

Recommendations and Policy Options: Higher Education Financial Aid Grant Programs and Awards

JLARC staff typically make recommendations to address findings during reviews. Staff also sometimes propose policy options rather than recommendations. The three most common reasons staff propose policy options rather than recommendations are: (1) the action proposed is a policy judgment best made by the General Assembly or other elected officials, (2) the evidence indicates that addressing a report finding is not necessarily required, but doing so could be beneficial, or (3) there are multiple ways in which a report finding could be addressed and there is insufficient evidence of a single best way to address the finding.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-638 of the Code of Virginia to allow in-state undergraduate students who are enrolled in at least six credit hours of academic coursework at public higher education institutions to be eligible to receive pro-rated state financial aid grant awards through the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program (VGAP) instead of requiring VGAP recipients to maintain continuous full-time enrollment and progress a class level each year. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 2

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-638 of the Code of Virginia to eliminate the requirement that students receiving the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program grant have a cumulative high school grade point average of at least 2.5. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 3

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-638 of the Code of Virginia to require recipients of Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program grants to meet the satisfactory academic progress requirements set by their public higher education institution instead of requiring all students to have a cumulative college GPA of 2.0 to continue receiving the grant after their first year. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 4

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-638 of the Code of Virginia to no longer require public higher education institutions to increase students' Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program grant awards as they progress to higher class levels. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 5

If the General Assembly wishes to maintain a progression bonus, it may wish to consider amending § 23.1-638 of the Code of Virginia to pilot a new state financial aid progression bonus program that requires public higher education institutions to provide a minimum increase of \$1,200 in additional state financial aid grant funding to students who re-enroll for their sophomore, junior, and senior years. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 6

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-601 of the Code of Virginia to require public higher education institutions to calculate per-student state financial aid grant awards after subtracting per-student federal Pell grant awards. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 7

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-636 of the Code of Virginia to eliminate the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program and establish the Virginia Commonwealth Award Program as the state's primary need-based state financial aid grant program. (Chapter 3)

RECOMMENDATION 8

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia should calculate low-expected family contribution enrollment bonuses for all public institutions as part of state financial aid grant funding formula calculations and include bonuses in all public institutions' grant funding recommendations each fiscal year. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 9

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia should publish on its website a description of the methodology used to calculate the recommended state financial aid grant funding allocations to public higher education institutions and update the description in a timely manner if and when changes to the methodology are made. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 10

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending Chapter 2 of § 23.1 of the Code of Virginia to require members of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to approve changes to SCHEV staff's methodology used to determine recommended state financial aid grant funding allocations to public higher education institutions. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 11

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-601 of the Code of Virginia to require staff from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to annually review and report to SCHEV council members key financial aid metrics for students, by expected family contribution bracket or the federal metric that replaces it, including: (i) the number of in-state undergraduate students attending public institutions; (ii) the aggregate and average amount of student financial need toward tuition and fees addressed using state financial aid grants; and (iii) the aggregate and average amount of unmet student financial need toward tuition and fees after all financial aid grants are awarded, and use this information as the basis for recommending to SCHEV council members changes to the state's approach to financial aid grant funding or student grant eligibility requirements, as needed. (Chapter 4)

RECOMMENDATION 12

The General Assembly may wish to consider amending § 23.1-601 the Code of Virginia to establish additional parameters for state financial aid grant awards that ensure public higher education institutions are prioritizing state grant funding to students with the most financial need. (Chapter 4)

Policy Option to Consider

POLICY OPTION 1

The General Assembly could amend § 23.1-101 of the Code of Virginia to allow financial aid funded through endowments at public higher education institutions to be factored into state financial aid grant funding decisions. (Chapter 4)

POLICY OPTION 2

The General Assembly could amend § 23.1-601 of the Code of Virginia to direct the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to design and implement a uniform financial aid awarding schedule, to be approved by SCHEV council members, for awarding grants through the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program and the Virginia Commonwealth Award Program, which would prioritize grant awards to those students with the greatest financial need. (Chapter 4)

POLICY OPTION 3

If the General Assembly implements a statewide financial aid awarding schedule, it could require the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia to allocate to Norfolk State University and Virginia State University at least as much state financial aid funding as was allocated to these institutions in the academic year preceding the implementation of the statewide schedule. (Chapter 4)

POLICY OPTION 4

The General Assembly could amend § 23.1-601 of the Code of Virginia to direct the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia to restrict public higher education institutions from awarding grants through the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program and the Virginia Commonwealth Award Program to less needy students, as measured by expected family contribution or another financial metric. (Chapter 4)

POLICY OPTION 5

The General Assembly could include language in the Appropriation Act directing the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia to design and pilot a state emergency financial aid program that provides public higher education institutions with grant funding for students with financial need who are facing a financial emergency that puts them at risk of dropping out. (Chapter 4)
