

A Bio-Enabled Platform to Access Polyamides with Built-In Target Properties

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ABSTRACT: The diversification of platform chemicals is key to today's petroleum industry. Likewise, the flourishing of tomorrow's biorefineries will rely on molecules with next-generation properties from biomass. Herein, we explore this opportunity with a novel approach to monomers with custom property enhancements. Cyclic diacids with alkyl and aromatic decorations were synthesized from muconic acid by Diels-Alder cycloaddition, and copolymerized with hexamethylenediamine and adipic acid to yield polyamides with built-in hydrophobicity and flame retardancy. Testing shows a 70% reduction in water uptake and doubling of char production while largely retaining other key properties of the parent nylon-6,6. The present approach can be generalized to access a wide range of performance-advantaged polyamides.

The polymer industry is a key driver in the transition to biomass as a carbon feedstock,^{1,2} having bolstered the production of bio-replacements for adipic acid, acrylonitrile, and methacrylic acid, among others.^{3,4} Moreover, it stimulates the discovery of novel molecules and functionalities that could rejuvenate the biochemical industry.^{5,6} For example, the polyesterification of 2,5-furandicarboxylic acid (FDCA) to polyethylene furanoate (PEF) yields a bioplastic with superior mechanical, thermal, and barrier properties compared to polyethylene terephthalate (PET).⁷ However, biopolymer discovery typically follows a pipeline approach beginning with a biobased platform intermediate and conversion to a single targeted monomer that is further (co)polymerized.⁸⁻¹⁰ The cost and effort associated with this approach is considerable, and represent significant risk since *a priori* polymer property prediction remains elusive.¹¹

Here, we demonstrate a streamlined process to accelerate the discovery of performance-advantaged biomonomers. By embracing biobased platform chemicals, in particular bioprivileged muconic acid (MA), properties in

conventional polymers like polyamide-6,6 (nylon-6,6) can be tailored without significant tradeoffs.^{12,13}

Produced fermentatively from lignocellulosic feedstocks,¹⁴ bioprivileged MA is an attractive candidate as a starting molecule for diversity-oriented syntheses¹⁵ to drop-in monomer replacements such as adipic acid (AA),^{16,17} terephthalic acid (TPA),¹⁸⁻²⁰ ϵ -caprolactam,^{21,22} and hexamethylene diamine²³; additionally, novel species like 3-hexenedioic acid and cyclohex-1/2-ene dicarboxylic acid have been reported.²⁴⁻²⁶ Work to upgrade MA to TPA and cyclohexane-1,4-dicarboxylic acid (CH₁DA) showed that *trans-trans*-MA (*tt*MA) would undergo Diels-Alder cycloaddition (DA) as a diene using ethylene as the dieneophile.^{27,28} Evidently, steric effects render *tt*MA as the only isomer capable of this reaction. In this work, *tt*MA's conjugated unsaturation is leveraged with DA chemistry to create a family of biobased cyclic diacids. By choosing dieneophiles to imbue desired properties like hydrophobicity or flame retardance, a variety of performance-enhanced nylon-6,6 copolymers can be generated (Fig. 1).

Hydrophobic diacids were produced through DA with bulky non-polar α -olefins. There was limited reactivity directly with *tt*MA; however, DA cycloaddition of dimethyl-*trans,trans*-muconate (dm*tt*M), and 1-octene (OC) or 1-tetradecene (TD) readily afforded the cycloadducts with alkyl-pendants of 6-carbons and 12-carbons, respectively (Fig. S1-S2, Table S1). Base-catalyzed hydrolysis yielded the diacids (Fig. 2). ¹H-NMR showed aliphatic peaks at 0.8 and 1.2 ppm with integrations near the expected values (Table S2). To test end-use properties, the diacids were independently precipitated as nylon salts with hexamethylene diamine (HMDA), mixed with AA/HMDA salts, and reacted to form nylon-6,6 copolymers.²⁹ A 25 mol% replacement of AA/HMDA salt was tested to observe a prominent effect on nylon-6,6 end-use properties. The polyamides were produced in

