



SC Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission

Providing Opportunity. Promoting Choice.

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Katherine H. Stevens
Executive Director

MINUTES

South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission Meeting
Tuesday, June 17, 2025
Virtual Meeting
Columbia, South Carolina

Commission Members Participating:

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Converse University, Chair
Dr. Gene Fant, North Greenville University, Vice Chair
Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University, Secretary
Dr. Ernest McNealey, Allen University
Dr. Pamela Richardson Wilks, Clinton College
Ms. Elise Ahyi as Proxy for Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College
Dr. Anita Gustafson, Presbyterian College
Ms. Hannah Craig as Proxy for Dr. William Barker, Southern Wesleyan University

Commission Members Absent:

Dr. Jeff Perez, South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, Ex-officio

Non-Commission Member College Presidents Participating:

Mr. Daniel Muller as Proxy for Dr. Bruce McAllister, Bob Jones University
Mr. Keith Faulkner, Charleston Southern University
Dr. Steve Adamson, Erskine College
Dr. Ronnie Hopkins, Voorhees University

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Commission Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:31AM. Ms. Katie Stevens, Commission Executive Director, informed participants the meeting is being transcribed and is being held in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act. She welcomed all in attendance and conducted a roll call of the Commission Members. Ms. Stevens confirmed the participating Commission Members in attendance and noted that Ms. Elise Ahyi is attending as Proxy for Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College, and Ms. Hannah Craig is attending as Proxy for Dr. William Barker, Southern Wesleyan University. A quorum was established.

Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to approve the March 11, 2025, Commission Minutes. Dr. Ernest McNealey, Allen University, moved to approve the Minutes and Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University, seconded the motion. There was no discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to report on Agency Updates at the Commission. Ms. Stevens announced Mr. Ross Waddell as the new Program Operations Coordinator at the Commission as of May 2, 2025. Ms. Stevens noted that Ms. Kira Demery's title was recently updated from Fiscal Operations Coordinator to Fiscal Operations Manager to better reflect her role with the Commission. Ms. Demery recently completed the LeadSC Program, a training program offered by the South Carolina Department of Administration for emerging leaders in state government. Ms. Demery continues to earn NASFAA credentials, recently completing her fourteenth credential, and soon will begin a two-year Treasurer Elect term with the SC Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators. Ms. Stevens also shared that Mr. Zachary Christian, Commission Deputy Director, coordinated the Commission's participation at Higher Education Day at the State House, as well as College and

Career Decision Day. Mr. Christian will be attending the annual NASFAA conference later this month in Anaheim, CA where he will participate in a panel to discuss his work with the state advocacy network. Ms. Stevens shared that she got married and changed her last name in April. Ms. Stevens also recently completed the South Carolina Executive Institute program where she built relationships with other executive managers and agency heads throughout state government.

Ms. Stevens informed attendees that the Commission has wrapped up the hearings portion of the Legislative Oversight Review. A total of four hearings were held between February and May of this year. Ms. Stevens also shared that the Commission recently completed a Financial and Procurement Audit by the State with no findings, and it was determined that adequate corrective action was taken on the one minor finding in a prior year's audit.

Ms. Stevens provided an update on the FAFSA Completion Portal made available to South Carolina high school counselors that allows them to view FAFSA completion statistics. Ms. Stevens reported that 40 high schools took advantage of the use of the portal, and data shows that schools who took advantage of this resource are outperforming other schools in submitted and completed FAFSAs. Ms. Stevens announced a live webinar that will take place on September 10, hosted by the South Carolina Department of Education, that will explain how the FAFSA Completion Portal works to other schools in the state in an effort to increase the number of participating high schools for the upcoming FAFSA cycle.

Ms. Stevens informed the Commission and all attendees of the targeted outreach conducted by Commission Staff to assist former Limestone University students with transferring their Tuition Grants to other participating colleges and universities, as well as providing information regarding other options available to them throughout the State.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Mr. Christian to discuss the Adoption of Commission By-Laws, and to provide a brief overview. Mr. Christian reported that during the data gathering process for the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee's review, it was discovered that other Commissions throughout the State have published By-Laws, and while no statutory requirement outside of what is required for the Department of Motor Vehicles could be found, Commission Staff wanted to ensure By-Laws were reviewed and adopted by the Commission. The draft of the By-Laws was provided to all Commission Members and college presidents prior to the meeting for review. Dr. Hopkins asked if anyone had questions for Mr. Christian about the By-laws, and there were none. Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to adopt the by-laws as presented. Dr. Harder moved to approve the By-laws and Mr. Keith Faulkner, Charleston Southern University, seconded the motion. There was no discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins invited Mr. Christian to provide a Review of the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 Award Years. Mr. Christian informed attendees that the maximum Grant for the 2024-2025 award year was \$4,800, with an average grant of \$4,405. Mr. Christian also noted that 13,000 (+4.18% change) grants were realized out of the 24,590 (-6.14% change) commitments made, as of June 5, 2025. This demonstrates a show-up rate of 52.87% (increase of 5.24%). The total number of applications received in 2024-2025 was 29,288 (-8.42% change). Mr. Christian explained that while the overall number of applicants were down in the 2024-2025 award year as a result of the challenges with FAFSA Simplification, the efforts that the Commission has taken to expand Grant access to a wider range of students resulted in more Grants disbursing. Based on projections for 2025-2026, the Commission authorized an increase in the maximum Tuition Grant to \$5,000. So far in the 2025-2026 award year, Tuition Grant applications are up as the FAFSA process for the 2025-2026 is going much smoother than it did in the prior award year.

