989, provided for a total of (10) semesters of college tuition funding if needed by the student. Once TOPS was created and replaced the former program, one of the stipulations was that it would be limited to (8) semesters. The original idea is one that has been attempted in the Legislature in 2008 through HCR 150 by Rep. Nickie Monica. In fact, several higher education officials and legislators are currently studying the idea and looking at offering the legislation in the near future. Again, though many agree that this has merit, the cost to extend the TOPS scholarship an additional year (\$19 million) currently prohibits its implementation.

14. Since many college students desire to graduate as soon as possible to pursue careers, legislators and the BOR should expand the TOPS scholarship to include summer sessions without penalizing the existing award, which it currently does. This would encourage more summer school attendance and reduce the amount of time needed to graduate as well as for the use of the award. This could ultimately save the State a good amount of TOPS funding. Since there is no way of predicting how many students would avail themselves to attend summer school, if paid for by TOPS, a fiscal note is non-existent at this time by any of the State agencies. Higher education officials interviewed in this study

did speculate that this would not be costly since summer semesters are traditionally much cheaper than regular semesters..

15. The Legislature and the BOR should strongly consider establishing and funding a TOPS award for graduate studies. It is in the State's best interest to increase and improve the professional ranks, as well as the basic workforce. This could motivate many to continue their education and provide the state with more professionals (e.g., better teachers, more doctors, lawyers, professors, pharmacists, nurses, accountants, etc.). A version of this idea was first sponsored before the 2004 Legislative Session by Sen. Jay Dardenne of Baton Rouge. It, too, failed due to an anticipated cost of \$3.5 million annually. Nevertheless, the concept has been revived through HCR 150 by Rep. Monica. Currently, if a TOPS recipient does not use all (8) semesters of his/her award before graduating, but he/she immediately enters Graduate School, the remainder of the TOPS scholarship may be applied towards graduate studies. In 2003, LOSFA reported that 360 TOPS recipients did just that, even though it amounted to 1-2 semesters at most.
16. The Board of Regents needs to encourage other universities and colleges to follow the lead of LSU in simultaneously providing both merit-based scholarships like TOPS and need-based scholarships, called "Go Grants", to deserving students. Research shows that currently in Louisiana, half of high school graduates qualify for TOPS, but only one-third of those come from lower-income families. On the

other hand, more than half of those attending college in Louisiana are considered poor. Higher Education leaders such as Chancellor JW believe Louisiana students need and deserve both types of awards (as stated in Chapter 4). Together, these grants can truly make a difference and increase college access to a large number of Louisiana college students. Based on the recent rating in the “Measuring Up 2008” higher education article, TOPS just isn’t sufficient to assist the growing college enrollment in Louisiana, especially for those from lower-income brackets.

17. TOPS retention has become a serious concern for the State, legislators, university administrators, TOPS officials, parents, and students. Since research shows that currently 25%-30% of TOPS recipients forfeit their scholarships within the first year of college, which calculates annually to between \$30-38 million of state funds lost, the State has a fiscal obligation to its taxpayers to find ways to drastically limit this wasted investment. Despite merit-based scholarships being awarded across the country, as stated earlier in the study, Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education JS, in his 2001 report to the Louisiana BOR, informed them that many of these recipients are either quitting college within their first two semesters or losing their scholarships. As Dr. S remarked, “Making higher education available and accessible to Louisiana students isn’t the real problem. Retaining them once they begin is.” One solution is to have the BOR require incoming TOPS college freshmen to attend regular counseling and

study periods with mentors during their first year as suggested in the literature review (Tinto, 2002). A second method for reducing lost TOPS awards and state funds (and to hold their recipients more accountable) is for the Legislature and BOR require those students who receive TOPS, but then lose their scholarship because of academics or reduced semester course hours, to reimburse the State for the amount of the funds they had received as suggested by the Editor of the Daily Advertiser in 2000. Doing this should motivate the students to be more serious about their studies and TOPS investments will be honored.

Implications for Future Research

Based on the research findings, limitations, and recommendations much more study is advisable on TOPS particularly in the areas noted below.

1. More research should be conducted on which schools do not provide necessary core courses, personnel, computers, and access to correspondence to meet the academic requirements for the scholarship and what can be done to remedy this predicament.
2. More research should be done on the effect of TOPS on low-income enrollment in Louisiana higher education institutions. Though data from the Reed (2005) study and this study indicate an improvement in who typically receives TOPS, nonetheless, recipients still remain primarily White and financially comfortable. Too many minority and poor students are still not attaining TOPS. An annual study and report by the State, with assistance from academic institutions, would prove beneficial to all concerned.

3. More research needs to be conducted on how TOPS continues to impact college preparation. Longitudinal studies are needed in this area. Results should be given to school districts to enable them to better understand what is needed to improve the quality of education in Louisiana.
4. More research is needed on the possible effect of the State simultaneously offering merit-based and need-based scholarships to attend college. The efforts of LSU to do this should be studied, as well as those of other states who currently offer both types of financial assistance. More research is needed on TOPS retention rates and the reasons why so many lose the award. This is a continuing area of concern for the state.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

1. Study Title: “A Mixed Methods Study of Factors Related to the Receipt and Retention of TOPS Scholarships in Louisiana”
2. Performance Sites: OG High School, M High School, O High School, N High School
3. Investigator: The following investigator is available for questions about this study M-F, 11:15-12:15PM or after 4:00PM:

Sam H. Theriot, North Vermilion High School Instructor
School phone: 337-898-1491
Home phone: 337-981-0890
4. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine and explain why Louisiana high school graduates who have applied for the TOPS scholarship have not received the award and what if anything can be done to improve future applicants’ chances of receiving TOPS.
5. Subject Inclusion: Individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 who have been engaged in high school and college education and the TOPS program
6. Number of Subjects: 50
7. Study Procedures: The study will be conducted in two phases at four separate locations listed above. In the first phase, subjects will take about 15-20 minutes to complete a questionnaire about their opinions and experiences with the TOPS program and high school academic preparation for college. In the second phase, subjects will spend 30 minutes being interviewed through open-ended questions about their survey responses.
8. Benefits: No compensation will be made for services. However, the study may provide valuable understanding about TOPS concerns and suggestions on how to improve the program.
9. Risks: The only study risk may be the inadvertent release of sensitive information found either in the questionnaire or from interviews. Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of the study results and comments. Files are kept in a secure place to which only the investigator has access.
10. Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the

study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

11. Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

12. Signatures: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dr. Robert Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

_____ Date: _____
Subject

_____ Date: _____
Investigator

APPENDIX B-1

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE RELATED TO EXPERIENCE WITH TOPS

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Part I: Demographics

1. What is your gender? Male _____ Female _____
2. What is your race? Caucasian _____ African American _____ Hispanic _____
Asian American _____ Native American _____ Other _____
3. What is your age? _____
4. What is your family income? <\$15,000 _____ \$15,000 - \$25,000 _____
\$25,001 - \$35,000 _____ \$35,001 - \$45,000 _____ \$45,001 - \$55,000 _____
\$55,001 - \$65,000 _____ \$65,001 - \$75,000 _____ More than \$75,000 _____
5. What was the highest educational level of your parent(s) or guardian(s)?
High school _____ High school graduate _____ Associate degree _____
Bachelor's degree _____ Graduate/professional degree _____
6. What is or was your marital status during college?
Married _____ Single _____ Divorced _____
7. Do you have children? No _____ Yes _____ How many? _____ During college? _____

Part II: High School

8. What high school did you attend? _____
9. Was it a public or private school? _____
10. What year did you graduate? _____
11. What was your four-year high school GPA?
<2.0 _____ 2.0-2.49 _____ 2.5-2.99 _____ 3.0-3.49 _____ 3.5-4.0 _____
12. What was your ACT score?
<16 _____ 16-19 _____ 20-23 _____ 24-27 _____ 28-31 _____ >31 _____
13. Were you a member of any teams, clubs, or organizations while in high school?

-a- How much time did they take per week? _____
-b- Were you an officer or leader in any of them? _____

14. Were you employed while in high school? Yes ___ No ___
If so, how many hours per day? _____ and/or per week? _____
15. What is your opinion of your high school academic preparation for college?
a) highly favorable ___ b) slightly favorable ___ c) average ___ d) fair ___
e) poor ___

Part III: College

16. At which college or university did you enroll?

17. What is your current college classification?
Freshmen ___ Sophomore ___ Junior ___ Senior ___ Not in School ___
18. How many semesters have you been (or were you) enrolled? _____
19. What is/was your area of study or major?
Arts/Humanities ___ Business ___ Computer Science ___ Education ___
Engineering ___ Science ___ Social Science ___ Undecided ___ Other ___
20. How many credit hours did you carry in your first semester? _____
How many credit hours did you carry in your second semester? _____
21. How many credit hours have you successfully completed? _____
22. Did you earn TOPS? YES ___ NO ___
23. If you did not earn TOPS, which of the following reasons best explains why?
-a- Core course requirement: _____
-b- GPA requirement _____
-c- ACT requirement _____

Part IV: Influence of TOPS on Educational Experiences

(Please circle the letter which best describes your feelings about TOPS)

24. The State has sufficiently educated Louisiana citizens about TOPS.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
25. I was aware of the TOPS awards' criteria and the various awards before
graduating high school.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
26. I was aware of required TOPS core curriculum before starting high school.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree

27. I was aware of TOPS because of my high school guidance counselor.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
28. The criteria to receive TOPS are too difficult.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
29. The TOPS award was a major factor in my decision to attend a Louisiana college.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
30. TOPS directly influenced my academic performance and study habits in high school.
a.) strongly agree b.) agree c.) no opinion d.) disagree e.) strongly disagree
31. How did TOPS influence your studies in high school?

32. How was your experience with the TOPS application process?
Favorable ___ Unfavorable ___ Why? _____

33. What recommendations would you make to improve TOPS? _____

34. Did you have any classmates who did not receive TOPS? Yes ___ No ___ How many? _____

APPENDIX B-2

ADMINISTRATOR QUESTIONNAIRE RELATED TO EXPERIENCES WITH TOPS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is your current title or position and how long have you been such? _____

2. Describe your duties with TOPS _____

3. What do you believe are the goals of TOPS? _____

4. Do you believe these goals have been achieved? _____

5. How has TOPS impacted high school education? _____

6. How has TOPS influenced access to higher education? _____

7. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be raised? _____ Why? _____

8. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be lowered? _____ Why? _____

9. What are TOPS strengths? _____

10. What are the weaknesses of the TOPS program? _____

11. Are the citizens (educators, students, parents, etc.) sufficiently informed about the TOPS program? _____ If not, what should be done to improve communications?

