



Consolidating the Revolution

2017 Update on the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program

by Thomas Lindsay
Director

Key Points

- In 2011, Texas Governor Perry challenged universities to craft what came to be called “\$10,000 degrees.” The Texas Affordable Baccalaureate program best incorporates the means specified by the governor and could serve as a model for the country.
- The Legislature should seek to incentivize universities to craft more affordable baccalaureate programs through passing along to schools some of the tax savings these programs produce.
- In January 2016, the AT&T Foundation awarded a \$400,000 grant to help eight more universities in Texas craft affordable baccalaureate degrees.
- For the first time, the college affordability debate is focusing on how schools themselves can lower their prices, rather than how taxpayers can come up with more money to subsidize public higher education.

2014: A Breakthrough in Public College Pricing

In his February 2011 “State of the State” Address, then-Texas Governor Rick Perry addressed Texas public higher education. “Today,” he said, “I’m challenging our institutions of higher education to develop bachelor’s degrees that cost no more than \$10,000, including textbooks” ([Perry](#)). At the time, average tuition and fees for a four-year degree at Texas universities stood at roughly \$27,000, and many were predicting that prices would need to go up further. He went on to specify how he hoped to see greater affordability accomplished: “Let’s leverage web-based instruction, innovative teaching techniques, and aggressive efficiency measures to reach that goal” ([Lindsay 2012](#); [Perry](#)).

Approximately one week after his State of the State Address, the governor offered further details in a follow-up letter to university presidents: “Programs may include online and blended classes; classes at no-frills campuses; credit for prior learning, dual credit and Advanced Placement; and open-source textbooks,” he wrote. His letter to the university presidents also envisioned that 10 percent of their degrees ultimately would be available for \$10,000 ([Hamilton](#)).

Perry’s challenge hoped to address the fact that, over the past 25 years, average college tuitions have risen roughly 440 percent. Outstanding student loan debt now stands at \$1.3 trillion—more than total national credit card debt.

Raymund Paredes, commissioner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, agreed with Perry’s case for the need for a

more affordable bachelor’s degree: “If we keep going the way we are, a baccalaureate degree at a public university will cost \$100,000 at some institutions in five years. We can’t go there. The state does not have the resources, we are not going to have enough financial aid to cover those costs. We have got to find different models. . . . Nobody is talking about everybody offering this low-cost, no-frills degree. We are talking about providing students an alternative and reinventing higher education” ([Ludwig](#)).

It should be emphasized that Governor Perry did not ask that the price for the new degrees total no more than \$10,000 for simply one academic year, but rather, for the full four years of a bachelor’s degree program. As such, Perry’s agenda was greeted with skepticism at the time. The chairman of the Travis County Democrats [called](#) the idea “preposterous,” adding that “nobody in higher education believes that is even possible” ([Selby](#)). The president of the Texas Conference of the American Association of University Professors, asked “Do you really want a stripped-down, bare-bones degree?” ([Hamilton](#)).

Their skepticism had a rational basis. In 2011, the average Texas public university student was paying roughly \$27,000 for tuition, books, and fees for four years, and prices looked only to be escalating further.

At the same time, however, and unlike the defenders of the higher education status quo, Perry’s message struck a chord with college students, their parents, and taxpayers, who have suffered from a quarter-century of [tuition inflation and historic student loan debt](#). They regarded a proposal like Perry’s to be perhaps exactly what was required. A contem-

poraneous Pew Research Center nationwide [study](#) found that 57 percent of Americans believe a college degree no longer carries a value worth the cost. Seventy-five percent of respondents believe college to be simply unaffordable (Pew Research Center).

For those on the outside looking in at the academic establishment, those whose future prosperity depended on garnering a bachelor's degree, something needed to change.