Dr. Hopkins asked Ms. Stevens to provide an Update on SC Tuition Grants Program Reviews. Ms. Stevens explained that Commission Staff have begun communicating with each college and university's third-party auditors about the required annual Program Reviews and reminded everyone that these are due back by December 31, 2025.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Mr. Christian to discuss the Requirement to Verify South Carolina Residency. Mr. Christian explained that the Commission requested the State residency verification policy from each institution for the South Carolina Tuition Grants Program and will be reviewing the policies to determine what, if any, adjustments may be needed for to ensure consistency across all institutions participating in the Program. This request came about after discovering that students received the Tuition Grant who were not eligible based on residency, and schools had to go back and refund the Commission for Grants that disbursed to students who were not eligible.

Dr. Hopkins invited Dr. Robert Lloyd, SCICU, to report on the 2025 Legislative Session. Dr. Lloyd reported that the South Carolina economy remains dynamic, and an increase in tax revenue resulted in a substantial budget surplus. Higher Education Excellence Enhancement Program (HEEEP), state funds designated for HBCU's and traditional women's colleges, was funded again for the upcoming year. The General Assembly agreed to maintain funding for the Tuition Grants program at the existing level and agreed to an increase in operating expenses for continued funding of their system, myTG. Dr. Lloyd also reported on the possibility of allowing lottery ticket purchases to be made with debit cards, which would increase the total amount of lottery spending in the State and if passed in legislation next year could potentially increase grant and scholarship funding in the State. Dr. Lloyd announced a legislative conference for Higher Education leadership taking place June 18, 2025 at the Convention Center. South Carolina Speaker of the House, Representative Murrell Smith, as well as someone from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities will be in attendance providing updates. Dr. Hopkins asked if anyone had questions for Dr. Lloyd, and there were none.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to discuss the State Budget Request for the South Carolina Tuition Grants program for FY27. Ms. Harrison stated the Tuition Grants Commission is required to submit its Budget Request to the Executive Budget Office each fall for funding in the next fiscal year. Ms. Harrison presented the projection that the Program can sustain the maximum grant of \$5,000 for the next three years with no additional funding needed, assuming all existing funding continues at the current amount. Based on this, Ms. Stevens recommended that we not ask for any new money, but we need to request level funding.

There are two different approaches the Commission can take when asking the General Assembly to maintain the increase in funding for the Program:

- (1) Create a request for recurring general funds (State appropriations) in the requested amount. Using this approach, the Legislature will view the request as a monetary need to sustain the increased grant amount moving forward. If approved, this would create a more stable source of funding; however, if the amount is not available in recurring funds through general State appropriations, they could opt to provide the funding once again through Lottery allocations. This option has been utilized in the past; however, the request was not approved.

- (2) Create an annual request for non-recurring funds at the current amount as Lottery allocations.

Ms. Stevens asked if anyone had questions about the information presented. Dr. Gustafson asked if not asking for additional funding was the right move given the possible increase in State lottery funding through the proposed use of debit cards for lottery purchases. Dr. Gustafson also noted the potential, on the federal level, of FSEOG going away and Pell being reduced. Based on this, Dr. Gustafson asked if not asking for additional State funding was the correct move. Ms. Stevens answered that she believed it was the right move at this time considering the amount of carry-forward dollars the Commission has. Dr. Gustafson asked why all students who were awarded did not receive the Grant if there is so much carry-forward, and Ms. Stevens clarified that the students who were awarded but did not receive the Grant were not actually eligible for the Grant. Ms. Stevens clarified that any eligible student in our system who files by the August 1 deadline is receiving a Tuition Grant. Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to approve the 2026-2027 Budget Request to the State Budget Division with a request for \$10 million in lottery funds to be converted to recurring general funds. Dr. McNealy moved to approve the Budget Request and Dr. Harder seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins announced the Rotation of the Tuition Grants Commission and Election of Officers. As scheduled, Dr. Gene Fant, North Greenville University, Dr. Anita Gustafson, Presbyterian College, and Dr. William Barker, Southern Wesleyan University, are rotating off the Commission. Presidents rotating on the Commission according to the Rotation Schedule are Dr. Bruce McAllister, Bob Jones University, Dr. Dwaun Warmack, Claflin University, and Dr. Elizabeth Davis, Furman University. Dr. Hopkins announced a new Vice Chair and Secretary for the Commission need to be elected due to elected officers rotating off the Commission. Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to approve Dr. Dwaun Warmack as the new Vice Chair and Dr. John Dozier as the new Secretary. Dr. McNealy moved to approve the appointment of officers and Dr. Harder seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to remind new Commission members to complete their Ethics filing by the July 1, 2025 deadline.

Dr. Hopkins asked if there was any new business. There was none.

Dr. Hopkins reminded all participants that the next meeting is scheduled for March 10, 2026.

Dr. Hopkins adjourned the meeting at 11:28 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Ross Waddell, Program Operations Coordinator
Acting Secretary for
Dr. Natalie Harder, Secretary
South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission