

ACHIEVE SCHOLARSHIP: A POLICY PROCESS CASE STUDY

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## **Dedication**

With a heart full of gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation to my mom and dad, Rudy and Juanita Rocha. They sowed the seeds of faith, perseverance, and strong will. My greatest supporters and staunchest defenders. Although my dad is not here, physically, his legacy lives on through me. My mom is the personification of strength, endurance, and grit and pushed back when life did not play fair. That is what drives me. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

PREVIEW

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ACHIEVE SCHOLARSHIP: A POLICY PROCESS CASE STUDY

by

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DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

This study applies the policy process framework and bounded rationality theory to look at a specific program, about specific stakeholders, within a policy process, and during a specific timeframe. The purpose of this study was to document the process of establishing and describing how the program's stakeholders navigate, collaboratively, through the policy process of deciding whether to adopt a version of Texas Promise in El Paso. This was not a study on the entire six phases of the policy process. The focus of the research was to understand how the stakeholders maneuver through the initial three phases of the policy process, to include: initiation; estimation; and the selection phase. A qualitative policy process analysis and case study approach was used with four stakeholders. The data collected stemmed from interviews, electronic communication, and internship notes. Findings from this study indicate that the policy process framework and bounded rationality theory works well when analyzing how stakeholders navigate the process of decision-making towards policy implementation. This study is a community policy process collaboration wherein the stakeholders were willing to attempt to find a solution to local problems that students face in El Paso, TX.

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PREVIEW

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Texas Promise: How it Started**

In early 2019, an independent school district superintendent, Dr. Miguel Gomez, within the El Paso County, attended a conference in San Antonio, Texas, where he learned about a program called Dallas Promise. Dallas Promise is a collaboration between school districts, community colleges, universities, the area workforce, and community advocates to close the equity gap and bring forth change within all the involved institutions in Dallas, Texas. The Promise program is a last dollar scholarship, which means the Promise scholarship pays what remains after the Pell Grant and other scholarships are exhausted (Dallas County Promise, 2019). Additionally, students are matched with degree plans that lead to career pathways in high-demand industries in the Dallas area. The superintendent took interest and decided he wanted to explore the possibilities of creating a similar Promise program in his school district in El Paso, Texas.

In February 2019, with assistance from my professors, I was able to connect with Dr. Gomez to begin my superintendent internship. After our first telephone call, Dr. Gomez charged me with researching Dallas Promise and identifying what is needed to implement the Promise program to El Paso. And so, I began investigating the Texas Promise policy process.

My search began with going to the Dallas Promise website. I found that Dallas Promise had been so successful, other cities in Texas were also interested in having the Promise program. To provide support to other cities, Dallas Promise created a branch called Texas Promise to act as a facilitator and a support system for those cities outside of Dallas. Currently, there are several cities in Texas in various stages of implementing the Promise program.

Texas Promise has three main goals: (1) to help high schools ensure all students graduate high school and are college and career ready; (2) to ensure that 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a college degree by 2030; (3) and to help the workforce solve the talent gap (Dallas County Promise, 2019). Its foundational purpose is to have a thriving community and eradicate poverty (Dallas County Promise, 2019). These goals are defined and explained in the literature review.

This study was about the policy process of whether a version of Texas Promise would be considered for adoption in El Paso. For this research, the identified stakeholders, using pseudonyms, in El Paso that have shown interest in Texas Promise are: West County ISD, the Community Council, and the University. Even as some information may be public record, as the researcher, I made every effort to conserve the stakeholders' privacy. I attempted to identify the contacts at El Paso Community College (EPCC) to gauge interest levels regarding this initiative, but a stakeholder was not identified in time for this study.

As the stakeholders progressed in the policy process, so did the name of the Promise scholarship in El Paso. What began as Texas Promise has now evolved to the Achieve Scholarship.

### **El Paso Demographics**

This study took place in El Paso, Texas. Having background knowledge and data provided a greater understanding as to why the stakeholders have certain perceptions and ideologies.

