

## From the Desk of the Executive Director



Melanie Amrhein

Wow, December is here...really? That means 2012 is almost gone and I don't know where it went. It has been a whirlwind year, but LOSFA has accomplished so much, from the successful outsourcing of our loan operations functions to gaining the Federal GEAR UP program; from launching the Louisiana Connect Portal to adding the powerful TOPS Progress Tracker (released this week, see related article); and so much in between.

I hope the students, parents and counselors are as excited about the TOPS Progress Tracker as we are. We have had this on our drawing board for some time and now can know that students have access to authenticated data that will ensure they meet academic requirements for the TOPS award.

As far as 2013 is concerned, we still have lots to accomplish. We are not resting on our

laurels, but are actively looking at additional enhancements to the portal that will involve our post secondary institutions and workforce development. It will be a very interesting year!

To all of our colleagues, industry partners, and friends, on behalf of LOSFA, I wish you a bright, blessed and beautiful holiday season and truly look forward to working with you in 2013.

- Melanie

# HAPPY HOLIDAYS

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## TOPS Progress Tracker now available to parents and students on Louisiana Connect College Access and Career Planning Portal

The Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) today announced a major addition to the Louisiana Connect college access and career planning Web portal ([www.louisianaconnect.org](http://www.louisianaconnect.org)) with the launch of the new TOPS Progress Tracker tool.

“The TOPS Progress Tracker will provide students and their parents with an ongoing opportunity to review student progression toward meeting the requirements necessary to qualify for a Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) scholarship award using their actual academic information,” said LOSFA Executive Director Melanie Amrhein. “This is a tool that LOSFA has dreamed of for many years and the Louisiana Connect portal is making it a reality. It will ensure that all students have equal access to critical information regarding their future eligibility for a TOPS award and to plan accordingly. For example, if discrepancies are detected that are not explained in the footnotes on the TOPS Progress Tracker display, students and/or parents can quickly notify the appropriate officials and, if warranted, corrections can be made promptly to avoid potential delays in TOPS eligibility processing,” she added.

**The TOPS Progress Tracker will display the student’s progress toward completing the required TOPS Core Curriculum courses.** As required TOPS Core curriculum courses are successfully completed, they will be added to the TOPS Progress Tracker listing and the number of remaining core units needed for TOPS qualification will be updated.

**The TOPS Progress Tracker will display the student’s highest ACT score (or SAT equivalent score) on record.** Students may take the ACT or SAT multiple times, but must obtain a qualifying score on a national or recognized test taken prior to high school graduation. ACT score (along with TOPS Core course completion and GPA) determines what level of TOPS award the student can receive. Composite ACT scores of 16 or less will not qualify for any TOPS award. Scores of 17-19 put the student on track for a TOPS Tech Award (which can only be used for a vocational/technical, non-academic program of study). Scores of 20-22 put the student on track to qualify for a TOPS Opportunity Award which pays an amount equal to tuition at an eligible public postsecondary institution. Scores of 23-26 put the student on track to earn a TOPS Performance Award which pays an amount equal to the TOPS Opportunity Award plus a \$400.00 annual stipend. An ACT composite score of 27 or higher puts the student on track to earn a TOPS Honors Award which pays an amount equal to the TOPS Opportunity Award plus an \$800.00 annual stipend.

**The TOPS Progress Tracker will display the student’s current TOPS Core GPA.** Many parents and students don’t realize that the cumulative high school Grade Point Average (GPA) displayed on their transcript after graduation and their periodic “report cards” prior to graduation is NOT the GPA used to determine TOPS eligibility. TOPS eligibility is determined by the GPA earned for the required TOPS Core Curriculum courses only. The TOPS Progress Tracker will convert the TOPS Core GPA displayed to a 4.0 grading scale (all qualifying TOPS GPA’s must be converted to a 4.0 scale if any other scale is used by the school attended) in order to determine TOPS eligibility.



**The TOPS Progress Tracker will display the TOPS award that the student is currently on track to receive.** Based on the TOPS Core Curriculum courses taken to date, the highest ACT score on record, and the TOPS Core Curriculum GPA to date, the TOPS Progress Tracker will display student progress toward a TOPS Opportunity Award, TOPS Performance Award, TOPS Honors Award, and/or TOPS Tech Award and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Louisiana Legislative Women’s Caucus Foundation Scholarship Application Period Opens

The application period for the Louisiana Legislative Women’s Caucus Foundation 2013 Educational Advancement Opportunity (EAO) Scholarship is now open. The Louisiana Legislative Women’s Caucus, through its foundation, has awarded \$13,000 in scholarships to young women in Louisiana since 2010. The purpose of the EAO Scholarship is to advance the overall education of deserving young women in Louisiana. Each scholarship award is for \$500 and is to be used for tuition, room & board and/or books. The EAO Scholarship will be awarded at the 6th Annual Women of Excellence Awards & Scholarship Gala to be held in Baton Rouge on Tuesday, May 14, 2013 at a location to be determined.