12. Are the existing TOPS core curriculum requirements sufficient to prepare all students to receive the scholarship? _____ If not, what should be done to do so?

13. Do all Louisiana students have access to required core courses and other academic requirements to receive TOPS? _____ If not, why? _____

14. What needs to be done for more students to receive the TOPS scholarship?

15. What needs to be done for more TOPS recipients to retain their scholarships?

16. Can you recommend any improvements to the TOPS program? _____

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF STUDY INTRODUCTION

Sam H. Theriot
228 Ursuline Street
Lafayette, La. 70506
July 1, 2008

Dear Graduate:

My name is Sam Theriot and like you, I am vitally involved in improving the future of education in Louisiana. Like you, I graduated from a public high school and attended a college/university in our great state. In fact, I've been attending either UL or LSU over the past thirty years obtaining numerous degrees in education. I've taught high school for over sixteen years, but I believe my finest work in education could be the subject of this letter. For the past seven years, I have been comprehensively researching the TOPS Scholarship program and its effect on our Louisiana high school graduates in order to help improve it for our future students. With your help, I believe we can do just that. I have enclosed a brief but thorough questionnaire for your review, which I hope you will sincerely and accurately complete together with any comments you wish to share on your personal experience with the TOPS process. Please be as direct and blunt with your answers and comments. I assure you they will be kept in strictest confidence. No one has taken the time to gather such data before. As I mentioned to the Legislature and TOPS officials, we need to ask questions of those who know the TOPS process best if we are truly going to improve it. You and your parent(s) are the experts on this, and I really need and want your input.

Please take the time to complete the survey and send it back to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. If you would like for me to follow up with a short telephone interview, please indicate where requested. I look forward to receiving your important comments and talking to you as soon as possible or by the end of July.

Respectfully and gratefully yours,

Sam Theriot
Ph.D Candidate, LSU

APPENDIX D
CASE STUDY PROTOCOL

I. Purpose of Study

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

II. Data Sources

A. Most Recent TOPS Requirements and Research Data

B. Survey of State Higher Education Financial Aid TOPS Officials

C. Survey of High School Guidance Counselors about TOPS

D. Survey of Sampling of Three High School Classes of 2005-2007 TOPS Recipients
from Four High Schools

E. Site Visits

1. Interview with State TOPS Coordinator

a. Review of TOPS Requirements

b. Discussion of TOPS Successes and Failures

2. Interviews with Selected School Guidance Counselors

3. Site Observations

a. OG High School

b. LP High School

c. G High School

d. M High School

e. O High School

f. N High School

g. SHC High School

4. Gathering of Documentary Evidence

F. State Websites

www.regents.state.la.us

www.osfa.state.la.us

www.lde.state.la.us

www.doa.state.la.us

www.zacharyschools.org/zhs/zhshome.html

www.ecs.org

www.2.edtrust.org

III. Data Collection Procedures (operational variables)

A. . Mail Request - Most Recent TOPS Success/Failure Ratio

B. Lists of 2003-2005 TOPS from Selected High Schools

C. Open-ended Interview with State TOPS Coordinator

D. Gathering of Documentary Evidence

1. Questionnaire

2. Field Notes

E. Document Analysis

1. TOPS Requirements (Explanation Building and Constant Comparative Analysis for “Emerging Themes”)

2. Documentary Evidence Gathered at Four High Schools

- F. Tops Coordinator and High School Counselors and 2005-2007 High School TOPS Recipients Survey Response of Open-ended Items (Constant Comparative Analysis of Responses for “Emerging Themes”)

IV. Case Study Reports (49 Individual Student and 21 Elite Reports)

- A. Coding of the Questionnaires
- B. Strengths and Weaknesses of TOPS as indicated by Parents, Graduates, and Elite Responses

V. Conclusions

- A. Summary and Limitations
- B. Recommendations for Improvement
- C. Future Research

APPENDIX E

TOPS CORE CURRICULUM REQUIREMENTS



TOPS Core Curriculum

For the Opportunity, Performance, Honors and Tech Awards

UNITS	COURSES
4	English I, II, III, IV
1	Algebra I or Integrated Mathematics I or substitute Algebra I - Parts 1 & 2 (two units), or Applied Algebra 1A & 1B (two units), or Applied Mathematics I & II (two units)
1	Algebra II or Integrated Mathematics II
1	Geometry, Advanced Math – Pre Calculus, Advanced Math – Functions & Statistics, Calculus, Pre-Calculus, Probability and Statistics, Discrete Mathematics, Algebra III, Applied Mathematics III, Integrated Mathematics III, or AP Calculus
1	Biology I or II
1	Chemistry I or II, or Chemistry Com
1	Earth Science, Physical Science, Environmental Science, Biology II, Chemistry II, Physics, Physics II, Physics for Technology, AP Physics, or substitute Agriscience I & II (two units)
1	Additional Math or Science: Geometry, Calculus, Advanced Math – Pre Calculus, Advanced Math – Functions & Statistics, Pre-Calculus, Probability and Statistics, Discrete Mathematics, Algebra III, Applied Mathematics III, Integrated Mathematics III, AP Calculus, Biology II, Chemistry II, Physics, Physics II, or AP Physics
1	American History
1	Civics and Free Enterprise (1 unit combined), Civics, or AP American Government
1	World History, Western Civilization, World Geography, or European History
2	Foreign Language (2 units in the same language), or American Sign Language I & II
1	Fine Arts Survey or substitute 2 units of performance courses in music, dance, or theater or substitute 2 units of studio art or substitute 2 units of visual art or substitute Speech III & IV (two units) or substitute 1 unit of an elective from among the other subjects listed in this core curriculum
½	Computer Science I or II, Business Computer Applications, Computer Technology Literacy, Introduction to Business Computer Applications, or Computer Science Elective or substitute Word Processing, Computer Multimedia Presentations, Desktop Publishing, Web Design, Telecommunications, Computer Applications, Computer Architecture, Computer Systems/Networking I, Digital Graphics and Animation, Multimedia Productions, Webmastering, Independent Study In Technology Applications, AP Computer Science A, AP Computer Science AB, Database Design and Programming, Java Programming, Database Programming with PL/SQL Training, Digital Media I or II, Advanced Technical Drafting, or Computer Electronics I or II or substitute ½ unit of an elective from among the other subjects listed in this core curriculum
Total: 17.5 units	

APPENDIX F

TOPS ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

AWARD	CURRICULUM	CORE GPA	ACT
Honors	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	3.50	27
Performance	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	3.50	23
Opportunity	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	2.50	20
Tech	College Prep Core 16.5 Units	2.50	17

Note: These requirements were established and are administered by LOSFA. It is expected that the core units will increase to 17.5 next year as will the Opportunity Award ACT score to 21.

APPENDIX G

ACT 1202 OF 2001 LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

<p>LOUISIANA STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE COMMISSION</p> <p>OFFICE OF STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE</p> <p>Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) Bulletin</p>	
TOPS BULLETIN NUMBER:	T2001- 11
DATE ISSUED:	July 11, 2001
EFFECTIVE DATE:	As Indicated
DISTRIBUTION:	Louisiana High School Principals and Counselors, City and Parish School Board Presidents, School Board Superintendents, College and University, Technical College and LAICU Chancellors, Financial Aid Offices, Business Offices, and Auditors, System Governance, Board of Regents, Department of Education, Louisiana Legislators, and Commission Members
TOPIC:	Changes Made to TOPS During the Regular Session 2001 of the Louisiana Legislature

To assure that your Scholarship and Grant Policy and Procedure Manual remains current, please record this document on your TOPS Bulletin index and retain it with your manual.

As of July 9, 2001, Governor Foster has signed the following legislation, which affects the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS):

- Act 1042 -- Prohibits restrictions on early high school graduates. Students who graduate from high school in less than four years will be considered for TOPS in the year they actually graduated effective beginning with the graduates of 2001. TOPS Bulletin T2000-06, dated April 18, 2001 details rule changes which preceded this legislation.
- Act 1053 -- Allows high schools to waive required courses in the core curriculum if the courses were not available to students at that school, through 2002-2003.*
- Act 1192 -- Provides eligibility for TOPS Opportunity and TOPS-Tech Awards to dependent students who graduate from a high school outside the United States if the school is accredited by an accrediting organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and meets BESE

standards for Louisiana nonpublic high schools or if the student completes the twelfth grade level of an approved home study program outside the U.S. Determination of eligibility for these students will be based on scoring three points higher on the ACT than the minimum required by law. Louisiana residency will be determined by the current test or demonstrated by residence in Louisiana for at least 24 months prior to leaving the U.S. and remaining a resident through the student's graduation or completion of a BESE approved home study program. Effective beginning with 2001 high school graduates.

- Act 1202 -- Requires the Board of Regents to develop a TOPS information reporting system which all public postsecondary institutions must utilize by 2002-2003. Also requires that BESE adopt and implement a policy that ensures that students and their parents (or the responsible party) are informed about the availability and requirements of TOPS prior to entering high school.
- Act 1144 -- Establishes new criteria for a TOPS-Tech Award. Lowers the minimum ACT composite score from 19 to 17 and establishes multiple options in the tech core curriculum. Also establishes a new formula for determining tuition that may be paid for TOPS Tech Awards at schools that offer baccalaureate degrees. Effective beginning with 2001 high school graduates.*
- Act 1221 - Creation of an alternate TOPS Performance Award based on an ACT composite score of 24 or higher, completion of ten honors courses (designated by the school) which are graded on a 5.0 basis, and a minimum 3.0 cumulative grade point average when converted. Students must also meet all other requirements, i.e., core curriculum, meeting all application deadlines and residency requirements. Effective beginning with the 2001 high school graduates.*

Rules implementing these legislative acts will be promulgated at the August 2, 2001 meeting of the Louisiana Student Financial Assistance Commission and, upon their approval, will be released in an upcoming bulletin.

*Detailed information and instructions will be forwarded to high schools in the next few weeks for certification of 2001 graduates who are affected by Acts 1053, 1144, and 1221.

APPENDIX H

2004 TOPS LEGISLATION

Twenty-eight instruments indexed as "TOPS" bills were introduced. The following chart highlights those bills that procedurally proceeded past a committee in the bill's house of origin.