El Paso is unique among other major cities in Texas. El Paso is in the westernmost point in Texas and is the only major city in the Mountain Time Zone. The closest major city to El Paso in Texas is San Antonio, which is 551 miles away. Dallas, where Texas Promise originated, is



635 miles away (Google, 2020). The population of El Paso County is 839,238 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The population is made up of 82.9 percent Hispanic, 11.6 percent White, and four percent African American. Other races are less than four percent, combined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The median income is \$46,871 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Table 1 depicts the poverty levels and educational attainment percentages for El Paso County and other counties in Texas that are also in various phases of implementing Texas Promise.

**Table 1**

*County Demographics: Poverty Levels and Educational Attainment*

		El Paso County	Bexar County	Travis County
	Poverty Level	20.5 %	17.2%	12.0%
	High School (HS) Graduation Rate	77.5 %	83.8%	89.1%
Population 18-24	HS Diploma or Equivalency	31.8%	38.9%	24.6%
	Some College or Associate Degree	52.3%	40.1%	43.1%
	Bachelor's Degree	5.9%	8.1%	20.9%
Population 25 and Over	HS Diploma or Equivalency	23.0%	25.9%	16.1%
	Some College	23.4%	22.5%	16.2%
	Associate Degree	8.0%	8.2%	5.1%
	Bachelor's Degree	22.8%	27.6%	48.6%

*Note.* U.S. Census Bureau, 2019

### **Statement of the Problem**

El Paso has a poverty rate of 20.5 percent while Texas has a poverty rate of 14.9 percent and the United States' poverty rate is 11.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Early childhood (EC) through post-secondary education, is fundamental in reducing the poverty rate (Anyon, 2014). However, there is a disconnect between EC-12 education, post-secondary education, and

the El Paso workforce (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2016). Some collaboration is occurring; however, it is needed with greater intent (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2016). Each entity is trying to overcome equity gaps that cannot be solved independently of each other.

The following are problems in El Paso that are caused by poverty and need to be addressed by more than one entity. El Paso County high school student graduation rates are low; not over 78 percent since 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Moreover, many of the 77.5 percent of seniors who do graduate from high school are not college ready (Luna-Torres et al., 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Another challenge students face is not having the financial resources to fill the gap after what is covered by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) (Luna-Torres et al, 2018). Lastly, students without a degree struggle to find good paying jobs in their communities resulting in businesses have a hard time finding skilled workers (Boatman & Long, 2018; Carnevale et al., 2013).

Texas Promise is the believed catalyst that can address the above problems in El Paso. Texas Promise had not been introduced in El Paso therefore, the systems to implement this program had not been established.

Communities, for the most part, are not privy to the details of establishing an entity, such as Texas Promise. Citizens may be aware of the problem and may desire a solution, but they are not aware of the negotiations and decisions among the stakeholders that take place behind closed doors even before a consensus is reached to implement a program like Texas Promise. This study provided an insider view of establishing a Promise program within the El Paso region.

## **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to document the process of establishing and describing how the program's stakeholders navigate, collaboratively, through the policy process of deciding whether or not to adopt Texas Promise in El Paso. This included identifying and defining the problems; determining the goals, objectives, and strategic positioning; conducting a cost and benefit analysis; and ascertaining the perspectives, values, roles, and negotiation strategies the stakeholders used to make decisions regarding Texas Promise.

This was not a study on the entire six phases of the policy process (Brewer & deLeon, 1983). The focus of the research was to understand how the stakeholders maneuvered through the initial three phases of the policy process, including: initiation; estimation; and selection. By studying the first three phases, stakeholders determined if they should consider implementing Texas Promise in El Paso for the purpose of addressing and ultimately rectifying the stated problems. The last three phases of implementation, evaluation, and termination begin after the selection phase and are not be part of this study.

