

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

TOOLS FOR ASSESSING ADMINISTRATIVE HOLDS



FROM THE NO HOLDING BACK PROJECT

As part of the [No Holding Back project](#), WICHE conducted student focus groups with 50 students from 10 institutions. The intent of these focus groups was to capture student perspectives regarding policies and practices around administrative and student success holds at the participating institutions.

Students were asked:

- ▶ To define the term “hold” as they understood it and identify times that they, friends, or classmates had experienced a hold.
- ▶ How they navigated the holds process, who they interacted with, how they were communicated with, and how they resolved their holds.
- ▶ About any impacts of experiencing and navigating holds.
- ▶ Insights or recommendations they would offer for higher education leaders and policy makers.

Students self-identified as belonging to one or more demographic groups when they registered for the focus groups. Most students identified with more than one racial or ethnic identity.

Additionally, 10% of the students described being transfer students, and many described themselves in ways that are often associated with ‘non-traditional’ learners: self-described ‘adult’ students, parents, or students who stopped out and returned to school, did not have parental or familial support, or veterans.

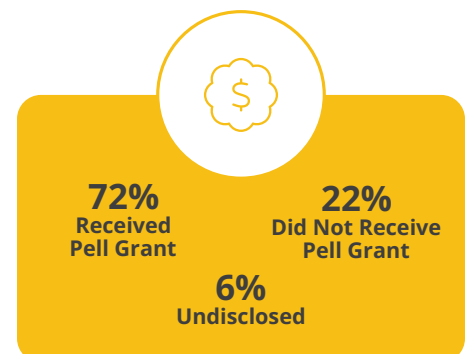
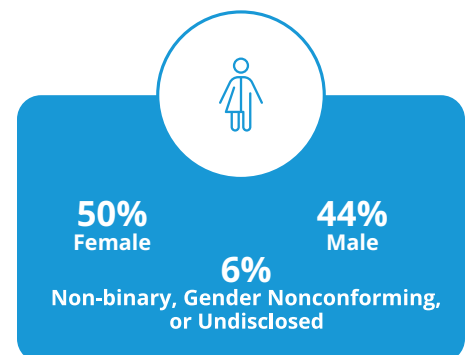
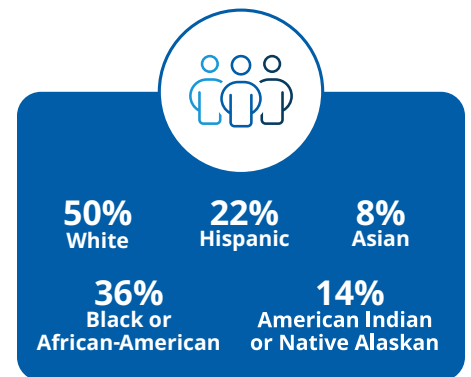
WICHE sought insights from former students as well, but only currently enrolled students attended the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted via videoconference.

Starting Ideas

Student perspectives can be an important part of an assessment of administrative holds. This guide, as well as student quotes and profiles that can be found among other [resources from No Holding Back project](#), provide possible approaches to exploring student insights. However, existing research about best practices for obtaining student feedback should also be consulted.

(continued)

Who Did We Hear From?





- ▶ Questions used for the *No Holding Back* student focus groups, shown at the end of this guide, are a possible starting point for planning student interviews or focus groups.
- ▶ Know whether, how, and when to seek institutional review board approval.
- ▶ Consider authentic and student-centered opportunities to involve students and learn about their needs, concerns, or impressions, for example:
 - Student journalism, student groups and clubs, student government and leadership.
 - Courses such as statistics and higher education policy, for which analyzing holds might constitute a class project or student research opportunity.
- ▶ Seek a wide range of student perspectives and consider what might limit certain students from providing their perspective, for example:
 - Conduct outreach to students who are no longer enrolled but are, or were, affected by holds.
 - Use multiple methods for getting feedback to optimize student involvement.
 - Bear in mind student work schedules or conflicts with work or home responsibilities, transportation, needs for special accommodation, and digital access limitations.
- ▶ Use student-centered, descriptive language, not just administrative terminology. For example, refer to holds in practical terms, such as when students couldn't register for classes, couldn't receive their financial aid, or were required to meet with a staff member. These terms can be more effective than institutional jargon like 'administrative hold' or 'debt hold'.



Student Perspectives

Selected experiences and testimony from the 50 students who participated in focus groups are highlighted throughout the [No Holding Back resources](#). Here are some common themes:

- ▶ Students often could not differentiate or name types of holds, but described the impact they had on them, often in more conversational terms.
- ▶ Students acknowledged that institutions need a way to prompt action and hold students accountable to their financial responsibilities to the institution.

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“Graduate students did some of the data analysis about holds. They also conducted a student focus group, which surfaced that students often don't know they have a hold until they try to register for classes or access their transcript. Students want improved communication regarding when holds are placed and how to resolve holds. We are using this feedback to improve communication to students and staff, including in Spring 2024, a webpage dedicated to explaining holds and how to resolve them and possibly posters with QR codes directing to students to the website in various places around campus.”

IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY

“Why can't you just give a due date? Why does it have to impact registration?”

