The influence of state merit-based aid on access and educational experiences: an exploration of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)

Roderick L. Smothers
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THE INFLUENCE OF STATE MERIT-BASED AID ON ACCESS AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE LOUISIANA TUITION OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS (TOPS)

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Counseling

by

Roderick L. Smothers
B.S., Louisiana State University, 1995
M.P.A., Louisiana State University, 1997
December 2004
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I can remember so vividly the words of my mentor, Dr. Huel D. Perkins, when he referred to the Ph.D. as the “calling card of success” for any one who plans to have a career in academia. He introduced me to a new way of thinking about the importance of education in America, but, more importantly, he helped me to realize the sense of urgency and dire need for more African-American males to be holders of the “calling card of success.” It was through his encouragement and my own hunger for knowledge and the ability to influence educational policy at the national, state, local and institutional levels that sparked my initial interest in pursuing a doctorate degree. As new prospects of inquiry opened and inspirations of thought dawned, I became more excited about the opportunity to be the owner of the “calling card of success” that my mentor had spoken so passionately about. Hence, my journey began in the fall of 1999 and now some four years later, I write to acknowledge those individuals who have been instrumental in supporting me through every road traveled and every obstacle encountered as my journey comes to an end. Although it is impossible for me to recognize all who have shown me support, there are a special few that I must mention here.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF TABLES............................................................................................................................................ ix

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF STUDY................................................................. 1
   The Access Dilemma Defined.................................................................................................................. 3
   Problem Statement ................................................................................................................................. 4
   Purpose of Study.................................................................................................................................. 6
   Research Questions............................................................................................................................... 6
   Significance of Study.............................................................................................................................. 8
   Scope and Limitations of the Study ....................................................................................................... 8
   Motivation for Study .............................................................................................................................. 9
   Definitions of Key Terms...................................................................................................................... 11

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................................. 14
   Review of Literature Procedure........................................................................................................... 15
   A Historical Overview of Federal Financial Aid Programs............................................................... 16
   Merit Based Financial Aid / State Merit Programs............................................................................ 20
      Louisiana’s State Merit Program(TOPS)......................................................................................... 22
      Georgia Hope Scholarship Program ................................................................................................. 22
      Florida Bright Futures ...................................................................................................................... 24
   Access to Higher Education.................................................................................................................. 25
      Higher Education in America – The Last Thirty Years................................................................. 26
      Barriers to Access............................................................................................................................ 28
      Budget Reductions for Public Higher Education ........................................................................... 28
      Minority Access to Higher Education............................................................................................. 30
   Summary.................................................................................................................................................. 33

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY.......................................................................................................................... 35
   Introduction to Methods....................................................................................................................... 35
   Research Context................................................................................................................................ 36
   Mixed Methods Design....................................................................................................................... 39
   Program Assessment Design............................................................................................................... 40
   Qualitative Research Methods............................................................................................................ 41
      Elite Interviewing ............................................................................................................................ 42
      Qualitative Sample ........................................................................................................................... 43
   Quantitative Research Methods......................................................................................................... 44
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Design</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Population</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Research Sample</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Test</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Collection Timeline</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Collection Timeline</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Statistics</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor Analysis</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Thought Exercise</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility, Transferability and Dependability</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS/RESULTS</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Findings</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1 - Demographic Data/Results</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the Influence of the TOPS Program</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives 2-8 Results</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Level of Agreement Items</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Level of Agreement Items</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Results</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor Analysis</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details of New Scales</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANOVA Results</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Findings</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals of TOPS</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerged Themes</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Survey Data Results</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Survey Data Summary</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 SUMMARY, MAJOR FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Methods</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Finding #1</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1  Louisiana State University Freshman Class Enrollment and TOPS Data 2002-2003 ................................................................. 51
Table 3.2 TOPS Awards by Selected Institutions 2000-2003................................. 51
Table 3.3 Classes Selected to Survey .................................................................... 53
Table 3.4 Table of Sub-scale Categories (Factors) ............................................... 55
Table 3.5: How each Dependent Variable Corresponds to Research Question # 3 ...... 61
Table 3.6: Definition of Independent Variables and # of Response Levels ............ 61
Table 4.1: Gender of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients................................. 71
Table 4.2: Race of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients .................................... 72
Table 4.3: Age of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients ..................................... 73
Table 4.4: Classification of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients....................... 73
Table 4.5: Residency Status of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients ................. 74
Table 4.6: Parent educational level of students who are TOPS recipients ............... 75
Table 4.7 Family income of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients....................... 76
Table 4.8: Academic Major of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients .................. 78
Table 4.9: Overall GPA of LSU students who are TOPS recipients......................... 79
Table 4.10 ACT score of LSU students who are TOPS recipients............................ 80
Table 4.11 Response Scales for Questionnaire Items ............................................. 82
Table 4.12: TOPS Familiarity Items ...................................................................... 81
Table 4.12.a: TOPS Agreement Items ................................................................. 82
Table 4.13 a: Factor 1: Academic Performance ..................................................... 87
Table 4.13b: Factor 2: Prior Knowledge / Awareness about TOPS ......................... 88
Table 4.13c: Factor 5: TOPS Award Criteria ......................................................... 89
Table 4.13d: Factor 3: Cost.................................................................................... 91
Table 4.13e: Factor 4: Personal ................................................................. 92
Table 4.14: Factor Analysis 1: Academic Performance (ACAFERF)................. 96
Table 4.15: Factor Analysis 2: Prior Knowledge about TOPS (PREKNOW)......... 97
Table 4.16: Factor Analysis 3: Cost................................................................. 98
Table 4.17: Factor Analysis 4: Personal (PERSONAL)........................................ 99
Table 4.18: Factor Analysis 5: Award Criteria (AWRCRIT)............................... 99
Table 4.19: Factor Analysis 6: College Attendance (COLATTN)....................... 99
Table 4.20: Sub-Scale Label Scores on Five Factor Analyses............................ 100
Table 4.21: Selected Experts for Interviews....................................................... 105
Table 4.22: Goals of the TOPS Program.......................................................... 109
Table 4.23: Researcher derived goals from interview data ............................... 112
Table 4.24 Emerging Themes ........................................................................ 113
Table 4.25 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 1....................... 128
Table 4.26 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 2....................... 129
Table 4.27 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 3....................... 129
Table 4.28 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 5....................... 129
Table 4.29 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 6 ....................... 130
ABSTRACT

Access to higher education at the beginning of the new millennium faces unprecedented challenges. Although many of those challenges have been identified and addressed through research and federal and state policies, there still exists an inherent gap in the current and potential future success of today’s college students. This is particularly true for minority and lower-income students. Some of the identified challenges include: lack of financial assistance, persisting through and graduating from college, pre-college preparation, socioeconomic status, and family support/motivation. This study focuses primarily on the financial barriers that impede the process of providing equal access to all students, which is the access dilemma.

The purpose of this study is to assess the Louisiana TOPS program a) to determine its primary goals according to key administrators, policy makers, and legislators, b) to determine the extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana, and c) to ascertain perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences. This study also explored the various aspects of the access dilemma in Louisiana and how TOPS has positively and/or negatively influenced its various components.

Qualitative and quantitative measures are employed in this study in an effort to explore the access dilemma in Louisiana and the impact that TOPS has had since its inception in 1997. Two primary sources of data resulting from a researcher-developed questionnaire and elite interviews with selected experts were merged to form the basis for this study.

Major findings of the study show that a) the lack of declared goals for the TOPS program has hindered its effective administration and evaluation, b) a majority of the qualitative responses revealed that the TOPS initiative has positively impacted higher education in
Louisiana, and c) TOPS has had positive and negative influences on the educational and social experiences of its recipients.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

Universal access to higher education has been a priority for the United States for well over a century. It was not, however, until the 1960s that educators, political leaders, policy makers and university governing boards began to pay serious attention to the issues of universal access. It was also during this period, which corresponds with the Civil Rights Movement, that the central position of access to America’s college and university campuses began to shift to the struggles of low-income families and minorities. These groups became increasingly sensitive to the strategic importance of higher education in the context of their struggles to obtain social justice and economic equality in America (Heller, 2002). Subsequently, the access agenda quickly shifted from the “universal approach” to one that is centered around minorities and low income families obtaining social justice and economic equality through the alteration in practices of the major American institutions. At the center of these institutions is the institution of higher learning (Heller, 2002).

The literature reveals a preponderance of evidence that supports the realities of prosperity and unprecedented wealth in America due to increased access to higher education. There is still, however, an increasing number of low-income and minority students who are confronted with significant financial barriers that limit their ability to access and persist in college (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

The literature also reveals that by the year 2015, 1.6 million students between 18 to 24 years old will be enrolled in college (Heller, 2002). A disproportionate number of these students will be low income and minority students who are not prepared for college. Because of the access dilemma, many of these students will be denied the opportunity to post-secondary educational opportunities. Many researchers argue that it is the responsibility of the federal
government to address the ongoing access dilemma as it is ultimately the global economy that suffers as a result of an uneducated workforce. Other researchers argue that the responsibility should be shifted more to the state level as the national financial burden is too overwhelming, and state demographics are markedly different. Researchers from the Advisory Committee for Student Financial Assistance (2001) argue that the access dilemma is more of a shared responsibility and that each entity that benefits from a more educated society should contribute its part.

Significant investments have been made at the federal, state and institutional levels to narrow the gaps in post-secondary participation. For the purpose of this study, I focus primarily on the state of Louisiana and the role it has played in increasing access to higher education for its citizens. In 1989, the state of Louisiana was one of the first states to implement a state-funded scholarship program that was awarded based on financial need and academic merit. This program, in its original form, was called the Taylor Plan as it was named after Pat Taylor, an advocate for higher education, who encouraged the Louisiana Legislature to pass the Tuition Assistance Program Act in 1989. This program offered merit-based grants to students from households with incomes of less than $25,000 a year. Eventually, the Taylor Plan evolved into what is known today as the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) which is awarded solely on the basis of academic merit. With the enactment of the House Bill 2154, the Louisiana Legislature created the TOPS program with the purpose of expanding higher education choices for residents of Louisiana (McDonald, 1996).

According to Lawton (2002), in the four years that TOPS has been in existence, it has already had a significant impact on post-secondary educational choices in Louisiana. Legislators argue that not only does this program provide an opportunity for average to above
average students to obtain post-secondary educations, but it also changes student incentives for doing well in high school (McDonald, 1996). TOPS also has a significant impact on the choices for Louisiana residents who would normally not be able to afford college. The affordability factor alone suggests that Louisiana has positioned itself to provide post-secondary education to a broader base of its citizens.

During the 2001 Louisiana Legislative Session, the TOPS program was heavily criticized by lawmakers (Shuler, 2001). Representatives and senators re-introduced several criticisms that were similar to legislative commentary from previous years: the requirements to receive TOPS are too low, the program is being used the most by families who can afford to send their children to college, the retention requirements for TOPS are too high, and the price tag on this program has outgrown the state’s funding capacity (Shuler, 2001). These complaints are, in part, why I have chosen to explore the TOPS program and the impact it has had on the state of higher education in Louisiana.

The Access Dilemma Defined

For the purposes of this study the access dilemma is defined as the circumstances that impede the ability of all students, especially low-income and minority, to take full advantage of post-secondary opportunities. The access dilemma as defined for this study is categorized into three general areas – physical/geographical access, financial access, and access to success. This study addresses, in part, all three of the sub-components of the access dilemma as they relate to higher education. The access dilemma is not just unique to individual states. Its tentacles confront policymakers across the country. Selingo (1999) reports that the United States is undergoing a college-access crisis. She attributes “shortfalls in college access to an ‘unprecedented convergence of events’ including the floundering economy, cuts to higher
education spending by cash-strapped states, and a rising demand for college education spurred by demographic changes” (p.1). Ted Sanders, President of the Education Commission of the States, concurs. As he states “America is at risk for losing a vital ingredient for its success – an educated populace” (p.1).

The findings of this research serve to further validate my thinking about the “access dilemma” and the impact that TOPS has had on addressing it in the state of Louisiana. The first conclusion inspired by this research is centered around the overarching issue of the access dilemma which involves the recognition of fiscal constraints and how those limitations evolve into the barriers that were previously mentioned.

**Problem Statement**

Horace Mann wrote: “Education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men: the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Downs, 1974, p. 23). Mann’s observation is even more relevant and significant for America in 2003 than when it was written over a century ago. Education is and continues to be the “great equalizer” of society. Intrinsically linked to the importance of higher education is the ideal that all segments of society should have equal access to post-secondary opportunities or higher education (Heller, 2002). For the purpose of this study, I have identified two very critical problems: 1) The access dilemma as it relates to minorities and low income citizens, and 2) the role of the state of Louisiana in solving the access dilemma through its state merit-based scholarship program.

Over thirty-nine years ago, the federal government, through the passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965, embraced the notion of ensuring that all Americans would have access to a college education without regard to race or economic status. This governmental assurance resulted in an unprecedented number of Americans being given the opportunity to attend college
who would otherwise not have had access. Despite these efforts, the participation of minorities and low income youth in higher education continues to lag far behind that of their middle- and upper- income peers (Heller, 2002). The literature reveals that low-income students who graduate high school at least minimally qualified (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education) enroll in four-year institutions at half the rate of their comparably qualified high-income peers (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

African-Americans and Hispanics are particularly under-represented in the post-secondary arena. Research reveals that these two groups earn bachelor’s degrees at a substantially lower rate than white students (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). Such under-participation and lack of degree completion have major implications for the lifetime income of low-income students.

Central to the myriad of problems encompassed in the access dilemma, are the efforts of states to close the gaps in post-secondary participation. The Louisiana TOPS program is one way of addressing this issue. Despite the immediate success of the program, many legislators and policy makers argue that a monitoring system needs to be implemented that evaluates, on a consistent basis, the numerous components of the TOPS program. Through legislative debate and media commentary the policy which created TOPS has been questioned. Some argue the policy lacks the administrative and evaluative components which are fundamental to the program’s success. For the purpose of this study, however, the main focus is centered around the problem of accessibility for under-represented students and students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of TOPS.

It is imperative that a study on accessibility be conducted for the TOPS program. Researchers have concentrated on the larger merit-based programs such as Georgia HOPE and
Florida Bright Futures because there is not sufficient data available on the TOPS program. It is also important to conduct this study because Louisiana citizens and legislators are asking critical questions which are being incompletely answered because of a lack of information. Legislators, who are making decisions about the future of TOPS, are not adequately informed.

A limited amount of research on state-funded merit programs exists. This is due, partially, to the newness of merit programs being funded at the state level when traditionally merit aid has been awarded at the university/college level (Selingo, 2001). Amidst the many perceptions that exist about merit-based aid versus need-based aid are some of the fundamental issues that Louisiana legislators have raised in their discussions about the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS).

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to assess the Louisiana TOPS program a) to determine its primary goals according to key administrators, policy makers, and legislators, b) to determine the extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana, and c) to ascertain perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences.

This study will determine if there are any accessibility disparities in the criteria of the Louisiana TOPS Program as it relates to minority (African American) and majority (White) students. Additionally, this study will ascertain the perceptions of students who are recipients of the TOPS award to determine the effectiveness of the program.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guide this study.

1. What are the goals of the Louisiana TOPS program?
2. To what extent do key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana?

3. What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients?

Specific objectives formulated to guide the researcher in answering research question # 3 include the following:

1. To describe and compare all survey respondents who are recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic characteristics: 1) gender, 2) race, 3) age, 4) classification, 5) residency status, 6) parental education level, 7) family income, 8) academic major, 9) grade point average (GPA) and 10) ACT score.

2. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college.

3. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.

4. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their awareness of TOPS.

5. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

6. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

7. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.
8. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions (i.e. decision to live on campus, decision to work, etc.).

**Significance of Study**

The significance of this research exists within its uniqueness as one of the first studies of the Louisiana TOPS program based on empirical evidence. This study is necessary because there has been no evaluative or comprehensive research done on the Louisiana TOPS Program. The fall semester of 2003 marks the fifth year anniversary of this program and, to date, basic questions about the program are still being asked by legislators and the citizenry of the state of Louisiana (Shuler, 2001). This premier study offers an in-depth look and provides answers to questions posed. This study builds on previous research that was conducted on the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program by the Georgia Council For School Performance and the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship Program (Heller & Sharpiro, 2000). Because the concept of state merit programs is so new, there is little information about their effects, and this study adds to the literature on this topic. From a practical standpoint, it is my hope that this study will result in policy makers making more informed decisions because state merit-based programs have the potential to significantly affect the access dilemma.

**Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study concentrates on ascertaining the perceptions of key leaders in higher education – namely, their assessments of the TOPS program’s success in accomplishing its primary goals, and their perceptions of influence on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients. The conclusions resulting from this study can only be applied to the Louisiana State University (LSU) student population. Because LSU’s student population is not analogous
with the state of Louisiana, broader implications beyond the LSU student population may have resulted in inaccurate assumptions. The Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance provided valuable information on the distribution of awards based on several demographic variables. This office could not, however, provide the detailed student/award information needed to draw inferences for this study. Subsequently, I depended heavily on the information obtained from Louisiana State University’s Office of Budget and Planning (LSUOBP). There were also limitations in obtaining data from the LSUOBP. Specifically, because of the university’s obligation to protect student records, I could not gain access to the names, physical addresses, e-mail addresses, or any unique identifying aspect of a student’s file. Consequently, this resulted in a methodological change in data collection. The LSUOBP did provide useful information that allowed me to obtain a meaningful sample of students as well as summative data on the overall population of TOPS recipients at LSU. Because of the ambiguity in the self-reported data fields, I could not verify the complete accuracy of the data that was used. This presented a major limitation for my study.

Motivation for Study

Louisiana is uniquely positioned to be a model for addressing the access dilemma. Despite all of the controversy regarding the desegregation settlement agreement, the demographic composition of the state, and affirmative action, there is a gradual shift at the state level from need-based to merit-based aid. This phenomenon, which has become more prevalent over the past decade at the federal and state level, has resulted in serious policy implications that must be studied if higher education is going to effectively address the impending changes in the racial or ethnic makeup of students or faculty in four-year colleges and
universities (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). This is especially true for Louisiana State University, the institution of which I have been an active citizen for over eleven years and have served in numerous capacities. My role shifted from undergraduate student to graduate student to employee. From my various vantage points, it has been increasingly evident that there are many underlying issues that affect access to higher education for minorities and low income students in the state of Louisiana and, indeed, at its flagship university.

Through my involvement at LSU, I observed many interesting trends which heightened my interest in access to higher education and programs that worked to increase the apparent gap of disparity. As an African American undergraduate student, I noticed that I was a minority in the truest sense because between 1991 and 1995, the African American student population at LSU was 6.4 percent (Budget & Planning, 2001). As a financial aid counselor and employee of the university, I interacted with numerous minority students who also felt out of place and unwelcomed at LSU. It was also in this position that I noticed a large percentage of minority students had household incomes that were either at or below the poverty level. As a professional staff person, I was in an even smaller minority group as African American professional staff comprised only 1.2 percent of the entire professional staff population. As a graduate student, there was a dearth of African American professors available to serve as mentors to existing students. As President of the Black Faculty & Staff Caucus at LSU, I served as an advocate for African American students, faculty, and staff. While serving the University community in this capacity, I was able to bring issues that adversely affected African-Americans to the forefront and hold university administration accountable for addressing those issues. This advocacy
resulted in the establishment of many positive relationships with the university’s upper-level administration which subsequently led to my interest in obtaining a doctoral degree in educational leadership, research and counseling with a higher education focus. Because of my experiences at Louisiana State University, I have made the conscious decision to devote a considerable portion of my life to studying and advocating programs that increase access to higher education for minority and low-income students.

Studying the Louisiana TOPS program is one way of investigating the issue of access to higher education for minorities and low income students. I believe that it is because of limited access to higher education that these groups (minorities and low income students) as a whole have plummeted educationally, socially, economically, and politically over the years (Perna, 2000). By studying this policy, I will be able to provide the members of the Louisiana Legislature with valuable feedback and recommendations which will ultimately lead to more informed decisions about this important and much needed state-merit program. This study is one way in which I will give back to minority groups and low income students who have been educationally disenfranchised for many years.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

Listed below are the definitions of terms pertinent to this study. Alternative interpretations are explored in the literature review and throughout the study.

**Merit-based award** - a monetary gift that is distributed based on academic achievement and/or scholastic ability.

**Need-based award** - a monetary gift that is distributed based on financial need and family household income, size, etc.
**Federally funded assistance** - monetary assistance that is provided by the federal government.

**State funded assistance** - monetary assistance that is provided by the state government.

**Minority** – anyone considered non-white (examples – African Americans, Pacific Islander, Asian, Eskimos, Hispanics, or Latinos). For the purposes of this study, minority equals African American.

**Majority** – anyone whose race comprises over fifty percent of the population. For the purpose of this study, majority equals white.

**Race** – for the purposes of this study, race is African American/ Black, Caucasian/White, Native American, Pacific Islander, Asian, Hispanic, Latino, Other.

**Gender** – for the purposes of this study “male”, “female” and “do not wish to disclose” are the gender classifications.

**Parish** - a civil division unique to Louisiana. It is equivalent to a county in other states. (See chart/list of parishes)

**High school attended** - the accredited or non-accredited high school from which a student graduated.

**Family household income** – a variable used to determine the family’s financial strength on the basis of the income and assets of the entire family. From this formula, the expected family contribution (EFC) is determined which is a major factor in the awarding of need based aid.

**Grade Point Average (GPA)** - a number used by most high schools, colleges and universities to determine the academic standing of a student. The GPA is determined by multiplying units (also called hours, credits, or credit hours) by the number of “grade points” assigned to a letter grade (on the 4.0 scale, an “A” equals 4.0 and an “F” equals 0). This yields the number of grade points
per course. GPA is calculated by dividing the total grade points by the total hours.

**Retention** – for the purposes of this study, retention is defined as the measurement of a student’s ability to remain in college and successfully graduate.

**Graduation Rate** - for the purposes of this study, graduation rate is a measurement of the time it takes a student to graduate (usually five to six years for an undergraduate degree).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two examines the literature related to concepts pertinent to this study. The primary purpose of this study is to study the impact of the Louisiana TOPS program to determine its primary goals and to ascertain the perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences. Additionally, this study explores the various aspects of the access dilemma, and the implications they have for minorities as well as other low-income citizens.

Very little research has been done in the area of state merit programs (Heller & Marin, 2002). Although over thirteen states have implemented broad-based merit scholarship programs, there has been little research conducted to determine whether these merit programs meet the goals that have been established for them (Heller & Marin) (See Appendix A). One of the primary needs of state merit programs is research that would yield answers beyond the assumptions that are made by opponents of these types of programs. Consistent with the literature base for merit programs is the lack of substantiating data on the TOPS program. This lack of information makes it difficult for TOPS program administrators to offer useful information about program outcomes which could be used by legislators when contemplating major changes in the program’s operation and implementation.

To ground my study, I explored the limited literature about state merit programs as well as literature on financial aid and access to higher education. I begin the literature review with an introduction and overview of financial aid and state merit programs. Then, I discuss the Louisiana TOPS program, Georgia Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship Program, and the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program. Next I expound, in a
general sense, on higher education access and then, specifically, on minority access to higher education.

**Review of Literature Procedure**

My review of the literature involved locating, reading, and evaluating the research related to state merit programs, need-based financial aid, and higher education access. In order to facilitate this process, I conducted a primary source, library source, and secondary source search. My first step in this process was to search for books on the aforementioned issues. This process was unsuccessful and ultimately led to my dependence on secondary source articles which provided needed general background information on the identified topics. From this pool of data, I was able to extrapolate an extensive source list of newspaper articles and internet sources which were also instrumental in providing pertinent information about the background of state merit programs and need-based aid.

From the secondary and limited primary lists, I compiled my initial source list. This source list was instrumental in my computer-based searches which included WebSpirs, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Dissertation Abstracts International, Scholarly Journal Archive (JSTOR), InfoTrac and Education Index. By using WebSpirs, I was able to conduct title searches simultaneously over several databases (i.e. ERIC and Dissertation Abstracts International). After conducting that search for each individual area of interest, I repeated the search on JSTOR and the Education Index. As previously stated, there was no information on the TOPS program and very limited information on the other state merit programs. There was, however, a wealth of information on need-based financial aid and access to higher education. From the information that was gathered, the following literature review was constructed.
A Historical Overview of Federal Financial Aid Programs

The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 gave public land, or its equivalent, for support of at least one college in every state (Dionne & Kean, 1996). This establishment of state universities in the 19th Century initiated democratization of college opportunities in the United States (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995).

Eighty-two years later, the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill) of 1944 (38 U.S.C. §§3451-4393, 38 C.P.R.21.1020) expanded college enrollment to new groups in society and started an explosion of post-secondary enrollment (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995). The purpose of the GI Bill was to reward veterans who had served their country during World War II and to help veterans catch up with their peers whose lives had not been interrupted by military service (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995). The GI Bill offered educational opportunity regardless of race, or financial need. At that point, financial aid policy was focused and easily manageable. Subsequent financial aid legislation and the regulations that were passed to implement this legislation have been created, amended, and changed so rapidly that financial aid policies have been developed without a coherent philosophical base (Cofer, 1997).

Fears from the United States citizens about the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 resulted in the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (20 U.S.C. § 401) (Huff, 1995). This legislation created the first federal student loan program, the National Defense Student Loan Program (now Perkins Loans) (20 U.S.C. §§ 1987 aa 1087hh, 34 C.F.R. Part 674) (Huff, 1995; Mumper, 1996). With an emphasis on science, this program provided low-interest loans for college students and included debt cancellation for those who became teachers after graduation (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995). This program addressed public concern that without financial assistance
some of the best and brightest minds would go untrained, and it opened the door for future loan and grant programs (Judy, 1997). The NDSL program was the first to require testing of students’ financial need to use a contract between the federal government and institutions (Judy, 1997).

One of the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement was the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 (20 U.S.C. § 1001 et seq.). This act provided financial aid to higher education institutions through Title III and financial aid to students through Title IV. Title IV of the HEA was the first explicit federal commitment to equalizing college opportunities for students based on need (Mortenson, 1998). This financial assistance was provided through grants, loans and work-study.

According to the literature, the periodic reauthorization of the HEA has always been a very complicated process (Merisotis, 1998). The reauthorizations and amendments passed since 1965 resulted in over 7000 regulations for implementing federal financial aid programs (Merisotis, 1998).

Before the 1972 Reauthorization of HEA, the higher education community urged Congress to enact formula-based, enrollment-driven federal aid to institutions. However, the legislators decided that funding aid to students was the more efficient and effective way to remove financial barriers for needy students and to equalize opportunities for higher education (access) (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995; Judy, 1997). The idea was that “students, voting with their feet, would take their federal aid to institutions that met their needs; less satisfactory institutions would wither” (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995 p.123).

A major change in the 1972 reauthorization was the term “post-secondary education” instead of “higher education” (Hansen, 1994; Heller, 1999). This change in terms opened the
door for proprietary schools to participate in programs under Title IV of the HEA. The various types of assistance available to students were also expanded. Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (now Pell Grants) were authorized at a maximum of $1,400 and were awarded through applications made directly to the federal government. State Student Incentive Grants (SSIG) were established to match federal dollars for state dollars as a method for encouraging states to enact or expand their own need-based student grant programs. This legislation also established the Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae) as a publicly chartered private corporation to increase liquidity and capital availability in the GSL program (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995).

In 1976 federal incentives were established to encourage states to establish loan guarantee agencies. Also in 1976, students without high school degrees became eligible for federal assistance as long as they had the “ability to benefit” from post-secondary training.

The Middle Income Student Assistance Act of 1978 (MISSA), passed as the Higher Education Amendments of 1978, widened eligibility for Pell Grants and opened subsidized guaranteed loans to any student regardless of income or financial need. MISSA changed the definition of need for federal support to include any student facing college expenses.

The 1980 Reauthorization Act focused on redesigning student aid programs and managing their growth (Judy, 1997). Loan interest rates were raised, and regulations for loan agencies were implemented to correct misuse of loan funds that had resulted through the liberal loan policies enacted under MISSA legislation. Public pressure in 1980 prompted Congress to provide more financial aid for the middle class through the new Parental Loans for Student program (PLUS). PLUS provided borrowing opportunities for parents of dependent undergraduate students and for students who were financially independent of their parents regardless of need (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995).
The election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 and his election promises to cut government spending created a shift in financial aid policy from grants to loans. It was also at this pivotal moment in history that the nation began to see a widening in the access gap for low-income and minority students (Heller, 2002). Under the Reagan administration, Pell grants, and other forms of federal aid were limited by budget appropriations.

The HEA Reauthorization of 1992 focused on achieving a better balance between grant and loan support for students. The goal of this Reauthorization was to increase grant aid and reduce reliance on loans. However, Congress raised the dollar ceilings for loan programs, uncapped the Parent Loan (PLUS) program, and created a new, unsubsidized loan that was not restricted by financial need. Guaranteed Student Loans were renamed Stafford Loans and PLUS and SLS loans became part of the Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP) (Heller & Marin, 2002). A new methodology for determining student and family ability to pay was established for all Title IV programs. Because of these changes, more middle class families qualified for financial aid, particularly loans (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995; Nettles, 1995). It was also during this period that state-funded merit programs began to re-emerge. Developed in 1993, the Georgia Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally scholarship program was one of the first state-funded merit programs (Heller, 2002).

Under the Clinton administration, increasing access to higher education was a major focus. The 1998 Reauthorization period focused primarily on increasing grant aid and providing tax credits to families who had students in college. The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, an independent source of advice and counsel to Congress and the Secretary of Education on student financial policy aid, devoted a majority of its efforts to addressing the issue of improving post-secondary access for lower-income students. The
members of this committee made compelling arguments to Congress for reaffirming the nation’s commitment to providing financial aid and other forms of support to low-income citizens (Heller, 2002). While the purpose of financial aid has remained focused on removing economic barriers to encourage students to attend and persist in college, the program was plagued by competing values and goals of public subsidy, educational opportunity, cost effective investment and institutional accountability. Judy (1997) argues that financial aid policy is a complex issue that needs to be examined in more detail.

In 1944, financial aid started out very focused as a specific program to meet a specific, limited need. Returning World War II veterans were to be rewarded for their sacrifice and dedication to the country with a free college education. Policy was simple and direct. Growth and changes, however, in the student financial system during the last forty-seven years have turned it into one of the biggest, most complex businesses in the United States. Although the purpose of financial aid has remained focused on removing economic barriers to attend and to persist in college, there is still a growing population of minorities and low income citizens who do not have access to post-secondary educational opportunities because of financial barriers.

**Merit-Based Financial Aid / State Merit Programs**

Heller (2002) argues that access to higher education is a federal responsibility. Bergquest (1995), however, argues that public higher education is a state responsibility, and that every state in the United States has established some form of public higher education system. Such systems may be hierarchical in nature and composed of several universities, such as in the state of Louisiana. In virtually every state, however, public systems of higher education are the chief vehicles by which most students leaving secondary schools continue their post-secondary educational aspirations (Bergquest, 1995). Since there is not any state that makes higher
education compulsory and because many public colleges and universities have “selective” admissions, the right of students to obtain access to higher education differs markedly from the right to obtain an elementary or secondary education within a state. Nevertheless, a state-established system of higher education is the focal point for many students seeking access to post-secondary education as a way to enhance their future life options.

In 1972, as a part of the Title IV Student Aid Programs, State Student Incentive Grant programs were established to foster access and choice for college in individual states regardless of income levels (Hauptman, 1990; McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). These state level grants became an integral part of college financing between 1980-2000 (Heller, 2002). It was during this period, however, that the use of financial need, as a determining factor for awarding grants and scholarships, began to erode and shift to a more merit-based system (Heller, 2002). Between the years of 1991 and 2001, spending by states on need-based scholarships for undergraduates increased 7.7 percent annually, while spending on merit programs increased at an 18.3 percent annual rate (National Association of State Scholarship and Grant programs, 2000, 2001 & 2002).

Currently in the zenith of their popularity, state-funded scholarship programs based solely on academic merit have been in existence for over fifteen years. With the passage of legislation in 1989 to create its Tuition Assistance Plan, Louisiana was at the forefront in offering need/merit-based grants to students from households with incomes of less than $25,000 a year (Shuler, 2000). Although Louisiana was one of the first states to initiate such a program, credit is often given to the state of Georgia for the creation of its Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) scholarship program which was created in 1993 (Heller, 2002). The Georgia HOPE scholarship program is now one of the largest state-run merit scholarship programs in the country, awarding approximately $300 million in 2000-01 (Cornwell, Mustard
The success and popularity of the Georgia HOPE program served as the impetus for many other states to invest in state-funded merit programs. Thus, in 2002, twelve other states had implemented broad-based merit scholarship programs that do not use financial need as a determining eligibility factor. Appendix A summarizes these programs.

**Louisiana’s State Merit Program (TOPS)**

Policy makers of Louisiana introduced a program which made post-secondary education more accessible in their state. Additionally, the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) opened many doors for minorities in the state (Shuler, 1997). This program is a comprehensive matrix of state scholarships administered by the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance. TOPS has four components: the Opportunity, Performance, Honor Awards and Teacher Award (McDonald, 1996) (See Appendix B).

TOPS provides tuition assistance and in some cases, cash stipends, through the Opportunity, Performance, and Honor Awards to qualifying students. The Teacher Award provides loans in amounts of $4,000 to $6,000 per year; these loans are forgiven if certain teaching requirements are met (McDonald, 1996). Each component of TOPS has specific ACT score and high school grade point average requirements. All components require 16.5 core units of high school work.

**Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program**

The Georgia Council for School Performance proclaims the Georgia Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) Scholarship Program as one of the most outstanding state merit award programs in the nation (Bugler & Henry, 1997). This program has assisted over 500,000 students in Georgia since its inception in 1993. HOPE is funded by the Georgia lottery and has become the model state merit award program for the following states: Alabama, Idaho, Louisiana, Maryland, Nevada, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia (Selingo, 1999). The effects of the $160 million dollar HOPE program on Georgia colleges have been
significant and are of national importance. President Clinton lauded the new program and appropriated its name for a federal tuition tax credit under his administration (Healy, 1997).

After two years in existence, the Georgia Council for School Performance began to conduct a series of longitudinal studies and extensive evaluations to determine the effects of HOPE on academic performance, college enrollment and college attendance. In the initial findings of Gordon, Hutcheson, Harkreader, and Henry (1997) the following information was revealed:

1) The number of high school graduates eligible for HOPE has grown rapidly, increasing from 46.8% in 1993 to 59.5% in 1998.

2) Average SAT scores and high school GPA have risen for college-bound seniors in Georgia since the program began.

3) There is no evidence that grade inflation has appeared or accelerated since HOPE began, as measured by the relationship between SAT scores and high school GPA.

4) Since HOPE started, more students enrolling in institutions in the University System of Georgia (USG) have college prep diplomas and fewer need remedial work.

5) Since HOPE began, minority students have not been crowded out of Georgia’s most competitive public research universities, including the University of Georgia and Georgia Tech. The proportion of minority students has increased slightly.

6) Fewer than 25% of HOPE scholars retain their scholarship through four years of college, but the percentage of students who lose HOPE has declined each year.

7) After two years of college, African-American students are the most likely to lose HOPE and are also the most likely to drop out of college if they lose their scholarships.

This state agency has conducted subsequent studies after each year of existence which has provided for an excellent evaluative tool for state legislators and public officials when determining whether or not the program warrants continued funding.

Dee and Jackson (1999) conducted a study of the Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program which focused primarily on the characteristics that directly contribute to the attrition rates of the students who had received the HOPE awards. The results showed that there are no significant
differences between African-American, Caucasian and Hispanic students with regards to their ability to persist in college. These results apply to a cohort of students who attend Georgia Tech. The researchers also suggest that students who major in disciplines such as engineering, computer science, or any of the natural and biological science areas are 21% to 57% more likely to lose the HOPE Scholarship than students in other academic disciplines (because there are fewer opportunities to earn the grades required to retain the Hope Scholarship).

**Florida Bright Futures**

The Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program was created to establish a lottery-funded scholarship program to reward any Florida high school graduate who merits recognition of high academic achievement and who enrolls in an eligible Florida public or private post-secondary education institution within three years of graduation from high school (Florida Department of Education [FDE], 2001). The Bright Futures Scholarship Program consists of three types of awards: the Florida Academic Scholarship, the Florida Merit Scholarship, and the Florida Vocational Gold Seal Scholarship (FDE, 2001).

The Florida Department of Education administers the Bright Futures Scholarship Program according to rules and procedures established by the Commissioner of Education. A single application is sufficient for a student to apply for any of the three types of awards. The department must advertise the availability of the scholarship program and must notify students, teachers, parents, guidance counselors, and principals or other relevant school administrators of the criteria and application procedures. The department must begin this process of notification no later than January 1 of each year (Florida Department of Education, 2001a).

The Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS), Georgia HOPE Scholarship Program and Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program are three amongst twelve broad-based merit scholarship programs in the United States. (Appendix A summarizes these programs) In aggregate, these twelve states awarded $863 million in merit awards during the 2000-
01 academic year (Heller & Marin, 2002). Despite this increase in merit aid, there is still a lingering problem with access to higher education that needs to be addressed.

**Access to Higher Education**

Access to higher education has been a key to personal prosperity and success (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1995). Changes in the American society and in the global economy now make higher education key to national prosperity and success (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). According to Pelavin and Kane (1990), if America is to remain competitive with other nations, it must implement strategies that augment its human and intellectual capital by expanding educational opportunity for all Americans. Heller and Marin (2002) argue that by strengthening their educational systems (secondary and post secondary), other industrialized countries have increased their skilled workforces. Like Pelavin and Kane (1990), Heller and Marin (2002) posit that if America is to retain its status as a global leader, it must also place an emphasis on education and workforce development. Americans must outperform citizens of other nations in the scope and quality of their higher education opportunities. Americans must also recognize the importance of broad and equitable access to public higher education if we are to heal the growing fractures within the American society and subdue their increasing divisiveness along economic and racial lines (Heller & Marin, 2002).

According to Becker (1993), college attendance has increasingly been part of the “good” life in America for the past fifty years. College enrollments, which were a mere one million at the end of World War II, have soared to more than fifteen million at the dawn of the 21st century (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). Despite all its flaws and limitations, the openness of the American higher educational system is a triumph of the democratic tenet that talent and effort outweigh birth and class status. This triumph must be reconfirmed. The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reveals that there are compelling new reasons why
access – the availability of affordable, quality higher education for all capable students – is more important than ever right now.

**Higher Education in America - The Last Thirty Years**

The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance reveals that over the past fifty years American higher education has experienced its greatest numerical gains in history. But those numbers encompass even broader social changes between 1974 and 1994. For example, Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, and Mazzeo (1999) report that women have increased their college-attendance rate from 26.7 percent to 43.1 percent. Additionally, African Americans who were legally barred from many public colleges until 1954 not only overcame legal obstacles but increased their high school completion rate from 67 percent to 73.7 percent and their college enrollment rate from 27.1 percent to 35.5 percent. Although African American students are still lagging behind white students in verbal and mathematical SAT scores, Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, and Mazzeo (1999) confirm that they have closed the gap significantly in the past twenty years. Hispanic enrollments in higher education also rose by more than 100 percent between 1974 and 1994 due mainly to a dramatic population growth, even though the percentage of Hispanic students completing high school and participating in college showed little progress over the twenty year period.

Donahue, Voekl, Campbell and Mazzeo (1999) also report that Asian Americans show more than a 100 percent increase in their college-attendance rate during the years of 1984 to 1994, while Native Americans and nonresident aliens also registered significant enrollment increases. Enrollments by students over 25 years of age skyrocketed between 1980 and 1990 and enrollment by persons over 25 grew by 34 percent. It has not been until the last ten years that low-income students have been increasingly able to enroll in college.
The rise in college attendance by minority, nontraditional, women, and part-time students reflects expanding opportunities for the less affluent. Historically, college affordability for these students was fueled by Pell grants and other federal and state need-based grants and scholarship programs (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

The positive statistics of minority achievement mask persistent inequalities in educational opportunity based on income and ethnicity. The college-attendance rate among families in lower income groups rose only by 8% between 1979 and 1994 (Heller, 1999). African American, Hispanic, and Native American students still trail Caucasian students on all educational participation and completion indicators (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). They are less likely to complete high school, less likely to enroll in college, more likely to attend a two-year than a four-year institution, and far less likely to complete a baccalaureate degree or enroll in graduate or professional programs. At every point along this continuum these minorities and low-income students are under-represented in proportion to their current presence in the American population (Heller, 1999a). If minorities do not at least maintain the present rate of progress, these gaps will not close – leading to even greater socio-economic stratification within American society in the very period in which the country’s “minority” populations are approaching “majority” status (Heller, 1999a).

For these gaps to be closed, the enrollment capacity of America’s public colleges and universities will need to grow. Preparations to accommodate the impending growth of the country must be in place to successfully meet the increased need for higher education. Some of the Western states, for example, are projecting increases in the numbers of high school graduates ranging from +6 to + 126 percent as early as 2009. These demographic increases will require expanded access capabilities for American colleges and affordable tuition combined with adequate financial aid for what will probably be a growing low-income population (Advisory
Adequate educational opportunity and equity will also mean improvement and equalization of elementary and secondary schooling and outreach to the high schools, in particular, to improve the completion rate. Colleges will need to develop and strengthen relationships with kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) to create smooth transitions to help ensure that the opportunity for education is open to everyone.

**Barriers to Access**

Literature indicates that far from preparing for these rising enrollments, several public policy trends are threatening existing levels of access. Pelavin and Kane (1999) suggest that rising tuition, a reliance on loans more than grants to finance education, and decreasing levels of budgetary support for state colleges and universities endanger the affordability of campus-based public higher education for all students. At the same time, a negative climate in regard to racially based affirmative action programs raises special hazards for historically underrepresented groups. Such limitations of access will accentuate the gulf between the educational and economic "haves" and "have nots"—further polarizing the American populations across racial and ethnic lines (Kane, 1994). Not only the poor will be affected. The problem of affordability is already affecting middle class students, most particularly middle class adult students seeking the retraining they require to keep apace of a complex global economy.

**Budget Reductions for Public Higher Education**

According to Heller (1999b), budgets for higher education across the states have been uneven for the past decade, but overall support for higher education has unquestionably dropped. State appropriations to higher education decreased sharply through the 1980s and continue to diminish more modestly today, representing a $7.7 billion loss since 1990 alone (Heller, 1999b). While higher tuition has borne the brunt of many of these cuts, the resulting reductions in targeted enrollment levels, course offerings, and support services have had their impact on
access, making college admissions more competitive at some public colleges and universities and making transfer from community colleges more problematic. The time-to-degree rate has become elongated for many students, placing many financially “at risk” or nontraditional students in even greater jeopardy of dropping out (Donahue, Voekl, Cambpell & Mazzeo, 1999).

Another major barrier to access has been the constant increase of tuition at four-year public colleges. Over the past fourteen years, tuition has increased three times as fast as household income and at more than three times the rate of consumer price inflation (Heller, 1999b). According to Heller, college tuition soared 234 percent between the 1990-91 and 1994-95 school years. In order to compensate for diminished state resources, public college tuition has recently been increasing at an average of about six percent per year after several years of double-digit inflation.

Sharp reductions in need-based financial aid and a shift from grants to loans have been occurring at the same time, such that many middle income families are facing income stagnation, and almost 40 million people – disproportionately minority – live below the poverty line (Heller, 1999a). In 1980, Pell grants covered 80 percent of the cost at a public colleges. As Heller reports, by 1995, those grants covered only 34 percent of the cost. Subsidized and unsubsidized loan programs partly took the place of grants. For students from all income groups, repayment of loans – as much as $20,000 for four years at public college or university – can be onerous. For students from the lowest family income groups, taking out a large loan – whatever the hypothetical future benefits – is a major deterrent to enrollment.

The financial aid pie has not only grown smaller; it is also being cut up differently. The literature reveals that many states have reallocated a substantial portion of their need-based scholarship money to merit-based awards, thus lowering the availability of monies for students
with less adequate educational backgrounds (Cornwell, Mustard & Sridhar, 2002). Other technical changes, such as exempting home equity as a financial asset, also tend to help more economically stable students at the expense of more financially fragile ones.

Public higher education has lost its priority status during recent decades as other state needs such as health care and prisons have taken budgetary priority. Concomitant with that change have been increasingly negative attitudes toward opportunity programs generally, and affirmative action programs, in particular. Both the judiciary and the court of public opinion have seemingly turned away from the idea of compensatory or “equalized” opportunity based on race or gender, either denying that race or gender-based injustices exist or claiming that actions designed to level the playing field for women and minorities unfairly tilt against the “traditional” players (Heller, 1999b).

All these changes tend to have a different impact on minority students if only because such students are likely to be financially vulnerable. Population and other demographic shifts have increased the proportion of high-school students who are poor and poorly prepared for college. Lower and middle-income whites, as well as nontraditional students, are also experiencing an attrition in educational opportunity that threatens to grow worse (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001).

**Minority Access to Higher Education**

Considerable progress has been made to address the issue of access to higher education for minority students in the last 35 years (Heller, 2002). A large part of this progress was due, in part, to the initiatives developed as a result of the 1965 Higher Education Act and the 1972 amendments. From the inception of the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (later referred to as the Pell Grant program) to the State Student Incentive Grant program, millions of Americans
have been afforded post-secondary educational opportunities (Heller). This is especially true for low-income and minority students. Other examples of federal and state initiatives include the Upward Bound and Talent Search programs, incremental increases in grant aid, tax credits and over twenty-one state administered programs that are either need or merit based or a combination of both (Heller & Sharpio, 2000).

In an effort to ensure that minority students have the opportunity for full and fair access, some post-secondary institutions have made special efforts to recruit and admit members of disadvantaged minorities (Saulnier, 1999). The justification and purpose of these efforts has many sources. In some colleges, minority recruitment efforts resulted from mandates beginning with the civil rights cases that began in the 1930s and 1940s over the exclusion of blacks from higher education (Hauptman, 1990). These cases reached their fullest consideration in the United States Supreme Court cases Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma and Sweatt v. Painter. In the Sipuel case, the Supreme Court held that a state may not deny a student admission to a public higher education institution solely on the basis of race, and in Sweatt, foretelling Brown v. Board of Education, the court held that a state may not establish an alternative post-secondary institution as an attempt to segregate black students in a public higher education system. Ten years later the justification for undertaking special efforts to increase the representation of minorities in higher education stemmed from the enforcement powers implicit in the Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which provides that any institution (i.e., college or university) which receives or benefits from federal financial assistance must use such monies in a manner that does not discriminate on the basis of race or national origin (Hauptman, 1990). Pursuant to this section, the U.S. Department of Education has promulgated a series of guidelines for determining that grant recipients do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin. These guidelines have generally followed the course set forth in the court
opinions that require colleges and universities to take affirmative steps to end discrimination.

Despite progress in the access dilemma, minority students are still faced with the perception that they do not perform as well as majority students (Perna, 2000). As Perna reports, some literature suggests that such perceptions are directly attributable to variables such as high school quality, educational expectations, parental encouragement, parental involvement, socioeconomic status, and lack of campus involvement. Other literature suggests that the academic success of minority students is no different from that of majority students (Gladieux & Hauptman, 1990). It is clear that the higher attrition rates of African American students are largely attributable to their socioeconomic background and to the peculiar characteristics of higher education institutions. Yet, it has also become clear that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, the attrition rate of African American students, after enrolling in college, is not different from that of whites (Perna, 2000). High attrition rates point directly to the increasing significance of institutional factors that impact African American students after college enrollment. After all, some indicators show increasing numbers of African American high school graduates enrolling in college but at lower rates than in previous years (Berube & Nelson, 1995). Several researchers have identified critical “leakage points” where disproportionate numbers of minority students are lost in the educational pipeline between completing high school and completing college or graduate and professional school (Richardson & Bender, 1987). Those points are (a) between high school and college, (b) between 2-year college and completing 4-year college, (c) between graduating from undergraduate college and entering graduate and professional school, (d) between entering graduate and professional school and graduation, and (e) before obtaining an advanced professional degree. At each of these points, disproportionately larger numbers of minority students drop out. The literature has also revealed specific factors that explain the disproportionately large share of the variance in attrition rates for
Black students. Those factors include (a) the academic preparation of black students for higher education, (b) the availability of family resources and access to institutional financial aid resources, and (c) institutional barriers to access, enrollment, and retention.

Summary

In 1944, financial aid started out very focused as a specific program to meet a specific, limited need. Returning World War II veterans were to be rewarded for their sacrifice and dedication to country with a free college education. Policy was simple and direct. Growth and changes in the student financial aid system during the last forty-four years have turned it into one of the biggest, most complex businesses in the United States. The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the establishment the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants (now called Pell grants) which occurred in the 1972 Amendments, were key federal initiatives that helped to achieve equality of post-secondary educational opportunities in America. As a part of Title IV student aid, the State Student Incentive Grant was developed to encourage state-funded scholarships. This was the beginning of the partial shift of the responsibility of providing post secondary educational opportunities to state governments. Many states responded to this initiative by creating programs that also used financial need as the primary criterion for awarding grants (Heller & Marin, 2002). Although the purpose of financial (federal and state) remained focused on removing economic barriers to attend and to persist in college, the access dilemma for African Americans and low income families continued to increase.

Over the last two decades (1980-81 academic year to 2000-01), spending on Pell and Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants increased from 214% (College Board, 2001), while spending on state-sponsored grants awarded to undergraduates increased 444 % (National Association of State Scholarship and Grant Programs, various years). It was also during this
period that the shift from financial need to academic merit occurred which resulted in a substantial increase in spending on state merit programs (18.3 % annual rate) (National Association of State Scholarship and Grant Programs, 2000, 2001 & 2002). Between 1991 and 2001 several state-run merit scholarship programs emerged. The Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students was implemented in 1997 as a means to positively impact the access dilemma in Louisiana.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Methods

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the purpose of this study is to assess the Louisiana TOPS Program in order to a) determine its primary goals according to key administrators, policy makers and legislators, b) determine the ways in which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana, and c) ascertain students perceptions on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences.

Chapter Three provides an explanation and description of the overall design of the methodology used in the study. Specifically addressed in this chapter are 1) the research design and conceptual framework, 2) the population and sampling procedures, 3) the instrumentation, 4) the data collection procedures employed, and 5) the data analysis process selected. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used to answer the major research questions:

1. What are the goals of the Louisiana TOPS program?
2. In what ways do key administrators, policy makers, and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana?
3. What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients?

Specific objectives formulated to guide the researcher in answering research question # 3 include the following:

1. To describe and compare all survey respondents who are recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic
characteristics:  1) gender, 2) race, 3) age, 4) classification, 5) residency status, 6) parent(s) education level, 7) family income, 8) academic major, 9) grade point average (GPA) and 10) ACT score

2. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college.

3. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.

4. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their awareness of TOPS.

5. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

6. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

7. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.

8. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions.

Research Context

In an effort to present a coherent approach to addressing the access dilemma, I had to first understand and confront my own beliefs and biases. After accomplishing this task, which initially I thought was insurmountable, I was able to clearly identify with several scholars who held similar beliefs and whose research findings supported my position on access. This position, informed by both experience and research, is what I have framed as the basis of this study and
what will hopefully result in sound implications for further study.

Consistent with the findings of Bergquest (1995), Heller (2002), Perna (2000), Cofer (1997), and Donahue et al., (1999), I believe that equal access to higher education is vital to human advancement and that support for higher education reveals a society’s commitment to progress. An investment in higher education is an investment in the future development and prosperity of all citizens, to include those who are limited because of financial barriers.

To further ground my position on the access dilemma, I relied heavily on the myriad works of Donald Heller, who has done extensive research on issues of access to higher education. (2000, 2002). My connection to Heller’s research was specifically linked to his views about the functions of federal and state government and how they should play a leading role in bridging the access gap. Heller was also integrally involved in recent studies by the Harvard Research Group on the impact of state merit programs, like TOPS, on the access dilemma. Subsequently, my reliance on the work of Heller et. al. was part in parcel to my position of support for minority and low income students who struggle the most to obtain equal access to higher education.

As I continued in my studies, there were many obstacles, one of which was embedded in the reality that outside of the work of Heller (2002), Perna (1999) and the Harvard Research Group there existed very little research on state merit programs. There were no theoretical or philosophical models that I could apply to the access dilemma as it related to state merit programs. Moreover, the practical models that were in place (Heller & Marin, 2002) were disputed by a majority of the research community. How could I, then, approach the issue of the access dilemma and state merit programs without infringing upon the work of the many researchers whose findings I had relied so heavily upon? This was the question that lingered in
my mind throughout my research experience.

It was not until after I designed my research instrument and pilot tested it in two experimental settings that I realized what approach I needed to take to further validate my thinking in this area. What had become apparent to me was that my approach was “target population” centered and lacked focus on the overarching population, which was the citizenry of the state of Louisiana. The TOPS program became a reality because of a public policy that was created and designed by Louisiana legislators, interpreted by policy makers and administrators, and made available to the citizens of Louisiana. Therefore, the far-reaching impact of this program was not just for minority and low-income students. Rather, it was for all citizens of the state of Louisiana who met the minimum criteria established for the awards. With this in mind, it became very easy and realistic for me to incorporate the research of Rossi (1993) who had spent a considerable amount of his career assessing new state (public) programs that were a result of public policy.

This study was designed to assess the effectiveness of the TOPS program on the social and academic experiences of its recipients. By adopting the “planned vs. actual” approach as presented by Rossi, I was able to maintain my research focus which was centered on the effectiveness of the TOPS program and how effective it had been at achieving its perceived goals. The “planned vs. actual” design compares the actual performance of programs that are a result of public policy, for a given time period with the planned performance/outcomes (Rossi, 1995). This approach is based on literature supporting the effective evaluation of public policy programs and the benefits that they have on society as a whole.

As scholar-researcher-practitioner, I value the opportunities that are made available by state merit programs. I see this conceptual design and its associated outcomes as a way of
linking state merit programs in a common mission while simultaneously advocating for the needs of minority and low income students. Thus, this conceptual design is meant to be a living design that is subjected to critical assessment, refinement, and adaptation. It is my hope to engage in continuous dialogue with all members of the professional education community within and outside the LSU and the state, so that the conceptual design becomes a catalyst for ongoing debate, reflection, and action.

**Mixed Methods Design**

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) assert that the mixing of qualitative and quantitative methods often results in the most accurate and complete assessment of the phenomenon under investigation. They identify six major methods of data collection as being key in collecting empirical research data – questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, tests, observation, and secondary data. For the purposes of this study, I am using two of the identified methods – interviews, and questionnaires. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie, when conducting mixed methods research, it is important that the researcher be mindful of the fundamental principle of mixed methods research, which states that methods should be mixed in a way that has complimentary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses. Their research shows that all methods have strengths and weaknesses. This fundamental principle can be applied to all methods of research. Tashakkori and Teddlie further posit that the fundamental principle should be followed for at least three reasons: (a) to obtain convergence or corroboration of findings, (b) to eliminate or minimize key plausible alternative explanations for conclusions drawn from the research data, and (c) to elucidate the divergent aspects of a phenomenon.

As previously mentioned, in order to understand the definitional constructs and contexts of the TOPS program, qualitative and quantitative measures will be employed in this program
evaluation. While it is important to emphasize the use of a mixed methods design to better understand this program, it is equally important to recognize that this research is a form of public program evaluation.

**Program Assessment Design**

Rossi (1995) discusses several program assessment designs that are used to ascertain programmatic outcome based on individual program objectives. Consistent with the views of many policy makers (Chelimsky, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1981), Rossi posits that these questions are answered best with a sample questionnaire design. For the purposes of this study, I adopted Rossi’s “planned vs. actual” design which compares actual program performance for a given time period with planned performance/outcomes. Rossi assumes that this design can be used for virtually all ongoing programs that have not been consciously changed during the evaluation period. While the TOPS program has been subjected to numerous changes, none of the modifications have had a significant impact on the fundamental objectives or processes of the program. The “planned vs. actual” design has the advantage of providing a natural lead-in to program analysis, since areas of differential performance are identified by the assessment. The procedural steps for applying this design include the following: identify the objectives of the program, collect data on sample/participants for the evaluation period, compare the actual data with the goals/objectives of the program, and estimate the effects of, or at least identify, any non-program factors that might have an impact on evaluation criteria.

Based on the literature review, decision makers want to know the effectiveness of the TOPS program. The questions this type of assessment asks, then, are centered around the effectiveness of the program and how it has impacted those it is intended to serve. This penury for information can be contrasted with the desire to know how the program can be improved.
which ultimately speaks to the urgency to design an evaluative instrument that addresses the needs of this specific research design.

There were several compelling reasons for using the planned vs. actual design for one of the first studies of TOPS: (1) to get a general assessment of program effectiveness and efficiency, (2) to establish explicit performance targets for future time periods, and (3) to identify some specific program areas that need improvement.

The research was structured such that the qualitative approach would be used to understand the general phenomenon and, from that understanding, more quantitative, structured, and precise measures of the impact of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of students were derived. These quantitative measures served to guide this research to areas where additional in-depth conceptual understanding is needed using a more qualitative approach.

**Qualitative Research Methods**

Qualitative research methods have become an increasingly popular method of inquiry for the social sciences and applied fields such as education (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although many of the methods used in quantitative research are borrowed from experimental sciences, the social sciences utilize an extensive array of appropriate alternative research methods. Some researchers have questioned the validity of qualitative research methods while others have argued that this type of research as superior to quantitative (Schartz & Walker, 1995). Creswell (1994) however, argues that qualitative research is deeply rooted in the area of research methodology and because of such a grounded history of serving as an instrument to gain a better understanding of the complexities of human interactions, this form of research has slowly taken its rightful place amongst research methods. Qualitative methods will be used in this study, in part, to supplement, validate, explain, illuminate and reinterpret the quantitative data that will be
retrieved from the TOPS program recipients (Bogdon & Biklen, 1992).

**Elite Interviewing**

The qualitative design for this study was in the form of elite interviewing which is an interview with any participant/person/individual who is given special, non-standardized treatment (Dexter, 1970). According to Dexter, elite interviewing is the best approach to use when interacting with individuals who view themselves as the experts on the topic/issue being researched. Elite interviews differ from other types of interviews in that the focus is not on a given situation or environment but on the interviewee who possesses certain specialized knowledge that may not be shared by the interviewer. The interviewer does not restrict the interview. Instead, the interviewer stresses the interviewees’ definition of the situation, encourages the interviewee to structure the event, and lets the interviewee introduce what is considered relevant. As Dexter suggests, because of the nature of the interview, the interviewer should research the background information necessary to understand the interviewee’s assumptions, accommodate changes in circumstances, and refrain from asking questions to which the interviewer should know the answers.

In this study, I interviewed prominent state legislators and other key administrative officials who have played a role in administering the TOPS program. Because I interacted with individuals of such prominent status, I utilized an elite interviewing research design. Marshall and Marshall (1995) support Dexter in their interpretation of elite interviewing as a unique form of extracting information from certain individuals because of their prominence and influential status. These individuals are usually well-informed people in an organization or community and are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research. Through the interviewing process, the interviewer is usually able to extract basic information
about areas in which little research has been done. These types of studies could form a baseline and could be used as benchmarks by later researchers to explore other hypothesis or conceptual frameworks. Marshall and Rossman discussed “elite interviewing” as a method that “incorporates creativity first in perceiving important aspects of a situation missed by others, and second in organizing and presenting that perception” (p. 294).

In this study, the interviewees provided an in-depth look at the overall success of the TOPS scholarship program. They provided many different perspectives and possible solutions to some of the identified problems with the program. One of the strengths of this study was its reliance on the voices of the professionals to suggest those solutions.

**Qualitative Sample**

For the purposes of this research, purposive sampling format was chosen. This type of sampling is also called “deliberate,” or “selective” because the researcher uses judgement in selecting individuals who will be instrumental in gathering data (Patton, 1990). Patton uses the term “purposeful,” and offers the rationalization that by selecting cases for study in depth, “the logic and power” is revealed. One can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study, thus the term “purposeful sampling.”

Potential participants for the interviews were selected based on recommendations from the staff at the Louisiana Board of Regents and the Louisiana Office of Student Office of Financial Assistance. Once identified, the potential interviewees were personally contacted. The interviewees participated in an in-depth interview that focused on their knowledge and experiences with the TOPS program. I conducted thirteen interviews with the following individuals: Rep. Charles McDonald (the State Representative who authored the TOPS program); Dr. Joseph Savioe, Commissioner, Louisiana Board of Regents; Dr. Jimmy Clark,
Deputy Commissioner, Louisiana Board of Regents; Thressa Hay, Associate Deputy Commissioner, Louisiana Board of Regents; Senator Gerald Theuinnisen, Chair, Senate Education Committee; Jack Guinn, Executive Director of the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance; Melanie Amrhein, Deputy Executive Director of the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance; Dr. Mark Emmert, Chancellor of Louisiana State University; Dr. James Wharton, Chancellor Emeritus, Louisiana State University; Pat Taylor, Founder of the Taylor Plan (impetus for TOPS); Michael Wang, Governor Foster’s Education Policy Advisor; Andy Koplin, Chief of Staff, Governors’ Office; and Dr. Walter Bumphus, President, Louisiana Community and Technical College System.

The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain data pertinent to research questions one and two which were centered around the goals of TOPS and the impact it has had on the status of higher education in Louisiana.

**Quantitative Research Methods**

Quantitative research involves the collection and analysis of data in numerical form. A researcher typically conducts a quantitative research project in order to test the existence of relationships between variables of interest (based on hypotheses derived from theory), or to make inferences about the quantity of specific attributes in a population based on measurements derived from a sample (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

In contrast to qualitative researchers, quantitative researchers are more likely to assume that there is a single reality that can be determined (within a range of probability) using appropriate, objective research methods (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). Accordingly, research instructions, interventions and measures are standardized to minimize or control for possible sources of error or bias. Research designs and methods are chosen to enable quantitative
comparisons (e.g., across distinct groups, settings, and/or time periods). Data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to permit the researcher to describe the magnitude and/or direction of observed values, trends and relationships, and the probability that they could have occurred by chance.

According to Rossi (1995) the criteria for evaluating the quality of quantitative research include: construct validity – is there evidence that the study succeeded in measuring the attributes or variables the researcher intended to measure?; reliability – is there evidence that the data collection instruments used provided accurate, consistent measures of the attributes or variables the researcher intended to measure?; internal validity – did the research design adequately control for extraneous variables and eliminate plausible rival explanations for the research findings?; and, external validity – did the research employ a sampling strategy that permits the generalization of the results beyond the specific research participants, research setting and time period, and if so, to which target population(s) in which settings?

**Questionnaires**

According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), questionnaires are one of the major methods of collecting data. When combined with interviews as a form of inter-method mixing, questionnaires are useful at virtually any point in a research program, but are particularly useful for exploratory research where little is known about the phenomenon of interest. In this particular instance, there is very little known about state merit programs and, more specifically, TOPS. As Tashakkori and Teddlie explain, questionnaires can be used very early in a research project and are often followed by other types of research such as more qualitative in-depth interviews. Questionnaires have also been proven useful following qualitative interviews and are often constructed as a result of data received from interviewing (Tashakkori and Teddlie,
Tashakkori and Teddlie provide detailed descriptions of the types of questionnaires that are most frequently used. A “type 1” data collection questionnaire is an unstructured, exploratory, open-ended and in-depth questionnaire. It consists of a series of open-ended questions to be answered by all or a subset of the participants in a research study. A “type 2” data collection questionnaire is a self-report instrument filled out by the respondents, and it includes a mixture of open- and closed-ended items. A “type 3” data collection questionnaire is based on a completely structured and closed-ended questionnaire. All participants fill out the same questionnaire, and all of the questions or items provide the possible responses from which the participants must select. The response categories often take the form of rating scales, rankings, semantic differentials, and checklists. A “type 2” data collection questionnaire was used for the purposes of this research.

**Questionnaire Design**

Questionnaires are used because they provide useful specific information about the area being researched (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). For the purposes of this study, questionnaires were used to gather data from participants in the TOPS program. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie there are thirteen principles of questionnaire construction: make sure that the questionnaire items match your research objectives; understand your research participants; use natural and familiar language; write items that are simple, clear and precise; do not use “leading” or “loaded” questions; avoid double-barreled questions; avoid double negatives; determine whether an open-ended or a closed-ended question is needed; use mutually exclusive and exhaustive response categories for closed-ended questions; consider the different types of response categories available for closed-ended questionnaire items; use multiple items to measure abstract constructs; develop a questionnaire that is easy for the participants to use; and,
always pilot-test your questionnaire. These methods were implemented to design the instrument for this study.

Due to the lack of research in this area, no instrument could be located which would meet the specific requirements of this study. It was, therefore, necessary to construct a survey instrument which would be adequate to elicit the required information. The development of the TOPS Effectiveness Questionnaire was initiated with an extensive review of the programmatic outcomes of the Georgia Hope Scholarship Program, Michigan Merit Award Scholarship Program, and the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program. Similar to TOPS, most of these programs have been implemented in recent years and, subsequently, little research has been conducted to determine whether these merit programs actually do meet the goals that have been established for them.

This study examined college students’ perceptions as they related to the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences. The specific objectives formulated to use as a guide in answering the research questions include the following:

1. To describe and compare all survey respondents who are recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic characteristics: 1) gender 2) race 3) age 4) classification 5) residency status 6) parent(s) education level 7) family income 8) academic major 9) grade point average (GPA) 10) ACT score

2. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college.

3. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.
4. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their awareness of TOPS.

5. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

6. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

7. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.

8. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions.

**Instrumentation**

A researcher-developed instrument, TOPS Effectiveness Questionnaire, consisted of four sections (see Appendix N): (1) Demographic Data. The first section of the questionnaire collected independent variable data through nine questions about student characteristics. Student characteristics examined included: gender, race, age, classification, residency status, parent(s) education level, family income, academic major, grade point average (GPA), and ACT score. These independent variables were identified as key factors in determining the impact of TOPS on certain categories of recipients. (2) Pre-thought. The second section of the questionnaire collected qualitative data about how TOPS influenced the students educational experiences before and during college. This section was positioned before the Likert-type scale questions and was designed to collect the participants’ thoughts before being exposed to the designed questions, which may have an impact on their responses. This section also contained one question that would allow the participants to provide their opinions on how the TOPS program
could be improved based on their experiences. This question was also key in providing recommendations for possible topics for future research. (3) Pre-Collegiate Educational Experiences. The third section of the questionnaire collected data about the students’ educational experiences before college. These questions covered different aspects of the pre-collegiate experience. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure students’ responses to the accuracy of the five statements that cover this area. Ratings ranged from Very Familiar to Unfamiliar. (4) Academic and Social Educational Experiences. The fourth and final section of the questionnaire collected data about students’ perceptions of the influence of the TOPS program on their academic and social educational experiences. These questions covered different aspects of the academic and social collegiate experience for most college students. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure students’ responses. Ratings ranged from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”

In addition to the review by the doctoral committee of the researcher, the initial draft of the questionnaire was reviewed and evaluated for content validity by a panel of faculty and administrative experts who are very familiar with the TOPS program and the use of survey questionnaires. “Expert” panel members were defined as those individuals who were knowledgeable about financial aid, state merit programs, diversity issues in higher education, students perceptions, and the student population being assessed. The panel selected for this process was approved by the doctoral committee. I also submitted the instrument to two outside professionals who have extensive backgrounds in evaluating state merit programs. (See Appendix C for a listing of the expert panel members and the outside professionals).
Target Population

In the years 2000 - 2003, over 34% of all TOPS recipients in the state of Louisiana enrolled at Louisiana State University (Budget and Planning, 1999 - 2003). When this percentage was compared to the other four year institutions in the state, and more specifically to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) and Louisiana Tech University (LA Tech) (the 2nd and 3rd largest four year institutions in the state), LSU was clearly identified as having the student population with the largest percentage of TOPS recipients (Table 3-B). Although I considered all four year institutions in the state of Louisiana as possible research sites, LSU was chosen because of its ranking in the number of TOPS recipients enrolled at the institution. More specifically, the overall target population was identified as the 12,790 who are TOPS recipients and enrolled for the Fall 2003 academic semester (LSUOBP, 2003).

