



SC Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission

Providing Opportunity. Promoting Choice.

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Katherine H. Harrison
Executive Director

MINUTES

South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission Meeting
Tuesday, March 11, 2025
Virtual Meeting
Columbia, South Carolina

Commission Members Participating:

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Converse University, Chair
Dr. Gene Fant, North Greenville University, Vice Chair
Ms. Sara Vaughn as Proxy for Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University, Secretary
Dr. Ernest McNealey, Allen University
Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College
Dr. Anita Gustafson, Presbyterian College
Ms. Hannah Craig as Proxy for Dr. William Barker, Southern Wesleyan University
Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez, SC Commission on Higher Education, Ex-officio

Non-Commission Member College Presidents Participating:

Mr. Keith Faulkner, Charleston Southern University
Dr. Steve Adamson, Erskine College
Dr. Nathan Copeland, Limestone University
Mr. Scott Cochran, Spartanburg Methodist College

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Commission Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:33AM. Ms. Katie Harrison, 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. Harrison confirmed the participating Commission Members in attendance and noted that Ms. Sara Vaughn is attending as Proxy for Dr. Natalie Harder, Coker University, and Ms. Hannah Craig is attending as Proxy for Dr. William Barker, Southern Wesleyan University. A quorum was established. Ms. Harrison recognized and welcomed the non-Commission members in attendance. Ms. Harrison also informed all participants of the special guests joining the meeting: Mr. Lewis Carter, Director, and Mr. Charlie LaRosa, Research Analyst, with the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee.

Dr. Hopkins announced that with Dr. Lester McCorn, former president of Clinton College, becoming president at Paine College (Augusta, Georgia), the Commission appointed Dr. Natalie Harder, president of Coker University, to serve as Commission Secretary. Ms. Archinya Ingram, interim president of Clinton College, was added as a Commission member for the remainder of Clinton College's position in the rotation of Commission members.

Dr. Hopkins called for a motion to approve the June 25, 2024, Commission Minutes. Dr. Ernest McNealy, Allen University, moved to approve the Minutes and Ms. Sara Vaughn seconded the motion. There was no discussion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Harrison to report on 2023-2024 Program Reviews. Ms. Harrison reported on the twenty-two participating institutions that underwent Program Reviews for the 2023-2024 year, stating all reviews were submitted by the deadline, with two deadline extensions granted, and all have been closed. Ms.

Harrison reported there were seven colleges with findings program-wide, with three of those institutions having two findings. The most common finding pertained to the requirement to disburse grants within five business days of the receipt of funds. With the requirement that all Program Reviews have a minimum six percent sample size, it was reported that the average review percentage was 10.4%. Ms. Harrison thanked all participants for their work during the Programs Review process this year.

Dr. Hopkins called on Mr. Zachary Christian, Commission Deputy Director, to report on the 2024-2025 Award Year. Mr. Christian reported that the Agency has experienced a decrease of 8.42% in the total number of applications received and a decrease of 6.14% in the total commitments made for the 2024-2025 Award Year compared to the 2023-2024 Award Year. Mr. Christian noted that, while there were decreases in the total applications received and commitments made this year, the Agency has realized grants for 12,998 students as of March 1, which represents an increase of 4.21% over the previous year, with several Non-Traditional program certifications still pending. Mr. Christian continues to attribute the implementation of the Agency's new student information system, *myTG*, as streamlining the certification process and enabling the Agency to disburse grants much earlier than with the prior process. Additionally, Mr. Christian explained the initiatives taken by the Commission in recent years have continued to expand students' access to the Tuition Grant Program. Dr. Hopkins called for any questions or discussion. There being none, the meeting continued.

