

Joint Committee on Higher Education Bill Summary

<u>BILL NUMBER</u>	S.411
<u>TITLE</u>	An Act to modernize financial aid access
<u>SPONSORS</u>	Senator Mark
<u>SIMILAR MATTERS</u>	H.1459
<u>PRIOR HISTORY</u>	New File
<u>SUMMARY</u>	<p>This bill establishes a revised MassGrant program, Massachusetts' primary need-based financial aid initiative for undergraduate students, detailing eligibility criteria, application processes, and award distribution methods. It mandates the creation of a user-friendly digital system for grant administration, an appeals process for denied applications, oversight by a Financial Aid Access Commission, and ensures continuity of aid for current recipients under prior programs.</p>

SECTION-BY-SECTION

Section 1: Amends section 9B of chapter 15A by replacing the section with the following. This bill goes into more depth for the MassGrant program than the previous law.

(a) Defines “eligible institution” and “expected family contribution,” and “MassGrant.”

Eligible institutions include private universities, while the current MassGrant statute only includes public universities.

(b) Establishes the MassGrant program to provide financial assistance to eligible MA residents at eligible institutions. The Board of Higher Education will administer the program and establish policies on eligibility, award amounts, and distribution.

(c) To be eligible for a MassGrant award, a student shall: (1) be a Commonwealth resident for at least 1 year, (2) be a US citizen or permanent resident, (3) be enrolled or accepted as an undergraduate student at an eligible institution, (4) demonstrate financial need, (5) maintain satisfactory academic progress, (6) not have a bachelor’s degree, and (7) comply with selective service registration requirements.

(d) Students will establish initial MassGrant eligibility during their sophomore year of high school based on family income, cost of attendance, disability status, cost of living, and other relevant factors.

(e) The Board shall: establish income eligibility, adjust award amounts, create an appeals process, train guidance counselors on eligibility, and maintain a public website.

- (f) Maximum award amounts shall be: determined annually based on appropriations, enrollment status, expected family contribution, and cost of attendance, and supplemented by additional need based aid as funding permits.
- (g) Awards shall be renewable for up to 5 years of undergraduate study, provided the student remains eligible.

Section 2: Inserts the following four sections after section 9B of chapter 15A;

9C:

- (a) Requires the Department to develop and maintain a digital system for MassGrant administration that prioritizes student accessibility and ease of use.
- (b) Details metrics that the Department shall establish for system accessibility and ease of use.
- (c) Requires the Department to report annually on system performance metrics to the Board and Legislature.

9D:

- (a) Requires the Board to establish an expedited appeals process.
- (b) Provides students with the right to seek judicial review of appeal determinations and to recover damages and compensation.
- (c) Requires the Department to provide information about legal assistance resources and maintain a list of attorneys willing to represent students on a contingency basis.

9E:

- (a) Requires the Board to establish an independent appeals review board.
- (b) 5% of the annual MassGrant appropriation shall be allocated with 3% for institutional capacity building grants for eligible institutions and 2% for department administrative costs.

9F:

- (a) Establishes a Financial Aid Access Commission and appoints members.
- (b) Outlines commission requirements to meet quarterly, review program data, make policy recommendations, and produce annual reports.
- (c) If more than 25% of rejected applications result in appeals, the Commission must conduct a program review and the state auditor must do a full audit. An independent investigation will be initiated and the Department must implement Commission recommendations within 180 days.

Section 3: Provides that funds for relevant financial aid programs that this act would discontinue will transfer to the MassGrant program.

Section 4:

- (a) Requires the Board of Higher Education to promulgate regulations to implement the sections of this bill not later than 180 days after the effective date of this act.
- (b) Provides that students receiving aid from comparable previous financial aid programs will remain eligible for equivalent and additional aid under MassGrant so long as they remain eligible under the previous program requirements.
- (c) The digital system under 9C shall be operational within 180 days after the effective date of this act.
- (d) The appeals process of 9D shall be operational within 90 days after the effective date of this act.
- (e) The staffing requirements of 9E shall take effect upon immediate passage of this act.
- (f) Requires full compliance with this act within 1 year of the effective date.

Section 5: This Act takes effect upon passage.