



Expanding the College Pricing Revolution: 2019 Update on the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program

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Key Points

- In February 2011, during his State of the State Address, then-Gov. Rick Perry called on Texas' public four-year universities to craft affordable bachelor's degrees, what the governor called, "\$10,000 degrees."
- The first Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Degree was launched by Texas A&M-Commerce and South Texas College. The new program commenced with seven students and grew to over 300 students and 121 program graduates by 2016.
- Fundraising for the expansion of the affordable baccalaureate was supported by the College for All Texans Foundation. The grants were secured from AT&T Aspire, the Greater Texas Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Meadows Foundation.
- To make college more affordable for more Texans, each public university should have at least one bachelor's degree under the Affordable Baccalaureate Program.

Texas Establishes More Beachheads in the Battle to Make College More Affordable

In February 2011, during his State of the State Address, then-Gov. Rick Perry called on Texas' public four-year universities to craft affordable bachelor's degrees, what the governor labeled at the time, "\$10,000 degrees."

In the seven years that have followed, Texas universities have risen to the challenge. In late 2013, the first Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Degree was launched by Texas A&M-Commerce and South Texas College. The new program commenced with "seven enrolled students and grew to more than 300 students and 121 program graduates by the fall of 2016" ([THECB](#)).

Impressed with the success of the new, lower-cost program, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board announced in March 2017 that it was awarding grants to four new Texas affordable baccalaureate programs. The grants, which total more than \$650,000, will go to Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Tarleton State University, South Texas College (in partnership with Austin Community College), and Texas A&M University-Commerce ([THECB](#)).

According to a press advisory issued by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the new grants will "support the planning, development and implementation of the institutions' new affordable baccalaureate programs" ([THECB](#)).

Commenting on the progress of the new program, Commissioner of The Higher Education Coordinating Board Raymund Paredes observed that "The Texas Affordable Baccalaureate is a cost-effective option to provide greater socioeconomic mobility for a greater number of Texans. The state must continue to innovate and provide cost-effective, high-quality education that meets the needs of an ever-changing global economy while providing greater opportunity and prosperity for Texans. The Coordinating Board welcomes these four new programs" ([THECB](#)).

The fundraising for the expansion of the affordable baccalaureate programs was supported by the College for All Texans Foundation. The grants were secured from AT&T Aspire, the Greater Texas Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Meadows Foundation. Grant recipients submitted applications and were selected through a competitive review process.

When Texas A&M-Commerce and South Texas College launched the first Affordable Baccalaureate Degree program, the new degree established was the Bachelor's in Organization Leadership. Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi plans to

employ its funds to craft an affordable baccalaureate program in mechanical engineering technology. The program will “incorporate competency-based curriculum to prepare workers with a skillset that is needed for employment in areas such as the refinery and process industries, among others, as projected by workforce needs. The program will also provide an opportunity for engineering technology associate degree holders to pursue opportunities and career paths as engineering technologists, helping to close the gap between the Coastal Bend Workforce Development Area and the rest of the country” ([THECB](#)).

Tarleton State University plans to employ its grant to the end of creating “alternative credit courses to reduce costs and time-to-degree for students” in its bachelor of science in applied science program. Through “combining a hybrid-delivery model with an alternative credit model for general education courses,” this program will look to “provide a path to an affordable baccalaureate degree for nontraditional students who have completed technical or occupational specializations from a community college or technical school, or during military training” ([THECB](#)).

South Texas College will join with Austin Community College (ACC) to craft “coursework, support services, and an articulation agreement for a 100 percent online, competency-based bachelor of applied technology (BAT) degree in computer information technology (CIT).” Under the new arrangement, “all of the existing competency-based courses in ACC’s associate of applied science (AAS) in computer programming will seamlessly transfer into South Texas College’s newly developed, competency-based BAT in CIT.” Through this, they hope to provide “students an affordable fast-track to some of the most in-demand information technology (IT) occupations in Texas and beyond” ([THECB](#)).

Texas A&M University-Commerce will employ its new grant to craft a Bachelor of Science degree in criminal justice, which will take the form of “a hybrid competency-based online program for certified first responders, military personnel, and adult learners with criminal justice employment experience.” This competency-based criminal justice degree is “designed to assist this nontraditional professional population by providing a more affordable option for degree completion.” Moreover, given the importance of

students’ post-graduation employment, the curriculum “will be designed so that competencies and learning outcomes are tied to specific lower division courses.” This lower-cost, competency-based program offers students the opportunity to “work at a pace that is most appropriate for their level of ability in a forum that allows for self-paced learning in an online learning platform” ([THECB](#)).