Texas A&M-Commerce and South Texas College Rise to the Occasion

The change came in the spring semester of 2014, when three higher education partners—Texas A&M University-Commerce, South Texas College, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB)—launched the “Texas Affordable Baccalaureate” (TAB) program, the state’s first public university bachelor’s degree combining online learning and competency-based standards. The degree was developed by community college and university faculty with a view to meeting the needs identified by community and business leaders. The new degree in organizational leadership can cost as little as \$750 per term and allows students to receive credit for as many competencies and courses as they can master each term. According to THECB’s website, students arriving “with no prior college credits should be able to complete the degree program in three years at a total cost of \$13,000 to \$15,000” ([THECB 2014](#)). Students who enter having already satisfied their general education requirements can complete the degree in two years, while those entering with “90 credit hours and no credential” can complete the degree “in one year for \$4,500 to \$6,000” ([Klein-Collins and Glancey](#)).

Given the excitement over the first TAB program, higher education reformers thought it was only a question of time before it expanded beyond the campuses of A&M-Commerce and South Texas College. They were correct in their prediction. In January of 2016, AT&T President Dave Nichols, Texas State Comptroller Glenn Hegar, and THECB Chairman Bobby Jenkins, [announced](#) that AT&T had pledged to contribute an additional \$400,000 to THECB’s College for All Texans Foundation in order to fund expansion of the TAB program from its current two campuses to ten, with the intention of enrolling more than 21,000 students over its first five years.

Under the terms of this new AT&T grant, public institutions of higher education in the state will compete for startup funding for TAB programs of their own. Re-

marking on the new funding initiative, THECB’s Jenkins explained, “Expansion of the TAB program is a key to achieving the state’s [60x30TX](#) higher education goals for completion, marketable skills, managing student debt, and ensuring that at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a college degree or certificate by 2030.” Most importantly, Jenkins said, “the TAB program, with its competency-based model, allows our institutions to serve the nontraditional students that are the new majority in higher education, such as military veterans, older, working students and Texans with some prior college credit but no degree” ([THECB and AT&T](#)).

Jenkins’ latter point deserves our consideration, because it is far from common knowledge. We still tend to think of college-going students as consisting predominantly of 18-22 year-olds who attend a residential campus full time. This is no longer the case. Today, the majority of those seeking some sort of postsecondary education—be it a two-year degree, a four-year degree, or a certificate—are nontraditional students. They are over the age of 25 and/or working full time and/or supporting families of their own. For this new majority, access to a traditional college education can be difficult if not impossible.

Moreover, in 2016, according to THECB estimates, 3.6 million Texans between the ages of 25 and 64 had earned some college credits but no degree. For this outsized demographic, the expansion of the TAB program could prove to be a boon and, in the process, expedite the state’s progress toward its 60X30TX goals.

The Future of the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program: The 2017 Texas Legislature

For the reasons listed above, the expansion of the TAB program is encouraging news for Texans. But more can and should be done. The Texas Legislature had the opportunity during the last (84th) session to expand the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate program to all Texas public universities. That did not happen then, but another piece of legislation, HB 385, looks to accomplish this during the current (85th) session (see Appendix B: “Current Legislation Proposed to Make College More Affordable.”)

HB 385 is entitled, “An act relating to the elimination of certain formula funding and dropped course restrictions for students enrolled in accelerated, affordable baccalaureate programs at public institutions of higher education.” It seeks to remove a number of the barriers currently impeding both universities and nontraditional students

who seek a Texas Affordable Baccalaureate program. These barriers deny formula funding to Texas universities for students who:

- have taken more than 30 hours past their degree requirements, counting courses taken at both the community college and four-year Texas public university level;
- have dropped more than six courses during their time in Texas public universities and/or community colleges;
- have repeated a course three times.

To enhance college affordability and therewith increase graduation and completion rates, this bill seeks to incentivize universities to follow the groundbreaking lead of Texas A&M-Commerce/South Texas College's TAB program. This will likely happen on a widespread basis only if

universities receive formula funding for students enrolled in TAB programs. To do this requires removing the “no-formula-funding” barriers to entry into these programs by the primary constituents served by the TAB program—nontraditional students enrolling and/or returning to college.

