

# Exploring the Context and Implementation of Georgia's New College Completion Grants Program

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## Executive Summary

Access to education, regardless of race or economic background, is a widely shared value. Yet, for many Georgians, especially those of color, the expense of a higher education is an absolute barrier. Equitable need-based aid can help lower costs and expand higher education access for people of color, and modifying the College Completion Grants program based on data is a good starting point. State financial aid staff can learn from student experiences to improve the program, while legislators can build on the momentum of College Completion Grants by expanding need-based aid.

This exploratory report investigates the impact of College Completion Grants after the program's first year of implementation. The College Completion Grants program is viewed against the state's historical backdrop of financial aid, with particular attention paid to enduring racial inequities within the financial aid system, including escalating student debt experienced by people of color. The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (GBPI) collected qualitative data from students and financial aid staff across Georgia's universities, technical colleges and private institutions.

## Introduction

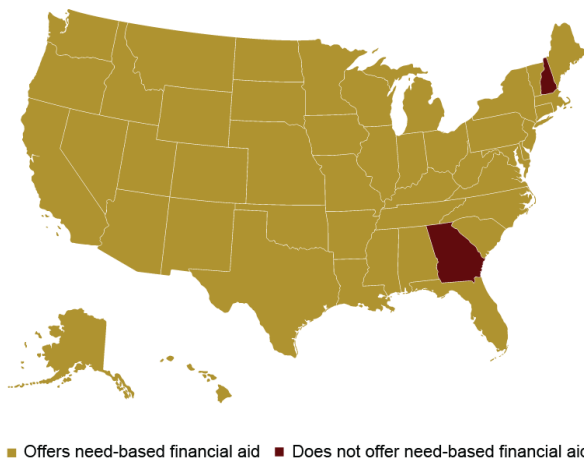
Many students and families struggle to afford college. Despite enrolling in a post-secondary program, some students may have to discontinue their studies due to financial constraints. Several factors contribute to students dropping out of college, such as emotional stress and mental health challenges.<sup>1</sup> To address the needs of students with low incomes, Georgia lawmakers voted to establish the College Completion Grants program in 2022.<sup>2</sup>

College Completion grants help students stay on track for graduation by offering need-based financial aid to bridge the gap for those with urgent unmet needs.<sup>3</sup> While college completion grants help students “cross the finish line,” they are a stop-gap measure.

Due to rising college costs, Georgia lawmakers should prioritize the implementation of a more comprehensive need-based financial aid program. This investment will provide substantial funding in the first year and beyond to meet the financial demands of economically marginalized students.

## Georgia’s Complex History of Financial Aid Policy

*Georgia Is One of Two States That Does Not Offer Need-Based Financial Aid*



Source: National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs.

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Over the last three decades, political, social and economic influences have shaped financial aid in Georgia. The College Completion Grants program was preceded by several financial aid policies created to serve students in their post-secondary endeavors.

Georgia is one of two states that does not provide a comprehensive state-sponsored financial aid program based on need.

However, of all states, Georgia provides the most merit-based funding to undergraduate students.<sup>4</sup> Need-based and merit-based financial aid have very distinctive purposes and outcomes.

Policymakers implement need-based financial aid to support students with low incomes, many of whom belong to historically marginalized communities, including communities of color.<sup>5</sup> Need-based financial aid is integral for educational attainment, especially for first-generation college students and those who are eligible for the Pell Grant—a federal need-based aid for students who demonstrate exceptional financial need. By focusing on students facing financial barriers, need-based aid helps create a more equitable education

