

# A College Degree in Three Years? New Program Increases Affordability

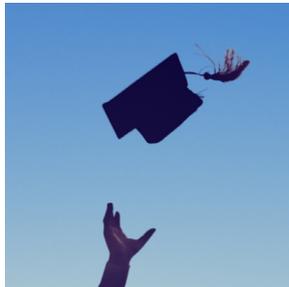


**by Thomas Lindsay, Ph.D.**

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Center for Innovation in Education  
Texas Public Policy Foundation



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## Executive Summary

The system and naming of college degrees appears to have come into being during the 13th century: The scholar attended lectures and argued on set questions in the schools, the bachelor was a student-teacher who was seeking to obtain a license to teach in his own right. The mastership was the highest grade in any faculty. Over time, the academic qualifications evolved and expanded. Moreover, in the U.K., the undergraduate degree requires, not the four years common in the United States, but three years. This is the case in [England, Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#). Bachelor's degrees in the U.K. tend to focus on the student's chosen major from the beginning of the degree program and thus are more professionally oriented than the U.S. education system, which tends to begin with a broad base of instruction.

The British three-year degree has begun to attract attention on the other side of the Atlantic. In 2014, Purdue University, under its new president Mitch Daniels, began to offer three-year bachelor's degrees in its Brian Lamb School of Communication (Lamb's School). The Lamb School's three-year degree is available to students in "general communication; public relations and strategic communication; mass communication; corporate communication; and human relations." The program requires students to take a heavier course load during four semesters, and to take courses during two summers. In their first year under the program, students enroll in 18 credit hours during the spring semester. They also take 18 hours of courses during both semesters of their second year, and during the fall semester of their third year. They are required to take nine credit hours during the first and second summers. They then graduate in May of their third year.

The cost savings for the three-year degree are substantial. According to Marifran Mattson, professor and head of Lamb's School, "the savings is \$9,290, roughly the cost of one year of in-state tuition." "It does place more responsibility on the student to take that number of credits," Mattson said. "But I don't think it's set so high that it's not achievable." She added that three-year degree students "will have time to take internships or study abroad."

Daniels grants that the "the three-year degree will not work in every academic area. ... For example, pharmacy and engineering coop programs will remain five year programs."

A number of those who argue on behalf of three-year college degrees share a desire to have the federal government tie the proliferation of such degrees to Title IV funding for each school. Against this call for still-greater involvement in higher education—including price controls—stands the U.S. Constitution as founded, under which authority over education at all levels is solely the concern of each individual state, through its "police powers." On this basis, the means to promote three-year college degrees that are most consistent with constitutional federalism would be to allow each state to incentivize such programs—or not.

However, state-level legislation is not immune to the unintended consequences that follow federal legislation. Far from it, in fact. The most direct route to expanding three-year college degree offerings in Texas would be for the boards of regents (or trustees) at Texas public universities to look to Purdue University's pioneering model and adapt it to their campus's character. To this end, the board of regents should appoint members of its academic affairs committee to study and report on Purdue University's efforts. The board should then approve a three-year degree program fashioned in accord with its distinctive identity.

## Key Points

- In the U.K., the undergraduate degree requires not the four years common in the United States, but three years. This is the case in [England, Wales](#), and [Northern Ireland](#).
- In 2017, Purdue launched the next phase of its three-year degree initiative, which offers three-year degrees in the arts and sciences, called "[Degree in 3: 4-Year Value for 3-Year Cost](#)."
- To accommodate three-year degree enrollees, Purdue offers them "[micro-internships](#)" as well as on-campus internships. These students may live on or off campus during the three years spent completing their degree.
- If students come to Purdue with Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits, these apply to their three-year degree programs in the same manner as the traditional four-year degree.
- Boards of regents (or trustees) at Texas public universities should look to Purdue University's pioneering three-year degree model and adapt it to their campus's character.

