

TOPS Report:
Analysis of the TOPS Program from 2004-2013

Louisiana Board of Regents

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Executive Summary

The Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), Louisiana's merit-based student aid program, was created via Act 1375 during the 1997 Regular Legislative Session. The first college freshman class to receive TOPS awards entered postsecondary education in the fall of 1998.

Act 1202 of the 2001 Regular Legislative Session requires the Louisiana Board of Regents (BoR) to prepare a report to analyze various aspects of the TOPS program. In accordance with Act 1202, this report includes:

- An analysis of the relationship between the high school courses taken and the student's score on the American College Test (ACT);
- The number of high school graduates who are eligible for TOPS and subsequently enroll in college;
- Persistence rates of TOPS students;
- Retention rates of TOPS awards, including numbers of and reasons for students losing award eligibility; and
- Graduation data, including rates.

The data in this report include current and historical data on TOPS students (students receiving an *Opportunity, Performance, or Honors* award) and non-TOPS students, to allow for comparison.

All indications are that the TOPS eligibility requirements do induce students to take a more rigorous high school curriculum, which in turn better prepares them for the ACT and for success in postsecondary education. As the key component for eligibility for a TOPS award, the *TOPS Core Curriculum* encourages students to take high school courses that will prepare them for success after high school, particularly in postsecondary education. Of the 2003-04 graduating high school class, 59.5% had completed the *TOPS Core Curriculum*. Ten years later, 69.5% of the 2012-13 high school graduating class had done so. Indications are that completion of the *TOPS Core* improves students' scores on the ACT. According to ACT, of the 2011-2012 high school graduating class, 22,033 students (approximately 49%) took the ACT and attended a public postsecondary education institution in Louisiana the following fall. Of these students, the average ACT composite for those who completed the *TOPS Core* was 21.4. The average ACT composite for those who did not complete the *TOPS Core* was 16.7. In addition, data indicate that taking a rigorous high school curriculum decreases the likelihood of having to take developmental coursework in college. Of the 2011-2012 entering freshmen cohort, 43% of those that had completed the Louisiana Board of Regents recommended college preparatory coursework [*closely aligned with the TOPS Core*] in high school were required to take developmental coursework upon entry into college. Of those that did not complete the same

rigorous curriculum while in high school, 89% were required to take developmental coursework.

One of the generally accepted purposes of TOPS is to keep Louisiana high school graduates in the State to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities. The TOPS program specifically seeks to entice Louisiana's best and brightest high school graduates (as determined by completion of the *TOPS Core Curriculum*, a minimum high school GPA and a minimum score on the ACT) to remain in the state for postsecondary education. To that end, since the program's inception in fall 1998, 256,923 students have met the eligibility requirements for an *Opportunity, Performance or Honors* TOPS award. Of those, 230,985, or 90%, have accepted an *Opportunity, Performance or Honors* TOPS award and enrolled in a postsecondary education institution in Louisiana.

In regards to persistence, aggregate data indicate that students who begin college with a TOPS award return to postsecondary education in subsequent years at a higher rate than non-TOPS students. TOPS awards are cancelled when students fail to maintain full-time and continuous enrollment, earn the required 24 hours of credit per academic year, or raise their GPA to the required minimum. Between 2004 and 2013, approximately 33% of TOPS recipients had their TOPS award cancelled at some point during their postsecondary academic career, and may or may not have earned the award back. Based upon data from the 2012-13 entering freshmen cohort of TOPS recipients, approximately 11% had their awards cancelled during or immediately following their first year of postsecondary education. Data indicate that of those awards which are cancelled, the majority are cancelled due to students' failure to earn 24 hours of college credit during an academic year.

In regards to graduation rates, data indicate that students who begin a baccalaureate or an associate degree program with TOPS graduate within 150% and 200% of time at much higher rates than do students without a TOPS award. Approximately 3 out of 5 TOPS recipients complete a baccalaureate degree within 150% of time, compared with 1 out of 4 non-TOPS students who do so within the same time frame.

Finally, it should be noted that since the program's inception, the State has made a significant and growing investment in TOPS. In total, the State has spent approximately \$1.9 billion on the TOPS program. Between the 1999 and 2014 fiscal years, total expenditures on the TOPS program increased 307%. In 1998-1999 the average TOPS award amount was \$2,288 (including *TOPS Tech*). In 2012-2013, the average TOPS award amount had increased 80% to \$4,122 (including *TOPS Tech*).

Brief History of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)

The Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), Louisiana’s merit-based student aid program, was created via Act 1375 during the 1997 Regular Legislative Session. The first freshman class to receive TOPS awards entered postsecondary education in the fall of 1998. Although the founding legislation does not directly document the goals of the program, four generally accepted purposes of TOPS are:

- To promote academic success by requiring completion of a rigorous high school core curriculum;
- To provide financial incentives as a reward for good academic performance;
- To keep Louisiana’s best and brightest in the state to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities; and
- To promote access to and success in postsecondary education.

Eligibility Criteria, Levels of Award, Renewal Requirements, Distribution of Awards

There are four levels of TOPS awards available to students enrolling at Louisiana’s colleges and universities: *TOPS Tech*, *Opportunity*, *Performance*, and *Honors*. Due to historical underutilization of the *TOPS Tech* award, this report will focus only on those students receiving an *Opportunity*, *Performance* or *Honors* award (some limited statistical analysis on the *TOPS Tech* award can be found in Appendix A).