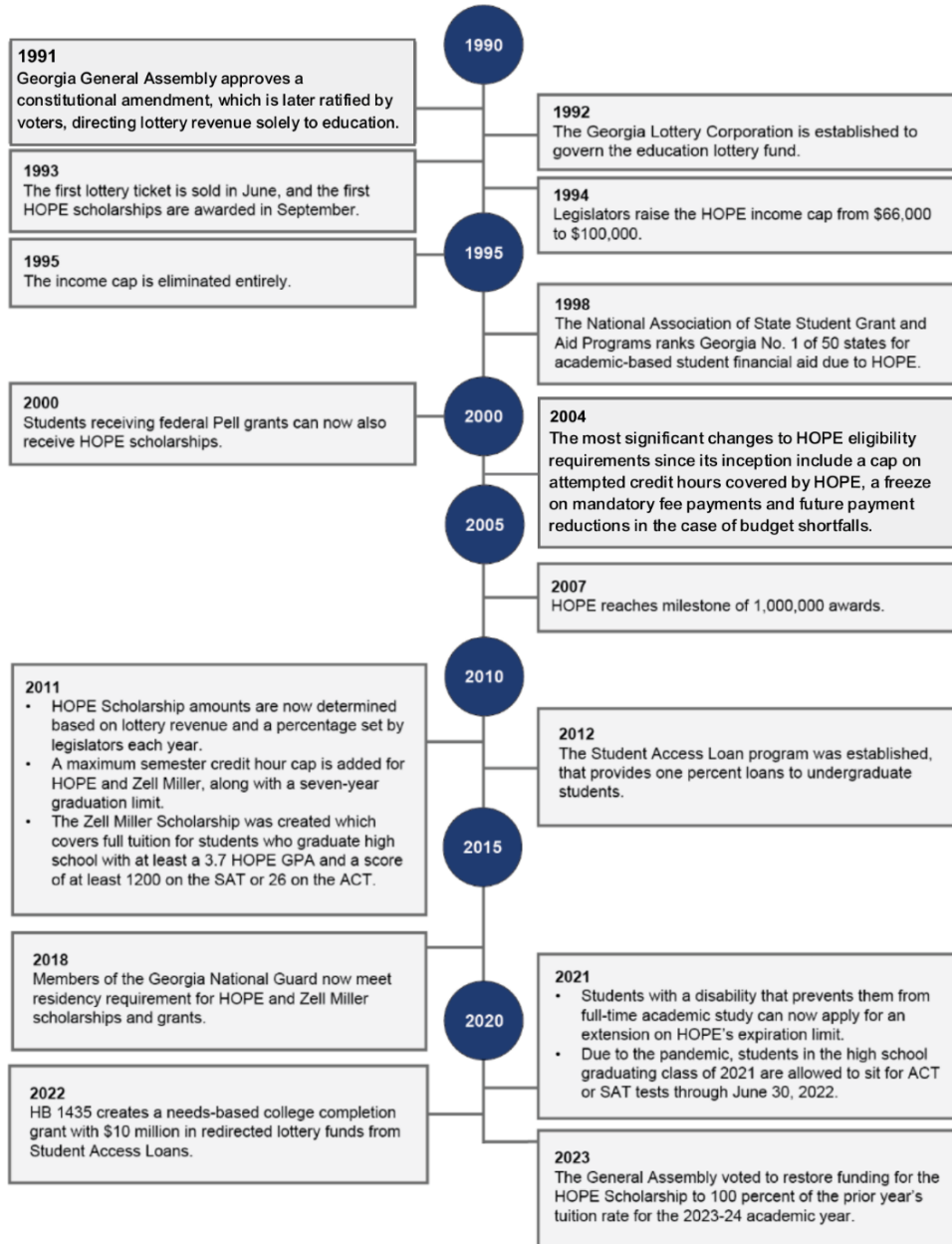
landscape, ensuring that economic circumstances do not hinder access to higher education.

In contrast, merit-based financial aid rewards students for their demonstrated skills or abilities, such as academic achievement, athleticism or community service. Georgia is well known for pioneering one of the nation's most robust merit-based scholarship models called HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally). Since its inception in 1993, the HOPE Scholarship has funded more than 2.1 million students across the state with over \$14 billion in financial aid in the last 30 years.<sup>6</sup>

The HOPE Scholarship has undergone significant transformation over its history. Originally, it was awarded for two years to students maintaining a *B* grade point average (GPA) and was subject to an income cap of \$66,000.<sup>7</sup> Within two years, the scholarship underwent pivotal changes, most notably, the removal of the income cap. It now encompasses the entire four-year duration of tuition costs at public colleges for students with a *B* GPA.<sup>8</sup> Throughout Georgia's financial aid history, there have been two major themes:

1. The HOPE scholarship has endured many regulatory changes, but still covers the majority of tuition costs at in-state public colleges.
2. Comprehensive need-based aid has remained non-existent, leaving a critical gap in support for students facing financial barriers to higher education.

