



SC Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission

Providing Opportunity. Promoting Choice.

111 Executive Center Dr
Suite 242
Columbia, SC 29210
(803) 896-1120
info@sctuitiongrants.org

Katherine H. Stevens
Executive Director

MINUTES

South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission Meeting
Tuesday, March 10, 2026
Virtual Meeting
Columbia, South Carolina

Commission Members Participating:

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Converse University, Chair
Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College, Secretary
Dr. Stanley Pritchett, Allen University
Mr. Daniel Muller as Proxy for Dr. Bruce McAllister, Bob Jones University
Dr. Pamela Richardson-Wilks, Clinton College
Ms. Elizabeth Wallace as Proxy for Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University
Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez, SC Commission on Higher Education, Ex-officio

Commission Members Absent:

Dr. Dwaun Warmack, Claflin University, Vice Chair
Dr. Elizabeth Davis, Furman University

Non-Commission Member College Presidents Participating:

Mr. Keith Faulkner, Charleston Southern University

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Commission Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:33AM. Ms. Katie Stevens, Commission Executive Director, informed participants that the meeting is being transcribed and is being held in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act. Ms. Stevens continued with the Welcome and Commission Roll Call and confirmed the participating Commission Members in attendance. Ms. Stevens noted that Mr. Daniel Muller is attending as Proxy for Dr. Bruce McAllister, Bob Jones University, Dr. Stacey Barber is attending as Proxy for Dr. Pamela Richardson-Wilks, Clinton College, for the second half of the meeting, and Ms. Elizabeth Wallace is attending as Proxy for Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University. A quorum was established. Ms. Stevens recognized and welcomed the non-Commission members in attendance. Ms. Stevens also informed all participants of the special guests joining the meeting: Dr. Robert Lloyd, President & CEO, and Ms. Emma Reabold, Vice President for Development & Campus Services, both with South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities, Inc. (SCICU).

Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to approve the June 27, 2025, Commission Minutes. Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College, moved to approve the Minutes, and Dr. Stanley Pritchett, Allen University, seconded the motion. There was no discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to give the Final Report on 2024-2025 Program Reviews. Ms. Stevens reported on the twenty-one participating institutions that underwent Program Reviews for the 2024-2025 year, stating all reviews were submitted by the deadline, with one deadline extension granted, and all have been closed. Ms. Stevens reported there were six schools with findings program-wide, with three of those institutions having two findings. Findings pertained to the thirty-day refund period not being met, disbursing to students who were not enrolled, and internal reconciliation discrepancies. Ms. Stevens informed attendees that one school has had internal reconciliation discrepancy findings for three consecutive years, and this institution

submitted an approved written plan of action to prevent further ramifications. Ms. Stevens encouraged collaboration and communication between departments on campus to help prevent similar findings in future years.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to also report on Review of House Legislative Oversight Process. Ms. Stevens reported that the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee finalized its review of the Tuition Grants Commission and approved the subcommittee's final study report on January 29, 2026. Ms. Stevens noted that an email went out to school presidents on January 30, 2026, that included the full study report and a brief overview video from Rep. Tim McGinnis, Chair (District 56 – Horry).

There were no findings of operational fault, mismanagement, or compliance deficiencies found in the report. The following recommendations were included in the report:

1. Create a strategic marketing plan to better inform adult learners, working professionals, and other non-traditional students of our program.
2. Formalize a strategic plan review cycle.
3. Clarify South Carolina Code of Laws section 59-143 pertaining to how the Children's Education Endowment Funds are allocated between the Tuition Grants Commission and the Commission on Higher Education.

Ms. Stevens expanded on formalizing a strategic plan review cycle. The current strategic plan was adopted in 2020, and the Agency has made a lot of progress in the last six years in line with items included in the Strategic Plan. Items that are being discussed to be included in the new Strategic Plan include examining award methodology to ensure students with the most financial need are receiving Tuition Grant. In addition, the Agency will explore opportunities to grow the non-traditional student population. Finally, the Agency looks to continue to strengthen operational excellence while looking for opportunities for Program expansion if funding allows. Ms. Stevens informed attendees that the Agency will be hosting a state-wide training for Financial Aid Administrators at our participating institutions on April 29, 2026, and time will be spent at this training gathering input and ideas from meeting attendees regarding the Agency's Strategic Plan.