The criteria for eligibility for the *Opportunity*, *Performance* and *Honors* awards include completion of a defined high school core curriculum, with a minimum grade point average in core courses, and a minimum ACT composite score. Table 1 lists current criteria and awards.

Table 1: TOPS Eligibility Criteria and Award Specifics, 2013

Award	Core	Core GPA	ACT Composite	Award Specifics	Duration
<i>Opportunity</i>	17.5 Units	2.50	20	Full-Time Tuition & Certain fees	4 years, or 8 semesters
<i>Performance</i>	17.5 Units	3.00	23	Full-Time Tuition & Certain fees + \$400/year	4 years, or 8 semesters
<i>Honors</i>	17.5 Units	3.00	27	Full-Time Tuition & Certain fees + \$800/year	4 years, or 8 semesters

Source: LOSFA website- TOPS Informational Brochures and Flyers

Currently, the *TOPS Core Curriculum* consists of 17.5 units. The *TOPS Core Curriculum* will increase to 19 units beginning with the 2013-2014 high school graduating class (the specific course requirements of the *TOPS Core Curriculum* are contained in Appendix B).

Administration of TOPS is statutorily assigned to the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA). Initial student eligibility is determined using a combination of: the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or TOPS On-Line Application; the high school transcript from the Department of Education’s Student Transcript System (STS); and official ACT scores.

To maintain eligibility, TOPS recipients must be continuously enrolled as full-time students, earn at least 24 semester hours equivalent of credit each academic year (fall, spring and summer), and maintain academic progress as demonstrated by the cumulative grade point average. Table 2 lists the minimum renewal requirements for each award.

Table 2: Renewal Requirements, 2013

Award	Hrs. Earned/Academic Year	Cum. GPA Each Academic Yr. (2.0 each semester/term)	Award Reinstated (Upon recovery of req. GPA)
<i>Opportunity</i>	24	2.30- first year; 2.50- subsequent years	Yes
<i>Performance</i>	24	3.00	Yes, as <i>Opportunity</i>
<i>Honors</i>	24	3.00	Yes, as <i>Opportunity</i>

Source: LOSFA website- TOPS Informational Brochures and Flyers

Continuing eligibility is determined by LOSFA based on data received from the postsecondary institution in which the student is enrolled.

In fall 2013, the majority (53.3%) of all TOPS awards went to students attending a UL System campus. The majority (52.5%) of students with TOPS awards had an *Opportunity* award. Approximately forty-eight percent (47.5%) of students with the highest level of award, the *Honor* award, attended an LSU System campus. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of TOPS awards received for the fall 2013 semester.

Table 3: Distribution of Award Types across System, Fall 2013

Award	LSU System	Southern System	UL System	LCTC System	Private Institutions	Proprietary Schools	% of all awards
Opportunity	27.4%	2.0%	57.5%	6.4%	6.3%	0.3%	52.5%
Performance	35.1%	0.8%	55.8%	2.2%	6.1%	0.1%	26.2%
Honors	47.5%	0.2%	39.8%	0.3%	12.1%	0.0%	21.3%
% of all awards	33.7%	1.3%	53.3%	4.0%	7.5%	0.2%	

Source: LOSFA- TOPS Payment Summary by Award Level for Academic Year 2013-2014

Act 1202 of 2001

Act 1202 of the 2001 Regular Legislative Session charged the Board of Regents (BoR) with developing a uniform TOPS reporting system for the purposes of policy analysis and program evaluation, and to provide accurate data and statistics relative to the program’s impact on the State and on students. In addition to the development of a TOPS reporting system, Act 1202 also required the BoR to prepare a report to analyze various aspects of the TOPS program (Act 1202 is included in Appendix C). To satisfy the reporting requirements, Regents’ staff developed interfaces between the major systems needed to identify and track TOPS students as they move through the postsecondary education enrollment cycle. According to Act 1202, the “TOPS report” should include:

- An analysis of the relationship between the high school courses taken and the student’s score on the American College Test (ACT);
- The number of high school graduates who are eligible for TOPS and subsequently enroll in college;
- Persistence rates of TOPS students;
- Retention rates of TOPS students, including numbers of and reasons for students losing award eligibility; and
- Graduation data, including rates.

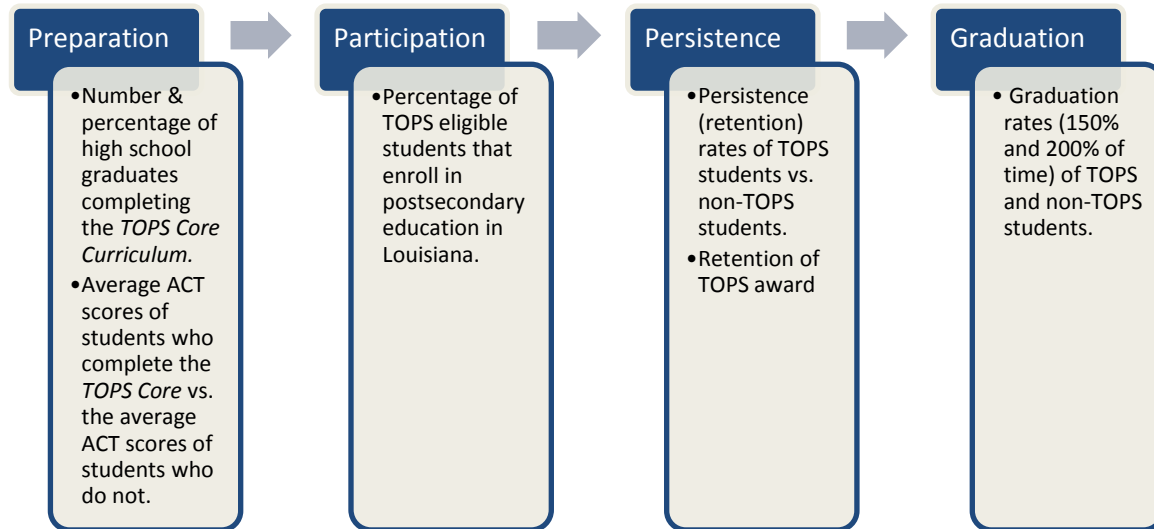
This report includes analyses of the five reporting specifications listed above.

