Amplifying Trends with Data

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ABSTRACT
A primary function of an organizational ombuds is to identify and report trends in visitor issues and make recommendations for responsibly addressing them. But how does an ombuds define a trend, and how can one know if the issue is truly pervasive or of consequence? This article describes a pattern of student experiences that was identified by a student ombuds at a large, public research institution. The ombuds mined relevant survey data that were previously collected by the institution to see if visitors' accounts seemed consistent with those of other students at the University. Exploring relevant existing data allowed the ombuds to report quantitative information to support the compelling anecdotal accounts of student visitors. This article is intended to get ombuds thinking about data collected by their organizations that may support trends they identify in their practice.

KEYWORDS
ombuds, data, adult learners

AMPLYFING TRENDS WITH DATA

One primary function of an organizational ombuds is to identify and report trends in visitor issues and make recommendations for responsibly addressing them ("IOA Best Practices: A Supplement to IOA's Standards of Practice," 2009). While this is often referred to as "upward feedback," there is also apparent value in reporting laterally across the organization to those who have discretion and proximity to address matters directly, locally and effectively. But under what circumstances should issues be reported and to whom? There is no magic number of incidents that creates a trend – no clear algorithm for determining when a concern might warrant a broader, more systematic response. Moreover, reporting trends and making recommendations are delicate tasks that may produce unintended consequences. The ombuds must tenaciously protect the identity of her visitors, which can be challenging when trends relate to areas of the organization that are smaller or have a very unique purpose. Ombuds also risk offending those who have clear and well-defined oversight in the area(s) of concern. This important aspect of ombuds practice is precarious work that requires well-planned communication and mutual respect.

Trends should be brought to light when a systematic response seems warranted – when concerns seem to be frequent or serious. One way to evaluate the ubiquity of an issue is to mine existing, relevant data. Data can provide a more comprehensive look at an issue and help the ombuds frame feedback regarding issues that were brought to her attention. A data-supported trend can serve as powerful impetus to change.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how ombuds offices can use data about the organization and its constituents to inform practice and policy considerations. Identifying relevant data can add power to the more subjective understanding that comes from interactions with visitors. Specifically, this article will present data about the experiences of a special population of undergraduate students at a large public university which were used to affirm and clarify stories shared in the Student Ombuds Office.

IDENTIFYING A TREND

The Student Ombuds Office at University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa welcomes about 400 visitors per year. The institution is very diverse, and ombuds visitors reflect that heterogeneity. Even so, the ombuds noticed a disproportionate number of students in their thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties – students who were frustrated by a system that seemed to be designed for younger learners. The ombuds staff became specifically interested in those who were pursuing undergraduate degrees. This population comprises a collection of adults who may have begun college early in life, but stopped out for some reason (to raise children, pursue a career, etc.) or those who pursued other interests early in life and have recently decided to attend college. The number of undergraduate students at the University who fall within this age range is not proportionally substantial, but common sense and fairmindedness suggests their concerns are worthy of the University's consideration.

These students brought a myriad of complaints, mostly related to course availability, curriculum, and faculty dynamics. Some academic programs are small and only offer courses during daytime hours, which is challenging for working adults. While the number of online course offerings at USF has increased each year, many programs still offer only traditional, face-to-face courses, which are less flexible. Other degree programs go so far as to require full-time enrollment, which is also not feasible for many adult learners. One ombuds visitor was forced to change her major because her desired major required a commitment to daytime classes that she simply could not manage. This affected her career options and seemed unfair. Another student was considering transferring to earn a degree from a more expensive, non-accredited institution because the

University did not seem able to accommodate his work schedule. The ombuds met with several adult students who had resolved to complete their degrees, but who encountered seemingly insurmountable challenges with scheduling and course availability.

