Competency-Based Education: Saving Students Time and Money

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Abstract

Competency-based education (CBE) is a system combining a planned and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and the expectations about learning are held constant (CBE Network, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education has suggested that allowing students to self-pace through mastery and demonstration of competencies can reduce both time and financial obligations (USDA, 2017). The CBE model presents a unique opportunity for higher education to begin thinking in terms of mastery of competencies, rather than the traditional time-based unit. Although the list prices of CBE models appear cost effective in comparison to traditional higher education models, little research has comprehensively examined and reported on the actual completion and affordability of CBE programs (Kelchen, 2014). The Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE), based at A&M-Commerce has created targeted metrics designed to track CBE outcomes, and has continuously collected and reported on essential data such as time to completion and associated costs. The current study evaluated student time and cost saving for 316 students who graduated from the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) Bachelors of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS) degree in Organizational Leadership ORGL, the first competency-based degree offered at A&M-Commerce. The results of the study show CBE students accelerated time to degree completion by at least a year compared to transfer counterparts in traditional programs. Cost savings mirror these findings with CBE students saving up to 53% over traditional models. These findings support the claim that competency based education can result in significant financial savings and increased time to degree completion in comparison to traditional programs.

Organizational Leadership Program Overview

- State's first SACSCOC approved competency-based degree offered by a public university
- Delivered completely online
- 99 competencies- 91 lower and 8 upper division mapped back to courses and 120 SCH total
- Competencies are defined by faculty and industry
- Students are supported by instructors and academic success coach
- Program delivered via a subscription model with students attempting as many competencies as possible in each seven week term for the same flat rate of $750
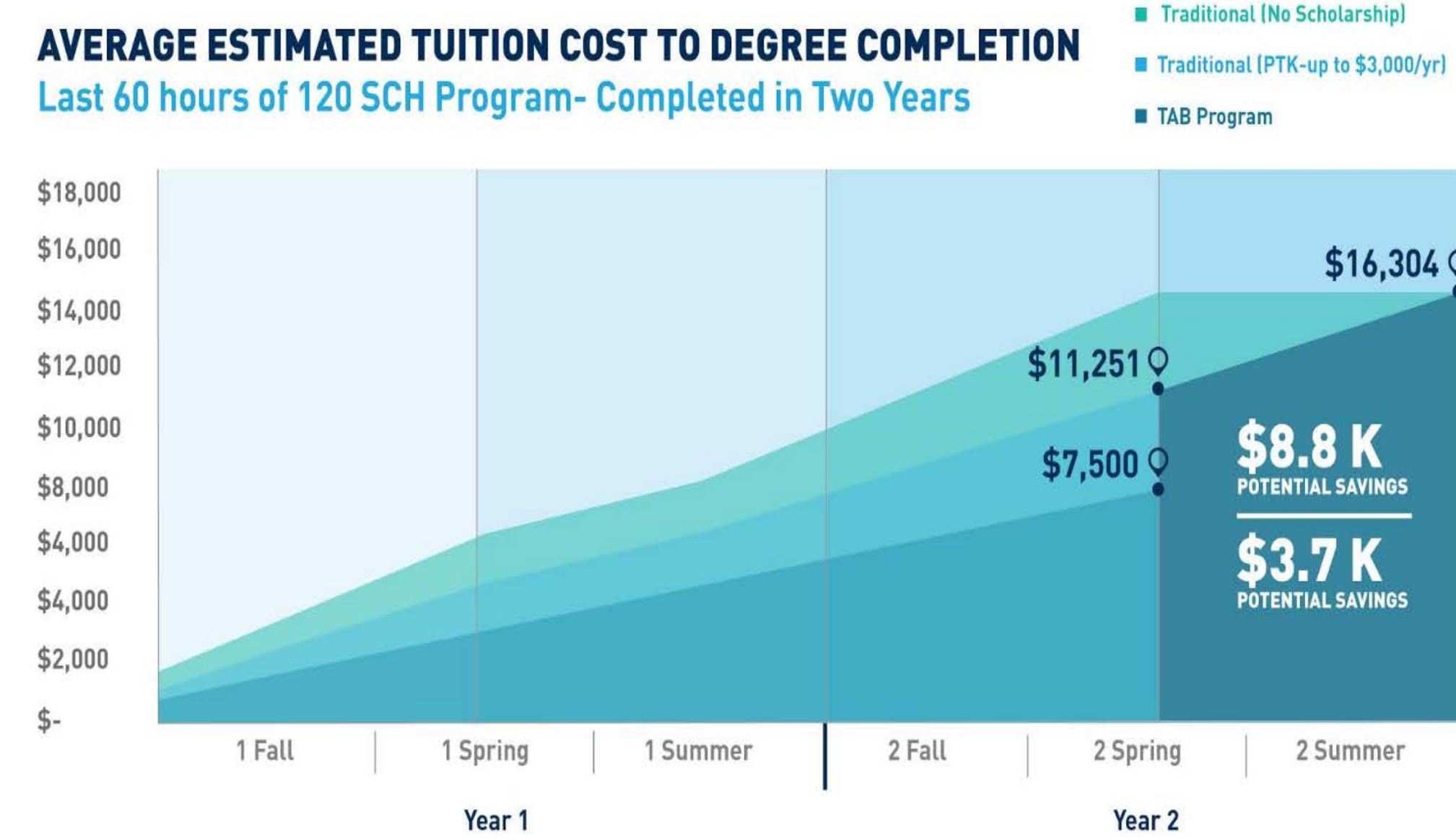

