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**A Description of the New Method of Calculating Grade Point Average
Eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship and its Relationship to the
GCollege411 Transcript Exchange Process**

Introduction

Percentage cost increases for the lottery-funded Georgia Pre-Kindergarten and Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally (HOPE) programs have outstripped increases in lottery revenues in recent years. The projected extension of this trend led the General Assembly to create a Joint Study Commission to examine ways to restructure the HOPE Scholarship Program in order to preserve it for future generations of Georgia students. The main recommendations of the Joint Study Commission were incorporated into House Bill 1325, which cleared the General Assembly after much debate and amendment and was signed into law by Governor Perdue in April of 2004.

The principal changes to HOPE in HB 1325: limited HOPE Grant hours to 95 quarter or 63 semester hours; established a spring checkpoint in addition to the current hour checkpoints; capped mandatory fee payments at January 2004 levels; established a series of three cost-saving triggers that would be engaged one at a time if the unrestricted reserve amount in the lottery education account fell below that of the previous year's amount; and established a new method of calculating grade point average eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship, effective for all high school graduates after May 1, 2007. The new method of calculating grade point averages and the related data collection method are the focus of this document.

Statutory Underpinnings of the New Method

The new statutory requirements are found in §20-2-157 O.C.G.A., and are appended at the end of this document. The intent of the General Assembly to create a new uniform reporting system for HOPE is established in §20-2-157(a). §20-2-157 (b) requires all Georgia public and private schools to adopt a new reporting system for HOPE, while (b)(1) specifies that the data must be submitted electronically to the Georgia Student Finance Commission (GSFC), and it must include the course and un-weighted grade records, grading scales, test information, and other data as required by GSFC. The GSFC is required in (b)(2) to calculate high school student grade point averages for graduates to determine HOPE Scholarship eligibility, and to inform students and high schools of student eligibility. The calculation method in (b)(3) calls for the equation of un-weighted grades given for courses in English, mathematics, science, social studies and, for college preparatory tracks only, foreign language to grades on a 4.0 scale. The grades in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses will be weighted uniformly with weights specified by GSFC. The resulting grades will be used to calculate the grade point averages for students, adjusting for term length. Paragraph (b)(4) establishes the eligibility standards of 3.0 for college preparatory students and 3.2 for career/technical students. §20-2-157(c) continues the current eligibility standard prior to May of 2007.

What the New Method Requires of GSFC and Georgia High Schools

GSFC is called upon to implement the new method of calculating HOPE grade point averages from elemental course and grade data summarized in electronic transcript form. Since GSFC must use un-weighted grades for the calculation, and since many schools only keep weighted grades, it will be necessary for GSFC to collect the school weighting schemes and grading scales needed to un-weight already-weighted grades. In order to do this, GSFC must create a data model that specifies all elements needed to identify courses, grading scales, weighting schemes, etc. This data model must be adaptable to all public and private schools in the state, so that grades no matter how reported may be converted to a common comparable set of grades for HOPE Scholarship eligibility purposes. In order to meet HOPE reporting requirements for college financial aid planning, which is integral to the college admissions process, GSFC must supply colleges with a list of preliminary HOPE-eligible seniors in mid-February. A final list will be compiled in June.

Georgia public and private schools must adopt the reporting system outlined above by February of 2007. At that time, they will need to transmit all course, grade, grading scale, and other elements specified by GSFC to GSFC for initial HOPE eligibility determinations. After the initial transmission of electronic transcript information, the high schools will also be called upon to review the preliminary list of HOPE Scholarship-eligible students for accuracy and completeness prior to its release to colleges. Timely effort and attention to detail are necessary on the part of local schools in order to make this planned process successful.

The Georgia Student Finance Commission's Plan for Implementation: An Overview

The Georgia Student Finance Commission's plan is to use the transcript exchange process that is part of GAcollege411.org to obtain the information needed for the HOPE Scholarship eligibility determination as described in statute while at the same time providing local schools with a mechanism for transmitting student transcripts to postsecondary institutions for application and admission purposes. The plan would thus not only meet the needs of GSFC and local high schools in complying with the new HOPE requirements, it would also provide through GAcollege411.org a powerful tool to students and parents for planning, applying and paying for college and for high schools and colleges for their roles in that process.

The GSFC plan for implementation requires that local schools, public and private, transmit from their student information systems through the transcript exchange process the data to be housed within the transcript exchange database in GAcollege411. To accomplish this, GAcollege411 will work with public schools and will provide extract-producing software for the most commonly used student information systems and generic solutions for all others. Up-to-date transcript information would be downloaded from that database by GSFC in February of each year for determination of student eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship. The initial list of student grade point averages would be

submitted to each school indicating in report formats the method of determining student eligibility for each potential graduating student. High schools would have a chance to correct errors in the original data so that a list of students deemed initially eligible for the HOPE Scholarship can be compiled and made available to colleges in February for financial aid planning purposes. The process would be repeated in June once all coursework for graduating seniors is completed. Final eligibility for the Scholarship cannot be determined until students have graduated. This final list of HOPE eligible students would then be made available to colleges for the registration and fee payment processes.

Because of the requirement that the HOPE Scholarship grade point average be calculated from un-weighted grades, and because of the fact that many schools only collect grades that are weighted at the teacher level, not at the central office or school level, the GSFC plan requires that all of the grading scales and course grade weighting practices of local schools be reflected in the data elements submitted to GSFC. The data elements describing these practices will be used to un-weight already weighted grades for purposes of the HOPE Scholarship eligibility determination. Those data elements that describe grading scales and weighting practices will be collected through a series of screens on GAcollge411 found in the Counselor Center. Counselors will be called upon to enter the information necessary to interpret and un-weight all of the student course grades contained in the transcripts transmitted to GAcollge411. These elements will also be used to provide legend and key information on any transcripts sent to colleges via GAcollge411. Each year, this information must be revised if there were changes or verified for the next academic year if there were no changes.

The remainder of this document will give a detailed description of the underlying logic surrounding the calculation of the HOPE grade point average. It will introduce the terminology that describes the data elements that must be collected, and will give examples and details about the uses of those data elements. Additional documents will describe the exact use of the extracts and the data collection screens in the Counselor Center, as soon as these are completed. These additional documents will be available as they are completed in the Counselor Center at GAcollge411.org.

The HOPE GPA Calculation

Overview

The grade point averages for all graduating seniors will be calculated by GSFC twice – once in February for financial aid planning purposes and once at the end of the school year in June for final HOPE eligibility determinations. The grade point averages will be calculated based on electronic transcript data submitted by public and private high schools to GSFC through the GAcollge411 transcript exchange process. The course and grade data contained in those transcripts will be “interpreted” by GSFC in light of the

information provided through the data collection screens in the Counselor Center at GAcollge411. A preliminary list of HOPE eligible students will be provided to colleges in February and a final list in June.

The process that will be used for calculating student eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship should be well understood by all involved in the transcript exchange process, especially counselors and school information technology personnel who are responsible for providing accurate data for that calculation. In short, the process involves: (1) identifying the grading scales that are in effect for a school for the time period covered by the transcripts; (2) taking student course and grade data and then identifying all courses that are in the appropriate core academic areas of English, mathematics, science, social studies and, for college prep only, foreign language; (3) eliminating those grades that are for credits not part of the high school record (identified by credit qualifiers); (4) eliminating those grades that are not part of the traditional grading scale (identified as grade qualifiers); (5) un-weighting those grades that have been weighted (identified by weighting indicators); (6) translating the un-weighted grades to grades on a 4.0 scale using the appropriate local school grading scale (identified by grading scale elements); (7) finding any Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate course grades (identified by the course number) from the previous step and adding 1.0 to all those grades earned in AP or IB courses completed before June 15, 2006 and 0.5 to all grades earned in AP or IB courses completed on or after June 15, 2006, with the highest possible grade being 4.0; and, finally, (8) calculating a grade point average from the sum of these grades taking into account credits attempted. The resulting grade point average will be compared to the appropriate standard, which is 3.0 for college preparatory students and 3.2 for other tracks. All students meeting or exceeding the standard will meet the grade point average requirements for the HOPE Scholarship.

Step One: Identifying Grading Scales

The elements used to identify grading scales will be collected through the screens in the Counselor Center of GAcollge411 described above. These elements were specified by GSFC after a survey of public and private high schools in Georgia yielded the knowledge that a host of different grading scales are in current use. The elements permit the capture of any known grading scales that use either letter or number grades as final student course grades. Using these screens, school counselors must define the grading scales in use at the school, and, if more than one scale was used in the transcript period, all scales that were used and their effective dates. The term designations used by the school will also be defined in these screens, and that information will allow the matching of transcript course grades with the appropriate grading scale. This information will also be used to create a legend on the printed version of transcripts sent to postsecondary institutions through the GAcollge411 transcript exchange. The collection of these elements is necessary for the calculation of grade point averages for the HOPE Scholarship determination. Step-by-step instructions for the completion of these screens will be given to local school personnel when the screens are constructed in early 2006. The elements collected by the screens are available now, and are appended to this document.

Step Two: Identifying Courses In the Academic Areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and Foreign Language Used to Determine HOPE Eligibility

This step involves identifying courses in the academic areas used to determine HOPE eligibility. The identification of these courses will be made through the course number, which is the same number reported by local public schools to the Georgia Department of Education in the end-of-year student record. This information should be readily available in the student information system of every public high school. The number is a ten-character number of the form 12.x456xxx. The numbers not indicated by an “x” in this form are used to identify specific course content. The two digits to the left of the decimal are used to indicate the main subject area field. Those course numbers beginning with 23 are English courses, those with 27 are mathematics courses, those beginning with 26 or 40 are science courses, those beginning with 45 are social studies courses, and those beginning with 60-64 are foreign language courses.

Private schools who use course numbers different from the state-approved numbers must supply to GSFC an electronic file equating the course numbers or other identifiers used in the school’s student course record with numbers on the state-approved course list. In the event that this information is not available for some reason in a public school’s student information system, the school will have to establish the same type of course equation that private high schools must establish.

It should be noted that although private schools must provide a course equation for the HOPE grade point average calculation, the same course numbers and descriptions used now by the private high school will be used to populate and student transcript sent to a postsecondary institution, so that there will be no change in the school’s current transcript course description.

Step Three: Eliminate Course Grades for Courses not Taken in High School

Because the HOPE Scholarship is to be based on a student’s complete high school academic record, credit awards for courses taken before the student’s high school career should not be counted in the grade point average calculation. These course grades and their credits must be qualified by a symbol called a “credit qualifier” present in the student course record as defined by the high school (an example may be using the symbol “#” to indicate that the course was taken in middle school but the student was given credit(s) for the course in high school). These symbols and their meaning will be collected on one of the screens used in the Counselor Center. As with the grading scale, these elements and their meaning will be printed as a legend if colleges choose to print a transcript sent from a high school through GAcollge411. Course grades associated with a credit qualifier will not be used in the HOPE Scholarship grade point average calculation.

Step Four: Eliminate Course Grades not on the Grading Scale

Some reported grades will not be in the form of grades on the “normal” high school grading scale. These course grades, called “grade qualifiers,” must be identified through the screens in the Counselor Center, and will not be used in the grade point average calculations. Possible examples include grades like: Pass, Fail, Audit, Incomplete, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory, etc. The symbols used in the student information system by the school and the symbol’s definition (Ex.: “P” for Pass, “Aud” for Audit, etc.) will also be printed as a legend on printed transcripts. It is an absolute requirement that any reported grade be defined either through the grading scales or through a defined “grading qualifier”.