## Introduction: Is the Four-Year Bachelor's Degree Merely a "Cultural Convention"?

According to *The History of Academical Dress in Europe Until the End of the Eighteenth Century* by W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley, the system and naming of college degrees appears to have come into being during the 13th century: "The three grades common to all were those of Scholar, Bachelor, and Masters (sometimes called Doctor or Professor). The scholar attended lectures and argued on set questions in the schools, the bachelor was a student-teacher who was seeking to obtain a license to teach in his own right. The mastership was the highest grade in any faculty" ([AcademicApparel.com](http://AcademicApparel.com)).

Over time, the academic qualifications evolved and expanded. Moreover, in the U.K., the undergraduate degree requires, not the four years common in the United States, but three years. This is the case in [England](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#). Scotland has a system closer to that in the United States. Much of American university education is "modeled after the Scottish system; however, a Scottish undergraduate degree still tends to be more focused than a typical US degree. An undergraduate degree in Scotland takes four years to complete" ([Across the Pond](#)).

Bachelor's degrees in the U.K. "tend to focus on the student's chosen major from the beginning of the degree program and thus are more professionally oriented than the US education system, which tends to begin with a broad base of instruction." This comparatively accelerated bachelor's degree is especially suited to "students who have a clear idea of what they want to study," allowing students to specialize in their "subject area from the start." Due to this early focus, "British degree programs are shorter – Bachelor's degrees are typically 3 years in length, with the exception of Scotland" ([Across the Pond](#)).

Recently, a number of universities in the U.K. have begun to offer two-year degrees. Called "fast track degrees," these two-year baccalaureates promise "the same level of academic content as traditional 3-year degree programmes. Completing a degree in 2 years means lower tuition fees and living costs, plus the opportunity to begin your career a year sooner" ([SI-UK](#)).

## Recent Changes in the Academic Calendar

### "Why We Need the 3-year College Degree"

The British three-year degree has begun to attract attention on the other side of the Atlantic. In 2015, CNN ran an editorial titled "[Why we need the 3-year college degree](#)." The piece was written by Will Marshall, president of the [Progressive Policy Institute](#) (PPI), and Paul Weinstein Jr., director of the public management program at Johns Hopkins University and a [PPI senior fellow](#).

Marshall and Weinstein begin by praising then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's "New College Compact," which sought to make college more affordable. However, they note that her plan "is not ... cheap — [the price tag is \\$350 billion](#). And it does not do enough to rein in college tuition costs, much less roll them back."

In light of this price tag, Marshall and Weinstein offer what they term a "friendly amendment" to candidate Clinton's proposal: the three-year college degree. Noting that three-year baccalaureate degrees are the "norm in many European countries," as well as at a "few [enterprising universities](#) here" in the U.S., they propose "requiring any U.S. college or university with students who receive any type of federal student aid to offer the option of earning a bachelor's degree in three years."

To this end, they recommend that schools and their accreditors "rethink their curriculum," for example, "reducing the number of electives, cutting back on core requirements or shifting to shorter semesters" are possible means available to schools for establishing three-year bachelor's degree programs.

Completing college in three years, instead of four, [they argue](#), would reduce "the cost of tuition and fees by 25%." This would produce an average total savings of \$8,893 for in-state students enrolling in four-year public colleges and universities. It would cut total college costs at private institutions by \$30,094.

Cutting tuition by 25 percent would reduce the amount students are required to borrow. Just under [70 percent](#) of bachelor's degree holders have taken out student loans, "with an average debt burden of \$29,400" ([Institute for College Access & Success](#)).

Rather than relying heavily on expanding public subsidies to help students graduate with lower or no student loan debt, this approach puts pressure on colleges to get escalating tuition costs under control.

Marshall and Weinstein take issue with those who would object that a three-year bachelor's degree "will make U.S. college graduates less competitive in the global marketplace." Three years to a degree is "good enough for Oxford and Cambridge, and the rest of Europe is following suit." They point to the fact that, today, "46 European governments have signed onto the Bologna Process, which is making the three-year college degree the norm across the EU."

Marshall and Weinstein also deny that three-year degrees would force schools with small endowments, to "jack up tuition or cut their budgets dramatically." Under their proposal, schools would be prohibited from "increasing tuition to offset the loss of a year's revenues." In addition, "campus capacity would be greater with the removal of the fourth year;" thus, "colleges could increase the number of students in each incoming class." They also note that, under their proposal, "students would be charged by the year, not the credit hour."