Louisiana State University has an enrollment of approximately 30,000 students. Undergraduates account for eighty-five percent of the total student population. The average size of the freshman class over the past four years has been 4986 students. Approximately 63.51% of those students are recipients of the TOPS scholarship (see Table 3-A). The average age of the overall LSU population is 20.5 years and the average age of entering freshmen is 18.4 years. The proportion of African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students has been steadily increasing over the past ten years, and now account for almost one-third of the total enrollment of the university. African American students account for approximately nine percent of the student population (LSUOBP, 2003).
Table 3.1: Louisiana State University Freshman Class Enrollment and TOPS Data 2000-2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of TOPS Recipients</th>
<th>Size of Freshman Class</th>
<th>% of Class on TOPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2421</td>
<td>5010</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2724</td>
<td>5039</td>
<td>54.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3257</td>
<td>4809</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4080</td>
<td>5089</td>
<td>80.17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: TOPS Awards by Selected Institutions 2000-2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of TOPS Awarded</th>
<th># attending LSU</th>
<th>% at LSU</th>
<th># attending ULL</th>
<th>% at ULL</th>
<th># attending LA TECH</th>
<th>% at LA TECH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>29,046</td>
<td>10,017</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>2641</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>2361</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>35,559</td>
<td>12,240</td>
<td>34.42</td>
<td>3327</td>
<td>9.35</td>
<td>2945</td>
<td>8.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>40,463</td>
<td>13,926</td>
<td>34.41</td>
<td>3896</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>3331</td>
<td>8.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>39,773</td>
<td>13,530</td>
<td>34.02</td>
<td>3878</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>3434</td>
<td>8.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative Research Sample

A cluster sample of students was drawn from students enrolled in courses that were identified by the LSU Office of Budget and Planning as having an enrollment of TOPS recipients that was greater than 75% during the 2003 Fall Semester. A listing of all courses with an enrollment of 75% or more of TOPS recipients was requested in conjunction with the initial request for a list of all TOPS recipients (See Appendix D). Class sizes ranged from one to 454 and the estimated average class size was thirty. These numbers were approximate because when
the list of classes was produced, the last day to drop without receiving a grade of “W” had not passed.

A 95% confidence level was selected to help ensure that significant research findings would be true results and not sampling errors. A sample of 300 or more TOPS recipients was needed to ensure the 95% confidence level (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). The 12,790 students who were currently on TOPS in 2003 comprised approximately 42.6 % of the entire student body; therefore, 500 students were surveyed to increase the probability that the sample would meet or exceed the number of TOPS recipients needed. Demographic and educational experience data was collected from all 500 students in the sample.

Because of the large population size, and the limitations presented through the process of acquiring access to the data, cluster sampling was used to distribute the sample more evenly over the available population to ensure more accurate results (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). A random number between one and six was generated using SPSS. Students enrolled in the course that corresponded to the random number selected were included in the sample until the desired sample size of 500 was reached. The random selection process resulted in thirty-two classes that contained a 75% or greater student enrollment that were TOPS recipients. Although thirty-two classes were identified, access was only granted to the fifteen courses identified in Table 3.3.
Table 3.3: Classes Selected to Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th># Enrolled</th>
<th># on TOPS</th>
<th>% on TOPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology 1201</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology 1201</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology 1201</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1201</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1201</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1201</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1421</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1420</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors 1003</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors 1003</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math 1023</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music 1751</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music 1751</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology 2000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology 2001</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table 3.3, there was a heavy concentration of science courses that were selected for the survey. While not representative of LSU’s student population, this selection was not coincidental as over 70% of the courses provided by the Office of Budget and Planning were in the science field. The random selection of these classes was chosen to decrease the threat to internal validity as a result of the selection process by providing a homogenous population of students. Therefore, the students involved in the study (the accessible population) were all attending the selected classes on the day that the questionnaire was administered. This type of
sample was used because of convenience, given the accessibility to student enrollment at LSU. Because the questionnaire was only administered once to each class, there was a decreased chance of biases being introduced into the study as a result of out-of-session discussion between students.

**Pilot Test**

After receiving feedback from the expert panel and the outside professionals, the questionnaire was revised and pilot-tested on two occasions with a representative sample of LSU students not included in the sample population. On the first occasion, the questionnaire was administered by a research assistant to a group of students attending a student organization meeting, twenty-eight of whom were white and fourteen of whom were African-American. On the second occasion, the questionnaire was administered by a research assistant to a group of students attending a program at the African American Cultural Center, forty-eight of whom were white and twenty-one were African American. These students were asked to read the cover letter and fill out the questionnaire, and were then debriefed by the research assistant to assess their overall reaction to the survey. The time that it took the students to complete the questionnaire was recorded by the research assistant, and the following questions were asked of the participants in a open forum: a) What difficulties did you have in completing the questionnaire? b) Were the verbal instructions for completing the questionnaire adequate and easy to understand? c) Were the written directions adequate and easy to understand? d) Did you have any difficulties with any particular section of the questionnaire? e) Did you have any difficulties with any particular question on the questionnaire? and f) Do you have any recommendations on how the questionnaire can be improved?
Generally, the students who participated in the pilot test of the questionnaire were able to answer the questions on the instrument without significant difficulty. The instrument required between eight and ten minutes for the students to complete, and no substantive problems were encountered. Only a few modifications were necessary to make the survey process and the instrument more readable and easier to understand. For example, neither the verbal nor written instructions specified what type of writing instrument to use and many of the non-TOPS recipients were not clear on if they should complete the demographic section of the questionnaire. The verbal instructions were adjusted accordingly to address both concerns. The debriefing and pilot tests also enabled me to ascertain the face validity of the questionnaire items. Based on feedback from the expert panel and the pilot-testing procedures, the content and face validity of the items listed in the questionnaire were high. After all modifications were completed, the final instrument was developed and administered to the study’s target population.

**Reliability**

The reliability of the sub-scales were estimated using the Cronbach’s Alpha internal consistency coefficient. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) contend that the degree of reliability needed in a measure depends to a great extent on the use that is to be made of the results. The authors posit that when decisions are not being made about individuals, that “a lower reliability coefficient measure (.30 - .50) may be acceptable” (p. 212). The reliability coefficients were determined for each of the six sub-scales as listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-scale Category (Factors)</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Knowledge about TOPS</td>
<td>.656</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
The students in the selected classes were asked to respond to each of the twenty-seven Likert-type items based on their own personal experiences. Both of the two sub-sections (3 & 4) measured responses related to the specific category (familiarity or influence).

The third sub-section of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items that were centered around perception. This section contained items that are designed to answer questions related to the perceptions of students familiarity with the TOPS program. The fourth sub-section was centered around influence of the TOPS program on educational experiences. Both of the sub-sections addressed research question 3 (What are the perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences?). Part of the effectiveness of the TOPS program is centered around the efforts of the administering agency to ensure Louisiana’s high school students are aware of the program. If this is not the case, then possible recommendations can be made on how to improve in that area.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Two primary sources of data were merged to form the basis for this study: questionnaires and elite interviews with selected experts. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher. Students identified as a part of the sample were asked to voluntarily participate in the survey. Completing and returning the survey and the consent form gave permission for student responses to be used for this study. This process provided total anonymity for participants. Surveys were coded with a student identification number and class number for
record keeping purposes. Each question response was numerically coded and entered into a data file for analysis with SPSS.

**Quantitative Data Collection Timeline**

The following procedures were used in collecting quantitative data:

1. On November 1, 2003, e-mail information packets from the researcher to selected LSU faculty were sent explaining the purpose of the project and asking for permission to administer the survey to students in the sample classes. Other material included in the mailing were a copy of the approved Institutional Review Board Application, a copy of the informational sheet and the consent form to be given to the students prior to administering the questionnaire, and a copy of the questionnaire. The letter emphasized that the students’ privacy would be protected and that all responses would be kept completely confidential with the data results being presented in aggregate form only. Respondents were given the opportunity to request a copy of the survey results by writing their address on the back of the consent form.

2. On November 7, 2003, the first round of follow-up calls were made to those faculty members who had not responded reemphasizing the importance of the study and encouraging them to allow their classes to participate. Those faculty members that could not be reached by phone (a minimum of two phone calls with no response) were sent an additional e-mail request for an administration date for the research survey.

3. On November 10, 2003, the follow-up calls were made by the researcher to all faculty who agreed to participate to confirm the date, time and location of the
survey administration.

4. During the weeks of November 12, 2003, through November 25, 2003, the data was collected.

5. Once the questionnaire had been administered and data collected, the researcher submitted all data scantrons to the LSU Office of Evaluation and Testing for scanning. The data was scanned, and a data diskette was provided for further analysis. The information was coded, and the data was entered into the computer and analyzed by the statistical package SPSS8.5 for Windows Millennium Edition.

6. Summaries of the results were prepared and are presented in various tables throughout this research document.

Qualitative Data Collection Time Line

The following procedures were used in collecting qualitative data:

1. On November 10, 2003, a letter from the researcher to selected legislators, policy makers, and higher education administrators was e-mailed (or mailed) explaining the purpose of the project and soliciting their support and participation. Other material in this mailing included a copy of the approved Institutional Review Board Application, and a copy of the pre-interview data sheet and consent form to be given to the participants. The letter emphasized that the participants’ privacy would be protected and that all responses would be associated with an alias unless permission was granted to use their name in conjunction with their responses. Participants were also given the opportunity to request a copy of the transcript by attaching a copy of their business card to the pre-interview form.
2. On November 14, 2003, a reminder e-mail (or letter) was sent to those selected individuals who had not responded reemphasizing the importance of the study and encouraging them to participate.

3. On November 18, 2003, telephone calls were made by the researcher to all individuals who agree to participate to confirm the date, time and location of the survey administration.

4. During the weeks of November 17, 2003 through December 5, 2003, the interviews were conducted.

5. Once the interviews had been conducted, the data was transcribed.

6. The transcripts were analyzed and coded to identify emerging themes.

7. During the week of December 15, 2003, follow-up letters were sent to all participants thanking them for their time and support of this research project.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis Procedures - Descriptive Statistics

The sample for the questionnaire was comprised of freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors who were TOPS recipients and also full-time students at Louisiana State University. Quantitative data were analyzed to identify the factors that had the most influence on students’ educational experiences. The first objective was to construct demographic profiles for all questionnaire respondents. Frequencies and percentages were compiled and reported for the total sample and for the TOPS recipient subgroup for each questionnaire item (freshman, etc.) based on questionnaire responses. Target and sample descriptive statistics, including sample size (N counts) and missing data, were examined and reported. Frequency count data for all independent and dependent variables was also examined. Means, standard deviations, ranges
and modes on all variables, where applicable, were also examined and reported. The crosstab function was also performed and reported, which allowed for a look at more than one independent or dependent variable at once to see how certain groups of participants responded. Differences in means were also reported.

The responses to the questionnaire items represented a participant’s level of familiarity or agreement with each item. The items, therefore, were rated on an ordinal level of measurement from highest to lowest that were mutually exclusive, but had some logical order and were scaled according to the amount of the particular characteristic they possessed. Although these data are ordinal in nature, they were treated as true interval data. Many researchers perform this conversion procedure in an effort to perform more sophisticated data analysis that need (at minimum) interval level data (Cresswell, 1994).

**Factor Analysis**

After this conversion was performed, a factor analysis was executed to determine whether a set of variables could be reduced to a smaller number of factors. This was also done in an attempt to identify underlying variables that would explain the pattern of correlations within a set of the observed variables. This technique is usually helpful to researchers because it provides a sound, empirical basis for reducing many variables to a few factors. This is done by combining variables that are moderately or highly correlated with each other. Each set of variables that is combined forms a factor which is a mathematical expression of the common element that cuts across the combined variables. From the analysis, there were six factor solutions based on ease of interpret-ability, simple structure, no cross loadings and high loadings for marker items. As a result of this analysis, the items were collapsed into six (6) factors and the six scales became six separate dependent variables that were directly linked to the
objectives of research question three. The six factors were: 1) academic performance 2) prior knowledge 3) cost 4) personal 5) awards criteria, and 6) college attendance. A complete presentation of how each factor and the items that make up each sub-scale is presented in Tables 4.14 - 4.19. Table 3.5 displays each sub-scale and the corresponding objective from research question three. Table 3.6 displays each independent variable, its measure and the number of response levels.

**Table 3.5: How each Dependent Variable Corresponds to Research Question # 3**
(What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-scale Category (Factors) Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Corresponding Objective to Research Question 3</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance</td>
<td>Objective 3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Knowledge about TOPS</td>
<td>Objective 4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Objective 7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Objective 8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award Criteria</td>
<td>Objective 5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Attendance</td>
<td>Objective 6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.6: Definition of Independent Variables and # of Response Levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Response levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>sex of the respondent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race</td>
<td>ethnicity of the respondent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age</td>
<td>age range of the respondent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classification</td>
<td>college level classification</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>residency status</td>
<td>residency of the respondent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

To more specifically address Objectives 2-8 of research question three, which were specifically formulated to assist in ascertaining the perceptions of how TOPS influenced the educational experiences of its recipients, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test for differences between the established groups (sub-scales) and the various effects on the six dependent variables. MANOVA is used to determine the effect of multiple independent variables or a multilevel independent variable on multiple dependent variables simultaneously. Not only does MANOVA provide univariate information on the effect of the independent variable(s) on each dependent variable, but it also demonstrates potential interaction effects. For these reasons MANOVA was the statistical technique of choice. For the purposes of this research, it was extremely important to know which factors were the most important as they served to evaluate the unique components of a state merit scholarship program. MANOVA could also protect against TYPE I errors (rejecting a true null hypothesis) that might have occurred if multiple ANOVA’s were conducted independently. All statistical analysis were performed using the statistical package SPSS 12.0.
Pre-Thought Exercise

Three questions in Section II of the questionnaire were qualitative in nature. The first question invited respondents to comment on the influence TOPS had on their educational experiences before college. The second question asked respondents to comment on how TOPS influenced their educational experiences during college, and the third question asked respondents to comment on what changes/recommendations they would make to improve the TOPS program.

According to Gall, Borg and Gall (1996), qualitative data resulting from open-ended questions of questionnaires and surveys often generate single words, brief phrases, or full paragraphs of text. They recommend coding or indexing the data to identify themes or patterns and organizing them into coherent categories that summarize and bring meaning to the text. The written responses to these questions were transcribed and analyzed based on the recommendations of Gall and Borg and presented in Appendix E.

Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

Building on the qualitative data analysis models of Baxter and Glaser (1998), Dexter (1970) and Miles and Huberman (1994), I was able to incorporate a variety of data analysis techniques in the qualitative section of this study. The qualitative data in this study consisted of elite interviews and qualitative survey responses.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), it is imperative that the original data be kept intact so that both the researcher and other interested researchers can refer to it if necessary. These authors further contend that when analyzing elite interview data, it is important to identify and extract the most important, meaningful, and interesting parts of the text in elite interviews. Qualitative studies that invoke this data collection method should ensure that the analysis is
subjective, and that the reader is convinced that the report is a) based on a careful reading of the interview texts, b) free of data inconsistencies or contradictions across subjects, and c) appropriately analyzed so that the readers can make their own judgements of validity and trustworthiness. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were analyzed and coded to identify emerging patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes were developed for assigning meaning to words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, and for clustering related segments for drawing conclusions within the context of the research questions underlying the study.

According to Dexter (1970) triangulation is another effective method of qualitative data analysis. Dexter supported this type of analysis because it gave the researcher more than one reference point for interpreting data. This was especially important when dealing with elite interviewees who often cite information that is prepared only for public consumption and may not always be totally accurate. According to Dexter, this is one of the risks associated with elite interviewing.

Triangulation “can imply either different data collection modes...or different designs...Different modes of data collection [use] any that come logically to hand but [depend] most on qualitative methods” (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994, p. 306). Lincoln and Denzin contend that using multiple theories as a technique “seems...both epistemologically unsound and empirically empty” (p. 307). Thus, I focused on triangulation through different modes of data collection because the probability that findings (and interpretations based upon them) will be found to be more credible if the inquirer is able to demonstrate a prolonged period of engagement “evidence of persistent observation...and different sources” (Lincoln & Denzin, p. 307). The data collected from the interviews was carefully recorded, transcribed, reviewed and
analyzed. The data was examined for common themes and patterns associated with students and their perceptions of the influences TOPS had on their individual educational experiences. Specifically, the data was analyzed to see if the in-depth, detailed information triangulated with the questionnaire results and to see if findings could be generalized across the study.

The use of elite semi-structured interviewing and the acquisition of supporting government documents and reports, which further validated the content richness of the interviews, provided different meanings and many different perspectives of the TOPS program. The semi-structured format allowed the interviewees to freely discuss possible solutions to some of the problems they had identified. One strength of this study was the reliance of the voices of the interviewees to suggest some of the solutions. Through the analysis process, I had to decide what information was pertinent or unnecessary for the purpose of my research.

Baxter and Glaser (1998) support the technique of coding interview data and qualitative responses to questions on survey instruments as a crucial step in data analysis. They define the following coding families, noting that multiple coding families are used in any one study: setting/context coeds, definition of the situation codes, perspectives held by subjects, subjects’ ways of thinking about people and objects, process codes, activity codes, event codes, strategy codes, relationship and social structure codes, methods codes, and preassigned coding systems (p.166-172). I coded both the interview and the survey data according to key concepts. These codes were later used to compare the themes that emerged from both data sets.

**Credibility, Transferability and Dependability**

Since the TOPS Effectiveness Questionnaire was specifically developed for this study, credibility, transferability, and dependability tests were conducted by providing a copy of the
interview transcripts to the interviewees for review and accuracy. Since the basis of this research was centered around describing and understanding the TOPS program from the participants viewpoints, they were the only people who could legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Additionally, a validation panel composed of experts in the fields of financial aid, higher education policy and research reviewed the interview protocol for clarity. The instrument was also pilot tested with three individuals who were knowledgeable about the TOPS program. This piloting was done to ensure that the instrument measured what it actually purported to measure according to standardized procedures. Revisions were made based on those reviews.

To ensure dependability of the qualitative data, an audio tape of the interviews was analyzed several times. Additionally, two different transcriptions were performed on the audio data, one by the researcher and another by a colleague to ensure consistency and accuracy. The transcripts were then compared and the final version was forwarded to the interviewee. Transferability was ensured by describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research at the onset of each interview.

Limitations

Due to the complexity of this research project and the limited availability of research personnel and funding, data collection and analysis was conducted at one institution by one researcher. The research results should be generalizeable and should provide useful information for administrators and policy makers, and the research design should be replicable by other researchers.

Another limitation of this study was that questionnaire responses were voluntary. Students who completed and returned the questionnaire might be viewed as more knowledgeable
about the TOPS program than students who did not complete the questionnaire.

Another limitation of this study will be that the findings of this research will not be
generalizeable to neither the larger population of LSU students nor to the overall population of
students throughout the state of Louisiana. This will be due in part to the heavy concentration of
science courses, many of which are for science majors. This factor alone will have an impact on
the type of students that will be surveyed as well as their responses to the questionnaire items.

Summary

A forty-one question survey was developed to collect data from students selected as part
of a systematic, random sample. The total target population was identified as 12,790 TOPS
recipients at LSU and the total sample size was set at 300.

Survey items included eleven demographic questions for all respondents, three
qualitative questions for TOPS recipients only, and a twenty-seven item 5-point Likert type
perception scale for loan recipient respondents, and a request for suggestions from TOPS
recipients only. Response data was coded for statistical analyses including central tendencies,
variability, factor analyses, and MANOVA.
CHAPTER 4: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS / RESULTS

As discussed in previous chapters the purpose of this study was to assess the Louisiana TOPS program a) to determine its primary goals according to key administrators, policy makers and legislators, b) to determine the extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana, and c) to ascertain perceptions of students’ on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences.

Chapter Four provides the findings of this study based on the data analysis conducted in accordance with the stated purposes of the study and the procedures as outlined in Chapter Three. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is labeled “Quantitative Data Findings.” This section includes reporting of the demographic characteristics of the participants surveyed as well as a statistical analysis of data which supports research question three and its supporting objectives. This section is divided into two parts, part one is an item analysis and part two is a scale analysis. Student level data and aggregate level data were analyzed using the SPSS Data Analysis System, Release 12.0.

The second section is labeled “Qualitative Data Findings.” This section contains the summary analyses of a series of elite interviews with selected experts who were chosen because of their direct involvement and experiences with the TOPS program. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies were used to answer the major research questions of the study. The major research questions of this study are stated as follows:

1. What are the goals of the Louisiana TOPS Program?

2. To what extent do key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS
has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana?

3. What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients?

Quantitative Findings

Understanding the impact of the TOPS program upon college students in the State of Louisiana is essential, thus in this study, research question number three [What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of the current TOPS recipients?] was designed to specifically address that issue. Measuring the general impact of a program of this nature is broad in both scope and ambition, therefore eight smaller and more specific objectives were developed. The practice of formulating specific objectives to support a larger, and more “general” research question makes data analysis and interpretation of the research findings more manageable and focused. The first objective focused on gaining a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of the students’ in the study. Objectives two through eight focused on gaining a better understanding of students’ perceptions of the TOPS program, as measured by response items on the survey instruments. Of key interest were student perceptions in the following areas: knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college, influence of TOPS on their academic performance, awareness of TOPS, criteria required to obtain a TOPS award, impact of TOPS on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities, impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college, and the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions. The eight research objectives formulated to measure the impact of the TOPS program are as follows:

1. To describe and compare all survey respondents who are recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic characteristics: 1) gender 2) race 3) age 4) classification 5) residency status 6)
parent(s) education level 7) family income 8) academic major 9) grade point average (GPA) 10) ACT score.

2. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college.

3. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.

4. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their awareness of TOPS.

5. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

6. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

7. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.

8. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions.

Objective 1 - Demographic Data/Results

The first objective of this sub-section was to describe and compare all survey respondents who were recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic characteristics: 1) gender 2) race 3) age 4) classification 5) residency status 6) parent(s) education level 7) family income 8) academic major 9) grade point average (gpa) 10) ACT score.

Survey Demographics - Gender

The first characteristic which described the study participants was gender. For the
overall group, the largest number of respondents were females (n=367, 56.3%). The remainder of the group reported their gender as male (n=285, 43.7%). Interestingly enough, the gender percentages for the sample and the target population are almost identical (See Table 4.1). This finding adds to the credibility of the sampling technique used in this study.

### Table 4.1: Gender of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>43.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>56.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** = Data not available.

The role that gender plays upon the perceptions of survey respondents will be discussed in detail further in this section.

**Survey Demographics - Race**

The second characteristic on which the respondents were described was race. Students were asked to identify themselves as being Black/African American, White/Caucasian American, Pacific Islander/ Native American, Hispanic, Asian American or Other. The race categories were mutually exclusive and respondents were asked to select the one which best described their race.

The majority (n=541, 83.2%) of the respondents were Caucasian. Second in number to Caucasians, were African American respondents (n=53, 6.9%), followed by Asian American respondents (n=29, 4.5%). Again, it was noted how similar the sample percentages were to the target population percentages. (See Table 4.2). Similarly to gender, these percentages support the validity of the sampling technique employed in this survey.
Table 4.2: Race of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black / African American</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White / Caucasian American</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>83.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander/ Native Amer.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** = Data not available.

The role that race plays upon the perceptions of the survey respondents will be discussed in detail further into this section.

Sample Demographics - Age

Another characteristic on which the respondents were described was their age.

Respondents were asked to choose between one of four age ranges provided. The majority of the respondents (n=615, 94.5%) were between the ages of 18 and 19, with the remainder of the sample ranging between the ages of 20-21 (n=31, 4.8%). Only a handful of students identified themselves as being over the age of 21. Table 4.3 displays all age information. Unfortunately, information regarding the age of the target population (LSU TOPS recipients) was not available.
Table 4.3: Age of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** = Data not available.

The role that age plays upon the perceptions of survey respondents will be discussed in detail further into this section.

**Sample Demographics - Academic Classification**

Another characteristic on which the respondents were described was their classification. For the overall sample population, the largest number of respondents were freshmen (n=564, 86.5%). The second largest group was classified as sophomores (n=68, 10.4%), with approximately 3% (n=19) identifying themselves as being either Juniors or Seniors. Table 4.4 displays all academic classification information. The classification characteristic was not available for comparison on the over all total LSU TOPS population. (See table 4.4)

Table 4.4: Classification of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>86.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>10.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
A respondents’ academic classification and the role that it plays on perceptions will be discussed in greater detail further in this section.

**Sample Demographics - Residency Status**

Another characteristic on which the subjects were described was their residency status. For the overall group, the largest number of respondents were Louisiana Residents (n=649, 99.54%). While the basic qualifications for TOPS mandates that a recipient be a Louisiana resident, the three Non-Louisiana Resident responses, in this case, can more than likely be attributed to the TOPS exception rule that allows non-resident students who attend a Louisiana school to take advantage of the award. This normally applies when one or more of the parents are employed in Louisiana. Again, the residency data was not available for the overall target population. (See table 4.5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Resident</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>99.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Louisiana Resident</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** = Data not available.
Sample Demographics - Parent’s Educational Level

Another variable used to describe the study participants was the highest educational level of the parent or guardian. A parent’s educational level has long been thought to impact and/or predict a child’s educational successes. Of the total group of respondents, one third (n =214, 33 %) indicated the highest level of education of their parent/guardian was a bachelor’s degree. Another third (n=202, 31%) indicated that their parent/guardian obtained a graduate/professional degree. Table 4.6 displays all parental education information. The overall target population for all TOPS recipients at LSU was not available for this characteristic. (See table 4.6)

Table 4.6: Parent educational level of students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Educational Level</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than high school</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school diploma</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>28.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>associate degree / certificate</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>33.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduate / professional degree</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>31.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ** = Data not available.

The impact of parent’s educational attainment will be explored further within this section.

Sample Demographics - Family Income

Respondents were asked to estimate their total family income by choosing one of eight levels of family income to which they belonged. When participants were asked to estimate their
total family income, the largest group (n= 272, 42.4%) among all respondents reported that their family income was more than $75,000. In contrast, 6.3 % (n=40) of survey respondents reported that their family income was less than $25,000. The group which received the lowest number of TOPS awards falls into the lowest income bracket. By collapsing the eight income categories, the data clearly indicates that approximately 70% of survey respondents have family incomes greater than $55,000 and 30% have family incomes less than $55,000. Of those lower 30%, 20% are from impoverished families making less than $25,000 a year (see table 4.7).

In contrast, more than half (n=7562, 60.46%) of the target population (all LSU TOPS recipients) stated that their overall family income was greater than $75,000 and 8.2% (n=1038) reported their income was less then $25,000. The target data indicates that a majority of TOPS awards are going to students who come from families who could possibly afford to send their children to college. This same data (conforming what the sample data yielded) confirms that the group receiving the smallest number of TOPS awards is also in the lowest income bracket.

According to statistics reported by the Office of Budget and Planning (2003) at LSU the average reported income for all TOPS recipient is $94,971. It should be noted that because it was not mandatory to complete the family income section of the FAFSA, families often report inaccurate data in an effort to safeguard family income information. The reporting of family income is not a requirement to receive a TOPS award.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Income</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than $15,000</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 - $25,000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,001 - $35,000</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Sample Demographics - Academic Major

Another variable used to describe the study participants was academic major. Students were asked to select one of seven choices of majors (with the option of “other” being included) which best described their current field of study. Nearly 60% of the respondents (n=379, 58.14) indicated that they were majoring in one of the sciences, defined as biology, chemistry, zoology, or physics. This was not surprising given LSU is a highly competitive Research One institution. The field of Engineering was also a popular choice (17.8%) and was second to the sciences. The next choice was other (See Table 4.8).

In contrast the sample data just described and the target population data (LSU TOPS recipients) was quite different. In the LSU TOPS population the dominant (n=7304, 58.35%), academic major was recorded as being “Other,” followed by majors in Arts and Humanities (n=1470, 11.74%), and Science (n=1035, 8.26%). It was also noted that the “other” category in the overall TOPS population for LSU was comprised of students in the following colleges: University Counseling and Advising Center (UCAC), University Center for Freshman year (UCFY), Mass Communications (MCOM) and Agriculture (AGRI). Music and Dramatic Arts (MDA) was added to the Arts & Humanities category to be consistent with the academic major categories created for the purpose of this study. The differences in academic majors between the sample and the target population are not pertinent, given that the sampling scheme was methodologically sound and the sample represents approximately 5% of the entire population.
Table 4.8: Academic Major of LSU Students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Major</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>58.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>17.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>7.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: = Overall LSU Other = UCAC (1329), UCFY (5008), MCOM (263), AGRI (704) = 7577
MDA (100) was added to Arts & Humanities

Further analysis of the academic major data will be provided later in this chapter.

**Sample Demographics - Grade Point Average**

Grade Point Average (GPA) was another characteristic used to describe the academic background of the sample population. Overall, the largest number of participants (n=288, 44.30%) reported a cumulative GPA between 3.5 and 4.0. The second largest number of participants (n=203, 31.23 %) reported a GPA between 3.0 and 3.49; and the third largest number of participants (n=114, 17.54%) reported a GPA between 2.5 and 2.99. It was noted that for the overall LSU TOPS population, the most frequently occurring GPA was 3.2016 with a standard deviation of .416. In comparison to the target population data (LSU TOPS Recipients) sample respondents seemed academically superior having larger percentages of their students in the top GPA range (3.5 to 4.0). However, when considering the mean GPA score for both, the mean GPA for the sample was 3.12 while the mean GPA for the target population was slightly higher at 3.2016.
Table 4.9: Overall GPA of LSU students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Point Average (GPA)</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below 2.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 - 2.49</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 - 2.99</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>17.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 - 3.49</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>31.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 - 4.0</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>44.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further analysis on the impact of current academic standing and GPA upon TOPS will be provided in a later section of this chapter.

**Sample Demographics - ACT Score**

The final characteristic on which the respondents were described was their ACT score (or SAT equivalent). Respondents were given seven ranges of ACT scores to choose from, with the instructions to choose which range contained their particular ACT score. A score below 12 was the lowest of the categories, and a score above 31 was the highest category (see Table 4.10).

Slightly more than one-third (n=242, 37.23%) of the respondents reported an ACT score of between 24 and 27. Another third (n=196, 30.2%) of the respondents reported an ACT score between 20 and 23, while the remaining third (n=176, 27.07%) reported an ACT score between 28 and 31. Only a small number (n=36, 5.5%) of sample respondents reported an ACT of 31 or above. In comparison to the target population data which indicated over 40% (n=5251, 41.99%) of the LSU TOPS recipients reported an ACT between 20 and 23, with 37% (n=4741, 37.91%) reporting an ACT between 24 and 27 and 17% reporting an ACT between 28 and 31. Clearly the sample had a higher percentage (27% vs 17%) of respondents in the top ACT category (28-31). The sample also had a higher percentage (5.5% vs 2.5%) in the most extreme category (ACT greater than 31).
Table 4:10 ACT score of LSU students who are TOPS recipients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT Score</th>
<th>Sample Population</th>
<th>All TOPS Recipients at LSU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>below 12</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-15</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>36 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-23</td>
<td>196 30.20</td>
<td>5251 41.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-27</td>
<td>242 37.23</td>
<td>4741 37.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-31</td>
<td>176 27.07</td>
<td>2168 17.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>above 31</td>
<td>36 5.50</td>
<td>308 2.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650 100.00</td>
<td>12504 100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding the influence of the TOPS Program

Part 1 - Item Analysis

Given the enormity of the third research question posed in this study (“What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients”?), it was necessary to divide the question into smaller, more manageable and focused research objectives. Attempting to determine what the “impact” or “influence” of a program of this nature with one question was not feasible, as there are many facets to the TOPS program and many areas to be explored. These areas (i.e., prior knowledge, cost, award criteria, personal choices and educational opportunities) which could not sufficiently be answered with a single, over-arching broad research question. Objectives two through eight (see pgs. 69-70) were specifically designed to measure perceptions of TOPS recipients in these areas.

As reported in the methods section of this study, a survey containing twenty-seven items which addressed various TOPS areas of interest was designed and disseminated. The twenty-seven items were designed to measure the respondent’s perceptions of the impact of TOPS. All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale. The first five items (see Table 4.12) had responses of the following choices: 1 = “unfamiliar;” 2 = “slightly familiar;” 3 = “don’t know
/ no opinion;” 4 = “familiar;” 5 = “very familiar.” Items six through twenty had responses of the following choices: 1 = “strongly disagree;” 2 = “disagree;” 3 = “don’t know / no opinion;” 4 = “agree;” 5 = “strongly agree.” Those items are identified in Table 4:12.a.

Since the item means did not always end in whole numbers, rounding was used to calculate to the next Likert category for ease of description and interpretation. What resulted was a modified version of the original Likert scale which established clear values to the five response categories. (See Table 4.11). Reverse worded items were coded such that in all instances, the concept of “Agreement” received the higher values (5,4) and the concept of disagreement received the lower values (1,2).

Table 4.11 Response Scales for Questionnaire Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Choices</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Response Choices</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very familiar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>familiar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>agree</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly familiar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unfamiliar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.12: TOPS Familiarity Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean±</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 or P1: I was familiar with the TOPS awards criteria prior to starting college</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>4.5588</td>
<td>.68121</td>
<td>very familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or P2: I was familiar with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>3.1893</td>
<td>1.5056</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>654</td>
<td>4.2599</td>
<td>.98208</td>
<td>familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>655</td>
<td>3.703</td>
<td>1.1516</td>
<td>familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>654</td>
<td>3.9312</td>
<td>1.2460</td>
<td>familiar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Mean values correspond to the response scale: 5=Very familiar ; 4=Familiar; 3=Uncertain; 2=slightly familiar and 1=unfamiliar

Table 4.12.a: TOPS Agreement Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 or I1</td>
<td>The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>3.1242</td>
<td>1.5487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 or I2</td>
<td>The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college in Louisiana</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>4.2879</td>
<td>1.0609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 or I3</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult)</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>2.0658</td>
<td>.92525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 or I4</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too lenient (easy)</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>2.9417</td>
<td>1.1317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 or I5</td>
<td>The amount of the TOPS award is sufficient to cover the cost of attending college</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>2.6375</td>
<td>1.1796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 or I6</td>
<td>Efforts by the State to educate TOPS recipients on retention requirements are sufficient</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>3.5470</td>
<td>.90036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 or I7</td>
<td>The GPA required to retain TOPS is too high</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>2.3914</td>
<td>.93011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 or 18</td>
<td>Efforts made by the State to educate Louisiana citizens about the TOPS program are sufficient</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>3.5431</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 or 19</td>
<td>My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to obtain or retain TOPS</td>
<td>651</td>
<td>3.7158</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 or 10</td>
<td>TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>3.5868</td>
<td>agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 or 11</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my study habits</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>3.0896</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 or 12</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to carry my current course load</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>3.3029</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 or 13</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to add/drop courses</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>3.2093</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 or 14</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to seek tutorial assistance</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>2.8512</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 or 15</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my desire to complete college (graduate)</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 or 16</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my involvement in extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>2.4115</td>
<td>disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 or 17</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>2.4230</td>
<td>disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 or 18</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.)</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>2.2597</td>
<td>disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 or 19</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to continue in some form of post baccalaureate degree program</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>2.9130</td>
<td>don’t know / no opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
### Objectives 2 - 8 Results

There were five survey items specifically designed to measure a respondent’s level of familiarity with various aspects of the TOPS program, such as the awards criteria and the curriculum. These items, along with their mean ratings, can be found in Table 4.12.

1) **“Familiarity” With Tops Award Criteria/Award Levels**

Of the five items, item number 15 “I was familiar with the TOPS awards criteria (ACT score, GPA, etc.) prior to starting college” received the highest mean rating of 4.55 (out of a possible rating of 5). A mean rating of 4.55 corresponds with the response category of “very familiar.” This mean rating (4.55) supports the theory that students are quite familiar with the TOPS award criteria prior to starting college.

Item number 17 was similar in nature to item 15 and received the second highest mean rating of the five familiarity items with a rating of 4.25. Item number 17 asked about the respondent’s level of familiarity corresponds with the response category of “familiar.” Again, respondents seem to be familiar or very familiar with the TOPS award criteria and the award levels.

2) **“Familiarity” With TOPS High School Curriculum**

When asked if they were “familiar with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school” (item 16) the answer was not very clear and caution is needed when interpreting. While the data provides evidence of a mean rating of 3.19 (don’t know/no opinion category) this mean
rating is somewhat misleading given the frequency of responses for the item. 52% of the responses were responses of 5 or 4 (very familiar and familiar), while 38% of the responses were responses of 2 or 1 (slightly familiar and unfamiliar) and only 8% of the responses were actual responses of 3, or of the “don’t know/no opinion” category. In this case, it is obvious that the mean is being negatively impacted by the outliers (high and low ratings). Unfortunately this is one of the limitations (and characteristics) of the mean, as it is effected by outlying high and low scores. While a mean rating of 3.19 is still viewed as the “average” or most typical score, care is needed in the interpretation given that the modal response (most frequently occurring score) for this item is that of a 4, or a rating of “familiar”. It appears that the majority of respondents are familiar with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school.

3) “Familiarity” With TOPS Retention Requirements

When asked if they were “familiar with the TOPS retention requirements prior to starting high school” (item 18), respondents indicated that they were. With a mean rating score of 3.7 and 69% of the respondents giving a rating of 5 or 4 (very familiar or familiar), respondents were clearly familiar with the TOPS retention requirements prior to starting high school.

4) “Familiarity” With TOPS As a Result of My High School Counselor

When asked if they became “familiar with the TOPS through their high school counselor” (item 19), respondents indicated that they had with a mean rating of 3.93 or a rating of familiar. With a mean rating score of 3.93 and 75% of the respondents giving a rating of 4 or 5 (familiar or very familiar), respondents became familiar with TOPS through their high school counselor and acquired a high level of familiarity based on the modal response of 5 (very familiar) for this item.

Academic and Social Educational Experiences

Items twenty through forty-one cover many TOPS areas of interest such as the perceptions about the TOPS award criteria, public awareness, prior knowledge, personal choices and educational
opportunities. The mean ratings and respective response categories for each of the twenty-seven items are listed in table 4.12.a. A detailed analysis of the item responses will be offered in this section while a scale analysis will be offered in a later section titled “Results-TOPS Survey Factor Scales”

**Objective 3 - to determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.**

Questions 28 through 39 (See Table 4.13a) were designed to collect responses about the influence of TOPS on academic performance. As evidenced by the mean ratings the opinions were either neutral or positive, indicating that *some aspects of TOPS had influenced their academic performance while some did not.* The items receiving the highest of ratings (highest level of agreement) were some of the highest mean ratings on the survey. These items were, “*My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to obtain or retain TOPS*” (mean = 3.71, Rating of Agree) and “*TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance*” (mean = 3.58, Rating of Agree). The items receiving the lowest ratings, tended to be items which were “less” about the academic impact of TOPS and more about the social and person influences of TOPS, which will be discussed in latter portions of this study.

While mean ratings on these items were generally neutral or positive (ratings of 4 or 5 are positive or high, 3 are neutral and ratings of 1 or 2 are negative/low), care must be exercised when interpreting some items (i.e. items 31, 32, and 34) whose mean rankings “appear” to place them in the “don’t know/no opinion” category. Although the mean ratings for these items are such that they fall into the “don’t know/no opinion” categories, an analysis of the frequency distribution table shows 40%-55% of the responses for these items as being in the “agree or strongly agree” category. In this scenario, the mean rating appears on the low side, nearing neutral territory, because of the tendency of the mean to be impacted by outliers. However this may be to the contrary when the data is analyzed in another manner, as there is a great number of respondents who do not feel
neutral, but instead are indicating “agree” or “strongly agree” from 40% to 55% of the time. For example, items 31 and 32 which read as “TOPS has influenced my decision to carry my current course load” and “TOPS has influenced my decision to add/drop courses” have 53% and 46% (respectively) of their responses being “agree or strongly agree” yet these items carry a mean rating of 3.3 and 3.2 placing them in the “don’t know/no opinion” category. In these cases, when averaged across all five response categories, the mean rating is pulled down to the “don’t know opinion” category. Mean ratings are correctly interpreted as being the “most typical” or “average” score, but they do not often report the total findings. It is for this reason (and that cited later in the MANOVA results section) that the impact of TOPS upon academic performance can be considered moderate to strong when all data is presented.

Table 4:13 a: Factor 1: Academic Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 28</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to retain TOPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 29</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 30</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my study habits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 31</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to carry my current course load</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 32</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to add/drop courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 33</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to seek tutorial assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 34</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my desire to complete college (graduate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 35</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my involvement in extra-curricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 36</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 4.13b: Factor 2: Prior Knowledge / Awareness about TOPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #15</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>I was familiar with the TOPS awards criteria (ACT score, GPA, etc.) prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #17</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>I was familiar with the various TOPS award levels prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #18</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>I was familiar with the TOPS retention requirements prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #19</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>I became familiar with TOPS through my high school counselor(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #25</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>Efforts by the State to educate TOPS recipients on retention requirements are sufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #27</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>Efforts by the State to educate Louisiana citizens about the TOPS program are sufficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that a 4 or 5 is the highest or most favorable rating, there appears to be a very high level of “familiarity” (items 15–19) and “agreement” (items 25 and 27) with items of this nature (Table 4.13b). The cumulative response categories for these items are “familiar” and “agree.” This data suggest that respondents know quite a bit about various aspects about TOPS.
TOPS prior to college and currently feel like the State of Louisiana has done a sufficient job of educating its citizens about the TOPS program and its retention requirements. Public awareness does not seem to be an issue for the state of Louisiana.

Objective 5 - to determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

Objective number 5 is supported by data found in questions number 22, 23 and 26. However, future discussions regarding the factor analysis will ultimately suggest only questions number 22 and 26 as supporting the construct. Mean ratings for the three items addressing the TOPS criteria can be found in Table 4.13.c.

Table 4.13c: Factor 5: TOPS Award Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 22</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 23</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too lenient (easy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 26</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>The G.P.A. required to retain TOPS is too high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While questions # 23 and #26 have a mean rating which classifies them in the collective “don’t know/know opinion” response category, and question #22 is classified in the “disagree” response category, there is more to be discovered. As was the case for objective three (academic), mean ratings can be misleading given the nature of outliers to influence the mean. Mean ratings do represent the most “typical” or “average score” but they may not give a full picture and further analysis is needed.

While question number 23, “The G.P.A. required to retain TOPS is too high” yielded a mean rating of 2.39 or “don’t know/know opinion,” a closer inspection of the frequency response data reveals something different. In fact, to the contrary, 68% of respondents disagreed with the
questions, indicating that the GPA requirement was not too high, which is quite different an interpretation than “no opinion.” According to survey data, 78% of the respondents disagreed with the statement posed in question #22, “The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult).” In addition to the mean rating (2.06/disagree), the additional information that 78% of respondents did not feel that the criteria was too stringent, further strengthens the argument that the criteria for receiving and maintaining a TOPS award are not too difficult.

**Objective 6 - to determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.**

Objective number 6 is supported by one piece of data; that data comes from question number 28, which reads, “TOPS has influenced my decision to continue in some form of post baccalaureate degree program.” This item has a mean rating of 2.93 and a cumulative response category of “don’t know/no opinion.” Further analysis indicated that 32% agreed with the question indicating that TOPS had impacted their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities while 41% disagreed. *TOPS does not seem to have much of an effect of the decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.*

**Objective 7 - to determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.**

Table 4.13d contains the mean ratings of items related to cost and the ability to afford college. The mean ratings of the cost items tend to gravitate towards the “don’t know/no opinion” and the “disagree” response ratings. Given the nature of the mean to be effected by outliers, frequency distributions of response categories were analyzed.

Fifty-nine percent of all respondents disagreed that the TOPS award was sufficient to cover the cost of attending college, while 32% agreed. Of those who disagreed, 7% were from the lowest income categories (less than $25,000) while 40% who disagreed were from the highest income and wealthiest
category of over $75,000. Respondents with higher levels of family income were the most dissatisfied with the amount of the award and the poorer ones were rarely dissatisfied. This seems quite ironic. Those in great need were happy with the amount of the award and those with the least need were not happy with the amount of the award. When asked if the TOPS award sufficiently covered the cost of tuition, 36% disagreed, while 52% agreed. When asked if TOPS influenced their decision to live on campus 63% disagreed, while 20% agreed. Apparently, the TOPS award does not impact housing decisions.

Table 4.13d: Factor 3: Cost

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #24</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>The amount of the TOPS award is sufficient to cover the cost of attending college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #36</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #37</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #39</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my career choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #40</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>TOPS has reduced the need for me to work while in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #41</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>My TOPS award has sufficiently covered the cost of tuition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Objective 8 - to determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions.

Table 4.13.e contains the mean ratings of items related to personal decisions. The mean ratings of the cost items tend to gravitate towards the “disagree” response ratings. Given the nature of the mean to be affected by outliers, frequency distributions of response categories were analyzed. When asked if TOPS had influenced their personal lives in college (i.e. relationships, friendships, etc.), 59% of all respondents disagreed, while 12% agreed. When asked if TOPS
influenced their career choices, 54% disagreed while 16% agreed. It is possible that given the relatively young age of the recipients and the novelty of the TOPS experience (given they are generally in their first year of school), the effects of TOPS in these areas have not been considered or explored yet. Other aspects of personal choices were discussed in objective number seven.

Table 4.13c: Factor 4: Personal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 22</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 36</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 37</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 39</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my career choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High Level of Agreement Items

Of the twenty-seven survey items, the five items which respondents “agreed the most” with are listed below. All five of these items were classified in the “agree” (3.5 - 4.49) category according to the interpretive scale established.

**Attendance**

“The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college in Louisiana” (mean = 4.28, Rating of Agree).

**Academic**

“My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to obtain or retain TOPS” (mean = 3.71, Rating of Agree). “TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance” (mean = 3.58, Rating of Agree).
Public Awareness – Educating the State about TOPS

“Efforts by the State to educate TOPS recipients on retention requirements are sufficient” (mean = 3.54, Rating of Agree). “Efforts made by the state to educate Louisiana citizens about the TOPS program are sufficient” (mean = 3.54, Rating of Agree).

In summary, TOPS recipients indicated that the TOPS award was a factor in their decision to attend college and that it had a direct impact on their academic performance. Recipients also felt that the state of Louisiana had done a sufficient job in educating its citizens about the TOPS program and its retention requirement.

Low Level of Agreement Items

Six of the twenty-seven items received mean ratings in the “disagree” response category. While respondents individually responded to items (on occasion) with ratings equivalent to “strongly disagree, slightly familiar and unfamiliar”, no items in the survey received a collective mean rating of “unfamiliar/slightly familiar” or “strongly disagree”.

TOPS Award Criteria

“The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent” (mean = 2.06, Rating of Disagree).

Academic

“The GPA required to retain TOPS is too high” (mean = 2.39, Rating of Disagree).

“TOPS has influenced my career choices” (mean=2.46, Rating of Disagree)

Personal

“TOPS has influenced my involvement in extra-curricular activities” (mean= 2.41, Rating of Disagree). “TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus” (mean = 2.42, Rating of Disagree). “TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.)” (mean = 2.25, Rating of Disagree).
In summary, TOPS recipients indicated that the TOPS award criteria and academic requirements were not overly stringent, nor did TOPS impact aspects of their social and personal life such as friendships, extra-curricular activities and whether they lived on campus or not.

Survey Results

Factor Analysis

To further summarize the information regarding the subjects’ perceptions of the TOPS program on their educational experiences, factor analysis was used to determine if underlying constructs existed in the data. As previously stated in the “Methods” section of this study, factor analysis is a statistical method used for determining whether a set of variables can be reduced to a smaller number of factors. It is an attempt to identify underlying variables (or factors) that explain the pattern of correlations within a set of observed variables.

To accomplish this procedure, an oblique principal axis factor analysis was used with an oblimin rotation on twenty-seven scaled items from the survey instrument. A diagnostic run of the study data allowing SPSS to identify all factors which had an eigenvalue of 1.0 or higher was performed. Using this procedure the analysis revealed a total of eight potential factors in the scale data. Examination of the resulting eigenvalues showed that the number of meaningful factors was between 6 and 8. This determination was made by plotting the factor eigenvalues and identifying the point of greatest reduction in the progressively declining values. The point of greatest reduction was identified to be six factors. Therefore, each of the analysis for six, seven, and eight factors was examined to determine the number of factors which yielded the factor groupings which both had substantively significant factor loadings for all items and made meaningful sense when the content of grouped items were examined. The number of factors was clearly defined to be six. This determination was made using a combination of the latent root technique and the scree plot.
technique. The specific item groupings and corresponding factor loadings are presented in Tables 4:14 - 4:19. The identified sub-scale labels were as follows: Factor 1 (Academic Performance) contained twelve items that measured the respondents perceptions of how TOPS impacted their academic performance. Factor 1, which had a total Eigenvalue of 6.17 accounted for 22.88% of the variance in the data for the six-factor solution. Factor 2 (Prior Knowledge about TOPS) contained six items that expressed the familiarity level of respondents prior to receiving their TOPS award. Factor 2, which had a total Eigenvalue of 2.61 accounted for 9.64% of the variance in the data for the six factor solution. Factor 3 (Cost) contained six items that were related to issues of cost and how TOPS positive or negatively impacted those aspects. Factor 3, which had a total Eigenvalue of 2.08 accounted for 7.68% of the variance in the data for the six factor solution. Factor 4 (Personal) contained four items that related to how TOPS impacted the personal decisions of respondents. Factor 4, which had a total Eigenvalue of 1.50 accounted for 5.38% of the variance in the data for the six factor solution. Factor 5 (Award Criteria) contained two items that measured the respondents’ perceptions on the criteria to receive and retain their TOPS award. Factor 5, which had a total Eigenvalue of 1.40 accounted for 5.16 % of the variance in the data for the six factor solution. Finally, Factor 6 (College Attendance) had two items that assessed the perceptions of respondents on attending college and how TOPS impacted those perceptions. Factor 6, which had a total Eigenvalue of 1.21 accounted for 4.10 % of the variance in the data for the six factor solution.

The six-factor solution accounted for 54.85% of the total item variance, but had three items which had multiple loadings. The Factor structure coefficients for this six-factor solution ranged from -.277 to .712 with all items having loadings sufficient to be retained in at least one of the factors.
All of the intercorrelations between the sub-scales identified in the six-factor solution proved to be positive in direction and minimal in magnitude. These correlations were as follows:

Academic Performance and Prior Knowledge about TOPS, r = .17 (p < .01); Academic Performance and Cost, r = .28 (p < .01); Academic Performance and Personal, r = .14 (p < .01); Personal and Award Criteria, r = .36 (p < .01); Cost and College Attendance, r = .21 (p < .01).

Detail of New Scales

The first factor identified in the scale was labeled “Academic Performance.” The items in this factor related to how TOPS influenced the characteristics that were directly related to academic performance including study habits, course load, adding and dropping courses, campus involvement, post baccalaureate studies, career options and relationships. All of these characteristics, in some way, were linked to the academic performance of students in college. Loadings on this factor ranged from .503 to .712 (See Table 4.14).

Table 4.14: Factor Analysis 1: Academic Performance (ACAPERF)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Loading1</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 28</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to retain TOPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 29</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 30</td>
<td>.711</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my study habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 31</td>
<td>.696</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to carry my current course load</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 32</td>
<td>.641</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to add/drop courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 33</td>
<td>.683</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to seek tutorial assistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
The second factor in this scale was labeled as “Prior Knowledge about TOPS.” Items in this factor were directly related to the students’ perceptions about their knowledge of TOPS prior to starting college or receiving the award. The “Prior Knowledge” concept is centered around familiarity awards criteria, award levels and retention requirements. Loadings on this factor ranged from .327 to .658 (See Table 4.15)

**Table 4:15: Factor Analysis 2: Prior Knowledge about TOPS (PREKNOW)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question #15</td>
<td>.627</td>
<td>I was familiar with the TOPS awards criteria (ACT score, GPA, etc.) prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #17</td>
<td>.658</td>
<td>I was familiar with the various TOPS award levels prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question #18</td>
<td>.637</td>
<td>I was familiar with the TOPS retention requirements prior to starting college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
The third factor in the scale was labeled as “Cost.” Items in this factor expressed the students’ perceptions regarding how TOPS has impacted the financial aspect of attending college. Some of the characteristics are centered around the overall cost of attending college, decisions to reside on campus, personal issues, career choices and the need to work while in college. Loadings on this factor ranged from .306 to .520 (See Table 4.16)

**Table 4:16: Factor Analysis 3: Cost (COST)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 24</td>
<td>.440</td>
<td>The amount of the TOPS award is sufficient to cover the cost of attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 36</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 37</td>
<td>.381</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 39</td>
<td>.306</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my career choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 40</td>
<td>.320</td>
<td>TOPS has reduced the need for me to work while in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 41</td>
<td>.520</td>
<td>My TOPS award has sufficiently covered the cost of tuition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourth factor in the scale was labeled as “Personal.” These items expressed the students’ perceptions about TOPS and the impact it has had on their personal college experiences. Such items included living arrangements, career choices and relationships. Loadings on this factor ranged from .228 to .267 (See Table 4.17)
### Table 4:17: Factor Analysis 4: Personal (PERSONAL)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 22</td>
<td>.439</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 36</td>
<td>.467</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 37</td>
<td>.436</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 39</td>
<td>.328</td>
<td>TOPS has influenced my career choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fifth factor in the scale was labeled as “Award Criteria.” This factor contained two items that reflected students’ perceptions about the award criteria of the TOPS program. Loadings on this factor ranged from .334 to .575 (See Table 4.18)

### Table 4:18: Factor Analysis 5: Award Criteria (AWRCRIT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 22</td>
<td>.575</td>
<td>The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 26</td>
<td>.334</td>
<td>The G.P.A. required to retain TOPS is too high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sixth factor was labeled “College Attendance.” This factor contained two items that was directly related to the cost to attend college. The loadings on this scale ranged from .574 - .683. (See Table 4.19)

### Table 4:19: Factor Analysis 6: College Attendance (COLATTN)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question # 20</td>
<td>.683</td>
<td>The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question # 21</td>
<td>.574</td>
<td>The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college in Louisiana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After identifying the six factors and assigning sub-scale labels to each, sub-scale scores were computed to correspond with the response scale. The sub-scale scores were identified as the overall mean rating of the items in each of the identified factors. The first sub-scale (Academic Performance) included 12 items, and had an overall mean scale score of 2.62. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of don’t know / no opinion. The second sub-scale (Prior Knowledge about TOPS) included six items and had an overall mean of 3.92. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of familiar. The third sub-scale (Cost) included six items and had an overall mean of 2.82. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of don’t know / no opinion. The forth sub-scale “Personal” included four items and had an overall mean rating of 2.30. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of disagree. The fifth sub-scale “Award Criteria” included two items and had an overall mean rating of 2.23. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of disagree. Finally, the sixth sub-scale “College Attendance” included two items and had an overall mean rating of 3.12. This sub-scale received an overall response rating of don’t know/ no opinion.

Table 4.20: Sub-Scale Label Scores on Five Factor Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Scales Labels</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>8.8840</td>
<td>.895</td>
<td>don’t know/ no opinion</td>
<td>ACAPERF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Knowledge</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.5984</td>
<td>.656</td>
<td>familiar</td>
<td>PREKNOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about TOPS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>4.4608</td>
<td>.684</td>
<td>don’t know/ no opinion</td>
<td>COST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>3.0360</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td>disagree</td>
<td>PERSONAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award Criteria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.5451</td>
<td>.555</td>
<td>disagree</td>
<td>AWRCRIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
College Attendance | 2 | 3.1242 | 1.5484 | .574 | don’t know/no opinion | COLATTN

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA)

The results of the factor analysis produced six new scales, all measuring different constructs. Data for each of these scales was collected, and each of the scales were then treated as separate “outcome” or “dependent” variables. When there are several dependent variables in the design, the use of MANOVA is necessary. MANOVA is used to determine the effect of multiple independent variables or a multi-level independent variable on multiple dependent variables simultaneously. As previously stated in Chapter Three, MANOVA is used to test for differences between groups of individuals and the various effects on the six dependent variables (scales). Not only does MANOVA provide univariate information on the effect of the independent variables(s) on each dependent variable, but it also demonstrates potential interaction effects.

The first step in conducting the MANOVA was to take into consideration the various assumptions that are critical to this procedure. Th first two tests conducted were Levene’s Test of equality of error variances and Box’s test of equality of covariance. These tests were conducted to make sure that the assumptions for the test of MANOVA had not been violated. It is fairly safe to violate the assumption of homogeniety of variances as long as the sample sizes are equal. Therefore, the Chi-square test was conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences in sample sizes. The results of the Chi square test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in sample sizes. Given this finding, the Pillai’s Trace test statistic was chosen as it takes unequal sample sizes into consideration. Because the test was significant, SPSS offered an adjustment when conducting the MANOVA. Because all of the assumptions for MANOVA were not met, the Pillai’s Trace method was used. According to Patton (1990) this method is the most robust when assumptions are not met. It is particularly useful when sample sizes are small, cell sizes
are unequal, or covariance are not homogeneous.

Difficulties were encountered in the initial attempts to conduct a full model MANOVA. SPSS was unable to process a full factorial MANOVA given that there were six dependent variables (six scales) and nine independent variables (race, gender, family income, etc.). Another complexity existed in the fact that all nine of the independent variables had many levels within each. The number of independent variables (n=9) and the levels within the independent variables (exceeding 35) made the computation of a full factorial (inclusive of all higher order interactions) impossible. After consulting with the methodologist for this study, it was agreed that a “construct grouping” approach would be applied, which is a common practice used by many statisticians. The nine independent variables were grouped according to likeness and commonality of the constructs, and three separate MANOVAs were then conducted. The three conceptually based categories were: Group 1 - Academic (ACT, GPA, Academic Major and Grade Classification); Group 2 - Socioeconomic (Parent’s Educational Level and Family Income); and Group 3 - Student Demographics (Race, Gender and Age).

**MANOVA Results**

**MANOVA 1 - Academic**

Despite the expected outcome, the first MANOVA testing academic effects did not reveal any significant main effects. There was, however, one two-way interaction (GPA * Academic Major) which resulted in $F(3,108) = 1.36, p<.002$ Pillai’s Trace = .280. The univariate analysis of variance for the interaction effect of GPA and Academic Major revealed a significant effect for the scale called “Attendance.” Hence, both “gpa” and “academic major” combined had an interactive effect on how the participants responded to the “attendance” scale dependent variable.

**MANOVA 2 - Family Socioeconomic**

The second MANOVA testing family socioeconomic effects revealed two main effects.
Those effects were one of “Parent Education” Pillai’s Trace = .068, [F(24, 2328) = 1.675, p<.021] and “Family Income” Pillai’s Trace = .099, [F(42,3504) = 1.43, p<.044]. Hence, both of the socioeconomic variables, parent education and family income, impacted how the participants answered the survey. Further tests needed to be run to determine in which of the six scales did the significant differences lie and on what scales was the impact being noted.

**Parent Education - Univariate and Post Hoc Tests**

Following the significant main effect of the “Parent Education” and “Family Income” variables, univariate analysis of variance was performed on each of the six dependent variables to determine where the main effect existed. The univariate analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of parent education for the scale titled “Academic” [F (93,5584) = 3.55, p<.007]. Hence, the parent education level had an effect on one of the six dependent variables on the scale named “Academic.”

Post Hoc Test (Tukey) for the “Academic” scale revealed that the difference lay in parent education levels 1 and 4 (high school diploma and graduate/professional degree) and within parent education levels 1 and 3 (high school diploma and bachelors degree). Respondents with parents who fell into these categories responded differently to the “Academic” scale.

**Family Income - Univariate and Post Hoc Tests**

The univariate analysis of variance also revealed a significant effect for the dependent variables titled “Academic” [F(35,584) = 2.145, p<.037] and “Attendance” [F(35,584) = 2.76, p<.008]. Post Hoc Tests (Tukey) for the “Academic” scale revealed that the difference lay in family income levels 2 and 4 (incomes of $25-$35K and incomes of $45 - $55K). Respondents with these family income levels responded differently to the “Academic” scale.

Post Hoc Tests (Tukey) for the “Attendance” scale also revealed a difference in levels 2 and 4 (incomes of $25 - $35K and $45 - $55K) and levels 7 and 2 (Incomes greater than $75K and
incomes of $25 - $35K). Respondents with family incomes of these levels responded differently to the “Attendance” scale. Hence, “family income” had an effect on the participants responded to the two scales called “academic” and “attendance.”

**MANOVA 3 - Student Demographics**

The third MANOVA testing student demographic effects revealed one main effect and one interaction effect. Those effects were on the variable “Gender” Pallai’s Trace = .037, [F (12,1200) = 1.88, p<.033] and the interaction “Gender” and “Age” Pillai’s Trace = 0.35, [F (12,1200) = 1.76, p<.049]. Hence, gender impacted how the participants responded to the questionnaire, and the combination of the variables “gender” and “age” also had an impact on how the participants responded. Further tests needed to be performed to determine in which of the six scales there was a gender and/or gender and age interaction effect.

**Gender - Univeraite and Post Hoc Tests**

Following the significant main effect of the “Gender” and the interactive “Gender and Age” effect, univariate analysis of variance was performed on each of the dependent variables to determine within which of the six scales did the significant effects exist. The univariate analysis of variance for “gender” revealed a significant effect for the dependent variables titled “Award Criteria” [F(22,604) = 3.93, p<.020] and “Priorknow1” [F(22,604) =4.74, p<.009]. Hence, “Gender” had an effect on two of the six scales called “Award Criteria” and “Priorknow1.” Since there are only two levels of “Gender” (male and female), the difference is between those two groups and how they responded to the “Award Criteria” and “Priorknow1” scales.

The univariate analysis of variance for the interaction effect (Gender * Age) revealed a significant effect for the scale labeled “Award Criteria” [F(22,604) = 3.93, p<.020] and “Priorknow1” [F(22,604) = 4.74, p<.009]. Hence, “Gender” and “Age” had an interactive effect on how the participants responded to two of the six scales called “Award Criteria” and “Priorknow1.”
Qualitative Findings

The qualitative section of this study involved a series of elite interviews that directly addressed research question one: What are the goals of the Louisiana TOPS Program? and research question two: To what extent do key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana? As explained in Chapter Three, elite interviewing is a form of in-depth semi-structured interviewing with an interviewee who is given special, non-standardized treatment (Dexter, 1970). According to Dexter, elite interviewing is the best approach to use when interacting with individuals who view themselves as the experts on the issue being researched. According to Dexter, experts are individuals who are usually well-informed about a topic or issue because of their direct experiences or research knowledge. Also, he defines non-standardized treatment as 1) stressing the interviewee’s definition of the situation, 2) encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation, and 3) letting the interviewee introduce to a considerable extent, his/her notions of what he/she regards as relevant, instead of relying upon the investigator’s notion relevance. For the purposes of this research, Dexter’s (1970) definitions of experts and non-standardized treatment were adopted. Through purposive sampling, fourteen individuals who played a significant role in the administration, policy development, or evaluation of the TOPS program were selected (See Table 14.30).

Table 4.21: Selected Experts for Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/ Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melanie Amrhein</td>
<td>Assistant Executive</td>
<td>Louisiana Office of Student Financial</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Assistance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack Guinn</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Emmert</td>
<td>Chancellor</td>
<td>Louisiana State University</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Jimmy Clark</td>
<td>Deputy Commissioner</td>
<td>Louisiana Board of Regents</td>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thressa Hay</td>
<td>Assistant Deputy Commissioner</td>
<td>Louisiana Board of Regents</td>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Joseph Savoie</td>
<td>Commissioner</td>
<td>Louisiana Board of Regents</td>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Wang</td>
<td>Education Policy Advisor</td>
<td>Governor’s Office</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy Koplin</td>
<td>Chief of Staff</td>
<td>Governor’s Office</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senator Gerald Thenuisen</td>
<td>Chair, Senate Education Committee</td>
<td>Louisiana Senate</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative Charles McDonald</td>
<td>State Representative</td>
<td>Louisiana House of Representatives</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. James Wharton</td>
<td>Chancellor Emeritus and Professor</td>
<td>Louisiana State University</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. James Callier for Mr. Patrick Taylor</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Taylor Foundation</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Walter Bumphus</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS)</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After identifying the principal data collection technique (in depth semi-structured elite interviews) and the fourteen expert individuals I began the data collection process. The scheduling of the interviews was one of the most difficult tasks to overcome. Dexter (1970) points out that being flexible around the schedules of elite interviewees is a necessity on the part of the interviewer. In scheduling the interviews, I also allowed the interviewee to select the location of the interview, consistent with Dexter’s instructions. At the start of each interview, I identified myself not only as a student and a researcher, but also as some one who had a genuine interest in the TOPS program and the impact that it has had on the citizenry in the state of Louisiana. After making that distinction, my role became one of an avid listener and a participant operating under the general elite interviewing principles as established by Dexter.

In this study, elite interviews provided an in-depth look at the overall goals of the TOPS scholarship program. Additionally, interviews provided many different perspectives and possible solutions to some of the identified problems with the program. One of the strengths of this study was its reliance on the voices of the “experts” to identify certain aspects of TOPS that were not made explicit in the legislation, statutes or policies.

**Data Analysis**

An interview guide was created and used as an outline during each interview. Concomitant to taping the sessions, I made field notes, consisting of analysis, descriptions and my thoughts at the time of their responses. This technique proved to be beneficial as I transcribed the interview data. In the interviews, I discussed with the participants their general views about the TOPS program and its putative goals. I asked them to discuss their direct involvement with TOPS and what role, if any, they played in the development of the TOPS program. I also asked them to recount what issues and problems they have seen arise since the inception of the TOPS program or since the onset of their
particular involvement with the program. I encouraged the participants to introduce any considerations that they deemed important and relevant to the TOPS program and I augmented the interviews with a review of available documents, committee meeting minutes, or any form of handouts that they could share with me from their various perspectives.

After each interview session, I analyzed each tape later that evening to ascertain if anything had gone wrong with the technical aspects (tape-recorder) or the interactional aspects (my role as interviewer). Each time that I listened, I compiled a list of notes on what to do and what to explore in subsequent interviews. As I listened and analyzed the tapes, I realized that, in many instances, I had lost opportunities for certain valuable information by not asking the appropriate follow-up questions. From this process, I was able to engage in follow-up conversations and correct or recapture information lost during the interview process.

In the analysis, I coded passages from the interview transcripts and documents and used the passages to identify key ideas and concepts to compare the statements and interpretations of the various participants. These strategies are best defined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and the comparative scheme analysis is outlined by Ragin and Zaret (1993). After thorough review of the existing literature on state merit based programs and after listening to the tapes of each interview several times, I concluded that there were several themes that emerged from the data derived from the fourteen interviews. Eventually, I developed themes and refined concepts and ideas that suggested collective meanings and allowed broader interpretations of the TOPS program, its implementation and policies. The themes coincided with my initial prediction of the goals that were directly related to research questions one and two.

The data required to answer the first and second research questions were taken from the interview guide items 1 and 2 (See Appendix F). The interviewees responded directly to each
question. Listed below are the responses to interview guide question # 2 which is directly related to research question # 1:

**Table 4:22: Goals of the TOPS Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Melanie Amrhein | 1. To encourage high school students to apply themselves and take the basic core curriculum  
|                 | 2. To reward high school students for their good academic performance on that set of core courses  
|                 | 3. To encourage the best and brightest students to remain in the state to pursue post-secondary opportunities |
| Jack Guinn      | 1. To encourage high school students to apply themselves and take the basic core curriculum  
|                 | 2. To reward high school students for their good academic performance on that set of core courses  
|                 | 3. To encourage the best and brightest students to remain in the state to pursue post-secondary opportunities |
| Mark Emmert     | 1. To encourage participation at colleges and universities in Louisiana by reducing financial disincentives  
|                 | 2. To encourage and reward academic performance  
|                 | 3. To influence high school curricula by specifying what constitutes a college prep/core curriculum  
|                 | 4. To encourage Louisiana students to remain in the state to attend college (table continues) |
| **Dr. Jimmy Clark** | 1. To encourage the best and brightest students to stay in Louisiana  
2. To promote access to post secondary educational opportunities  
3. To provide incentives to do well in high school and college by promoting a core curriculum  
4. Limiting the time it takes to complete an undergraduate degree by limiting the award to 8 semesters |
| **Theressa Hay** | 1. To keep the best and brightest students in Louisiana  
2. To provide a financial incentive for students to perform well in high school and to prepare for college by taking the core curriculum  
3. To serve as a benefit for the citizens of Louisiana |
| **Dr. Joseph Savoie** | 1. To encourage high school students to focus on a rigorous high school curriculum that would prepare them for college  
2. To retain the best and brightest in the state of Louisiana  
3. To serve as a financial incentive for good academic performance in participation in post-secondary educational opportunities |
| **Michael Wang** | 1. I see it as an opportunity to assist students who are likely to be successful, to assist them in their ability to pursue post secondary education  
2. To help retain talented individuals in the state of Louisiana Research shows have a tendency  
3. To serve as an incentive to improve the rigor of the high school curriculum as well as the number and percentage of students engaged in that rigorous high school curriculum |
| **Andy Koplin** | 1. I think that the goals were to expand access to college for students who had applied themselves  
2. It was a good incentive to keep students focused on their studies |

(table continues)
| Senator Gerald Thenuisen | 1. To promote access to post secondary educational opportunities  
|                          | 2. To promote success in high school by providing an incentive for success  
|                          | 3. To encourage parental involvement in students education through financial incentives  
|                          | 4. To keep the best and brightest students in Louisiana  |
| Representative Charles McDonald | 1. To motivate and attract students to post secondary education through financial incentives  
|                                | 2. To prepare students academically through the promotion of a core curriculum regardless of where they decided to pursue their post secondary educational opportunities – technical or community colleges or the four year universities  
|                                | 3. Goal was to attract our brighter minds to stay in the state  |
| Dr. James Wharton | 1. To encourage young people to understand that they can get a college degree regardless of their financial background  
|                          | 2. To promote success in a core curriculum (college preparatory courses)  
|                          | 3. To retain the best and brightest minds in Louisiana  |
| Mr. James Callier for Mr. Patrick Taylor | 1. To prepare students for success in college by taking the core curriculum (solid)  
|                                | 2. To give the students an incentive to do better in high school  
|                                | 3. To motivate parents to get involved in students education  
|                                | 4. To retain students in Louisiana  |
| Dr. Walter Bumphus | 1. To assist in maintaining Louisiana’s best and brightest students in the state to pursue post secondary educational opportunities  
|                          | 2. To serve as a financial incentive for students to perform well in their secondary educational endeavors  
|                          | 3. To promote success in a core curriculum  |
Goals of TOPS

As a result of the information displayed in Table 4:22, there were four consistent goals/themes that emerged from the articulated goals expressed by the interviewees. Those goals/themes are listed below in Table 4:23.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal 1:</td>
<td>To maintain Louisiana’s best and brightest students in the state to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 2</td>
<td>To promote access to post-secondary educational opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 3</td>
<td>To promote academic success by participating in a rigorous high school core curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal 4</td>
<td>To reward good academic performance with financial incentives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the interviewees felt the lack of expressed goals was indeed a major flaw that existed with the TOPS program. When I asked Louisiana’s Commissioner of Higher Education, Dr. Joseph Savoie, what were the goals of the TOPS program he stated:

That is the same question that I asked my staff when we were given the direction to analyze and make recommendations on the TOPS program. There were no stated or universally agreed upon goals that I could sense, and I don’t think that there are now. I think that is one of the shortcomings, because you can’t guide policy unless you know what it is you are trying to accomplish. So, I think different people, have different senses of what TOPS is all about. That’s one thing that we’re going to present to the legislature in the spring (2004), is that you’ve got to decide what you want the goals of this program to be. In other words, what are the priority intents of this program because if we don’t know what those are then we don’t know if it is being successful or not, so it’s all anecdotal at this point.

He went on to express what he perceived as the goals of TOPS based on his experiences and anecdotal data (See Table 4.22).

The lack of concise goals for state merit programs of this kind is not unique to Louisiana. Research indicates that this is an ongoing challenge in many states (Heller & Marin, 2002). Dr. James Wharton, Chancellor Emeritus of Louisiana State University and Professor of Chemistry, expressed similar sentiments about the expressed goals of the TOPS program. As a result of his concerns about the absence of the expressed goals and proper reporting of the effectiveness of the
program, he encouraged Representative William Daniels to propose a bill that would require the Board of Regents to make a progress report to the Louisiana Legislature on an annual basis. This document, which was originally titled “TOPS Notes,” was eventually written in the form of a bill and was passed by both houses of the Louisiana Legislature as Act 1202 during the 2002 legislative session. The first report as mandated by Act 1202 will be presented during the 2004 legislative session.

**Emerged Themes**

Research question two: To what extent do key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana? was also directly addressed by qualitative data in the form of interview guide question three. Again, after closely analyzing the responses to this question from all fourteen interviewees, I identified five emerging themes and how they related conceptually to the four core goals of the TOPS program. Those themes are listed in Table 4:24.

**Table 4:24 Emerging Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key words/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to Success</td>
<td>access</td>
<td>geographic, legal, academic, financial,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>retention, graduation, preparation, SES,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>minority, opportunity, credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Choice</td>
<td>choice</td>
<td>decision, college, options, skills, scholarships,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>award packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of High School Curriculum</td>
<td>quality-hsc</td>
<td>academic preparation, core, GPA, credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Universities</td>
<td>quality-c</td>
<td>private, public, facilities, labs, residence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>student activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Impact on Families</td>
<td>cost</td>
<td>grants, loans, merit aid, tuition, student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>aid, affordability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While analyzing the interview transcripts, I discovered several consistent themes that were saturated throughout the data. For the purposes of research, however, I had to narrow down my choices to the ones that I felt were more important and would be the most beneficial in responding to research question two. In the initial coding phases, I noted and recorded repetitive themes in the interviewees description of their involvement with TOPS. When I reexamined the data to explore the prevalence of the codes that I had identified, I found additional themes that began to emerge. Through selective coding strategies, however, I was able to focus more specifically on the category of TOPS goals and the impact it has had on the state of Louisiana. The systematic expressions of the interviewees resulted in my ability to provide a clear picture of how TOPS plays such a significant role in so many aspects of our state. After uncovering the five themes that are described in Table 4:33, I then proceeded to expound on each theme and incorporate how the responses of each interviewee substantiated each.

**Access**

Consistent with the research literature, access to higher education in the state of Louisiana was a dominant theme for the administrators, legislators and policy makers that I interviewed. Dr. Joseph Savoie was very passionate about the topic of “access” and spent a considerable amount of his interview talking about how Louisiana has addressed its access goals through the master plan. Dr. Savoie states:

The Louisiana Master Plan for Higher Education, while it is explicit in talking about increasing opportunities, it is also implicit in a lot of the strategies which may or may not be obvious. In fact, we have three specific goals that address increasing opportunity for student access to success. Some specific objectives to increase participation are kind of broad. One goal is to increase enrollment by 2% by the year 2007. Now that may not sound like a lot, but it’s in the face of a 6% decline in the number of high school graduates. So you can’t get there unless you have a larger proportion of your high school graduates who go on to post-
secondary opportunities, because we do not have a growing population like most states do. In fact, we’re the only state in the south that is projected to have a decline in the number of high school graduates. Well our enrollment goal doesn’t make sense unless you do something aggressive to change what would be the natural result. So multiple efforts at that, making sure that there are services available in each region of the state, and that has a lot to do with community college development and learning center in Alexandria and the learning center down in West Jefferson Parish, the additional role for Sowela and Fletcher Technical and Community Colleges, all play a part in making sure those services are available. To make sure that from a structural standpoint that there is access, but then not only access but the quality or the ability to prepare for success once you get there. That’s multilayered as well, number one the admissions criteria are going to do that because they are a statement of what you need to do in order to be prepared in order to be successful. And, if you want to go to a four year school, you’ve go to do it, so there is a carrot and stick involved there. We matched it with TOPS purposefully because there is a lot of talk about being higher than TOPS, but because admissions criteria is so new, we didn’t want to confuse people. You have a set of criteria for TOPS; you’ve got a set of criteria for admissions; you’ve got a second set of criteria for admissions at LSU. It was just too much, so we wanted to simplify as much as possible, and everyone seems to be familiar with the TOPS criteria. It also provides a financial incentive, instead of just being admitted. Then we work to make sure that students would have access to those courses. Up until just a few years ago, not every high school offered those core courses, and now all but a handful do, those who don’t are in rural northeast Louisiana. But, we’ve got all of the courses available free, online, or in a variety of delivery modes, either on the internet or interactive audio/video or tape with a teacher aid you can go in and answer questions from North Western. So we’ve got all that and it’s all based on ACT’s standards for transition so every course has what ACT says it’s supposed to have
and any high school could access it to make it available for students so there should be no question about access to the courses.

Dr. Savoie’s comments addressed two of the fundamental issues that are key to improving access in the state of Louisiana: 1) Access to post secondary opportunities from a structural standpoint and 2) Access to adequate sources of academic preparation (core curriculum) to be successful in post secondary endeavors. His comments also substantiated how TOPS is interwoven into the “access fabric” and how it will be instrumental in reaching the goals as outlined in the Master Plan.

Researchers note that the challenges associated with access from a national perspective are very similar. The access dilemma is often linked to enrollment gaps and substandard public education in minority communities (Heller & Marin, 2002). Many researchers argue that state merit programs like TOPS serve as limiters to access by taking away from aid that should be designated to needy (minority and low-income) students. While philosophically I agree, in part, with this concept, I posit that Louisiana demonstrates one way in which a state merit program is used as an incentive to improve the quality of schools that are located in minority communities. This ultimately leads to better prepared students who can then take advantage of merit aid.

**College Choice**

College choice was another theme that emerged from the interview discussions centered around how TOPS has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana. Policy makers have given a considerable amount of attention to the college choice process over the past thirty years (Heller, 2002). They have often identified five factors that most significantly relate to a students’ decisions to pursue a college education: student academic ability, parental encouragement, socioeconomic status, participation in extracurricular activities, and parents’ level of education. While other research concurs with these findings, it often indicates that socioeconomic status tends to outweigh the others. Chancellor Mark Emmert stated:

I think there is good evidence, especially at LSU, that (TOPS) has also promoted students
coming to LSU that would have otherwise left Louisiana for higher education. That has clearly been a positive effect. I think it has increased access for some significant portion of its recipients. The other significant portion would have attended college any way, but for many I’m sure it had a positive impact on not just access but choice. I think that has been one of the unintended side effects of TOPS. By that, I mean that when you’ve essentially removed price from the selection decision, because all state universities, for a TOPS eligible student, are virtually free. Prior to TOPS you may have found a student from Lake Charles who might have said, “Gee, I think I’m going to go to McNeese because I have to pay tuition and if I live at home it’s less expensive and so I’m going to stay there.” Where as now, that same student can say, “Gee, I don’t have to pay tuition, I think I’ll go to LSU because I can afford room and board.”

Consistent with the literature, Theressa Hay of the Louisiana Board of Regents further substantiated how TOPS plays a significant role in the college selection processes of Louisiana’s college bound students. She states:

Now, TOPS has also, and I think a benefit is, it may afford students to go to the university of their choice rather than be limited by how much they can afford. A student who lives in north Louisiana may certainly now have an opportunity to go to LSU because TOPS helps them financially. And, so it’s a win/win for the student. If they are better prepared, then they can succeed at a school like LSU, but it may help them get there and normally, they would have considered going to a regional institution, not that going to one of those institutions is a bad thing, but students should, if they are prepared at a level, have a choice as to where they want to go to school.

A student’s socioeconomic status was also a strong indicator of college attendance because it can open doors of access to certain students or limit their ability to even consider attending college.
The literature suggests that financial issues are definitely key factors in the college choice process. Several of the interviewees, however, suggest that when the cost factor is removed from the college choice process, most students will choose the college that is often considered a premier institution. Others argue that programs like TOPS are likely to affect not only the propensity to enroll in college (and, more specifically to go to four year institutions), but also students’ choices among institutions.

**Quality of Universities**

Consistent with the literature on the quality of America’s universities, several of the interviewees indicated their views on how TOPS has a positive impact on the quality and improvement of colleges and universities in Louisiana. Ideally, most institutions look to tuition increases to make improvements centered around the concept of increasing their competitiveness in attracting better students. Such improvements include building new and refurbishing old facilities, increasing the number of support services offered, upgrading technology and other infrastructures, and focusing on other attributes that are necessary to improve the attractiveness of the college.

According to a majority of the interviewees, the TOPS award has served as “a carrot” to attract better students and because TOPS covers tuition, it has allowed colleges and universities to focus on other areas. According to Chancellor Emmert:

> I think it has allowed us (LSU) to more aggressively increase our admissions standards. Because we did have students who are now able to have financial incentives to stay in Louisiana rather than go to Georgia for example. And so we’ve been able to move our admissions standards up more aggressively and attract a pool of students that used to leave Louisiana but now they are staying here because of price and because of quality.

Dr. James Wharton further substantiates this notion by stating:

> TOPS combined with admissions requirements, has improved our graduate rates dramatically; it’s improved our retention rates dramatically. When we started to increase our admissions standards years ago, our grad rate was 30%. It is now over 60% and that is due in large part
Dr. Wharton also attributes the increase in graduation rates to having students who are better prepared to enter college. Ultimately he feels that this factor could be directly attributable to TOPS. If you prepare in high school then you will be a better student in college and we have been able to prove that....That those students require less remediation when they are in four year institutions. They are retained longer, and they do graduate at a faster rate.

Dr. Joseph Savoie contends that TOPS has had an indirect impact on the quality of the state’s colleges and universities because of the unprecedented attention it has drawn to higher education in Louisiana. Subsequently, because the “public eye” is so focused on TOPS and obtaining free college tuition for their respective family members, it is inevitable that they would turn their attention to the institutions that will provide such an important service at the cost of the state. Such attention brings about a greater demand for accountability and the assurance that quality services are being provided to the students. Dr. Savoie stated:

I think it (TOPS) has focused the attention more on higher education because it’s such a popular program. There are regular discussions by the media, parents, counselors, and schools that touch on the many aspects of the TOPS program. I think it clearly has made more discussions like taking the right kinds of courses in high school. It has a real value and not an esoteric value. There have been, I guess, hundreds of articles about TOPS in the media since it’s inception, and I don’t know that we’ve had like that in a discussion of higher education and its importance and preparing for it and the value of it without TOPS. Ultimately this has resulted in what I call a heightened sense of public awareness. And with that awareness comes the spinoff advantage of people being concerned about the Universities. So they’ve been kind of more engaged in the discussions of the viability of our university systems than they probably would have been without all of the public discussion on
tops, because that spins off...our kids are earning a scholarship....are the schools doing a good job. So to me that’s an advantage because the more people think about us, the more concern they have for us, and the more support we get in the appropriations process.

**Quality of High School Academic Climate and Curricula**

“Taking a challenging, college preparatory curriculum is critical to students' success,” said Representative Charles McDonald, "I encourage all parents, teachers, and academic officials to emphasize the importance of being prepared to succeed in higher education to Louisiana’s young people." As the debate continues among higher education leaders in the state of Louisiana and indeed the nation, a closer look must be taken at how state merit aid is impacting the academic climate and curricula at the secondary education level. Because eligibility for merit aid scholarships is contingent on a high level of academic performance in high school, one might expect such a program to influence the effort expanded by students in high school. In light of the financial rewards available, it is also conceivable to expect parents to offer encouragement to their high school children beyond the normal level of parental support. More importantly, parents are expected to hold the public school systems accountable for providing the type quality education needed to take advantage of such awards.

A majority of the interviewees for this research also agree that the successful completion of an identified core curriculum will result in immediate improvements in the types of students that are produced to go on to post-secondary institutions. TOPS, through its requirements, promotes the completion of a core curriculum. The TOPS core curriculum, which is also consistent with the Board of Regents Core Curriculum, is outlined in Table 4:34.

While Dr. Joseph Savoie is in support of all students participating in a rigorous high school core curriculum, he is not certain if TOPS has a direct impact on the increase in core participation in Louisiana. He stated:

We are actually now in the process of analyzing data, and it looks like those are the trends...that is, more students are taking college preparatory curriculum. We also have data
which verifies that students who have taken the core curriculum do much better than those who didn’t. TOPS recipients have better retention rates. And, I think this last year was the first graduating class, and so we’ve got some data on graduation rates of TOPS recipients vs non TOPS recipients. Now that’s a rough cut though, because I don’t know that you could conclude that TOPS created those results because it’s just as likely that the fact that they took the right courses in high school created those results. No one depends on the other, but a lot of those kids may have been taking those courses anyway because they were college bound, so they took a college bound curriculum. You don’t know whether TOPS necessarily provided the additional emphasis or motivation for them to take those courses. You could maybe determine that if you look at the college going rate has improved, and I think it has so at least there is that evidence which would indicate such a pattern. The fact that it has a time limit on it probably has impacted graduate rates for students trying to maintain TOPS, and know that it runs out after a certain period of time. I think they did a longitudinal study on that and I don’t know if we have enough for just one year to be firm in that conclusion although it is very likely.

Dr. Clark believes that because of TOPS, discussions are being held at all levels that ultimately reinforce the importance in participating in a core curriculum. He stated:

There has always been a TOPS core, and what the Master Plan has done, by identifying the Regents core, which for the time being is the exact same as the TOPS core, is reinforced the need, if you’re going to go to a four year institution, regardless of if you’re a TOPS recipient or not, you need to be prepared. I think it has helped to reinforce, I think it’s caused there to be discussion not only at the student level, but at the teacher level, the counselor level and the school board level, that college preparation is important for ultimate success. There’s one thing to get into college, it’s another thing to graduate from college. And, every study, obviously, that we’ve looked at shows that the number one indicator for potential college
success is the difficulty or the level of preparation, the vigor or the curriculum the student took in high school.

Dr. Clark’s comments further validate what researchers argue about the importance of ALL students participating in a rigorous core curriculum. He further expressed the importance of a core curriculum in the following statement:

And so, do I think that the existence of a TOPS core is important, absolutely, do I think that in the early phases of the TOPS program, that there could have been a better identification of the core, probably so, I’m hoping that what we’re doing at the Regents in terms of “Core or More” and having tied our (Board of Regents) core into the TOPS core is helping. Now, frankly, I think that there needs to be an evaluation and that’s one of the things that we’re doing right now on a couple of things, is looking at the courses that have been identified as the TOPS core courses in terms of whether or not they deem the taking of those, regardless of whether you have TOPS or not leads to a better propensity for success in the post secondary education environment. The question that comes to mind, is that do two years of foreign languages really make a difference to a person’s ability to succeed in a four year institution. And we’re looking at that very carefully now. The development of the student transfer system, which I think is going to be so key to all of these studies, is actually occurring as we speak. In moving forward, if we need to collect transcript level data on individual in 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th graders and 12th and this past year, we finally had the 12th grade transcripts as a result of the TOPS program. And of course we were there because of the change of them finding eligibility for not only their standard high school GPA but for core GPA, and a continued to focus on CORE is absolutely needed necessary and if TOPS has done nothing else, it has allowed us to piggy back on that notion. Nationally, the discussion of achievement gaps between identifiable demographic populations, be they rural, be they ethnic, be they gender, be they what ever, has become a serious, serious focus. No Child Left
Behind, discussion is taking place and I think that we are ahead of the game in terms of having recognized and understood that we need a rigorous core, everyone needs a rigorous core to be potentially successful. Regardless of if you’re in the LTC, Community College, or a 4 year institution.

Michael Wang, Governor Foster’s Education Policy Advisor spoke to the impact TOPS has had on the ability of high schools to offer every course in the TOPS core curriculum. This was not always the case as of the last 5 years. Mr. Wang stated:

I absolutely have no doubt that TOPS promotion of a core curriculum is working, and that is evidenced by the fact there is no high school in the state today, that can’t, either via distance learning, or some other forum, provide students with access to the TOPS curriculum. More students are taking that curriculum than ever before and we’re seeing it in the numbers, we have lower remediation rates at the universities today than we had when TOPS was first implemented, we have more students taking those rigorous courses.

**Economic Impact on Families**

A shared belief among most Americans is that a college education has quickly become the equivalent to what a high school education was over twenty years ago. Specifically, it has become the necessary element for a good job and comfortable lifestyle. The Higher Education Act of 1965 focused primarily on providing affordable educational opportunities to all citizens, but especially to those citizens who were the most needy. Hence, the nation saw a shift in the concentration of federal and state funding from merit aid to need based aid. This was a major step in decreasing the financial burdens that were often placed on families who choose to send their children to college.

During the past decade, however, we have seen a reversal in the shift that occurred over thirty-eight years ago. Since the early 1990s, states have been investing in strategies for awarding aid that does not focus on financial need, but instead academic merit. While merit aid programs still provide some financial relief to families, many researchers argue that they do not provide relief to the
families that need it the most. The elite interviewees that were associated with this research had mixed views on the economic impact of state merit aid. More specifically, a majority of them thought that TOPS has had a significant impact on the citizens and families in the state of Louisiana. The type of impact is still in question. Listed below is an example of how much TOPS has benefitted Louisiana families over the past five years (See Table 4:38). In its initial year of operation in 1997-1998, the TOPS program awarded $69.6 million to 4,432 students, or an average award of $1,609 per student (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2002). In its second year, the program expanded to award $69.6 million to 56,289 students, with approximately 57 percent of the dollars going to existing TOPS recipients renewing their scholarships, and the remainder awarded to incoming students (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2002). In 1999 the TOPS program awarded $131.5 million to over 70,200 students (Louisiana Board of Regents). When the overall financial impact of TOPS is observed, it is clear that Louisiana has raised its commitment to providing post secondary educational opportunities to its citizens than in previous years. Chancellor Mark Emmert stated:

I think TOPS also has unintended economic impacts on families. I think that families that once were saving for college, and we have anecdotal evidence that suggest that families are saying well look if you go to LSU or an in-state school, instead of Alabama or Georgia, then we’ll be in a position to do other things, like buy you a car, let you go on a vacation, let you live a more attractive lifestyle by maybe having an apartment or there are other lifestyle choices that may or may not have educational impact. Don’t have empirical evidence of that, but lots of anecdotal evidence of that.

Dr. Jimmy Clark contends that:

TOPS has become a way for legislators to respond to the needs of their middle class constituents. And to maintain a mechanism where by the citizenry of Louisiana feels as though they are getting something directly back from their taxes, regardless of the intention of
the policy itself. The state appropriated budget for TOPS has increased progressively since it’s inception in 1997. (See Table 4:34)

Data from the Noel Levitz Survey on the impact of the use of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid as the common application for the TOPS program revealed that parents are especially concerned about the price of higher education (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2002). I argue that these concerns are warranted as the rising prices of higher education are a threat to access and will make such opportunities inaccessible to many people. Conversely, the Noel Levitz Survey also revealed that parents of high school students are optimistic that their children will be able to get a higher education degree because many of them are sufficiently qualified and motivated to attend college.

Dr. Clark further substantiated the claims of Noel Levitz and adds an interesting perspective on how TOPS has influenced Louisiana’s ability to regulate tuition as he stated the following:

There are lots of ways that TOPS has impacted Higher Education in Louisiana, from seemingly mundane yet consequential impacts such as the debate on tuition and the ability to raise tuition. One may say, what does that have to do with TOPS? Well it has everything to do with TOPS. I’m suggesting that there are some impacts of TOPS that maybe don’t tie directly to the goals that we talked about in terms of affordability, in terms of keeping the best and the brightest. For instance, I find that TOPS and the existence of TOPS probably has had more impact on policy discussions, legislative discussions both at the table and behind closed doors, that have impacted the ability of management boards and campuses and ultimately the Board of Regents to effectively develop a tuition policy that is in the best interest of all parties. Citizens, legislators, and campus administrators are all impacted in some way. And, we’ve had the most restrictive and continue to have the most restrictive legislation to where 2/3 of both houses have to pass fee increases and so we’ve had to become, as a post secondary education community very creative to get around that, and so you have educational
enhancement fees that are now a part of the educational landscape. Instead of just having a
direct tuition cost, and obviously because of TOPS, because the legislature cannot afford to
pick up that addition. The impact that has had just in this past year when this educational
enhancement has become prolific at all levels. From technical colleges to community
colleges to 4 year institutions, and the questions that have been raised on both the campus
level and the management board level and here the phone calls from people saying what is
going on with these hidden cost, why am I paying this. I thought TOPS paid everything. And
so those types of discussions impact individuals in a very adverse way, impact policy makers
and decision makers in terms of trying to create policy that truly makes sense it gives a clear
road-map in terms of where we need to head and how we can get there on affordability issues
and so its ...that’s one area that I think it has had a direct impact. It has had an impact in
terms of (in a positive way) just engaging individuals and families, parents and students at a
much earlier age about the prospects of how to afford post secondary education or college.
And I would refer specifically to the findings we’ve had with our explore assessment
instrument which is the eight grade assessment that ACT utilizes as a part of its E-pass
program (Education Planning and Assessment Program). ACT has been profoundly amazed
at the high levels of responses that are garnered in that assessment that Louisiana eight
graders when they ask what they need help with or what they would like to learn more about.
And the number one response is that they would like to learn more about how to afford or pay
for college. And, in other areas of the country, that is not the response. Over 76% of our
eight graders indicate that they want to know more about paying for college. (eight graders)
and we believe and ACT believes that this is a direct response of the TOPS program.

As the literature suggests, one of the most widely expressed concerns of the public is the affordability
of post secondary educational opportunities. One of the fundamental assumptions that was derived
from the interviewees that are charged with administering and evaluating the TOPS program is that for the state of Louisiana, TOPS is playing a major role in addressing those concerns. The interviewees at all levels affirmed that they believe in and are committed to the continued support of higher education in the state of Louisiana. Not only does it serve as the cornerstone of a more enlightened and well-equipped citizenry, but it also ensures stability, growth, and prosperity for the state in years to come.

In summary, it is important to note the goals and themes that emerged from the qualitative data. The four putative goals of TOPS include the following: 1) to maintain Louisiana’s best and brightest students in the state to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities, 2) to promote access to post-secondary educational opportunities, 3) to promote academic success by participating in a rigorous high school core curriculum, and 4) to reward good academic performance with financial incentives. The five major themes of the TOPS program that emerged from the data are 1) access to success, 2) college choice, 3) quality of high school curriculum, 4) quality of colleges and universities, and 5) economic impact on families. The information/data that was revealed by the individuals who I identified as experts, based on their credentials, was applicable in every aspect. Consistent with my preconceived thoughts, these individuals affirmed that to implement a policy, the local stakeholders must find some way to make sense of the goals, assumptions and expectations that they ascribe to the policy, and to reconcile them with the culture of their organization in some systematic fashion. This happened to be an inherent flaw with the TOPS program. While there are many different viewpoints among legislators, policy makers, administrators, parents and students about the goals of the perfect state merit aid program, based on the data, TOPS remains to be one of the most comprehensive programs of its type in the nation.

**Qualitative Survey Data Results**

Section two (Pre-Thought Exercise) of the survey instrument (TOPS Effectiveness Questionnaire) consisted of three open-ended questions: (1) How did TOPS influence your
Collectively, the responses to those questions yielded 1537 qualitative items to be analyzed and interpreted. The questions solicited data about how TOPS influenced the students’ educational experiences before and during college. In addition, this section contained one question that allowed the participants to provide opinions on how the TOPS program could be improved based on their experiences. This question was also instrumental in providing recommendations for possible topics for future research. As predicted by Patton (1990), the responses were presented in several formats, such as single words, brief phrases and full paragraphs of text. Consequently, a considerable amount of time was spent reading and re-reading the text to identify coherent themes. Once the themes were identified, they were linked to the factor labels to determine common themes relevant to the students’ perceptions of the TOPS program. The following descriptive labels (codes) were assigned to each of the identified themes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key words/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved high school study habits</td>
<td>Study (HS)</td>
<td>“made sure to get good grades in high school in order to receive TOPS,” work hard, good grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved college study habits</td>
<td>Study (COL)</td>
<td>study, go to class, drop courses, graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to strive for better grades</td>
<td>Persist</td>
<td>“made sure to get good grades in high school,” try harder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4:26 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 2

**Factor 2 - Prior Knowledge about TOPS (PREKNOW)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key words/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influenced decision to take classes in high school</td>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>“I had to take the required high school courses to get TOPS,” mandatory, classes, set curriculum, “dictated what courses to take,”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced familiarity with requirements to receive TOPS</td>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>GPA, requirements, residency, substitutions, core curriculum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4:27 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 3

**Factor 3 - Cost (COST)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key words/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influenced ability to afford college</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>money, opportunity, less expensive, “school for free”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase the award amount</td>
<td>Increase $</td>
<td>books, tuition, technology fee, academic excellence, job, employment, off-campus, loans, scholarships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4:28 - Qualitative themes from survey related to Factor 5

**Factor 5 - Award Criteria (AWRCRIT)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Key words/phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raise or lower the academic requirements</td>
<td>Standards</td>
<td>ACT, GPA, raise, lower, stringent, requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend the length of time to complete</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>extend, time, semesters, summer, graduate school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once all of the data was transcribed and coded into themes, I began to observe patterns and connections both within and between the categories of questionnaire data and the data resulting from the elite interviews. These relationships were clear indicators of the connectedness of state merit aid and the access dilemma. More importantly, the relationships demonstrated that two important classes of Louisiana citizens, administrators, policy makers and students shared similar beliefs about the TOPS program.

**Qualitative Survey Data Summary**

In summary, qualitative data acquired from the survey instrument revealed eleven consistent themes that were directly related to five of the six established factors resulting from the quantitative factor analysis. The themes were further divided into two categories of either “influences” or “recommendations.” Those themes, as indicated in tables 4:25 - 4:29 were 1) improved high school study habits, 2) improved college study habits, 3) encouraged to strive for better grades, 4) influenced decision to take certain courses in high school, 5) influenced familiarity with requirements to receive TOPS, 6) influenced ability to afford college, 7) influenced decision to go to college in the state, 8) increase the award amount, 9) raise or lower the academic requirements, 10) extend the length of
time to complete a degree on TOPS, 11) allow residents who leave the state to return and maintain eligibility.

The themes revealed from this section represent the perceptions of the participants at the time the survey was administered. The implications, however of the influences and recommendations are far reaching. For example, participants indicated that not only does the retention factor of TOPS improve their study habits in college, but it also motivated them to study harder while in high school to obtain TOPS. This notion implies that motivation and expectation are key elements of success for students who are in both secondary and post secondary education. The data revealed through these themes also indicate that there is a great need for financial assistance beyond the first post secondary degree. These data also reveal that although students may leave the state initially, many of them return Louisiana to either complete unfinished degrees or to take advantage of post baccalaureate opportunities in the state.