Another common concern shared by adult learners related to attendance policies that restricted their ability to manage other aspects of their lives. One mother's grade was reduced because she did not go to class when her son was having surgery. When she approached her professor, he reiterated his attendance policy. A father's child was in a car accident which caused him to miss an exam and, while he was able to eventually make it up, that was only after navigating a number of bureaucratic hoops and long after the course had ended. He expressed feelings of frustration because he believed his grade was negatively affected by issues beyond his control.

Visitors also complained about course material and teaching style. Several students had already completed a career in a specific field and entered the University with a sense of what they needed to learn in order for their degrees to be meaningful. They expressed frustrations about content and also about pedagogy. For example, one student said his entire class failed an exam so the instructor let students watch a movie and write a response for extra credit. The movie was in no way relevant to the course content. The visitor was certain the younger, more traditionally aged students were grateful for the opportunity to raise their grades, but he was committed to mastering the material and was disappointed by the instructor's accommodation. Others talked about attempts to respectfully challenge what was being taught in courses and how they felt shut down by instructors who were unwilling to engage in that kind of discourse.

Other concerns brought by these visitors related more to customer service and support. They shared feelings of vulnerability asking for help from faculty and staff, especially those much younger than the students themselves. Faculty and staff members often want to give uniform support and treatment to their students. When a student in her sixties expressed a need for extra assistance accessing electronic resources for a research project, it was refused to her in an effort to treat all students equally. Another student was upset by an academic advisor's suggestion that her aspirations of graduate school were too ambitious because of her age.

Technology and electronic business systems also tended to create challenges for students who were not of a more traditional college age. Students are expected to monitor their student financial accounts using an online system. The University does not generally mail paper bills and statements. This created a problem for one student who historically satisfied his tuition bill with a tuition waiver issued by his employer. One semester, he took a course for which charges exceeded the norm. He was not aware that there were additional charges until he was contacted by a collections agency months later since he was unfamiliar with the online system.

These undergraduate visitors consistently reported feelings of being misunderstood and alone. Many said they were the only students in their classes who were not in their late teens or early twenties and that they had not met any other students like them.

MINING EXISTING DATA

The experiences of these visitors are certainly not unique to students at USF. The literature confirms that adult students learn differently and that the youth-oriented culture of large, competitive research universities can be challenging for them (Kasworm, 2010; Knowles, 1984). While efforts to improve the experiences of more traditional students are often rewarded with government funding and national rankings, their effect may not be experienced equally by all students on campus. USF has gained national attention for its strides in improving student persistence to degree attainment. While the success of this population of students may not align

with any set of prescribed metrics, the administration is committed to the welfare of all students. The ombuds was sure that the University would be interested in the information she had gleaned from visitors and would want to explore feasible, reasonable ways to respond. As she prepared to share their stories– which were valid, compelling, but of small number – the ombuds decided to consult readily available data that were collected from students and generate a comparative analysis of the experiences of this population of students and those who were of a more traditional age.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a national instrument used by hundreds of institutions annually to measure student experiences and inform practice. The reliability and validity of NSSE has been well established which makes it an accurate source of data about the student experience (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2008). The NSSE instrument was created to assess students' participation in institutional programs and activities. Results reflect how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attendance. NSSE data can inform the deployment of institutional resources and the organization of curriculum and other learning opportunities linked to student success (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2017).

The NSSE instrument is distributed to freshmen and seniors at USF every other spring term. The ombuds used these responses to compare the engagement experiences of adult students with those of a sample of younger students. There were 167 NSSE participants who were at least 40 years old at the time NSSE was administered. The age of 40 was identified as a threshold for defining these students simply because that is the marker for those adults who are protected from age discrimination in employment matters. A random sample of 167 students between the ages of 18 and 22 was selected to serve as a control group. These comparative analyses were conducted using SPSS 22.

The specific items selected for analysis had to do with behaviors that enhance student engagement and success, behaviors that detract or interfere with student engagement and success, or perceptions of interactions with personnel. Items reported in this article are those that rendered statistically significant differences between the two groups.