Step Five: Un-weight Grades Using Weighting Indicators

All grades for students that have points added by the teacher or through the student information system because of the nature of the course are “weighted”. All weighted grades must be identified by a “weighting indicator” or through a uniform weight that applies to a particular course number. Screens in the Counselor Center will provide for the collection of the elements necessary to identify and define these weighting indicators. These elements are defined in the list of elements appended to this document.

On the screens, a school may identify, for example, that the weighting indicator symbol “H” is defined as an honors course and that all honors courses are given a weight of 5 points, meaning that five points are added to the numerical grade actually earned by the student so that the grade reported on the transcript for the student includes the additional points. In this example, a grade of “83” given to a student for a course with a weight of “5” added points would be reduced to an un-weighted grade of “78.” If only letter grades are reported on the transcript, an honors course might have a weight of 0.5 of a letter grade. It is important to note at this point that the points added as weights for a student grade must be in the same form as the grade reported on the transcript.

All course grades will be translated to un-weighted grades at this point, including AP and IB courses. Un-weighted grades for these courses will be weighted in a uniform fashion in Step Seven below.

Step Six: Translate Un-weighted Grades to Grades on a 4.0 Scale

Once the un-weighted grades that will be used in the HOPE grade point average calculation have been identified, they will be translated to grades on a 4.0 scale using each school’s grading scale. Thus, a grade of 83 will be translated to a “3.0” for a school whose grading scale has a “highest B” of 89 and a “lowest B” of 80. The elements “highest B” and “lowest B” will be reported on screens in the Counselor Center. If

schools only report letter grades as student course grades, then all plusses and minuses will be eliminated and the letter grade will be translated to a grade on a 4.0 scale. At this step all grades will be one of these values: A = 4; B = 3; C = 2; D = 1; F = 0.

Step Seven: Provide Uniform Weights to AP and IB Courses

The requirement in §20-2-157 O.C.G.A. is that all Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate course grades be weighted by GSFC in a uniform fashion statewide, in keeping with a 4.0 grading scale. The GSFC has adopted a standard weighting of 1.0 on a 4.0 scale for all AP and IB courses completed before June 15, 2006 and 0.5 on a 4.0 scale for AP and IB courses completed on or after June 15, 2006. This means that a grade of 3.0 for an AP course obtained in Step Six above would be changed to 3.5 at this step if the course was completed on or after June 15, 2006. Similarly, if the same course were completed before June 15, 2006, the 3.0 would be converted to a 4.0 at this step. A grade of 4.0, on the other hand, would remain at 4.0, since to provide a weight to this grade would change the 4.0 scale set by statute to a 5.0 scale.

Step Eight: Average Grades Taking into Account Credits Attempted and Apply the Appropriate Eligibility Standard

Standardized grades for all courses used in the HOPE grade point average calculation were obtained in Step Seven above. However, the grades must be counted in the calculation method according to their proportion of the total credits attempted by the student. A course grade that earns 1.0 credit, for example, would be counted twice as much as one that earns only 0.5 of a credit. Of course, this step is necessary only if schools have courses that do not all have the same attempted credits. “Credits Attempted” are used rather than “Credits Awarded” because failing grades are to be included in the HOPE grade point average calculations. Multiplying the grades by the “Credits Attempted,” summing the result, and dividing by the sum of the credits attempted that are counted in the HOPE grade point average calculation will yield the grade point average for a student. For students who do not have a graduation date, the eligibility standard will be linked to the program of study element, so that for those programs of study that include college prep a 3.0 standard for eligibility will be used, and for all others 3.2. Eligibility at this point must be characterized as preliminary, since a student can only be truly eligible when all coursework is completed. After a student has graduated, a final determination of eligibility will be made based on the standard indicated by a student’s diploma type.

This concludes our description of the new HOPE grade point average calculation process and its relationship to GACollege411 and the transcript exchange process. For more detailed information, and for updates, please visit the Counselor Center at GACollege411.org.