

3.0 Description of the HOPE GPA Calculation

A Description of the Method of Calculating Grade Point Average Eligibility for the HOPE Scholarship and its Relationship to the GAcollege411 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 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 April 30, 2007. The new method of calculating grade point averages and the related data collection methods are the focus of this document.

Statutory Underpinnings of the HOPE GPA Calculation

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 O.C.G.A.(a). § 20-2-157 O.C.G.A. (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 they must include the course and un-weighted grade records, grading scales, test information, and other data as required by GSFC. 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.

The HOPE GPA Calculation

Overview

The grade point averages for all graduating seniors are 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 are 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 are “interpreted” by GSFC in light of the information provided through the school profile in the Counselor Center section of GAcollge411. A preliminary list of HOPE eligible students is provided to colleges in February and a final list in June.

The process that is 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 for all courses ending before June 15, 2006 and 0.5 to all courses ending after June 15, 2006; and, finally, (8) calculating a grade point average from the sum of the these grades taking into account credits attempted. The resulting grade point average is then 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 are collected through the school profile in the Counselor Center section 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 the school profile, 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 are defined in the school profile, and that information allows the matching of transcript course grades with the appropriate grading scale. This information is also used to create a legend on the printed version of transcripts sent to postsecondary institutions through the GAcollge411 Transcript Exchange process. The collection of these elements is necessary for the calculation of grade point averages for the HOPE Scholarship eligibility determination. The elements collected by the screens are available and are included in this workbook.

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 is made through the course number, which is the same number reported by local public schools to the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) 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 that use course numbers different from the GADOE list of course numbers must supply an electronic file to GSFC equating the course numbers or other identifiers used in the school’s student course record with numbers on the GADOE course number 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. To facilitate the matching process, GSFC provides an electronic form in STARS.

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

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 are collected on the school profile located in the GAcollege411 Counselor Center. As with the grading scale, these elements and their meaning appear as a legend if colleges choose to print a transcript sent from a high school through GAcollege411. Course grades associated with a credit qualifier are not used in the HOPE Scholarship grade point average calculation.

Step Four: Eliminate Course Grades not on the Grading Scale

Some reported grades are not 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” = Pass, “Aud” = Audit, etc.) will also appear 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. The school profile in the GACollege411 Counselor Center provides for the collection of the elements necessary to identify and define these weighting indicators. These elements are defined in the list of elements included in this workbook.

In the school profile, 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 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 .5 of a letter grade. It is important to note that the points added as weights for a student grade must be in the same form as the grades reported on the transcript.

All course grades are translated to un-weighted grades at this point, including AP and IB courses. Un-weighted grades for AP and IB courses are re-weighted in a uniform fashion as described in Step Seven below.

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

Once the un-weighted grades that are used in the HOPE grade point average calculation have been identified, they are translated to grades on a 4.0 scale using each school’s grading scale. Thus, a grade of 83 is 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” is reported on screens in the Counselor Center. If schools only report letter grades as student course grades, then all pluses and minuses are eliminated and the letter grade is translated to a grade on a 4.0 scale. At this step all grades are 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. GSFC has adopted a standard weighting of 1.0 on a 4.0 scale for AP and IB courses ending before June 15, 2006 and .5 on a 4.0 scale for AP and IB courses ending after June 15, 2006. This means that a grade of 3.0 for an AP course taken in 2005 obtained in Step Six above would be changed to 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 the steps above. However, the grades must be counted in the calculation method according to their proportion in 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 .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 included in the HOPE Scholarship 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 Scholarship grade point average calculation yields the grade point average for a student. For students who do not have a graduation date, the eligibility standard is linked to the Graduation Program of Study data element, so that for those programs of study that include college preparatory a 3.0 standard for eligibility is used, and for all others a 3.2 standard is used. 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 is made based on the standard indicated by the Diploma Type data element for that student.

This concludes our description of the 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 section of GAcollege411.org.