Bills to toughen TOPS rules proposed
Opposition mounting

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In a bipartisan but controversial push, two state lawmakers have filed bills that would make it harder for students to earn a Taylor Opportunity Program for Students award.

The measures were filed separately by state Reps. Franklin Foul, R-Baton Rouge, and Gene Reynolds, D-Dubu-

The bills are virtually identi-
cal and will be debated dur-
ing the 2017 regular legisla-
tive session, which begins
April 10.

Both also will be opposed by the Patrick F. Taylor Founda-
dation, which is named after
the founder of the popular scholarship.

Under current rules, high

school students must achieve a cumulative GPA of at least 2.5 to be eligible for TOPS. Both bills would increase that to 3.0 for the

basic TOPS award, called
"Opportunity."

The purpose of TOPS is to keep the best and brightest here," Foul said Monday. "To fulfill the intent of the pro-
gram, raising the GPA from 2.5 to 3.0 is a good measure."

Reynolds, who said he plans to work with Foul, made a similar point. "If we are going to spend the mon-
ey we are spending, I want excellence," said Reynolds, a former educator who is chairman of the state House
Democratic Caucus.

The eligibility criteria for
other forms of TOPS would remain unchanged.

James Caullier, executive
director of the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation, said one of the benefits of TOPS is that it encour-
ges high school stu-
dents to take more rigor-

ous classes to earn the assis-
tance.

"If we change that, we will change the whole culture of high school," Caullier said. "We will create an environ-

ment where students will take
the easy route and thereby be less prepared to go to college."

He said minority and low-
income students would be
heavily affected.

TOPS bills regularly spark
arguments, and previous bids to toughen eligibility rules have failed. However, new funding problems for
TOPS could change the de-
bate this time.

TOPS is supposed to pay for tuition and some other costs, depending on the level
awarded.

The new rules would apply
to students who graduate from high school during and after the 2020-21 school year.

About 50,000 students get
the assistance, including about 14,000 at LSU.

However, they are receiv-
ing about 70 percent of the
normal amount for the cur-
rent semester because of state financial problems.

The state faces a projected shortfall of about $440 mil-
lion for the financial year that begins July 1, which means TOPS may be underfunded again this year.

The Legislature appropri-
ated $229 million for TOPS
for 2016-17. Fully funding
TOPS would have required a $286 million appropriation.

Rankers of tougher stan-

dards contend Louisiana has set the academic bar too low for a merit award.

Others have argued that
current rules are overly re-
strictive and unsustainable for

some students, especially those
from low-income families.

Foul said his legislation es-
specially makes sense because of state problems financing TOPS and would ensure aid for the most
deserving students.

"I am trying to tighten up the solvency of the program," he said.

Reynolds said that, when the bill is revised, he would favor offering students ways other than a 3.0 GPA to earn TOPS, such as rewarding students for meeting a certain ACT score.

The ACT is a test of college readiness.

Reynolds' bill also would al-
low students who are in good
academic standing to leave col-
lege for a year or two, such as
for a job, and return to school with TOPS assistance resum-
ing.

He said that provision stems from evidence students be-
 tween the ages of 23 and 26 are the fastest growing part of the student body.

Foul said Caullier asked him if he would be willing to study the issue more. "I told him I would like to move forward with a bill, but I would work with them to take care of their concerns," he said.

Caullier noted that last year,
the Legislature approved a bill that increases GPA rules for the two of the other forms of TOPS — "Performance" and "Honors" — that have higher awards.

"We felt that 'Opportunity' should remain where it is," he said. "We discussed that at length."

Caullier added, "If we make
the requirements too high, we
will create a bridge too far. The
students won't even try."

Earlier this year, another bid
to increase TOPS eligibility rules failed.

In February, the state Board of Regents shelved a staff study recommendation that would have required recipients to earn at least 30 credit hours per year, up from 24 now.

Foul said problems with fund-
ing could change the legislative
landscape.

"In the past, when TOPS was fully funded, no one wanted to make any changes," he said.

TOPS was authorized in 1997.

The state spent $2.6 billion for the program from 1999-
2016, according to a report by the state Board of Regents.

TOPS has helped 293,000 stu-
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