Ms. Stevens also reported more on the third recommendation pertaining to SC Code of Laws section 59-143. As a result of convoluted language that was clarified during the oversight process, the amount of funding Tuition Grants will receive from the Children's Endowment will decrease by around \$9 million moving forward due to a change in how the Tuition Grants funding amount will be calculated. For the next few fiscal years, carry-forward funds will allow the Agency to keep Tuition Grant at its current amount without requesting increased funding. The Agency anticipates that in FY30, the Commission will need to ask for an additional \$12 million from the General Assembly to be able to continue our current \$5,000 maximum annual award. Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez, SC Commission on Higher Education President and Executive Director, added that meeting attendees should continue to maintain relationships with members of the General Assembly in preparation for future budget requests to fund State programs.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Mr. Zachary Christian, Commission Deputy Director, to give the Update on the 2025-2026 Award Year. Mr Christian noted that as of March 4, 2026, 36,453 Tuition Grant applications have been received, which is up 9% from the 2024-2025 award year and 1.5% higher than 2023-2024 applications. Additionally, 25,805 commitments were made (up 7.18% from 2024-2025), and as of March 4, 2026, 13,075 students received Tuition Grant in the current 2025-2026 award year, which is up 100 students from 2024-2025. As of now, our show-up rate is 50.67% but subject to change due to non-traditional programs at some of our schools that have not completed 2025-2026 Certification. Mr. Christian also noted that the Agency is closely monitoring 2026-2027 data to see if Tuition Grants are indirectly impacted by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act that will result in changes to federal awarding at our schools in the 2026-2027 award year.

Dr. Hopkins invited Ms. Stevens to report on Agency Updates and Initiatives. Ms. Stevens noted that Agency staff continue their involvement in state, regional, and national organizations to provide the knowledge and skills required to successfully administer the Program. Ms. Stevens highlighted that Ms. Kira Demery,

Commission Fiscal Operations Manager, continues to identify necessary procedural changes to mitigate risk and strengthen Agency's fiscal integrity. Ms. Demery also continues to streamline refund procedures by assisting schools with enabling them to return funds electronically. In addition to her work at the Agency, Ms. Demery serves as the Treasurer-Elect of the South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SCASFAA). In this role, she has worked alongside the current SCASFAA Treasurer to recommend policy changes to the SCASFAA Executive Board.

Ms. Stevens also noted that Mr. Ross Waddell, Commission Program Operations Coordinator, continues to participate in outreach events where he provides information about Tuition Grants as well as other financial aid information. He is also on the planning committee for College and Career Decision Day, an annual event at the State House put on by the Commission on Higher Education that celebrates the accomplishments of each year's high school graduating class.

Ms. Stevens highlighted Mr. Christian's involvement in state and national organizations that included him presenting a session titled "Advocacy by the Numbers" at annual conferences. In this presentation, Mr. Christian explained the agency's internal geocoding process used to support the SCICU letter writing campaign and direct communication sent from the Agency to all members of the General Assembly. In addition, Mr. Christian presented a session at a regional conference that provided financial aid administrators with tools to work with data and reports. In October 2025, Mr. Christian began a two-year as Co-Conference Chair on the Executive Committee of the National Association of State Student Grant & Aid Programs (NASSGAP).

Ms. Stevens also described her involvement in NASSGAP. She recently concluded a decade-long tenure on the Executive Committee of this organization and received the Distinguished Service Award at their October 2025 conference as a result of her service in a variety of different roles. Ms. Stevens had the privilege of meeting staff members from the offices of Senator Lindsey Graham, and Representatives Joe Wilson, James Clyburn, and Russell Fry at the recent National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) Leadership & Legislative Conference. During these meetings, she advocated for support of Pell Grant funding, elimination of student loan origination fees, and other matters of importance for South Carolina students. Ms. Stevens also recently served as a resource expert on a College Affordability panel hosted by the Hunt Institute as part of their State Policy Fellows program.

