

Free higher education retention policy of a local college in the Philippines: Insights of disqualified students

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To cite this article (APA): Ablian, J. D., Yabut, M. D., Tolentino, N. B., Serial, R. D., Sarmiento, E. K., Caras, K. P., Maniquiz, I. J. Y., & Dragon, C. D. (2023). Free higher education retention policy of a local college in the Philippines: Insights of disqualified students. *Journal of Research, Policy & Practice of Teachers and Teacher Education*, 13(1), 118–133. <https://doi.org/10.37134/jrppte.vol13.1.9.2023>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.37134/jrppte.vol13.1.9.2023>

Published: 30 June 2023

Abstract

Educational institutions should understand students' needs to provide a policy to help students achieve academic success. This study examines the insights and personal recommendations of purposively selected 20 college students disqualified from free higher education through a qualitative approach. It proposes a retention policy to address their needs. The research findings indicate that students were disqualified from free higher education for various reasons, including academic failures, difficulties processing subject withdrawals, balancing work and studies, and personal problems. The students' insights on the scholarship retention policy revealed their awareness and understanding of the procedure, a positive perception of its importance, recognition of the impact of personal circumstances, and the significance of responsibility and learning. They also suggest that the policy should be retained or revised and provide more clarity and consideration. By incorporating these insights and suggestions, the proposed retention policy aims to optimize retention rates, enhance student success, and ensure equitable opportunities for all recipients.

Keywords: Free higher education, retention policy, local college

Introduction

Education plays an essential role in different countries around the globe. Institutions must see that opportunities are provided for the student's success. One of the factors that educational institutions shall provide is access to different scholarship programs. Various institutions offer these to provide opportunities for all students to achieve their goals in life. There are many types of scholarships, such as merit-based, need-based, and diversity-based scholarships (Cain et al., 2018). Merit-based scholarships are awarded based on academic achievement, while need-based scholarships are distributed based on financial need (Son-Turan, 2016). Diversity-based scholarships are designed to promote diversity in educational settings by awarding

scholarships to members of traditionally underrepresented groups (Snilstveit et al., 2017). The eligibility criteria for scholarship programs vary widely. According to Abdul-Rahman Balogun Muhammed-Shittu (2019), some programs require a particular grade or test score, while others require a specific significant or community service experience. In addition, some are restricted to students due to their geographic areas or those who meet specific demographic criteria, as ascertained by Budy Satria et al. (2023). These are the several circumstances that students need to understand.

Scholarship programs, on the other hand, offer several potential benefits. According to Selim Ahmed and Muhammad Mehedi Masud (2014) and Palid et al. (2023), these programs help ease attending college students' financial burden to achieve academic excellence and ensure equal access to higher education. Additionally, it has been found to positively impact student outcomes by alleviating academic performance and helping reduce retention rates. Salinas (2018) mentioned that students with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs are attracted to these programs that contribute to diversity and inclusivity within educational institutions. Furthermore, scholarships increase the chance to interact with fellow recipients and provide opportunities for networking and mentorship to alums, donors, and faculty members (Kataoka-Yahiro et al., 2022). However, it is essential to note that scholarships also have drawbacks. For instance, merit-based scholarships can create a competitive environment that discourages students who do not receive a scholarship or are awarded a smaller amount than expected (Cain et al., 2018).

Moreover, Abdul-Rahman Balogun Muhammed-Shittu (2019) stated that meeting the eligibility criteria for scholarships can be challenging and may result in the underrepresentation of certain groups. Consequently, these programs can generate resentment and inequality among students who perceive them as unfair or undeserved advantages (Brooks & Harmon, 2022). Scholarship programs can inadvertently discourage students from pursuing their passions or interests and foster a sense of entitlement or dependency among recipients (Machingura et al., 2023).