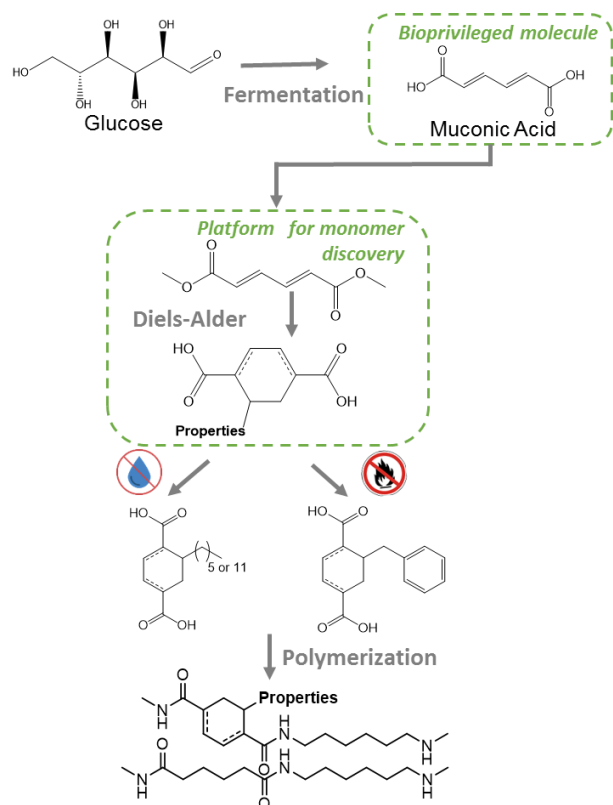


Figure 1. Platform approach for the discovery of property-advantaged comonomers. Bioprivileged *tt*MA is derivatized via Diels-Alder cycloaddition to novel co-monomers that enable polyamides with built-in target properties, such as hydrophobicity and flame retardancy.

two stages using a pressurized reactor vessel with continuous agitation. Elemental analysis and ^1H NMR confirmed the stability of the novel diacids throughout polymerization (Table S3, Fig. S3-4). Neat nylon-6,6 served as a benchmark to these cycloaliphatic polyamides as they were characterized for various properties (Table 1). Under similar polymerization conditions, it was observed that nylon-6,6 exhibited the highest molecular weight with a dispersity ($\bar{D}$) of 2, typical of step-growth polymerization.

The cyclo-aliphatic polyamides showed a decrease in M_n , most notably in CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD, which also showed significantly higher $\bar{D}$ values. We primarily attribute these molecular weight distribution (MWD) effects to the wide range in melting points of the various Nylon salts (Table S3) that would promote disparate polymerization rates, particularly during polyamidation start-up. Additionally, the asymmetry of the novel monomers may cause differences in propagation rates. The potential for heterogeneity in CH₁DA-OC and TD was investigated through transmission electron microscopy of osmium-stained slices, imparting contrast to the unsaturated bonds (Fig. S5). The homogeneity of the micrographs indicates a lack of microphase separation. Future optimization of the polyamidation process will further improve the MWD; here, our purpose is to investigate value-added property enhancement imparted by the biobased diacids.

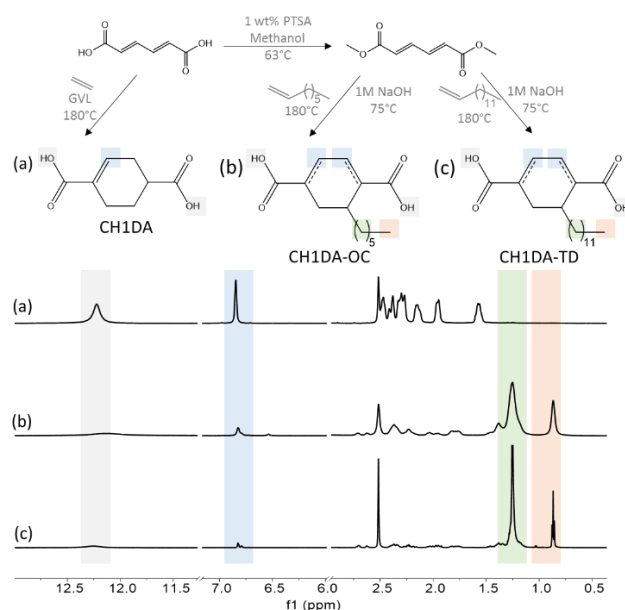


Figure 2. Novel diacid syntheses: direct DA of *tt*MA and ethylene yields CH₁DA, whereas CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD were formed by reacting *dmtt*M with the corresponding α -olefins. ^1H NMR in DMSO-*d*₆ confirms the formation of the desired products.

