THE COLOR OF OPPORTUNITY

More and more students are using TOPS, but not the students the program was originally intended to serve

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Naima Bastian remembers the day, nearly 30 years ago, when the Texas-born oilman strode into her middle school in New Orleans East and made a startling promise to a classroom full of eighth-graders: If they could hold a B average through high school, the man said, he'd pay for their college education. Patrick Taylor's spontaneous and generous pledge would forever change the landscape of higher education in Louisiana — and spawn copycat programs in other states.

But the taxpayer-financed scholarship program that bears the since-deceased Taylor's name today is hardly recognizable as the one he created in 1988.

Taylor, who grew up poor and received a scholarship to a prep school and attended LSU in part because it was cheap, told the class at Livingston Naima Bastian, center, joined Patrick Taylor, top, and her classmates on the cover of New Orleans Magazine in 1988.

"It was supposed to be for inner-city kids," said Bastian, 42, who went on to become an unofficial poster child for Taylor's program. "It was supposed to be for children whose parents weren't able to save the money for them to go to college."

Over a generation, Taylor's vision has been transformed from a small-scale, privately funded program to encourage poor children to achieve in school into a massive government subsidy that largely benefits middle-class and affluent families.

The annual cost to taxpayers has quintupled since 1998, the year the state first took over Taylor's program and offered it statewide, in 1989, it had an income cap of $25,000, about $47,850 in today's dollars. But since 1998, everyone who qualifies academically has been eligible, even the children of millionaires.

Now, more than two-thirds of the students who receive TOPS come from families with incomes that exceed the old cap, adjusted for inflation. One in five comes from a family that makes more than $150,000.

Roughly 40,000 students graduate in a typical year from Louisiana high schools. State data shows that white graduates are almost 3 times more likely to receive TOPS scholarships than black graduates. Asian students are the most likely to receive TOPS, at 52 percent.

White Students
Total 2013-14: 25,841
Receiving TOPS: 12,120
47%

Black Students
Total 2013-14: 17,052
Receiving TOPS: 3,812
17%

Asian Students
Total 2013-14: 967
Receiving TOPS: 502
52%

Hispanic Students
Total 2013-14: 1,542
Receiving TOPS: 555
36%

Note: Numbers represent public and private high school graduates. They do not reflect 2,520 students who did not report their race or attend college out of state.
Sources: Louisiana Department of Education, Board of Regents
Advocate graphics by DAN SWENSON
How Louisiana slashed college aid and left students to pick up the tab

TOPS

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The academic requirements also are a bit different from those of the original program. The minimum 3.0 GPA Taylor demanded was lowered to 2.5 when the state took over. At the same time, a requirement that recipients score at least a 20 on the ACT was added: three points higher than the average of 17 posted by high school seniors.

That’s one reason black students are massively underrepresented among TOPS recipients. The state data analyzed by The Advocate shows that a white student is almost three times more likely to get a TOPS scholarship than a black student. Asked by The Advocate whether such disparities troubled him, Bastian replied: “I think it’s a great thing that TOPS is a merit-based program, and I think that’s why it’s continued to be successful.”

He added: “As a state, we need to do a better job of making sure that every child has a chance to have a great education,” adding that the reforms his administration championed helped narrow the achievement gap between black students and white students.

There’s still a long way to go, however. Louisiana has the lowest educational attainment among black people of any state in the nation, by a comfortable margin.

When Taylor started his scholarship program in 1988, it wasn’t explicitly aimed at black kids, but it was clear they would be the prime beneficiaries. And it was unambiguously for people who couldn’t afford college.

“Our whole class wasn’t black,” recalls Bastian, who went on to study at Stanford University at New Orleans and is now an in-house social worker at a senior living complex in Marrero. “We had some white kids, Hispanic kids also — but they were poor. We were at Livingston; Livingston was in a poor area.”

DISPARATE BENEFITS

While TOPS money goes to students, it ultimately winds up in the coffers of the school Louisiana students attend. At some schools, a far greater proportion of students enjoy the benefits of TOPS than at others. At LSU, for instance, more than half the student body is on TOPS, and the proportion of in-state students receiving TOPS is higher than that. At the other end of the spectrum, less than half of 1 percent of SUNO students get TOPS.

Percentage of students on TOPS, fall 2014:

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<td>26.8%</td>
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In 2007, Louisiana taxpayers spent $157 million on TOPS tuition aid, or an average of $2,940 per full-time student. Compare that with SUNO, which got a total of $66,668 — an average of $25 per student.

That’s more than a hundredfold difference.

Rising tuition

Although sticker prices at Louisiana’s public universities are still below the national average of $9,410, they’re quickly approaching it.