In addition, scholarship programs can influence student outcomes, including academic performance, retention, graduation, and post-graduate outcomes (Dahal, 2020; Han et al., 2020). Scholarship programs have a significant impact on academic success. Scholarship programs can encourage students to study more, earn higher marks, and enroll in difficult courses. For example, Angrist et al. (2002) noticed that a merit-based scholarship program in Colombia could boost low-income students' test scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates. Deming and Dynarski (2009) learned that an Arkansas merit-based scholarship program improved students' college grades and reduced dropout rates. Scholarship programs have an impact on retention and graduation as well. Retention regulations, on the other hand, are vital to scholarship programs since they offer students standards for retaining their eligibility. There is recent research about the influence of scholarship programs on student outcomes, yet only a few have managed to discuss the effect of retention rules (de Freitas e Silva & Sampaio, 2022; Wilson et al., 2020). In the study of Dahal (2020) and Palid et al. (2023), they mentioned that scholarship programs have been found to improve student outcomes such as academic performance and graduation rate. Yet, examining how retention policies affect student test scores is crucial; for instance, to continue being eligible, Cain et al. (2018) state that some scholarship programs may demand that students maintain a particular GPA or take a certain number of credits each semester. These rules help students succeed academically by encouraging them to do so; however, they also present obstacles for those who can't achieve the requirements.

Moreover, the effects of retention rules may also vary based on the type of scholarship program. According to Snilstveit et al. (2017), Merit-based scholarships, for instance, may have tighter retention requirements than need-based scholarships, which may

penalize students from low-income families. So, it's essential to consider how different student types might be affected differently by retention rules.

For the time being, retention guidelines are a crucial part of scholarship programs. These rules are essential to scholarship programs since they specify the requirements the students must meet to remain eligible. Retention policies may make it more difficult for students to maintain their scholarship eligibility by adding new conditions and restrictions. This could discourage qualified people from applying for and maintaining their eligibility. Some studies have been conducted about the effect of retention policies on student outcomes (de Freitas e Silva & Sampai, 2022; Wilson, 2020). Scholarship programs can benefit from retention policies since they give students specific criteria to follow, guaranteeing that the program rewards those who are dedicated and fulfill the requirements. According to Dahal (2020) and Palid et al. (2023), scholarship programs can enhance student outcomes, including academic performance and graduation rates. Even so, implementing retention measures may disproportionately affect underprivileged students who may encounter extra difficulties in achieving the requirements, leading to potential inequities and decreased outcomes for these students. Evaluation of the impact of retention rules on student achievement is also crucial. For instance, as Cain et al. (2018) stated, to be eligible for some scholarship programs, students may need to maintain a specific grade-weighted average or take a particular amount of credits each semester. Retention policies, however, can also offer additional resources and help to underprivileged students who may profit from more time to complete academic requirements and acquire necessary skills. Moreover, evaluating retention policies' impact on student performance can also assist in identifying problem areas and better target support services. Students subjected to retention policies may feel more strain and stress, affecting their mental health and general well-being. Students may profit from these rules by being encouraged to perform better academically, while those who cannot meet the standards may be hindered.

Furthermore, the effects of retention policies may vary depending on the type of scholarship program. For instance, merit-based scholarships may have stricter retention requirements than need-based scholarships, which may disadvantage low-income students (Snilstveit et al., 2017). Consequently, it is essential to consider how retention regulations may affect various types of students differently. Scholarship programs can be made more efficient and equitable by comprehending how retention policies affect student outcomes.

In the Philippines, Republic Act 10931, known as the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act, was signed by former President Rodrigo Duterte to protect and promote the rights of all Filipino students to quality education at all levels (Republic Act, 2016). The law requires the students to accomplish all admission and retention requirements of their respective schools. Thus, the school must provide a retention policy for all qualified students besides the existing provisions of the law to ensure that students under free higher education will adhere to and pursue their studies. Fortunately, the Polytechnic College of Botolan, a local college in Zambales, was one of the recipients of Republic Act (RA) 10931. One of its retention policies was the 6-Point System where college students who accumulated three failed subjects equivalent to 6 points from their stay at the institution will be disqualified from free higher education. Since the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of disqualified college students in the institution: 86 students (2020), 91 students (2021), and 281 students (2022). Some studies concern the Philippines' free higher education (Carreon & Balinas, 2022; Lomer & Lim, 2022; Tullao & Ruiz, 2022; Verdote, 2020) and the Unified student financial assistance system in tertiary education (UniFAST) (Asuncion & Tullao, 2018), yet concerns from the students are still unheard of. Thus, this paper discussed insights and personal recommendations of college students disqualified from free higher education and provide a policy that could help benefit both the institutions and the students. This undertaking