The thermal and crystal behavior of this family of cycloaliphatic polyamides were characterized through differential scanning calorimetry (DSC), wide-angle X-ray scattering (WAXS), and thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) (Fig S6-S9). DSC showed pure nylon-6,6 having the highest melting temperature (T_m) and degree of crystallinity (χ_c). The cyclic counts disrupt chain regularity and hydrogen bonding, reducing both T_m and χ_c . For example, CH₁DA shows T_m depression of 17 °C and reduction in χ_c by about 30% compared to nylon-6,6. The long alkyl chains and high dispersity of CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD further restricted crystal formation with T_m depression of $\approx$ 30 °C and χ_c reduction of 54%. TGA under nitrogen showed that the degradation temperature ($T_{\text{d}50}$) increased slightly for all copolymers (Table 1). Pure nylon-6,6 demonstrated a char yield of 2.9% at 500 °C. It was expected that the hydrocarbon-rich, alkyl-chain functionalized polyamides (CH₁DA-OC/TD) would show a lower char yield, which was confirmed experimentally. Insights into the crystal structure were determined through room-temperature WAXS. The semi-crystalline nature of the polyamides was confirmed by sharp Bragg peaks representing the crystalline segments and a broad halo characteristic of the amorphous regions. The percent crystallinity ($\chi_{c,\text{WAXS}}$) was calculated from the ratio between areas under the peaks normalized over the total area. Nylon-6,6 exhibited two prominent peaks at approximately at 20° and 24°, corresponding to the (100) and (010)/(110) doublet of the α -phase.³⁰ CH₁DA and CH₁DA-OC showed one broad peak for intrasheet scattering at around 21° whereas CH₁DA-TD showed a small shoulder for the scattering of (010)/(110) plane. This shoulder could be attributed to ordered domains formed by the longer alkyl pendant groups. The similarity amongst WAXS patterns suggests that the crystalline phase is comprised solely of nylon-6,6 units with the relegation of

Table 1. Properties of nylon-6,6 and novel cyclo-aliphatic copolyamides at 25 mol% co-monomer loading.

Sample	M_n^a (kDa)	$\bar{D}^a$	T_m^b [°C]	ΔH_m^b [J/g]	T_c^b [°C]	$\chi_{C_DSC}^b$ [%]	$T_{g_DSC}^c$ [°C]	$\chi_{C_WAXS}^d$ [%]	Char _{500°C} ^e [%]	T_{dio}^e [°C]
Nylon-6,6	34.3	2.0	262.2	67.2	231.4	26.3	72.7	41.5	2.9	410.8
CH ₁ DA	21.6	1.9	245.9	46.2	209.7	18.1	88.1	39.3	3.4	418.7
CH ₁ DA-OC	12.4	4.9	228.1	29.9	177.7	11.7	81.4	37.2	2.4	418.7
CH ₁ DA-TD	15.5	5.2	231.6	30.6	190.6	12.0	76.6	27.0	2.4	418.7

[a] M_n : Number-average molecular weight; $\bar{D}$: Dispersity; [b] T_m : Melting temperature; ΔH_m : Enthalpy of melting; T_c : Crystallization temperature; χ_{C_DSC} : Percent crystallinity (DSC); [c] T_{g_DSC} : Glass-transition temperature from modulated DSC and [d] χ_{C_WAXS} : Percent crystallinity from WAXS (annealed); [e] Char_{500°C}: Residual mass at 500 °C; T_{dio} : Decomposition temperature at 10% mass loss under N₂.

cycloaliphatic counts to the amorphous phase.³¹ Due to annealing, χ_{C_WAXS} values are 60–220% larger than χ_C . Moreover, only CH₁DA-TD shows a marked diminishment in crystallinity from nylon-6,6. These observations show that the crystallization rate is lower in the copolymers.

The novel counts were intended to reduce hygroscopicity, a major drawback of nylon-6,6. Nylon-6,6 has several hydrophilic amide linkages that attract water, especially in the amorphous domain. Water strongly plasticizes, reduces glass transition temperature (T_g), modulus, and strength while increasing extensibility. Water absorption depends on composition, crystallinity, molding, geometry, and exposure conditions.³² We characterized hydrophobicity through 24 h water absorption (ASTM D 570), moisture uptake at 50% relative humidity (RH), and contact angle measurements (Fig. 3). Samples were injection-molded into the ISO 527-2-1BB geometry prior to testing. Immersion tests showed nylon-6,6 demonstrated the highest water absorption. This was reduced by 40% in CH₁DA-OC, whereas CH₁DA-TD had a water uptake of only 0.8%, a 70% decrease from nylon-6,6. This dramatic reduction is especially significant considering the broad dispersity and reduced crystallinity of the OC/TD samples that counteract the hydrophobicity of the novel monomers. Similar improvements in hydrophobicity are known in castor oil-derived Nylon-6,10 (60% reduction) or Nylon-6,12 (80%).³³ However, higher carbon-numbered Nylons differ from Nylon-6,6 in most respects with 100% replacement of adipic acid, with significant compromises in thermal and mechanical properties. Here, the OC/TD copolymers retain many Nylon-6,6 characteristics, including similar T_g values and crystal structure. The polymers at 50% RH followed a similar trend. CH₁DA-TD showed the most prominent improvement exhibiting a moisture absorption of only 0.35%. Surface wettability was determined using contact angles, where a higher angle corresponds to a decreased affinity towards water at the solid-liquid interface. Equal surface roughness was ensured prior to testing, to reduce its influence on the observed results. Nylon-6,6 exhibited a