The Foundation prides itself on encouraging young women of Louisiana to uphold high levels of integrity, excellence in character and outstanding academic standards. Individuals who receive this scholarship not only benefit from the monetary award, but also from having the distinction and honor of being named a Louisiana Legislative Women’s Caucus Foundation Scholar. Individuals can apply for the scholarship by visiting [www.llwc.louisiana.gov](http://www.llwc.louisiana.gov) to download the scholarship application. Scholarship applications must be received in the Women’s Caucus Office by Friday, February 8, 2013.

Should you have any questions regarding the Louisiana Legislative Women’s Caucus Educational Advancement Opportunity (EAO) Scholarship, please contact Trin Johnson in the Women’s Caucus Office at 225.342.0334.

## Deadline for START Deposits to Qualify for 2012 Tax Exemption is December 28

*START Account Owners Can Exempt Up to \$4,800 in Deposits Per Account This Tax Year.*

December 28 is the deadline for Louisiana families to qualify for the 2012 tax benefits provided by START, the state's 529 college savings program.

Deposits to new and existing accounts must be received by 3:00 p.m. CST on December 28, 2012 to qualify for tax benefits and state matching contributions for the current calendar year.

START investors can exempt up to \$2,400 in deposits per beneficiary per year from income reported on their state tax returns. For married couples filing jointly, the exemption from income can be up to \$4,800 in deposits. If account owners are unable to make \$2,400 (or \$4,800) in deposits in one year, they can carry forward unused portions to subsequent years.

"START account owners should send in their deposits as early as possible, especially because of the holiday season," said Carol Fulco, START Director. "This is also the perfect time of year to give a gift of education by opening a new START account for a child, grandchild, niece, nephew or other family member," Fulco added. Both online and printable applications are available at [www.startsaving.la.gov](http://www.startsaving.la.gov).

In addition to a \$2,400 or \$4,800 annual tax exemption, START benefits include a state-paid match on deposits made

each calendar year ranging from 2 percent to 14 percent, depending on the account's classification and owner's adjusted gross income. Other benefits include a choice of investment options in fixed, variable and mixed portfolios; the flexibility to use funds at any accredited college or university for tuition, room and board, books, fees and more; and a tax exemption on earnings when used to pay these expenses.

START deposits can be sent by overnight delivery to: START Saving Program, Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA), 602 North Fifth Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802. Postmarks or payments mailed but not received by 3:00 p.m. on December 28, 2012, will not be credited until 2013 and will not be eligible for 2012 tax incentives.

Deposits will also be accepted in person in the Mobile/Manchac Room on the first floor of the Galvez Building in downtown Baton Rouge at 602 North Fifth Street from 8:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Wednesday, December 26 through Friday, December 28. Parking is available in the Galvez Parking Garage on North Street and parking can be validated by the Galvez Building Security guard on duty. For more information, contact the Office of Student Financial Assistance toll-free at 1-800-259-5626.

## Give the Gift of Higher Education

Are you looking for the perfect gift for a loved one this holiday season? Consider giving the gift of higher education through a START Saving account!

With the rising cost of education, students find themselves with more expenses than scholarships and grants can cover. This is why it is so important to start saving for a child's college education early.

You can contribute to your loved one's future education this holiday season by opening a START Saving account in their name or donating to their existing account. To open an account, simply complete the application online at [www.startsaving.la.gov](http://www.startsaving.la.gov) or download, print and complete the paper application and submit it to: START Saving Program, P.O. Box 91271, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-9271.

Printable gift certificates are available at <http://www.startsaving.la.gov/savings/forms.jsp>. Show a special child in your life how invested in their future you are today by giving them the gift of higher education!



Printable gift cards are also available with Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa themes.

# LOSFA Outreach

## Southern Regional Education Board Conference

Jerri Mack, one of LOSFA's Public Information and Communications Supervisors, and Dianna Frank, one of LA GEAR UP's Program Coordinators, attended the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Conference meeting in Jacksonville, FL last month.

Representatives from the 16 states that make up the SREB met to discuss important issues, such as how to best reach students and their families and the role of social media in college planning.

"The SREB conference was a great networking opportunity that gave us a lot of information on what other states are doing to create a college going culture, to give all students the information and tools they need to graduate high school and to be prepared to enroll and succeed in a postsecondary education program," said Frank.



From L to R: Jerri Mack and Dianna Frank at the Southern Regional Education Board Go Alliance Meeting in Jacksonville, Fla.

## Baby Grand at Woman's Hospital

Over 2,000 new and expecting parents learned about the START Saving program at this year's Baby Grand event, hosted by Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge. The event, which brought together parents and numerous organizations from across the state, was attended by two members of LOSFA's Public Information and Communications (PIC) outreach team. PIC Supervisor Jerri Mack and Representative Ebony Holmes spread START's message of saving for college from an early age and gave the crowd information on how to start saving for their children's' educations.



From L to R: Jerri Mack, START mascot Earl E. Start, and Ebony Holmes attended Baby Grand at Woman's Hospital to give expectant parents information about the START Saving program.

## Student Transcript System Training

Kate Herke of the LOSFA Public Information and Communications division conducted the agency's annual Student Transcript System (STS) training workshops for non-public high school counselors and administrators during November of this year. LOSFA scheduled six sessions over four days, so that as many people as possible could attend.