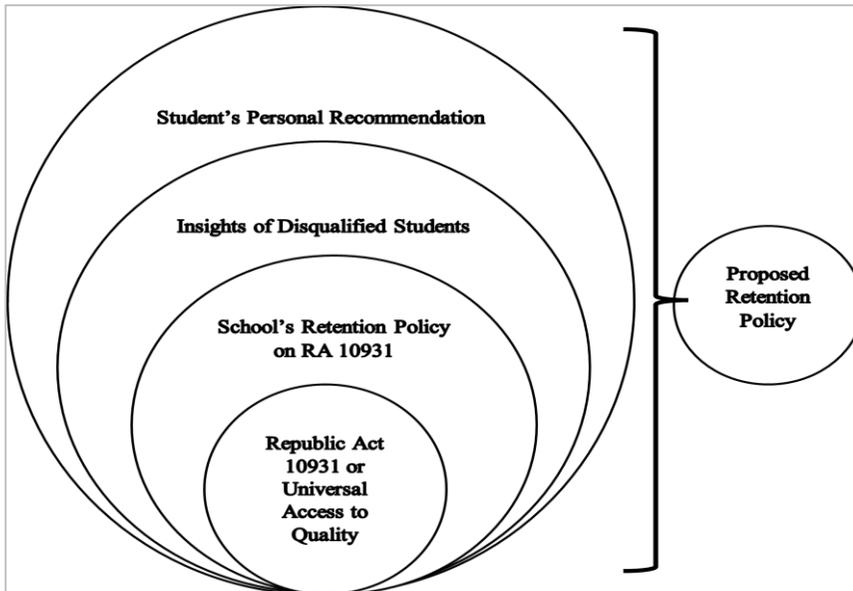
helps improve institutional policy and provides more opportunities to attain student success. It also helps increase the chances of the students to attain their goal in life and become a responsible citizen of the community.

Conceptual framework

Since there is a need for more theory to hold on to this study, the researcher constructed a framework to understand the analysis better. The research paradigm of the study is indicated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Research Framework



The research paradigm includes the Republic Act 10931 as the center of the study in which the school's retention policy was aligned. Then, the insights of the disqualified students and their recommendations were determined to provide a suggested retention policy that will provide more opportunities for students.

Research objectives

Polytechnic College of Botolan caters diverse students which includes Indigenous Peoples students. The 6-point system retention policy of the institution under Free Higher Education Act (RA 10931, 2016) reminds the students to be more aware of the consequences once disqualified. Since the students who enrolled in a local college are not financially capable, paying tuition fees is not easy for them. Thus, they should be critically informed of the policy. Ahmad Safril Mubah (2019) emphasizes that students must be more aware of the existing policy. Therefore, academic institutions must see to it that there is a clear communication between stakeholders (Abery & Gunson, 2016). Providing a more comprehensive and clear policy also increase student's success (Abdul-Rahman Balogun Muhammed-Shittu, 2019). With these existing reasons, the main goal of this study was to determine the insights and

personal recommendations of the students disqualified from free higher education regarding the retention policy at Polytechnic College of Botolan. It also answers the following questions:

1. What are the college students' reasons for being disqualified from Free Higher Education?
2. What are their insights about the Free Higher Education retention policy of the institution?
3. What are their personal recommendations to the retention policy of the institution?
4. What retention policy for free higher education can be proposed for all the students of the institution?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was utilized since the study focused on conducting interviews, particularly with twenty (20) college students at Polytechnic College of Botolan, to gather the data and information needed to fulfill the objectives of this undertaking. These participants who are purposively chosen are taking Bachelor in Elementary Education and Bachelor of Science and Information Technology since these two programs are the only programs qualified for free higher education. Aspers and Corte (2019) defined qualitative research as an iterative process in which the scientific community better understands the issue being examined by generating new meaningful distinctions.