STUDENT AT 4-YEAR UNIVERSITY

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES



FROM THE NO HOLDING BACK PROJECT

- ▶ Students who could interpret a hold alert and found them easy to resolve were less likely to describe the experience as a hold stoppage on certain activity and more as a benign process. Students who experienced efficient and successful holds processes often described feeling a sense of trust and well-being in their college.
- ▶ Conversely, students expressed resentment of processes they perceived as bureaucratic, and for some, errors and institutional miscommunications amplified their impression that institutions didn't care about students. Students stated that the experience changed their impression of the institution, from being primarily focused on their academic success to primarily focused on profitability.
- ▶ Students often described the experience of holds for administrative purposes as stressful, punitive, and demoralizing.
- ▶ Students described greater emotional and psychological stress associated with financial-related holds, even those that were functionally easy to resolve.
- ▶ Students explained that life challenges or circumstances overtook the possibility or priority of taking a college administrative action or clearing the hold. Some students with persistent holds experienced ongoing challenges outside of school and saw holds as part of a compounding cycle of challenges. In some cases the stress of experiencing holds was exacerbated by a lack of access to needed mental health supports.
- ▶ Students frequently described a hold as the end-point in what felt like a chain of ineffective communication or lack of communication about administrative processes.

Students offered recommendations and requests, including:

- ▶ Alternative mechanisms to prompt or enforce necessary administrative tasks, including proactive and effective communication, rather than restricting registration.
- ▶ Proactive communication to alert students to impending or upcoming holds and reasons for them, including advance alerts about the impact of a hold on the next semester's registration, particularly from spring to fall semester.
- ▶ Improved and increased communication about holds, including:
 - Preventative communication prior to receiving a hold
 - Clear and detailed information about the process and timelines for lifting the hold
 - Ongoing communication during the life of the hold
 - Affirmative confirmation that the hold had been released from their account

“ They text us all the time for events and stuff like that, so why not about holds?

STUDENT AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

“ Not every student who is struggling or needs supports is failing their classes. All students need support.

STUDENT AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

“ If I had advice for the institution, it is to communicate with the students every semester to remind about how to avoid holds, and there should be a grace period.

STUDENT AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

(continued)



- Staff and advisor contact to help students avoid future holds, particularly when holds related to challenging life circumstances.
- More frequent, detailed, and continual communications using a range of channels (text, email, student portal, postal mail, phone calls, and in-person meetings)
- ▶ Consolidated, centralized, liaison, or triage approaches to resolving holds. These could include a dedicated staff member or office to assist on more than one type of hold, seamlessly contact or hand-off to other relevant staff, and manage institution-led follow up.
- ▶ Student-centered and positive language and terminology regarding holds, rather than administrative terms, jargon, or punitive messaging.
- ▶ Rapid appeals options, especially for holds placed in error or related to incongruent aid and payment schedules, and overall, increased payment flexibility.

Institution Perspectives

Institutions in the project expressed a desire to hear and consider what students need.

“ Ask students often about what they see or experience as inequities in institutional practices and take intentional steps to remove them.

UNIVERSITY OF GUAM



“ Consider holds from the student's point of view. Ask the questions: is the process, practice, or policy student centered, is it equitable, does it impose an unnecessary burden on students?

PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY



Do you have a story, perspective or idea about this?

Share with us here:

www.wiche.edu/

[administrative-holds/share](http://www.wiche.edu/administrative-holds/share)



Sample Student Focus Group Guide

This demonstrates the focus group guide utilized for the No Holding Back project, to capture student perspectives regarding administrative and student success holds policies and practices. This guide is for demonstration only, and is not a comprehensive, validated focus group planning tool. See also the important considerations and examples for getting student perspectives, in the foregoing Student Perspectives guide.

When engaging a focus group, consider:

- ▶ Introduce yourself and provide background information about the purpose of the focus group and how the information will be used
- ▶ Offer an appreciation gift for participant time, e.g., gift card, institutional 'schwag' or educational or organizational tool
- ▶ Establish and agree upon meeting behavior
 - Meeting time limits and giving 'equal time' across participants
 - Permission to skip or choose not to answer a question
 - What is shared will not be disclosed outside of the meeting by other participants
- ▶ Obtain informed consent, including confidentiality assurances, consent for recording, and so forth.

Discussion Topics & Questions to Participants

- ▶ Ask everyone to introduce themselves. You may consider asking students to share information such as: what year are they in? What is their major? Are they transfer students? What are their educational goals?
- ▶ Let's talk about what a 'hold' is. Had you all ever heard of the term "debt hold," "financial aid hold," "administrative hold," or "Student success holds" before I reached out?
 - Probe: where did you hear the term? From whom?
- ▶ Could you describe when you experienced a time you couldn't register for classes or access your transcript, and how that affected you personally? Going through school and in your careers has it affected you any?
 - Can anyone describe your experience having a hold on your records related to a debt or unpaid balance?
 - Have any of you been affected by these holds in terms of your financial situation—for example, whether you had sufficient financial aid or your own money to clear holds? [Conversely, probe for someone who didn't have trouble clearing debt, and how they were able to...]
- ▶ And so now that you've been recruited for this discussion, what is your understanding of what these holds are?
 - Follow up probe: Before getting recruited for this discussion, did you clearly understand what these were and why your college used them, or were you less clear?
- ▶ And let's talk about how you got information about holds being used. Do you remember how you were informed, like by text or email? Were you able to tell when you got messages or alerts about things, which needed to be taken care of to be able to register or get your transcript, and which were just informational or optional?

(continued)



FROM THE NO HOLDING BACK PROJECT

- How could your institution better share information about these holds with students?
- ▶ Now--how does (or how did) your institution help you overcome those holds? (I.e. remove the barrier to letting you register for classes or accessing your transcript, payment plan?)
 - Were you able to get the hold removed? Was it clear and easy enough, or not?
 - If not, how did your institution make it harder for you?
 - So, in a perfect world, what do you all think should be done to help students overcome these holds? [From your perspective, did these holds help you?—to not get behind on payments, or in your schooling? Or did they do something other than help you?]
- ▶ How do you think this is affecting other students? Have you heard of this happening to other people?
- ▶ Do you all have anything else you'd like policy makers or higher education leaders to think about on this issue; things you would want them to know?