TOPS Report: Historical Analysis of the TOPS Program, 2004-2013

Overview of Report

The data in this report include current and historical data on TOPS students (students receiving an *Opportunity, Performance, or Honors* award) and non-TOPS students, to allow for comparison. As illustrated in Figure A, the report is presented in an order that follows the students' progression through the postsecondary enrollment process; from preparation, to participation in postsecondary education, to persistence, to graduation.

Figure A: Graphical Overview of Report



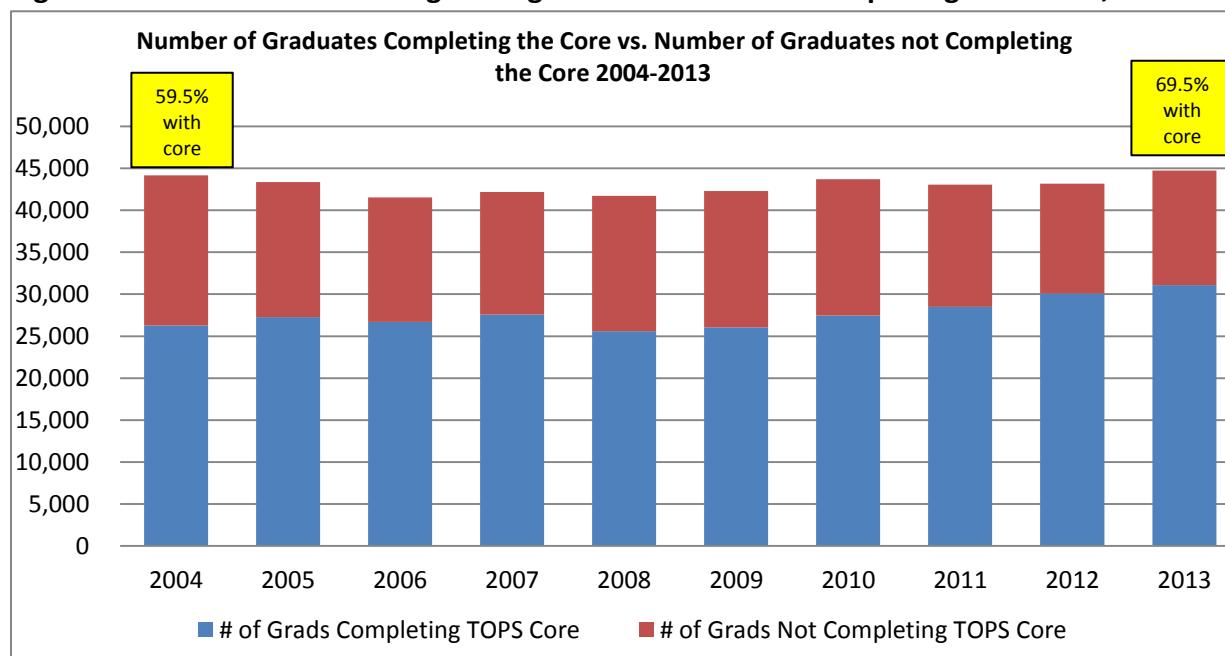
It should be noted that some of the data provided in the “Preparation” section, and all of the data provided in the “Participation,” “Persistence” and “Graduation” sections of this report do not include private postsecondary institutions since those institutions do not currently participate in Regents’ reporting systems.

Preparation

TOPS eligibility requirements require students to take high school courses that will prepare them for success after high school, particularly in postsecondary education. The *TOPS Core Curriculum* is the key component for eligibility for a TOPS award. With the 2001 Master Plan, the BoR adopted the *TOPS Core* as the *Regents’ Core*, the most important element of the minimum standards established for admissions to the state’s public four-year universities. With this change, students had a double incentive to complete the college-preparatory curriculum. In 2008 the Regents adopted as its core the *Core 4*, an even more demanding college-preparatory curriculum. The *TOPS Core* is a subset of the *Core 4*.

As shown in Figure B, the number and percentage of high school graduates completing the *TOPS Core Curriculum* has increased from 59.5% in 2004 to 69.5% in 2013, despite a decrease in the total number of high school graduates (a result of demographic changes in the early 1990's which led to a decrease in the number of school-age children in Louisiana).

Figure B: Number and Percentage of High School Graduates Completing *TOPS Core*, 2004-2013



Source: LOSFA internal data files.

The *TOPS Core* was changed in 2008. An additional Math or Science requirement was added.

