Abstract

Competency-based education (CBE) is an approach that measures mastery of competencies rather than seat time. The goal of CBE is to offer flexible, affordable and ultimately post-secondary education to a growing base of non-traditional learners (Bonnie Ortizone, 2014). Currently, non-traditional students account for nearly half of all the students in higher education (Douglas-Gabriel, 2016). Existing research however, is limited as to how well students fare in CBE programs, particularly in comparison to traditional degree models (Kelly & Columbus, 2016). The current study analyzes results from a survey completed by alumni of both a CBE program and its traditional counterpart at Texas A&M-University-Commerce. This survey was administered with the goal of evaluating both student satisfaction with degree programs, and post-completion outcomes. Student demographics provide insights related to the learners who enroll in competency-focused degree programs. The analysis and results in this study include three key areas of disparities in the findings: staff and faculty interaction, affordability and acceleration, and post-graduation outcomes. Although both program graduates rated their respective degrees highly, through a visual description, we will show how the results suggest superior outcomes for the CBE program relative to the traditional program. Furthermore, an analysis on the transfer cohort graduation rates for both the programs indicate that CBE students are graduating at a 57% faster pace than students in the traditional program. This study provides evidence to support the notion that CBE can aid students in accomplishing positive outcomes.

Purpose of Study

• Comparative study of surveys of graduates of both the traditional Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences (AAS) and its competency-based counterpart, the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) program in Organizational Leadership (ORGL), also a Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences at A&M-Commerce, in order to assess student satisfaction with the degree programs and employment outcomes
• Investigate on three key areas of focus-faculty/staff interaction, affordability/acceleration and alumni outcomes

Methodology

This comparative study surveyed the graduates of both the traditional AAS program and its competency-based counterpart, the TAB-ORGL program, at A&M-Commerce. The goals of this study were to assess both student satisfaction with the degree program and employment outcomes. Since the ORGL program graduated its first students in Spring 2015, the respondents were students who graduated from both programs since then, even though the traditional program is older. At the time that the survey was administered, the TAB-ORGL program had 122 graduates and the AAS program had 353, for a potential maximum of 475 subjects. The graduates were recruited directly via email and invited to complete an online survey. Prior to the authors contacting the graduates, the A&M-Commerce Institutional Review Board approved the research proposal.

CBE vs. Traditional Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CBE</th>
<th>Trad.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Focus = outcomes</td>
<td>Focus = inputs (e.g. seat time)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning is constant. Time is the variable.</td>
<td>Some students master the material; others may not.</td>
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</tbody>
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Affordability and Acceleration

In regard to cost and acceleration to degree, 54% (N=50) of the TAB-ORGL graduates felt that this modality allowed them accelerate time to degree completion to a great extent and only 37% (N=38) agreed to the same under the traditional AAS format. Additionally, 54% (N=50) TAB-ORGL graduates observed a huge reduced cost to degree, while only 21% (N=38) traditional AAS graduates managed to reduce their overall cost to degree.

Conclusion:

The research outlined in this poster supports an argument for augmented results for graduates of the TAB-ORGL Program, particularly in the areas of faculty and staff interaction, post graduation outcomes and affordability and acceleration. Although CBE likely will never entirely replace traditional programs, it is hard to argue against providing options that are viable for certain, previously underserved student populations. Hopefully, data-driven evidence that supports the "iron triangle" value proposition of CBE—cost, access, and quality—will ensure its sustainability. While we believe continuing to track these student populations is a good start, certainly more data is needed to fully support the efficacy of competency-based education is needed. The earliest data available for the TAB-ORGL Program is from Spring 2014 when the program enrolled its first students; thus, it still is too early for any conclusive results. As the program matures, hopefully better results will be available to determine the true impact of a competency-based model versus traditional.

Key Findings

Faculty and Staff Interaction:

How often did you receive guidance or feedback from faculty?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional BAAS Graduates</th>
<th>TAB Program Graduates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often did you receive guidance or feedback from your advisor/academic success coach?</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
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Nearly 78% (N=50) of TAB-ORGL program graduates agreed they received weekly feedback from faculty, compared to a much lower 42% (N=41) for the traditional AAS program graduates. Overall, 75% (N=50) TAB-ORGL graduates were Very Satisfied with the interactions with their faculty compared to a lower 56% (N=40) for traditional AAS graduates.

Employment

Nearly half (50%, N=50) of the TAB-ORGL graduates felt they received weekly feedback from their advisors compared a much lower 12% (N=41) for the Traditional AAS Graduates. Consequently, TAB-ORGL graduates reported higher levels of satisfaction with their advisors over traditional AAS students (ORGL: 62% N = 50; AAS: 46% N = 41).

Cost of the Program

In terms of career development after graduation, TAB-ORGL graduates were more likely to receive a promotion at their current employer (ORGL: 35% N = 43; AAS: 14% N = 36), while traditional AAS graduates were more likely to obtain a better position with a new employer (ORGL: 12% N = 44; AAS: 31% N = 36). Consequently, over 40% of respondents in both surveyed groups experienced an increase in income after obtaining their degrees at A&M-Commerce (ORGL: 43% N = 44; AAS: 44% N = 36), with the increase ranging widely from $2,995 to $33,900 per year. More than half of survey respondents from either program hold salary levels greater than $60,000 per year (ORGL: 55% N = 44; AAS: 61% N = 36).

Comparative Demographics Data

Students in both programs share similar characteristics thus making both student populations comparable:

- Age: Majority of students in both programs are between ages 25 – 60yrs. Average age (ORGL: 38; AAS: 39), supporting the notion that completer degrees better serve post-traditional learners, adult learners and/or working adults.
- Ethnicity Distribution: A large portion of students enrolled in both programs are white (ORGL: 66%; AAS: 61%), but there is a growing base of Hispanic (ORGL: 16%; AAS: 14%) and African American student enrollment (ORGL: 14%; AAS: 19%).
- Location: 98% students are from Texas.

Another significant finding was that the majority of the accumulated debt for TAB-ORGL graduates (34%) was within the lower range, from $1 - $10,000, while 49% of the debt for traditional AAS students ranged from $10,001 - $50,000.

Figure:

- Only 18% (N=38) traditional AAS graduates feel that they might be able to accelerate through the program when they were thinking of enrolling, while for TAB-ORGL graduates nearly 56% (N=50) agreed that acceleration was one of the main reason to enroll in the program. Only 29% (N=38) of the traditional AAS students chose cost to be a major deciding factor to enroll in the program, in contrast, 58% (N=50) of the TAB-ORGL graduates said cost was a deciding factor, highlighting both the feasibility and affordability of the TAB program.

Figure:

- As a result of the time and cost effectiveness shared by graduates, only 22% (N=38) TAB-ORGL students reported additional debt, compared to 67% (N=38) for traditional AAS students. Another finding was that the majority of the accumulated debt for TAB-ORGL graduates (34%) was within the lower range, from $1 - $10,000, while 49% of the debt for traditional AAS students ranged from $10,001 - $50,000.