

Crossing the Finish Line: Increasing Degree Completion for Students Who Have Stopped Out

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Abstract

Each year, hundreds of thousands of students leave higher education without earning their degree. Helping these students return and complete their degree is an enormous opportunity for higher education to propel social and economic mobility for students and their broader communities. With limited resources at postsecondary institutions, however, most institutional attention tends to go to students *currently* enrolled, not those who *were* enrolled. In this case study of Florida State University's Completion Campaign, we detail how a low-cost, high-impact effort has helped over 1,600 students in four years return to complete their degrees. We illustrate the key features and components of the program, its impact on student success, and considerations for institutions who may want to adopt similar approaches.

Keywords: dropout; senior stop out; completion

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Introduction

The pursuit of higher education is a commitment of time, energy, and resources shared among the student and the institution. Many students, especially those beginning full-time at a bachelor's degree granting institution, have plans to take full advantage of their opportunities and successfully complete their degree within four years. What many do not anticipate is that some type of obstacle will surface that will impede their ability to progress to graduation.

Of the first time, full-time degree seeking students who entered college in the U.S. in fall 2014, only 45.4 percent earned their bachelor's degree within four years, and only 65.4 percent in six years. A troubling 26.6 percent discontinued their enrollment altogether in postsecondary education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021).

Not having a degree can significantly impair a person's ability to progress in the workforce, impacting earning potential and much more. In 2015, the median earnings of bachelor's degree recipients working full-time were 67 percent higher than those of high school graduates, whereas those with some college but no degree only earned 12 percent more than high school graduates (Ma et al., 2016). Over a lifetime, estimates are that men with a bachelor's degree earn about \$670,000 more and women would earn \$490,000 more than those with some college but no degree (Social Security Administration, 2015).

Vincent Tinto suggests "the process of persistence is not the mirror image of the process of leaving" (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). There are myriad reasons why students discontinue their enrollment in college: finances, family obligations, institutional fit, lack of academic preparation, mental health, medical challenges, and others. What is most disappointing is that many students leave higher education even after earning significant college credit—leaving sometimes when they are only one or two terms away from graduation.

Literature Review

Higher education researchers and practitioners know considerable amounts about the risk-factors associated with student retention and persistence, especially for first-year students, and the many strategies developed to curb attrition (Mayhew et al., 2016). Minimal research, however, focuses on the students who leave within months of completing their degree.

Determining which near-completers may be susceptible to discontinuing enrollment can be challenging. Mabel and Britton (2018) questioned whether credit hour completion or duration of enrollment would serve as a better proxy for identifying these students prior to stopping out. While monitoring duration is an important and necessary part of computing retention and completion rates, it can be misleading when students are unable to complete full-time course loads or have intermittent enrollment. Looking at credit accumulation, Mabel and Britton (2018) found that "students who failed to

earn 20 percent or more of their attempted credits each semester, on average, were more than five times as likely to withdraw without earning a degree relative to students who failed no more than 10 percent of their course load each term” (p. 41).

Hunt et al. (2012) found that institutional issues played a minor role in a student’s decision to withdraw during their senior year, whereas pressures from family expectations, balancing academics while employed, and recent or anticipated poor grades played a significant role. A Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey found that the reason a student stopped out of college in the first place often continued to be the barrier that prohibited them from reenrolling, including difficulties with work/life balance or the expense of attending college (Lumina Foundation, 2019). Using a hazard analysis to predict persistence and graduation, Berzenski (2019) determined that predictors often differed between first-time-in-college and first-time transfer students. They did find, however, that students’ total units enrolled and cumulative campus grade point average were prominent predictors of graduation and dropout rates among both populations.

While it is important to understand the factors that may persuade a student to discontinue enrollment, it is equally as important to understand why they would return. In a survey conducted by Johnson (2021), late-departures who returned to their institution to complete their degree were asked what motivated their return. Their reasons fell into three categories: intrinsic motivation, career advancement, and financial factors. Many of the students identified intrinsic motivators as their leading reasons to recommit to completion—that there was a sense of accomplishment, an acknowledgment that they were so close to finishing, and a desire to continue to learn that influenced their actions.

