



## *House Budget and Research Office*

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### **2026 SESSION: HIGHER EDUCATION BUDGET AND LEGISLATIVE HIGHLIGHTS**

The University System of Georgia (USG) serves as the state's public higher education agency and is comprised of 25 institutions throughout the state. The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) oversees the state's technical colleges, adult literacy programs, and various economic and workforce development programs. TCSG is comprised of 22 institutions with 88 campuses throughout the state. The state also provides financial assistance and aid to students at eligible private and public institutions and colleges all over the state through the Georgia Student Finance Commission (GSFC).

#### **Budget Highlights**

- HB 973, the Amended FY 2026 budget, includes \$29.8 million to establish a school of optometry at Georgia Southern University. HB 973 also includes \$40 million in one-time funds for the University System of Georgia for major repairs and rehabilitation. These funds will be used to maintain nearly 59 million square feet of space at 25 institutions throughout the state. The Technical College System of Georgia receives \$48 million in one-time funds for major repairs and rehabilitation for its over 14 million square feet of space at 22 colleges spread across 88 campuses around the state.
- HB 974, the FY 2027 budget, includes \$218 million in formula funds for the University System of Georgia to reflect a 4.95% increase in enrollment and a 0.56% increase in square footage. In addition, the budget includes \$9.5 million to fund start-up costs for the University of Georgia School of Medicine. The School of Medicine was founded in 2024 and an inaugural class of 60 students is expected to begin classes in the Fall of 2026.
- The FY 2027 budget includes \$200,000 for research grants for the University of Georgia and the Georgia Institute of Technology to fund continuing research on the removal and remediation of polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), or "forever chemicals."
- Through HB 973, the University System of Georgia receives \$838,000 in one-time funds to support blueberry breeder research and \$7.6 million for Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service infrastructure and facility upgrades. In HB 974, the Agricultural Experiment Station receives \$450,000 for three positions within the College of Agricultural and Environmental Services to support the University of Georgia's Synthetic Biology Initiative. Additionally, \$160,000 is provided for positions to support the peanut breeding and cotton breeding programs at the University of Georgia. Through the Georgia Tech Research Institute,

\$500,000 is provided to support post-harvest technology research for the peanut industry, bringing the total base funding to \$1 million.

- The Georgia Research Alliance (GRA) is a nonprofit, public-private partnership that supports research institutions and promotes economic development. HB 974 includes \$3.6 million in additional funds for existing member institutions and to expand GRA membership to Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University and \$2 million as one-time, state matching funds for two new Eminent Scholar endowments. Additionally, \$15.7 million is provided in capital funds for specialty lab equipment and infrastructure to support Georgia’s research talent.
- HB 974 includes an increase of \$243,035 to the University System of Georgia to support the growing costs of providing Georgia Library Learning Online (GALILEO) system access to Georgia students. These funds are in addition to the \$105,770 that was provided in the Amended FY 2026 budget. In FY 2024, there were almost 50 million searches of GALILEO resources between USG and K-12 users.
- The FY 2027 budget includes \$584,931 for Georgia Public Libraries to offset the rising costs of providing the Public Information Network for Electronic Services (PINES). These funds are in addition to the \$146,233 provided in the Amended FY 2026 budget. The PINES program includes 300 libraries, which allows the sharing of over 10 million library resources from one part of the state to another. In the last fiscal year, over 3.6 million items were moved between libraries as part of the PINES program. Additionally, HB 974 includes \$5.9 million in capital funds to support projects at five local libraries throughout the state and \$7 million for technology upgrades and major repairs and renovations at library facilities statewide.
- House Bill 973 includes \$325 million at the Georgia Student Finance Commission (GSFC) to provide state-matching funds for an endowment to support the needs-based DREAMS Scholarship program and to initiate scholarships.
- The Amended FY 2026 and FY 2027 budgets include an additional \$18.4 million and \$21 million, respectively, for the Georgia Student Finance Commission to fund the growing participation in the Dual Enrollment program. With these additional funds, the FY 2027 appropriation comes to \$130 million in state funds, which will provide awards to more than 70,000 students across the state.
- House Bill 974 provides an additional \$45 million to fund HOPE scholarships at public and private institutions. This additional funding brings the total appropriation for Fiscal Year 2027 to over \$1 billion, which will provide awards to more than 120,000 students throughout the state. These funds are in addition to the increase of \$12 million provided in House Bill 973 for the growing utilization of HOPE scholarships by students throughout the state.
- HB 974 includes \$2.5 million to initiate the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship pursuant to Senate Bill 85 (2025 Session). The scholarship provides up to \$30,000 per year to eligible former foster care students for tuition, room and board, meal plan, and books.
- The FY 2027 budget includes \$6 million in total funds to continue the Behavioral Health Professions Service Cancelable Loan program. This service cancelable loan, established as part of the mental health reform initiatives created through HB 1013 (2022 Session), has disbursed \$10 million to behavioral health professionals in this state since its first award year beginning in 2023.