## Financial Aid Timeline in Georgia



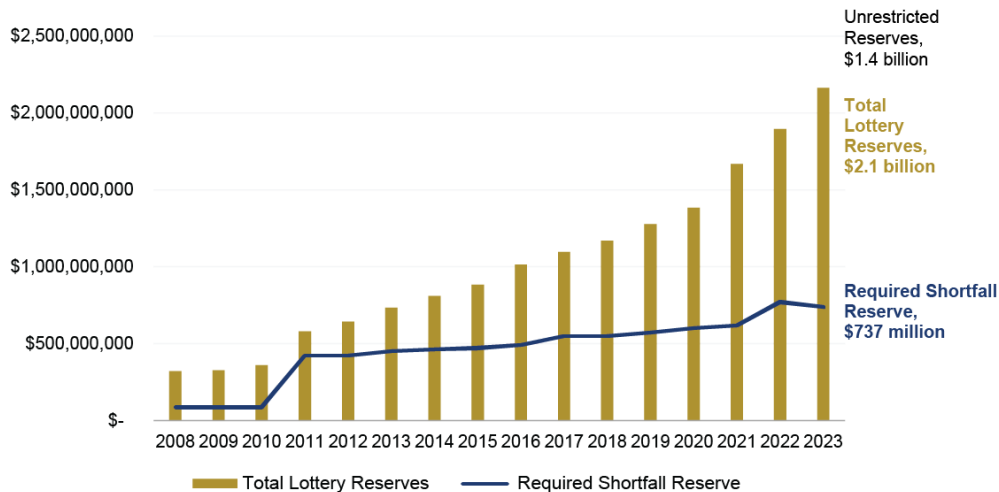
Sources: Parliament, James. (2021 April). HOPE Scholarship. *New Georgia Encyclopedia*; Georgia Student Finance Commission. (July 2011). *Scholarship & Grant Award History*; Michael Lanford. (April 2017). *The political history of the Georgia HOPE scholarship program: a critical analysis*; H.B. 326, Georgia General Assembly, 2011-2012 Reg. Sess. (Ga. 2011); e. Griffin, G., & McGuire, L. (2021). *Student access loan program*. Georgia Department of Audits & Accounts; S.B. 82, Georgia General Assembly, 2017-2018 Reg. Sess. (Ga. 2018); g. S.B. 187, Georgia General Assembly, 2021-2022 Reg. Sess. (Ga. 2021); Georgia Student Finance Commission. (2021). *Executive Summary of Substantive Changes: FY 2022 State Program Regulations*; Lee, J. (2022). *Georgia Invests \$255 Million More In FY 2023 Budget for College Affordability*. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.

## Georgia Education Lottery: Reserves Stand at an All-Time High

In establishing the HOPE Scholarship, lawmakers approved a state constitutional amendment designating lottery reserves to be used exclusively for education. That amendment was later ratified by Georgia voters. The lottery can only fund post-secondary scholarships and pre-kindergarten programs such as Head Start.<sup>9</sup>

Lawmakers require a shortfall reserve of 50% of the prior year’s lottery proceeds to sustain the education lottery reserves. In 2023, the Georgia Revenues and Reserves Report revealed that the required shortfall reserves totaled \$737 million once proceeds, surplus and interest are accounted for.<sup>10</sup> The exponential growth of education lottery proceeds has been consistent since 2008. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, the education lottery earned \$72 million in interest alone.

*The Unrestricted Lottery Reserves Totaled \$1.4 billion in 2022-23 Fiscal Year*



Source: State Accounting Office—Georgia Revenues and Reserves Report.

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In 2011, the General Assembly took additional measures to safeguard the education lottery and moved the shortfall reserve requirement from 10% to 50% of the previous year’s net proceeds. For many state-level policy initiatives, securing funding for implementation can be a major hurdle. However, in the case of need-based financial aid, the education lottery has excess (unused) funds totaling \$1.4 billion over the required shortfall amount.<sup>11</sup> Advocates for need-based financial aid argue that lawmakers should see the education lottery as a viable mechanism to create a comprehensive need-based financial aid program. Whereas peer states like Tennessee and North Carolina fund their need-based aid programs through state general revenues, Georgia has a dedicated education lottery with large reserves that could support financially marginalized students with need-based grants.<sup>12</sup>

Georgia’s unrestricted education lottery reserves could be used similarly to the Louisiana GO Grants. This need-based aid program is comprehensive, and students can receive between \$300 and \$3,000 annually based on their financial eligibility.<sup>13</sup> In instances where students demonstrate lingering financial need even after factoring in the expected family contribution and external scholarships, the GO Grants step in to bridge the remaining gap and provide assistance.<sup>14</sup> The award calculation below demonstrates how comprehensive need-based financial aid can help students afford college.

## Need-based Financial Aid Example

### Need-Based Financial Aid Example

|                              |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Cost of Attendance Yearly    | \$28,000        |
| Expected Family Contribution | – \$8,000       |
| <hr/>                        |                 |
| Financial Need               | \$20,000        |
| Federal/State Gift Aid       | – \$17,500      |
| <hr/>                        |                 |
| <b>GO Grant Award</b>        | <b>\$2,500*</b> |

\*Annual grant award limited to \$3,000.00 maximum per year

Source: Office of Student Financial Aid, University of Georgia, Georgia resident cost of attendance, fall 2023 and Spring 2024; GO Grant Program Questions and Answers, Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance.

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Scholarships based on financial need play a pivotal role in supporting students facing greater financial vulnerability, thereby increasing access to post-secondary opportunities.<sup>15</sup> To institute a comprehensive need-based aid program, Georgia lawmakers should explore a model similar to the Louisiana GO Grants program. This would be a significant step toward offering more consistent and substantial financial support to students who are financially marginalized.