The interest in connecting with students who have stopped out with the intent of getting them to re-enroll has been embraced by numerous institutions. The State University of New York (SUNY) reported positive outcomes from their Re-Enroll to Complete Program, which connected with students who had previously borrowed federal loans and were approaching the end of their six month grace period before repayment began (The State University of New York, 2019). Cleveland State University partnered with the community organization College Now Cleveland to offer the (Re)Connect to College program to recruit local students to return to complete their degrees. They also promote a loan forgiveness program for students who have debt from prior semesters (Enrollment Services, n.d.). Outreach services have also extended to companies such as InsideTrack and ReUp who partner with community colleges and universities to support their re-enrollment goals through the use of data and analytics and may even include a coaching component for students who commit to returning (Inside Track, n.d.; ReUp Education, n.d.).

Some state higher education systems or legislatures have also launched reenrollment and degree completion efforts. For instance, within the past decade the Florida legislature funded two programs to support students who discontinued enrollment. Complete Florida was introduced in 2013 with the aim of recruiting Florida adults with some college but no degree to participate in distance learning programs at a Florida college

or university. The program was discontinued in 2020 (What is Complete Florida, n.d.). The Last Mile Completion Program, launched in 2019, was created for students who were within 12 hours of completing their first associate or baccalaureate degree from a state or community college in the Florida College System. All 28 colleges in the Florida College System currently participate (Derby, 2019). While variations of reenrollment initiatives exist across the nation, they all appear to have the shared goal of helping students alleviate or overcome the barrier which caused the discontinued enrollment.

Description of FSU's Completion Campaign Program

Like most institutions, Florida State University (FSU) experienced a student attrition pattern in which some students left the university despite significant progress toward their degree. To understand what was causing these students to leave and to explore what could be done to have them return, the Graduation Planning and Strategies (GPS) Office at FSU launched the Completion Campaign.

The GPS Office at FSU was developed in spring 2017 under the guidance of the Office of the Provost. The goal was to identify and support undergraduate students experiencing barriers to degree completion through individual intervention, policy review, and program development. While there were numerous existing university initiatives supporting the timely graduation of currently enrolled students, it became clear to the GPS team that there was a gap in university operations—there were no systematic outreach efforts being made for students who discontinued enrollment (i.e., those who left college without completing a degree).

It was especially concerning to see students who were potentially 1-2 terms away from graduation no longer enrolling in classes. Since delaying or foregoing degree completion can significantly impact a student's future, the Completion Campaign's outreach effort was launched to re-engage with these near-completers.

Components of Program

Navigating the return to college after an absence can be challenging, especially if the student needs to go through a formalized readmission process or finds themselves no longer living near the college or university. The Completion Campaign aimed to support re-enrollment and provide students with the most efficient, cost-effective path to degree completion.

It was decided very early on that for this initiative to be successful, it needed to be intentional and personalized. Students were already accustomed to receiving generic messaging about enrolling for classes in a future term, so GPS began to explore what could be done to set this communication and outreach effort apart. Steps included:

1. Identifying the population. Having at least 100 credit hours was selected as a proxy given that most students with this many credit hours were likely 1-2 terms away from graduating. Students also had to be in good academic

standing. Using these criteria, GPS reviewed nearly 2,900 academic records from May 2017–May 2021. Proportionally to the entire undergraduate population, transfer students represented a larger group discontinuing enrollment than the freshman-start population.

2. Coordinating with academic affairs colleagues. While there was a standardization of overall degree requirements, knowing the intricacies of each academic program and major was challenging. The team partnered with academic units to review each student's academic progress and identify any deficiencies or academic obstacles that may prohibit the student from returning to their most recent program of study. This review allowed GPS to anticipate some of the procedural challenges a returning student may encounter.
3. Contacting the student. As early as their first semester of non-enrollment, these students received personalized communication inviting them to talk about their reasons for stopping their academic progress. Correspondence initially began with an email to their university account but then escalated to phone calls, text messages, and messaging to other emails on file.