TOPS LEGISLATION (Only highlights)		
Instrument & Status	Author	Summary
SB 209 (Act 804)	Senator Adley	Extends the alternate establishment of residency for a dependent student who is a La. school graduate whose parent lives in an adjoining state for the purpose of TOPS eligibility under certain circumstances to add those who graduated in the 2002-2003 school year, but limits the location of the parents' residence to require that it be in a county that adjoins a parish with a population greater than 41,600 and less than 42,400.
SB 224 (Act 804)	Senator Malone	Allows an award recipient to use his award for any "cost of attendance" in accordance with regulations governing the award of federal student aid.
SB 283 (pending House committee)	Senator Dardenne	Regarding required core courses, reduces the number of units of required computer courses <u>from</u> one and one-half units <u>to</u> one-half unit and deletes the increase in required total units <u>from</u> 16 ½ units <u>to</u> 17 1/2.
SB 424 (indefinitely postponed in House committee)	Senator N. Gautreaux	Creates a new award as part of the TOPS program for students who applied, but were ineligible for an Opportunity Award because they scored too low on the ACT based on their freshman year work combined with certain other minimums. Provides

		<p>an award equal in amount to an Opportunity Award for a total of not more than six semesters to eligible students who complete their freshman year in college. Requires students receiving such an award to meet the same continuation requirements as are required under <u>present law</u> for students with an Opportunity Award.</p>
<p>SB 435 (Act 800)</p>	<p>Senator Theunissen</p>	<p>Adds Agriscience I and II as an option among the list of science core courses from which a student must select core science courses to qualify for TOPS.</p>
<p>HB 32 (Act 472)</p>	<p>Representative Martiny</p>	<p>Allows students to substitute from among other core courses for the one and one-half unit of computer courses required beginning in 2007-2008.</p>
<p>HB 487 (Act 507)</p>	<p>Representative Powell</p>	<p>Provides for a TOPS award for a student who meets the residency requirements, meets ACT or SAT score requirements, has successfully completed 12 credit hours of college work and is enrolled in an eligible institution full time, and has not met other initial eligibility requirements, but has scored at a specified level on specified intelligence tests that demonstrates the student is uniquely gifted.</p>
<p>HCR 266 (enrolled)</p>	<p>Representative Futrell</p>	<p>Requests the Board of Regents to study and report on the effects on TOPS of increasing , for the Opportunity Award, the required minimum ACT composite score to 21 for certain students beginning in the 2007-2008 school year.</p>

APPENDIX I

SCR 5 OF 2004 LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

TO: Carl Crane, Chairman
House Committee on Education
J. Chris Ullo, Chairman
Senate Committee on Education

From: E. Joseph Savoie
Commissioner of Higher Education

RE: Regents’ Response to Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 5 of 2004

The following is the response from the Board of Regents to Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 5 of the 2004 Regular Session of the Louisiana Legislature (SCR 5). If you or any members of the Committee have questions, please contact me.

PURPOSE OF RESOLUTION

SCR 5 “urges and requests the Board of Regents...to study allowing students not initially eligible for a TOPS award due to their failure to achieve the required high school grade point average or ACT score or to successfully complete the required high school core curriculum, to be eligible for an Opportunity Award for not more than six semesters, based on the student meeting, at the end of the student’s freshman year at an eligible college or university, all requirements established for a student receiving an Opportunity Award to continue to receive the award prioritized based on a ranking system established by the Board of Regents using certain additional criteria.”

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In the fall of 2003, 10,783 class of 2003 Louisiana high school graduates enrolled as first-time, fulltime freshmen in public postsecondary education and did not receive at least a TOPS Opportunity Award. Of these 10,783 students, 8,660 (80%) completed the fall semester in good standing. Of these same 10,783 students, 4,527 (42%) continued their enrollment in the spring semester, enrolling fulltime and completing the spring semester in good standing (however, many of the remaining 6,256 students may have continued in the spring semester on a part-time basis and/or on academic probation).

The following table represents the distribution of the cumulative grade point average (GPA) of those 4,527 students completing the spring semester in good standing, by the level of institution in which they were enrolled.

Cumulative GPA	Four-year students	Two-year students	Total
n/a	15	31	46
1.99 and below	819	95	914
2.00 to 2.49	1,264	168	1,432

2.50 to 2.99	1,048	208	1,256
3.00 to 3.49	508	165	673
3.50 and above	144	62	206
Total	3,798	729	4,527

Students receiving a TOPS award are required to maintain fulltime enrollment, complete a minimum of 24 semester hours of credit and earn a minimum GPA of 2.3 at the end of the spring semester of their freshman year. For each subsequent year, the GPA must be at least 2.5. For the purpose of this study, the Board of Regents suggests requiring a minimum GPA of 2.5 at the end of the spring semester of the freshman year. The above data indicate that 2,135 students would meet this requirement.

SCR 5 defines the priority ranking system established by the Board of Regents as the following academic criteria:

- (1) The grade point average of the student at the end of the student's freshman year at an eligible college or university.
- (2) The college courses taken and the difficulty of such courses in the student's freshman year.
- (3) The high school grade point average of the student.
- (4) The ACT score achieved by the student in high school.
- (5) The courses taken and passed by the student in high school that were part of the core curriculum.

Because the Board of Regents has collected end of term and course outcome data for only one academic year, and because the possible combinations of the above criteria would produce a large number of possible scenarios for a priority ranking system, the Board respectfully requests the opportunity to explore these possibilities and report to the House and Senate Education Committees upon completion of its analysis.

APPENDIX J

HB 1247 OF 2004 LOUISIANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION

<p>HB1247</p>	<p>BEARD</p>	<p>INVOLUNTARILY DEFERRED IN HOUSE EDUCATION</p>	<p>STUDENT/LOANS- SCHOLARSHIP: Provides alternative TOPS Opportunity Award eligibility requirements for certain high school students who graduate during the 2003-2004 school year or thereafter and do not have the specified minimum ACT/SAT score (OR +\$806,400 GF EX See Note)</p>
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Proposed law provides that present law provisions establishing a minimum composite ACT score (or equivalent SAT score) for certain students to be eligible for an Opportunity Award shall not apply to any such student graduating during the 2003-2004 school year or thereafter from a La. public high school or nonpublic high school (that meets all present law requirements applicable to such nonpublic school) if the student meets any one of the following guidelines:

- (1) The student has a high school cumulative GPA (calculated in accordance with present law provisions) that is at least 3.0 on a 4.0 scale and has an ACT composite score that is at least 19 or an equivalent SAT score.

- (2) The student has a high school cumulative GPA (calculated in accordance with present law provisions) that is at least 3.5 on a 4.0 scale and has an ACT composite score that is at least 18 or an equivalent SAT score.

- (3) The student has a high school cumulative GPA (calculated in accordance with present law provisions) that is at least 4.0 on a 4.0 scale and has an ACT composite score that is at least 17 or an equivalent SAT score.

APPENDIX K
EXTENDED TABLES OF DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Extended Table 4.2: Respondents by Gender – Survey Question #1

OG High	Male	Female	Total
2005 Class	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5
2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	3
2007 Class	4 (57.1%)	3 (42.9%)	7
M High	Male	Female	Total
2005 Class	3 (100%)	0	3
2006 Class	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0
O High	Male	Female	Total
2005 Class	1 (14.3%)	7 (85.7%)	8
2006 Class	0	2 (100%)	2
2007 Class	4 (57.1%)	3 (42.9%)	7
N High	Male	Female	Total
2005 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2
2006 Class	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	5
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	7

Extended Table 4.3: Respondents by Race – Survey Question #2

OG High	Black	White	Hispanic
2005 Class	0	5 (100%)	0

“(table continued)”

2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0
2007 Class	0	7 (100%)	0
M High	Black	White	Hispanic
2005 Class	0	3 (100%)	0
2006 Class	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0
O High	Black	White	Hispanic
2005 Class	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	0
2006 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)
N High	Black	White	Hispanic
2005 Class	2 (100%)	0	0
2006 Class	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	3(42.9%)	1(14.2%)

Extended Table 4.7: Respondents by Grade Point Average (GPA) – Survey Question #11

OG High	2.0-2.49 GPA	2.5-2.99 GPA	3.0-3.49 GPA	3.5-4.0 GPA
3.58 GPA 3-Year Average				
2005 Class	0	0	2 (40%)	3 (60%)
3.55 GPA Average				
2006 Class	0	0	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)
3.58 GPA Average				

“(table continued)”

2007 Class 3.61 GPA Average	0	0	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)
M High 3.58 GPA 1-Year Average	2.0-2.49 GPA	2.5-2.99 GPA	3.0-3.49 GPA	3.5-4.0 GPA
2005 Class 3.58 GPA Average	0	0	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)
2006 Class	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0
O High 3.41 GPA 3-Year Average	2.0-2.49 GPA	2.5-2.99 GPA	3.0-3.49 GPA	3.5-4.0 GPA
2005 Class 3.5 GPA Average	0	0	4 (50%)	4 (50%)
2006 Class 3.42 GPA Average	0	0	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)
2007 Class 3.33 GPA Average	0	0	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)
N High 3.34 GPA 3-Year Average	2.0-2.49 GPA	2.5-2.99 GPA	3.0-3.49 GPA	3.5-4.0 GPA
2005 Class 3.5 GPA Average	0	0	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
2006 Class	1 (25%)	0	2 (50%)	1 (25%)

3.13 GPA Average				
2007 Class	1 (14.3%)	0	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)
3.39 GPA Average				

Extended Table 4.8: Respondents by ACT Score – Survey Question #12

OG High 23 ACT 3-Year Average	16-19 ACT	20-23 ACT	24-27 ACT	28-31 ACT	Above 31 ACT
2005 Class	0	4 (80%)	0	1 (20%)	0
23 ACT Average					
2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0
24 ACT Average					
2007 Class	1 (14,2%)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	0	0
23 ACT Average					
M High 26 ACT 1-Year Average	16-19 ACT	20-23 ACT	24-27 ACT	28-31 ACT	Above 31 ACT
2005 Class	0	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)
26 ACT Average					
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
No Data					
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
No Data					
O High 22 ACT 3-Year Average	16-19 ACT	20-23 ACT	24-27 ACT	28-31 ACT	Above 31 ACT
2005 Class	4 (50%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	0
21 ACT					