## **Theoretical Framework**

What is a theoretical framework? Maxwell (2012) defines a theoretical framework as a “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research- is a key part of your design” (p. 39). Green (2014) said that a theoretical framework is used to, “give direction to a study” and each framework will utilize theory or theories differently (p. 35). Grant and Osanloo (2014) wrote that a theoretical framework, “is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed for a research...it serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significances, and the research question” (p. 12). Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) stated that a “theoretical framework

involves the presentation of a specific theory, such as systems theory or self-efficacy and empirical and conceptual work about that theory” (p. 6).

Grant and Osanloo (2014) made a key point; they compared a theoretical framework to a blueprint that an architect develops. And, as the theoretical framework guides the researcher, it also provides the specific lens from which the research will be viewed (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

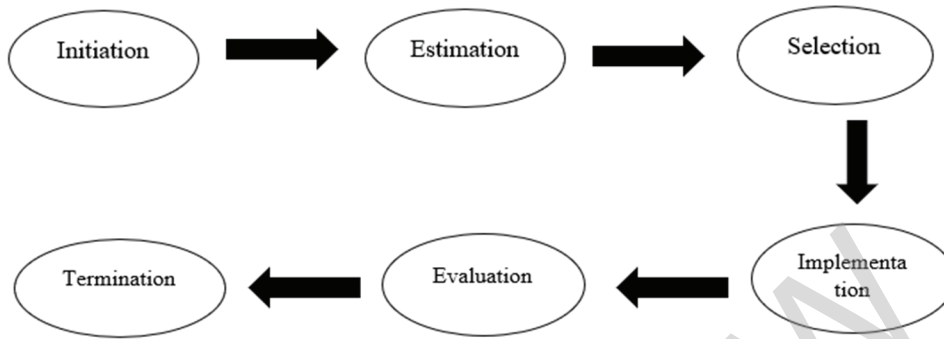
This research utilized the policy process framework and bounded rationality theory to look at a specific program, about specific stakeholders, within a policy process, and during a specific timeframe.

### **Policy Process Framework**

The policy process framework provides direction by grouping the process into a “sequence of functional phases” (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; Olsen, 2003, p.356). The policy process serves as a “basic template that allows to systematize and compare the diverse debates, approaches, and models in the field and to assess the individual contribution of the respective approaches to the discipline” (Jann & Wegrich, 2007, p.43). This framework follows the process of the policy phases over time and “stresses the interconnections and interdependencies between different groups” (Olsen, 2003, p. 357; Weible, Heikkila, deLeon, & Sabatier, 2012).

There are phase variations of the policy process, Brewer and deLeon (1983) formulated a six-phase policy process that is widely used. The six steps consist of initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, and termination (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Weible et al., 2012). The sequence is not rigid, but fluid, a useful tool to monitor forward progress (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; Olsen, 2003). At times it is necessary to stop and re-evaluate within the policy process because as time passes the problem could have changed, evolved, or new information or data could have been retrieved (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; Olsen,

2003). It is prudent to ask questions during each stage of the policy process to “understand the value demands, expectations, and identifications of each” stakeholder (Brewer & deLeon, 1983, p. 16). Figure 1 depicts the phases of the policy process.



*Note.* The six phases of the policy process by Brewer & deLeon (1983).

**Figure 1**  
*Policy Process Phases*

The process of the policy phases is the “study of change and development of policy and the related actors, events, and contexts” (Weible et al., 2012, p. 3). As it is related to human fallibility in decision making, the policy process does not always follow the six-phase sequence, as stated above. Only in an ideal world, with completely rational people, would the sequence be followed from Phase One to Phase Six (Jann & Wegrich, 2007). Moreover, in policy research it is rarely the case where the “whole policy cycle framework” is researched given the time constraints and complexity involved in analyzing the phases. (Jann & Wegrich, 2007, p. 45). This research focused on the initiation, estimation, and selection phases.

