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Texas House Bill 51: A Coercive Isomorphic Force on Texas's Regional Comprehensive Universities, a Matter of Access and Equity

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The state of Texas has a highly autonomous system of public higher education. It is one with a diverse degree of institutional types across the four-year and two-year sectors. Each sector, and institution have highly nuanced organizational structures and missions and serve a diverse state population with various cultural, financial, educational backgrounds, and needs (De Los Santos, 1997; Perna & Finney, 2014; THECB, 2017). The state of Texas has 80 public two-year institutions and 39 four-year institutions (THECB, 2017). This includes six university systems, 50 community college districts, several technical colleges, and multiple independent public colleges and universities across the pipeline (Perna & Finney, 2014). Most of the four-year university systems are comprised of independently accredited and independently governed college campuses. Several of the community colleges have multiple campuses, each accredited as independent institutions, while others are accredited as a single district. Together, these approximate 119 colleges and universities form the public higher education pipeline—loosely overseen by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) (Perna & Finney, 2014).

Though the THECB has limited authority to penalize or hold institutions accountable, it has significant power in shaping the educational agenda for the state and coordinating efforts towards student access and success based on extensive institutional data. Historically, these plans have been broadly used to ensure equal opportunity and meet labor demands for the Texas economy. Based on projections for workforce demands, the THECB set its most recent state goal to credential 60 percent of Texans between the ages of 25-34 by 2030 (THECB, 2017). This state goal, articulated in the current strategic plan and entitled *60x30*, came on the heels of the previous 15 year-long strategic plan, which allowed the coordinating board to set a statewide educational agenda focused on improving equity and access in higher education.

In a clear articulation of their vision for equity, THECB titled the previous longstanding plan, *Closing the Gaps*, when the board developed the plan in 2000 (THECB, 2000). *Closing the Gaps* was developed with this particular nomenclature and was rooted in a clear focus on equity because, despite diversity of institutional type, which theoretically should have expanded the opportunities for access and student success for students from various backgrounds, students in Texas from Black, Latinx, and/or poor financial backgrounds were least likely to enroll or graduate from any of Texas's public higher education institution at that time (THECB, 2000). Under *Closing the Gaps*, the THECB prioritized initiatives and encouraged institutional efforts that aimed to increase educational equity between the state's most educationally deprived groups (racially and financially marginalized students) and those who were benefiting the most from the current educational system (White affluent students) (THECB, 2000).

Another less prominent but important priority of the *Closing the Gaps* era was increasing institutional prestige and educational excellence (THECB, 2000). At the onset of this strategic plan, the state of Texas had two public flagship institutions (The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University), in addition to one leading private research institution (Rice University). However, in comparison to some of the state's national counterparts (e.g., California and New York, both of which enjoy exceptional levels of reputation based on their systems of higher education serving large and diverse citizen populations), Texas seemed to demonstrate room for improvement (Daniel, 2008). To make these improvements, thought leaders from multiple arenas (including the two public flagship institutions, the oil and gas industry, and those from the tech industry) identified a need to

increase the number of nationally recognized flagship institutions for two primary reasons: (1) improving academic excellence and (2) improving economic vitality (THECB, 2000). The way the state went about realizing this vision, to improve institutional prestige and stabilize the economy, was by adopting Texas House Bill 51 (TX HB 51) (THECB, 2009).

The Development of TX HB 51

TX HB 51 was developed in 2008 and enacted in 2009 as state legislation. The policy was widely supported and sought to improve academic excellence among the state's existing public institutions of higher education, as opposed to creating a new system or adding an additional research or flagship university to the current landscape (TEC 62.145; THECB, 2009). Though the landscape of Texas higher education was determined to be robust enough in size, thought leaders at the THECB (in conjunction with education policy makers on both sides of the aisle) connected improving the national prestige of the state's public universities with improving the local and state economy (TEC 62.145, THECB, 2017). Introducing TX HB 51 put forth a performance-based funding model that identified eight of the state's most promising comprehensive regional universities¹ as emerging tier-one universities and incentivized those eight institutions to demonstrate academic excellence by requiring each to increase activity in four out of six of the following performance areas, four of which are concerned with research:

1. institutional research productivity;
2. institutional research expenditures;
3. number of graduate programs offered;
4. number of conferred doctoral degrees;
5. number of nationally and globally recognized research driven faculty hires; and
6. the academic profile of the incoming freshmen cohort (TEC 62.145, THECB, 2009; THECB, 2017)

Concerns for Equity

The sixth benchmark—to improve the academic profile of the incoming freshmen cohorts at these institutions by increasing the average accepted ACT and SAT scores and increasing the number of students within the top 25% of their graduating high school class (THECB, 2009)—is unrelated to research endeavors. This benchmark requires that comprehensive research universities striving for tier-one recognition do so by complying with a policy that rewards them for committing to narrowing student enrollment through the use of traditional indicators of academic prowess (such as the ACT and SAT, which have been demonstrated to have differential predictive ability of college performance along the lines of racial and socioeconomic status according to decades of research) (Aguinis, Culpepper, & Pierce, 2016). This particular benchmark is the clearest indicator that TX HB 51 has had the capacity to contribute to the erosion of diversity and inclusion efforts in the enrollment process of comprehensive regional universities (Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017).

