

**Highlighting New
Poverty Research****by Mark C. Long,
Victor Saenz, and
Marta Tienda**

“Policy Transparency and College Enrollment: Did the Texas Top Ten Percent Law Broaden Access to the Public Flagships?” published in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political Science and Social Science*, Vol. 627, January 2010

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by Center faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wcpc.washington.edu

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Policy Transparency and College Enrollment:

Did the Texas Top Ten Percent Law Broaden Access to the Public Flagships?

Background: Shifts in the American labor market have made higher education increasingly important to an individual's economic security. Over the past several decades, many universities have used race-based affirmative action plans to broaden access to higher education. In the late 1990s, race-based affirmative action plans came under judicial and legal attack at the state and national levels. In response to a judicial ban on race-based affirmative action, the Texas legislature implemented a plan to promote access to higher education regardless of socioeconomic or ethno-racial background or geographic location. Beginning in 1998, the state's Top Ten Percent Law guaranteed admission to college to all Texas students graduating in the top ten percent of their high school classes. Although the intent of the law was to increase socioeconomic and geographic diversity, the impact of the law on these outcomes has been unclear.

Methods: WCPC Faculty Affiliate Mark Long and his collaborators Victor Saenz and Marta Tienda combined data from the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project, the University of Texas Office of Admissions Research, and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core Data to see how access to Texas' two public flagship universities, the University of Texas at Austin (UT) and Texas A&M University (TAMU), changed following the introduction of the Top Ten Percent Plan. Using a dataset of 1,846 Texas high schools, the researchers first examined sending patterns to see whether the law affected the number or geographic distribution of high schools sending students to the two universities. Next, they examined whether there had been changes in the geographic and socioeconomic profiles of the schools from which students were applying and enrolling in these universities. Finally, they used hazard models to examine how schools' sending patterns changed over time to determine whether or not observed shifts in sending patterns are likely to persist.

Findings: The researchers found evidence that a larger share of schools sent students to UT following the adoption of the top ten percent plan, but the share of schools sending students to TAMU did not increase. The authors suggest that this may be a result of several factors, including the fact that TAMU already attracted students from a larger share of schools than UT prior to the law, and TAMU's rural location, which may make it less attractive to students from more urban areas. With respect to the backgrounds of students attending UT after the law was implemented, UT saw increased representation of students from high poverty schools, from schools with larger shares of minority students, and from schools in rural areas, small and mid-sized cities, and from geographic regions that were traditionally underrepresented. In addition, the hazard analyses showed that schools that began sending students were likely to continue to send students in subsequent years, suggesting that high schools may develop institutional links with universities. These links appear to persist over time and appear to have intensified after the passage of the Top Ten Percent Law. Over all, the researchers suggest that the law has met its goal of increasing socioeconomic and geographic access to higher education in Texas. They suggest that transparency may be an important factor in the law's success: the ten percent plan makes it easy for individuals to understand whether or not they will be able to benefit. The researchers suggest that transparency may be an equally important feature in other programs that seek to broaden access to social services or to reach diverse populations.

Poverty Research Flash

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Poverty Research Flash 2010-02

Policy Transparency and College Enrollment:

Did the Texas Top Ten Percent Law Broaden Access to the Public Flagships?

New research from Mark C. Long, Victor Saenz, and Marta Tienda

Key Findings

- Under Texas's Top Ten Percent Plan, which guarantees the top ten percent of each graduating high school class admission to one of the state's universities, the share of schools sending applicants and enrollees to the University of Texas (UT) increased, while the share of schools sending students to Texas A&M University remained stable or declined.
- Following the implementation of the law, UT saw increased representation of students from high poverty schools, from schools with larger shares of minority students, and from schools in rural areas, small and mid-sized cities, and from geographic regions that were traditionally underrepresented.
- Schools that sent students to UT in one year were likely to send students the next year, suggesting schools may develop institutional links that may be one factor underlying the stability of sending patterns over time.