The primary tool for gathering the data and information from the participants was a structured interview, which the respective schools' administrators validated. The researcher prepared a series of questions to determine the reasons for the disqualification of the respondents from free higher education, their insights on the scholarship retention policy, and their recommendations.

The data regarding the disqualified student list was secured in the Management Information System. Then, a pre-selection of the possible participants was communicated, and the goal of this research was explained to them. The researchers secured consent from them and administered necessary precautions to make this study more accurate and feasible. All information was subjected to data privacy, as mentioned to the students.

In this undertaking, the gathered data from one-on-one interviews were analyzed thematically. We transcribed the recording based on what the participants said and rechecked the transcription to verify all the responses. Manual coding was employed and used the strategy suggested by Miles et al. (2014) involving three stages. The researchers simplified, abstracted, and transformed the participant's narratives as part of the data condensation. The transcribed narratives proceed to data display in which we organized and compressed the information, allowing us to conclude by creating analysis matrices with emerging themes and sample significant statements. The last stage is about verifying conclusions, which involves stepping back to consider what the analyzed data mean and assessing their implications for the questions at hand. At the same time, verification entails revisiting the data as many times as necessary to crosscheck or verify these emergent conclusions. Since qualitative data analysis is nonlinear by nature, as Lochmiller and Lester (2016) stated, an iterative process was used in this study. Inter-rater dependability was employed in member-checking and theme identification to assure the data's quality and reliability. This study utilized the descriptive survey method of research. This method involves information about variables, and it is employed to measure the existing phenomenon.

Results

Reasons of students for disqualification in free higher education

As shown in Table 1, the study's findings reveal that several factors can lead to scholarship disqualification among students, with four main themes identified from the responses.

Academic failures

The theme of academic performance highlights the challenges that students face in maintaining academic success, particularly during the pandemic, where online learning difficulties and low internet access have been cited as significant barriers. Additionally, personal circumstances such as family issues or unwanted pregnancies can also impact academic performance, which is evident from these responses, “I failed three subjects that’s why I lost my scholarship, because during online learning it’s hard for me to accomplish my module that’s why I failed three subjects” (Respondent 1) and “The reason for my disqualification on free higher education is because I give birth so that’s why I failed my three subjects” (Respondent 3).

Unable to process dropping of subjects

Students who fail to fill up a dropping form indicating their intention to drop a subject are at risk of disqualification from scholarship programs, leading to financial and academic setbacks which are evident from their responses, “I’ve got four failed subjects because I did not pass a dropping form ahead of time” (Respondent 9).

Table 1

Reasons of Students for Free Higher Education Disqualification

Theme	Theme description
Academic failures	This theme refers to students' failure in one or more subjects that led to their disqualification from free higher education. Students failed due to online learning difficulties and low internet access during the pandemic, while others failed due to personal circumstances such as giving birth, unwanted pregnancy, or family problems.
Unable to process dropping of subjects	This theme refers to students' failure to fill up a dropping form to indicate that they will be dropping a subject. As a result, they were unable to drop the subject and subsequently failed, leading to disqualification from free higher education.
Work and study balance	This theme refers to students who failed due to neglecting their studies because of work responsibilities during the pandemic.
Personal problems	This theme refers to students who faced personal problems, such as unwanted pregnancy or family issues, that affected their academic performance and resulted in disqualification from free higher education.

Work and study balance

The theme indicates the challenges that students face in balancing their academic and work responsibilities. Students who are balancing work and study responsibilities may face challenges in meeting the academic requirements of their scholarship program which is apparent in their responses, “I am busy at work at that time, so I couldn't manage the time to study and work. I had three failed subjects” (Respondent 19).