Regardless of whether or not the Texas Legislature succeeds in the 85th session in offering Texas Affordable Baccalaureate programs statewide, the efforts of THECB, combined with the generosity of the AT&T Foundation, promise to expand the program somewhat. And as the program begins to grow in Texas, it can be reasonably expected that the other 49 states will take notice, for they are struggling with the same issues of tuition inflation and student loan debt. As I argued in an earlier rendering of this update, [a higher education revolution](#) appears to be in the making ([Lindsay 2015](#)). ☆

Appendix A:

[The Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program](#)

(ereducause.edu 2015)

The Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program

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Rebecca Klein-Collins, Associate Vice President, Research, and Kathleen Glancey, Consultant, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

A targeted collaboration among higher education entities in Texas addressed a key problem for would-be students and their families: affordability. In January 2014 the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), South Texas College (STC), and Texas A&M University-Commerce (A&M-Commerce) launched the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) Program, the state's first competency-based bachelor degree. The program's inaugural degree, an applied baccalaureate in organizational leadership, offers a low-cost alternative to a traditional postsecondary degree. The degree is also designed to provide students with employer-identified 21st century competencies. While gaining or demonstrating these competencies, students have the opportunity to accelerate their time to completion, reducing costs further.

The program features a blended model that combines competency-based courses and more traditionally formatted courses. Students earn the first 90 credit hours required for the degree through self-paced, online, competency-based modules, and the last 30 credit hours in either a hybrid or online format.

The TAB Student

More than 3.6 million Texans who have earned college credit do not have a degree. The Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program was designed to help those individuals complete their degrees while also helping associate degree holders and those with considerable work experience earn a bachelor's degree. The degree is also designed to provide an option for first-time students who prefer a self-paced format.

Students in the program commented:

“It has been my miracle I feel like because it fits into what my life is now, which is a full-time employee, a wife, a mother, and now a student. It’s taking a much shorter time.”

“The 750 dollars was perfect. I said, ‘Wow! Nobody’s doing that.’”

“It’s stuff I’ve been doing for a very long time.”

Background

In 2011, Texas Governor Rick Perry challenged all Texas institutions of higher education to develop a \$10,000 bachelor’s degree, inclusive of all materials. The THECB, accepting this challenge, began working with A&M-Commerce and STC to build a new program. A&M-Commerce, a four-year institution, was an early adopter of online education and expressed early interest in developing a competency-based program. STC, a two-year institution, is one of three Texas public community colleges authorized by the Texas Legislature to offer bachelor’s degrees in applied technology.

The first task of the TAB leadership team (which included staff from THECB, A&M-Commerce, and STC) was to identify the kind of degree to design and offer, taking into consideration both student demand and local employers’ needs. The leadership team examined labor markets and anticipated job growth in the STC and A&M-Commerce regions using data from the Texas Workforce Commission and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Several initiatives in Texas, in addition to the governor’s \$10,000 degree challenge, helped shape the TAB Program. One major influence was the [Texas Tuning Project](#) (2009–2013). A faculty-led pilot funded by the Lumina Foundation, this project was designed to define what students must know, understand, and be able to demonstrate after completing a degree in a specific field. The project helped the TAB leadership team understand building a degree from the ground up. During the same timeframe, the state-wide general education core curriculum was being revised, resulting in the [Texas Core Curriculum](#) (TCC). The TCC focuses on increasing student learning and improving student success and is based on the Essential Learning Outcomes of the [Liberal Education and America’s Promise](#) (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). Thus, by the time faculty groups convened in 2011 to develop the TAB’s lower-division competencies, participants could draw from the lessons and experiences of the Texas Tuning Project and the work on the TCC.

After identifying the competencies, the team developed a matrix using Bloom’s Taxonomy Action Verbs¹ to define learning outcomes, and then developed the corresponding assessment processes, assessment instruments, and course materials. [LEAP’s Essential Learning Outcomes](#) were integrated into all three TAB degree components: general education core curriculum, lower-division electives, and upper-division applied coursework.

A competency framework resulted that includes two levels of competencies for the TAB degree: for the lower level, 72 general education core competencies and 19 lower-division competencies for a total of 91 competencies students must demonstrate; for the upper level, eight large overall competency categories that provide the overarching framework.