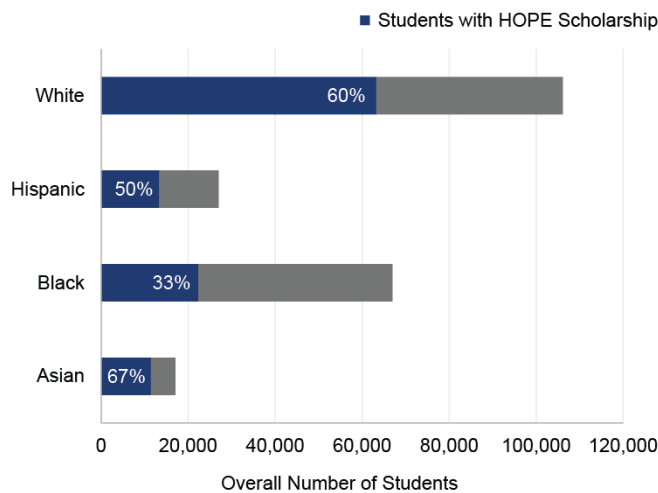


## Racial Inequities in Georgia’s Financial Aid Model

Georgia is unique in that it lacks a comprehensive need-based program yet has led the U.S. in merit-based scholarship funding. This policy paradox has limited Georgia’s success in equitably equipping students with the financial support needed to navigate college affordability. Merit-based aid can cause and worsen racial disparities and has proved to be insufficient in making Georgia a more educated state.<sup>16</sup>

Merit-based financial aid in Georgia is primarily designed to enhance in-state enrollment by expanding post-secondary options for local students who are already on a trajectory toward attending college. However, this approach has unintended consequences, particularly regarding scholarship accessibility for students facing racial marginalization. Unfortunately, the current structure of the HOPE Scholarship system tends to favor white and Asian students. Historically, the HOPE Scholarship has exacerbated funding disparities and created a widening financial support gap between white and Asian students on the one hand and Hispanic and Black students on the other. This underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable financial aid system that addresses the unique challenges faced by all students, irrespective of their racial or ethnic background.

*Students of Color Are Less Likely Than White Students To Receive the HOPE Scholarship at USG Institutions*



Source: GBPI Analysis of the University System of Georgia Data, Fall 2021 Number of Undergraduate Students with HOPE Scholarship by Race and Ethnicity.

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In the fall of 2021, the University System of Georgia (USG) reported that 67% of Asian students and 60% of white students received the HOPE Scholarship, while only 50% of Hispanic students and only 33% of Black students enrolled in USG were awarded HOPE.

Multiple research studies have shown that merit-based scholarship programs like the HOPE Scholarship do not help alleviate historical race and class gaps in college attendance.<sup>17</sup> Overall, the HOPE Scholarship has caused racial equity gaps among recipients and increased enrollment disparities by race and ethnicity.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this, lawmakers have spent the last three decades prioritizing need-based aid loans over equitable need-based aid. The Student Access Loan (SAL) program was created in 2012 and received \$26 million from the education lottery. This initiative aimed to assist students

experiencing financial hardship by providing them with loans at a 1% interest rate.<sup>19</sup> Georgia is one of only seven states that provide loans to students. However, most other states invest significantly more in comprehensive need-based financial aid in the form of a grant.<sup>20</sup>

In 2022, lawmakers voted to allocate \$10 million from the SAL budget to establish the College Completion Grants program due to a high 31% default rate and operational costs.<sup>21</sup> Despite \$1.4 billion in unrestricted lottery funding available, the College Completion Grants program budget is just \$10 million for all public, private and technical schools. While completion grants are need-based, the large unrestricted education lottery reserves indicate that the state can substantially expand need-based aid beyond the current \$10 million budget.

## Student Loan Debt Disparities

### How the Student Loan Debt Crisis Harms Black Women

Nationally, Black women bear the greatest burden of the student loan debt crisis. Black women carry the most debt of any racial/ethnic group, totaling on average \$38,800 for undergraduate student loan debt and \$58,252 for graduate student debt in the United States. This plight worsens due to occupational segregation and gender and racial pay gaps. Statistically, Black women must attain a bachelor's degree just to earn as much as white men who have some college but no degree. Black women borrowers are forced to borrow the highest amount of student loans to attend college and then suffer from wage discrimination during the repayment process. Georgia is third in the nation for student loan debt per borrower, behind the District of Columbia and Maryland, respectively.