The sessions, which were held at the computer lab at the Louisiana Technology Park complex in Baton Rouge, covered all aspects of STS entry and inquiry, from beginner to advanced, with special attention to problems that various attendees had experienced. 107 counselors, administrators, and other school staff, from around the state, attended.



LOSFA's Kate Herke answers questions during an STS Training session at the Louisiana Technology Park complex in Baton Rouge.

## Rockefeller State Wildlife Scholarship aids in long-term Louisiana conservation efforts

Louisiana has long been referred to as the “Sportsman’s Paradise” due to its wealth of wildlife and abundant bodies of water teeming with fish throughout the state. Passionate Louisianans enjoy the hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreational activities offered by the state. Many even turn the conservation of these resources into a career.

“The Department of Wildlife & Fisheries (LDWF) is the chief and principal steward of Louisiana’s Fish & Wildlife Resources,” said Robert Love of the LDWF Coastal & Nongame Resources Division. “Like other resource conservation agencies we must constantly attract new employees to be our next generation of scientists and managers.”

The high level of interest in careers in conservation led to the creation of the Rockefeller State Wildlife Scholarship, a competitive scholarship that awards \$2,000 annually for an undergraduate student and \$3,000 annually to a graduate student pursuing a degree in forestry, wildlife or marine science at a Louisiana Public College or University.

“Our Rockefeller Refuge in Cameron Parish is one of the premier research oriented refuges in all North America and is the source of the revenue that funds this scholarship,” said Love. “Louisiana will always face new challenges in natural resource management and supports the use of Rockefeller funds by our State Universities for the education of future conservation leaders.

“It is essential that we properly educate our future conservationists to address the challenges associated with wildlife & fishery restorations and conservation of our forest and wetland habitats, while accommodating resource needs of an expanding human population, as well as a changing climate.”

In order to make sure that the scholarship goes to a student interested in a career in conservation, LDWF has deemed the following majors as eligible courses of study – Wildlife, Wildlife Conservation, Wildlife Management, Fisheries, Wildlife and Fisheries Science, Forestry, Forestry Management, Urban Forestry, and Natural Resource, Marine and Environmental Science. LDWF officials will also consider students in the following majors on a case by case basis - Biology, Biostatics, Oceanography/Coastal Science, and Coastal Environmental Science.

Students interested in this scholarship can learn more and download the scholarship application on LOSFA’s Web site at [www.osfa.la.gov/rock.htm](http://www.osfa.la.gov/rock.htm).

To qualify for consideration, a student must:

- Be a U.S. citizen or national or eligible non-citizen and be registered with Selective Service if required
- Be a Louisiana resident for at least one year prior to July 1st of the scholarship award year
- Complete and submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) no later than July 1
- Complete the Rockefeller State Wildlife Scholarship Application so that it is received by LOSFA no later than July 1 to be considered for Fall/Winter/Spring awards. If the Application is not received by the July 1 deadline, but is received by December 1, the student may be eligible for consideration of a Spring award, if funds are available.
- Be enrolled as a full-time undergraduate or graduate student in a Louisiana Public College or University majoring in forestry, wildlife or marine science with the intent of obtaining a degree in that field. Undergraduate students must have earned at least 60 hours of college credit and have at least a 2.50 cumulative college GPA.
- As a graduate student have at least a 3.00 cumulative college GPA on all credits earned in graduate school

Renewal Requirements:

- Have received the scholarship for not more than five academic years (three undergraduate and two graduate)
- By the end of the academic year (spring term), have earned at least 24 hours of earned credits during the fall, winter and spring terms at a school defining 12 semester or eight quarter hours as the minimum for full-time undergraduate status, or earn at least 18 hours total credit during the fall, winter and spring terms at a school defining nine semester hours as a minimum for full-time graduate status; and
- Achieve a cumulative GPA of at least 2.50 as an undergraduate student at the end of each academic year or achieve a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.00 as a graduate student at the end of each academic year; and
- Maintain continuous enrollment as a full-time student unless granted an exception by LOSFA; and
- Continue to pursue a course of study leading to an undergraduate or graduate degree in wildlife, forestry or marine science.

For additional information or assistance with the Rockefeller State Wildlife Scholarship, contact Erica Hughes at 225-219-7707 or [Erica.Hughes@la.gov](mailto:Erica.Hughes@la.gov).



# LOSFA's Social Media Sites



<http://www.facebook.com/LOSFA>



<http://www.twitter.com/LOSFA>



<http://www.youtube.com/LOSFA1000>



[www.Flickr.com/LOSFA](http://www.Flickr.com/LOSFA)



For more information, contact the  
Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance:

By Phone: 800-259-5626

By E-mail: [custserv@la.gov](mailto:custserv@la.gov)

By Mail: P.O. Box 91202, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-9202

Web Address: [www.osfa.la.gov](http://www.osfa.la.gov)

For submissions, opinions or comments for LOSFA LOOP, please  
contact Gus Wales at [Gus.Wales@la.gov](mailto:Gus.Wales@la.gov).