- The FY 2027 budget includes an additional \$34 million in formula funds for the Technical College System of Georgia to reflect a 9.4% increase in enrollment and \$500,000 for the High Demand Apprenticeship Program to meet the growing demand for these apprenticeship slots at businesses across the state.
- The Amended FY 2026 budget provides \$6 million to TCSG to develop a new Georgia Career Navigator System, which is an upcoming statewide digital tool that will connect students, jobseekers, and employers by aligning education and training pathways with in-demand careers to support workforce readiness and economic mobility.

### **Legislative Highlights**

- [HB 541](#) (Rep. Katie Dempsey, 13<sup>th</sup>) expands tuition equalization grant eligibility to include higher education institutions that offer baccalaureate programs in nursing, have a current physical presence in Georgia for at least 10 years, have received accreditation from the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, and have accreditation from either the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools or a regional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. These institutions must also have a four-year average passage rate of at least 80 percent for the National Council Licensure Examination, and admit students who have a high school diploma or equivalency or a degree from an accredited postsecondary institution. Such institutions are only considered as approved institutions for the tuition equalization grant program, not the Dual Enrollment program or HOPE scholarships/grants.
- [HB 1293](#) (Rep. Jan Jones, 47<sup>th</sup>) transitions the Dual Achievement Program from a pilot program to a permanent program within the Technical College System of Georgia. In order for a student to be eligible for the program on or after July 1, 2028, the student must meet the following criteria: be between 18 and 23 years of age; be withdrawn from a public school in this state; have not yet earned a high school diploma; meet admission requirements; participate in provided wraparound services; and provide written acknowledgement of specified information. The bill allows eligible 16- or 17-year-old students to participate in the program if they live in a completion special school attendance zone that does not have an operating completion special school. The bill requires the State Board of Education to coordinate with the Office of Planning and Budget to develop a funding formula for the program, to be implemented by Fiscal Year 2028.
- [HB 1328](#) (Rep. Will Wade, 9<sup>th</sup>) increases the maximum number of persons who can receive the University of North Georgia military scholarship.
- [HB 1379](#) (Rep. Houston Gaines, 120<sup>th</sup>) creates the 'Foreign Funding Transparency and Accountability Act.' The bill requires each public educational institution to submit either a report detailing all funding received from a foreign source of concern during a specified time period, or a report affirming that no such funding has been received during a specified time period.
- [SB 432](#) (Sen. Larry Walker III (20<sup>th</sup>) extends the sunset from July 1, 2026, to July 1, 2031, to allow the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia to retain certain non-lapsing revenues.
- [SB 523](#) (Sen. Russ Goodman, 8<sup>th</sup>) prohibits the exclusion from participation, denial of benefits, or discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion of any person in this

state, as related to educational programs or employment through a public school that receives federal or state financial assistance. The bill establishes a statewide K-12 Title VI coordinator dedicated to monitoring complaints of discrimination and harassment in public schools, in accordance with Title VI of the federal 'Civil Rights Act of 1964.' The bill requires the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia to establish policies and procedures to report, investigate, and act on complaints related to discrimination and harassment.

- **SB 556** (Sen. Chuck Payne, 54<sup>th</sup>) creates the Dedicating Resources to Educationally Advance More Students (DREAMS) Scholarship as a needs-based scholarship program for eligible students enrolled in eligible postsecondary institutions in Georgia. The maximum award amount per year is set at \$3,000, with a duration maximum of eight semesters or 12 quarters. The Georgia Student Finance Authority is authorized to establish and maintain a separate fund for this program, which will include public or private grants, gifts, donations, or contributions dedicated to this program. The bill includes advanced fine arts courses in the calculation of student grade point averages for the purpose of determining HOPE and other scholarship eligibility. The bill prevents the prohibition of possession of an opioid antagonist on university system or technical college system property or at university system or technical college system sponsored activities. The bill requires institutions and units to acquire and maintain a supply of opioid antagonists in a secure location, subject to available funding from community funding sources. For institutions or units that maintain an automated external defibrillator, the bill requires such institutions or units to maintain an opioid antagonist storage compartment within three feet of said automated external defibrillator, subject to available funding from community funding sources. The bill authorizes university system and technical college system personnel to administer opioid antagonists when necessary in specified situations. The bill establishes a scholarship for medical students that is conditional on the applicant agreeing to practice medicine in this state for no less than four years after graduation from an eligible medical school. The bill raises the maximum contribution amount per beneficiary for savings trust accounts related to the 'Georgia Higher Education Savings Plan Act' from \$235,000 to \$550,000. The bill provides for a tax deduction related to certain qualified tuition programs. The bill updates the Georgia Defined Contribution Plan to clarify that individuals performing services for an institution in which they are enrolled in either part time or full time are excluded from being considered employees. The bill clarifies provisions related to the minimum reserve amount of the lottery shortfall reserve.