Personal problems

Finally, the theme emphasizes the impact of personal issues on students' academic performance. Students who face personal issues such as unwanted pregnancy or family problems may struggle to meet the academic requirements of their scholarship program which is evident in their response, “Because of the subject failures, I had a problem so I neglected my studies, this is the time when I'm down, I don't know what to do anymore s I failed” (Respondent 12).

Student's insights on the institution's retention policy

The themes that emerged from the responses of the disqualified students regarding the scholarship retention policy, as presented in Table 2, provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for institutions to support students in maintaining their scholarships.

Awareness and understanding of the policy

The theme emphasizes the importance of students being fully aware of and understanding the scholarship retention policy of their institution as seen in their responses, “My insights on the retention policy is we need to make sure that we really understand the school policy are being aware” (Respondent 02).

Table 2

Insights of the Disqualified Students on the Scholarship Retention Policy

Theme	Theme description
Awareness and understanding of the policy	This theme refers to the students' insights about the importance of being aware and understanding the scholarship retention policy of the institution. Students acknowledged the need to comprehend the policy, while others mentioned that they were not fully aware of it or did not understand it well.
Positive perception of the policy	This theme describes that the students believe the policy is necessary to encourage students to take responsibility for their academics, limit the number of scholars, and provide opportunities for more deserving students.
Impact of personal circumstances	This theme pertains to the student's circumstances and how these have affected their academic performance and scholarship retention. Students mentioned challenges such as family problems, work commitments, pregnancy, and financial difficulties due to the pandemic.
Importance of responsibility and learning	This theme refers to the students' acknowledgment of their responsibility to study well and not neglect their learning. Students mentioned that the scholarship retention policy serves

as a reminder for students to take their academics seriously and strive to excel in their studies.

Positive perception of the policy

The theme suggests that some students understand the importance of the scholarship retention policy. It highlights the need for institutions to communicate the purpose and benefits of the policy to students which is visible in their response, “My insights on the retention policy are good because here we know that learning must not be neglected” (Respondent 12).

Impact of personal circumstances

The theme emphasizes the challenges that students face due to personal circumstances such as family problems, work commitments, pregnancy, and financial difficulties which is visible in their response, “I am aware on the policy of the school, I tried to talk to my instructor but they don’t give me words to uplift my feelings that time and there is nothing that I can do than to accept it” (Respondent 6) and “It is good for having a policy, the problem is for my online class because of during pandemic that’s why is not easy for me but my family’s financial situation that makes me also unhappy” (Respondent 18).

Importance of responsibility and learning

The importance of responsibility and learning theme suggests that some students understand the need to take their academic responsibilities seriously and not neglect their learning. This theme emphasizes the need for institutions to create a culture of academic excellence that encourages students to take ownership of their academic performance and strive to excel in their studies as shown in their responses, “My insights on the retention policy are good because here we know that learning must not be neglected” (Respondent 12).

Students’ recommendations regarding the retention policy

The emerging themes show that there are different opinions and perspectives regarding the scholarship retention policy. Some participants support the policy, while others favor revision or feel that more consideration and clarification are needed as evident in Table 3.

Support for the policy

The theme suggests that some participants agree with the current scholarship retention policy and believe that it should not be revised as shown in their responses, “I have no any suggestions about the policy because for me students would appreciate it because it will remind them to be aware on their academics” (Respondent 10). These participants feel that the policy is effective in motivating students to work hard and achieve good grades. They also appreciate the opportunity provided by the free higher education policy and recognize the importance of retaining their scholarship. These participants may feel that the policy is fair and helps to maintain high academic standards in the institution.

Favoring revision

The theme shows that some participants believe the scholarship retention rules should be changed to allow students more chances to explain their situation and be given consideration for scholarship retention as seen in their response, “I suggest reach out to those students who has disqualified on free higher education and hear their voice about it” (Respondent 13) and I hope they will change their minds that not everyone who fails doesn't study hard. I hope that before we are removed from being a scholar, they will summon us and talk to us and I hope that they will find out what is the real reason for our failure (Respondent 12).