### **Bounded Rationality Theory**

According to Simon (1990) bounded rationality is “used to designate rational choice that takes into account the cognitive limitations of the decision-maker” (p. 15). Weible et al. (2012) stated, as it concerns the policy process “individuals are goal-oriented but imperfect in their

cognitive abilities to understand the contextual environment that they must navigate for goal achievement” (p. 5). Decision makers have cognitive constraints, in the form of lacking information, resources, time, or mental processes (Simon, 1990). Given the human cognitive imperfections in decision making, bounded rationality will be utilized in this study. It is impossible to understand and have all the information needed for all decisions made within the phases of the policy process (Brewer & deLeon, 1983; Jann & Wegrich, 2007).

The policy process framework and bounded rationality were used to provide direction to the study. The phases of the policy process provided the template to organize the sequence of actions (Brewer & deLeon, 1983). Bounded rationality theory helped explain how the decisions were made as the stakeholders considered implementing Texas Promise in El Paso (Simon, 1990). This theory was selected for this study as it is widely used in the field of policy process research for realistic perspective (deLeon & Weible, 2010; Jann & Wegrich, 2007; Weible et al., 2012).

### **Research Question**

The overall research question guiding this study was as follows:

How did the stakeholders navigate through the first three phases (initiation, estimation, and selection) of the policy process, as they work to decide whether or not to adopt the Texas Promise Program in El Paso?

### **Secondary Questions**

The secondary questions guiding this study are:

1. In the initiation phase, how did the stakeholders define and prioritize the problems? How did these priorities align with each other?

2. In the estimation phase, what did the stakeholders perceive as the risks, costs, and benefits of adopting Texas Promise in El Paso?
3. In the selection phase, what was each stakeholder willing to compromise, negotiate, and accommodate before they decided to adopt the Texas Promise?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study centered on the policy process of introducing a new scholarship program, Texas Promise, to El Paso and explores the relevance it has for EC-12 education, higher-education institutions, and the local workforce. The significance of this study was to unveil the intricacies of the policy process as stakeholders navigate through the first three phases of the policy process cycle: initiation, estimation and selection. Each stakeholders' perspectives and values will be identified to determine their "why?" in considering adopting Texas Promise in El Paso.

### **60x30TX**

In 2015, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) launched 60x30TX. The main goal of 60x30TX is to have 60 percent of Texans, ages 25-34, obtain a post-secondary degree or certificate by 2030 (60x30TX.com, 2020). To remain competitive and relevant with other cities in Texas and the country in education and the workforce, El Paso needs to achieve these goals. To accomplish this, El Paso students need to be college and/or career ready. El Paso students need guidance and mentoring for their college and career path to stay in El Paso. Some El Paso students need financial support, aside from FAFSA/TASFA, to attend a two- or four-year college. Also, El Paso students need post-secondary education to have the opportunity to make living wages (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2016;

Carnevale, 2013). Table 2 shows the educational attainment and income from El Paso County, Bexar County, and Travis County; two other counties considering implementing Texas Promise.

**Table 2**  
*Educational Attainment and Income*

	High School Diploma/GED	Some College/ Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree
El Paso	\$23,602	\$28,036	\$46,724
Bexar	\$28,457	\$34,189	\$50,469
Travis	\$30,978	\$39,479	\$58,055

*Note.* U.S. Census Bureau, 2019

### **College, Career, Military Ready**

The Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Student Achievement accountability domain, how EC-12 schools are rated, is directly correlated to the 60x30TX. Within the Student Achievement domain, high schools are rated and granted points towards their A-F rating if a student is College, Career, Military Ready (CCMR). CCMR is 40 percent of the Student Achievement domain (TEA, 2019). Further details will be provided in the literature review.

With this research, the examination of the policy process regarding Texas Promise in El Paso identified the macro and micro level challenges and opportunities to continue to add to this study.

### **Personal Disclosure**

To maintain the ethical integrity of the research it was incumbent of me to disclose my involvement as it pertained to bringing Texas Promise to El Paso. Creswell (2009) explained that given the depth of the researcher's involvement with the participants in a qualitative research, it is necessary for the researcher to disclose any biases and background regarding the researcher