Student Demographics
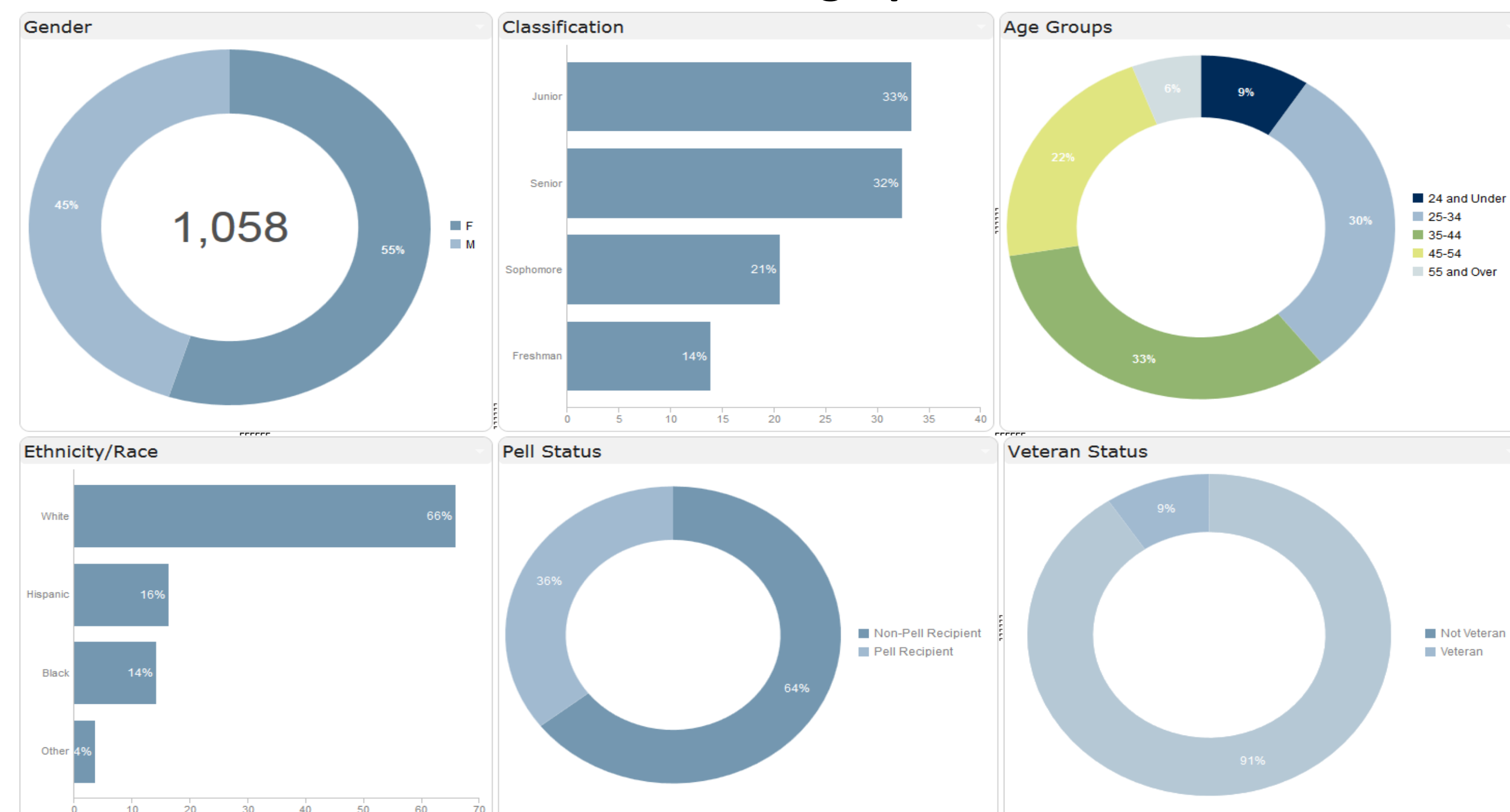
The chart above shows the demographics of the 1058 students that have enrolled in the program since inception. A majority of students (90%) are ages 25+ and the average age of students enrolled in the program is 38. The student classification when enrolling shows that 86% do not come to us via a freshmen class. On average, TAB ORGL students transfer 72 semester credit hours into the program. These are clear indicators that the students being served in the TAB-ORGL program are post-traditional students/adult learners who have earned large loads of credit hours but have no degree to show for their work. CBE seems to be a viable option for them to complete their degrees since it allows them to study at their own pace and maximize their qualifying transfer credits.