Rather than relying heavily on "expanding public subsidies" in an effort to help students graduate with lower or even no student loan debt, their approach hopes to put "more pressure on colleges to get their escalating tuition costs under control" ([Marshall and Weinstein](#)).

*Bloomberg's editors lament the fact that college tuition and fees continue to soar while the earnings of recent graduates remain flat.*

### "Four Years on Campus Might Be One Too Many"

In November 2017, *Bloomberg's* editors echoed the case for three-year college degrees. In "Four Years on Campus Might Be One Too Many," they lament the fact that "college tuition and fees continue to [soar](#) while the earnings of recent graduates remain [flat](#)." The "straightforward" solution they envision to cut college costs is to "reduce the amount of time it takes to earn one" ([Editorial Board](#)).

They explain that the U.S.'s four-year bachelor's degree is based on a "cultural convention" rather than "pedagogical wisdom." In most European [countries](#), as well as India, Singapore, and Australia, the majority of undergraduate programs take three years to complete."

On the one hand, the editors praise Purdue's recent foray into three-year degree programs. On the other hand, they opine that "it's not likely that other institutions will soon follow Purdue's example." Why? "With [applications](#) to the country's top four-year schools far surpassing the number of available spots, colleges have little incentive to provide a discounted option."

However, argue the editors, "getting a college education is more than just a commercial transaction." They find a "public interest" in making higher education more affordable and accessible. This public interest demands a "role for public officials," albeit one which "may be limited." They recommend "tying eligibility for state and federal student aid to a school's offering of a three-year option" as a possible means by which government might incentivize schools to make degrees more affordable.

### From the U.K. to the U.S.: Pioneering the "Degree in 3"

A number of U.S. colleges and universities have not waited for the government programs demanded above. In 2011, "schools including [Grace College and Seminary](#), [Baldwin-Wallace College](#), [Lesley University](#), and [St. John's University](#) introduced three-year degree programs, according to a [running list](#) created by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU)" ([Hopkins](#)).

In 2014, Purdue University, under its new president Mitch Daniels, began to offer three-year bachelor's degrees in its Brian Lamb School of Communication. "This is another way to make college more affordable. ... Purdue needs to think innovatively to help young people get the full value out of their education experience," commented Daniels at the time. The

Lamb's School's three-year degree is available to students in "general communication; public relations and strategic communication; mass communication; corporate communication; and human relations" ([Vizza](#)).

The program "requires students to take a heavier course load during four semesters, and to take courses during two summers." In their first year under the program, students enroll in 18 credit hours during the spring semester. They also take 18 hours of courses during both semesters of their second year, and during the fall semester of their third year. They are required to take nine credit hours during the first and second summers. They then graduate in May of their third year ([Vizza](#)).

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Daniels granted that the “the three-year degree will not work in every academic area. ... For example, pharmacy and engineering co-op programs will remain five year programs.”

## Phase Two: Purdue Introduces Three-Year Degree Programs in the Liberal Arts

In the fall of 2017, Purdue University launched the next phase of its three-year degree initiative, which offers three-year degrees in its division of arts and sciences ([Jaschik](#)). The new program is titled “[Degree in 3: 4-Year Value for 3-Year Cost](#).” The accelerated programs will be lodged in the College of Liberal Arts and offer a number of liberal arts degrees, among them anthropology, communication, English, history, interdisciplinary studies, languages and culture, philosophy, political science, sociology, and the visual and performing arts (see Appendix: “Purdue’s Three-Year Degree”).

Under the new program, students must declare their intent to enroll in a *Degree in 3* major by the end of their first year. This is required in order to ensure that these students will be able to enroll in all the courses needed to graduate in three years. This decision is not binding. Students may opt out at any time and pursue the traditional four-year degree, instead.

To accommodate the three-year degree enrollees, Purdue offers them “[micro-internships](#)” in partnership with Parker Dewey as well as on-campus internships. These students are free to live on or off campus during the three years spent completing their degree. If they come to Purdue with Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate credits, these apply to their three-year degree programs in the same manner as the traditional four-year degree.