Dr. Hopkins called on Ms. Harrison to report on Agency Updates and Initiatives. Ms. Harrison reported that upon the August 2024 retirement of Ms. Gena Miles, Commission Financial Officer, Mrs. Kira Demery was promoted to the role of Fiscal Operations Coordinator after serving as the Tuition Grants Program Coordinator since January 2023. In April, Mrs. Demery will complete her participation in the LeadSC Program, a training program offered by the SC Department of Administration (Admin) for emerging leaders in state government. As part of this program, Mrs. Demery has worked closely with individuals from other state agencies, shadowed Government Relations personnel through their workings at the State House, met with state legislators and the Governor, and has learned the inner workings of State government. Mrs. Demery was also recently elected as the Treasurer-Elect for the South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SCASFAA) and will begin the first of her two-year service on the SCASFAA Board as an elected officer on July 1.

Ms. Harrison announced the agency recently accepted the resignation of Ms. Shay Shealy West, Commission Program Operations Coordinator. Ms. Harrison expressed the Commission's thanks and appreciation during Ms. West's time with the Agency. It was reported that the Agency will open applications and begin the recruiting process for the Commission's next Program Operations Coordinator in the coming weeks.

Ms. Harrison highlighted Mr. Christian's achievement of earning the FAAC© designation through the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators' (NASFAA) accredited Certified Financial Aid Administrator® Program in September. Including Mr. Christian, there are only 20 aid administrators in South Carolina who currently hold this designation. Mr. Christian's higher education advocacy continued with his February participation in the annual NASFAA Leadership & Legislative Conference & Expo, where he organized Capitol Hill visits for a group of aid administrators from South Carolina. The group, which included aid administrators from the University of South Carolina, Clemson University, Coastal Carolina University, and Trident Technical College, met with the Deputy Legislative Assistant to Senator Tim Scott, and the Senior Policy Advisor to Senator Lindsey Graham to advocate for federal student aid programs on behalf of South Carolina students.

Ms. Harrison also described her leadership in planning and executing a successful annual conference of the National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP) in October 2024 and is currently overseeing the planning for the upcoming NASSGAP Annual Conference, which will be held in Washington, D.C., in October. Ms. Harrison continues to serve as part of the leadership planning team for the combined NASSGAP and SHEEO collaboration project to assist state agencies with their FAFSA Simplification efforts. Additionally, Ms. Harrison is currently participating in the South Carolina Executive Institute, a program offered by Admin allowing participants to work closely with executive leaders from around the state and build trusting relationships, address complex problems, and gain insight into successfully moving their organizations into the future.

The Tuition Grants Commission was recently recognized as the “Champion of Learning” during the January LinkedIn Learning Sub-administrators meeting for creatively promoting LinkedIn Learning. As the agency’s sub-admin, Zachary created a Cyber Security Awareness challenge and requested all staff participate in honor of Cyber Security Awareness Month, continuing to place emphasis on the importance of data privacy and information security best practices. Admin continues to promote the use of LinkedIn Learning for all state employees.

Ms. Harrison reported that the Tuition Grants Commission entered into a data sharing agreement with the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), allowing the Commission to receive the 45-day headcount master file of all high school seniors enrolled in public high schools located in South Carolina. The data, which was uploaded to the Commission’s student information system, *myTG*, allows the Commission to provide student-level FAFSA Completion Status Information to approved high school counselors and personnel at other designated education-related entities. Individual high schools, school districts, or approved non-profit education-related entities may enter into a data sharing agreement with the agency to participate in the FAFSA matching process. Private high schools are also able to enter into an agreement and provide their list of seniors to review completion status information. Since rollout the week of January 27, 13 high schools, districts, and education-related entities have signed MOUs, allowing staff at a total of 30 high schools to access FAFSA Completion Status Information for their senior students. Of those 30 schools, they are performing slightly better than the statewide average as reported by the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), showing a 30.25% FAFSA completion rate compared to the statewide average of 28.9%. Through a partnership with the S.C. Commission on Higher Education (CHE), the Commission is continuing to announce the availability of the FAFSA Completion Status Information portal and continue to enroll new districts/schools regularly.