The graph below shows that the TAB-ORGL program through its flat-rate model provides significant cost savings of roughly $8,800 compared to all transfer students in general, and $3,700 of saving versus transfer students who receive at least $3,000 in scholarship support per year. TAB-ORGL students save up to 33 percent more in comparison to students in the general transfer population who received a top-tier transfer scholarship at A&M-Commerce

The graph bellow shows that TAB-ORGL students can save up to 53 percent more in comparison to students in the traditional student population, with potential savings to degree completion of roughly $17,500.
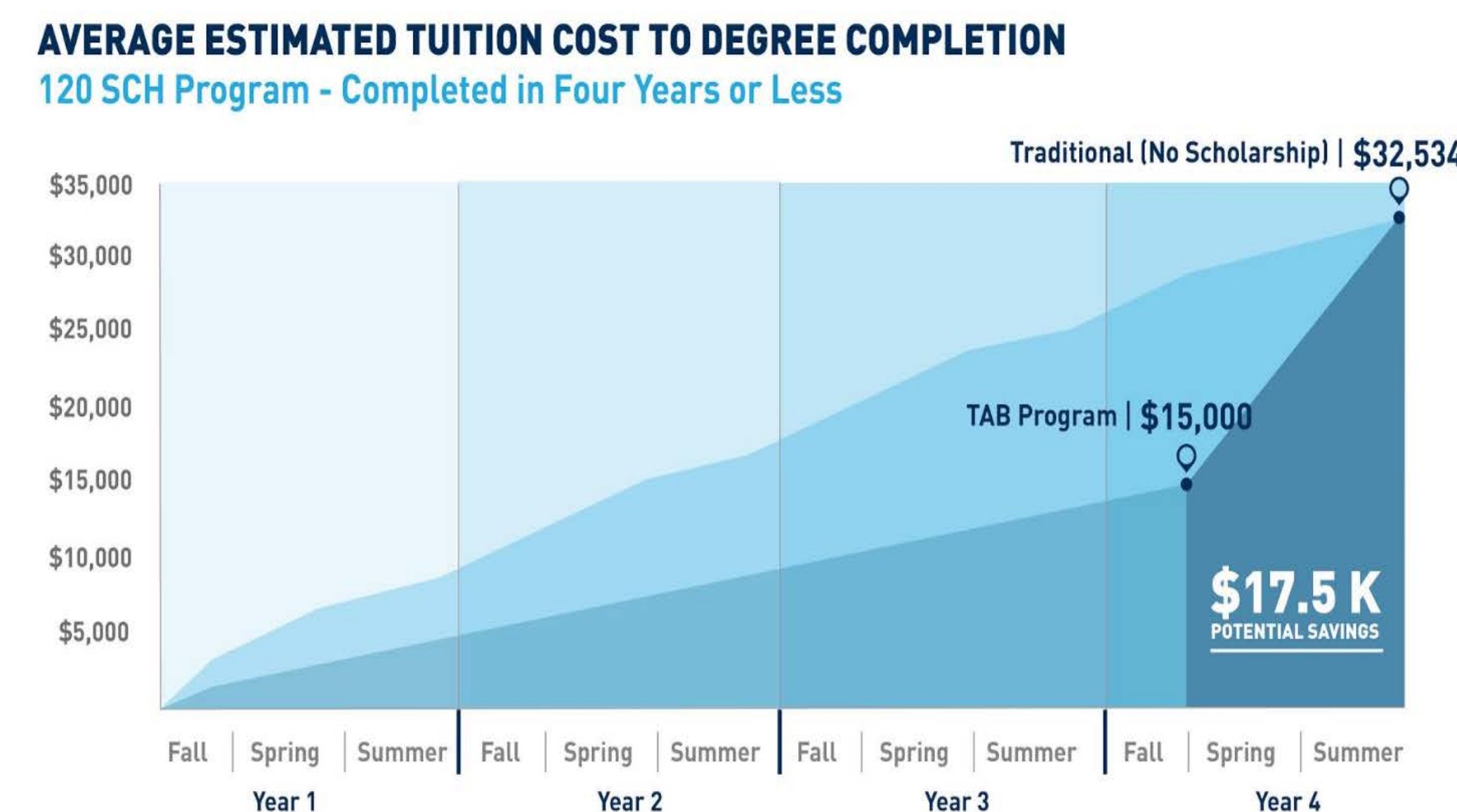
Estimated Cost Savings for TAB-ORGL Students