Ms. Stevens informed attendees that the Agency has a Communication and Outreach Intern for the Spring 2026 Semester named Lily Oyebade, a sophomore Business Administration major at Columbia International University. Lily has been assisting with social media, helping with communication to State legislators, and will wrap up her time with the Agency by working on a marketing and communications plan geared towards adult learners and non-completers.

Ms. Stevens reported on the Agency's FAFSA Completion Portal, an initiative that allows high school counselors to access real-time FAFSA completion information. A total of 63 high schools are currently using the portal, and as of March 3, 2026, participating schools are seeing an average FAFSA Submission Rate that is 3.43% higher than the State average and a 3.36% higher FAFSA Completion Rate than the State average.

Ms. Stevens also highlighted the Agency's online Data Center, developed by Mr. Christian, that was launched in December 2025. The Data Center brings together FAFSA completion dashboards, recent Annual and Accountability Reports, and historical Program data all in one place, with interactive tools that make trends easy to review.

Dr. Hopkins invited Mr. Christian to give SC Residency Updates. As reported in the June 25, 2025, Commission Meeting, the Agency reviewed the State Residency Determination Policy submitted by each institution. This review allowed Commission staff members to identify areas of improvement needed to align with State Residency Regulations promulgated by the SC Commission on Higher Education as well as the Tuition Grants Program Policies and Procedures Manual. Mr. Christian noted that the Commission on Higher Education also began developing proposed regulatory revisions with a final draft being circulated in the Fall 2025 semester

with the anticipation of being adopted into the Code of Regulations during this legislative cycle. Mr. Perez added that the proposed changes allow for additional flexibility when determining residency and will require institutions to collect the following four pieces of documentation to verify SC residency:

1. Proof of Domicile
2. Driver's License
3. Vehicle Registration
4. Prior Year's SC State Tax Return

Based on the proposed changes, and while ensuring compliance with the current regulations, the Tuition Grants Commission developed a model Residency Determination Policy and form, which schools could adopt as-is or incorporate the changes within their existing policies. Mr. Christian reported that all schools have submitted residency policies and forms that have been reviewed and approved by the Agency. While one institution did not meet the March 2, 2026 deadline, they submitted the required documentation on March 3, 2026, and it was approved.

Dr. Hopkins invited Ms. Stevens to give the Review of the 2026-2027 Budget Request. Ms. Stevens reported that the Commission's Budget Request did not include a request for any additional funds but asked for funds to be moved from Lottery (non-recurring) to General Fund (recurring). The Budget Request also included a \$180,000 General Fund increase to support the Agency's personnel needs and to cover increased technology fees. Ms. Stevens reported that budget debate in the House and Senate is still taking place and is tentatively scheduled to conclude when the full Senate makes its recommendations during the week of April 20, 2026.

Ms. Stevens called upon Dr. Lloyd and Ms. Reabold to provide the SCICU Update and Legislative Outlook. Ms. Reabold informed attendees Higher Ed Day taking place on April 16, 2026, at the State House, and the SCICU Legislative Conference will take place June 4, 2026, at the Convention Center. Dr. Lloyd informed attendees of current legislative topics impacting SC independent institutions, on the state and federal levels.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Stevens to present the Staff Recommendation regarding Initial 2026-2027 South Carolina Tuition Grant Maximum Award Amount. Ms. Stevens reported that based on our current carry-forward dollars, enrollment projections, the ten-year calculation formula used in the fiscal impact analysis pertaining to the Children's Endowment funding, and anticipated Legislative funding, the Agency feels comfortable keeping the maximum Grant for the 2026-2027 award year at \$5,000. Dr. Pritchett moved to set the initial maximum Grant at \$5,000. Dr. Dozier seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, and the motion was passed unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins reminded all Commission members to complete their Ethics filing by the March 30, 2026, 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 June 16, 2026, at 10:30 AM.

Dr. Hopkins adjourned the meeting at 11:56 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

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