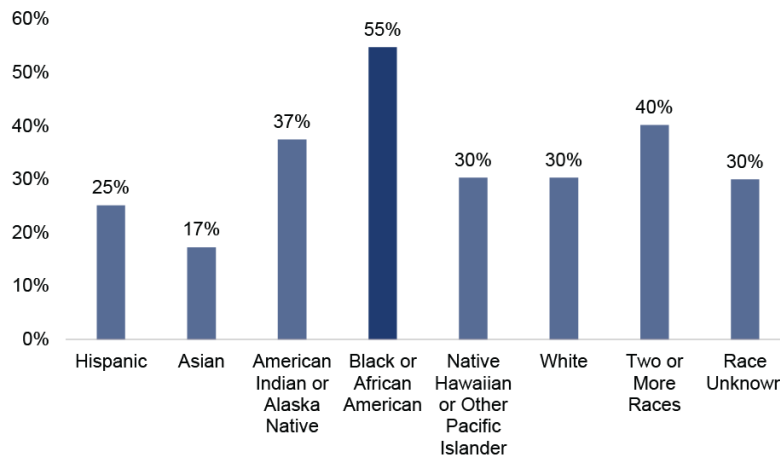
Navigating college affordability can be especially difficult for students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Data shows that Black student enrollment has doubled, and Latinx student enrollment has more than quadrupled in the last two decades.<sup>22</sup> This is a positive trend given that these groups have been historically excluded from family wealth building and higher education, which can serve as a pathway to economic stability.

Unfortunately, college costs are increasing, and financial aid is becoming increasingly necessary. Without sufficient financial aid, many people of color are forced to borrow more in student loans, making higher education even more inaccessible.<sup>23</sup>

Georgia ranks third in the nation for student loan debt per borrower, with over 1.6 million borrowers in the state for \$69 billion of student loan debt.<sup>24</sup> The student loan debt crisis disproportionately impacts students of color, with Black students in the University System of Georgia (USG) borrowing at higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups.



**Black Students in USG Have the Highest Percentage of Student Loan Debt**



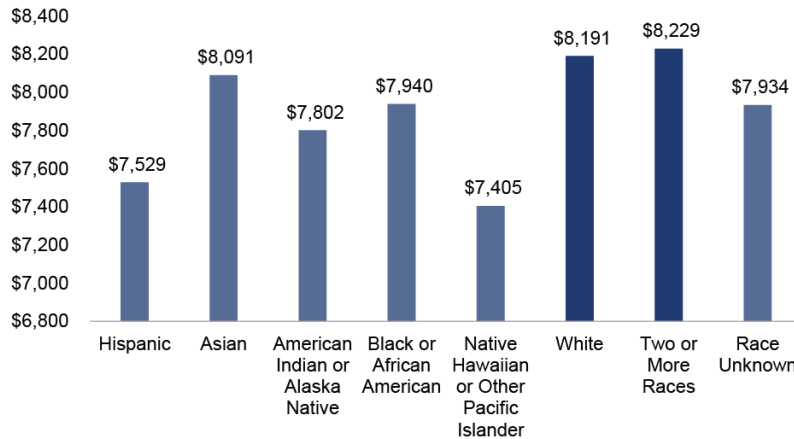
Source: GBPI Analysis of the University System of Georgia Data, Fall 2021 Percentage of Students with Loans by Race and Ethnicity.

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Student loan debt and working multiple jobs can be major obstacles for students trying to earn their degree. These burdens can slow down the pace of degree completion and make it more likely that students will pause enrollment (“stop out”) or drop out altogether. Mitigating student loan debt begins with providing equitable financial aid and investing in students during their first year of post-secondary education.

Students enrolled in institutions within USG graduated with an average debt burden of \$8,019 in 2021, slightly down from \$8,033 in 2018. Despite this small decrease (which is a larger decrease when inflation is accounted for), the total undergraduate student loan debt was still \$847 million for current USG students in 2021.<sup>25</sup>

*White Students and Students Who Identify as Having Two or More Races Averaged the Most Student Loan Debt*



Source: GBPI Analysis of the University System of Georgia Data, Fall 2021 Average Undergraduate Student Loan Amount by Race and Ethnicity.