Degree Program Structure

The competencies required for the BAS/BAAS in organizational leadership map to a total of 120 credits, distributed as shown in **Table 1** (next page).

Table 1. Distribution of credits and competencies in the BAS and BAAS

	Competency Areas	Format	Equivalency Number of Credit Hours
General Education Core Curriculum	Global understanding, problem-solving, effective communication, analysis, ethics, and literacy	Self-paced, online competency-based modules	42
Lower-Division Electives	Additional career-focused competencies, including foreign language	Self-paced, online competency-based modules	48
Upper-Division Applied Coursework	Interpersonal skills, organizational behavior, problem-solving/decision-making, change management, resource management, strategy/operations management, information literacy, statistics/applied research	Hybrid; traditional and online New pilot: self-paced, competency-based modules	30

Since many students begin the program with an associate degree or prior learning from the workplace or military, they may satisfy many degree requirements through transfer credit or through any method of prior learning assessment (PLA) available, including College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams and portfolio assessments. Both A&M-Commerce and STC also have a long history of accepting the American Council on Education's (ACE) credit recommendations for military training and occupations and for corporate training. The TAB Program accepts transfer credits from technical associate degrees that typically would not be accepted by academic degree programs. A maximum of 75 percent of the degree requirements can be met through a combination of transfer and PLA credits. Trained TAB academic coaches and program staff help students identify likely areas for PLA credit.

Curriculum

The BAS/BAAS in organizational leadership was originally designed as a program in which students complete three-quarters of the degree through competency-based modules and the remaining quarter through accelerated upper-division coursework using a more traditional format. Faculty teams developed the competencies for both the lower and upper divisions.

Although faculty members identified the lower-division competencies and learning objectives, they received help with the instructional design, development of the online competency modules, and appropriate online direct assessments from Pearson Education. The TAB leadership team decided to use Pearson's services because of the organization's work with Northern Arizona University's (NAU) Personalized Learning program. Faculty worked closely with Pearson throughout the design and development process to ensure the academic integrity of the program and to align competencies with the state's core curriculum and lower-division outcomes. The upper-division, problem-based curriculum, also developed by faculty, is driven by eight competency categories. The curriculum is designed to be delivered in six seven-week terms as follows:

- Term 1: Issues in organizational leadership
- Terms 2 & 3: Data-driven decision making
- Terms 2 & 3: Behavior, ethics, and leadership
- Terms 4 & 5: Leadership and leadership theory
- Term 4: Leading organizational change/group and work dynamics
- Terms 5 & 6: Capstone project

STC currently offers a hybrid of online and face-to-face curriculum delivery. In STC's hybrid model, students complete some work online, then meet with other students once a week to practice the content together. At A&M-Commerce,

the upper-division work is completed in a virtual environment because the BAAS in organizational leadership is offered exclusively online.

Assessment Approach

All competency modules include embedded course assessments. Assessments for both the general education core curriculum and the lower-division electives follow the same process. Each module contains a pre-assessment a student takes as a diagnostic at the beginning of the module and a post-assessment taken at the end of the module. If a student score meets the determined cut-point on the pre-assessment, the student may go straight to the post-assessment. The post-assessments are longer and more difficult and are designed to show a deeper level of understanding of the competencies. Students have three chances to pass the post-assessment and must score 80 percent or higher to move to the next module.

Student mastery of the upper-division competencies is evaluated through a capstone e-portfolio. Students use the e-portfolio to apply their knowledge and skills to a real-world scenario, as a way to demonstrate job skills to potential employers.

The program designers are considering future use of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), or similar comprehensive assessment tools, as an additional assessment instrument. The program designers expect student results from this assessment will enable A&M–Commerce and STC to benchmark their students against those at other institutions nationally.