contact angle value of ~75°, while CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD showed similar performance (~87°).

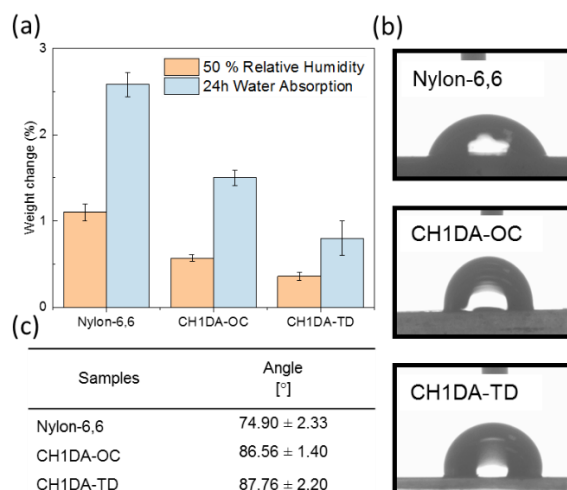


Figure 3. (a) Weight change on 24 h water immersion and 50% RH conditioning for nylon-6,6, CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD. (b) Contact angle images. (c) Contact angle values.

The viscoelastic properties were tested using dynamic mechanical analysis (Fig. 4, Table 2). The storage moduli (E') are reported in Table 2 from within the glassy plateau at 0 °C. All cycloaliphatic polyamides showed an increased E' compared to nylon due to the rigidity introduced by cyclic units in the polymer backbone. While this intimates that the tensile modulus may also be significantly higher, the molecular weight disparity between the novel copolymers and Nylon-6,6 preclude a thorough direct comparison of mechanical properties until the MWD has been better optimized. T_g for the polymer samples was located at the maxima of $\tan \delta$, which corresponds to the ratio between E' and the loss modulus (E''). T_g is strongly influenced by the flexibility and molecular mobility of the polymer backbone and their pendant groups. Additionally, T_g is suppressed by high $\bar{D}$ values, where the proliferation of smaller chains have a plasticizing effect. The unfunctionalized cycloaliphatic polyamide (CH₁DA) had higher E' and T_g

than nylon-6,6 due to the reduced flexibility introduced by the cyclic counts. With the introduction of alkyl pendant

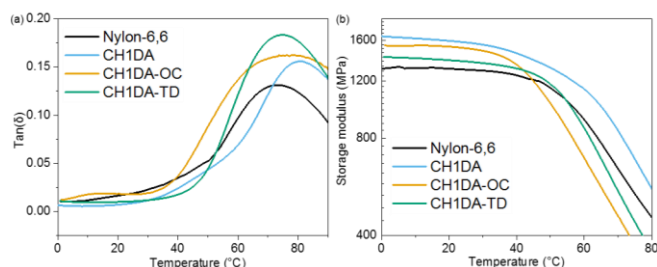


Figure 4. (a) Tan (δ) and (b) Storage moduli for dry annealed polyamide series at 10 rad s⁻¹ versus temperature at 5 K/min ramp rate.

Table 2. Torsional DMA results of polyamides showing storage moduli, loss moduli, and glass transition temperatures.