FINDINGS

A simple independent t-test rendered valuable, supportive evidence of some of the concerns student visitors had shared in the Ombuds Office. For example, according to the survey results, students 40 and over were more likely than younger students to care for dependents ($t(328)=-13.024$, $p=.000$) and work off campus ($t(330)=-7.092$, $p=.000$). While this seems rather intuitive, it gives evidence to the fact that their lives are different, which may warrant some different behavior on campus. These learners were also less likely to participate in high impact practices like internships ($t(330)=3.785$, $p=.000$), study abroad ($t(329)=4.327$, $p=.000$), or faculty research projects($t(326)=2.280$, $p=.023$) (Kuh, 2009). This affirms the idea that high impact practices were designed for younger, more traditional students, and that other practices may have more impact on the success of adult students. These data provided a foundation for more creative approaches to the University's engagement of these students.

Table 1

Hours per week spent	Age Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Working for pay OFF CAMPUS	18-22	165	2.82	2.445	.190
	40-70	167	5.04	3.220	.249
Providing care for dependents (children, parents, etc.)	18-22	164	1.37	.894	.070
	40-70	166	4.42	2.873	.223

Table 2

Did or plan to	Age Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Internship, co-op, field experience, student teaching, or clinical placement	18-22	167	2.90	.833	.064
	40-70	165	2.52	1.004	.078
Study abroad program	18-22	167	2.31	.968	.075
	40-70	164	1.93	.533	.042
Work with a faculty member on a research project	18-22	165	2.38	1.068	.083
	40-70	163	2.13	.886	.069

The survey data also confirmed that classroom behavior and learning strategies varied significantly between these and younger students. Students who were 40 or older were less likely to prepare for exams with other students ($t(332)=5.351$, $p=.000$), work with other students on course assignments ($t(332)=3.411$, $p=.001$), or ask another student for help understanding material ($t(331)=4.761$, $p=.000$). They did, however, indicate a more independent approach to their education. They reported being more likely to contribute to class discussions ($t(330)=-4.520$, $p=.000$), to prepare multiple drafts of a paper before turning it in ($t(331)=-4.131$, $p=.000$), and to complete reading assignments in preparation for class ($t(329)=5.356$, $p=.000$). They also reported a higher tendency to review their notes after class ($t(328)=-3.487$, $p=.001$). All of these differences support the notion that adult learners at USF work independently and may feel quite alone as they navigate their educational journeys, as was evidenced by the stories of ombuds visitors. These findings, supplemented by the compelling stories of individual visitors, allowed decision makers to empathize with the experiences of these students and consider ways the University might demonstrate compassion and support as they navigate their way through the academic system.

Table 3

How often have you (school year):	Age Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students	18-22	167	2.57	1.050	.081
	40-70	167	1.99	.908	.070
Worked with other students on course projects or assignments	18-22	167	2.69	.862	.067
	40-70	167	2.36	.933	.072
Asked another student to help you understand course material	18-22	166	2.44	.911	.071
	40-70	167	2.00	.768	.059
Asked questions or contributed to course discussions in other ways	18-22	166	2.74	.947	.073
	40-70	166	3.19	.873	.068
Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in	18-22	166	2.39	1.071	.083
	40-70	167	2.85	.979	.076
Come to class without completing readings or assignments	18-22	165	2.10	.798	.062
	40-70	166	1.66	.694	.054
Reviewed your notes after class	18-22	164	2.83	.957	.075
	40-70	166	3.17	.838	.065

NSSE results revealed that students who were 40 or older (M=2.30, SD=.956, N=166) felt that they had fewer opportunities to solve real-world problems in the classroom than their younger counterparts (M=2.38, SD=.935, N=167), t(331)=.733, p=.464. This supported the experiences of visitors who expressed a desire for more meaningful classroom learning experiences. Many of the ombuds' visitors had experienced the "real world" and felt that the University could improve the quality of classroom content by raising expectations and making curriculum more relevant.

