Students, professors gear up for possible TOPS cuts in state legislative sessions

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As state lawmakers attempt to reach a compromise in Baton Rouge during the legislative special session to offset a potential $1 billion deficit, one program vital to academics and pupils alike hangs in uncertainty: the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students.

"As it is right now, there’s a lot of students in Louisiana that rely on TOPS," Charles Savage, a freshman political science major, said. "I think you’re going to see a lot of people leave the state or possibly not go to college at all if they start cutting TOPS."

The special session, the fifth called about the state’s financial deficit since 2016, was called by Gov. John Bel Edwards to try to fill the shortfall in the state budget. Indecision plagues whether to enact higher taxes in order to fill the gap or to put deep cuts into programs the government funds, including TOPS.

"TOPS is a program that has grown exponentially since it came out," said Pearson Cross, Ph.D., a professor in the political science department. "Expenses are close to $300 million a year to fully fund TOPS under the current structure."

Already, the TOPS task force, created to look over proposals, has reached an impasse on what changes to make to the program. Among the 11 possible proposals, the members were split on every one. All 11 were sent to the legislature for consideration during regular session.

Cross said he expects "there could be cuts to TOPS."

UL Lafayette students and faculty are concerned about the 2016 cuts that reduced TOPS funding by a significant amount.

Cross said State Sen. Dan “Blade” Morrish has said he hopes to make TOPS accomplishment-based as opposed to the current structure.

"The most logical thing to do with TOPS, of course, from my point of view, would be to means test it," Cross opined, "meaning TOPS would go to those students whose parents are not particularly affluent.”

As is, several TOPS recipients have rather affluent parents, Cross said, many of whom make over $150,000 a year.

"And you say, ‘Well, that doesn’t make sense,’” Cross said. "‘Why should we be taxing poor people to send the children of affluent people to college?’"

The lack of decisiveness, Cross said, comes from the "mess" among the governor, Legislature and TOPS task force. No decision has been made, and all three seem to be sending any options to the next for approval. Cross, however, said he believes there could be another underlying reason for the lack of decision.

"Hovering above all of it is the governor’s election of 2019," Cross said. "Neither side wants to give the other side a clear victory that could be used against them in electoral politics in a year. As a result, we are where we are."

Cross said he would not be surprised if the cuts are seen all around, a little to quite a few programs in healthcare and higher education.

Students said they are concerned about what this could mean for them and fellow classmates.

Raynika Patton, a sophomore political science major and TOPS recipient, agreed wholeheartedly with Savage.

"Louisiana wonders why we’re number 49th or 48th in education,” Patton said. "This is why. Because we want to cut education funds."

Patton argued there should even be a change to the Constitution that cuts must come from other places.

"If y’all keeping tax from health and education, how do you expect to improve your state?” Patton demanded.

Savage said he believes the cuts will come from health and mental services first, which he said he believes isn’t a good move. Patton agreed partially, saying she believes there will be some cuts to programs in education, but not in such totality as the previous cuts in 2016.

President of the Student Government Association Mary McMahon argued she does not expect cuts to TOPS again.

"I believe our representatives received such a backlash from the community when TOPS was cut in 2016, that they are hesitant to make any changes or to cut it in any way," McMahon said. "I think that shows forth from how the task force that was created couldn’t even come to a decision."

McMahon said, regardless of the looming decision, SGA is working at some things to respond in proactive and reactive ways to the possible cuts.

"We are having a letter-writing campaign that we will be introducing in..."