These participants could think the policy is stringent and ignores factors in a student's life that might impact their academic success. They recommend that the approach be more flexible and considerate of students who have obstacles including family issues, work commitments, or financial constraints. These participants think a more sympathetic and understanding policy would help ensure deserving students are not disqualified from their scholarships.

Table 3

Personal Recommendations Regarding the Retention Policy

Theme	Theme description
Support for the policy	This theme includes responses from participants who think that the scholarship retention policy should not be revised. They believe that the policy is effective in encouraging students to study hard and achieve good grades. They argue that the policy serves as a motivation for students to preserve their scholarship and appreciate the opportunity provided by the free higher education policy.
Favoring revision	This theme includes responses from participants who think that the scholarship retention policy should be revised. They believe that the policy needs to be reviewed and improved to give students more opportunities to explain their situation and be considered for scholarship retention. They argue that the policy should be more considerate and flexible to accommodate students who face challenges that affect their academic performance.
Consideration and clarification	This theme includes responses from participants who think that the policy needs more clarification. They believe that the school should provide more information about the policy to avoid speculation and confusion. They argue that students need to know the consequences of failing to meet the retention policy requirements and the options available to them if they are disqualified for free higher education.

Consideration and clarification

The theme shows that some participants think additional explanation is needed for the scholarship retention policy. These participants might feel a lack of knowledge regarding the policy, fueling student rumors and uncertainty. They recommend that the institution provide more detailed information about the consequences of failing to adhere to the retention policy's requirements and the options open to students who are not eligible for scholarships. This is evident from the following sample response, Also give consideration to the students, look at the previous grades because if they failed only in the first semester and then the previous

semester, the grades will be high, the reason of the students should be known first before the scholarship is revoked (Respondent 11).

These participants thought a more transparent and well-defined policy would help to guarantee that students are completely aware of its requirements and repercussions.

Proposed retention policy

A scholarship retention policy aims to set standards and requirements for scholarship recipients to ensure they remain qualified for ongoing support. The purpose of this policy, as shown in Table 4, is to support the objectives of the scholarship program and guarantee that resources are allocated to those dedicated to achieving academic excellence. The researcher thoroughly assesses the relevant literature, policies, and recommendations based on RA 10931 to create an appropriate scholarship retention policy for the institution. This policy helps to create a supportive and accountable environment for scholarship recipients and motivates them to make use of their educational opportunities by outlining clear guidelines and consequences for breaking them. Asuncion & Tullao (2018) suggested that difficulties can be addressed when a thorough policy is developed.

Table 4

Proposed Free Higher Education Retention Policy

Scholarship retention policy
Section 1. Grade requirements
To maintain their scholarship, students must maintain good academic standing under the following circumstances:
1.1 Students who failed 1 or 2 subject/s within the semester or within the stay on the program will be given a warning letter from the Scholarship Office and must attend mandatory counseling.
1.2 Students who failed 3 or more subjects within the semester will automatically be disqualified upon enrolling in the next semester.
1.3 Students who failed 3 or more subjects within the stay on the program will be interviewed by the Guidance officer to determine whether the student will be disqualified.
Section 2. Review and appeal process
Students who have extenuating circumstances that affect their academic performance, such as illness or family emergencies, may request a review and appeal of their scholarship retention status.
2.1 The review and appeal process will start upon enrollment period for every semester.
2.2 Students must provide documentation to support their request (e.g., letter of appeal, medical certificate, and recommendation from the Guidance Office)
2.3 The student must not have failing grades in the last semester attended and rendered a community service (e.g., tree planting).
2.4 No students are allowed to appeal once disqualified for the second time EXCEPT when the student provides a valid reason which the committee will determine and examine (e.g., medical or health problems, financial/family problems).
2.5 The decision will be made by a scholarship committee.
Section 3. Mandatory counseling
Students who are at risk of losing their scholarships and being disqualified due to poor academic performance are required to attend counseling sessions with their academic advisor or a designated counselor to develop a plan for academic improvement.