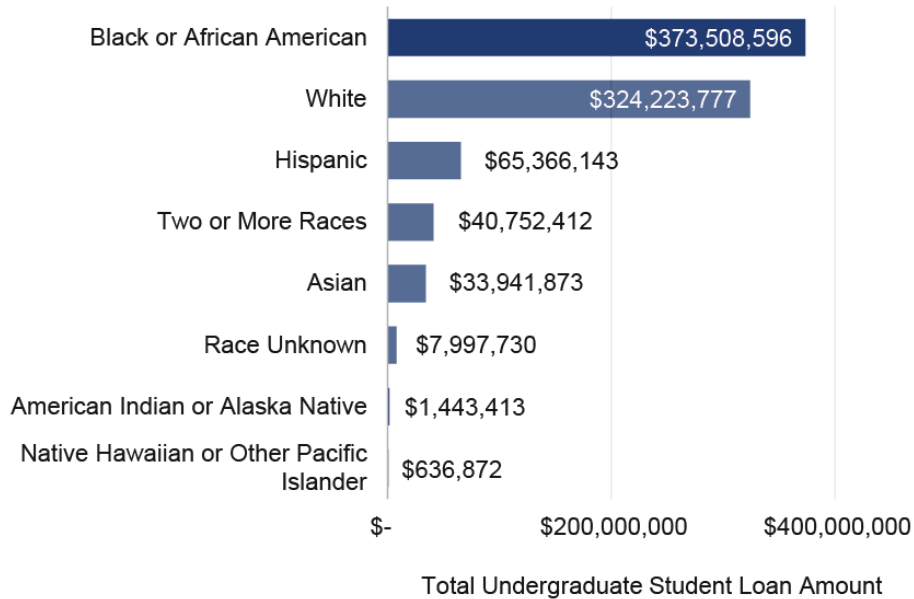
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In 2021, white students carried the second-highest average of student loan debt in USG. However, wealth disparities still impact students of color more over time. In Georgia, white households' median net worth is 13 times higher (\$157,975) than that of Black households (\$11,830).<sup>26</sup> The racial wealth gap contributes to and is made worse by student debt. Black families, on average, have fewer resources to pay for college. Consequently, Black students are more likely to turn to loans to pay for higher education and borrow more on average.<sup>27</sup>

Student debt reduces Black wealth early in life, continuing a cycle of lower wealth and assets. Ironically, the bridge to economic security that higher education represents can exacerbate wealth disparities between white and Black Georgians when coupled with excessive student debt.<sup>28</sup> In addition to discrimination, Black Georgians experience “predatory inclusion,” where higher education can be accessed only on exploitative terms that reduce its benefits.<sup>29</sup> These systemic setbacks are revealed by the total undergraduate student loan amount by race.

White students make up roughly 45% of USG student enrollment, but only 37% of student loan borrowers. Despite constituting 29% of USG student enrollment, Black students represent 44% of all student loan borrowers. Black students bear the highest student loan burden, totaling more than \$373 million. These figures underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions.

**Black Students Have the Highest Amount of Student Loan Debt  
Totaling \$373 Million**



Source: GGBPI Analysis of the University System of Georgia Data, Fall 2021 Total Undergraduate Student Loan Amount by Race and Ethnicity.

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Georgia pioneered the merit-based scholarship prototype, but disparities in student loan debt and merit-scholarship attainment gaps expose major inequities. State lawmakers should acknowledge the HOPE scholarship’s racial inequity and limitations in improving educational outcomes for all students.

## College Completion Grants Program: A Start, But a Long Road Ahead

The College Completion Grants program provides up to \$2,500 to support students in need. Grants are available to students at public, private and technical colleges around the state who are 80% complete towards graduation.<sup>30</sup> With a \$10 million budget redirected from the Student Access Loan Program, the College Completion Grants program is slated to sunset by 2026.

The 2022-23 academic year was the first year of operation, and colleges utilized a little over half of the annual \$10 million budget, or \$5.5 million, with an average of \$1,150 per award. Of the 79 eligible institutions, 69 took advantage of the completion grants, awarding aid to 4,254 students.<sup>31</sup>

State lawmakers saw this policy as an opportunity to advance means-tested financial support for students with minimal financial gaps. Evidence suggests that completion grants can be effective. Georgia State University's Panther Retention Grants (PRG) program is one of the nation's trailblazers for completion grants and has supported students with over 10,000 emergency financial needs since 2011. A research study was conducted at Georgia State University to examine the causal impact on student outcomes for Pell Grant recipients and students from underrepresented racial groups. This study aimed to understand the effectiveness of completion grants.<sup>32</sup>

Findings indicated that receiving PRG lessened students' time to degree completion, but it was unclear whether PRG increased student graduation rates. Researchers did find that for students who received the retention grant, the average student loan debt amount decreased by \$3,700. The research on Georgia State University's PRG program provides a critical understanding of the potential impact of completion grants at one institution. Exploring the statewide implementation of the College Completion Grants program after its first year can provide valuable insights into how to maximize the program's impact for all students.

## Financial Aid: Student Perspective

While the College Completion Grants program is designed to help students get across the finish line, there is still a need for lawmakers to establish financial aid interventions for students who have been marginalized earlier in their post-secondary careers. This will help ensure consistent student success and eliminate barriers to completion. To illuminate how students can optimize financial aid, including College Completion Grants, current Georgia college students detail their college affordability journey:

### Chantelle's Story

Chantelle is a first-generation college student attending a private liberal arts college in Georgia. She is an in-state student who has faced many challenges when it comes to college affordability. Chantelle's parents did not attend college, and as a result, she did not have many conversations with them about her higher education plans. This made her feel alone and unprepared.