Ms. Harrison shared that in 2023 the Commission was selected as one of eight state agencies to undergo an extensive and formal review by the House Legislative Oversight Committee. Public input was gathered regarding the agencies involved in 2023, and the Tuition Grants Commission completed all applicable requests and submitted required reports to the Committee in March 2023. Due to unexpected delays in their review of another state agency, the Committee’s review of the Commission was delayed until this current legislative session. Agency leadership appeared before the Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee on February 27 and presented information regarding the agency and Program at the first of several meetings. While the Agency has already participated in the Public Input hearing in 2023, the agency is being requested to appear before the full Committee on March 19. Agency leadership will appear before the Subcommittee to continue presentations in late April. Ms. Harrison thanked Mr. Carter and Mr. LaRosa for their support and guidance as the Commission works through this oversight process.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Ms. Harrison to report on the Review of the 2025-2026 State Budget Request for Funding of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Program. Ms. Harrison reported the FY2026 Budget Request process began in September, and Commission Staff appeared before the Executive Budget Office and Governor’s Office on October 16, 2024, the House Ways and Means Higher Education Subcommittee on January 23, 2025, and the Senate Finance Higher Education Subcommittee on March 5, 2025. The Commission requested a portion of the increased lottery allocations to be funded out of general, recurring funds, if possible, or to maintain the current \$20,000,000 in funding from lottery allocations. Ms. Harrison reported the Governor’s Executive Budget recommended maintaining the \$20,000,000 lottery allocation, but did not include the \$160,000 recurring funds request for operating expenses. The House Ways and Means Committee agreed with the Governor’s recommendations and submitted to the full House a budget which includes maintaining the \$20,000,000 funding from lottery allocations. Ms. Harrison indicated the House is scheduled to debate the Budget beginning this week, and the Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to meet during the week of April 8, with the full Senate tentatively scheduled to make its recommendation during the week of April 22, 2025. Based on the current recommendations, Ms. Harrison reported that she believes the Commission will maintain level funding for the upcoming fiscal year. Dr. Hopkins called for any questions, there being none, the meeting continued.

Dr. Hopkins called on Dr. Robert Lloyd, President and CEO of South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (SCICU), to report on the 2025 Legislative Outlook. Dr. Lloyd reported that one area that was affected was that the House Ways & Means Committee cut funding to the Higher Education Enhancement Program (HEEP), which has traditionally been cut by the House and added back in by the Senate. HEEP is crucial for enhancing educational opportunities for low-income and educationally disadvantaged students in South Carolina, focusing primarily on students attending Historically Black College and Universities and Women's Colleges. Dr. Lloyd reported that the Governor's Office and the Senate remain supportive of the Program and believes the funding will be restored in the Senate's version of the Budget. Dr. Lloyd also provided a brief federal legislative update and the potential impacts on Higher Education in South Carolina.

Dr. Lloyd also shared that SCICU is closely watching the evolvments happening with the U.S. Department of Education and the Trump Administration's desire to phase out the Department. Dr. Hopkins thanked Dr. Lloyd for his update and the advocacy SCICU does on behalf of the member institutions.