Section 4. Communication and transparency

The school must provide clear and comprehensive information about the scholarship retention policy to all students, including the grade requirement, the maximum time limit, the review and appeal process, and the counseling requirements. The policy must be communicated through the school's website, student handbook, and other relevant channels.

Discussion

Students' academic achievement is critical in determining their eligibility for scholarships. Students who cannot achieve academic criteria, either due to personal factors or other reasons, risk being excluded from these programs. Regardless of the reasons, these students are automatically disqualified from Free Higher Education since they failed 3 or more subjects. This indicates that there should be assistance or support coming from the institution to allow the students facing difficulties to have a chance, especially in times of crisis like the pandemic. It also highlights how these issues are being addressed by the institution to provide necessary measures to aid the students in achieving their goals. As stated by Wijesundara et al. (2018), it is important that the institution acknowledge and identify these variables that contribute to academic hindrances. Thus, implementing remedies and offering academic support to students to overcome these challenges are significant steps to reduce underlying issues of academic issues while extending all-inclusive educational support as mentioned by Wu and Guerra (2017). Additionally, there should be more intensive orientation and information dissemination to students about the processes involving dropping courses and the repercussions of failing to do so. This action can help reduce the chance of being excluded from free higher education. As mentioned by Linder et al. (2014), providing clear guidelines and instructions will benefit the students allowing them to continue their studies without any financial burdens. Another cause of disqualifications was prioritizing work over study as part of the effect of the pandemic. The academic requirements to pass the subjects make it harder for them to cope while choosing to work to reduce financial stress. Thus, providing them with more educational opportunities due to their circumstances like online resources, and allowing flexible schedules on submissions and deadlines while fulfilling their employment responsibilities would address these issues. By taking this action, students will be given the chance to achieve academic success as suggested by Moore et al. (2018). Another issue that the students raised is their personal concerns like family problems and unwanted pregnancy which made them unable to balance their studies. These problems that affect their academic performance also need relevant support and understanding since some of the participants are Indigenous People students. This could entail offering counseling services, flexible academic schedules, and financial aid to pay for any additional costs resulting from personal concerns. By addressing these difficulties, students can obtain the assistance they need to overcome personal obstacles and succeed academically, increasing the likelihood that they will continue to be supported by scholarships (Gebregergis, 2018; Korumaz & Ekşioğlu, 2022). Additionally, it is essential for teachers to be aware of any personal challenges that their students might be facing and to provide understanding and accommodations as needed (Romero-Martin et al., 2019).

According to their recommendations, the policy successfully encourages students to put in extra effort and earn good scores. Additionally, they value the chance that the free higher education policy offers and understand how crucial it is to keep their scholarship. These participants feel that the policy is just and supports the institution's commitment to high academic standards. As McDonnell et al. (2022) stated, providing a better approach is an essential resource and should be protected by ensuring students improve their academic

success through scholarship retention. On the other hand, students suggested that the policy should be more flexible and considerate of students who experience challenges including family issues, employment commitments, or financial difficulties. These participants believe that a more sympathetic and understanding policy would ensure that deserving students do not lose their scholarships. According to Mallen and Dingle (2021), it is advised that the scholarship retention policy be revised to include more flexibility and consideration to support and retain students experiencing challenges including family issues, work obligations, or financial difficulties. To ensure that deserving students can continue to get help, Karadag (2021) also claims that institutions' policies and qualification standards must be reviewed. Additionally, if students no longer qualify for scholarships because they have reached the maximum number of points, they may consider offering various forms of financial assistance, such as grants or loans, to aid them in achieving their educational goals (Gebregergis, 2018). By examining these policies, deserving students can keep getting support. Participants agree that a more transparent and straightforward approach would help to ensure that students are completely aware of the requirements and repercussions of the policy. It is important to provide information dissemination activities like student orientation programs to provide students with adequate information about the policy (Finnegan & Alleman, 2013). Imam Setyo Nugroho et al. (2021) also suggests that evaluating student orientation can inform the development of effective strategies for increasing student retention and success. Educational institutions need to provide clear and concise information about their scholarship retention policies, particularly if some participants are uncertain or have questions (Seriakova & Kokoza, 2019). By making the scholarship retention policy more transparent and easily understandable, educational institutions can ensure that participants make informed decisions which Maurer (2017) also specified.