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*“We only had like three counselors for the entire school...I feel like if there were more counselors and more funding allocated toward than that process [college admissions] would have been a lot smoother than what it was.”*

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Chantelle's experience was further compounded by the fact that her school counselor, who undoubtedly had good intentions, was overwhelmed by a high caseload of students seeking guidance (This experience is likely common across Georgia, with the state's lopsided 411:1 student-to-counselor ratio.<sup>33</sup>). In the midst of this demanding environment, Chantelle often found herself feeling like the "odd one out," as she struggled to receive the individualized support that she needed.

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*“I would love to work just one job. I haven't done that in quite some time, it would definitely be helpful. I'm disabled...working two jobs, doing college and having to like make enough to afford car insurance and pay my monthly bills. Just so I can like drive all the way to Atlanta, which is an hour and a half away from here to receive medicine. That, would genuinely make my life better, it [need-based aid] would definitely help relieve all of that stress of trying to figure out how I'm going to cover things.”*

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Her journey balancing schoolwork, two jobs and a physical disability is not an unfamiliar one; many students spoke about the constant churn of systemic barriers that make their lives more difficult. When asked what lawmakers should do to better support college students, Chantelle said:

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*“There are so many folks who want to continue to get their education and make their life better for themselves and their families, but literally can't because they can't afford college. And so, I think it's important for more students to share their stories and share their voices on what's going on with them that like really drives home, the point that behind these decisions that you're making, and that they're the ones who are being impacted.”*

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## Dexter's Story

Dexter is an economics major at a large public institution in Georgia. He and his family struggled to make ends meet and experienced housing insecurity, resulting in homelessness throughout high school. Dexter was afraid to talk to his counselor for fear of his parents getting reported due to his housing circumstances. As a result, he avoided building a relationship with his counselor. Frequently absent from school and the first in his family to pursue college, he faced added complexity in navigating the stressful college admissions process without the support system typically available to many.

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*"I didn't know how to apply for scholarships. My family, they didn't go to college. So I can't ask my parents. I don't have any relatives or cousins who went to college so I can't ask them. I was basically like kind of terrified going into college because they would send me like the yearly total, and I think at the time it was like \$24k or \$25k a year. I have a thousand dollars in my bank account, I don't know how far that's gonna go... I had to pay to apply and some of them I could get waived, but it would be difficult to have them waived. And I just did not have the resources to apply to different schools, like some people tend to do."*

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Like many students, Dexter did not graduate from college in four years. Due to a rigorous course of study, working two jobs and managing his mental health (including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and bipolar disorder), he is in his fifth year of college. Because of his circumstances, Dexter has exceeded his HOPE Scholarship eligibility and had to take out additional loans to cover expenses while working two jobs.

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*"I can't go to my parents and ask them for money, both my parents are disabled, they don't even have a thousand dollars in their bank account combined. I can't ask my brother, my sister, my grandparents, they don't have any money to give me."*

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Dexter was able to continue his college education through a combination of the HOPE Scholarship and institutional and federal need-based financial aid. However, as his financial aid options are now mostly exhausted, it has been challenging for him to persist

through his final year of college. When he learned that Georgia was one of two states that did not offer need-based financial aid, he was frustrated and responded with the following:

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*“I think need-based aid...personally would take away all my worries, when it comes to school. I could focus on academics. I think for the majority of people that would be the same case.”*

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To complete college, Dexter plans to contact the financial aid office to inquire about his eligibility for a college completion grant. Without comprehensive need-based financial aid, students like Dexter struggle for various reasons beyond their control. Dexter has overcome many challenges, and although his journey has been arduous, he is excited to be the first college graduate in his family this spring.

## Financial Aid Staff Feedback & Policy Improvements to Explore

State lawmakers supported the College Completion Grants program to assist students with small outstanding tuition balances. A group of dedicated college financial aid professionals were responsible for bringing this legislation to fruition. Several themes emerged after interviewing four staff members representing diverse geographies and institutional categories, including USG, the Technical College System of Georgia, private colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Most participants felt that the rollout of the policy—training information and policy regulation communication from the Georgia Student Finance Commission—was helpful. The only drawback that some participants expressed was the short timeframe between the College Completion Grant legislation and implementation of the new policy, which they acknowledged is partly due to the state legislative timeline (The bill was signed into law in May 2022; it became effective July 1; and implementation began in August).<sup>34</sup>

Financial aid staff generally welcome the extra funds to help students complete college. However, based on input from financial aid staff in Georgia, there are specific areas for improvement that will inform future financial aid policies.