Faculty and Student Support Staff

Faculty have multiple roles in administering the TAB program. Full-time program staff serve as academic coaches and work with individual students throughout a student's program to provide feedback and support. These coaches work with the same students from enrollment through graduation, checking in with students at least once per week. The program uses learning and predictive analytics developed by Civitas Learning to help students persist and graduate on time. The academic coaches can see at a glance how their students are doing and give more attention to students who fall into at-risk categories.

Faculty members also serve as content instructors, providing real-time feedback and support, as well as administering assessments (pre and post), facilitating the student's learning by answering questions, providing one-on-one tutoring, and monitoring progress. These full-time instructional staff members are assigned to specific content domains or courses. Additionally, for the upper-division part of the degree, full-time faculty work in a more traditional faculty role, delivering both face-to-face and online courses.

Cost and Pricing/Sustainability

The first-year start-up costs to develop the TAB Program were covered by a two-year, \$1 million grant from the EDU-CAUSE Next Generation Learning Challenge. The grant supported a portion of the curriculum and competency mapping completed by Pearson, along with the development of a suite of marketing resources (including small initial social media buys) and the development of gap-ware to automate the student enrollment process. Both participating institutions also contributed considerable time, however, as well as human and financial resources. The estimated outlays and in-kind staff time was \$250,000 from A&M–Commerce and \$160,000 from STC. In addition, both institutions committed to taking on the cost of the predictive analytics from Civitas Learning.

For the lower-division curriculum the student's price for the program is \$750 for each seven-week period of enrollment, inclusive of electronic resources. Students may complete as many competency modules or courses in each seven-week term as they can. Six seven-week terms are offered during each 12-month academic cycle. Because students can complete core and lower-division competencies online and through self-paced modules, those with work-based and other experiential learning can advance quickly.

The THECB estimates that the program's cost per credit for the applied baccalaureate in organizational leadership is about half the cost of a traditional degree, saving the student \$113.73 per credit. Using this estimate, the student potentially saves between \$13,088 and \$23,088 in tuition and at least two semesters of time.

Accreditation

Obtaining the necessary accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) for the applied baccalaureate in organizational leadership was a lengthy process. SACSCOC originally approved the program in January 2013, but later approached the team requesting a substantive change proposal from both institutions. After several conversations with SACSCOC, including the submission of a substantive change proposal, SACSCOC determined that the program did not contain direct assessment and was similar in scope to currently offered programs at both institutions. SACSCOC therefore accepted notification of the program and added it to the scope of accreditation at each institution in December 2013.

Financial Aid

Because of the way in which the program maps the competencies back to the credit hour, and because two seven-week terms in the TAB Program are equivalent to one standard term, students pursuing the applied baccalaureate in organizational leadership can receive federal financial aid. The biggest challenge in meeting financial-aid regulatory requirements was the self-paced feature of the program. To meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) requirements, TAB students must complete the equivalent of four courses across two seven-week terms (comparable to students in traditional programs completing 12 semester credit hours each traditional semester). Currently, as program enrollments increase, A&M–Commerce is looking into new financial-aid software systems to support this process.

Issues and Challenges

A significant challenge in developing the TAB Program was the faculty's initial lack of knowledge about competency-based education and, for some, initial resistance to the concept. The team devoted time and energy at the front end to engaging and educating faculty from both institutions. According to Ali Esmaili, dean for Bachelor Programs and University Relations at STC, after two to three months of meetings the faculty began to talk with greater ease about competencies. Mary Hendrix, A&M–Commerce's Vice President for Student Access and Success, notes that while this was the biggest challenge, the solution also yielded the largest reward in that the faculty became completely invested and developed a curriculum they could call their own.

Although the new program required changes to policies, financial aid processes, student information systems, and registration at each institution, the biggest challenge the team encountered may have been IT integration. During the first several terms, neither institution's learning management system had the capability to enroll students in the competency-based modules or link the program competencies to the course-based format tracked in the student information systems. During the start-up phase, when initial enrollments were low, manual enrollment and tracking were manageable. Increasing enrollment, however, requires a better solution. Project partners are currently working to bridge the gap between the student information management systems and learning management systems. If there is a message to deliver to potential competency-based degree program designers from the TAB leadership team, it is to think about technology challenges sooner rather than later.