While some students responded immediately, it took others six months to a year to feel comfortable sharing their story. Some shared that they did not think the university cared about them anymore, or that they were embarrassed that they did not finish, or that they had situations in their lives that forced them to leave. Hearing from the GPS office provided the confidence and pathway needed to reengage in higher education. Since the GPS team had already conducted initial academic record reviews for each student before reaching out, the team was able to offer each student a detailed plan for completion. These plans included returning to the university in a future term, enrolling as a transient student at another institution, or taking a CLEP test for those last few hours of credit they need. If necessary, a student was then connected to the appropriate academic and student support resources to facilitate their return.

The Completion Campaign aimed to have students earn their degree—not just re-enroll. After a student committed to returning, GPS continued to monitor their progress toward completion. For some, it was simply checking grades and verifying future term registration. For those who required more attention, regular check-ins were established to ensure the continuation of positive progress.

Demographic Distribution of Students in Completion Campaign

Gender. During the fall and spring terms of the year, the gender distribution of students who stopped out generally mirrored the gender distribution of the university's undergraduate student body. Since the Completion Campaign has begun, the FSU undergraduate enrolled population includes 56 percent female and 44 percent male with minimal change between terms (FSU Office of Institutional Research, 2021). However, the gender distribution of students identified in the summer for not being enrolled in either the summer or coming fall terms did not match the gender distribution

of the student body, with many more males identified. During the summer terms, males accounted for at least 57 percent of the outreach and as high as 65 percent of the outreach list in summer 2018. Unlike other enrollment periods, FSU students can register for summer and fall courses at the same time in late spring. The students who were identified during the summer term were not enrolled in either summer or fall courses, and it is unclear what percentage of these students would have eventually enrolled for fall courses without the Completion Campaign outreach.

Race. Like the gender distribution, there has been minimal change within the racial diversity of the general FSU undergraduate population since the launch of the Completion Campaign (FSU Office of Institutional Research, 2021). The distribution by race in the Campaign was comparable to the general undergraduate population, with the exception of White females and White males. Some of the noticeable differences are that while White women typically account for about 33 percent of FSU's undergraduate population, they only made up 23.65 percent of the outreach population. Similarly, White males typically account for about 26 percent of the FSU population, but they made up 31.05 percent of the outreach population. There were occasional fluctuations between terms among other populations of students; however, they were typically isolated to one term and did not warrant concern.

Table 1 illustrates a comprehensive distribution of students identified in the Completion Campaign by race and gender from May 2017 – May 2021. Although the total percentage of male students identified through the Completion Campaign is disproportionate to the general undergraduate population, this was a result of having higher non-enrollment numbers in the summer terms.

Table 1. Comprehensive Distribution of Students Identified in Completion Campaign by Race and Gender (May 2017 – May 2021)

Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.17%	0.14%	0.31%
Asian	0.90%	1.35%	2.25%
Black/African American	6.40%	4.53%	10.93%
Hispanic/Latino	10.79%	11.83%	22.61%
Native Hawaiian/Oth Pac Island	0.03%	0.03%	0.07%
Not Specified	0.55%	0.86%	1.42%
Two or More Races	3.49%	4.22%	7.71%
White	23.65%	31.05%	54.70%
Total	45.99%	54.01%	100.00%

Pell Grant Status. The percentage of Pell Grant recipients in the Campaign generally mirrored FSU’s student body, with about 25 percent of students in the Campaign receiving a Pell Grant (FSU Office of Institutional Research, 2021).

Evidence for Student Success

Of the 2,900 student records reviewed, 1,648 worked with the GPS team and earned their degrees as of May 2021. There are 774 additional students who are actively engaging with the office and have either already returned or are working to return by alleviating the barriers that contributed to their stoppage.

Table 2 illustrates the status of students identified through the Completion Campaign through May 2021. The column “Actively Engaged with GPS” includes students who have already enrolled as well as students working toward re-enrollment. The information for column “Not Returning to FSU” was determined through outreach with students, staff, and data from the National Student Clearinghouse to indicate enrollment at another institution.

Table 2. Distribution of Current Status of Students Identified Through the Completion Campaign

	Degree Posted	Actively Engaging with GPS	Not Returning to FSU	Not Responsive to Outreach	Total
First-Time in-College	886	351	131	84	1452
Transfer	762	423	157	100	1442
Total	1648	774	288	184	2894

As suspected, there were numerous reasons a student made the decision to stop out, and it was rarely just one reason. Over half of the respondents, 53 percent, experienced challenges making academic progress within their degree requirements. This included being unsuccessful in their current major, which led to an administrative intervention requiring a major change; failing to submit official transcripts from a prior institution for coursework taken as a transient student; or not completing the application for graduation during their anticipated final term of enrollment.

Forty percent experienced a shift in priorities, which in most cases led to them leaving the Tallahassee area, where FSU is based. Typically, these students were balancing work and family commitments. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, also contributed to these students needing to re-evaluate how completing their education fit into their current life situation. Financial concerns impacted 32 percent of the responding population. Some of these students had past course schedules canceled for non-payment of tuition; others saw a significant change in federal financial aid availability. Of the population who attributed financial challenges

impacting their ability to return, only 26 percent were Pell Grant recipients in their final term before discontinuing enrollment. Finally, 12 percent disclosed experiencing mental health or medical challenges that forced them to pause their studies.

The amount of time between discontinued enrollment and connecting with this population was critical, as the longer a student was removed from enrolling in courses, the tougher it was to get them to return. Connecting with the student early, even if re-enrollment could not be immediate, was key in maintaining a student's commitment to earning their degree. This observation echoes findings in the 2019 National Student Clearinghouse report *Some College, No Degree*, which concluded that students who re-enrolled within three years of their last enrollment had a 50 percent greater chance of completing than those who re-enrolled after four or five years (Shapiro et al., 2019, p. 10).

The time between initial GPS outreach to the student and degree completion varied widely. There were 539 students who earned their degree without any additional terms of enrollment after initial GPS outreach. The reasons for why these students had not completed their degrees varied. For some, it was a failure to submit formal test credit reports and transcripts from other institutions. Although students received communication from the university about potential requirement deficiencies and the documentation needed to rectify the outstanding requirements within their final term of enrollment, students did not always submit the documentation on time.

There were also students who satisfied all their degree requirements but never applied for graduation, so they still appeared to the university as a degree-seeking student. At FSU, students must complete an electronic application for graduation during their expected final term of enrollment. Completion of the application prompts the university to review the student's academic record to determine their eligibility to graduate at the conclusion of the given term. The application is open between the second and third weeks of the semester and students receive several email reminders about the process while the application portal is open. Applying for graduation once the online application closes is still an option; however, it requires coordination with the student's college and Office of the Registrar. Efforts have been underway at FSU to explore what can be done to minimize the number of students impacted by their failure to participate in the graduation application process, including the development of an automatic graduation application process.

Most students had to re-enroll in the university: 783 students earned their degree within 1-2 terms of initial contact and 188 students within 3-4 terms. The remaining 138 students took 5 terms or more to complete their degrees.

Table 3 illustrates the total time it took the Completion Campaigns' students to complete their degree at FSU, from first matriculation at the university, to stoppage, to reenrollment and completion. Since much time can pass between leaving the university and completing, connecting early with students who stop out was important to prevent further delays.

Table 3. Distribution of Earned Degrees by Admission Type and Time to Degree (Years at FSU)

	≤ 2	2.5 – 4	4.5 – 6	≥ 6.5	Total
First-Time in-College	0	340	462	84	886
Transfer	82	476	154	50	762
Total	82	816	616	134	1648

The Completion Campaign’s ongoing efforts have helped to increase FSU’s overall graduation rates. Of the first time, full-time degree seeking students who entered FSU in fall 2010, 62.6 percent completed their degree in four years and 80.1 percent completed in six years (FSU Office of Institutional Research, 2018a). The 2014 cohort rose to a 71.6 percent four-year graduation rate and an 84.2 percent six-year graduation rate (FSU Office of Institutional Research, 2018b). The Completion Campaign’s direct contribution to that improvement reflected .5 percent of the total FSU student population who graduated within four years and 2.5 percent of those who completed a degree within six years.

Furthermore, while the students who had stopped-out were the primary beneficiaries of the Completion Campaign, currently enrolled students also benefited. By documenting the reasons for discontinued enrollment, GPS identified several workflow processes at the institution that contributed to a student not earning their degree. This data served as the catalyst needed to have institutional conversations about processes and procedures that needed to change. One significant change was transitioning a paper-based process for students seeking a waiver for a specific degree requirement to an electronic process. As a paper-based workflow, students not only had to know how to request the form, but it had to be approved by multiple offices which led to a significant delay in processing. This barrier was previously unknown to the broader university community, and the Campaign’s findings helped it become an institutional priority to address. Potentially eligible students are now prompted to apply for the waiver well before their final term of enrollment through the FSU student portal and the entire process, including communication about the status of the request, occurs entirely electronically using a workflow created within the student information system. This enhancement not only positively impacted the students identified in this initiative, but also positively impacted processes for currently enrolled students. Academic units have also amended their post-semester communication to students who applied for graduation but were no longer eligible to earn their degree once final term grades posted. Colleges have increased their outreach to this population and often include GPS in the correspondence knowing these students will likely be included in the Completion Campaign.

Strategic staffing of this initiative played a significant role in its early success. The overall management of the program—identifying the population each term, gathering academic progress information, and communicating to the students—was overseen by

a dedicated staff member within the GPS office who served as the connector among campus partners supporting the students' return. The Campaign found that some barriers to completion can be more complicated than others and took longer to resolve. As such, there were considerable benefits to having staff who had significant institutional experience, a passion for student success, and an interest in maintaining relationships with students over extended periods of time.

Next Steps

While the Completion Campaign experienced success as early as its first semester of implementation, outreach strategies, data collection, and program maintenance are consistently under review. As student needs evolve so do the barriers impacting the ability to progress toward degree completion. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for everyone; the program can only continue to build on the existing momentum if each student's individual situation is acknowledged. Available institution resources for this population can also change, so it is essential to communicate with campus partners regularly to ensure the best possible support and most efficient path to completion can be offered.

Moving forward, given the high number of students who have returned to complete their degrees through the Completion Campaign, there is interest in lowering the current earned credit hour threshold and expanding outreach to include additional students who have discontinued enrollment regardless of total earned hours and how close they are to completion. This expansion requires at least one additional staff member. While the foundation of the current outreach efforts would be maintained, this population would need to make a different commitment to returning to FSU to complete their degree, as the options for completing remaining requirements, especially if residing out of state, may not be feasible. The language used when working with these students and the action steps required to commit to the return would also require different campus support.

Conclusion

Monitoring retention and degree completion is an industry standard; however, limited resources often force institutions to allocate support to the most vulnerable populations of currently enrolled students. So much energy is placed on keeping a student enrolled, with much less going toward those who have already left. FSU's commitment to connect with those who have discontinued enrollment was unique because it was a population often forgotten. These students made a significant investment in their future when first enrolling at the university. Leaving higher education, especially when just a few credit hours short of completion, could dramatically impact their future, both personally and financially.

By helping students identify individualized, innovative paths to completion; providing concise information to simplify a student's decision making; sharing guidance on where they could turn for help; and being encouraging to persist in school, the Completion Campaign illustrated for students that a degree was still attainable, even when they felt they had exhausted all of their options.

The lesson from FSU's Completion Campaign is clear. Institutions can increase completion rates among students who stop out through low-cost outreach and support. Doing this work helps institutions live up to their promise to empower upward mobility for individuals and their communities.

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