The Next Step Needed: Expand the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Degree Programs Statewide

To make college more affordable for more Texans, each public university should have at least one bachelor’s degree under the Affordable Baccalaureate Program.

As I detailed in *Consolidating the Revolution*, the Texas Legislature had opportunities during both the 84th and 85th sessions to expand the Affordable Baccalaureate Program to all Texas public universities, but declined to do so ([Lindsay](#)).

Instead, the Legislature passed SB [1782 in the 85th Legislature](#), which eliminates dropped course restrictions for *all* qualifying adult students seeking to return to college ([Perez](#); [SB 1782](#)).

On its face, it appears that SB 1782 solves the returning-adult dilemma through its blanket provision of waivers for all returning adult learners. But it remains to be seen whether this approach will help to boost affordable baccalaureate programs statewide. The Legislature’s prior, failed attempts to incentivize universities to adopt affordable baccalaureate programs sought to provide *targeted* waivers—supporting only those schools seeking to develop affordable baccalaureate programs.

SB 1782, in contrast, will clearly help some adults to return to college, which is all to the good. But whether it will incentivize growth of the much-needed affordable baccalaureate programs remains to be seen.

But some wonder whether financially straitened Texas students can wait on this result. Better, they argue, to press forward with legislation mandating that *every* Texas public four-year university offer at least one Affordable Baccalaureate Degree program. This writer agrees. ★

Appendix A:

Text of SB 1782 (enrolled), 85th Legislature ([Texas Legislature Online](#))

S.B. No. 1782

AN ACT

relating to the elimination of certain formula funding and dropped course restrictions for returning adult students at public institutions of higher education and to the tuition rate that may be charged to those students for certain excessive undergraduate hours.

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

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

(e-1) The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall adopt rules under which an institution of higher education shall permit a student to drop one additional course under circumstances described by Subsection (b) than the number of courses permitted to be dropped under Subsection (c) or under a policy adopted under Subsection (d) if the student:

(1) has reenrolled at the institution following a break in enrollment from the institution or another institution of higher education covering the 24-month period preceding the first class day of the initial semester or other academic term of the student's reenrollment; and

(2) successfully completed at least 50 semester credit hours of course work at an institution of higher education before that break in enrollment.

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 the number of semester credit hours reported to the Legislative Budget Board for formula funding under this section semester credit hours for any course taken up to three times by a student who:

(1) has reenrolled at an institution of higher education following a break in enrollment from the institution or another institution of higher education covering the 24-month period preceding the first class day of the initial semester or other academic term of the student's reenrollment; and

(2) successfully completed at least 50 semester credit hours of course work at an institution of higher education before that break in enrollment.

SECTION 3. Section 61.0595, Education Code, is amended by amending Subsection (d) to read as follows:

(d) The following are not counted for purposes of determining whether the student has previously earned the number of semester credit hours specified by Subsection (a):

(1) semester credit hours earned by the student before receiving a baccalaureate degree that has previously been awarded to the student;

(2) semester credit hours earned by the student by examination or under any other procedure by which credit is earned without registering for a course for which tuition is charged;

(3) credit for a remedial education course, a technical course, a workforce education course funded according to contact hours, or another course that does not count toward a degree program at the institution;

(4) semester credit hours earned by the student at a private institution or an out-of-state institution; ~~and~~

(5) semester credit hours earned by the student before graduating from high school and used to satisfy high school graduation requirements; and

(6) the first additional 15 semester credit hours earned toward a degree program by a student who:

(A) has reenrolled at an institution of higher education following a break in enrollment from the institution or another institution of higher education covering the 24-month period preceding the first class day of the initial semester or other academic term of the student's reenrollment; and

(B) successfully completed at least 50 semester credit hours of course work at an institution of higher education before that break in enrollment.

SECTION 4. (a) The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall adopt the rules required by Section 51.907(e-1), Education Code, as added by this Act, not later than June 1, 2018.

(b) The change in law made by this Act to Section 51.907, Education Code, applies beginning with the 2018 fall 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.

References

Lindsay, Thomas K. 2017. [*Consolidating the Revolution: 2017 Update on the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program*](#). Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Perez, Wally. 2017. "[Texas Senate approves bill benefiting returning students](#)." *The Ranger*, May 10.

[SB 1782](#). 2017. Enrolled. 85th Texas Legislature (R).

THECB (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board). 2017. "[Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board awards expansion grants for four new Texas Affordable Baccalaureate programs](#)." Press release, March 2.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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