## Concerns Regarding the Three-Year Degree Movement

### Expansion in the Face of a “Dearth of Data”

As described above, Purdue’s earlier experience implementing its three-year college degree in communications led it to expand the program into the liberal arts. But some critics argue that “there’s little data to suggest the idea warrants an expansion” ([Jastrzebski](#)).

A 2017 report finds that at the Lamb’s School, “only a small fraction of the approximately 500 graduates from the school

in the last three years have participated in the three-year degree sequence” ([Jastrzebski](#)).

According to Josh Boyd, who directs the Lamb School’s undergraduate programs, “We may have had one or two drop out, but I keep track of the ones that are still on track. So we’ve had 10 – four have finished, six are still on track” ([Jastrzebski](#)).

One current obstacle to expansion that Boyd notes is the difficulty advertising the new program on the nationwide admissions process, the [Common Application](#) ([Jastrzebski](#)).

Another obstacle consists in the different reactions to the new program on the part of students versus their parents: “We anticipated that students and parents would both be really excited about this. And our experience has been parents are much more excited about it than students are,” observed Boyd, who attributes the greater enthusiasm on the part of parents to the fact that the three-year degree costs less than the traditional four-year degree ([Jastrzebski](#)).

Getting a college education is more than just a commercial transaction. There is a public interest in making higher education more affordable and accessible.

### A Failure to Launch?

Three years after writing “[Why we need the 3-year college degree](#),” Johns Hopkins University’s Paul Weinstein has published an updated appraisal of the three-year degree movement in the United States. Published in May 2018 by the [Progressive Policy Institute](#), the title of his new report conveys its somber

conclusion: *Who is offering 3-year college degrees and why aren’t they working?* ([Weinstein 2018](#)).

On the one hand, Weinstein is encouraged by the fact that more schools are offering three-year degrees in an effort to help reduce the cost of college. On the other hand, “if one were to assign a grade to the current crop of three-year bachelors’ degree programs, it would be an ‘F’” ([Weinstein 2018, 3](#)). Why?

Most of the new three-year degree programs, in Weinstein’s view, “merely rush students through a program designed to take four years” ([John Hopkins University](#)). Today, he finds that at least 32 schools now offer three-year degree programs. In addition to Purdue University are now Ball State, American University, New York University, University of Iowa, and Kent State, among others. But due to the compressed nature of what are still “essentially four-year degrees squeezed into three years,” none but a few “very motivated” students are finding it appealing ([John Hopkins University](#)). He found as little as 2 percent participation at some schools, with a high of 19 percent at New York University.

To make three-year bachelor's degrees “the norm, not the exception,” he argues, will require “reinventing the college curriculum” in order to provide “in three years the core skills our students need to get good, middle class jobs or go on to graduate school to acquire highly specialized skills” (Weinstein 2018, 6).

To accomplish this reinvention of the curriculum, he offers the following recommendations: First, he maintains that the contemporary curriculum has become “oversaturated with unnecessary electives and general education requirements” (Weinstein 2018, 5). These should be “cut.”

Also needing to be cut, in his estimation, is the year of study abroad. “There are also lots of cheaper ways to go abroad than pay your college to send you; and with one less year of undergraduate study, students will now have the time” (Weinstein 2018, 5).

Declaring academic majors early would also bolster the expansion of three-year degree programs, finds Weinstein, who notes that college students in Great Britain generally are “to declare an intended concentration prior to gaining admission to a university” (Weinstein 2018, 5). He recommends that this requirement be adopted in the United States.

To make it possible for students to enter college with as many course credits as possible, he urges the U.S. Congress to pass legislation requiring that any school whose students receive federal aid or federally subsidized student loans award these students course credit for scores of at least 3 on any AP exam. In this vein, he also recommends that all 36 AP subjects be eligible for college credit.