Indications are that completion of the *TOPS Core* improves students' scores on the ACT. The latest data available from ACT indicate that, "On average, students who complete the Louisiana Board of Regents recommended college preparatory coursework [*closely aligned with the TOPS Core*] in high school earn higher ACT composite scores." According to ACT, of the 2011-2012 high school graduating class, 22,033 students (approximately 49%) took the ACT and attended a *public* postsecondary education institution in Louisiana the following fall. Of these students, the average ACT composite for those who completed the *TOPS Core* was 21.4. The average ACT composite for those who did not complete the *TOPS Core* was 16.7.¹

In addition, data indicate that taking a rigorous high school curriculum decreases the likelihood of having to take developmental coursework in college. Of the 2011-2012 entering freshman cohort, 43% of those that had completed the Louisiana Board of Regents recommended college preparatory coursework [*closely aligned with the TOPS Core*] in high school were required to take developmental coursework upon entry into college. Of those that did not complete the

¹ "The ACT High School-to-College Success Report: 2011-2012 Freshmen"

same rigorous curriculum while in high school, 89% were required to take developmental coursework.²

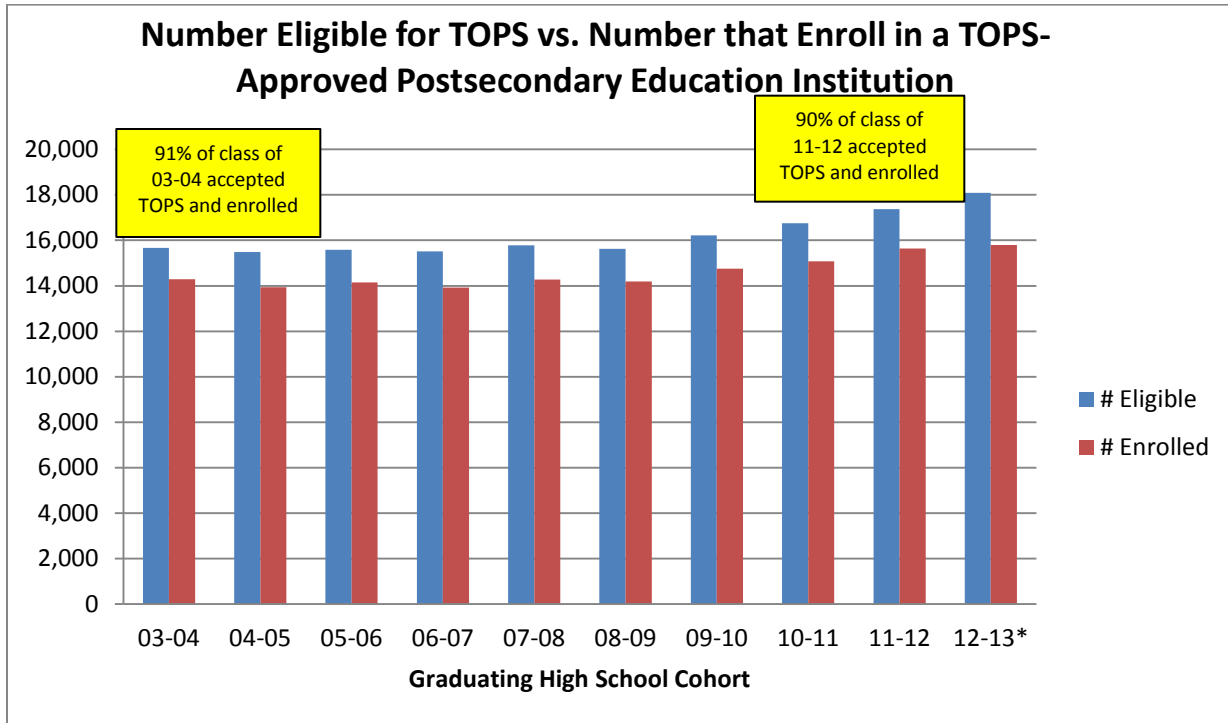
All indications are that the TOPS eligibility requirements induce students to take a more rigorous high school curriculum, which in turn better prepares them for the ACT and for success in postsecondary education.

Participation

One of the generally accepted purposes of TOPS is to keep Louisiana high school graduates in the State to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities. The TOPS program specifically seeks to entice Louisiana's best and brightest high school graduates (as defined by completion of the *TOPS Core Curriculum*, a minimum high school GPA and a minimum score on the ACT) to remain in the state for postsecondary education. To that end, since the program's inception in fall 1998, 256,923 students have been deemed eligible for an *Opportunity, Performance or Honors* TOPS award. Of those, 230,985, or 90%, have accepted an *Opportunity, Performance or Honors* TOPS award and enrolled in a postsecondary education institution in Louisiana. Therefore, the TOPS program has succeeded in keeping Louisiana's high school graduates in the State to pursue postsecondary education.

² "The ACT High School-to-College Success Report: 2011-2012 Freshmen"

Figure C: Number Eligible for TOPS vs. Number that Enroll by Graduating High School Class



Source: LOSFA internal data files.

*Students have until the first college semester following the first anniversary of the date they graduate from high school to accept a TOPS award. Therefore, the data reported in Figure C above for the class of 12-13 represent only those students in the 12-13 high school graduating cohort who accepted a TOPS award by the fall 2013 semester. The remaining cohort of eligible students has until the fall 2014 semester to accept a TOPS award.

Persistence

Persistence in postsecondary education is usually measured by the rate at which first time, full-time, degree-seeking students are retained to (or return for) their second year. As illustrated in Tables 4 and 5, students who begin college with a TOPS award return to postsecondary education in subsequent years at a higher rate than non-TOPS students.