Dr. Hopkins called on Ms. Harrison to present the Staff Recommendation regarding Initial 2025-2026 South Carolina Tuition Grant Maximum Award Amount. Based on the continued recommended support of \$20,000,000 in Lottery Funding by the House Ways & Means Committee, and with the expectation that the Senate will concur, along with evaluation of funds available to carry-forward, following the established awarding philosophy of equalized grant values, the Commission staff recommends to the Commission that initial grants for 2025-2026 be increased to \$5,000, representing a \$200 increase over the current year award amount. Dr. Hopkins called for discussion, and hearing none, called for a motion to increase the Maximum Grant for 2025-2026 Award Year to \$5,000 for the 2025-2026 Award Year. Dr. John Dozier, Columbia College, moved to set the initial Maximum Grant at \$5,000. Dr. McNealey seconded the motion. There was no further discussion, and the motion passed unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins called upon Mr. Christian to discuss the Staff Recommendation of the Revision to the Deadline Extension Date. Mr. Christian explained that at the June 25, 2024, Commission Meeting, the longstanding November 15 Eligibility and Appeal Deadline was extended to January 15 effective with the 2024-2025 Academic Year. After reviewing the data associated with this extension and realizing the unintended consequences and impacts to the administration of the Program, Commission Staff are recommending the Eligibility and Appeal deadline be revised to December 15. Mr. Christian reported that while the deadline extension allowed students additional time to satisfy all eligibility requirements, including completing the annual felony, drug, and alcohol affidavit, and to submit appeals, if necessary, the number of students that were made eligible between November 16, 2024, and January 15, 2025, is consistent with the same number of students reinstated in the month prior to the November 15, 2023, deadline during the 2023-2024 Academic Year. Mr. Christian also reported this lengthy deadline extension led several unintended impacts, including: the Commission's inability to close out fall semester disbursements prior to the close of the calendar year, which led to balancing issues with the State's Accounting System, SCEIS; the inability to accurately determine fall grant disbursements and run projections to ensure available cash on hand matches the need to disburse spring grants without using the allowable "two disbursement" policy for spring grants; impacted the Commission's ability to provide accurate and timely academic year updates to the House Ways and Means Higher Education Subcommittee as part of the annual budget hearing process, which of the members of the Subcommittee have come to expect; and, delayed the geocoding process used to support SCICU's letter writing campaign and the Commission's mailing of Tuition Grants recipients information to the General Assembly by over a month. Mr. Christian explained the combination of the same number of students being reinstated during the period leading up to the eligibility and appeal deadline between the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 academic years, and the negative impacts felt by the Commission, it is the Staff's recommendation that the Commission consider revising the Eligibility and Appeal Deadline to December 15. This change would still provide students and financial aid staff at the participating colleges and universities additional time over the former November 15 Deadline date, while ensure Commission Staff can properly close out the fall semester without any additional delays, allowing for a smooth transition between semesters. Mr. Christian added that part of this request would be to pull back the February 15 deadline for school-initiated appeals for

new spring starts, to January 15. Dr. Hopkins called for any questions or discussion. Ms. Vaughn raised concerns with the February 15 to January 15 adjustment for school-initiated spring starts as it pertains to Coker University's academic calendar and asked for clarification regarding this adjustment. Mr. Christian explained that of the more than 60 spring-only appeals received by the Commission, fewer than 15 students met the February 15 deadline, specifically. With this proposed adjustment, so long as schools notified the Commission of their spring starts on or before January 15, Commission Staff would work with this specific subset of students to ensure all necessary items were requested. This change would also loosen some of the restrictions initially placed on the school-initiated appeals. Dr. Hopkins asked for any insight or additional comments from the financial aid administrators participating on the call. Ms. Carolyn Sparks, Associate Vice President of Enrollment and Director of Financial Aid, Wofford College, expressed support of December 15, whose remarks were echoed by Ms. Nancy Tate, Director of Financial Aid, Spartanburg Methodist College. Ms. Tate also expressed the challenges associated with the delay in eligibility statuses being updated in myTG ahead of their spring packaging, which she believed the earlier deadline date would solve. Dr. Hopkins thanked those for the insight and called for a motion to revise the deadlines to December 15 and January 15, respectfully. Dr. McNealey moved to revise the eligibility and appeals deadlines. Dr. Anita Gustafson, Presbyterian College, seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Dr. Hopkins reminded all Commission members to complete their Ethics filing by the March 30, 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 June 17, 2025, at 10:30 AM.

Dr. Hopkins adjourned the meeting at 11:42 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Zachary R. Christian, Deputy Director
Acting Secretary for
Dr. Natalie Harder, Secretary
South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission