

How this innovative university is addressing the 60x30TX initiative

Using CBE to help 60% of Texans graduate with either a certificate or degree by 2030

Texas A&M University-Commerce is tackling the 60x30TX initiative head on. Through innovative education programs, the University works to ensure students have marketable skills and reduced debt at graduation, while partnering with area-wide businesses to improve job prospects.

AT A GLANCE

Student Number: 12,500

Interviewees:

- James Fountain, Executive Director for the Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE) at Texas A&M-Commerce
- Carlos Rivers, Operations Research Analyst at Texas A&M-Commerce



SUMMARY

The 60x30TX initiative tasked all Texas colleges and universities to have at least 60% of Texans graduate with either a certificate or degree by 2030. Using CBE, Students are accelerating time-to-completion by at least 1 year and are seeing cost savings of almost \$9,000 in comparison to students in comparable traditional degree programs. Data drawn from Brightspace allows A&M-Commerce to get a granular view of how students are progressing, right down to individual grades all the way up to overall retention and completion metrics.

QUICK FACTS

- Started with 7 students; quickly grew to 441 enrolled students
- Nearly 92% of students are aged 25+
- 85% term-to-term retention rate
- 85% average term completion rate
- 428 graduates
- Time-to-degree: 1.4 years
- Cost-to-degree: Around \$6K
- Competency-based Education (CBE) Program

ALIGNING INSTITUTIONAL GOALS WITH THE 60X30TX INITIATIVE

In January 2014, Texas A&M University-Commerce launched the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) Program, a BAAS in Organizational Leadership, the state's first competency-based bachelor level degree program. In 2015, the 60x30TX initiative tasked all Texas colleges and universities with promoting student success through focus upon educating and empowering the next generation of citizens and employees. The strategy targets Texas residents who are mainly aged 25-34. It seeks to have at least 60% of Texans graduate with either a certificate or degree by 2030. 60x30TX's chances for success depend upon attracting new learners, ones that might already be on a career path, but need further education for advancement. Or perhaps they have already done some higher education, but are looking for ways to leverage what credits and skills they currently possess.

These "new traditional" learners have unique needs and issues that have customarily impeded them from achieving educational and career goals. As such, the state of Texas has recognized how important building the next generation of Texan is going to be for the economic and social destiny of the state.

A&M-Commerce's embrace of innovative education programs and technology to address the needs of the 60x30TX initiative set it apart. The University helped pioneer blended learning and flexible models such as



“We had a student who was a statistician in the army. He completed his advanced statistics course in 36-hours! But he spent all 7 weeks on art appreciation.”

Carlos Rivers, Operations Research Analyst, Texas A&M-Commerce

competency-based education (CBE). CBE and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), as well as leveraging predictive analytics are all recommended by the state initiative as a means of helping students to persist through and succeed in their education.

While CBE is a heavy lift in the initial stages, the rewards to students are numerous and tangible, as we hope this story will reveal.

WHY ADOPT NEW EDUCATION STRATEGY AND TECHNOLOGY?

James Fountain is the Executive Director for the Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE) at A&M-Commerce. While that may seem like a Texas-sized title, it pales in comparison to his passion for CBE. “Technology isn’t just a fad,” he explains. “The demographic is changing, students are changing, and higher education needs to change as well.” The Institute advocates for CBE and engages with other higher education institutions across Texas to help develop new CBE programs in support of the 60x30TX plan.

Carlos Rivers is the Operations Research Analyst at A&M-Commerce. He collects and analyzes the data that drives informed institutional decisions and policies. As well, he is an expert in predictive analytics and has contributed to the development and adoption of new learning models across Texas.

Student success is at the heart of the A&M-Commerce mission. ICBE tracks student data to show the impact of higher education on their lives. This is no small task. For James, Carlos and the rest of the team, student success is the transformation of student lives. CBE provides adult learners the opportunity and flexibility to finish something they started a long time ago.

“Many adult learners have a high level of semester credit hours, but no degree to show for their work. We realized we could cater to them using CBE.”

Carlos Rivers, Operations Research Analyst at Texas A&M-Commerce

THE GROWING DEMAND FOR CBE

“90% of our student population is aged 25 years and up,” explains Carlos. “That student is exactly who the 60x30TX initiative is trying to reach.” Initially, CBE at A&M-Commerce was offered to a target audience of working professionals. The initial beta group of only seven students was designed to receive feedback and maximize best practices so the program could move to scale. Over time, as word spread and program leaders recognized potential markets, enrollment reached more than 400. Since 2014, CBE has produced more than 400 graduates. There was little marketing involved. Students were attracted to the CBE program mainly by word-of-mouth, which only shows how eager students are for this type of model of education. “Just like in Field of Dreams, we believed:



build it and they will come,” beams James. Carlos echoes this success, saying “Students tell us that if it weren’t for these types of degrees, they wouldn’t have come back to school.”

These types of challenges that students and states face aren’t exclusive to Texas. James reveals that he receives consistent requests for consulting on CBE programs across the country. The demand for CBE is real and it’s a growing trend.

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING NEW STUDENTS WHILE MANAGING DEBT

Adult learners have unique needs and seek flexible education solutions. CBE at A&M-Commerce provides one that fits their schedules. These “new traditional” students may be working full-time, have family obligations, or struggle with financial barriers preventing easy attendance at a set time in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Despite these potential barriers to education, A&M-Commerce seeks to help these students to not only see education as a viable and attractive option, but also enable them to persist and complete their education, career, and life goals. This also means ensuring that students can graduate with the state-mandated goal of a student debt that is at, or below 60% of their first annual salary after graduation. By offering a flat rate tuition of \$750

per term and accepting otherwise unused existing semester hours as transfer credit, A&M-Commerce is helping to manage their students’ debt load. Students are able to achieve a degree for under \$6,000, saving about half the cost that it would have been in a traditional setting.

On top of the significant tuition savings, students can graduate at a faster pace. Students are accelerating time-to-completion by at least 1 year and are seeing cost savings of almost \$9,000 in comparison to students in comparable traditional degree programs. Students can satisfy parts of degree requirements through transfer credits or prior learning assessment (PLA). A pre-assessment allows Faculty members to work individually with their students to create personalized learning paths for each course. Once a student has mastered competencies and completed an artifact, a post-assessment of 80% or better is needed to receive course credit. A student has the option to spend more or less time on their course depending upon the level of mastery they have with it. There are many ways a student can accelerate or decelerate time to degree completion, depending upon their interests or graduation timeline. CBE allows students to speed up on what they already know, and take additional time on competencies and skills that are new to them.



“Having worked with many Learning Management Systems’, Brightspace is the most effective platform to deliver a CBE program. We’re excited to see how D2L is embracing innovative education solutions to help our students to truly succeed.”

James Fountain, Executive Director for the Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE), Texas A&M-Commerce

THE IMPACT OF INCREASED INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE

Research conducted by Carlos suggests that students feel they receive a greater level of guidance and feedback from faculty members in their CBE program than they would from traditional programs. This again supports A&M-Commerce’s student-centered educational mission, and helps to increase the likelihood of persistence and completion. “CBE is a strategy,” explains James, “that gives that flexibility that adult learners need to complete their program and move up in their careers.”

TRACKING STUDENTS THROUGH THE PROGRAM

As Texas tracks the progress of the 60x30TX initiative, A&M-Commerce tracks its students through its CBE program and also the number of students graduating through CBE programs throughout the state. Texas’s 2017 status report reveals 60x30TX is on schedule to deliver on its intended outcomes. A&M-Commerce is also on track to meet its regional and institutional goals as mandated by the state. Data drawn from Brightspace allows A&M-Commerce to get a granular view of how students are progressing, right down to individual grades all the way up to overall retention and completion metrics.

PRODUCING STUDENTS WITH MARKETABLE SKILLS

To ensure students are learning skills that can lead to job prospects upon graduation, A&M-Commerce analyzed labor markets and strategized with business leaders and potential employers. Analysis revealed an increased demand for managerial/supervisory positions in the services industry and manufacturing base. They looked at the type of student who might be working with 10-15 years of experience, but who simply needed the piece of paper to move them up in their degree in order to make them qualified for mid-level manager positions. By exploring the industries in which students were likely to find employment, A&M-Commerce was able to build programs that teach the skills and competencies needed, in the shortest time possible. Employers also currently make up the advisory board for the program. A field of industry experts were also invited to participate in the program’s 5th year review.

“A student might be working with 10-15 years of experience, but they simply need that piece of paper to move them up in their degree, and in their job.”

James Fountain, Executive Director for the Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE) at Texas A&M-Commerce



DEVELOPING A COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK TO MAP TO CREDIT HOURS

“Our students still receive a traditional transcript to show credit hours and grades,” explains Carlos. This allows students to have the transcript they need should they wish to transfer out to another institution or pursue a graduate education. Mapping back to credit hours was also important for accreditation reasons. Equally important is that financial aid in Texas requires institutions to provide information about credit hours so students can continue to receive financial support. A&M-Commerce is using Brightspace as a means of connecting competencies with specific artifacts that show evidence of learning. Reporting tools such as the Brightspace Datahub, are important to show on how they’re meeting the standard for substantive interaction.

“By pointing to artifacts stored in the digital portfolio, we can demonstrate the back-and-forth, the substantive interaction, that goes on between instructor and student.”

James Fountain, Executive Director for the Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE) at Texas A&M-Commerce

CONCLUSIONS AND THE FUTURE OF CBE IN TEXAS

By embracing new education models and next generation education technology, James is confident that they’re on the right path to encouraging new students to enrol, to remain, to graduate, and ultimately to discover a great career path, with as little debt as possible. And this is why he advocates so strongly for CBE as a potential solution. The numbers bear him out. A&M-Commerce is currently closing in on 400 graduates through their CBE program. The institution is also about to launch a second TAB program this Fall, a BS in Criminal Justice that will target first-responders and experienced criminal justice professionals. “We’re truly planting a lot of gardens that will reap a lot of student completions over the next few years.”

Over the next 5 years, Carlos says that the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board estimates that because other Texas institutions are implementing additional Texas Affordable Baccalaurate programs, we’ll be seeing at least 20,000 enrolled students by 2030. A&M-Commerce is and has been on the forefront of CBE and works towards driving the facts and the metrics home to other Texas higher education institutions. D2L shares their conviction and is honored to partner with A&M-Commerce as they advocate for innovative education solutions in the state of Texas.