ESTIMATED COST SAVINGS FOR TAB STUDENT	Average Texas Public University Tuition and Fees	Texas Affordable Baccalaureate Program	COST SAVING TO STUDENT
Cost per credit hour	$266	$125	$141
Annual Cost	$7,986	$4,500	$3,486
Cost for 120 hour Degree	$31,944	$15,000	$16,944

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) created an estimate cost savings table for TAB-ORGL student's versus their Traditional counterparts attending other Texas public institution of higher education. The cost scenario breakdown shows that a TAB-ORGL student could complete a bachelor's degree for around half the cost of a traditional program.

Estimated Cost Scenarios for TAB-ORGL Students

ESTIMATED COST FOR TAB STUDENT SCENARIOS	YEAR 1 General Core Curriculum	YEAR 2 Lower Division Electives	YEAR 3 Upper Division Applied	ESTIMATED COST TO STUDENT (Average of 6 SCH per seven- week term)
High School Graduate with no College	42 Semester Credit Hours	48 Semester Credit Hours	30 Semester Credit Hours	$15,000
Student with 42 Credits of core curriculum, 18 Credits of Lower Division Electives		30 Semester Credit Hours	30 Semester Credit Hours	$7,500
Student with 42 Credits of Core Curriculum, 48 Credits of Lower Division Electives			30 Semester Credit Hours	$3,750

This table shows how CBE students can save money and accelerate time to degree by at least a year, regardless of enrollment scenario. The cost for a TAB-ORGL student will range from a minimum of $3,750 to a maximum of $15,000 once enrolled in the program. The TAB-ORGL program is helping students transform debt they may have incurred in the past pursuit of a higher education credential into a degree.