Finally, Weinstein urges Congress to “limit financial aid to three-year degree programs and that schools cut the cost of these degrees and associated fees by at least 25 percent” (John Hopkins University). This recommendation to increase radically the role and power of the federal government in higher education was first outlined by Weinstein in his 2014 report *Give Our Kids a Break: How Three-Year Degrees Can Cut the Cost of College*, published by the Progressive Policy Institute. The following passage from Weinstein's 2014 report reveals the extent to which he is willing to expand government control of higher education:

To ensure that schools don't simply raise tuition prices to four year levels while providing just three years of

college, participating colleges and universities would have to agree to not raise tuition and fees (including school housing) beyond what they charge for three years at today's prices (both sticker and median). In addition, annual tuition increases would be limited by some agreed upon formula that tracks just slightly above the rate of inflation. *To ensure fairness, future increases could be determined by a review commission made up of federal, state, and local officials, university and college presidents, as well as student representatives* (Weinstein 2014, 6; emphasis supplied).

## Recommendations

The above-cited concerns over the lack of popularity of the new three-year degree offerings, while doubtless legitimate, appear nonetheless premature. The three-year degree movement, to the extent that it constitutes a “movement,” is still in its embryonic stages. Were more schools to adopt three-year degree programs, and to advertise the cost savings therefrom, we might reasonably expect enrollments to grow.

As they do, the average debt for college would shrink accordingly.

Moreover, and more important, one can grant, with Weinstein, that three-year bachelor's degrees could save students, their parents, and taxpayers money and simultaneously make participating universities more accessible to more qualified students; but does this desideratum require the governmental intervention for which he simultaneously

lobbies?

As we have seen, the above-summarized arguments on behalf of three-year college degrees share a desire to have the federal government tie the proliferation of such degrees to Title IV funding for each school. Against this call for still-greater involvement in higher education—including price controls—stands the U.S. Constitution as founded, under which authority over education at all levels is solely the concern of each individual state, through its “police powers.” On this basis, the means to promote three-year college degrees that are most consistent with constitutional federalism would be to allow each state to incentivize such programs—or not.

However, state-level legislation is not immune to the unintended consequences that follow federal legislation. Far from it, in fact. The most direct route to expanding three-year college degree offerings in Texas would be for the boards of regents (or trustees) at Texas public universities to

The means to promote three-year college degrees that are most consistent with constitutional federalism would be to allow each state to incentivize such programs—or not.

look to Purdue University's pioneering model and adapt it to their campus's character. To this end, the board of regents should appoint members of its academic affairs committee to study and report on Purdue University's efforts. The board should then approve a three-year degree program fashioned in accord with its distinctive identity.

In advancing the case for board action, it should be noted that nothing prevents college students from completing their degrees in three years at present, although students at [some universities](#) find that the required courses needed to graduate in *four years*, much less three, are not offered when they need them. As noted earlier, such accelerated,

lower-cost programs are not for every student, and cannot apply to all major fields of study. However, with student-loan debt at approximately \$1.5 trillion—outpacing even total national credit card debt—interest in such saving opportunities could well spread as quickly as new programs arise.

At the very least, those students with the interest and motivation to finish college more quickly and with less debt would now find programs built to meet their needs. In the process, Texas' [60x30 goal](#) would move closer to success. And this improvement would cost Texas taxpayers not a cent. ★

# Appendix

## Purdue's Three-Year Bachelor's Degree

### Frequently Asked Questions<sup>1</sup>:

#### **Why does CLA offer degrees in an accelerated format?**

Degree in 3 aligns with Purdue's commitment to value in higher education. It is a simple innovation that addresses the issue of cost. The level of cost savings depends upon an individual student's circumstances. Degree in 3 offers students the opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree in three years, entering a workforce and accelerating their earning power. The Degree in 3 suggested arrangement of courses provides an option to help students envision that academic path.

#### **Can you explain how it works?**

As a student, you will declare your intent to pursue a Degree in 3 major by the end of your freshman year in order to be assured of the opportunity to enroll in the classes you need to finish in three years. You should initiate a conversation with your academic advisor in time to enroll for summer courses after your freshman year. To complete the Degree in 3, you will take a full academic load for three years in addition to completing summer classes between the first and second and second and third years of study.