Moreover, despite the development of TX HB 51 under the THECB's *Closing the Gaps* agenda, the only benchmark related to equity is an optional benchmark, which incentivizes institutions to preserve student success programs, such as the McNair Scholars program, a program centered on student success for racially minoritized and financially underprivileged undergraduates interested in

¹The eight comprehensive regional universities include: Texas State University, Texas Tech University, University of Houston, University of Texas at Arlington, University of Texas at Dallas, University of Texas at El Paso, University of Texas at San Antonio, and University of North Texas—Denton.

careers in research (THECB, 2009; THECB, 2017). However, unrelated to access at the undergraduate level and articulated as an optional performance priority, the success benchmark is limited in its ability to promote the level of educational opportunity that the *Closing the Gaps* or *60x30* strategic plans posited as necessary to ensure the economic vitality of the state of Texas or to ensure economic access for historically marginalized students. This particular aspect of TX HB 51 makes it a policy that runs counter to the vision of equity articulated under *Closing the Gaps* and limits its capacity to aid the state in meeting the credentialing goals that the THECB set forth in the latest strategic plan, *60x30*. Despite these concerns, the eight universities identified as emerging research universities by TX HB 51 (once known for having broad access policies and more diverse student bodies than the more selective research powerhouses in the state) have now competed for state funding based on their ability to meet these accountability metrics for the past decade as they race to be named as Texas' next flagship institution (THECB, 2009; THECB, 2017; TEC 62.145 (c)).

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this backgrounder is to provide a theoretical framework to understand how each contributor within this critical forum adds to the narrative addressing the development, implementation, and impact of TX HB 51 as a performance-based funding model that has potentially challenged the capacity of the state to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students. Each author included in this journal issue offers a different theoretical lens as they examine the phenomenon of third party state-level governmental influence on public higher education, which I identify as coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This critical forum is not intended to offer a theoretical analysis of isomorphism itself. However, understanding coercive isomorphism as a phenomenon in the field of education is instrumental in understanding the broad implications of TX HB 51.

Coercive Isomorphism

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) defined three types of isomorphism: memetic, normative, and coercive. Broadly, the concept purports that organizations of all types, in any given field, will morph into homogenous entities as the leaders of those organizations attempt to embody the most legitimized practices and norms within their professional domain (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Practices and norms that thought-leaders, field professionals, and the general public consistently tout as most value in a particular field can be defined as legitimized and are highly likely to be mimicked or positioned as priorities as institutions undergo isomorphic transformation.

Of the three forms of isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this critical forum is most concerned with coercive isomorphism. Coercive isomorphism occurs when stakeholding agents exert influence over organizational leaders to transform the mission, norms, and priorities of their organization in pursuit of external legitimization, which ultimately leads to a homogenized field of institutions. Put plainly, and set squarely in the context of higher education, the theory is about stakeholders who have direct and/or indirect authority over colleges and universities through political and/or fiscal influence, and the power they have to influence organizational change that might lead an institution to match or surpass the level of prestige enjoyed by similar colleges or universities. Examples of such stakeholders might include a governor, a state educational coordinating board or other agencies concerned with education, large corporations with considerable legislative influence, alumni donors, and, especially, state policy makers. Through political and/or fiscal persuasion, influential stakeholders are able to encourage institutional growth that prioritizes the ideals that benefit themselves and/or others.

Review of the Literature

Few scholars have explicitly identified coercive isomorphism (the homogenizing influence of external university stakeholders) as a negative influence on educational equity and access. Scholars such as Cassim (2005) and Ramirez and Tiplic (2014) have studied this particular aspect of isomorphism in countries outside the United States. However, only a small number of scholars have addressed institutional isomorphism as it occurs among regional comprehensive universities in Texas specifically (e.g., Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017; Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, & Barlow, 2013; Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, & Wang, 2010; Doran, 2015). Few of them identify isomorphism as the phenomenon under investigation, and none of them explicitly refer to the phenomenon as coercive isomorphism.