The final open-ended question allowed the participants to provide their opinions on how the TOPS program could be improved based on their experiences. The most frequently listed improvement to the TOPS program related to the award amount and the desire to have it increased. While 48% of all respondents either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the current TOPS awards were sufficient to cover the cost of tuition, approximately 68% of all qualitative responses indicated that they wanted the award increased. Other comments ranged from raising or lowering the GPA requirement to keep TOPS to extending the amount of time that the award is available to include graduate school.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, MAJOR FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to assess the Louisiana TOPS program a) to determine its primary goals according to key administrators, policy makers and legislators, b) to determine the extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana, and c) to ascertain perceptions of students on the influence of the TOPS program on their educational experiences. This intent of this study was to answer to the following three questions:

1. What are the goals of the Louisiana TOPS program?

2. To what extent do key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana?

3. What has been the influence of the TOPS program on the educational experiences of current TOPS recipients?

Measuring the general impact of a program of this nature is broad in both scope and ambition, therefore eight smaller and more specific objectives were developed. The first objective focused on gaining a better understanding of the demographic characteristics of the students in the study. Objectives two through eight focused on gaining a better understanding of students perceptions of the TOPS program, as measured by response items on the survey instrument; of key interest were student perceptions in the following areas: knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college, influence of TOPS on their academic performance, awareness of TOPS, criteria required to obtain a TOPS award, impact of TOPS on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities, impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college, and the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions. The eight research objectives formulated to measure the “impact” or “influence” of the TOPS program were as follows:
1. To describe and compare all survey respondents who are recipients of the TOPS Award based on the following personal and educational demographic characteristics: a) gender b) race c) age d) classification e) residency status f) parent(s) education level g) family income h) academic major i) grade point average (GPA) and j) ACT score.

2. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their knowledge about TOPS prior to starting college.

3. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the influence of TOPS on their academic performance.

4. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding their awareness of TOPS.

5. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the criteria required to obtain a TOPS award.

6. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their decision to pursue post-secondary opportunities.

7. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their ability to afford college.

8. To determine the perceptions of all survey respondents regarding the impact that TOPS had on their personal decisions.

Summary of Methods

This study used a mixed-methods design involving quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data was collected primarily using elite interviews. Additional qualitative data was collected from the three qualitative questions that were listed on the survey instrument. The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain data pertinent to the research questions one and two which were centered around ascertaining the goals of TOPS and the impact it has had on the status of higher education in Louisiana. Emerging themes were identified and concepts were organized and labeled according to the established coding system. The quantitative data was collected using a forty-one
question survey instrument which was administered to a sample of approximately 500 TOPS recipients at Louisiana State University. The instrument (researcher developed) was designed to measure student perceptions of the TOPS program and utilized a five point Likert-type scale. The instrument also captured various pieces of demographic student data.

Summary of Findings

While the volume of information generated from this study was massive, only the most relevant and important findings will be discussed in this section.

Major Finding #1

Perceived goals of the Louisiana TOPS Program

The lack of clearly expressed goals for the TOPS program was cited as a major flaw by many of the administrators, legislators and policy makers interviewed for this study. Consistently, the lack of concise goals for the state’s top merit program was articulated. However, research suggests that this problem is not one which is unique to Louisiana as many other state wrestle with this very issue. This process of conducting elite interviews resulted in four primary goals of the TOPS program being identified. The goals of the TOPS program were identified as being:

1) To maintain Louisiana’s best and brightest students in the state to pursue post-secondary educational opportunities.

2) To promote access to post-secondary educational opportunities.

3) To promote academic success by participating in a rigorous high school core curriculum.

4) To reward good academic performance with financial incentives.
Major Finding #2

The extent to which key administrators, policy makers and legislators believe that TOPS has impacted the status of higher education in Louisiana

While the responses to this question were varied in both scope and detail, the direction of the responses seemed to be positive in nature. The majority of responses viewed the TOPS initiative as having a positive impact upon higher education. A careful analysis of interview responses resulted in the following five emerging categories which TOPS was credited with impacting:

1) Access to Success
2) College Choice
3) Quality of High School Curriculum
4) Quality of Universities
5) Economic Impact on Families

Major Finding #3

TOPS Participants are familiar with the TOPS Program and its requirements prior to beginning college

Survey results indicate that TOPS participants are familiar with all aspects of the TOPS program. Participants are familiar with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school and have gained much of their knowledge about the TOPS program through their high school counselor. Participants reported that they were aware of the TOPS requirements for admission, and that they were familiar with the award criteria and the award levels and the retention requirements to maintain TOPS prior to starting college. It appears that lack of “knowledge” or education about the TOPS program was not a problem for participants in the present study. It would be even more interesting to survey those who are still in high school to see if their level of familiarity is the same as those who are no longer in high school. Those who have left high school and who are receiving TOPS would naturally report a higher level of familiarity with TOPS then those who are not current
recipients of TOPS and those who are currently in high school. It might also be interesting to survey those who did not get a TOPS scholarship but who were qualified to determine if they cite a lacked familiarity or knowledge of the program.

Further mean analysis of items addressing this area found differences in responses based on demographic characteristics of the respondents. Some of the more detailed findings were:

1) Caucasian American students were more familiar with TOPS than all other races prior to starting college.
2) African Americans students became familiar with TOPS through their high school guidance counselors a considerable amount more than Caucasians and Hispanics students. 3) Females became familiar with TOPS through their high school guidance counselor more than males.
4) Students with the highest ACT scores reported a greater level of familiarity with TOPS before starting college and were also more familiar with the various TOPS awards.
5) Younger students indicated that they were more familiar with the various TOPS award levels than older students, however, older students appear to be more familiar with TOPS prior to starting college than the younger TOPS recipients.

Major Finding #4

**African American students are less likely to receive TOPS awards**

Only 8.2% of the LSU sample (and 6.9% of the LSU population) were African American. However, according to the 2003 ACT- High School Profile Report African Americans taking the ACT (N=10,775) had an average ACT score of 16.7 and those with core or more had an average ACT score of 17.5. Given the ACT requirements for TOPS, 20 or higher, it may be possible that this group of students do not easily meet the TOPS ACT requirements and that is why they are not receiving a larger portion of TOPS awards. A review of ACT scores by ability level (GPA) for this
ethnic group also shows great disparity, as 50% of the African American students who take the ACT seem to have a GPA which qualifies them for TOPS. It is possible that African American students are meeting the GPA requirements but their low ACT scores are making them ineligible for receiving the TOPS award. Further study in this area is clearly needed to better understand why African Americans are not receiving a larger portion of TOPS awards.

Both nationally and locally (Louisiana) research supports the notion that a rigorous high school curriculum consisting of college-preparatory courses has a huge payoff as it relates to better ACT scores. Commissioner Savoie stated that “a key predictor of students’ achievement on the ACT Assessment and their subsequent success in college is the completion of college-preparatory courses during high school.” Dr. Clark further validated the Commissioner’s statement by adding that “students who have taken a core curriculum of college-prep courses – defined as at least four years of English and three years each of math (algebra and above), social sciences, and natural sciences (with lab experience) – tend to score significantly higher on the ACT Assessment than those who have not completed this core curriculum. This is true across all gender, ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries.” Further study in this area is clearly needed to better understand why African Americans are not receiving a larger portion of TOPS awards.

Further mean analysis of items addressing this area found differences in Academic readiness based on demographic characteristics of the respondents. Some of the more detailed findings were:

1) 20% of African Americans agreed that the TOPS criteria was too stringent, as opposed to 7% of Caucasians.

2) 81% of African Americans and 71% of Caucasians agreed that their GPA had been influenced by their efforts to retain TOPS.

3) 68% of African Americans and 58% of Caucasians agreed that TOPS had a direct influence on their academic performance.
Interestingly, finding number two is a source of possible contradiction as 26% (n=155) of the respondents in this survey are reporting a GPA of less than 2.5, which potentially places them in danger of losing their TOPS scholarship. Of those who have less than a 2.5 GPA African Americans account for 16%. However, when African Americans are compared amongst themselves, 26% of all African Americans have a GPA of less than 2.5%

**Major Finding #5**

**Students from low income families are less likely to be recipients of TOPS awards**

The group to receive the smallest number of TOPS awards is also the poorest group. Students of lower income parents, defined as less than $25,000 combined family income, are receiving only 6% of the TOPS award according to sample data. The proportion in this same income level is slightly larger at the LSU population level, with 8.2% of all TOPS recipients having a family income of less than $25,000. Collectively, students with family incomes less than $35,000 represent 15% of the sample in this study and 13.6% of the target population (LSU). When ethnicity was considered, 20% of African Americans had a family income of less than $25,000 as opposed to 4% of Caucasians.

The largest group to receive the TOPS award was also the wealthiest group, with 42% of those receiving TOPS having family incomes greater than $75,000. This was true for the sample and was also true for the population, but at greater percentages with 60% of LSU TOPS awards going to students with family incomes greater than $75,000. Generally TOPS recipients tend to be those students from middle to upper-middle income families. Interestingly, these families are those which would be expected to be able to afford to pay for college. However, financial need and ability to pay are not requirements for a TOPS award, as it is a merit based award. Does this mean then, that those with greater family incomes also seem to be more qualified to receive a TOPS awards and are therefore more likely to receive the TOPS award? Data suggests that this just may be the case. The
role of family income is discussed in the next finding.

**Major Finding #6**

**Money Matters: family income, college cost and the TOPS award were key factors in the decision and the ability to attend college**

Overall, without regard to family income, 49% of respondents agreed (and strongly agreed) that the TOPS award was a factor in their decision to attend college, while 44% disagreed (or strongly disagreed). Those with greater family incomes have less of a need for financial assistance. As such, they are less likely to be concerned with the cost of college attendance or the TOPS award. Given the family income breakdown of those receiving the TOPS award, it is quite plausible that “cost” and therefore the “award” was not a factor to those of higher family income brackets, but that it was a factor for those of lower income brackets. The MANOVA results discussed in Chapter 4 supports this explanation as it indicated that family income had a statistically significant effect on both the attendance and academic scales.

The decision to attend college was influenced by the student’s family income levels. However when asked if the “TOPS award was a factor in their decision to attend college” students from different income levels responded differently. Students of family incomes of $25k-$35K and those of incomes of $45K-$55K have statistically significant differences in how they responded to this question, just as those with incomes greater than $75K and those with incomes of $25-35K did. These groups were clearly at the top, middle and bottom of the income scale and that is why their responses to the question were so drastically different. Lower income students had more statistically significant responses than the middle income students, and the lower income students had more statistically significant responses than the upper income students.
Major Finding #7

Parental education level matters

Parent education level has often been used as an “indirect” measure of family income or socioeconomic status. In most cases this is reasonable to expect, as it is assumed that higher educated persons yield higher paying and more professional, white-collar jobs. However, in the state of Louisiana, there is somewhat of an anomaly. Louisiana has a strong petrochemical and industrial plant work force, and many of the persons working in this industry may be considered blue collar, but due to years of service, the hazard and overtime pay, as well as technical expertise required (such as instrumentation and machinery), they are earning salaries which rival many professional, white-collar jobs. For this reason, parental education levels may not be a measure of what one thinks and may not be a reliable indicator.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents indicated that their parents had a bachelors degree or higher, (with 50% of those being a graduate or professional degree) as opposed to 28% holding a high school diploma. In this study, a respondent’s parent’s level of education influenced how they responded to questions of an academic nature. The Academic Performance scale (Chapter 4, Table 4.13a) contained twelve items that dealt with the respondents perceptions of how TOPS impacted their academic performance. Results of the MANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in ratings of the Academic Performance scale due to parental education. The MANOVA indicated that respondents with parent education levels 1 and 4 (high school diploma and graduate/professional degree) and those with parent education levels 1 and 3 (high school diploma and bachelors degree) responded. Respondents with parents of these education levels clearly responded differently to the “Academic” scale. Much like income, the drastic difference in ratings appears to be between the lower (high school diploma only) and upper groups (bachelors and graduate/professional degree).
Major Finding #8

**TOPS criteria for receiving and maintaining a TOPS award is not too difficult**

Overall (79%), respondents did not find the criteria to receive the TOPS award too challenging. Additionally, 32% of respondents did indicate that they felt the TOPS criteria was too lenient. Additional findings relative to the difficulty of the TOPS criteria are follows:

1) 20% of African Americans thought that the criteria to receive TOPS was too hard, as opposed to 7% Caucasians.
2) 13% of males thought the criteria was too difficult as opposed to 7% of females.
3) 8% of respondents with families of low income, as well as 8% of respondents with families of high income felt the criteria was too difficult.

Major Finding #9

**Gender and age produced statistically significant effects**

In this study, there were 56.3% females and 43.7% males. The population percentages were nearly identical at 56.5% and 43.5%, respectively. What is of greatest importance is the investigation of the statistical effects of gender. Do gender effects really exist? The third MANOVA testing student demographic effects revealed one main effect of “Gender” and one interaction effect of “Gender and Age.” Hence, gender impacted how the participants responded to the questionnaire, and the combination of the variables “gender” and “age” also had an impact on how the participants responded. Further analysis of the Gender main effect revealed a significant difference on the scale entitled “Award Criteria” and “Priorknow1,” just as the interaction effect did. Accordingly, men and women clearly felt differently about the award criteria and about their prior knowledge or familiarity with TOPS. The difference was great enough to be statistically significant.
Major Finding #10

**The TOPS high school curriculum may result in academically stronger students**

One finding pertains to the academic credentials of the TOPS students and their chosen course of study. Nearly 77% of the respondents indicated that they were majoring in one of the Sciences (defined as Biology, Chemistry, Zoology, or Physics) or Engineering. It is plausible that the more rigorous TOPS high school curriculum has made them more prepared to pursue an academic course of study which is traditionally more challenging. If true, this would be a wonderful outcome to give credit to the TOPS program. Although another explanation could be along the lines of the “chicken and the egg” line of thinking that since the TOPS program is a merit based program with academic standards that the program is attracting more academically prepared students to start with and that is why they are pursuing these areas of study.

Interpretation of this sample data is done cautiously and generalizability is not possible at this time. It would be interesting (and necessary) to study this phenomena in greater detail to see if this is actually true or not and why it might be occurring. A potential future study would be to look at the academic majors of choice which have historically occurred *prior* to the initiation of TOPS and the TOPS high school curriculum. This data would be necessary for comparison purposes. Of similar interest would be a study comparing high school GPAs before and after the inception of the TOPS program and the TOPS high school curriculum.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any study, there are certainly limitations to be addressed. This section offers a discussion of those noted limitations.

**Limitation 1**

**Generalizability and Sample Size**

This study could benefit from an increased sample size and longitudinal data collected over
time, to monitor perceptions and trends. While the sample size is adequate, a larger sample size may yield more information and data which may yield more generalizable results.

**Limitation 2**

**Different, Broader Sample Group**

More information about TOPS familiarity and public awareness issues is needed and should be elicited from those who are not TOPS recipients. This sample group would reveal a lot of relevant information, as those who are TOPS recipients would naturally be expected to have higher levels of familiarity with the program. Other universities may yield additional or even contrary information which could add to the study.

**Limitation 3**

**Use of Qualitative Interview Data**

An oversight in the qualitative interview consent form was the failure to obtain written permission to use the names of the elite interviewees in association with their quotes. Subsequently, at the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was asked for permission to use his or her name. In all cases, permission was granted. The granting of permission from each interviewee became a part of each interview recording and was transcribed accordingly.

**Limitation 4**

**Scope**

An oversight in the survey was the failure to collect information on the “type” of TOPS award that each respondent received. This information would have added a great deal to the analysis and results section of the paper and perhaps added more to the discussion of cost and award.

Another welcome addition to future surveys would be information regarding generational attendance, more specifically, how many TOPS recipients are the first to attend college in their
family. Learning more about a student’s pre-collegiate preparation is also of great interest. The type of high school training and academic preparation they received has a great deal of influence on how successful they are in college. Success in college is necessary to retain the TOPS award.

Conclusions

According to a report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, an independent group commissioned by Congress to study financial aid, 168,000 low-and moderate income high school graduates who qualified for some form of postsecondary education couldn’t afford to attend any college in 2002. Financial constraints kept another 406,000 students from attending a four-year college. The report, “Empty Promises: The Myth of College Access in America,” also predicts that in the first decade of the 21st century, 2 million college-qualified students from minority and low- and moderate-income families won’t be able to afford any college at all. By the end of the decade, the report says, a four year college degree will be priced out of range for 4.4 million students. According to this report “On average, annual unmet need for minority and low-income families has reached $3,200 at two-year public colleges, $3,800 at public four-year public colleges, and $6,200 at four-year private colleges, which strongly discourages many high-school graduates from enrolling and persisting to degree completion” (p. 42).

The findings of this research take into account the aforementioned data provided by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, and serve to further validate my thinking about the “access dilemma” and the impact that TOPS has had on addressing this dilemma in the state of Louisiana. The first conclusion that was inspired by this research was centered around the overarching issue of the “access dilemma” and how it should be categorized into three general areas – physical/geographical access, financial access, and access to success. This study addresses, in part,
all three of the sub-components of access as it relates to higher education.

Qualitative and quantitative results clearly indicate that access does not begin with post-secondary education. It begins in elementary school. Access barriers are shaped in people’s lives precluding academic preparation, high-school graduation, and ultimately, failure to enter and graduate from college. Building models that assist in eliminating access barriers, instilling the idea that college is a viable option, and ensuring that requirements are fulfilled in order to attend college must be addressed before any access barriers can be eliminated. Access includes the delivery of instructional systems in order to serve diverse students at the post-secondary level. Working adults, nontraditional students seeking opportunities for learning, and students living in rural areas must all be positioned for access to further education if the gap of disparity is to be closed.

Barriers of access to post-secondary education can also be defined financially. This factor has been influenced by both internal and external changes that are reflected in the transforming environment for learning, shifting government policies and priorities, growing demands from constituents, and the ever-growing demands of the global economy that dictate the need for higher education. Of particular concern regarding financial access is the impact of need-based and merit-based aid and which level of government should support educational programs that provide opportunities of access.

Many citizens (especially minority and low-income students) are unfamiliar with the subtleties of public policy. The traditional distinction between the states’ role and the federal role in promoting higher-education access, however, is embodied in the Higher Education Act. The primary role of the federal government is to enable students to gain access to post-secondary education through broadly available need-based aid programs, particularly Pell grants and Perkins loans. It is the primary role of the federal government to promote equality of choice for students. It falls to the
states to support institutions of higher education – the so-called “public” sector – that provide
students with a broad range of program and campus choices and meet public needs the private sector
by itself would not. Thus, as a rule, federal aid is “means tested” and levels the playing field for the
neediest of students, while state aid is “means blind,” and aids institutions with little regard for the
class origins of their students. The federal government also expands educational opportunities and
promotes access to the American mainstream, making diversity a reality through those that it serves.

Invariably, the federal government is tied to all three components of the “access dilemma.”
States, however, have traditionally been tied to only two – access to success and geographical access.
Now that states have linked themselves to the third component (financial access), by providing merit-
aid, they must make sure that this type of aid is afforded to all levels of students with the focus on
those who need it the most.

Who is Really on TOP(S) in Louisiana

Louisiana is uniquely positioned to be a key player in the “arena” of higher education. For
the past eight years, a considerable amount of progress has been made to address the overall
disparities that exist in the participation and persistence rates of students at the secondary and post-
secondary levels of education in the state (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2002). Through
programmatic data, Louisiana’s legislators, policy makers, educators and administrators have made it
widely understood that the social and economic prosperity of the citizens of the state requires a strong
post-secondary education system. They have realized that if Louisiana is to be ranked in any
category other than last or second to last in terms of education, health care and other societal issues,
the appropriate investments must be made in the time-tested benefits of post-secondary education,
which many researchers argue, are the cornerstones upon which access to success is built. Amongst
the progress that has been made over the past eight years was the statewide creation and acceptance
of two critical documents that have been referred to by citizens as blueprints for economic prosperity. The first document was titled *Louisiana Vision 2020: A Master Plan for Economic Development*, in which higher education was assigned a pivotal role. The second document, which complements the first, was titled *Louisiana Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education* -- in which opportunities to increase student access and success are paramount. Embedded within the contents of both documents was the vision for the creation of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS).

Dr. E. Joseph Savoie, in a speech given at the Board of Regents/National Science Foundation LA EPSCoR 2002 Conference, stated “With TOPS, we have the most comprehensive scholarship program in the South, if not the nation. It was specifically designed to provide an incentive for Louisiana residents to prepare themselves academically for postsecondary education in our state. The desired result is an educated workforce enabling Louisiana’s citizens to fully participate and prosper in the global market.” If the words of Dr. Savoie are to become a reality for this state, there is still a considerable amount of work that must be done. This is particularly true if Dr. Savoie’s reference to “Louisiana residents” is to encompass ALL Louisiana residents.

Although the Louisiana TOPS program has been the source of success for many Louisiana residents – its impact has not been consistent across racial and socioeconomic statuses. In fact, a large percentage of African American and low-income citizens in the state receive TOPS awards at disproportionately lower rates when compared to White and Asian American citizens. According to the data revealed in this study, African American students were less likely to receive TOPS awards. Only 8.2% of the LSU sample (and 6.9% of the LSU population) who were African American received TOPS awards. From a state perspective, only 11% of all TOPS recipients were African American while 82% were White and 7% were categorized as “other.”
This research also reveals a problematic finding when considering how TOPS serves students from low income families. Specifically, students from lower income families are less likely to be recipients of TOPS awards. The group to receive the smallest number of TOPS awards was also the poorest group. Students of lower income parents, defined as less than $25,000 combined family income, are receiving only 6% of the TOPS award according to sample data. The proportion in this same income level is slightly larger at the LSU population level, with 8.2% of all TOPS recipients having a family income of less than $25,000. Collectively, students with family incomes less than $35,000 represent 15% of the sample in this study and 13.6% of the target population (LSU). When ethnicity was considered, 20% of African Americans had a family income of less than $25,000 as opposed to 4% of Caucasians.

The largest group to receive the TOPS award was also the wealthiest group, with 42% of those receiving TOPS having family incomes greater than $75,000. This was true for the sample and was also true for the population, but at greater percentages with 60% of LSU TOPS awards going to students with family incomes greater than $75,000. Generally TOPS recipients tend to be those students from middle to upper-middle income families.

Although all of the major findings of this study are significant and have great implications for Louisiana, the aforementioned findings are of particular importance as they relate to TOPS and its impact on African American and low income students. The quantitative and qualitative results of this research supports the notion that TOPS is a much needed and much utilized program in the state of Louisiana. The challenge, however, continues to be how to improve Louisiana’s economic and revenue structures that opposes our ability to provide appropriate levels of financial support to ALL Louisiana citizens.

Higher Education in Louisiana is at a critical juncture as the state attempts to address the
apparent gap that exists between those who have access to post-secondary opportunities and those who do not. The *Louisiana Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education* emphasizes excellence, access, and affordability with the goal of serving all residents who have the interest and potential to learn. This research demonstrates that there is still a considerable amount of progress to be made in this regard.

**Further Recommendations**

The research findings and subsequent conclusions of this study provided the basis for several recommendations where additional research would be of value. Therefore the following recommendations are presented:

1. Additional efforts need to be made to educate students about the TOPS core curriculum prior to starting high school.

   Forty-five percent of the students/respondents were “familiar” or “very familiar” with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school. Approximately fifty percent of the students/respondents were either “slightly familiar” or “unfamiliar.” A further illustration of this found in the qualitative data as ten out of fourteen (71%) of the interviewees agreed that a greater effort needed to be made to educate students about the TOPS program and all of its components.

2. The putative goals of the TOPS program need to be declared through resolution/act of the Louisiana Legislature

   The lack of clearly defined goals and or objectives for the TOPS program has been a major hindrance to the administration and evaluation of the TOPS program. The Louisiana Commissioner of Higher Education, Joseph Savoie, further supports this claim as he indicated “You can’t guide policy unless you know what it is you are trying to accomplish.” Once the goals of TOPS are clearly defined, it will be it easier to assess the effectiveness of the program.
3. Establishment of a TOPS award specifically geared towards community colleges.

Higher education leaders are concerned with the issues surrounding remedial education policies and practices. The Louisiana Master Plan for Higher Education (2000) clearly defines the role of remedial education delivery as a function of the community college. One out of two students who attend community colleges take a remedial class, and the impact of that could be dramatic to community colleges throughout the United States. One of the most important issues in remedial education concern the costs associated with providing remedial services. Pell Grants are a critical component of efforts to support remedial education as almost one half of the community college Pell Grant recipients have taken at least one remedial course (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 1995). However, effective measures for determining the actual costs of providing or withholding remedial support are not understood. This makes true discussion about the actual impact regarding community college finance and the notion that the average student who attends a community college in Louisiana would not be eligible to receive a TOPS award based on the current requirements.

4) Establishment of a TOPS award that includes graduate studies

Thirty two percent of all responses to the third open-ended survey question (What changes/recommendations would you make to improve TOPS?) indicated that students felt that TOPS award that would cover the expenses of graduate studies was needed. This concept was also embraced by 5 out of 14 (38%) of the elite interviewees.

Other recommendations include: 5) Establishment of a TOPS curriculum to be implemented for high school students, 6) Launch a state-wide TOPS awareness campaign to inform Louisiana citizens about TOPS criteria and benefits, 7) Initiate a tracking system that reinforces, encourages rewards, and supports TOPS recipients’ success in college, and 8) Initiate a job/career placement option which will help TOPS graduates find employment in the state.

-150-
Implications for Future Research

Researchers need to consider a major shift in thinking about the “access dilemma” – a shift from thinking of access as a broad issue that is unique to providing opportunities to attend college, to an issue that is more specific and aimed at addressing the components of the “access dilemma” that are often overlooked. A shift should also be considered in the allocation policy that moves away from making more money available to a lesser number of the relatively privileged few to an allocation policy that makes greater sums of financial resources available to those with fewer educational opportunity alternatives. A shift should be made from wrestling with affordability issues that may not matter to the majority of students who are attending post-secondary institutions to a concern for the issue that may make college attendance more affordable for all.

The quality of education over the next decade should be a concern to policy makers, educational leaders, and researchers. As indicated by McPherson and Schapiro (1998) an increasing share of aid for post-secondary education is based on merit and not need. This trend has important implications for education policy as it is concerned with expanding access to higher education, equalizing opportunities to attend college, affecting the choice of institution, and promoting individual investment in human capital.

Based on the results of this study, there is a clear “shift” in higher education in the state of Louisiana. Dramatic increases in state funding for higher education now exceed those of most other states. The literature indicates that since 1993, merit-based aid has significantly replaced need-based aid in more than 25% of the states (Heller, 2002). Only five “populous” states dedicate substantial funds to need-based aid; and, in 1998-99, the three states (Louisiana, Florida and Georgia) with large merit-based aid programs spent 37% more on merit-based aid compared to need-based aid expenditures (Heller & Marin, 2002)
While the TOPS program reflects the best thinking of policy makers at its inception, continued examination of processes and procedures in light of a continually changing higher education landscape is imperative. Louisiana statutes provide no guidelines or directions on the intent of the TOPS program. It is imperative, therefore, that once these goals are established, the following areas be considered for further research and evaluation: 1) to determine if TOPS is accomplishing its established goals, 2) to evaluate the retention rates of TOPS recipients, and 3) to determine if the awareness level of TOPS throughout Louisiana.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program (year implemented)</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
<th>Award Criteria</th>
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<td>Land leases and sales</td>
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<td>General revenues</td>
<td>GPA and ACT</td>
<td>Full tuition and fees at a Louisiana public institution, or a comparable amount at a Louisiana private institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Merit Award Scholarship (2000)</td>
<td>Tobacco settlement</td>
<td>State curricular framework test</td>
<td>One-time award up to $2,500 at a Michigan public or private institution; $1,000 out of state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Eminent Scholars Program (1996)</td>
<td>General revenue</td>
<td>GPA and SAT/ACT</td>
<td>$2,500 at a Mississippi public or private institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri Higher Education Academic Scholarship Program (“Bright Flight”) (1997)</td>
<td>General revenue</td>
<td>SAT/ACT</td>
<td>$2,000 at a MO public or private institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada Millennium Scholarship (2000)</td>
<td>Tobacco settlement</td>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>$80 per credit hour at a Nevada 4-year public or private institution or $40/$60 per credit hour (lower division/upper division) at a Nevada community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina Legislative for Future Excellence</td>
<td>General revenues</td>
<td>GPA, SAT/ACT, and class rank</td>
<td>Full tuition plus $300 at a public South Carolina institution; comparable amount at a South Carolina private institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing IN-State Student Excellence (PROMISE) Scholarship (2002)</td>
<td>Lottery and taxes on amusement devices</td>
<td>GPA and SAT/ACT</td>
<td>Full tuition at a West Virginia public institution or comparable amount at a West Virginia private institution</td>
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### TOPS CRITERIA CHART

#### (Abbreviated Version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award Type</th>
<th>Maximum Award</th>
<th>High School GPA Required</th>
<th>Minimum ACT Score Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOPS Tech</td>
<td>Tuition Assistance</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Tuition Assistance</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Prior Year State Average (Currently 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Tuition Assistance and $400 stipend per year</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors</td>
<td>Tuition Assistance and $800 stipend per year</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX C

LIST OF OUTSIDE EXPERTS FOR INSTRUMENT REVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ken Redd</td>
<td>Director Research and Policy Analysis</td>
<td>National Association of Financial Aid Administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Heller</td>
<td>Associate Professor and Senior Research Associate</td>
<td>Center for the Study of Higher Education The Pennsylvania State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Dietrich</td>
<td>Interim Director</td>
<td>Office of Student Aid and Scholarships Louisiana State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmaine Allen</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Baton Rouge, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armond Brown</td>
<td>High School Principal</td>
<td>McKinley High School - Baton Rouge, Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice Gipson</td>
<td>Student (Sophomore)</td>
<td>Louisiana State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Wharton</td>
<td>Chancellor Emeritus and Chemistry Professor</td>
<td>Louisiana State University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

LETTER REQUESTING DATA FROM LSU'S OFFICE OF BUDGET AND PLANNING

Louisiana State University
Department of Educational Leadership
Research and Counseling

DATE: August 25, 2003

TO: Dr. Risa Palm
Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost

THRU: Eugene Kennedy, Chair
Department of Educational Leadership, Research & Counseling
Becky Ropers-Huilman, Associate Professor (Major Professor)
Department of Educational Leadership, Research & Counseling

FROM: Roderick L. Smothers, Doctoral Candidate

RE: Request for access to data on the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS)

As you are aware, I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership Research and Counseling here at Louisiana State University (LSU). I am writing to solicit your support for the research that I am conducting. The purpose of the research is three-fold: 1) to ascertain perceptions of effectiveness of current recipients of the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) awards; 2) to determine if TOPS is accomplishing its legislatively mandated goals and; 3) to acquire input from key TOPS administrators and Legislators on the effectiveness of the TOPS program.

I plan to use two methods to acquire the data needed to complete this research project. First, I will administer an approved questionnaire to a selected sample of students at LSU. Secondly, I will analyze existing TOPS data to make generalizations about the effectiveness of the program on the approved LSU cohort.

To facilitate this process, I will need to request specific information from the Offices of Budget and Planning, Records and Registration and Student Aid and Scholarships. This request for information on current and past TOPS recipients will include the following: demographic data - name, date of birth, social security number, ethnicity, gender, parish, high school attended, family household income category, level of TOPS award and e-mail address on file; academic data - college grade point average, high school grade point average, retention record, ACT and/or SAT scores, academic major, credits attempted and earned and graduation rate (if applicable). The results of my research will be reported in composite form and the anonymity of ALL students will be protected.

This research comes at a very critical time in the 5 year history of this state merit scholarship program. Many researchers posit that state funded merit programs are a detriment to the nation’s overall access dilemma. Based on my review of the preliminary data reported by the Board of Regents and the Louisiana Legislative Auditor, I argue that the Louisiana TOPS program has had a tremendous impact on increasing access to higher education in the state of Louisiana. Your support of my request will uniquely position LSU, through scholarly research and publications, to

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162
contribute to the limited body of research knowledge that currently exists on state funded merit programs. Additionally, it would provide Louisiana policy makers and legislators with much needed information to make better informed decisions about the future of this program.

My research proposal has been approved by my dissertation committee which is comprised of the following faculty members: Becky Ropers-Huilman, Major Professor, Tom Durant, Professor, Sociology, Geri Holmes, Assoc. Professor, School of Human Resource Education and Workforce Development, Katie Cherry, Professor and Chair, Psychology, and Eugene Kennedy, Professor and Chair, Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling. I have also attached a copy of my approved IRB forms for your review.

My hope is to begin collecting and analyzing data at the beginning of the fall 2003 semester. Your approval to move forward with requesting the information detailed in this memorandum from the aforementioned departments would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by telephone at (225) 578-5934 or by e-mail at rsmothe@lsu.edu. You may also reach my Major Professor, Dr. Ropers-Huilman, by e-mail at broper1@lsu.edu (She is on sabbatical leave for the Fall 03 semester). Thank you in advance for considering my request.

xc: Karen Demby, Dean of Enrollment Management
    Bob Kuhn, Office of Budget and Planning
    Robert Doolos, Office of the University Registrar
    Patrick Dietrich, Office of Student Aid and Scholarships
APPENDIX E

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES FROM QUANTITATIVE INSTRUMENT

QUESTION 1: How did TOPS influence your educational experiences?

I was going to LSU anyway

Gave me money and opportunity

In no way, just let me know college would be less expensive

Kept me in state

Not at all

It pushed me to work hard for my grades

Effect what classes I took in high school

It did not influence my education before college

Made sure I met the requirements to qualify, made me reconsider going out of state for school

Helped me make my chance as to which college I could go to because affordability

Made sure to get good grades in high school in order to receive TOPS

I made sure I had good grades

It made me work harder to get better grades so I could be able to go to college

I had to take the required high school courses to get TOPS

Great deciding factor

It did not influence me

Influence me to keep grades up

It did not make a difference

Made me strive to do well in high school

I took more classes that helped me learn more

Did nothing, I was already a hard worker

It made me work for good grades

TOPS made me strive to do better on placement test and consider on in state school

It motivated me to do better in high school

Had to take certain classes in high school to receive TOPS

It didn’t really influence my educational experience before college except for the fact that I made sure I met all the requirements

A big influence, TOPS is the reason I went to LSU instead to going to an out of state school.

