

Editorial: Louisiana student aid merits some discussion

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Louisiana's college scholarship program TOPS is in the cross hairs of state budget discussions, and that's a good thing. There's no threat that it's going away, nor should it.

But recent developments have raised legitimate issues regarding its cost and objectives during a time of tough budget decisions.

Last month, Gov. Bobby Jindal said he wanted to dip — "raid," critics say — into the state's tobacco settlement to undergird the \$198 million TOPS program that has more than doubled since 1998. The governor would take \$40 million from the tobacco funds, though the tobacco-supported Millennium Fund already accounts for just less than 15 percent of the TOPS program.

A few days after the governor's proposal, the Louisiana Budget Project asserted that merit-based TOPS disproportionately serves students from middle-class families at the expense of disadvantaged students who rely on need-based Go Grants. "Unlike TOPS, which has always been fully funded by the Legislature, the Go Grants program has been chronically underfunded," states the report.

Also, Go Grants of \$2,000 for full-time students and \$500 to \$1,000 for part-time students "leave large unmet financial needs." TOPS students receive an average of \$3,009 with tuition increases expected to push the per-student cost to \$4,315 by 2013.

So besides the question of the governor's fiscal prudence in dedicating yet more funds to a specific budget area, there is the larger question of whether Louisiana can afford TOPS as it exists or if changes are warranted.

A talk radio debate this week floated ideas such as converting TOPS scholarships to loans if a student leaves the state after graduation. Among the flaws there is TOPS partly was envisioned as a means of getting high school students to take tougher courses and shoot for higher grades. Ideally, they also would attend college in Louisiana and stay here.

But a penalty for leaving the state — "imprisoning high-performing students" even if there are no growth opportunities, as one observer noted — doesn't seem fair. Raising academic standards, however, is one idea that merits more thorough discussion.

Louisiana's 2.5 grade-point average threshold is among the lowest for state-supported scholarship programs. Florida requires a GPA of 3.5, while Georgia and Alabama established a 3.0 GPA. New Mexico requires a student to achieve a 2.5 GPA for the first semester of college to qualify for assistance in the second semester.

The Council for a Better Louisiana is among those that support raising academic standards as a means "to mitigate the budget impact of increasing tuition" and encourage greater academic performance, its president says. Rather than abandon the merit-based system for TOPS, Barry Erwin suggests any TOPS savings from increasing academic standards could be used to bolster needs-based Go Grants.

However Louisiana approaches its scholarship and grant programs, it doesn't take a huge GPA to realize that tinkering may be in order. Even in an election year, let's hope lawmakers aren't too timid to embrace the discussion.

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