Troubled Notions of Excellence Propagated by TX HB 51

Concepts concerning academic excellence heavily undergird the legitimated performance benchmarks outlined in TX HB 51. Though the thought leaders of the state responsible for developing the policy accepted those notions of excellence, some scholars have called those priorities into question. Altbach and Hazelkorn (2017) offered a conceptual analysis that explained why most colleges and universities undergoing institutional transformation towards research one status and national prestige based on national ranking systems will never meet these expectations of academic excellence. They concluded that institutions would trade aspects of their organizational culture critical for student development and access in the process of attempting to reach impossible productivity measures that do not necessarily benefit students. Therefore, Altbach and Hazelkorn (2017) recommended that these institutions collectively reject and resist the standards of academic excellence as they are conceptualized in TX HB 51. Similarly, Gonzales, Núñez, and Clemson (2014) conducted a qualitative study and found that chasing the external validation of ranking regimes was associated with the adoption of values that promote “individualism, standardization, commodification, and homogenization” (p. 13). They, too, recommended a resistance of these norms based on concern for the integrity of knowledge production in the academy (Gonzales et al., 2014).

Emerging Research Universities & Underprivileged Student Populations

Due to structured stratification in the U.S. higher education pipeline and historical *de jure* and *de facto* acts of educational exclusion, students of color and those from low income backgrounds have historically relied on comprehensive regional institutions as access points to attain a four-year degree (Harclerod & Ostar 1987; Henderson, 2007; Orphan, 2015; Pizarro Milian, 2016). The emerging research universities of Texas come from this particular institutional sector and in doing so may be emerging from the grasps of these student populations, as well. Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, and Wang (2010) found that two of the identified emerging research universities—the University of Houston and the University of Texas at San Antonio—consistently attracted students of color under the Top 10%² plan up until 2008. Their study called for more research on the enrollment management outcomes at these institutions following the enactment of TX HB 51 due to the policy’s per-

²Texas Top 10% plan is a statewide policy that guarantees automatic admission to any Texas public university for high school graduates ranked in the top 10 percent of their senior class. Like TX HB 51, the Top 10 percent mandate was developed and passed under the *Closing the Gaps* strategic agenda as an effort to increase equity in access for students from poor urban and rural school districts in Texas. However, today Top 10 percent no longer applies to the state’s highest ranking universities. For example, the flagship institution, The University of Texas at Austin, adheres to a more exclusionary Top 7 percent plan.

formance benchmarks related to selectivity in the admissions process. Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, and Barlow (2013) found differential graduation outcomes at these same institutions along the lines of race and gender, prior to TX HB 51. However, the authors noted that the study was limited in its methodology due to the timing of the study. Conducted in 2013, insufficient time had passed between the study and the enactment of the policy to allow for the interrogation of the impact of TX HB 51 without using statistical analysis that relied on inferential modeling to predict data that had not yet been captured, therefore the authors acknowledged the need for more research on the effects of TX HB 51 in years following their study (Crisp et al., 2013).

Considerations of Institutional Mission

Three of the emerging research universities impacted by TX HB 51 are Hispanic Serving Institutions and two of the institutions are located in cities with the state's highest concentrations of Black and Latinx citizens (Social Explorer, 2017). Doran (2015) offered a historical analysis of the changes brought to University of Texas at San Antonio by TX HB 51, paying particular attention to the institutional mission of the university as a federally identified Hispanic Serving Institution. Since 2010, Leslie Gonzales has explored the experiences of faculty members in the changing organizational cultures of emerging tier-one universities under the influence of TX HB 51 (e.g., Gonzales, 2013, 2015; Gonzales & Pacheco, 2012; Gonzales & Rincones, 2011).

Together, these scholars have all laid the foundation of support for the implications of TX HB 51; however, scholarship is still needed to assess the actual impact of TX HB 51 on the enrollment patterns of students at emerging research universities across the state. This deficit of scholarly exploration into the phenomenon of coercive isomorphism on enrollment management practices at regional state universities leaves a gap in the literature, particularly as it pertains to understanding its impact on the educational opportunities available to low-income and racially marginalized students.

Implications of Isomorphism in the Lone Star State

In 2009, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) designated eight public institutions across the state of Texas as emerging research institutions following the enactment of TX HB 51. As is explained by the theory of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), this bill has the potential to fiscally incentivize those designated universities towards significant organizational change. Proponents of TX HB 51 believe these changes have the potential to advance knowledge production and the reputation of the state (as it relates to academic excellence) on a national scale (TEC 62.145; THECB, 2017). However, the people of Texas (students and their families, specifically) and policy analyst should be critically concerned as they monitor the impact of TX HB 51 on comprehensive regional institutions, after taking into consideration the theory of coercive isomorphism.