**Financial Aid Professionals Raised Concerns at Multiple Levels  
About the College Completion Grants Program**

| Financial aid staff challenge  | Suggested improvement  |
|--|--|
| <b>Policy level</b>  |  |
| The high threshold for eligibility (80%) limits the program's impact.  | Lower the eligibility threshold, perhaps as suggested in HB 249, which sought to improve the College Completion Grant by decreasing the eligibility from 80% to 70% at four-year colleges and 45% at two-year institutions but was vetoed by the governor.     |
| <b>Regulatory level</b>  |  |
| <p>Off-campus housing, an "indirect cost", can block students from receiving a college completion grant.</p> <p>In the College Completion Grants regulations, a student's financial gap in determining completion grants only includes direct costs to the institution such as tuition, on-campus housing and meal plans.</p> <p>If a student finishes 80% of their program but has a financial gap due to off-campus housing cost, the student will not be eligible for a completion grant.</p> | Account for indirect costs such as housing within the regulations to meet the actual needs of students.  |
| <b>Institutional level</b>   |  |
| <p>Some institutions have an arduous manual process to determine student eligibility in the inaugural year.</p> <p>Staff look first manually for students who have balances, then see what percentage of their program they have completed.</p>  | <p>Institutions can press for more funding to upgrade IT systems for improved automation to determine college completion grant eligibility.</p> <p>Individual institutions can self-organize/reach out to one another to share information and innovation.</p> |

## Conclusion

College completion grants have received overwhelming support in the state legislature over the last two years. Supporting students in their post-secondary careers is a shared value of many lawmakers. Georgia has a long history of being a leader in providing merit-based scholarships and has achieved numerous milestones along the way. The introduction of the College Completion Grants program is a significant step forward in the state's efforts to support financially disadvantaged students.

This exploratory report demonstrates that both students and financial aid staff see the need for more funding to assist students with greater financial need. Adjustments to the College Completion Grants program such as accounting for indirect costs and decreasing the eligibility threshold could allow greater access to grants and ease the administration process for financial aid staff.

Building on the momentum of College Completion Grants, a comprehensive need-based financial program is a necessary next step to ensure more equitable financial aid for Georgia students. Utilizing the \$1.4 billion in the education lottery reserves to create a comprehensive need-based aid program can help reduce student loan debt and create a sustainable pathway for individuals to enter Georgia's workforce.

## Appendix: Methodology

This exploratory research report serves as a baseline to understand the first year of implementation of the new College Completion Grants program. The program is viewed from a historical and systemic perspective within the context of the challenge of college affordability for current Georgia students. Due to barriers in identifying College Completion Grants administrators and Completion Grants recipients, the researcher chose to provide a snapshot of the financial aid staff experience and the perspectives of select students on their financial aid journey.

### Timeline

**July:** The researcher developed interview questions for financial aid staff members at participating College Completion Grants institutions to examine the first year of implementation. For financial aid staff, the researcher gathered emails of financial aid staff from private, TCSG and USG institutions to invite staff via email to interview.

An extensive effort was made to identify College Completion Grants administrators via email and phone calls. It is unclear on institutions' websites which financial aid staff

member administers the College Completion Grant. Therefore, the researcher relied heavily on the professional contacts within her college admissions network to gain access to the College Completion Grants administrator. Given the lack of publicly available information, the researcher used a snowball method to identify interviewees and find additional College Completion Grant administrators across Georgia.

The interviewer was intentional about reaching out to diverse institutions for students and financial aid staff interviewees. Interviewees represent different geographical locations including North Georgia and South Georgia. Diverse institutional types were considered such as research universities, state universities, public, private, two-year and four-year colleges. Interviewees also represent HBCUs and PWIs.

For student interviews, the researcher developed interview questions for students enrolled in a post-secondary institution to provide feedback about their college preparation and affordability journey. Following a similar invitation approach used to identify financial aid staff, to secure student interviewees the researcher relied mostly on professional networks to identify student participants.

**August:** The researcher scheduled and conducted interviews with students and financial aid staff. Participation was voluntary, and interviewees completed a digital participant consent form in advance. Interviewees were given the following interview style options:

- A virtual recorded session via Microsoft Teams with a meeting transcript.
- A virtual session via Microsoft Teams with no recording, with a meeting transcript only.
- A hybrid of both virtual recorded meeting/meeting transcript with the option to discuss anything “off the record.”

**September:** Interview transcripts were generated, and a research thematic analysis was used. Patterns were identified in student and staff interviews to find themes within the data.

**October:** After data was analyzed, the researcher developed the report. In instances when direct quotes and interview audio clips were used, the researcher followed up with interviewees to confirm their consent to share the data in this format.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gallup, Inc. (2023, September 1). *Gallup-Lumina State of higher education*. Gallup.com. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Young, A. (2023, February). Overview: 2024 fiscal year budget for lottery-funded programs. Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. <https://gbpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/PDF-Formatted-GA-FY-2024-Lottery-Funded-Programs-Budget-Overview.pdf>

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