Average tuition has grown by 32 percent over the past five years here — more than in any other state, by far. In fact, no other state has seen tuition go up by more than 15 percent over that same period, according to College Board data. The average increase has been 15 percent.

Some skyrocketing prices might normally trigger considerable political backlash. But much of the middle-class constituency TOPS serves was protected, making the increases more palatable.

Even so, the program doesn’t shield everyone — despite its modest requirements, only about 1 in 4 students at Louisiana’s universities receive TOPS.

At two-year schools and at the historically black universities, only about 1 in 17 students is covered by TOPS. TOPS Technicians judging students pay for two-year schools — has a lower ACT requirement than the other TOPS awards, but the program is hardly used, for reasons that state officials have not fully grasped. Less than 2,000 students each year make use of those scholarships; Tech awards make up less than 2 percent of all TOPS spending.

For students who aren’t on TOPS, the tuition increases are very real, and Louisiana offers little in the way of aid to help low-income students make up the difference.

On average, American states put more than 60 percent of their student aid into need-based programs, according to College Board data. The average here is 53 percent. Louisiana, by comparison, puts just 8 percent of its aid into programs based on need.

Louisiana’s main need-based program, called Go Grants, de- nied in 2007, but its funding has remained flat since 2008. It no longer gets out one-tenth of much state money as TOPS.

Thanks to sharply rising tuition, the stalled funding for Go Grants has had the effect of a cut. The number of students receiving Go Grants has fallen by almost a third in the past few years. Because the grants need to be larger, on average, in order to keep growing, the money now buys only half as much as it did before.

A popular model

Large merit-based programs, many of them derived from inspiration from TOPS, have become increasingly popular.

But Louisiana’s is distinctive partly in that its merit requirements are so low.

Most other state programs require a GPA of at least 3.0. Mississippi’s requires a 3.5, among Georgia’s massive HOPE program, have no minimum in the ACT score, which reduces racial disparities in the outcome.

Ironically, unusually modest benchmark scores cause its origins as a program targeting the poor. They’ve stayed in place as the program morphed into an open one, and they are a key aspect of TOPS’ popularity.

For middle-class Louisiana students, the benchmarks may bend to be easily attainable.

And for many parents — especially those who wish to send their children to public colleges or universities rather than private ones — the scores may be lower than the benchmarks to be as low as possible.

“Studies show that students perform better in public universities than in private ones,” said John Dougherty, R. Mandeville, expressing a widely held view.

Davis, who heads the Senate Finance Committee, authored a bill that would raise the benchmarks to 20 in persuasive with weak public over TOPS, but there is no question that the state is finally paying for a service that’s worth its weight in gold.

“What’s wrong with Louisiana having a program that helps middle-class kids too?” asked Sen. Joe Donahue, R. Mandeville, expressing a widely held view.

“I think the people in the area that work as hard as they do to deserve to have some programs in place,” said Dougherty, who took the lead in authoring Louisiana’s public education plan. “I think it’s important to get their kids as well.”

Why shouldn’t they? And why shouldn’t they have some programs too?”

But for TOPS critics, the most-est benchmarks are a major detractor for a program that lacks incoherence. They grouse that finishing high school with a combination of Bs and Cs and a 20 on the ACT doesn’t neces- sarily translates into scholarship material — especially if the stu- dent in question had had other advantages.

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WHERE THE TOPS MONEY HAS GONE

Over the life of the program, the University of Louisiana system has gained the most from TOPS. The Southern University system, by comparison, has received $31.5 million. Loyola University has received $1.5 million. The Louisiana College system has stayed steady at $1.1 billion. The For-profit system has received $964.8 million. The LCTC system has received $189.5 million. The Private nonprofits system has received $53.5 million. The UL system has received $9.6 billion. The percentage of TOPS benefits received by the different systems is as follows:

- Southern system: 48%
- For-profit schools: 41%
- LSU system: 8%
- UL system: 3%
- Private nonprofits: 2.3%
- LCTC system: 2.3%
- Other systems: 0.1%

Best and brightest?

Among the fundamental goals of TOPS: to encourage more Louisiana highschoolers to take a challenging curriculum and to keep the so-called “best and brightest” of them in state for college.

There's strong evidence the program is succeeding at the first.

Louisiana high schools have tried to make as many students eligible for TOPS as possible, naturally. State data shows that 71% of high school students now take the required curriculum, compared with 58% a decade ago. James Caillier, executive director of the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation, said the foundation's research shows that only about 10 percent of high school students took the “TOPS core” when the program was new.

But it's much more difficult to judge whether TOPS is achieving its other major aim: keeping Louisiana's strongest students here.