The responses of these student populations regarding University support were also significantly different. Students 40 or older demonstrated less satisfaction with the University's interest in their academic success (t(324)=2.626, p=.009), their opportunities for social involvement (t(328)=3.408, p=.001), their overall well-being (t(325)=5.372, p=.000), and their non-academic responsibilities (t(324)=4.888, p=.000). For each of these items, these students' responses were significantly lower than those of students who were 18-22. These findings are consistent with visitors' perceptions of "going it alone" and not receiving consideration for special life circumstances. The data buttressed information the ombuds was able to share with administrators regarding visitor experiences and provided compelling evidence of a deficit that might be more closely scrutinized and addressed.

Table 4

Institutional Emphasis	Age Code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Providing support to help students succeed academically	18-22	164	3.13	.800	.062
	40-70	162	2.88	.924	.073
Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)	18-22	165	2.93	.938	.073
	40-70	165	2.52	1.045	.081
Providing opportunities to be involved socially	18-22	165	3.09	.896	.070
	40-70	165	2.73	1.007	.078
Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.)	18-22	164	3.17	.869	.068
	40-70	163	2.62	.983	.077
Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	18-22	162	2.41	1.072	.084
	40-70	164	1.87	.924	.072

IMPLICATIONS

After talking to adult visitors about their needs and the ways in which the University might better accommodate them, the ombuds concluded that a broad, programmatic solution may be neither feasible nor sensible. Instead, resolutions might involve simply raising awareness among faculty and staff of this population and all that makes it unique. Perhaps a simple campaign for fairness and empathy could alter the experiences of these students so that they feel like more valued members of the diverse, complex University community.

The student ombuds and other faculty and staff, including the director for faculty development, developed a proposal for an initiative that would address effective and appropriate service to an increasingly diverse student population. The "I Care" curriculum engages University employees in conversations about core values that drive their work with students, effective ways to manage complaints, and opportunities they have to invest in students' success at every encounter. Its content includes modules on cultural competence, emotional intelligence and problem solving. The intended outcome is for faculty and staff to develop common language, an expressed expectation, and a brand associated with student care. This is one step of a larger, more comprehensive shift in the culture at USF—a place where *every* student has an opportunity to succeed and *every* person on campus has a role in that success.

Another more focused initiative being considered in response to these findings is the establishment of a networking group specifically for these students. Many adults who visited the Ombuds Office expressed feelings of being alone. They were not even sure there were other students like them on campus. A networking organization could host educational and social events throughout the year addressing some of the shared experiences at the University.

Course availability will continue to be a challenge for students who span hundreds of academic departments and programs, but the qualitative and quantitative data derived from the ombuds' project, along with the support of academic administrators, may facilitate more individual approaches to course completion. An increasingly diverse student population certainly seems to warrant an increasingly diverse approach to higher education.

CONCLUSION

The *Standards of Practice* of the International Ombudsman Association call for ombuds to identify trends, issues and concerns about policies and procedures, and provide recommendations for responsibly addressing those ("IOA Standards of Practice", 2009). This charge positions the ombuds uniquely to influence timely and meaningful change.

A simple analysis of available data from a larger sample of constituents can substantiate the anecdotal, yet compelling stories an ombuds hears. These data alone, however, cannot adequately convey the full scope of visitors' experiences. The Ombuds Office is a safe, credible space that permits candor from constituents who may be less inclined to share in other venues. Many ombuds are exempt from reporting information that other organizational authorities would be required to share, creating a risk-free, zero-barrier space for discussing even the most egregious concerns. Visitors are often outliers – those not likely represented by broad-encompassing data collected across the organization. The ombuds is able to listen compassionately, empathetically, non-judgmentally, and then, when appropriate, give voice to concerns without identifying the source. This ability to gather rich perspective from visitors, coupled with more comprehensive and scientific evidence of such issues, can enhance the ombuds' communications with decision makers and maximize opportunities for appropriate, timely, and meaningful response.

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