#### **If I decide I do not like the program, can I transition to a traditional four year degree program?**

Yes. You are not required to complete the Degree in 3, even after declaring your intent to do so.

#### **If I am already enrolled as a full-time student, can I apply to complete my degree in three years?**

Yes. However your ability to complete the Degree in 3 may be impacted by a decision to do so late in your current plan of study. Talk with your academic advisor to see if Degree in 3 works for you.

#### **What is the cost of a three year program? Is it cheaper than a four year degree?**

The savings vary depending upon your personal situation including residency status, campus living situation, scholarships, AP credit, etc. Published tuition rates apply for all academic terms of study. You can see a general cost comparison [here](#).

#### **Can I apply for merit awards or scholarships as part of a three year program?**

Incoming and continuing students can apply for scholarships. The College does not offer specific scholarships for students in Degree in 3 at this point in time. Individual academic units within the College may have scholarships available.

#### **What is the impact of choosing the three year degree option on my need-based Purdue financial aid?**

Most students should find the percentage of costs covered with grant money will be similar to that over four years of study. Federal loans will also be available for fall, spring, and summer terms. Keep in mind that while we can accelerate your awards, it does not change the aggregate maximums granted.

#### **I received a University-level merit scholarship (Trustees, Presidential, Emerging Leader), what happens to my scholarship if I choose the three year option? Will I still receive the full scholarship if I graduate early?**

Students in the three year program will be able to use their University-level merit scholarship during the summer. The summer disbursements will count towards 8 semesters of eligibility. A student who attends this program will still be enrolled in 8 semesters when summers are counted.

#### **What study abroad opportunities are available for three-year students?**

Opportunities vary based upon your major. Study abroad programs range from one week, to Maymester, to semester, to full year. Please ask your academic advisor to learn more.

#### **What internship opportunities are available for three year students?**

Micro-internships through the College's partnership with Parker Dewey and on-campus internships are available. An off-campus internship may be an option depending upon your specific course schedule.

<sup>1</sup> Appears on Purdue's *Degree in 3* website.

**Can I pursue a double major with the three year program?**

A second major can be pursued, although it might not be possible to complete two majors in three years. Please consult with your academic advisor.

**Can I participate in the Honors College while completing a three year degree?**

Yes, you can complete both a 3 year degree and the Honors College requirements.

**Do I have to live on campus all three years?**

You may select the residence option of your choice.

**If I choose a Degree in 3 option, can I still enroll in a learning community?**

Yes. During STAR, you'll work with an academic advisor who can help tailor your plan of study around your desired learning community. CLA has several learning communities to choose from. The College is developing a learning community specifically designed for students completing their degree in 3 years for Fall 2018.

**Can I apply AP or IB credits towards a three year degree?**

Yes. Any credit granted by Purdue can be applied as it fits within your specific major's plan of study.

**Degree in 3 Potential Savings**

Based on Purdue's current rates for tuition, fees, and room and board, the following chart illustrates the potential cost savings of a three year degree for students entering in Fall 2017. Individual circumstances will vary depending upon residency, living choices, study abroad, etc. Regardless, Degree in 3 offers a unique value option for students and their families.

<b>Four-Year Costs:</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non-Resident</b>	<b>International</b>
Four years of tuition and fees	\$39,968	\$115,176	\$123,176
Four years of room and board	\$40,120	\$40,120	\$40,120
<b>Total costs:</b>	<b>\$80,088</b>	<b>\$155,296</b>	<b>\$163,296</b>
<b>Three-Year Costs:</b>	<b>Resident</b>	<b>Non-Resident</b>	<b>International</b>
Three years of tuition and fees	\$29,976	\$86,382	\$92,382
Three years of room and board	\$30,090	\$30,090	\$30,090
Two summers of tuition and fees	\$5,001	\$14,402	\$15,402
Two summers of room and board	\$6,000	\$6,000	\$6,000
<b>Total costs:</b>	<b>\$71,067</b>	<b>\$136,874</b>	<b>\$143,874</b>
<b>Potential Cost Savings:</b>	<b>\$9,021</b>	<b>\$18,422</b>	<b>\$19,422</b>

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## About the Author



**Thomas 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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