



An Ombuds Reflection on Student Stopouts in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

An Ombuds reflection on student stopouts in higher education. This paper discusses the barriers that force students to choose to temporarily stopout or pause their education and the Ombuds' influential role in identifying, preventing, limiting, and aiding in the re-enrollment of stopouts.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, stopout, higher education



One critical challenge can change the course of a student's academic experience and become the catalyst for the decision to stopout. In higher education, a student stopout is commonly known as a student who withdraws intending to re-enroll at a later date. While the intended action is meant to be temporary, the data shows that only 42% of stopped-out students return to college within a term and 60% return within a year (Educational Advisory Board [EAB], 2020). The EAB reports suggests over 70% of students return to school within 3 to 4 years. This gap in enrollment highlights the important of continuous enrollment. The issue is barriers to continuous enrollment can force students to choose to stopout which can pause or end their college education journey. These statistics present a challenge for institutions and an opportunity for the Ombuds profession.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the importance of the role of the ombuds in identifying and mitigating student stopouts in higher education. University ombuds have firsthand experience with students navigating disruptive issues the result of which could be an enrollment interruption, degree delay, or the end of their college journey. A visit to the ombuds office can reveal the nature of the issues, which could be anything from financial problems to academic concerns. Regardless, the university ombuds can assist in addressing the problem and can be an integral part of the solution.

There are many examples of the benefits of ombuds interventions. One such example is early detection, which is when a student visitor presents an issue to the Ombuds early enough to prevent the damage of stopping out. This means the student can avoid interruption of their studies and limit the risks of increasing time to degree or degree completion (DesJardins, et al., 2022a). One example of early detection is the resolution of an outstanding balance owed to the institutions. These and many other financial issues may result in withheld transcripts and a lack of access to previous credits and without access to a transcript, previous credits cannot be used to transfer to another institution.

There are times when a student contacts the ombuds office after they have already stopped out. In this situation, the ombuds can act as an intermediary for critical feedback and bear witness to the state of current events that highlight the student's vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities may be upward reported to shed light on the types of pivotal problems whether academic, financial, or medical that create barriers, precipitate delays, or terminate educational goals. Many potential issues exist, such as the affordability of a meal plan that becomes a dispute that snowballs or university audits resulting in billing for outstanding balances years after charges were initially incurred. Billing issues become registration holds which can result in stopouts. The ombuds can assist in these matters by assisting students in contacting the appropriate office regarding payment options. The outcomes can be detrimental, and the barriers can become insurmountable without some guidance and discretionary measures being applied.

Higher education administrators are not completely aware of the underlying factors that cause students to interrupt their degree-seeking goals. Ombuds can help fill the gap and provide administrators with a better understanding of the phenomena of the stopout experience. The Ombuds' approach consists of unique direct engagement with students relating to their accounts of personal experiences. The key component of the ombuds dynamic is facilitating conversations where students feel safe to share and explore preventative measures or conflict resolution which can then be effectively trend-reported. Trend reporting these encounters may influence the development of resolution options designed to avoid the stopout or to encourage re-enrollment outreach measures.

It is clear stopouts affect time to degree and degree completion (DesJardins, et al., (2006). The impact of delays in enrollment or graduation is problematic for students, colleges, and universities. The University ombuds may be an untapped resource to all university stakeholders



in understanding the issue and making critical changes. The ombuds can take a proactive “deeper level” approach by providing independent, informal, impartial, and confidential spaces uniquely focused on seeking options. Higher educational leadership should consider developing processes that would allow them to routinely gather and analyze relevant data to gain a better understanding of the effects of institution-specific stopout issues. Additionally, addressing communication gaps will build more awareness of this critical issue. Ultimately, the university ombuds should continue to provide guidance for those at risk and provide upward feedback to higher education leadership.



AUTHOR BIO

Angella Wint is a doctoral student in Higher Education Leadership and Research Methodology and University Ombudsman at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, FL. Prior to her current position with the university, she worked as a Paralegal in the General Counsel's Office. She has worked at Florida Atlantic University since 2016. She is also a member of the International Ombudsman Association (IOA). Angella recently passed the examination required as the first step to becoming a Certified Organizational Ombudsman Practitioner®." (winta@fau.edu)