It's easy enough to see that most of the kids who qualify for TOPS take it. A recent Board of Regents report found that roughly 9 of every 10 TOPS qualifiers over the past decade accepted the award and enrolled in a Louisiana college.

But what about the cream of the crop?

TOPS offers awards in three tiers, with slightly more generous grants at the upper levels. The highest award, TOPS Honors, requires a 3.0 GPA and a 27 on the ACT.

Although the number of students qualifying for that level over time has been going up, the percentage of honors awardees who decide to enroll at a Louisiana college has stayed steady at about 83 percent. Those who qualify for the lower levels of TOPS are substantially more likely to take it, averaging 92 percent.

In other words, the highest-performing TOPS recipients are twice as likely to decline the award as the less-outstanding ones — probably because the top students are getting tempting out-of-state scholarship offers.

But the fundamental problem with trying to answer the question of whether TOPS has kept more of Louisiana's best and brightest here is that there is no baseline to form a basis of comparison.

Although TOPS' many backers often crow about its success, the truth is that state officials created a program that has given out more than $2 billion in taxpayer money without making any real effort to gather statistics on whether it was moving the needle.

“Where's the data that shows this has worked?” asked Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, who is deeply skeptical of the claims. “The governor keeps saying it's keeping the best and brightest in the state. I want to see the research. If you show me the data, I'll be quiet.”

Former state Rep. Charles McDonald, R-Bastrop, who authored the bill that created the current TOPS program, agrees it might have been prudent to study TOPS' effects more closely — though he's confident it has kept more top kids here. “A lot of times you have goals, but you never go back and get a true measurement,” he said. “I think we need to gather that data.”

Former Gov. Mike Foster, who signed McDonald's bill lifting the income cap from TOPS, said he doesn't need any statistics. “Some things are just self-evident,” he said. “It's been a big success. More people are applying for TOPS than ever before, and we're keeping them up to me and thank me for that program than for anything else I ever did.”

Reining in the cost

Many critics, including Moller, of the Louisiana Budget Project, say TOPS is simply ill-designed: It's a merit program that rewards mediocrity, while providing little additional incentive for top performers. And it does nothing for the needy.

“We got it wrong on both ends,” Moller said.

Moller and other liberal critics say they'd rather see a program that raises the merit bar much higher and pumps the resulting savings into more need-based aid. On Friday, Gov. John Bel Edwards' higher education transition team released its report, which makes similar recommendations.

But proposals to raise the standards have run into a buzzsaw of opposition, some of it coming from the Taylor Foundation, which continues to wield great sway over its namesake program. Caillier, the foundation's director, and Taylor's widow, Phyllis, serves as the public faces of the program and are its most influential lobbyists.

Caillier said the foundation would strongly support boosting need-based aid, to help fulfill Taylor's original mission of helping the poor. But he believes the Legislature is skeptical of the purely need-based GO Grants, and fears that any attempt at a swap would simply tighten TOPS but leave need-based aid alone.

Some legislators want to increase the bar to 24,” Caillier said. “If you did that, you'd eliminate 80 percent of the minority students. And that was the original intent.”

Just about everyone agrees that the way TOPS is structured is unsustainable, but there's little consensus on its design. And so the compromise position has become to control its growth while changing the rules as little as possible.

The Legislature tried to do that in 2015, passing Sen. Donahue's bill to “decouple” TOPS from tuition. Had the bill become law, the size of a TOPS scholarship would not have automatically risen in tandem with tuition — in other words, the Legislature could raise tuition at some point in the future and put that cost on students, rather than on the state.

Although the bill passed easily — and had the crucial support of the Taylor Foundation — Jindal vetoed it anyway, saying that not guaranteeing the state would cover all eligible students' tuition would be breaking an implicit promise.

Donahue's bill looks like a clinch to pass again this year. Edwards, who supported it last year and who faces a daunting budget crunch, has said he'd sign it.

The question is whether a bigger reimaging of Louisiana's signature aid program is in the cards. But it seems unlikely.

It makes no sense to Kimbrough, the Dillard president. Though the private university he runs has been the indirect beneficiary of about $8 million in TOPS scholarships over the years, Kimbrough said the program isn't helping the people it was set up to help — or those who really need a hand.

Instead, said Kimbrough, who is married and has two children, he doesn't need any statistics. “So I already have privilege, and my kids are gonna be able to do whatever they want,” he said. “And now the state of Louisiana is going to say, 'We're gonna give you some money on top of that.' That's crazy to me. I don't need that money! Give that money to someone who really needs it.”

“Where we're doing is not in the spirit of what Patrick Taylor created. It's nowhere near the spirit of what he created.”

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