Table 4 compares the overall retention rate (retention at any public postsecondary institution, not necessarily the institution in which the student started) to the second, third and fourth year (if available) of students who began at a four-year institution with TOPS verses those who began without TOPS (i.e., non-TOPS students).

Table 4: Statewide Retention Rates of TOPS vs. Non-TOPS Students Who Began at a Four-Year Institution

Fall Semester Entering Class	2 nd Yr. Retention		3 rd Yr. Retention		4 th Yr. Retention	
	TOPS	Non-TOPS	TOPS	Non-TOPS	TOPS	Non-TOPS
	2004	85%	62%	82%	54%	77%
2005	88%	68%	81%	56%	76%	49%
2006	88%	68%	82%	58%	78%	52%
2007	89%	69%	83%	59%	78%	53%
2008	90%	70%	83%	58%	79%	53%
2009	89%	71%	82%	60%	77%	52%
2010	89%	72%	82%	61%	77%	54%
2011	88%	71%	81%	59%	N/A	N/A
2012	87%	71%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: BoR internal data files. TOPS Tech award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

Table 5 compares the overall retention rate to the second and third year (if available) of students who began at a two-year institution with TOPS verses those who began without TOPS (i.e., non-TOPS students).

Table 5: Statewide Retention Rates of TOPS vs. Non-TOPS Students Who Began at a Two-Year Institution

Fall Semester Entering Class	2 nd Yr. Retention		3 rd Yr. Retention	
	TOPS	Non-TOPS	TOPS	Non-TOPS
	2004	69%	36%	66%
2005	76%	54%	65%	38%
2006	74%	57%	63%	39%
2007	78%	57%	66%	44%
2008	81%	59%	69%	41%
2009	78%	53%	64%	35%
2010	77%	54%	60%	34%
2011	72%	53%	55%	33%
2012	74%	52%	N/A	N/A

Source: BoR internal data files. TOPS Tech award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

Students who receive a TOPS award must maintain minimum academic criteria to retain their award (see Table 2). The award is cancelled when students fail to maintain full-time and

continuous enrollment, earn the required 24 hours of credit per academic year, or raise their GPA to the required minimum. Based upon data from the 2012-13 entering freshmen cohort of TOPS recipients, approximately 11% had their awards cancelled during or immediately following their first year of postsecondary education.

As Table 6 illustrates, between 2004 and 2013, 136,616 students received TOPS awards. Of these TOPS award recipients, 45,654 (33%) had their TOPS award cancelled at some point during their postsecondary academic career, and may or may not have earned the award back. Of the 45,654 awards which were cancelled, 28,880 (63%) were cancelled due to students' failure to earn 24 hours of college credit during an academic year.

Table 6: Percentage of TOPS Awards Cancelled by Cohort

Entering Cohort	Total # of Awards	Total # of Awards Cancelled*	Cancelled: 24 Hr. Requirement	Cancelled: GPA Requirement	Cancelled: Non-Continuous Enrollment	Cancelled: Student Resignation
2004-05	14,620	6,050 (41%)	3,424 (23%)	354 (2%)	2,272 (16%)	729 (5%)
2005-06	14,443	6,111 (42%)	3,146 (22%)	357 (2%)	2,608 (18%)	699 (5%)
2006-07	14,667	6,090 (42%)	3,818 (26%)	358 (2%)	1,914 (13%)	727 (5%)
2007-08	14,227	5,779 (41%)	3,666 (26%)	497 (3%)	1,616 (11%)	656 (5%)
2008-09	14,920	5,949 (40%)	3,796 (25%)	586 (4%)	1,567 (11%)	603 (4%)
2009-10	15,297	5,640 (37%)	3,593 (23%)	582 (4%)	1,465 (10%)	567 (4%)
2010-11	15,576	4,708 (30%)	3,059 (20%)	441 (3%)	1,208 (8%)	635 (4%)
2011-12	16,042	3,397 (21%)	2,487 (16%)	155 (1%)	755 (5%)	545 (3%)
2012-13	16,824	1,930 (11%)	1,891 (11%)	8 (0%)	31 (0%)	459 (3%)
Total	136,616	45,654	28,880	3,338	13,436	5,620