It forced me to take certain classes in high school

It forced us to take classes we may not have otherwise taken in high school

Determined which courses were mandatory in high school

I took the ACT more times to qualify for TOPS

I worked hard on my studies to get TOPS

TOPS influenced how I got my grades. It kept me on track.

It influenced me to make good grades to get it

I chose a college in Louisiana because of TOPS

To make good grades

Make me try hard
Made me realize I had to do good to obtain TOPS. I wanted and needed it or would not be able to go to college. TOPS allowed me to take courses that I needed now for college. It made me try harder, so I would receive it. Before made me study harder to get in. Motivated me. Made it stressful with the different forms that I had to fill out. Didn’t. Did not. I made sure that I took the appropriate classes in high school. It challenged me to work harder. It made me work harder in high school so I could get good enough grades to receive TOPS. It didn’t. It gave me a set curriculum in high school. None. It made me want to get it so I could go to school for free. It pretty much decided that I would go here or UNO. Determined what classes I took. Dictated what courses to take. It did not. Made me work hard to earn it. It made me strive to qualify for TOPS. It helped me decide to stay in state. Made me study more. Made me work harder so I could go to college. Take certain classes that I may not have taken. It made me make sure I had the requirements GPA and ACT. TOPS influenced me to go LSU over other universities because it was free. I made sure I was taking the classes in high school needed to fulfill the TOPS requirements. It made me made me make sure I was taking the necessary courses and maintaining high grade, etc. Positively I went to a state college. It made me study harder, in hopes that I could receive it. Encouraged you to work hard in high school. Gave me goals to achieve in high school in order to receive the award. Made me wanna go instate. Motivated me to do well in school.
Course requirements in high school

It made me put effort into making good grades

Yes, they caused me to schedule certain classes for TOPS

Created goals for me for my ACT scores and my GPA

I definitely had to work to get TOPS. I knew I couldn’t make it through college without it.

I took classes to fulfill graduation and TOPS requirements

It helped me decide what school I wanted to go to

Helped me decide on what schools I wanted to go to

It made me want to make better grades so that my parents would not have to pay college tuition

There was no influence

I tried to do my best so I could go on to college

I knew that if I was to attend college in Louisiana then I would have to maintain a certain GPA unweighted.

I was aware that if I received TOPS I would be able to go to state school tuition free.

I knew I had to be granted TOPS for me to go to college so it made me work for my grades.

It really helped because my family wouldn’t have had enough money to pay for my college tuition without it.

Had to work for better grades to receive the stipend

Made me work harder to get higher grades and the needed ACT score for the $800 stipend

I knew about TOPS, but I did not know how serious the requirements were. It helped make LSU an easier choice.

Very little

It made me want to continue a good path so that I would be rewarded

I had to take the required courses for TOPS.

I did not determine whether or not I would go to college, but it is definitely a great help.

I chose high school courses such as environmental science as an elective to receive TOPS.

It didn’t

It made me try harder to get better grades in high school so I could get a scholarship

I knew about TOPS, so it influenced me to do well in high school so that I could get it.

TOPS encouraged me to do the best I could in high school so that I would get TOPS

I knew that I had to keep my grades up because I had to receive TOPS to goto LSU

Some courses that were required for TOPS also contribute to me receiving an academic achievement award for Allied Health Sciences
I was required to complete specific courses in high school, and earn a set GPA and ACT score. Helped to make sure I kept good grades in high school for my overall GPA. It also placed much more emphasis on the ACT.

It influenced my decision to attend LSU s public university opposed to a private one. Only a little, because without TOPS I had most likely still be at LSU.

TOPS influenced me to take some courses that I may not have otherwise taken. It also pushed me to do better on my ACT.

I strived to get good grades for TOPS, and if I would not have received TOPS, I probably would be attending a community college near my hometown.

It gave me a goal to strive for.

It made me work harder to do better in school and to make good grades. It allowed me to have an education without worrying about having to pay so much. It proved that I graduated from high school as a good student.

I took the required courses in high school. However, most of these classes were required for me to graduate.

It didn’t.

It didn’t really. I was well qualified, and the required courses for TOPS were part of my curriculum.

I had to take required courses in high school in order to receive TOPS.

TOPS required me to take certain classes in order to achieve the benefits.

It motivated me to obtain my good grades and to do my best on the ACT.

Gave me the money to help attend college.

I knew that I would be able to afford college because of my performance during high school.

TOPS influenced my educational experiences by giving me the drive to excel in high school so that I would be a recipient of the awards.

I decided to attend an instate college.

It helped me to decide to attend an instate college.

I decided to attend an instate college. TOPS was one of numerous reasons to make good grades.

It made me focus more in class.

It set a standard to meet in high school. Helped to shape my goals in life pre-college.

Encouraged me to maintain a high GPA.

I decided to attend an instate college. TOPS was one of numerous reasons to make good grades.

I decided to attend an instate college.

It made me strive for better ACT scores so I could better my financial status for college.

It let me go to college here at LSU.

TOPS influenced me to study hard and get good enough grades to receive TOPS.

Made it easier to choose a college.
TOPS helped me decide to take the required classes and work hard to make sure I made the grades to receive the award.

It influences me in the fact that it made me want to do good to receive TOPS.

Made me work harder to get money for college.

Encouraged an above average GPA and good ACT score.

It didn’t influence my educational experiences, just let me do good in high school.

I gave me incentive to make better grades in order to qualify.

It made me try harder so we could save money in college.

Tried to keep my grades up.

It made me want to stay in the state and has helped me to actually go to a university.

It made me work harder in high school so I could receive it.

Gave me incentive to stay in L.A.

Keep my grades up.

It helped me decide to come to LSU.

It made me want to have a high GPA and make good grades.

I strived to meet the tops requirements.

I did good so I get to go to school for free.

TOPS motivated me to make the grades so I could attend college without any tuition.

It has challenged me to work harder.

Had to take certain classes to be in it.

It made me try harder in school and take the classes required for TOPS.

It made me take some courses I probably wouldn’t have.

It made me want to get good grades so I could be eligible for TOPS.

I wanted to go on the ACT to get higher award.

It made me make good grades to get TOPS.

I did not take honors classes because they are not encouraged for TOPS.

Not much, always wanted to come to LSU.

It didn’t really have much influence on my education before college. I knew I could meet the requirements.

I took some high school classes that were required for it.

TOPS assured me that my tuition would be paid for in any college in the state.

Made sure I got good enough grades.

It made my decision to go to LSU a little bit easier.

TOPS influenced me to do as well as I could in high school so I could receive all of the benefits offered. My high school was very promoting with the TOPS programs.

TOPS got me the motivation I needed to keep my grades up.

TOPS influenced me to come to LSU because I couldn’t afford to pay for private school. (Loyola)

I had to keep and maintain the required GPA. This caused me to work harder. I changed my decision of going to University of Austin and chose LSU.
TOPS put a big impact on choosing a college for me. I took every class, requirements, and score to be a recipient of TOPS.

It made me take classes I would need in order to do well in college like higher math and science classes

I knew in high school I had to make the best grades that I could and I also tried harder to get my ACT score higher.

It didn’t. I had planned to go to West Point since my junior year in high school I did choose LSU because of TOPS though.

TOPS greatly influenced my educational experiences before college. Although I was a hard working student already, the TOPS award I was trying to receive required a particularly high GPA.

It made me have a reason, financially, to make good grades.

It was an incentive to get the highest part of TOPS.

It didn’t

Determined it (couldn’t afford other school)

It influenced me to stay in Louisiana for college

I wanted to attend a LA university only if it provided my tuition

Had to meet TOPS requirements in high school

Financial relief

It didn’t. I already made good enough grades to get TOPS so I wasn’t really worried about it.

It didn’t

It gave me a nice incentive to get good grades

I made sure to qualify

Because of the money paid for my college tuition by TOPS, I was able to go to a highly ranked college prep school (private).

I was required to required to take core classes and fulfill requirements (Physics, 2 years of art, etc.)

It motivated me slightly because I knew that doing substantially well in high school would help me financially in college. However, I was often more motivated by general interest and other (ethical and spiritual) motivations.

TOPS influenced the classes that I took in high school. I had to choose certain classes to meet the requirements to qualify for TOPS.

It encouraged me to do well so I could get the money

It affected which high school courses I chose to take so that I could receive TOPS

Motivated me to go to school in state

Made me study harder

I made sure to make the best grades possible to receive TOPS

Made me not try hard in school because standards me easy and there was no need to go after other scholarship.

It challenged me to make good grades

It gave me incentive to strive for excellence in high school so I could be eligible for the award

It made me think twice about courses I would take

It influenced me to make something of my high school career

It motivated me to work hard to get a better GPA and test scores.
I pushed myself to meet the requirements to receive TOPS.

I worked harder at school so that I could get TOPS for college, this made my high school grades good.

It gave me because opportunity to attend college, therefore promptly to work harder in high school classes to meet requirements.

Made me take courses that were needed to obtain a TOPS scholarship and obtain good grades while in high school.

It challenged me to make good grades

It made me try harder in school

TOPS gave me the best financial deal. It’s the reason why I decided to go to LSU

It influenced me to keep a GPA high enough to get TOPS

TOPS didn’t have an influence on my educational experiences before college. It did encourage me to do well in school so I would be able to get TOPS

Getting TOPS wasn’t very difficult, but the HONORS AWARD gave me an incentive to work harder.

It made me try harder in high school, to keep my grades up.

It encouraged me to maintain my grade point average so that I would qualify for TOPS.

Knowing that I could be eligible for TOPS. It made me work harder in order to meet the requirements for TOPS so that I could receive the scholarship.

I took the classes need to get the scholarship

It forced me to start preparing for college sooner than I normally would have.

It provides incentive for students to perform well to receive TOPS.

I worked and studied hard to make sure that I received TOPS.

Encouraged me to study harder so that I would receive extra money

It made me want to strive for that 3.5 GPA

More of an incentive to go to college instate.

I took certain classes so TOPS would be awarded to me.

TOPS made me work to keep a 2.7 GPA.

It helped me to determine where to go to college

It made me keep up my GPA and strive for a high ACT score.

I had to take certain classes in high school.

It encouraged me to stay instate

It allowed my parents to not worry about paying for college that money could go elsewhere.

It made me work hard at raising my ACT score.

I wanted to get the highest TOPS to receive $800 extra a year, so I got a 27 on my ACT.

TOPS encouraged me to make higher grades.

Tried harder to get good grades.

Made me get good grades prior to college so I could qualify.

Increased studying so I could meet requirements

I wanted to make sure I stayed on TOP, doing my best so I would be guaranteed paid tuition.

TOPS made me try hard as I could so I could receive the most benefits.

It didn’t. I always strived for the best.

Not really. I made good grades regardless.
I could go to my pick of colleges knowing tuition would be covered.

I believe the TOPS curriculum in high school I made me (and many other students) a more well rounded person. It made me strive harder for the good grades I wanted, therefore making me a better student.

Made LSU look very attractive. It motivated to get a 27.

Did not really effect my experiences before colleges.

It motivated me to strive for higher grades and standardized test scores.

I had to take several classes in high school and make a certain ACT score and core GPA in order to receive TOPS. It pushed me to perform even though I thought I would be going out of state.

I did well in school.

I did well enough to get TOPS.

None at all

I was always aware to strive for

It determined where I went to college

Encouraged me to make higher GPA/ACT to receive more awards

It didn’t

Before college a lot of classes were recommended to students because they were mandatory for TOPS. However, because the TOPS requirements are so minimal they were equivalent most of the requirements. I exceeded most of the requirements for TOPS, therefore graduation requirements as well.

Encouraged me to make better grades in order to receive the highest stipend.

I had a goal to receive the TOPS scholarship plus a stipend so I worked hard to achieve that goal.

I was always aware to strive for

I studied hard and managed to keep my grades up in order to be a recipient of TOPS.

None – (Just had to make sure that the high school classes I took pertained the TOPS curriculum)

It made me want to stay in state for college

I had to schedule certain classes in high school to be eligible for TOPS. I couldn’t slack off and schedule the easy classes.

TOPS set a record that I had to surpass to receive it. It gave me a goal to work toward.

I took all the courses I needed to take, and tried to get a high GPA

My parents did not have to pay for college, I didn’t have to worry about how I was going to college.

It made me want to have a high GPA so that my tuition would be paid for.

I had to take certain classes to meet the TOPS curriculum so I became interested in areas I may not have. It made me choose LSU because it helps with tuition.

It made me work hard in school and try to get a good ACT score so that I would get TOPS.

It helped me a great deal with tuition.

Helped me care more about my grades.

Try to keep up my GPA and get a 20 on the ACT.

I took all the classes I needed in high school so I could get TOPS.
TOPS influenced me to do the best I could so that I could qualify for it.

They didn’t

Not at all

Gave me something to shoot for

It didn’t I was always a good student

It encouraged me to make good grades to have the chance to go to college for free.

It gave me a goal to reach I knew I had to meet the requirements to receive TOPS, so I did.

Know that I could receive free tuition made me try harder to make good grades in school.

It influenced me to stay in state

Made me work harder to achieve a better ACT score

To make the grades and take the right classes

The TOPS scholarship influenced me to strive to perform better in high school so that I could receive the highest award.

Allowed me to go to any public university in Louisiana

I worked harder in high school in order to have the requirements for TOPS.

I knew I didn’t want to pay for college, so I worked hard in high school to receive TOPS.

Working toward receiving TOPS made me take certain classes in H.S. to be able to get TOPS.

It just let me know that I was safe with money when college came around

I did not try harder in high school to assure that I would receive TOPS.

TOPS encouraged me to perform well in high school and to work hard for the ACT so I could receive the awards.

It encouraged me to make better grades and attend Louisiana State University.

Encouraged me to get the best grades. I couldn’t in order to help my family pay for college.

I knew I had to get it or else

I had to work towards getting the requirements TOPS influenced the schools I looked in consideration of where I would attend college. I also followed the assigned TOPS curriculum in high school.

TOPS influenced me to take the required courses and work hard to maintain a high G.P.A.

Didn’t have to worry about paying for college

It didn’t influence my education experiences because I did not plan to attend a college in Louisiana nor in any of the colleges in the commonwealth market.

In high school, we learned about TOPS requirements. In order to go to LSU I strove to meet the TOPS requirements.

The requirements for TOPS were always in the back of my mind throughout high school but it didn’t really affect my academic performance.

It didn’t

Influenced schedule decisions in high school, specifically by classes I needed to take

I took classes that TOPS required

It made me try harder

Didn’t think about it because I wasn’t worried about grades
Strive for TOP scholarship; 27 on ACT = $800

It inspired me to work hard to earn a high G.P.A. in high school

I made sure to get above a 28 on my ACT and to keep my GPA high enough to get the $800 stipend.

It made me focus on maintaining a high score in order to secure my TOPS.

It made me work harder.

I wanted to make sure my ACT was high enough and GPA high enough to get the most money. It finalized the decision to stay in state.

Choosing to stay in state for college

It influenced the classes I took in high school

It had no effect

It made me try to get the higher level of TOPS with the better grades.

Had to maintain GPA

TOPS was my only incentive to apply and attend LSU

My grades were always high so there was no influence to bring grades up to achieve TOPS.

It helped me to decide on which college I was going to attend

It was a goal I worked towards attaining

Influenced my college decision making

It pissed me off. My high school GPA was a 3.48 because I switched schools and worked against the point-curve system. I got the lowest TOPS level although I have a 33 on the ACT.

Made me try better in school

Not that much I planned on going to college and doing the best. I could at whatever school I felt led to go to.

I did not receive TOPS before college.

It made me take my grades, ACT and SAT, and college preparations more seriously.

Helped me decide which courses to take

It did not have much of an effect because my grades were well above the amount necessary to obtain TOPS.

There wasn’t a very big influence overall; I always worked to keep my grades up.

There are certain types courses required to obtain TOPS. However, I planned to take these courses anyway, so TOPS did not greatly affect my education.

I took the ACT twice to try to get a high enough score to get a stipend

It had no effect on my educational experiences before college.

TOPS helped me to keep my grades up.

TOPS made me keep my grades up in high school.

TOPS encouraged me to do well in high school so that I would be well prepared for the ACT and also to have a good GPA so that my tuition would be paid for.

Because I received TOPS, I stayed in Louisiana.

I had to meet all requirements in high school to be eligible, and strived to maintain my GPA so that I would receive a stipend.

It determined my decision to go to college in Louisiana.
It encouraged me to work harder in high school.

To do my best academically to scholarship, TOPS as well as others.

It made me study so that I would get TOPS.

I have always has a high GPA, but I am not good standardized test taker. It made me work hard preparing for the ACT to make sure I made at least a 20.

Forced me to keep up my GPA and to get a sufficient ACT score.

In a way TOPS helped me to push for a higher ACT score so that I could get the awards that are worth more, but since my GPA was already high I wouldn’t say it helped my grades.

Pushed me to achieve academic success

It inspired me to achieve academically in high school in order to achieve academically in high school in order to be eligible for the TOPS award.

Because I did not want to take out loans to pay for tuition when I could be there.

Because, where I grew up, If you didn’t have scholarships or it wasn’t free. You had to pay for it yourself.

It helped me choose LSU as my college. Helped me improve my grades.

Took ACT multiple times to get a higher score to get a higher TOPS award.

Made me strive so that I could receive the highest TOPS awards.

TOPS influenced me to focus on my grades and ACT.

Made me keep my grades up, do good on ACT

My high school counselors didn’t inform us of the requirements until our junior year, so TOPS influenced my class choices then. It also was the ruling factor in the final decision to stay in state for college.

I made sure my test scores and GPA were high enough.

Not that much. Still went to college prep school to eventually prepare for med school. The fact that I got TOPS wasn’t a huge factor in staying in state, but it helped.

It made me want to take advantage of the money and go somewhere instate

Caused me to take necessary courses in high school to obtain TOPS instead of taking easy ones.

It did not, I would have taken classes necessary for TOPS anyway.

Not much at all if I recall correctly. Just made me think about the formal process I would be going through.

It allowed me to expand my college choices.

TOPS helped me keep my goals on mind with regards to good grades.

I hated high school. I wasn’t even there half the time

It didn’t influence my educational experiences before college. The requirements for TOPS are so low I wouldn’t have had to try at all to qualify.

It helped me strive to get the best grades I could so, that I would receive the highest TOPS award.

It helped me decide to stay in this state for my college career.

It made me strive to do better on both school grades and the ACT because I knew I needed the money and also kept my college choices to other state colleges.
I took classes in high school that I was certain would meet the required criteria.

I knew what I had to achieve academically if I would to go to college, because I couldn’t without TOPS.

I kept up with the TOPS requirements to ensure that I received TOPS for college. I knew I was going to apply for TOPS and I figured I would receive this award.

I kept my GPA up in high school to get the highest TOPS possible. I made sure I got at least a 28 on the ACT. I took challenging courses in high school (honors, AP).

TOPS allowed my college decision to be more easily made – which did relieve some stress of my senior year.

I actually didn’t, I didn’t have to take any classes that I normally would not have taken or work any harder for my grades.

I took the classes required for TOPS, but I would have taken them anyways they are college preparatory classes, I strived for success in them.

TOPS had a minor influence on the courses I took in high school.

In high school, I did my best regardless of the TOPS awards I was competing for, so TOPS didn’t really have much influence during this time period.

I worked a little harder to be eligible for the TOPS honors award.

TOPS influenced me to work towards the goal of earning the requirements to receive the TOPS scholarship and TOPS also influenced my decision to stay instate for college.

I knew in high school that my overall GPA determined whether or not I would attend a nationally credited university like LSU or a local college; even though my parents had enough money to send me out of state tye6 would not just hand it to me. It made me want to get good grades.

Provided the knowledge that I would be able to pay for college.

It pushed me to get a higher ACT score

I wanted to make good grades

He pushed me to do well

TOPS made me more aware of core courses needed to enter college.

It did not make much of a difference

Because of TOPS I chose to stay in state

Allowed we chance to afford LSU

It determined if I went to college or not

Money was not a huge issue. It did, however, help persuade my parents into letting me go to LSU.

It made me better prepared for college because of the classes I had to take.

I was pushed harder to receive TOPS! I tried more in high school.

I had to take more advanced classes in high school. They really helped me this year in college.

TOPS influenced me to stay in state for the scholarship.

It made me work hard to maintain a high GPA and ACT score.

I wanted to make good grades

It helped me narrow down where I wanted to attend college, helped me go to college in Louisiana.

Made it a little easier
Made me try harder on the ACT.

High school grades were based on my attempt to get TOPS.

It gave me a goal to work towards

It made me work harder in high school to ensure that I was awarded TOPS.

I worked harder so my parents would not have to pay for college. It motivated me to do well in school.

It made me want to outperform myself in high school.

Made me work harder in high school because I wanted to make TOPS.

It made life easier knowing I would have a source of tuition payment for college.

Made me take economics and civics

Tops made me take ACT testing seriously. I went into the test trying my best because I knew there would be a reward.

Helped me made the decision of coming to LSU.

It did not influence my educational experiences.

A great deal. I had the grades and ACT scores and it was free tuition. Why would I pay.

It was always a thought in high school because TOPS is a free ride, financially, for my parents so I always wanted to keep my grades.

I tried harder in high school to ensure I would get TOPS.

I strived to get good grades to receive the award.

TOPS made me work better at getting a higher ACT score.

It encouraged me to go because without it, my family couldn’t afford it.

It motivated me to achieve higher grades in high school and strive to better my ACT score.

It gave me a desire to learn and make better grades in order to give me a chance to get funding for college.

To know that there is such a system put there to pay for college a better option to take when graduating high school.

Made me consider LA college over others. Made me go for higher grades to receive TOPS.

It just made me aware of what courses to take and have high my ACT had to be.

I worked enough to get the TOPS. TOPS award and if TOPS did not exist I would have gone out of state.

It made me take useless classes and also not be able to take ones that I was interested in.

Helped me decide to go to college.

I followed a curriculum in high school to match TOPS criteria.

The thought of receiving a scholarship encouraged me to take courses that would qualify me for the TOPS award.

The existence of TOPS gave me the piece of mind that, if rejected from other schools. I could always go to LSU (or other LA school) cheaply.

It did not really. I was sure I was going to get it.

Made me study more and make better grades.

It encouraged me to take high school classes that I will benefit from in college.

Made me set a goal to make on my ACT on my ACT score so I could get TOPS.
Very little

Class choice
It gave me concrete academic goals to work for.

Gave me something to achieve.

I was required to take certain classes, like fine art survey to meet requirements for TOPS.

TOPS influenced me to go to LSU (instate) and to college because my tuition was free.

It did not. My grades have always met the TOPS requirement.

It made me want to excel on the ACT and keep my GPA high.

I did not have to worry about meeting requirement because I did well in school.

It made me want to get good grades in high school.

It pay most of my tuition for school. Otherwise I wouldn’t have gone.

Made me stay in Louisiana because of the free tuition even though I desperately wanted to move out of state.

Made me work harder to get it.

Not much because I was in high school making straight A’s.

It helped me to strive for academic excellence in order to receive TOPS.

I had to work hard to get it.

Encouraged me to make good grades.

I knew that I had to study hard to make the grades in order to get TOPS.

TOPS hasn’t influenced my educational experiences until college.

I was able to attend a major university.

Studied more and paid attention in classes.

Made me try harder in high school, so I could receive it and come to LSU.

Made me try harder

It motivated me to study hard and work harder in school.

Didn’t have to worry about paying for school once I got TOPS.

Didn’t have to worry about paying for school.

 Didn’t influence, I already had scholarship prospects.

It made me try to keep my GPA up so that I could get TOPS.

It made a big influence because I had to get on my job in high school and make good grades to receive a free college education.

It made me want to make the grades needed to receive the award.

Deciding what classes to take

It gave me something to aspire to and obtain. An extreme motivational tool to achieve new levels of success.

TOPS motivated me to attend the university of my choice without worrying about my tuition charges.

It made me encouraged that I would get a college education.

TOPS gave me hope that I can go to LSU, because otherwise many parents would have sent me to some other school.

It did not influence me at all. I didn’t even know about TOPS until my 11th grade year in high school.
TOPS encouraged me to keep up my GPA in order to be able to qualify for the scholarship.

Made me want to get good enough grades TOPS.

It only influenced me to work hard to help pay for the expense of college.

Made me work harder in high school and make good grades.

I knew what grades and ACT score I had to have to get TOPS and I got them.

I studied harder so that I could get most of my college education paid for.

I knew what grades I had to have to get TOPS and I got them.

In high school, I knew that meeting TOPS requirements were important this caused me to try harder in academics.

I took classes mainly just to get TOPS

They picked the classes I took

Made me stay in LA

I was exciting that I was able to attend college for free.

It encouraged me to do well in school so I could get TOPS.

Encouraged me to do well in school

I was moving to Texas, now I am not. Very helpful

It really didn’t

I knew it was going to help me out and my parents

Made me work harder

It helped me decide which decide which college I chose to attend

I just knew I had to get it

It made me work hard to earn TOPS.

Had to take college prep courses

I would not have been able to come to LSU without TOPS.

It motivated me to do better in school, and make higher scores on standardized tests.

TOPS helped me pay for school

Make me more focused in high school

It made me take courses that I would not have normally taken.

If I didn’t receive TOPS I would be in a bad situation. Made me work harder.

TOPS helps to pay for my education so I was able to go to a school I wanted to

It didn’t

It influenced me and gave me the idea of attending a big university

In high school, my first priority when scheduling classes was to make sure by my senior year I would have completed all courses required to receive TOPS. These courses stimulated my appetite for learning and influenced my subsequent course scheduling of higher level biologies.
QUESTION 2: How has TOPS influenced your educational experiences during college?

Keeps me studying.

TOPS has allowed me to attend college and it is definitely a reason for me to keep my GPA up.

It helped by me not having to get a job 1st semester.

I continue to maintain a high GPA to keep TOPS.

It gives me a standard to maintain in college.

It has greatly helped me financially.

Encourages me to keep up GPA.

TOPS keeps me motivated and I must achieve it.

It allowed me to be able to afford it.

During college it has influenced me to maintain good grades.

It helps me stay determined to keep my grades up to keep the award.

It has reduced my stress about having to pay tuition. It allows me to think of the great opportunity. I have to also make the best out of the opportunity I have given.

TOPS has not influenced my experience so far besides the fact that it primarily pays for my tuition.

It motivates me to work harder in order to retain TOPS.

It motivates me to work harder so I can keep TOPS.

It has been a big help. I have an on-campus job and do not have to work as much as I would without TOPS.

I have to make sure to keep up my GPA in order for me to receive TOPS because it really helps out my family.

Very little. I know that I have to maintain a decent GPA. But I maintain an excellent GPA anyway.

I must study to keep TOPS.

It really allows me to appreciate everything that is open to me through education.

Forced to keep up GPA.

It has enabled me to focus on learning rather than focusing on major education expenses.

TOPS helped me to study more because I didn’t have to get a job this semester.

Very little.

It has made me really pay attention to GPA.

Yes, I didn’t have to take out a student loan which means I don’t have to worry about money as much.

With TOPS I have not had to work while I study.

I strive to keep my GPA high.

It has made me work hard to keep TOPS.

It has greatly helped me financially.

I don’t really know, but I know I need to do well to keep it.

TOPS has helped me financially so that I don’t have to work to afford college TOPS also still encourages me to do well that I can keep it.

It keeps me from slacking off.

Well, it didn’t really inspire me to do my best because I only made what I had to get in order to keep TOPS. I didn’t strive because it wasn’t
really money that was paying for my education. But it is an awesome opportunity for everyone. Free school—what’s wrong with that? Also, as a result of TOPS, I am going to school for a longer period of time—graduating with a major and a minor.

TOPS has provided funds for my tuition.

Allowed me to be able to go to the college of my choice, rather than settling for a different college because of financial reasons.

It has made me aware of maintaining a high GPA.

Not much at all.

It has given me more opportunities by improving my financial capabilities.

I try to keep my grades up so I can keep my TOPS.

TOPS has helped me to keep my grades up. Keeping TOPS has been my goal for my freshman year.

It also sets a goal for me as far as getting the appropriate GPA.

It makes you work to keep your grade up to keep TOPS.

It makes me work harder to maintain TOPS.

Helped me to be here.

It gave me motivation to do well.

It has made me focus a little harder.

So far it has just been nice to have my tuition pretty much covered and out of the way—as long as I make decent grades and keep it.

TOPS helped financially (i.e. books).

To maintain a good GPA.

Worries me to death, anxiety.

I study, and have to maintain my GPA in order to keep my extra money.

I strive to maintain my TOPS.

Yes, I have improved in my classes because of my high school background.

It makes me study harder to keep it.

Makes the financial situation easier for my parents.

Gave me money.

Nervous to keep it.

Allows me to attend college with a little less stress.

Makes me work harder.

Allows me to attend a large university—also influences me to maintain a good GPA.

It motivated me to work harder.

Makes me keep my grades high to keep TOPS.

I am trying very hard to keep TOPS.

Have to keep grades up.

Influenced me to keep a certain a GPA.

Don’t know yet.

It has helped me financially and kept that stress of my mind.

Makes sure I keep up my GPA.

Pays for college.

It motivates me to keep my GPA up.

None.

Study more. Keep close eye on grades.
Constantly on my mind, making me work hard to get a 3.0.

Not sure yet.

It has influenced me to keep up my grades and school hours so I can keep TOPS.

I definitely wanted to go to a Louisiana college. It makes me study hard to keep up my GPA to keep TOPS.

Well, it is my first semester but I am doing everything I can to make sure I meet my award goal.

Positively.

Not much.

College is expensive. TOPS helped to keep me out of debt.

Encourages you to keep your grades up to keep it.

Yes because of the required GPA and my college choice was based on TOPS.

Not as poor as I would be.

Motivates me to do well.

I probably would not be here without it.

Paid for it.

It has helped to remind me to try my besting my courses so that I can continue to come to college here.

It has not since LSU raised its fess and I now have to pay money.

Stresses me about loosing TOPS because I am screwed without it.

I have been relaxed about college and now I know I have to work harder.

Yes.

It makes me work harder to keep it.

I want to keep my grades up to keep TOPS.

It makes me keep up with my grades so I don’t lose my scholarship.

It has provided me with a way to focus more on education than paying for it.

It keeps me in line as far as grades go.

It reminds me to keep the grades high and to not mess up so that TOPS would still be there for me.

It helped with many college expenses.

It allowed me to come here.

I have more money to spend on food.

More spending cash.

More money for other activities.

Helped me to decide where to go to college and paid for it.

Money was provided for books.

Less working.

I still continue to try to maintain a good GPA.

TOPS is the only reason I can pay for college.

It helped me to keep my GPA up.

My parents would have paid either way. I think they are able to give me more allowance money which means I have to work less and can focus more on school and earning better grades.

Made it so that I only have to pay for books to go to school.
Had to keep certain GPA and number of hours to maintain scholarships. Somewhat stressful at the time but more than well worth it.

It has not.

It has kept me focused on studying and trying to make better grades so I can keep TOPS.

I was able to attend LSU instead of McNeese.

Helped out financially.

It allowed me to attend LSU rather than a smaller local college.

It has not influenced me yet.

Keeps grades up.

I would not be able to go to college if not for TOPS.

It has not made a difference.

Has made me work hard to get required GPA.

It has paid for my tuition which would have been a major burden.

Not much.

It has saved a lot of money and made me want to make good grades.

TOPS allows me to have less financial burden especially in my first few years of college.

It makes me work to do well in college so that I may keep the award. Hasn’t yet.

A big influence. TOPS is the reason I went to LSU instead of going to an out of state school.

It forced me to closely monitor my grades and the number of hours I take each semester.

I don’t have to work while in college because of a scholarship.

Extra stipend pays for textbooks. Motivates me to keep GPA within required range.

Doesn’t make me worry about how to pay for college and makes me work harder.

I work hard to maintain my GPA so I don’t lose TOPS.

I have to do good so that I can keep TOPS. It helps me get through college.

It has paid for most of my education.

It puts the same pressure on me to keep up my grades.

TOPS influences me to study harder to maintain a high GPA so I don’t lose my award.

It keeps me motivated to keep TOPS.

Helps me to keep my grades up to keep receiving my money.

Motivates me to maintain a good GPA.

Make me work harder to keep it and that way wouldn’t make my parents pay.

I have been able to achieve my dream of becoming a doctor.

It keeps me working hard so I don’t lose it.

Still have to stay on my school work and get good grades.

It has been great not worrying about the expense, just my living expenses.

Again, it makes me more conscious of my grades because I want to keep it.

Pays my tuition, saves me money.
To keep my GPA high.

It hasn’t. It has made me study harder to continue having TOPS.

I maintain the necessary GPA.

It has not.

TOPS encourages me to keep progressing and make sure my grades are high enough.

It has challenged me to work harder.

Had to do well to keep TOPS.

TOPS is the reason I am here. It is my only funding for college.

I wouldn’t be here.

It makes me want to get good grades so I can keep TOPS.

It has not affected me too much.

It makes me make good grades to keep TOPS.

It helps me to spend more time on work instead of earning money for school.

I tend to study more.

TOPS made me decide to stay in Louisiana for college. I knew I wanted to attend a large university, but it hadn’t been for TOPS I would have gone to UGA.

I have to strive to get a good GPA.

TOPS has allowed me more time to study because I do not have to work for my tuition money.

Makes sure I make good enough grades to keep it.

It makes me work harder, knowing that I have to keep up a certain grade point average.

It keeps me working hard so I can keep TOPS. TOPS also frees up some time I would have to work so I can study more.

I probably could not afford to go here if not for TOPS.

It has paid for a lot of my major expenses (because I have another scholarship) but some of my friends wish it would pay for more required fees.

I work harder to keep TOPS, but sometimes I am a little over-pressured to keep TOPS.