Average					
2006 Class 21 ACT Average	0	3 (100%)	0	0	0
2007 Class 24 ACT Average	2 (33.3%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	0	2 (33.3%)
N High 20 ACT 3-Year Average	16-19 ACT	20-23 ACT	24-27 ACT	28-31 ACT	Above 31 ACT
2005 Class 21 ACT Average	0	2 (100%)	0	0	0
2006 Class 20 ACT Average	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	0	0	0
2007 Class 20 ACT Average	3 (42.8%)	2 (28.6%)	2 (28.6%)	0	0

Extended Table 4.9: Respondents Involved in Extracurricular Activities – Survey Question #13

OG High 93.3% 3-Year Average	Participant	Non-Participant
2005 Class	5 (100%)	0
2006 Class	3 (100%)	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)
M High 100% 1-Year Average	Participant	Non-Participant
2005 Class	3 (100%)	0

“(table continued)”

2006 Class	0	0
2007 Class	0	0
O High 88.2% 3-Year Average	Participant	Non-Participant
2005 Class	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)
2006 Class	2 (100%)	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)
N High 92.9% 3-Year Average	Participant	Non-Participant
2005 Class	2 (100%)	0
2006 Class	5 (100%)	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)

Extended Table 4.10: Respondents Employed during High School – Survey Question #14

OG High 53.3% Not Employed 3-Year Average	Employed Part-time	Not Employed
2005 Class	1 (20%)	4 (80%)
2006 Class	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)
2007 Class	4 (57.1%)	3 (42.9%)
M High 66.7% Not Employed 1-Year Average	Employed Part-time	Not Employed
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)

“(table continued)”

2006 Class	0	0
2007 Class	0	0
O High 76.5% Employed 3-Year Average	Employed Part-time	Not Employed
2005 Class	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)
2006 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
2007 Class	7 (100%)	0
N High 59.1% Employed 3-Year Average	Employed Part-time	Not Employed
2005 Class	0	2 (100%)
2006 Class	3 (60%)	2 (40%)
2007 Class	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)

Extended Table 4.14: Survey Question #15 - What is your opinion of your high school academic preparation for college?

OG High Response: Somewhat to Highly Favorable	Highly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Average	Favorable	Poor
2005 Class	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	3 (60%)	0	0
2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	0	1 (33.3%)
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	0
M High Response: Average	Highly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Average	Favorable	Poor
2005 Class	0	0	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0

“(table continued)”

2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High Response: Highly Favorable	Highly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Average	Favorable	Poor
2005 Class	3 (42.9%)	2 (28.6%)	0	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)
2006 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	4 (42.8%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.3%)	0
N High Response: Average	Highly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Average	Favorable	Poor
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0
2006 Class	3 (60%)	0	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	0
2007 Class	1 (14.3%)	1(14.3%)	4 (57.1%)	0	1 (14.3%)

Extended Table 4.15: Survey Item #24 - The State has sufficiently educated Louisiana citizens about TOPS

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)	0
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	0	1 (14.3%)	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

“(table continued)”

2005 Class	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	0	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)
2006 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	1 (14.3%)	4 (57.1%)	0	2 (28.6%)	0
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0
2006 Class	2 (40%)	0	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	3 (42.8%)	0	2 (28.6%)	0

Extended Table 4.16: Survey Item # 27 - I was aware of TOPS because of my high school guidance counselor

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)	0	0	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	1 (33.3%)	0	1 (33.3%)	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	0	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)
2006 Class	1 (50%)	0	0	1 (50%)	0
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	0	1 (14.2%)	0
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (100%)	0	0	0	0

“(table continued)”

2006 Class	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	0	2 (40%)	0
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	0	1 (14.2%)	0

Extended Table 4.18: Survey Item #25 - I was aware of the TOPS awards' criteria and the various awards before graduating high school

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	1 (14.3%)	0	0	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	5 (62.5%)	2 (25%)	0	1 (25%)	0
2006 Class	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	4 (57.1%)	1 (14.3%)	0	2 (28.6%)	0
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	2 (100%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	5 (71.4%)	1 (14.3%)	0	0	1 (14.3%)

Extended Table 4.19: Survey Item #26 - I was aware of required TOPS core curriculum before starting high school

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	4 (80%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0	0	0
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	0	0	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (66.7%)	0	0	1 (33.3%)	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	5 (62.5%)	0
2006 Class	1 (50%)	0	0	1 (50%)	0
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.3%)	0	3 (42.8%)	1 (14.3%)
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	0	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0
2006 Class	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	0	2 (40%)	0
2007 Class	1 (14.3%)	5 (71.4%)	0	0	1 (14.3%)

Extended Table 4.20: Survey Item #28 - The criteria to receive TOPS are too difficult

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	1 (20%)	0	3 (60%)	1 (20%)
2006 Class	0	1 (33.3%)	0	0	2 (66.7%)

“(table continued)”

2007 Class	0	1 (14.3%)	0	4 (57.1%)	2 (28.6%)
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	0	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	0	0	0	5 (62.5%)	3 ((37.5%)
2006 Class	0	0	0	2 (100%)	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)
2007 Class	0	2 (28.6%)	0	3 (42.8%)	2 (28.6%)

Extended Table 4.21: Survey Item #30 - TOPS directly influenced my academic performance and study habits in high school

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	0	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)	0	0	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0

“(table continued)”

2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)
2006 Class	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0	0
2007 Class	1 (14.3%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	0
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0	0
2006 Class	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	1 (20%)	0
2007 Class	2 (28.6%)	2 (28.6%)	0	1 (14.2%)	2 (28.6%)

Extended Table 4.23: The TOPS award was a major factor in my decision to attend a Louisiana college – Survey Item #29

OG High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	1 (20%)	0
2006 Class	0	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)	0
2007 Class	6 (85.7%)	0	1 (14.3%)	0	0
M High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	1 (33.3%)	0	2 (66.7%)	0	0
2006 Class	0	0	0	0	0
2007 Class	0	0	0	0	0
O High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	2 (25%)	0	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	0
2006 Class	1 (50%)	0	0	1 (50%)	0

“(table continued)”

2007 Class	4 (57.1%)	2 (28.6%)	0	1 (14.3%)	0
N High	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2005 Class	3 (75%)	0	0	1 (25%)	0
2006 Class	2 (66.7%)	0	0	1 (33.3%)	0
2007 Class	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.2%)	0	3 (42.9%)	0

APPENDIX L

EXTENDED QUALITATIVE STUDENT RESULTS

Table 4.22A: Qualitative Comments from the Student Questionnaire

31. How did TOPS influence your studies in high school?
12 Respondents – It made me study harder.
10 Respondents - I needed TOPS to go to college.
9 Respondents - It made me take higher-level courses.
9 Respondents – It played no role in my high school performance.
8 Respondents - It made me want to receive good grades.
5 Respondents - It gave me something to strive for or do better.
5 Respondents - It influenced me to score higher on the ACT.
2 Respondents – I was more aware of college and the scholarship.
2 Respondents - I did not want to burden my parents with the expenses of a college education, nor did I want to work every semester.
1 Respondent - It helped me make the decision to stay in Louisiana to attend college.
1 Respondent - It made me aware of how unqualified our high school math teachers were.

Table 4.24B: Qualitative Results from the Student Questionnaire

Question #33: What recommendations would you make to improve TOPS?
OG High graduates remarked: “I started really concentrating on high school grades and core requirements during my Sophomore year of high school.” “TOPS Tech should be applicable to the first two years of regular college.”

“I currently hold a 3.0 GPA and have done so for two years in college, but I missed the 4-year TOPS by one point on my GPA while in high school.”

“I had no problems with taking/passing core courses, but after being awarded the Honors Scholarship, I never received the \$400.00 stipend that goes with it.”

“I was well-prepared for core courses but had no ACT preparation courses. They should be offered at least in each area (ACT Preparations). TOPS should be based on GPA, not ACT.”

“High school core courses were okay. I missed TOPS due to an ACT of 18. I went to college on a PELL Grant, Academic Competitive Grant and other financial assistance. My high school GPA was fine.”

“TOPS ran out after four years. I used all four years; it should last more than four years if needed and continue throughout the duration of undergraduate as long as you maintain the required college GPA.”

“If you receive TOPS Tech or whatever for technical or 2-year program, it should be able to be used for two years of your bachelor degree.”

“There should be more money to students who have a higher GPA, but may not have good standardized testing skills, (lower ACT scores).”

“The TOPS applicants should be able to receive TOPS if their GPA is at least 3.0 whether or not they have the required ACT score.”

“Lower the required ACT. Some people are good students but not good on big tests like that.”

“I believe that if a student maintains TOPS all four years during his college education, he should be rewarded at the end/upon graduation.”

“Core courses prepared me for college, but I was limited because of the size of OG.

Without TOPS, I and many like me would not have been able to attend college.”

“I think that TOPS does not provide enough money. A lot of students are only able to attend college because of TOPS. However, each Louisiana college or university is continuing to raise tuition. If tuition is rising, then so should TOPS. Also, college is a big change! “Core courses, GPA, and ACT were fair and available. I had no problems either during high school or college.”

O High graduates responded:

“I had no problems, but plenty of friends have lost it because of being unprepared for college. I believe it’s a shame that so much money is being wasted.”

“We were made aware of TOPS courses starting in 8th grade. They should stress ACT scores earlier on. My ACT score did not reflect my abilities as a student. I graduated from high school with honors while taking all Honors classes. Throughout college I maintained 3.0 GPA. Counselors could have spent more time preparing us for college. Two out of three counselors did nothing. Credits from smaller college would not transfer to ULL, so I lost time and money. TOPS officials should interview worthy students to decide who gets TOPS, not just use GPA and ACT scores.”

“Not until junior year, did I really understand what was required to get TOPS (GPA, ACT core courses). My high school was corrupt and they played favoritism. If you were an athlete or on the dance team, or a cheerleader, you were guaranteed your passing grades or bonus points. We really didn’t learn anything. We need better ACT preparation before testing.

“Having TOPS allowed me to attend the college of my choice, whereas without it, I would have had to stay close to home and gone into great debt to pursue my

degree...no problems now.”

“Counselors talked about and scheduled all necessary core courses. I only received the average amount of TOPS, not equal to the highest amount at LSU. I lost about \$400.00/semester. I was told I would receive equal to LSU tuition after graduation from high school. Instead, Xavier awarded me a full academic scholarship, paying the difference after TOPS.”

“I fully understood TOPS procedures and core courses and had no problems. It has worked well but without it, I couldn’t have attended unless I worked or secured a loan. Because of TOPS, I can afford to concentrate on my grades and studies.”

“Continue it as it is. Never ever make it need-based. It was not the intention of the program when initiated.”

“Something needs to be done about the requirements of ACT scores with colleges.”

“Some students do not like taking standardized tests or the ACT, so the GPA scores need to be looked at very closely.”

“The process was stressful. The application process should be explained more.”

“I think summer hours should be able to be paid for to some extent by TOPS.”

“I luckily got extra money after tuition payments that I used on text books, but didn’t get the money until two months after the semester started. It would have helped to have that process be quicker.”

“Supply more information into the mainstream. It wasn’t pushed until the junior year on how to apply.”

“Teachers should have proper TOPS educational training to further help students.”

“Start preparing students in junior high instead of high school.”

“The guidance counselors need to better prepare students on TOPS and necessities

needed before graduation. We are lost when we graduate because of lack of directions.”

N High graduates commented:

“There needs to be better study guides, more time for test taking, no fees!”

“TOPS originally did not consider my SAT score and gave me the wrong award.

TOPS should be mindful that students take the SAT even if they are going to a Louisiana university or college.”

“The TOPS award is a privilege; however, I believe those students who do not complete their college education should be required to reimburse the TOPS program.”

“I would lower the ACT requirement. Scoring a 20 is very hard. I have taken the ACT 8 times and I never once scored a 20.”

“I think TOPS needs to pay all of tuition for students who do not get Pell Grants. TOPS only pays ½ of the tuition, the other ½ is either paid by loans or out of pocket.”

“Go directly to the schools and explain to freshman and/or 8th grade students.”

“Send e-mails and reminders and make requirements to keep TOPS clear!”

“I struggled with math and had to retake ACT four times. It was most burdensome.

Structure programs implemented into the curriculum to learn how to properly take and pass standardized tests as well as teaching what will be on test.”

“I was fully informed at meetings. The courses were fair, but I struggled through math courses, including college algebra. My GPA was high taking all honors courses except math (high in all other 3 subjects).”

“Scheduled core courses were no problem, nor was the LOSFA application. I received the wrong TOPS at first. They gave me the wrong one due to incorrect reported SAT scores. I had to correct this, not the state. Because I’m a working

single mom, without TOPS it would have been difficult to attend college.”

“TOPS has allowed me to attend college. My academic preparation at high school was only fair. The application process was smooth. The amount of each scholarship should be increased to cover full amount of tuition, currently not enough.”

“Core courses were explained with no problems with either ACT or GPA. I didn’t need TOPS to attend college financially. The only negative is the amount of time the state took to established my account at ULL.”

“I was unaware of core courses until my Junior year. I had the appropriate GPA but not ACT to earn it. The school should have offered ACT workshops. I currently maintain a 3.2 GPA in Accounting at my own expense.”

Table 4.25B: Qualitative Result from Student Questionnaire

Question 32: How can the State improve retention rates of TOPS students?
Students from M High responded as follows: “TOPS is a great program. Kids don’t realize how much TOPS helps you prepare for college, not to mention financial help as well.” “I lost TOPS in the fall of my Junior year because of a low GPA average. I stayed out two years, but without TOPS, I could not afford college. I will begin fall 2009 and change my major to Business.” “In order to keep TOPS, you have to start college immediately instead of allowing graduates to work and mature and earn other money to pay other bills. Young adults need time to grow up and see how much TOPS means instead of losing it. All core courses were offered on my campus. Now that I’ve lost it, I fully know what it means not to have it. Also, there ought to be a way to get it back when I return since I

messed up only one semester.”

OG High graduates remarked:

“I received TOPS in 2005 but lost it in my 1st semester at La. Tech due to low grades and was put on academic probation until I brought up my grades. Keep the GPA requirement as is. If you lower the GPA requirements, students won’t work as hard and will “sluff off”.

They should be more lenient when it comes to your first year of college. It’s a whole new experience and it’s hard because you’re not sure what to expect.”

“Lower the college GPA requirement to 2.0 for retention of TOPS.

“Core courses didn’t really prepare me for college; there were no mid terms or finals.

They just prepared me for LEAP and TOPS. I lost TOPS because I slipped below 3.0. I still have the basic TOPS since I have a 2.8 GPA. High school didn’t teach critical thinking and research papers, I had to learn on my own.”

Coming from such a small community and school, I wasn’t at all prepared. My first semester really hurt me, and I’m on probation for TOPS. I’m finally starting to get the hang of things, but I really need all the financial aid I can get. I think they should be a bit more understanding.”

O High students had this to say:

I lost TOPS in my 1st semester due to insufficient course hours (dropped down to 12 hours and failed one class, leaving a total of 9 hours). I didn’t know I had to make up the class. Now I rely on my Pell Grant and work wages. I made Freshman mistakes but retention requirements are reasonable.”

“There should be a probationary period for those who drop below GPA in college.”

“The application process was easy until after the 1st year. I didn’t know what to do

after the 1st year of college. I didn't know if I had to reapply. There should be on-going communication between recipients and college and state.”

“I lost TOPS because people did not explain to me what I had to do in college. My GPA is a 3.0, but I lost it because I did not have enough hours.”

“Once a person acquires it, don't make the requirements so high to keep it.”

“TOPS is already a great program, but Freshmen should be entitled to a redemption or probation semester.”

N High graduates commented:

“My son lost TOPS his first year of college because he was not prepared for the curriculum. As a parent I was not sufficiently educated about what was required to maintain TOPS.”

“They should have a probation period in the first year for those who don't receive it but display proof of accomplishment on their own.”

“Too many students are playing around and wasting TOPS, which isn't fair to those who really need TOPS. Those students should have to pay it back to the state. Then maybe they would take college more serious.”

“High school experience was okay. I lost it in the 1st semester, but I have maintained my GPA ever since. There should be second chances for those who lose it due to illness.”

APPENDIX M

EXTENDED QUALITATIVE ELITE RESULTS

Table 4.17: Qualitative Results from the Administrator Questionnaire

1. What do you believe are the goals of TOPS?
CM: "To raise the expectations for academic achievement for our kids." KD: "To encourage more high school graduates to stay in Louisiana for school, and to provide access to higher education to more high school graduates." MN: "To afford students the opportunity to receive financial assistance as a reward for successfully completing prescribed course work." ST: "To award students with a scholarship for their academic achievement." CM: "To allow college or technical college bound students to receive a tuition-free education." SC: "I believe that TOPS was implemented to assist students who are academically capable but not necessarily financially capable of reaching college. I also believe that it was a tool used to entice students to take high school more seriously, because of the big financial pay off." TB: "I believe that the totals of the TOPS program are as follows: To help with the expense of college for Louisiana students. To help high school students take classes that will prepare them for college." TB: "To encourage students to continue education beyond high school."

2. Do you believe these goals are being achieved?
Though half the experts felt the goals are being achieved, the other half felt that only some of the goals had been achieved. One guidance counselor had these remarks:

SC: "I believe that in regards to assisting students who are academically capable that TOPS has made a difference. Unfortunately, the universities continue to increase their activity fee, which is very disappointing and discouraging to low- income students. "In regards to students taking high school more seriously, I don't know that that has happened. I believe that we have many students in this day and age who believe they are doing good work when they are only doing the minimum to get by in class. We have failed our children somewhere along the way with our expectations."

3. How has TOPS impacted high school education?

CM: "More students are taking core curriculum courses, (i.e, chemistry, 4 math courses)."

JW: "Many more students enrolled in vigorous courses, those taking the core have much higher test scores. More student and parent time invested in academic preparation. Better discipline in schools."

KD: "It has helped defined a core curriculum, and encouraged schools to offer the core classes."

MN: "Provided an incentive for at-risk students and has assisted high school curriculum to increase rigor."

ST: "More students are taking core curriculum classes and they try harder to maintain good GPA. Also more students are deciding to go to college earlier."

CM: "It has allowed more students to attend college without seeking loans to attend Louisiana colleges."

SC: "Regardless of a student's grades or achievement from first grade through high school, I feel that we have too many parents who are pushing their students to take

the TOPS core curriculum. We have far too many students who are simply not academically capable of taking Algebra II and/or Chemistry who are choosing to take these courses because of TOPS. That in and of itself is not the big problem, because these students usually do end up passing these courses (just barely). The real problem as I see it is that these students are not looking outside of the scope of college and are missing out on the wonderful opportunities that could be waiting for them at technical colleges are specialty programs throughout the state.”

TB: “TOPS curriculum has required the student to take more stringent classes that will help them better prepare for college.”

TB: “It has affected some students to raise their GPA. Others feel it is too hard.”

7. What are TOPS strengths?

CM: “Motivates students to achieve. Provides monetary rewards for working hard in high school.”

JW: “Students feel they have earned TOPS; motivation of students, teachers and parents, TOPS makes it clear that certain high schools or whole parishes are not up to standards.”

KD: “Challenge; Access; Motivation to succeed (to keep TOPS complete 24 hours/year; meet the GPA).”

MN: “Prescribed curriculum encourages students to schedule advanced coursework and financial opportunities.”

ST: “More students are taking the core courses than before.”

CM: “It allow students to attend college without having to worry about paying basic loans.”

SC: "I think that TOPS does a great job getting the information out to high school counselors who can then give the information to our students."

TB: "The core courses prepare the student for college."

TB: "Four years of paid tuition."

8. What are the weaknesses of the TOPS program?

CM: "Some schools do not offer all core courses."

JW: "Not sufficiently promoted in some school and parishes; students who want to go to college are not given the help required to qualify."

MN: "Not enough emphasis on the "Tech" endorsements."

ST: "Availability of certain courses at small schools."

CM: "A lot of people don't know about the requirements to receive TOPS."

SC: "I think TOPS and high school systems do a terrible job in making the students aware of and promoting the TOPS Tech award. With so much emphasis on the amount of money available for students receiving TOPS, receiving TOPS Tech is a let down to the students. I also feel, as I stated in an earlier answer, that I believe we have some students who really should not be looking at college at all because they are not going to make the grade. These students unfortunately are so focused on taking the courses (not necessarily doing well in the courses) that they miss out on other opportunities that are right in front of their faces. Students are made to think by society that college is where you need to be and that community colleges and technical colleges are less than. I think guidance counselors make the effort to let the students know about all of the opportunities available to them, but I sometimes feel we are hitting our heads against a wall."