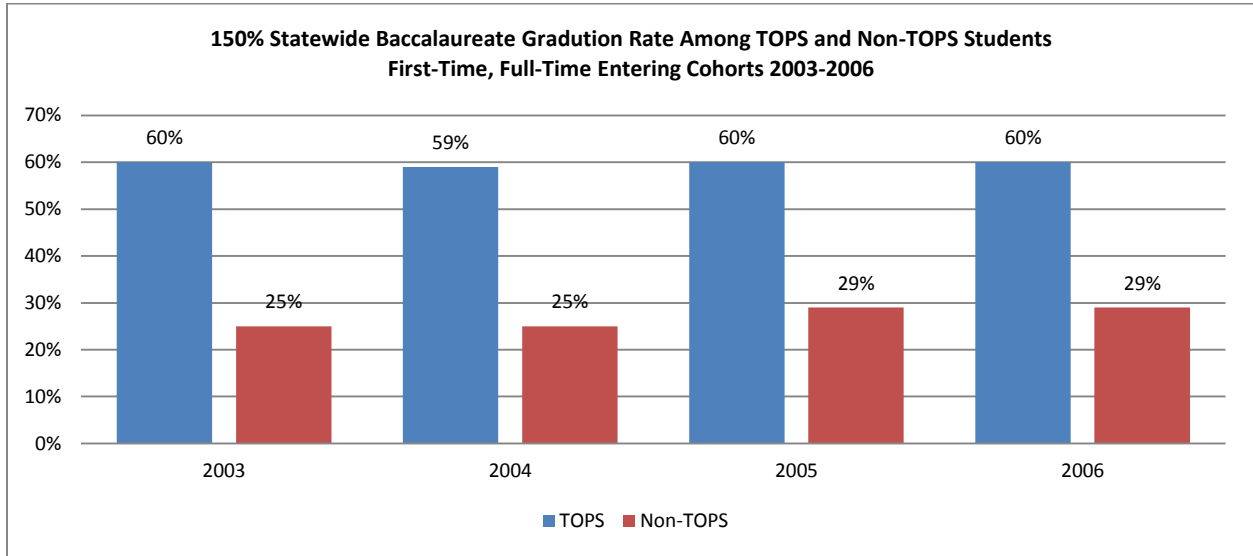
*Does not include those cancelled due to resignation.

Source: LOSFA internal data files. TOPS Tech award recipients not included.

Graduation

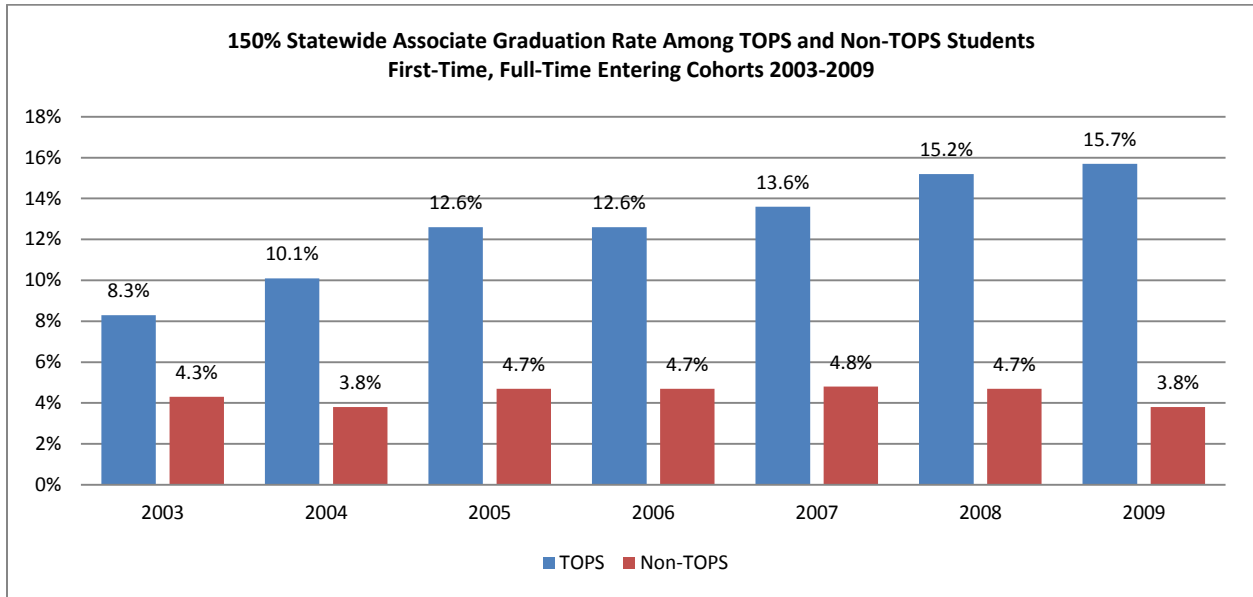
Graduation is typically measured by calculating the rate at which first-time, full-time degree seeking students earn their academic degrees within 150% of the time required (i.e., within six years for baccalaureate degrees and within three years for associate degrees). This 150% protocol was adopted by the federal government and has become the standard followed by the states. As Figures D and E both illustrate, students who begin a baccalaureate degree program or an associate degree program with TOPS graduate within 150% of time at much higher rates than do students without a TOPS award. As Figure D illustrates, approximately 3 out of 5 TOPS recipients complete a baccalaureate degree within 150% of time, compared with 1 out of 4 non-TOPS students who do so within the same time frame.

Figure D: 150% Statewide Baccalaureate Graduation Rate among TOPS and Non-TOPS Students



Source: BoR internal data files. *TOPS Tech* award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