Conversely, the institutions must make the scholarship policy's requirements and guidelines concise and crystal clear. The existing 6-points system of the institution solely focused on the number of failed subjects. It does not allow students to be heard of. Students who accumulated 3 or more failed subjects regardless of their circumstances were automatically excluded from being a recipient of the Free Higher Education. Thus, the institutions must ensure that students have access to and a thorough understanding of this information to avoid disqualification. As Abery and Gunson (2016) stated, academic institutions must prioritize awareness and understanding of their scholarship retention policies. This can be acquired by creating clear communication channels and routinely informing students of policy updates (Ahmad Safril Mubah, 2019). This may encourage students to recognize the value of the scholarship program, take responsibility for their academic achievement, and strive to meet the requirements to maintain the scholarship (Lee & Rao, 2017). Moreover, scholarship recipients may feel a sense of pride and affirmation for their academic accomplishments. This favorable policy assessment is consistent with Abdul-Rahman Balogun Muhammed-Shittu's (2019) findings that scholarships can positively impact student graduation and retention rates. Furthermore, scholarships have been reported to positively affect students' academic progress. Institutions can assist students in developing the abilities necessary to succeed academically and in their future employment by instilling a sense of responsibility and nurturing a passion for learning (Suroto et al., 2017). According to research, a student's sense of responsibility and expectation to succeed significantly affects how adaptable they are to learn in their first academic year, which, in turn, can result in more academic performance and better overall success in life (Kimanthi et al., 2019).

Conclusion and recommendation

The reasons for the students' disqualifications are academic failures, unable to process dropping of subjects, work and study balance, and personal problems. The students' insights

on retention policy were awareness and understanding of the policy, positive perception of the policy, the impact of personal circumstances, and the importance of responsibility and learning. The student's recommendation on the retention policy was support for the policy, favoring revision, consideration, and clarification. Thus, there is a proposed retention policy for free higher education to address the needs of the students.

To avoid unnecessary circumstances, they should familiarize themselves with the scholarship retention policy and its requirements early on to ensure they understand what is expected of them. Maintain good academic standing by prioritizing their studies, seeking academic support when needed, and managing their workload effectively. They may also seek guidance and support from student affairs and services or the scholarship committee if they encounter challenges or personal issues that may affect their eligibility for the scholarship and may take responsibility for their progress and actively engage with the policy by attending workshops, information sessions, or counseling sessions that guide retention policy. The proposed policy may be implemented at the institutional level to provide more opportunities to students. In addition, a sufficient allocation of resources may be provided to support students' affairs and services to ensure the effective implementation and delivery of this policy.

The study is only limited to accounting for the reasons and insights of the students regarding the free higher education retention policy, thus, proposing a retention policy that would benefit the stakeholders. Considering this, the long-term impact of the proposed policy may be investigated on students' academic performance, career outcomes, and overall well-being. It is also possible to investigate the effectiveness of different support mechanisms and interventions in helping students overcome challenges related to scholarship retention and may explore the perspectives and experiences of scholarship recipients from diverse backgrounds to ensure that policies and support services are inclusive and address the needs of a diverse student population.

Acknowledgment

We extend our sincere gratitude to our College President, Dr. Mary Grace S. Manangan, and to our School Administrator, Dr. Joy P. Cortez for the support to this undertaking and sharing valuable insights to make this study possible. We would also like to thank Mr. Oscar Raquidan, Head of the Management Information System and Scholarship program for providing feedback and suggestions to help us shape the direction of this study.

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