Because I must have a certain GPA to stay on TOPS, I have been working harder to get above that GPA. I have also chosen the number of hours in class to stay on TOPS.

It makes me work harder knowing I have to maintain a certain GPA in order to keep it.

I do everything that I can to keep my GPA high enough so that I don’t lose the TOPS money that I am getting.

It has made it possible for me to not have a job, allowing me to focus on academics.

It is also a great influence in college. In order to keep my reward and yearly stipend, I have to maintain a 3.0 GPA.

It makes me work harder, every test counts.

It only has in the matter of not having to pay.

I have worked to keep my GPA.

Not.

It has caused my parent to make me stay in Louisiana when I really wanted to go out of state for school.

I feel motivated to achieve a 3.5 at least to maintain my award.
Made them cheaper.

It has given me the opportunity to attend LSU.

Helped me maintain a good GPA.

It enabled me to not have to worry about working to pay for college.

It has helped a lot financially and was one of the reasons I chose to go to LSU.

I have to maintain a certain GPA to keep it; I guess it motivates me to perform to a certain level.

I don’t have to worry about paying for college as much.

It allowed me to go. Make it easier.

While slacking off because it’s given me the motivation to do well because otherwise I’ll lose my $800 stipend.

I don’t have to worry about finding money to pay for school.

TOPS has paid my tuition, which has been an immense factor in my ability to afford college. Without it, I would have had to major in a different focus of music at a different school in order to get a scholarship that accommodate tuition.

It causes me to focus on my studies so that I can keep my GPA at a level that will allow me to remain qualified for TOPS.

It helps keep on top of the work plus my parents don’t let me forget about it.

It’s the reason I’m here.

Makes me keep track of my grades and my number of hours.

I have been stressed to make better grades so I can keep TOPS.

Caused me to study harder and work to keep it.

Makes me scared that I will lose.

It challenges me to work hard I school.

The money received from TOPS has lessened what I have had to pay for school.

Yes, I think about dropping classes.

It helps me to strive to do good.

I know that I have to maintain a certain amount of hours and a GPA to keep TOPS.

TOPS had me push myself harder to get good grades so I will not lose my scholarship.

I work hard so that I do not lose TOPS.

TOPS has help fund my education allowing me to focus on school and not financial matters.

 Forces me to obtain and maintain a certain GPA which helps me out by setting a limit to how low my grades can set.

It has encouraged me to reach a high GPA to keep the award.

It keeps my grades up.

It helps a lot to pay for college.

It drives me to keep a 3.0 GPA or higher.

It has helped me decide the college I attended and has helped financially so I could attend LSU.

TOPS hasn’t affected my educational expenses. My parents save money.

It makes me appreciative of the free education I have received. Also, makes me strive to keep my grades up.

I am aware that if I allow my grades to drop too low, I will no longer be able to receive the scholarship.
Knowing that I could lose TOPS if I don’t make a certain GPA or take a certain number of classes, I study harder and am more aware and conscious of my grades.

Helped me to keep grades up.

It has let me focus on school without worrying about paying a fee bill.

It provides incentives for me not to lose TOPS because it pays for my education and my parents threaten that if I lose it I have to get a job. This allows me more time to focus on my studies.

I am continuing to work hard in college so that I do not lose TOPS.

Made me want to keep TOPS and benefits by studying.

It makes me want to maintain my GPA to keep my award.

I’ve had to concentrate on keeping my grades high enough to keep TOPS and my stipend.

I strive to do my best so that I may keep my TOPS award. It encourages me to make good grades.

I will maintain a GPA that will allow me to continue receiving TOPS.

I am a first semester freshman so it hasn’t influenced me much yet.

Motivated me to keep TOPS.

I study more to keep up my GPA in order to keep my TOPS.

Less stress on finance, more stress on academics.

It allows me to not work and focus on school.

It keeps me motivated to maintain a high GPA to keep my scholarship.

It pushes me to maintain a high GPA.

It makes my parent’s lives less stressful and my life less stressful. Now, I have spending money also.

TOPS encouraged me to make higher grades.

Study often to keep my grades up so I can keep TOPS.

Has helped me to maintain good grades to hold it.

Allowed me to focus more on studying that on the money.

Really makes me realize how great TOPS is and how hard I need to work to keep it.

TOPS keeps me on my toes as a college student so I don’t lose my money.

It saved me money.

Not really. I still make good grades regardless.

None.

It is the only reason I am in college now. It is paying for the education I will love to have and that will shape my future. If it were not for TOPS, I could be working at McDonald’s. Who knows? It also makes me want to be a good student in order to keep my TOPS funds.

It has pressured me to get at least a 3.0. I do less socializing to maintain my average.

None.

It motivates me to really concentrate my grades and maintain the TOPS required GPA.

It’s made college affordable for my parents. It also makes me work to keep my grades up.

Has given me more money.

I must do well enough to keep TOPS.

More funds for leisure.
I need to bring my grades up so I don’t have TOPS.

It makes me want to strive to do well.

I know that I have to keep my grades high because if I lose the scholarship I will have to pay tuition for myself.

It pays for tuition, which saves money.

Same.

I am just trying to maintain TOPS.

It helps my family pay for me to be here.

I’d say it motivated me.

It makes me strive excellence in order to keep it.

A lot by not having to worry as much about my financial situation.

It makes me study hard for a high GPA.

I try to work harder in classes to keep TOPS.

It helped me to be better prepared.

I want to keep TOPS so it encourages me to keep my GPA high.

It has made me keep up my grades so that I can keep my scholarship.

It has persuaded me to maintain my scholarship through diligent study.

It keeps me motivated to do well in school.

Helps out financially.

Because I have TOPS I can’t take a semester off to go live in the Caribbean for a semester.

It has not made any difference.

TOPS makes me aware of my GPA and course load.

It continues to push me to do well.

Keep up good grades.

To keep my GPA up.

I just got here.

By scheduling and paying me some money.

Well it’s paying for my educational experience, but its not affecting the effort I put forth.

I make sure to follow the guidelines so I don’t lose TOPS.

It forces me to keep y GPA above 3.0 so that I will keep my TOPS money and my semester allotment of $300.

Didn’t have to stress about money.

It has also influenced me to keep working hard because of the monetary aspect.

TOPS has influenced my experience in college in that I have studied harder to keep my GPA up, so I can continue to keep my stipend.

I have to make sure I keep the required GPA.

It has enabled me to have a little more money for various costs here.

Made money a non-factor, so that I may concentrate on my classes.

Just got here.

Slightly-I know I must maintain a certain GPA to keep it.

It has helped me to see many different people from many different educational and financial backgrounds.
As a result of TOPS, I do not have to work to support myself and pay for tuition. Consequently, I can focus more on my schoolwork and have made better grades.

I go to school free.

It has been a force that made me stay in state for college. I had the grades and scores to go to an elite private school in the North, but my father made me stay because of TOPS, therefore, I do not care for TOPS.

Reason to keep GPA up.

Maintaining grades to keep TOPS. Allowed me to get more out of school instead of working a job.

It encourages me to maintain the Honor Awards level.

None.

It kept me in Louisiana.

Made me strive for high GPA to maintain TOPS.

It’s extremely nice to have my tuition paid for, and I am keeping my GPA extremely high to keep it.

It gives me the motivation to work hard and maintain a high GPA.

Set a standard to strive towards, maintain the required GPA.

Still don’t think about it.

It made it possible for me to go because if not I couldn’t afford it.

It encourages me to try harder in all my classes so I can keep receiving TOPS.

It has provided valuable financial assistance, which will help me pay tuition of graduate school.

It gave my parents a break after putting three sisters through college before TOPS.

Makes me work really hard to keep my grades up to go to college for free.

I have not had to pay tuition although I don’t have enough money now to live. My parents may be wealthy but they don’t help me out at all.

It pays for me to go here.

Well, I only had to spend four grand of my own money on living, books, and fees instead of the full thing.

Help motivate me to keep my grades up.

Causes me to work harder to maintain my level of TOPS.

It has not.

Will encourage me to maintain a high GPA since I need the funding.

It has assisted paying for tuition and books.

TOPS has allowed me to be a full time student and not have a job. I’m very appreciative because doing so would detract from my educational experiences.

It made me realize how much better I am than everyone else.

It has saved me a lot of money. That gives me time to study instead of having a job.

It has allowed me to attend college and not worry about finances.

It has let me take out only a small loan to finish things off. TOPS allows me to concentrate on class because I do not have to work.

It helps financially and gives me more study time because I don’t have to work as much.
It has also helped my financial load to be decreased.

It allowed me to get motivated for the best grades possible.

Receiving the TOPS award was a major factor in my decision to attend a Louisiana college. I make sure to keep my grades up to continue to receive TOPS.

Has helped immensely with the cost so that I can concentrate on my course work instead of a job.

TOPS has enabled me to attend college without making student loans. This has allowed me to focus on school better.

I have had to make sure to keep my grades up to keep TOPS.

I chose to attend a Louisiana university.

TOPS has made it possible and easier for me to attend college.

In college, I have worker harder to make sure I maintain a 3.0 GPA required by TOPS than I may have otherwise.

It has helped my family pay for my education. I went to LSU rather than Florida because of TOPS. TOPS continues to influence me to maintain a high academic standing to keep the TOPS scholarship.

I know that my GPA cannot drop below a 3.0 or I will be pursuing other career opportunities that do not require a college education. If TOPS were to be pulled, I would definitely transfer out-of-state.

Helps with tuition, doesn’t completely cover it though. Its another reason to keep up my GPA.

Makes me study more. I don’t want to face consequences of nothing.

TOPS has influenced me to study harder and be aware of my current GPA.

Made me strive to succeed, so that I don’t lose TOPS.

It has helped my family to pay for my college tuition.

TOPS has not really influenced my educational experience during college other than paying tuition.

This is my first semester in college and so far it has encouraged me to keep my grades up so that I can continue to receive tuition money.

It has pushed me to keep my grades up so I can keep TOPS.

Keep my grades up so I can keep TOPS.

I want to maintain a high GPA but not just because of TOPS.

Keeping grades up to maintain stipend.

Worried me.

It really hasn’t influenced my experiences. I know what I want to do and there’s a certain path to take to get there.

It has not greatly influenced my college education. I know I must maintain a certain GPA, but I would make that GPA without working very hard.

Motivation to keep high GPA.

With TOPS I am able to go to a school not in my hometown. Without it, I would not be able to afford room and board, and tuition. Keeping TOPS is part of my motivation for earning good grades in college.

I feel more motivated to keep up my grades (and graduate in four years).

It did not have much of an effect because my grades were well above the amount necessary to obtain TOPS.
Need to keep grades up to maintain TOPS.

None.

It has helped a lot with my family expenses. With three other kids going to private schools, my parents have plenty to pay monthly.

I haven’t had to worry about paying for my education.

It has made me stay focused on my grades so I could keep TOPS all 4 years.

Again, pushes me to achieve academic success, as I must attend college and therefore, need a means of paying for it.

Makes me work harder so I can keep TOPS.

I know I have to keep my GPA about a 2.5 so I’m making sure of that, though I am trying for a higher GPA than that.

It provided needed financial assistance.

Forcing me to keep a certain GPA and maintain certain hours.

I need a high GPA to get accepted to dental school. So that has been my main goal. But if not, I would try extremely hard to keep my GPA high enough to keep TOPS. If I lost TOPS, my parents would not let me stay at LSU.

It makes me study to keep TOPS.

To continue doing well academically to maintain my scholarship and possibly procure more scholarships.

Yes, it has encouraged me to work harder to keep my TOPS.
APPENDIX F

ELITE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Louisiana State University
College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling

Title of Study: The Impact of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program For Students

Principle Investigators
Researcher/Student: Roderick L. Smothers
(225) 578-5934

Major Professor: Becky Ropers-Huilman, Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling
111 Peabody Hall – Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70804
(225) 578-6900

Please state your name and title and length of time in your current position and describe the official capacity in which you work with TOPS?

1. What are the goals of the TOPS program? Do you think TOPS has achieved those goals?

2. In your opinion, how has TOPS impacted the status of Higher Education in Louisiana?

3. Do you think the TOPS criteria to obtain TOPS needs to raised? Do you think it needs to be lowered?

4. Do you think the citizens of Louisiana are informed about the TOPS program?

5. Do you think the Louisiana is doing enough to educate its citizens about the TOPS program?

6. What ethnic group do you think TOPS impacts the most? Why?

7. Do you know of any flaws (programmatic, administrative, etc.) that exist with the TOPS program? What fiscal challenges, if any, do you think TOPS has or will encounter.?

8. Do you think TOPS has influenced the status of access to higher education in Louisiana?
9. Do you think the establishment of a TOPS curriculum to be implemented for high school students would be successful?

10. Do you think a tracking system that reinforces, encourages rewards, and supports TOPS recipients’ success in college would be successful?

11. Do you think initiating a job/career placement option that will help TOPS graduates find employment in the state would be successful and useful?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share with me for my study?
1. Name___________________________________________________________
   First Middle Last
   Business Address________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

2. Phone#_____________________________________________ E-mail address________________

3. Title/Position_________________________ Organization/Agency________________________
APPENDIX G

COPY OF APPROVED INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FORM

IRB #: 2408 LSU Proposal # __________ Revised: 06/11/2003

LSU INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) for
HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECT PROTECTION

APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

Unless they are qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/projects using living humans as subjects, or samples or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

Instructions: Complete this form.
If it appears that your study qualifies for exemption send:
(A) Two copies of this completed form.
(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts A & B).
(C) Copies of all instruments to be used. If this proposal is a part of a grant proposal include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
(D) The consent form that you will use in the study

to: ONE screening committee member (listed at the end of this form) in the most closely related department/discipline or to IRB office.

If exemption seems likely, submit it. If not, submit regular IRB application. Help is available from Dr. Robert Mathews, 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu or any screening committee member.

Principal Investigator Roderick L. Smothers Student? Y/N

Ph: 578-5934 E-mail rsmothe@lsu.edu Dept/Unit ELRC

If Student, name supervising professor Dr. Ropers-Huil 578-6900

Mailing Address LSU Academic Affairs Ph 578-5934
146 Thomas Boyd Hall - Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Project Title The Influence of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students

Agency expected to fund project N/A

Subject pool (e.g. Psychology Students) Full-time undergraduate students at Louisiana State Univ

Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changed I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted.

PI Signature /Date 9/8/03 (no per signatures)

Screening Committee Action:
Exempted X Not Exempted ___ Category/Paragraph ___

Reviewer Signature  Date 9/16/03

S. Kim MacGregor

193
May 1, XXXX

John Doe, Professor  
Department of Chemistry  
Louisiana State University  
111 Choppin Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Dear Dr. Doe,

I am a Doctoral Candidate at Louisiana State University in the Department of Educational Leadership Research and Counseling. I am writing to solicit your support for the research that I am conducting. The purpose of the research is three-fold: 1) to ascertain perceptions of effectiveness of current recipients of the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) awards; 2) to determine if TOPS is accomplishing its legislatively mandated goals and; 3) to ascertain input from key TOPS administrators and Legislators on the effectiveness of the TOPS program.

One way in which I plan to acquire the data needed to complete this research project will be to administer a questionnaire to a selected sample of students at Louisiana State University (LSU). My hope is to begin the data collection process at the beginning of the 2003 Summer semester. In that LSU has been approved as the site for collecting data because of convenience, I am requesting your permission to administer a questionnaire to your Chemistry 1001 class (sections 1, 2 & 3) during the week of June 10-15, 2003. The administration of the questionnaire will take approximately 12-15 minutes (including instruction time).

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire I will present a thorough description of my intentions to the students explaining the procedure and purpose for collecting the data. All participants will fully understand that the information will be made available to them upon written request. Human Subjects Guidelines for Louisiana State University will be carefully followed. All forms will be approved prior to data collection and copies will be provided to you before the administration of the questionnaire.

If you should decide to assist me in this research endeavor or have any questions or concerns, please contact me by telephone at (225) 578-5934 or by e-mail at rsmothe@lsu.edu. You may also reach my Major Professor, Dr. Ropers-Huilman, at (225) 578-6900 or by e-mail at broper1@lsu.edu. Thank you in advance for considering my request for assistance.

Roderick L. Smothers, MPA  
Doctoral Candidate
May 1, XXXX

Mrs. Melanie Amrhein, Assistant Executive Director
Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance
1885 Wooddale Blvd.
Baton Rouge, La. 70806

Dear Mrs. Amrhein

I am a Doctoral Candidate at Louisiana State University in the Department of Educational Leadership Research and Counseling. I am writing to solicit your support for the research that I am conducting. The purpose of the research is three-fold: 1) to ascertain perceptions of effectiveness of current recipients of the Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) awards; 2) to determine if TOPS is accomplishing its legislatively mandated goals and; 3) to ascertain input from key TOPS administrators and Legislators on the effectiveness of the TOPS program.

To acquire the data needed to complete this research project I will be administering a questionnaire to a selected sample of students at Louisiana State University and conduct interviews with key constituents such as yourself who have a vested interest in the successful implementation and administration of the TOPS program. Because of your position as an administrator in the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance, I believe that your input would be a very valuable source of information. I am, therefore, soliciting your participation and support in the form of a 1 hour interview to be held at a time convenient for you between June 15-30, 2003. The interview will be very informal and will be conducted by me.

Authorization to conduct this study has been granted by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board and has also been approved by my Major Professor, Dr. Becky Ropers-Huilman who is an Associate Professor in the College of Education - Department of Educational Leadership Research and Counseling.

If you should decide to assist me in this research endeavor or have any questions or concerns, please contact me by telephone at (225) 578-5934 or by e-mail at rsmothe@lsu.edu. You may also reach Dr. Ropers-Huilman at (225) 578-6900 or by e-mail at broper1@lsu.edu. Thank you in advance for considering my request for assistance.

Roderick L. Smothers, MPA
Doctoral Candidate
Memorandum

TO: Dr. Becky Ropers-Huilman, Associate Professor, Christine Day, Associate Director - Student Aid and Scholarships, Bonnie Alford, Director, Orientation Services, Geraldine Holmes, Associate Professor, School of Human Resource Education & Workforce Development

FROM: Roderick Smothers, Doctoral Student

RE: Review of Survey Instrument

I am writing this memorandum to request your assistance in serving as a member of a panel of experts to review my survey instrument.

This commitment to serve would entail your participation in a 30-45 minute meeting to review and give feedback on the enclosed survey instrument. The purpose of the study is to ascertain the perceptions of current TOPS recipients on the effectiveness of the TOPS program. The study will be conducted by me during the 2003 Summer School Session at Louisiana State University.

I have attached a copy of the survey instrument for your review.
You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are a student at Louisiana State University. Your participation will involve completing and returning the attached questionnaire. The information provided by you is crucial to the success of the study. We ask that you respond to each question completely and honestly, and that you return the survey to the administrator upon completion.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and the completion of a questionnaire along with a signed consent form will indicate your consent to participate. This survey will not be a part of your academic records at Louisiana State University and services currently provided to you by the University, or the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance will not be affected by your participation or failure to participate.

The results of this study will be used by the researcher to make recommendations to the appropriate administrative agencies for improvement to the program. If you would like to receive a copy of the results, please notify the researcher/administrator.
Title of Study: The Impact of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program For Students
Study Site: Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College Approved Classroom Settings

Investigators: The investigators listed below are available for questions about this study Monday-Friday from 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Roderick L. Smothers, Ph.D. Candidate - (225)578-5934
Becky Ropers-Huilman, Asst. Professor - (225)578-6900
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling
111 Peabody Hall – Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this study will be to evaluate the impact of the Louisiana TOPS program for the following 1) to determine if the TOPS program has increased access to higher education for minority students and ; 2) to ascertain the perceptions of students on the effectiveness of the TOPS program.

Participants:
The participants in this research study are full-time students at Louisiana State University who are recipients of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS). Participants must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

Number of participants: 500

Study Procedures:
If you agree to participate, a questionnaire will be administered to you by Roderick Smothers during your Chemistry 1001 class. The questionnaire will be administered with appropriate instructions and should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire will ask specific questions about your knowledge of the Louisiana TOPS program and how it has impacted your educational experiences.

Benefits:
By participating in this research, all subjects will be automatically entered into a drawing with a chance of winning $100. Additionally, your participation may yield valuable information about the Louisiana TOPS Program.
**Risks:**
There are no risks involved in participating in this study. The data will remain confidential and will be stored in a secured location in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling. In addition, once analyzed, the data will be coded in such a way that your identification is protected.

**Right to Refuse:**
You are NOT OBLIGATED to participate in this study. If at anytime you would like to discontinue completing the questionnaire you may do so at no penalty. Just simply inform the investigator that you do not wish to proceed and s/he will stop.

**Privacy:**
The results of this study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I WILL WILLINGLY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH IT DESCRIBES. This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have question about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I also acknowledge the investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

_________________________________________  ____________________
Signature of Subject                          Date
Title of Study: The Impact of the Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program For Students
Study Site: Work settings/offices of Approved Interviewees

Investigators: The investigators listed below are available for questions about this study Monday-Friday from 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Roderick L. Smothers, Ph.D. Candidate - (225)578-5934
Becky Ropers-Huilman, Asst. Professor - (225)578-6900
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling
111 Peabody Hall – Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this study will be to evaluate the impact of the Louisiana TOPS program for the following
1) to determine what policy flaws, if any, have hindered TOPS program operations; 2) to determine if the
TOPS program has increased access to higher education for minority students; 3) to ascertain the
perceptions of students on the effectiveness of the TOPS program. 4)to make recommendations for
improvement to be submitted to state legislators.

Participants:
The participants in this phase of the research study are university administrators, legislators, policy makers,
and researchers who have been identified as having substantial knowledge about the Louisiana Tuition
Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS).

Number of participants: 8

Study Procedures:
If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed by Roderick Smothers at the location of your choice.
The interview will be recorded with a tape recording device and the data gathered from this interview will be
transcribed and reduced to writing. The data collected will then be used to substantiate or discredit the
presupposed thoughts of the interviewer/researcher/student.

Benefits:
By participating in this research you will contribute to the limited body of research knowledge that currently
exists on state funded merit programs. Additionally, input may yield valuable information that would
provide Louisiana policy makers and legislators with resources to make better informed decisions about the
future of this program.
Risks:
The data collected will remain confidential and will be stored in a secured location in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling. In addition, once transcribed, the data will be coded in such a way that your identification is protected.

Right to Refuse:
You are NOT OBLIGATED to participate in this study. If at anytime you would like to discontinue the interview process you may do so at no penalty. Just simply inform the investigator that you do not wish to proceed and s/he will stop.

Privacy:
The results of this study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

BY SIGNING THIS FORM, I WILL WILLINGLY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH IT DESCRIBES. This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have question about subjects’ rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I also acknowledge the investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

________________________________________   _______________________
Signature of Subject                          Date
APPENDIX N

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Perceptions Toward Louisiana’s Tuition Opportunity Program for Students

SURVEY OF LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Directions: This questionnaire is divided into four parts. Please respond to all sections as directed.

SECTION ONE: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Please fill out the corresponding oval in the provided scantron.

1. What is your gender
   a) Male
   b) Female

2. What is your race
   a) Black/African American
   b) White/Caucasian American
   c) Pacific Islander/Native American
   d) Hispanic
   e) Asian American
   f) Other

3. What is your age
   a) 18 - 19
   b) 20 - 21
   c) 22 - 25
   d) Over 25

4. What is your classification
   a) Freshman
   b) Sophomore
   c) Junior
   d) Senior
   e) Graduate
   f) Other

5. What is your residency status
   a) Louisiana Resident
   b) Non-Louisiana Resident

6. Indicate the highest educational level of parent(s)/guardian(s)?
   a) less than high school
   b) high school diploma
   c) associate degree/certificate
   d) bachelor’s degree
   e) graduate/professional degree
7. Please estimate your total family income for 2003:
   a) less than $15,000
   b) $15,000 - $25,000
   c) $25,001 - $35,000
   d) $35,001 - $45,000
   e) $45,001 - $55,000
   f) $55,001 - $65,000
   g) $65,001 - $75,000
   h) greater than $75,000

8. What is your academic major (field)
   a) Arts & Humanities (English, Performing Arts, Philosophy, Religion, etc.)
   b) Science (Biology, Chemistry, Zoology, Physics, etc.)
   c) Engineering, Computer Science
   d) Business (Accounting, ISDS, Management, Marketing, etc.)
   e) Social Sciences (Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, etc.)
   f) Education
   g) Other

9. What is your current overall GPA?
   a) below 2.0
   b) 2.0 - 2.49
   c) 2.5 - 2.99
   d) 3.0 - 3.49
   e) 3.5 - 4.0

10. What was your highest ACT (or SAT equivalent) score?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>SAT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) below 12</td>
<td>below 540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) 12 - 15</td>
<td>(540-600) - (720-760)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) 16 - 19</td>
<td>(770-810) - (900-930)</td>
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<td>d) 20 - 23</td>
<td>(940-970) - (1060-1090)</td>
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<tr>
<td>e) 24 - 27</td>
<td>(110-1130) - (1210-1240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) 28 - 31</td>
<td>(1250-1280) - (1370-1410)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) above 31</td>
<td>above 1410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Are you a recipient of a Louisiana Tuition Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) award?
   a). Yes
   b). No

   If you are NOT a recipient of the TOPS award, you may stop here!

SECTION TWO: PRE-THOUGHT EXERCISE
Please write your answers to questions 12-14 on this sheet.

12. How did TOPS influence your educational experiences before college?

13. How has TOPS influence your educational experiences during college?

14. What changes/recommendations would you make to improve TOPS?

SECTION THREE: PRE-COLLEGIATE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Please darken the corresponding oval on the provided scantron to indicate your level of familiarity.

Scale: a.) Very Familiar  
b.) Familiar  
c.) Don’t Know / No Opinion  
d.) Slightly Familiar  
e.) Unfamiliar

15.) I was familiar TOPS awards criteria (ACT score, GPA, etc.) prior to starting college.  
a) very familiar  
b) familiar  
c) don’t know/no opinion  
d) slightly familiar  
e) unfamiliar

16.) I was familiar with the TOPS high school curriculum prior to starting high school.  
a) very familiar  
b) familiar  
c) don’t know/no opinion  
d) slightly familiar  
e) unfamiliar

17.) I was familiar with the various TOPS award levels prior to starting college.  
a) very familiar  
b) familiar  
c) don’t know/no opinion  
d) slightly familiar  
e) unfamiliar
18.) I was familiar with the TOPS retention requirements prior to starting college.
   a) very familiar   b) familiar   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) slightly familiar   e) unfamiliar

19.) I became familiar with TOPS through my high school counselor(s).
   a) very familiar   b) familiar   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) slightly familiar   e) unfamiliar

SECTION FOUR: INFLUENCE OF THE TOPS PROGRAM ON ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Please darken the corresponding oval on the provided scantron to indicate your level of agreement.

Scale: a.) Strongly Agree
   b.) Agree
   c.) Don’t Know / No Opinion
   d.) Disagree
   e.) Strongly Disagree

20.) The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

21.) The TOPS award was a factor in my decision to attend college in Louisiana.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

22.) The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too stringent (difficult).
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

23.) The criteria to receive the TOPS award are too lenient (easy).
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

24.) The amount of the TOPS award is sufficient to cover the cost of attending college.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

25.) Efforts by the State to educate TOPS recipients on retention requirements are sufficient.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

26.) The G.P.A required to retain TOPS is too high.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

27.) Efforts by the State to educate Louisiana citizens about the TOPS program are sufficient.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

28.) My current GPA has been influenced by my efforts to obtain or retain TOPS.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

29.) TOPS has had a direct influence on my academic performance.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree

30.) TOPS has influenced my study habits.
   a) strongly agree   b) agree   c) don’t know/no opinion   d) disagree   e) strongly disagree
31.) TOPS has influenced my decision to carry my current course load.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

32.) TOPS has influenced my decision to add/drop courses.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

33.) TOPS has influenced my decision to seek tutorial assistance.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

34.) TOPS has influenced my desire to complete college (graduate).
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

35.) TOPS has influenced my involvement in extra-curricular activities.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

36.) TOPS has influenced my decision to reside (live) on campus.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

37.) TOPS has influenced my personal life in college (relationships, friendships, etc.).
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

38.) TOPS has influenced my decision to continue in some form of post baccalaureate degree program.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

39.) TOPS has influenced my career choices.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

40.) TOPS has reduced the need for me to work while in college.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

41.) My TOPS award has sufficiently covered the cost of tuition.
   a) strongly agree  b) agree  c) don’t know/no opinion  d) disagree  e) strongly disagree

Thank you for your participation
- End of Survey-
## APPENDIX O

### FACTOR LOADINGS (CORRELATIONS)

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# APPENDIX P

## INITIAL ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS FOR TOPS

| Residency Requirement | - A resident of Louisiana (independent student)  
- Has a parent or legal guardian who is a resident of Louisiana during the 24 months preceding the student’s graduation (dependent student) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Citizenship Requirement | - A citizen of the United States  
Note: students who are not citizens but are eligible to apply for citizenship are deemed to satisfy the citizenship requirement if within 60 days after the date the student attains the age of majority, the student applies to become a citizen and obtains citizenship within one year after the application date. |
| Secondary Education Requirement | - Certified to have graduated from a Louisiana public or nonpublic high school approved by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE); the school must also meet certain other requirements OR  
- A graduate from an out-of-state high school which has been approved by the appropriate state educational agency in the state where the school is located; or which is accredited by the Association of Colleges and Schools’ Commission on Secondary and Middle Schools and meets BESE standards for non-public schools in Louisiana; or which has been approved by the Department of Defense OR  
- Certified to have successfully completed at the 12th grade level a home study program approved by BESE; if such students ever attended a Louisiana public or Louisiana nonpublic high school approved by BESE, he must have attended a Louisiana public, Louisiana nonpublic, or out-of-state school, he must be certified to be in good standing at the time he last attended school.  
- Tech and Opportunity only: Graduate of a high school outside the U.S. and its territories which meets BESE standards for approved Louisiana nonpublic schools and which is accredited by an organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education OR  
- Tech and Opportunity only: Certified to have successfully completed at the 12th grade level a home study program approved by BESE conducted outside the U.S. and its territories |
| High School GPA Requirement | - **Opportunity Award:** Minimum cumulative 2.5 GPA calculated on a 4.0 scale  
- **Performance Award:** Minimum cumulative 3.50 GPA calculated on a 4.0 scale (Beginning with the 2001-2002 award year, 3.00 on a 5.0 scale is required for students completing 10 or more high school honors courses.)  
- **Honors Award:** Minimum cumulative 3.50 GPA calculated on a 4.0 scale  
- **Tech Award:** Minimum cumulative 2.50 calculated on a 4.00 scale  
Note: Starting in 2002 - 2003, minimum cumulative GPA to be calculated using only core curriculum for all awards. |
| ACT Requirement | **Opportunity Award:** ACT composite score of at least equal to the state’s average ACT composite score, rounded to the nearest whole number, but never less than 19; eligible out-of-state, home study and students outside the U.S. and its territories must make an ACT score at least 3 points higher.  
**Performance Award:** ACT composite score of 23 or higher (Beginning with the 2001-2002 award year, 24 is required.); eligible out-of-state and home study students must make an ACT score at least 3 points higher.  
**Honors Award:** ACT composite score of 27 or higher; eligible out-of-state and home study students must make an ACT score at least 3 points higher.  
**Tech Award:** ACT composite score of 17 or higher (The required score was 19 for 1999-2000 graduates.); eligible out-of-state, home study, and students outside the U.S. and its territories must make an ACT score at least 3 points higher. |
| Curriculum Requirement | **Opportunity, Performance, and Honors Awards:** Completion of 16.5 units consisting of specific classes designated as a “core curriculum” as defined in statute

Note: This requirement does not apply for Performance Awards to 1997-1998 graduates were certified as graduating within the top 5% of their class at a BESE approved LA public or nonpublic high school.

**Tech Award:** Students may complete the Opportunity, Performance and Honors core curriculum or one of the core curriculum options exclusively for Tech awards as defined by statue. |

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VITA

Roderick L. Smothers, son of Corine Smothers Fleming and Ronnie Green, was born on July 18, 1973 in Vidalia, Louisiana. Currently, he resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with his teenage son Roderick Jr.

Roderick graduated from Vidalia High School in 1990. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, which he received in 1995. In 1997, Roderick also completed a Master of Public Administration degree from Louisiana State University. In August 2004, Roderick will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership, Research and Counseling from Louisiana State University.

Roderick has served the Louisiana State University community by working in numerous professional capacities. His first position, which re-affirmed his commitment to higher education, was as a Student Aid Officer. After two years of service as a Student Aid Officer, Roderick accepted a position in the Division of Continuing Education as a Program Director for the Professional Development Training Program. He worked in this capacity for 1 ½ years after which he was appointed to the position of Assistant to the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Campus Diversity and Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs. While serving in this position, Roderick played an integral role in establishing the new Diversity program at the state’s flagship institution of higher learning. He firmly believes that any institution that lacks diversity, lacks one of the key elements to institutional success. In his role as the Director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Roderick wholeheartedly embraced the mission of creating an environment at LSU that supported individual difference, sustained inclusion, and cultivated a campus atmosphere that was free from bias. Currently, Roderick serves as the Dean of Enrollment Management at South Louisiana Community College.

Roderick serves as a Sunday School teacher at the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church where he has been an active member for the last ten years. He is a sponsor for the church’s Youth in Action Ministry as well as a member of the single’s ministry and the church brotherhood. Roderick serves on the Board of Management at the Baranco Clark Branch of the YMCA. Roderick is actively involved in his fraternity, where he has held numerous local, district, regional and national positions. In his spare time he enjoys LSU sports, reading, working with computers and spending time with his teenage son, Roderick, Jr.