## Key Performance Indicators for TAB-ORGL Graduates

The KPIs below shows that 316 TAB-ORGL graduates as of Fall 2017, brought in an average 81 semester credit hours, and took 53 semester credit hours at A&M-Commerce to graduate. With a semester credit hour completion rate of 91%, it took these graduates on average of 7 TAB terms or a year and seven-weeks, to obtain their degrees. Graduates of our CBE TAB-ORGL program, that may have had high amounts of accumulated debt, have finally completed their baccalaureate at our institution for under $6,000.
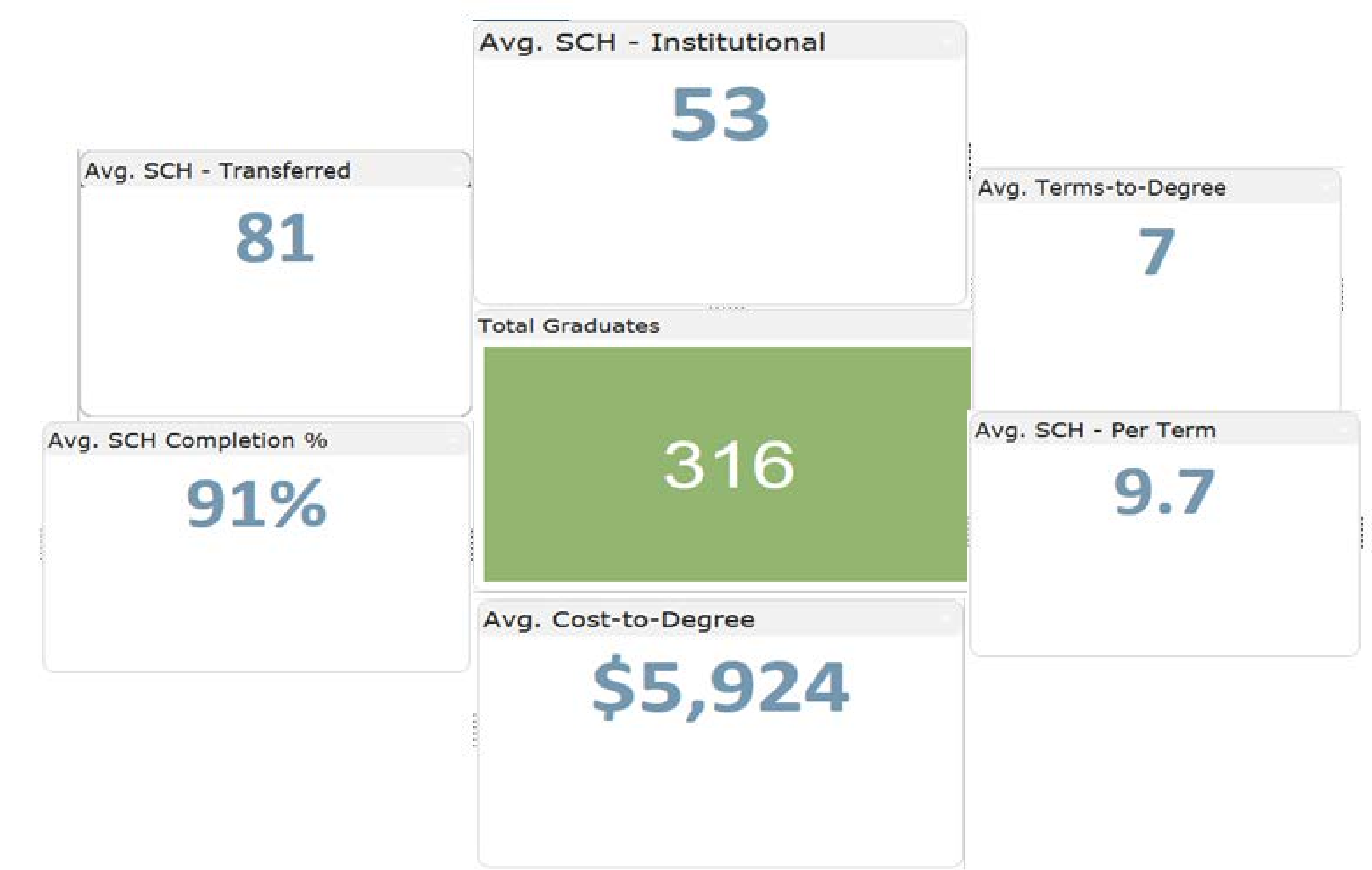
Accelerated Time-to-Completion