TB: "The ACT score of 20 is hard for some students that do not test well on standardized test. The student may be capable of studying and putting forth the effort it takes to be successful, yet cannot make the score on the ACT."

TB: "The ability of small schools to offer required courses and the cost of the ACT if taken repeatedly. The required GPAs in that not all schools have the same standards."

9. Are the citizens (educators, students, parents, etc.) sufficiently informed about the TOPS program? ___ If not, what should be done to improve communications?

While the experts split with their opinions on this question, several had this to say:

CM: "Yes. Could improve T.V. coverage on the program. Also, use weekly papers throughout the state."

JW: "No. See above; TOPS and success in later life should be a subject of discussion in high schools on frequent basis."

CM: "No. More workshops that target parents and teachers in the school system."

SC: "Yes. I believe that if a parent today is not aware of the TOPS program that parent is not truly involved with his/her student or the school system."

TB: "Yes, for those of them that want to obtain knowledge to help their students."

TB: "The two school systems I have worked in talk TOPS at every opportunity."

Table 4.22B: Qualitative Comments from the Administrator Questionnaire

5. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be raised? _____ Why? _____

CM: "No. It will automatically be raised with the increase of ACT scores."

JW: "The core should be strengthened. Agriculture should be taken out of science

courses and so on.”

KD: “No. Have the core curriculum raised to match the high school redesign curriculum.”

MN: “No”

ST: “No. Recently, an additional science, math class has been added to core curriculum.”

CM: “No. The requirements are at a achievable level.”

SC: “Yes. I have always felt that the GPA of a 2.50 should have been higher. I do not believe that most students who graduate from high school with a 2.50 have the study habits necessary to be successful in college.”

TB: “No. The core curriculum are classes they need to take, and if any more were added, the little schools would not be able to provide the classes needed for the TOPS program.”

TB: “No. The 17 1/2 credits required for the class of 2008 is a good foundation.”

6. Should the criteria to obtain TOPS be lowered? ___ Why? _____

CM: “No. We need to raise the bar not lower it.

JW: “No.”

KD: “No. Students need a challenge to aspire to. TOPS is not tough; need-based aid will help those who cannot make it but still have a chance at college.”

MN: “No.”

ST: “No. The students need the courses in the core curriculum in order to be prepared for college.”

CM: “No. The scholarship should have some sort of academic stipulations to keep it

competitive.”

SC: “No. I think the core curriculum has improved with the addition of the new credit in science and/or math. I already believe that the GPA is too low.”

TB: “No. The core courses are necessary for the success of the students in college.”

TB: “Sort of. The TOPS tech award requirements are absurd, (example, Business English, Fine Arts, Chemistry, etc.). Why do they need Chemistry?”

10. Are the existing TOPS core curriculum requirements sufficient to prepare all students to receive the scholarship? ___ If not, what should be done to do so?

CM: “Yes. ACT tutoring is important.”

JW: “No. Limit the courses. Math, English, Social Studies, Science, Foreign Language to college preparation and at least 17 1/2 units.”

KD: “To receive the scholarship, yes.”

MN: “Yes.”

ST: “Yes.”

CM: “Yes.”

SC: “I think the core curriculum requirements are sufficient, but that does not mean a student will be prepared for college or to receive the scholarship. There is so much more to college than being able to pass some classes. Even if a student is capable of passing the courses to earn the GPA required of 2.50, in many cases that student does not have the study habits required for college. This is true of students who make even higher GPA’s.” I think that the state should mandate a course that teaches study habits, as well as career awareness and opportunities for success after high school (i.e. programs available). Many schools teach a course entitled

“Education for Careers”, but that course needs to be for an entire year, be worth one credit, and encompass the other items mentioned—not just career information.”

TB: “Yes.”

11. Do all Louisiana students have access to required core courses and other academic requirements to receive TOPS? ___ If not, why? _____

CM: “Yes.” Some are on line.”

JW: “No. Parishes refuse to provide the courses.”

KD: “Yes, if not in their school, then by correspondence or through compressed video courses.”

MN: “Yes.”

ST: “Yes. I teach at a small rural school and my students are able to take all required courses. Students can take courses by LVS or by correspondence.”

CM: “No.”

SC: “I am sure not all Louisiana students have access to the required core courses. I know that St. Martin Parish high schools have had all courses in place for the TOPS core almost since the first year of the program. The only course that might not have been in place the very first year was Fine Arts Survey. I could not answer the question of why some students might not have access to required core courses.”

TB: “I feel that students of smaller schools have more difficulty in obtaining the classes than larger schools. However, these students can take the classes by Virtual School or correspondence courses.”

TB: “No. Smaller parishes and schools are unable to offer all the courses from financial and staffing situations.”

4. How has TOPS influenced access to higher education?

CM: "Admission standards have to be raised at almost every college in our state."

JW: "Increased number of students prepared for college; increased college success rate; increased percentage of A students attending college and many more ways."

KD: "Students are more likely to complete the core curriculum, since they have a good chance at access."

MN: "Increased enrollment for students who may not have been afforded the financial opportunities otherwise."

ST: "Many students that did not get at least a 20 on ACT would not have been able to afford college unless they took out student loans."

CM: "It has allowed more students to attend college."

SC: "I believe that many of the students who received TOPS would have gone to college without it through student loans, Pell Grants and college work study. I do believe however that it has allowed students who have received it to not be as stressed because of financial matters which allows them to be more academically productive."

TB: "The TOPS program has helped in providing the lower socioeconomic students the hope and opportunity to attend college."

TB: "It has made college obtainable economically for some."

12. What needs to be done for more students to receive the TOPS scholarship?

CM: "Quality teaching and a motivated learner."

JW: "Promote the program and improve instructions for parishes like St. Helena, East Feliciana provide additional capital."

KD: “Careful advising and monitoring, from the eighth grade, for both students and parents.”

MN: “More publicity to insure parental involvement.”

CM: “Guidance Counselors and educators in the school systems need to assure early-on that students are adhering to the TOPS requirements and checking to make sure the required courses are available at their schools but if not find a way for students to take those courses.”

SC: “I think we should be concerned with more students earning the TOPS Tech award than the TOPS scholarship. But if you want more students to receive the TOPS scholarship, the state and school systems need to start doing a better job showing students the connection between being successful in school and in the outside world in reference to ethic, attendance, etc.”

TB: “I would like to see the grade point average of the students figured in with the ACT score so that the poor standardized test takers could make up for their poor testing skills.”

TB: “TOPS Tech requirements must be re-evaluated. The TOPS requirements need to be more static and not have the change of the week. When I speak to students, I always say, “As of today...”

14. Can you recommend any improvements to the TOPS program?

CM: “We need to encourage more students to consider Technical and 2-year college training. No reduction in requirements. Communicate that opportunities are available to those who work hard.”

JW: “I do this every legislative session.”

<p>KD: “Have the core curriculum reflect the new high school redesigned Core-4 curriculum. Promote TOPS Tech as a viable option – more students should take advantage of it, particularly those interested in the trades.”</p> <p>MN: “More emphasis on “Tech” endorsements through high School Career/Technical curriculum.”</p> <p>ST: “I think it is a good program because it challenges the students to take upper level courses to better their education. I do not know of any improvements that need to be made.”</p> <p>CM: “TOPS needs to have more informative workshops for the public and schedule a parish wide workshop so that all educators in the school system can know exactly what TOPS is and what the requirements are for students.”</p> <p>SC: “I think the program overall is a good program. The main issue I have is that I think that we need to start putting some emphasis on the TOPS Tech award.”</p> <p>TB: “At the high school level, the only recommendation I have is to consider the grade point average along with the ACT score.”</p> <p>TB: “Rename the Tech requirements, make allowances for small schools, fund voluntary ACT workshops, and once enrolled in college, assign mentors.”</p>

Table 4.25A: Qualitative Comments from the Administrator Questionnaire

<p>13. What needs to be done for more TOPS recipients to retain their scholarships?</p> <p>CM: “More pre-college counseling so they understand they must complete 24 hours per year.”</p> <p>JW: “Make the appeals process better known.”</p> <p>KD: “Students need to stay aware of implications of their choices. TOPS is not an</p>
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entitlement, but a scholarship to win and the maintain.”

MN: “Develop an incremental schedule for disbursement of funds with freshmen to be reserved for later payments.”

CM: “Students need to take those higher level courses in high school that will prepare them for college level courses.”

SC: “This goes back to the fact I believe students who probably should not be in college actually earn TOPS but cannot retain it because of extremely poor study habits.” “On the other hand, maybe we should look at students being able to start college a little later. The more mature a student is the more successful he/she will be. Many students are far too immature to give it 100%. Some students choose to go to work for a few years and then go to college, but TOPS is only good for a specific period of time after graduation.” “Maybe once a student begins and is not totally successful and realizes that they are not ready, they could take a break from school and continue at a later point in their life without the fear of losing TOPS altogether.”

APPENDIX N

“MEASURING UP 2008: THE NATIONAL REPORT CARD ON HIGHER EDUCATION”

Foreword

By James B. Hunt Jr.,
Chairman, National Center's Board of Directors

Since 2000, the Measuring Up report cards have evaluated the progress of the nation and all 50 states in providing Americans with education and training beyond high school through the bachelor’s degree. In their totality, the five editions of the national and state report cards constitute the most extensive assessment ever of the educational performance of American higher education. Our purpose in the Measuring Up series is to assist the nation and the states in improving higher education opportunity and effectiveness.

[More...](#)

The 2008 National Report Card: Modest Improvements, Persistent Disparities, Eroding Global Competitiveness

By Patrick M. Callan
President, The National Center

Measuring Up 2008 is the most recent in the series of national and state-by-state report cards for higher education that was inaugurated in 2000. The key findings this year reveal that the nation and most of the 50 states are making some advances in preparing students for college and providing them with access to higher education. However, other nations are advancing more quickly than the United States; we continue to slip behind other countries in improving college opportunities for our residents.

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What's New in Measuring Up 2008

Measuring Change Over Time

This year, however, a state's Change Over Time is determined by its improvement or decline in performance on a key indicator in each performance category. The key indicators were selected because they are broad gauges for understanding state success in the performance areas.