Sample	E' ^a [GPa]	E'' ^a [MPa]	T _{g,DMA} ^b [°C]	E' _{sat} ^c [GPa]	T _{g,sat} ^c [°C]
Nylon-6,6	1.32	16.5	73.3	0.687	-6.5
CH ₁ DA	1.65	10.9	80.3	0.027	1.6
CH ₁ DA-OC	1.55	18.6	78.6	1.06	12.6
CH ₁ DA-TD	1.42	15.6	74.8	0.95	20.9

^aE', E'' are storage and loss modulus, respectively, for dry samples at 0 °C. ^bT_g from peak tan (δ). ^cE'_{sat} and T_{g,sat} is the E' and T_g measured for 40 day water immersion samples.

groups (CH₁DA-OC and CH₁DA-TD), two opposing effects could occur. On one hand, chain mobility is restricted due to steric hindrance causing a rise in T_g, whereas an opposing chain-length dependent plasticizing behavior (and dispersity) is expected to decrease T_g.³⁴ The latter effects dominate, where the C₁₂ pendant group had a slightly depressed T_g of 75 °C compared to its C₆ counterpart (79 °C). Moreover, T_{g,DMA} and T_{g,DSC} followed similar trends (Table 1).

To assess the effect of water uptake on thermomechanical properties, T_{g,sat} was measured after 40-day water immersion, to saturation. Nylon-6,6 showed the lowest T_{g,sat} in accordance with its high water uptake (Table 2, Fig. S10–11), suffering an 80 °C depression from its dry value. The copolymers were less plasticized with higher T_{g,sat} values, e.g., CH₁DA-TD showed only a 54 °C reduction. Additionally, CH₁DA-OC/TD exhibited a higher T_g than alternatives like nylon-6,10, due to the difference in backbone rigidity in the polymers.³⁵ This demonstrates the performance advantages of novel cyclic monomers over a linear polyamide system.

To illustrate the platform nature of DA-based derivatization of MA, we grafted allylbenzene (AB) to dmttM. This aromatic pendant group was chosen to enhance char formation, a key metric towards inhibiting flame spread.^{36,37} Additionally, hydrogenation of the double bond (CHDA-AB) further enhances thermal stability and also precludes any potential for retro-Diels-Alder under char-forming temperatures (Fig. 5a, S12–S14, Table S4). A comparison of

char yields between CH₁DA-AB and CHDA-AB elucidates the role of unsaturation in the design of

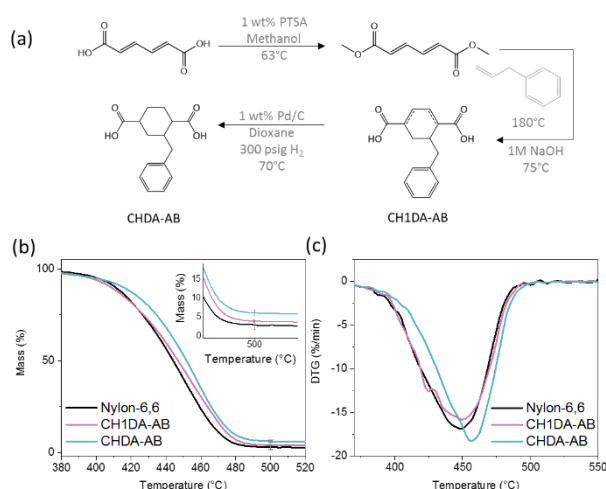


Figure 5. (a) DA-upgrading of *tt*MA with AB to generate char enhancing diacids. (b) TGA and (c) DTG (triplicate average) graphs of polyamides with 25 mol% loading of novel diacids.

flame-retardant monomers using the synthesis technique outlined here. TGA (triplicate runs) was carried out on each polyamide under an inert environment. From Fig. 5b it is inferred that hydrogenated CHDA-AB (6.1% ± 0.61), with its aromatic pendant group, achieved a doubling in char with respect to neat nylon-6,6 (2.9% ± 1.2). Interestingly, a difference in char yield was observed between CH₁DA-AB (3.9% ± 0.36) and CHDA-AB. Inspection of the DTG curves (Fig. 5c, Fig. S8) showed an increase in T_{d10} by 7 °C for CHDA-AB, which together with the aromatic pendant serves to enhance char formation. Further increases in condensed-phase action to impede flammability can likely be achieved using vinyl-based phosphorus and nitrogen groups³⁸ using the DA-derivatization strategy.

This study illustrates the rapid differentiation of MA to novel monomers using the highly versatile DA reaction, facilitating the development of nylon-6,6 copolymers with tailored properties. More broadly, the pairing of platform with diversity-oriented synthesis techniques presents an efficient strategy for developing performance-advantaged biopolymers. The adaptation of this approach to other platforms will accelerate the embrace of sustainable materials through the proliferation of new and useful plastics.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Experimental procedures for the synthesis of monomers and polymers, additional characterizations including ¹H and ¹³C NMR, elemental analysis, GPC, DSC, TGA, WAXS, water uptake, contact angle, and rheology results.

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