The graph below compares the graduation rates of two cohorts of transfer students from our traditional BAAS program and CBE BAAS/TAB-ORGL program at A&M – Commerce that started Fall 2015. By next year (Fall 2016), only 24.21% of transfer students from the traditional cohort had graduated, in comparison to a much higher 43.51% for the CBE cohort. A difference in accelerated time-to-completion of 19.3% percentage points faster for the TAB-ORGL cohort.
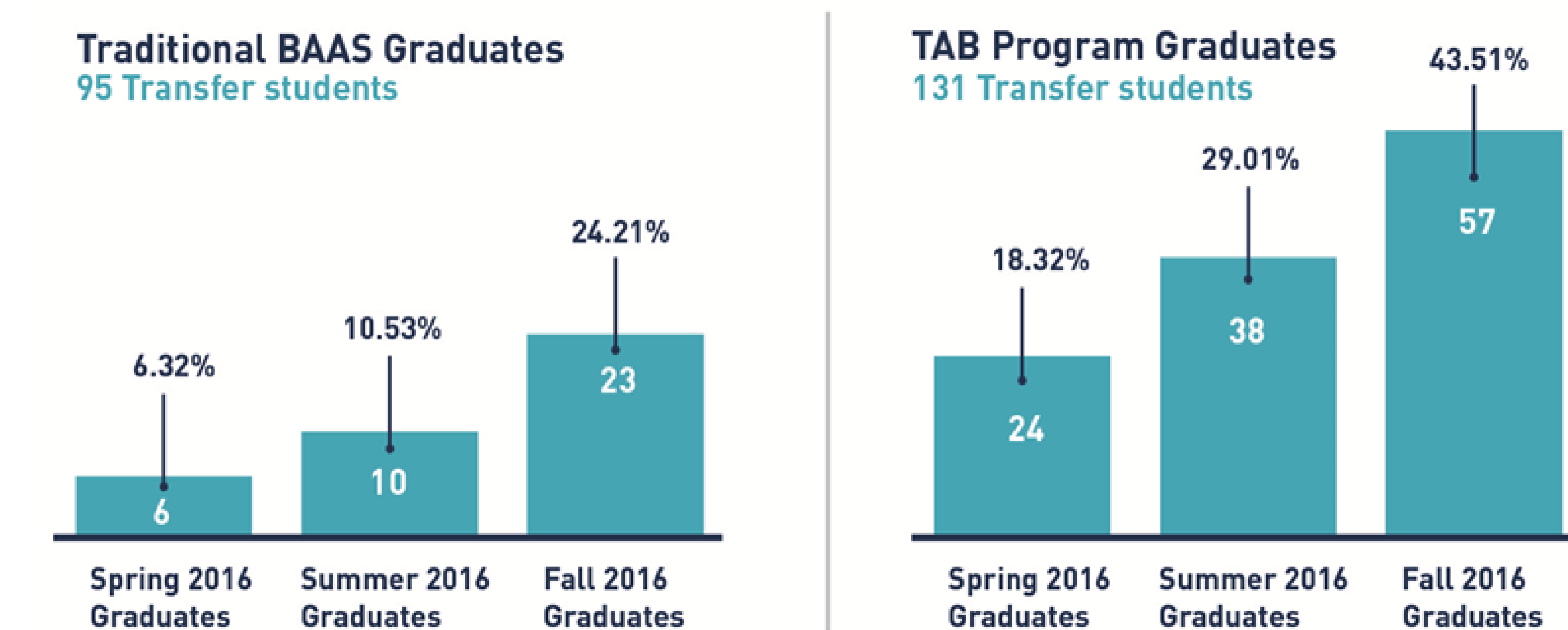
Conclusion

These findings suggest that competency-based education supports both affordability and acceleration for the increasing number of post-traditional students in particular, such as working adults who need the flexibility CBE offers. In Texas specifically, there are over 3 million post-traditional, working students with some college and no degree. Competency-based education seems to provide an effective and high-quality pathway for these students to return and complete their degree. As new models of education and teaching emerge in the higher education landscape, constituents will increasingly demand greater evidence of program effectiveness. It is our hope that this study and future research will continue to provide crucial evidence that will reflect in an upwards trend in the development and implementation of additional CBE programs, not only in the state of Texas, but nationwide.