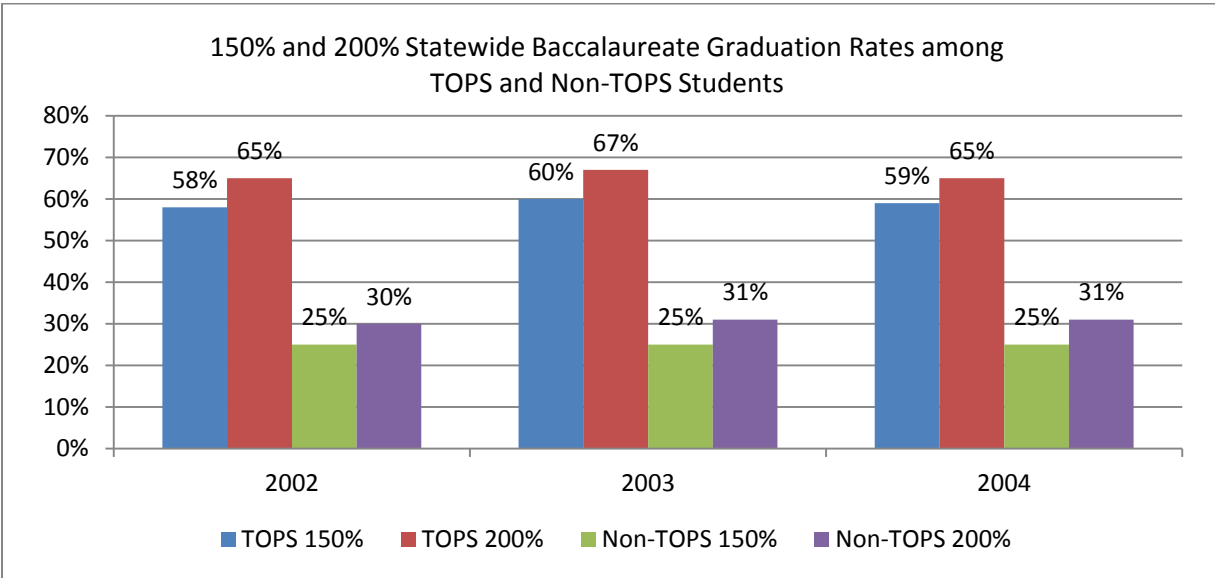
Figure E: 150% Statewide Associate Graduation Rate among TOPS and Non-TOPS Students



Source: BoR internal data files. *TOPS Tech* award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

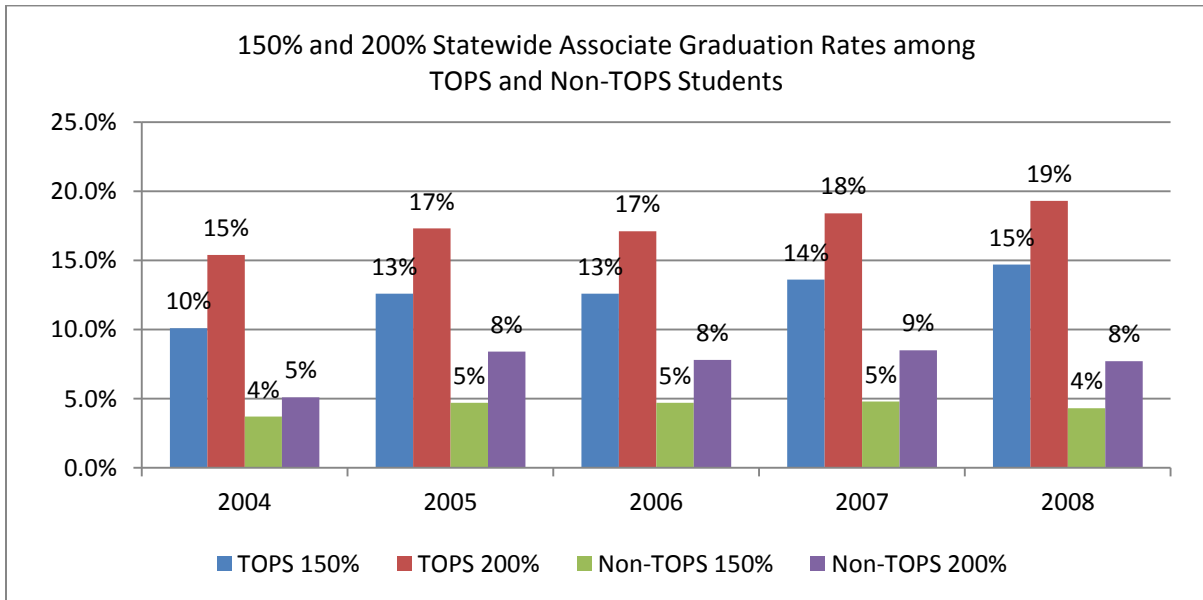
Figures F & G display the comparisons between the standard federally-accepted 150% graduation rates versus a 200% graduation rate. Again, TOPS recipients graduate at a higher rate than non-TOPS students.

Figure F: 150% and 200% Statewide Baccalaureate Graduation Rates among TOPS and Non-TOPS Students



Source: BoR internal data files. *TOPS Tech* award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

Figure G: 150% and 200% Statewide Associate Graduation Rates among TOPS and Non-TOPS Students