[More.](#)

Improvements in Data

A number of new data sources are used for Measuring Up 2008 because the new data provide states with a more comprehensive portrayal of their performance. This year, the National Center replaced the data derived from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) with the American Community Survey (ACS), which is also administered by the Census Bureau.

[More.](#)

About Measuring Up

The Measuring Up 2008 national and state report cards on higher education were made possible by grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation for Education. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high-quality education and training beyond high school. The National Center is solely responsible for Measuring Up 2008. For further information about the National Center and its publications, visit <http://www.highereducation.org/>.

APPENDIX O

2004 Z HIGH SCHOOL TOPS PILOT STUDY FINDINGS

Individual Case Findings from Z High School Tops Respondents

Class of 2000

From the 197 Z High School graduates, 86 or 44% received a TOPS scholarship of some sort. Out of that number, only 23 or 27% of the recipients lost the award since they began college in the fall semester of 2000. Where most of the members of the class were female (120 or 61%), equally most of the TOPS recipients and those who subsequently lost TOPS were also female (59 or 69% vs. 16 or 70%). Additionally, where most of the members of the class were White (135 or 70%), an overwhelming number of the TOPS recipients and those who lost it were also White (81 or 94% vs. 22 or 96%). When cross checking analysis was applied to the Class of 2000, the largest single group who graduated, were summarily and proportionately awarded TOPS, and comparatively lost it were White females at 70%. A random selection of nine out of twenty-three 2000 TOPS recipients who lost the award were interviewed. Each of the participants who agreed to be a part of the survey were White females. Male recipients of this class who lost TOPS and were contacted refused to be interviewed. They simply were not interested in participating or felt it was a waste of their time since they were no longer in school. More enriching data could have been obtained had a more diverse mix of interviewees been available. Despite this limitation, rich descriptive feedback was gathered from those who agreed to discuss their TOPS setback.

Class of 2000 Student Interviews

Student #1 was a 3.5 GPA student with a 25 ACT. This graduate who was very active in high school organizations and majored in Psychology at LSU lost her TOPS early on

in her first semester in college due to delays in getting her application in to the state office and college financial aid office. She blamed her high school counselor for failure to process her forms though she admitted on her questionnaire that her high school did a very favorable job in preparing her for college. Maintaining the necessary college grades to keep TOPS was not her problem. In fact, she has never dropped out and is still currently attending LSU. After losing her TOPS scholarship, student #1 decided to rededicate herself to finishing college, which she has done quite successfully at her family's own expense for the past three years.

Student #2, a graduate with a 3.76 GPA and an ACT of 21, was extremely involved in high school activities and a school leader. She attended Northwestern Louisiana University, majoring in Radiology and successfully completing a full course load in her first year. Upon transferring to Our Lady of the Lake Medical College her second year, she discovered she had not met their TOPS requirements. Her GPA and credit hours had slipped below the required amount. She requested an exemption from the school but was denied. Consequently, she was financially forced to attend a local private-owned business college where she is currently scheduled to graduate in ultra-sound technology this December. She believes TOPS needs to ease its academic policy, especially for new college students who make initial mistakes. A Basic Tops scholarship requires that to maintain a scholarship one must remain a full-time student with a course load of 24 credit hours each year and hold a 2.5 GPA.

Student # 3 was perhaps the most heartfelt interview during this case study. Hardships are not new to college dropouts, but this particular case was noteworthy. This graduate, another White female who was both an outstanding student athlete and school leader with a 3.0 GPA and 19 ACT, attended Southeastern Louisiana University and majored in

Nursing. Her TOPS application process was extremely discouraging and frustrating. Applying was simple, but receiving the actual scholarship money was annoying. Her award was not sent to her university by the start of her first semester. In fact, it wasn't received by Southeastern until midway through the fall semester. Completely unprepared for this inconvenience, her parents did the only thing possible...they borrowed money to send their daughter to school. The TOPS office was no help to them, giving them excuse after excuse and blaming the university for the error while the university was equally unrepentant for the miscommunication as they blamed the state.

Student #3 passed the required number of courses to maintain TOPS her first year while also working part-time on campus to fund her housing needs since she lived away from home. But then, at the end of her second year fall semester, her life was drastically changed when abruptly her father died of a massive heart attack. Not able to function emotionally, she failed her fall courses. She believes her high school adequately prepared her for college and TOPS was a good program.

Student #4 expressed a communications disagreement between the local school and parents. A White female graduate, she had an impressive 3.4 GPA and 28 ACT, was in Who's Who among Outstanding American Students and was a school leader for three of her four high school years. She attends Southeastern Louisiana University, majoring in Nursing. Though she scheduled more than the necessary hours of credit (30) her first year, she completed only 23, one less than the required 24 credit hours. She lost TOPS at the beginning of her second year of study. She admitted that the TOPS application process was easy though she became confused as to how many hours she needed to maintain the scholarship. After losing TOPS, student #4 remained in college at her own expense, where she is still studying nursing.

Student #5 sounded very much like previous speakers, reiterating how she also lost TOPS because of falling below the minimum required course load for the first two years. Another White female graduate, she held a 3.2 GPA with a 21 ACT score upon completing Z High School. She majored in Health Sciences at LSU until she lost TOPS during her second year spring semester after successfully completing all 30 hours of class her first year. She slipped below the required 24 credit hours during her Sophomore spring semester at LSU. She became ill during her last week of finals; and after confusion over rescheduling her final, she missed the exam and resulted in a failure for that class. This left her with only passing 23 credit hours, missing the TOPS requirement by one credit hour. As a result, she transferred to Lady of the Lake Health Sciences School, where she currently studies radiology with a Pell Grant.

Student #6, another White female graduate, finished high school with a 3.2 GPA and an ACT of 23, receiving a Basic TOPS award. She was a very active student while at Z High then attended Southeastern University, majoring in Elementary Education. She scheduled 34 credit hours of class during her first year of college but passed only 22 hours, two shy of the required amount to keep TOPS. This was due to medical problems she experienced, causing her to stay out of college for one year. After this setback, she chose to get married and have a child. When she asked to re-apply for TOPS, she was informed that she was no longer eligible. Though she admits that her first experience with the TOPS process was easy and delightful, she had harsh words for the second attempt. She feels that the state and its universities care very little for those who in her words “fall through the cracks of real life”. At her own expense, she currently attends Baton Rouge Community College studying for a business degree.

Student #7 was eager to exchange her thoughts on TOPS. This White female graduate

earned a high school GPA of 3.0 with a 22 ACT. An athlete and editor of the Z High newspaper, she selected UL-Lafayette as her college destination to study Mass Communications. Though she scheduled 30 credit hours her first year of college, she didn't last more than the one year because her grades fell well below the required TOPS GPA. She was unable to pass remedial math in college and blamed her high school for not properly preparing her for college math. She resigned at the end of her first year of college due to grades and the fact that when she reapplied for TOPS she was informed by the state that she could only get it back one of two ways...by having a baby or due to some family tragedy that caused her to drop out. She responded that she surely was not going to have a baby just to regain her TOPS award and that this mentality by the state was extremely unfair.

Student #7 is still struggling after four years of working and saving to return to college one day so that she won't have too many student loans to repay. Because she lost TOPS, she became very discouraged. However, she has been holding in her own words "a dead end job" doing billing for workman's compensation for a small business. Her current boss told her she should return to college to pursue an associate degree, which could provide some more opportunities of employment for her. Her mom hopes she will before she gives up and just gets married for financial security.

Our last interviewee of the Class of 2000 was another White female, student #8. Interestingly, this student graduated with an incredible 3.8 GPA and impressive 28 ACT. She attended UL-Lafayette and majored in French. She scheduled 30 credit hours her first year and passed them all. So, how or why would this intelligent student lose TOPS? She never really was certain she wanted to attend college or if she was comfortable with her major. If she didn't like a professor, she simply dropped the course. Consequently,

her irrational decisions lost her TOPS because she fell below the required minimum credit hours. Though she admitted she was aware of the consequences of her actions, it didn't bother her because she really wasn't ready for college. After losing TOPS at the end of her first year of college, she transferred to UNO, which was not a good environment for her. She blamed the high school for not adequately preparing her for college and felt she had learned very little while there. This talented student dropped out after one additional year in college in New Orleans.

Class of 2000 Parent Interviews

Student #1's mother acknowledged that her daughter had been very immature and unprepared for college because she skipped classes and did not carry the required load. She stressed the need for the local high school to better prepare its students for both the TOPS process and college attendance to enhance their chances for success.

Student #3's mother acknowledged that the university eventually reimbursed them for the initial tuition they had paid for her daughter to attend her first semester while waiting on TOPS but not with the interest the family had to repay the bank. She suggested that the university was insensitive to her daughter's abnormal circumstances while TOPS offered to reinstate her award the next semester due to her hardship. Though her daughter accepted, it was during the spring semester that her daughter took an early withdrawal when depression set in and she felt she could not continue. Her daughter resigned from college and three months later, she enlisted into the U.S. Army to overcome her grief of losing her father and to take advantage of the Army's college benefit of free college tuition since losing TOPS. This mom believes that TOPS should include summer school, especially since it was during that first summer after her husband died that her daughter returned to school and did well. Unfortunately, TOPS does not

credit summer courses or GPA towards their annual requirements. Giving up on TOPS, it was during that summer that her daughter joined the military. Ironically, mom believes that TOPS should increase their academic standards to motivate students to take their schoolwork more seriously. She also believes that there is plenty of wasted tax dollars in the program that needs to be remedied.

The only TOPS recipient's father to be interviewed reported that his daughter, a Class of 2000 graduate with a 2.5 GPA and 21 ACT, attends LSU and majors in Marketing. After receiving the Basic TOPS award, she scheduled 30 credit hours her first year of study but passed only 21 hours (three less than required to keep TOPS). His daughter thought she could take the necessary hours during her first summer session to meet the TOPS requirements, which is not permissive. Consequently, she lost TOPS at the beginning of her second year of study.

This disgruntled father blamed the high school guidance counselor for not taking the time to better inform his daughter about the requirements to keep TOPS, especially since no mention of summer credits not counting towards the overall course work could be found in the application brochure at that time. He expressed a very unfavorable experience with both TOPS and the local high school. No one explained what was required at the high school level, though LSU admitted to giving him the TOPS brochure which states that summers do not apply to TOPS either for credit or paying summer tuition. This father also expressed concern that high school counselors are not doing as much as necessary to assist all students to obtain TOPS, just higher ranking students. In this instance, a communication problem existed between the student's parents and Z High School. His daughter did not resign from LSU but continued her studies at personal expense.