Next Steps

With the continued rollout of the first TAB degree program, A&M–Commerce and STC plan to launch other competency-based degrees at their institutions within the next few years. Additionally, THECB, A&M–Commerce, and STC developed the degree program for replication in other institutions and for other degree programs. These partners will share all competency maps, learning outcomes, and objectives—including the program model itself—with any other institutions.

Employers have been a strong presence during the program's development, and the team plans to continue the relationship with them by including them on a program advisory committee. The advisory committee will keep the curriculum current, review assessment results, and ensure that program design continues to align with employer needs.

Now that A&M–Commerce has decided to offer the upper-division applied coursework as competency modules, the TAB leadership team and faculty groups will work together to adapt the curriculum, competency assessments, and artifacts that students will use in their e-portfolios, given the new version.

Finally, as the NGLC grant cycle comes to a close, the role of THECB will phase out. The two institutions will work together directly, without THECB serving as facilitator or coordinator. Blackboard Learning Solutions has been working with the TAB leadership team on their strategic planning efforts and is making recommendations to help the two institutions take on more responsibilities in program organization, infrastructure, and administration.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. Benjamin S. Bloom, Max D. Engelhart, Edward J. Furst, Walker H. Hill, and David R. Krathwohl, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, Benjamin S. Bloom, ed. (NY: Longmans, Green, 1956).

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Appendix B: Current Legislation Proposed to Make College More Affordable

85R1881 KSD-F

By: Murphy

H.B. No. 385

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

relating to the elimination of certain formula funding and dropped course restrictions for students enrolled in accelerated, affordable baccalaureate programs at public institutions of higher education.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1. Section 51.907, Education Code, is amended by adding Subsection (b-1) to read as follows:

(b-1) This section does not apply to a student enrolled in an accelerated baccalaureate program created in collaboration with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board that uses a competency-based model and year-round flat-rate tuition to facilitate degree completion, as verified by the coordinating board.

SECTION 2. Section 61.059, Education Code, is amended by adding Subsection (r) to read as follows:

(r) Notwithstanding any other law, the board may not exclude from being counted in the hours reported to the Legislative Budget Board for formula funding contact hours or semester credit hours for a student's enrollment in a course for which the student has previously generated formula funding for the same course if the student is enrolled in an accelerated baccalaureate program created in collaboration with the board that uses a competency-based model and year-round flat-rate tuition to facilitate degree completion, as verified by the board.

SECTION 3. Section 61.0595, Education Code, is amended by

adding Subsection (f-1) to read as follows:

(f-1) In the formulas established under Section 61.059, the board shall include without consideration of Subsection (a) or (e) funding for semester credit hours earned by a student who is enrolled in an accelerated baccalaureate program created by an institution in collaboration with the board that uses a competency-based model and year-round flat-rate tuition to facilitate degree completion, as verified by the board.

SECTION 4. Section 51.907(b-1), Education Code, as added by this Act, applies beginning with the fall 2017 semester.

SECTION 5. The changes in law made by this Act to Sections 61.059 and 61.0595, Education Code, apply beginning with funding recommendations made under Section 61.059, Education Code, for the state fiscal biennium beginning September 1, 2019.

SECTION 6. This Act takes effect immediately if it receives a vote of two-thirds of all the members elected to each house, as provided by Section 39, Article III, Texas Constitution. If this Act does not receive the vote necessary for immediate effect, this Act takes effect September 1, 2017.

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Tom Lindsay, Ph.D., is director of the Foundation's Center for Higher Education. He has more than two decades' experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

In 2006, Lindsay joined the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) staff as director of the agency's signature initiative, *We the People*, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was named Deputy Chairman and Chief Operating Officer of the NEH in 2007.

Lindsay received his B.A., *summa cum laude*, in Political Science, and went on to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. Oxford University Press recently published Lindsay's American Government college textbook, *Investigating American Democracy* (with Gary Glenn). He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world's most prestigious academic journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, the *Journal of Politics*, and the *American Journal of Political Science*.

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