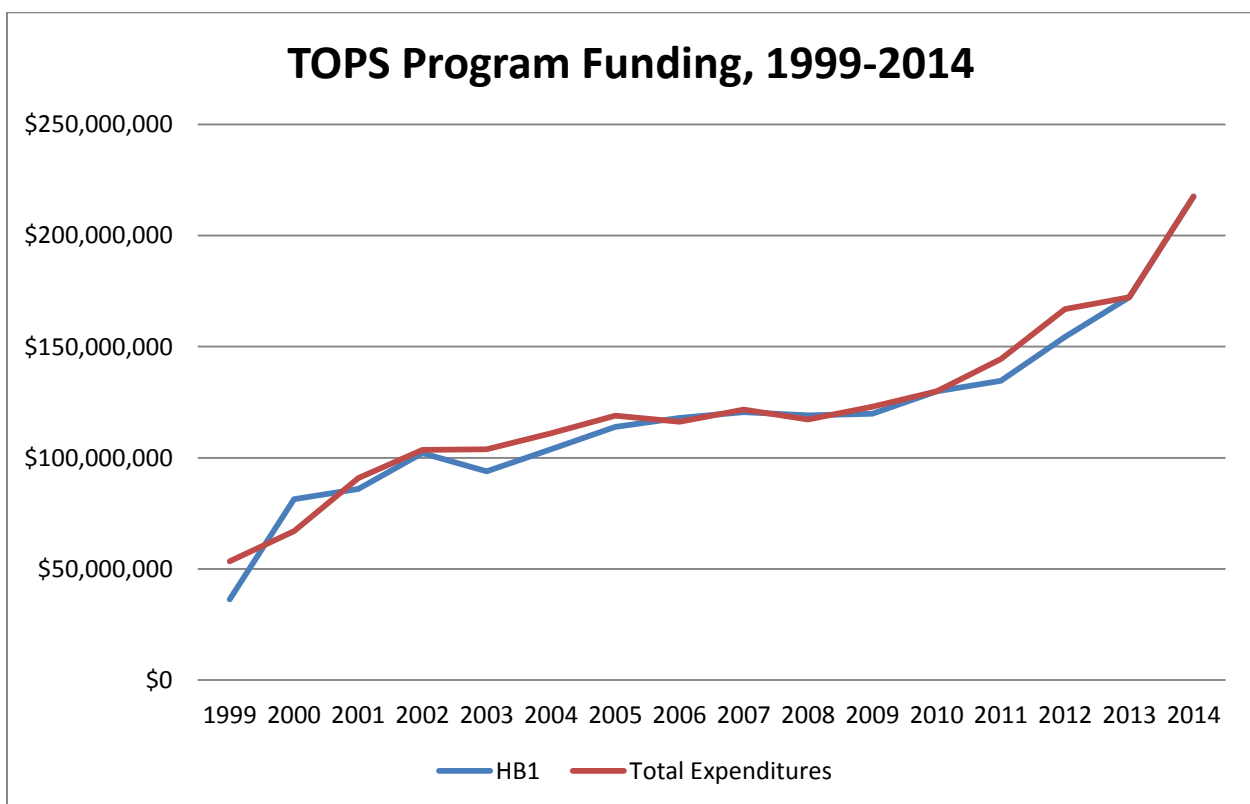


Source: BoR internal data files. *TOPS Tech* award recipients are considered non-TOPS for purposes of this analysis.

Funding TOPS

From 1999 to 2012 the State spent approximately \$1.9 billion funding the TOPS program. During that same time period, total expenditures on the TOPS program increased 307%. In 1998-1999 the average TOPS award amount was \$2,288 (including *TOPS Tech*). In 2012-2013, the average TOPS award amount had increased 80% to \$4,122 (including *TOPS Tech*). As Figure H illustrates, there has been a disparity between HB1 appropriations and total expenditures in several fiscal years. As a result, more recently, supplemental funding has been required to fully fund the TOPS program.

Figure H: TOPS Program Funding, 1999-2014



Source: LOSFA internal data files.

Conclusions

In accordance with Act 1202 of the 2001 Regular Legislative Session, this report has analyzed:

- The relationship between the high school courses taken and the student's score on the American College Test (ACT);
- The number of high school graduates who are eligible for TOPS and subsequently enroll in college;
- The persistence rates of TOPS students;

- Retention rates of TOPS awards, including numbers of and reasons for students losing award eligibility; and
- Graduation data, including rates, of TOPS students.

In regards to the relationship between the high school courses taken and students' score on the ACT, indications are that completion of the *TOPS Core* improves students' score on the ACT.

In regards to keeping Louisiana's "best and brightest" high school graduates in the state to pursue postsecondary educational opportunities, data indicate that since the program's inception, 90% of students deemed eligible for a TOPS award have accepted the award and subsequently enrolled in a postsecondary education institution in Louisiana.

In regards to persistence, data indicate that students who begin college with a TOPS award return to postsecondary education in subsequent years at a higher rate than non-TOPS students.

In regards to retention of TOPS awards, between 2004 and 2013, about 33% of students with TOPS awards had their award cancelled at some point during their postsecondary academic career. Data from the 2012-13 entering freshmen cohort of TOPS recipients indicate that approximately 11% had their award cancelled during or immediately following their first year of postsecondary education. Data also reveal that the majority (63%) of awards that are cancelled, whether cancelled during the first year of college or at any point thereafter, are cancelled due to students' failure to earn 24 hours of college credit during an academic year.

In regards to graduation rates, students who begin a baccalaureate degree program or an associate degree program with TOPS graduate within 150% and 200% of time at much higher rates than do students without a TOPS award. More specifically, approximately 3 out of 5 TOPS recipients complete a baccalaureate degree within 150% of time, compared with 1 out of 4 non-TOPS students who do so within the same time frame.

Considerations for Future Analysis

In addition to the analyses provided above, Board of Regents' staff, in future iterations of the "TOPS Report," anticipates conducting analyses and reporting significant findings on the following:

- A longitudinal analysis of the percentage of the high school graduating class who are deemed eligible for a TOPS award;
- Characteristics (especially ACT composite scores and high school GPA) of those students who are eligible for a TOPS award but do not accept the award or enroll in postsecondary education in the State of Louisiana;

- Graduation rates of those students who lost their TOPS award at any point; and
- Average time-to-degree of TOPS recipients verses Non-TOPS students