Student #4's mother was less amenable towards TOPS than her daughter. She argued that they had remained uninformed on how to maintain TOPS. She questioned why the high school or TOPS office had not conducted a workshop to stress to students and parents the importance of maintaining the requirements of keeping TOPS. She believes the school did little to motivate students like her daughter on how to follow the TOPS requirements and to keep up their GPAs.

Student #5's mother was furious with LSU for being so insensitive towards her daughter's illness during finals. In her opinion, this one incident caused her daughter to lose TOPS. She questioned how a university could reschedule a final without properly informing her daughter of the new time. LSU, however, saw it a different way, blaming her daughter for the miscommunication.

Student #6's mother also responded much more unfavorably than did her daughter when asked about her experience with the TOPS process as well as with the high school. She blamed Z High teachers for not adequately teaching her daughter math or for not regularly calling to inform the parents of their daughter's struggles with her math grades. She blamed the school for not training the parents on how to fill out the TOPS application correctly. However, this mother quickly shared the blame for her daughter's failure with TOPS on her daughter's poor judgment in joining a sorority on campus her first semester.

Class of 2001 Student Interviews

Student #1, my first interview of the Class of 2001, was a White male who graduated with a 3.0 GPA and 21 ACT. The recipient of the Basic TOPS award, he attended LSU and majored in Mass Communications. He admits that he didn't take TOPS very seriously because he didn't think it would last more than a few years. Though he scheduled and passed the necessary class load to keep TOPS (27), he admits to having

experienced an unfavorable process with TOPS. He felt that people who aren't well educated couldn't fill out the forms properly. He suggested the sooner TOPS and high school officials educate both students and parents on TOPS, the better the program will run. Waiting until a student's junior or senior years of high school is too late. The freshman year of high school is when he felt TOPS should be discussed.

He felt he was not mature or responsible enough to keep TOPS. He felt that guidance counselors should have offered short courses to students and parents on how to prepare both for high school and college requirements. Instead he blamed the high school for his scrambling through deadlines. He also suggested the state needs to do more recruiting and dissemination of TOPS information. He lost his TOPS award because of dropping down to 9 semester hours without realizing that he needed 12 each semester. He also believes that the state should practice leniency and allow students whose grades fall a semester to regain TOPS if they bring those grades back up another semester. His last suggestion to colleges and TOPS is that they need to provide summer intervention programs to allow recipients who fall below a requirement to meet a specific deadline before each semester. He did not resign from school upon losing TOPS. Rather, he continued at his own expense, transferred to UNO two years ago, and continues his studies there today. He considered his experience with TOPS as quite unfavorable.

Student #2, a Black male who graduated with a 3.6 GPA, a 20 ACT, and as captain of his high school basketball team, attended Belhaven College in Mississippi on a full athletic scholarship even though Louisiana awarded him a TOPS scholarship (applicable only in a Louisiana college). He majored in Communications, took and passed 15 credit hours each semester but got hurt playing college sports. When he transferred back to LSU, his course work was credited to his LSU program, but he no longer qualified for

TOPS, even though he maintained a 2.8 GPA while attending a Mississippi college.

Though his high school experience with TOPS was pleasant and informative, his college experience with it has been a disappointment because he cannot understand how something he worked so hard for and was awarded to him is no longer available for him upon returning to Louisiana.

He understood why he lost the athletic scholarship in Mississippi, but with a deserving GPA, why isn't TOPS still there for him? After all, didn't his parents pay lots of taxes all his life for this reason? So, where are the benefits of the scholarship he never used? He believes the state owes him this, but knows the state won't change this provision in time for his schooling. He credits his former senior counselor with explaining the process well to him and assisting in filling out the TOPS application forms in class during the start of his senior year at Z High School. He continues his studies at LSU at his own expense as a broadcast journalism major, scheduled to graduate next year.

Student #3, a White female graduate, scored a 26 ACT and maintained a 3.0 GPA while at Z High. She was very active in school organizations and decided to attend LSU her first semester of college to major in Dental Hygiene. A recipient of a Basic TOPS scholarship, she took and passed the required 12 credit hours to keep TOPS. She credited her high school counselor with making the application process simple and easy. However, she was not happy with LSU nor her major and decided to change both her choice of schools and major the next semester. Since LSU didn't offer her the caliber of Art and Fashion Design education she desired, she transferred to Santa Monica College in California where both the proper training and future jobs of her industry exist. As she lamented, "It's a shame that this state (Louisiana) doesn't offer the kinds of job opportunities to pursue a college degree as does New York or California." In fact, she

reminded me that the cost of her education per credit unit is actually much cheaper in California than it would be here in Louisiana despite TOPS. So, it wasn't a hard decision for her to forfeit TOPS to move to California.

Student #4, another White male graduate, registered a 3.6 GPA and 20 ACT score. He selected to attend Our Lady of the Lake Nursing School his first semester of college. His academic struggles began early on in that first semester when he scheduled 13 credit hours but passed only 10, two below the minimum requirement. His life's priorities soon changed when he resigned from college to become a husband and provider. He didn't lose TOPS. He simply got tired of school and wanted to start working as a security guard. Did he blame his high school counselor or teachers? No. Did he feel the courses TOPS requires in high school to be unnecessary? Yes. He complimented his high school counselor for making the application process easy and informative, but wondered why classes in Fine Arts Survey or Band or Choir were necessary for TOPS. He suggested that the schools begin educating students about the TOPS requirements in their freshman year rather than in the junior or senior years as in his case because then it's almost too late to properly schedule required TOPS classes to receive the scholarship. Often this causes unnecessary anxiety in a student's last one or two years of high school. He does not plan on returning to college.

Student #5, a Black male graduate, maintained a 3.4 GPA and a 21 ACT score. Commanding officer of his high school ROTC unit, he chose to attend Southern University in Baton Rouge his first year of college to study Computer Science. He scheduled 21 hours of courses, of which he passed none. He is married and the father of one child.

Of all the interviews conducted to determine the problems with TOPS and why

students lose it, this one yielded the most frustrated participant. Admitting that the application process was easy while attending Z High, the receiving end at the college was the complete opposite. In his opinion, Southern University's Office of Financial Aid was unorganized and negative about assisting students in need on the status of their TOPS. They didn't want to be bothered with TOPS as much as they did with federal grants. He felt TOPS could have better communicated with Southern and LSU. Every time he called the TOPS state office, they were too busy to help as was the Southern office.

Student #5 was then deployed by the Army to Georgia for preparation for Bosnia. His TOPS and schooling were put on hold. He returned from overseas and returned to college again just to be recalled by the military again for duty in Afghanistan. Upon returning to America, he decided to transfer his studies and TOPS from Southern to LSU, just to discover that Southern had kept his TOPS funding and messed up his grades. He was forced to consider studying at his own expense and that of the Army because his records have been so messed up. LSU blamed Southern. Southern blamed LSU and this student.

Lines of communication between the TOPS agency and the two universities broke down as did record keeping at both schools, both of which student #5 feels are in need of vast improvement and more concern for students, especially veterans. He has not returned to school because he is still waiting for the TOPS confusion to be solved. He plans to study at LSU once this happens. His recommendations included stressing the importance of TOPS to high school students at an earlier age, making high school students more serious about their TOPS courses, and establishing better communications between TOPS and all schools.

Student #6, a White female graduate, finished with a 3.2 GPA and 28 ACT score

while attending Z High. She attended Baton Rouge Community College, majored in Criminal Justice, and successfully completed 30 credit hours her first year. As a single mom, she was forced to provide for her family and chose to fast track her career by attending a court reporting school for a year. Consequently, she lost TOPS when she withdrew from a recognized college program, not for academic reasons. She returned to BRCC but was denied access to the remainder of her TOPS scholarship. She is now studying in her 4th semester at her own expense to become gainfully employed but cannot understand why TOPS won't assist her, especially since it was not lost for academic or insufficient course hours but for economic reasons. Isn't TOPS supposed to help students in need, at least those who can maintain their GPAs?

Class of 2002 Student Interviews

Student #1, a White male graduate, was the only subject willing to participate in this study. Either only a few other TOPS dropouts from this class could be located, or those who were contacted refused to interview because they didn't have time. This young man maintained a 3.2 GPA and scored an ACT of 20 while attending Z High. He attended LSU and studied Information Systems for three semesters successfully scheduling and passing 24 hours during his first two semesters as required and 6 summer school semester credits, which did not apply to TOPS. He selected to sit out a semester and left LSU. He returned to college at Baton Rouge Community College but lost TOPS as a result of resigning from LSU. He did not lose it because of academic reasons. He too questioned why are tax funded scholarships provided to deserving students not more available to students who return to college.

VITA

In 1972, Samuel H. Theriot graduated from Abbeville High School and began his postsecondary career majoring in both English and history (Liberal Arts) while attending the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. Upon his graduation in 1976, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree and shortly thereafter was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives, where he served the people of Vermilion Parish for the following seventeen years (1979-1996). While serving in the Legislature, he concentrated his efforts on education, environment, and natural resources laws. He returned to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to complete his teacher certification in 1986 in secondary education with a double major in English and social studies and began teaching at J.H. Williams Middle School. In 1987, he transferred to North Vermilion High School where he taught until 1996.

Not satisfied with only teaching, he again returned to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette to attain a Master of Education degree in administration and supervision in 1996. He left the teaching profession in 1996 when he was elected as Vermilion Parish Clerk of Court, where he served until 2000. At this time, he returned to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette as an adjunct instructor for two years. He also, in 2000, enrolled into the Doctor of Philosophy in educational leadership and research at Louisiana State University (LSU). He also taught social studies at Zachary High School during this time from 2002-2004. In 2004, he returned to North Vermilion High School to teach social studies and become department chair, both of which he continues to do today. His professional educational interests include public policy, leadership, and

governance.

During his tenure in the Louisiana Legislature, he was recognized several times by both the Louisiana Association of Educators (LAE) and the Louisiana Federation of Teachers (LFT) as “Outstanding Legislator of the Year” for his contributions towards public education. In 2007, he was selected “Teacher of the Year” at North Vermilion High School. He currently resides in Lafayette, Louisiana, with his wife Mary and two children, Ashley and Jacob.