The theory of coercive isomorphism explains that the missions of these designated institutions—once concerned with access, equity, and student-centered teaching—might shift away from these priorities as the state's comprehensive research universities morph into research-oriented organizations, which do not prioritize these same values (Crisp et al., 2010; Doran, 2015). Moreover, monetary resources that might have once been designated through state appropriations or allocated by university leadership towards functions that support equity and access have the potential to be reallocated in the wake of such legislation (Crisp et al. 2010; Doran, 2015). In this particular context, coercive isomorphism has considerable implications for low-income and underrepresented students of color as it pertains to their ability to attain upward economic and social mobility via higher educa-

tion (Altbach & Hazelkorn, 2017; Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, & Barlow, 2013; Crisp, Horn, Dizzino, & Wang, 2010; Doran, 2015). I address this concern in greater detail in a separate piece, which has been included in this critical forum. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the critical forum, which I curated to better understanding the nuances in the development, implementation, and potential consequences of TX HB 51.

Issue Overview

As of January 2019, it will have been a complete decade since the enactment of TX HB 51. By 2016, five of the designated emerging research universities had already risen to the Carnegie classification of tier-one “highest research activity” status. However, the state of Texas has yet to name any one of them as an official flagship institution. Those five institutions included Texas Tech University, The University of Texas at Arlington, The University of Texas at Dallas, University of Houston, and University of North Texas (THECB, 2017; THECB, 2018; Watkins, 2016). Each of the contributing authors to this critical forum offer insight into why the state of Texas was motivated to generate more flagship institutions, what that competition has looked like over the last decade, and what the implications of TX HB 51 are for vulnerable student populations within the context of the state’s strategic plan for higher education.

The first article in this issue, “Attack and Parry: An Examination of Gubernatorial Rhetoric and Agenda Setting for Higher Education in Texas, 2000-2015,” offered the readers a rigorous and empirical analysis into how the political agenda of former Texas governor, Rick Perry, as an indirect university influencer led an educational accountability campaign that created fertile ground for the enactment and implementation of TX HB 51. Using Stata—a quantitative analytic software—to conduct a discourse analysis on 28 of the governors’ addresses Rick Perry made from 2000 to 2015, authors Drake and Marsicano found that governor Perry, acting as a political entrepreneur, primed constituents and framed his educational political agenda around the ideals of accountability, efficiency, and competitiveness during the years that Texas House Bill 51 (TX HB 51) was adopted and enacted by the Texas Legislature. In their piece, the authors made direct connections between Perry’s vision for micro and macro-economic growth through improved access to higher education and increased accountability measures across the P-20 pipeline.

The second article, “Theoretical Starting Points: The Field of Emerging Research Universities,” considered the phenomenon of emerging tier-one research institutions through the conceptual framework of strategic action fields. Offering a conceptual foundation, Ryan’s piece demonstrates the way Texas’s regional institutions were incentivized by the state to compete for resources in order to improve not only the reputations of the institutions but the overall reputation of Texas as it sought to compete with the state of California.

The third article, “Texas House Bill 51: An Incognito Higher Education Performance Funding Policy,” outlines the implications of the performance metrics mentioned in this background in greater detail with the purpose of explicating the unintended consequences of performance-based funding models that ignore predictable consequences to vulnerable student populations. Authors Bradley and Doran offered a critical policy analysis that identified TX HB 51 as a performance-based funding model and considered the varied power dynamics between policy influencing stakeholders and those with little to no influence. Through their analysis, Bradley and Doran drew parallels between the documented unintended consequences of national performance-based funding models and the predicted unintended consequences of TX HB 51, specifically considering the effects of TX HB 51 on racially marginalized and financially vulnerable student populations.

Conclusion

This backgrounder detailed the scope of the critical forum that follows concerning Texas House Bill 51 (TX HB 51) of the 81st Legislature, also referred to as the emerging research university policy. Here, I have offered a bit of background on the policy concerning the aims of TX HB 51 and why the policy was developed. However, and perhaps more importantly, I have offered a framework for considering TX HB 51 as a performance-based funding model that promotes coercive isomorphic change to the foundational mission of comprehensive regional universities.

In this work, and through the articles curated for the forum that follows, I have hoped to make clear that the implications of a performance-based funding policy, such as TX HB 51, may pose a threat to equity and access in higher education for vulnerable student populations due to its level of influence. Any external force to a college or university that incites this level of organizational change should be critically analyzed and empirically investigated to ensure that access and equity for students, particularly those from historically marginalized or financially disenfranchised populations, is not lost in the pursuit of evolution. This issue seeks to synthesize and expand the current narrative surrounding the impact of TX HB 51, by providing a forum to interrogate the development, implementation, and impact of the legislation on these students as they seek better life opportunities through higher education in Texas.

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