

BALANCING DATA, TIME, AND EXPECTATIONS: THE COMPLEX DECISION- MAKING ENVIRONMENT OF ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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As a growing entity within higher education organizational structures, enrollment managers (EMs) are primarily tasked with projecting, recruiting, and retaining the student population of their campuses. Enrollment managers are expected by institutional presidents as well as through industry standards to make data-driven planning decisions to reach their goals. However, despite the availability of data, some enrollment managers revealed a different reality from traditional, rational decision-making models. This study explored the factors that contributed to or influenced the decision-making process of six enrollment managers working in either two- or four-year public colleges and universities located in the Midwestern United States. Interviews, including a word association exercise, documents and artifacts of tools utilized to make enrollment management decisions, and observational field notes were gathered and analyzed in this qualitative study grounded in constructionism. Using the theories of Bounded Rationality and the Garbage Can model as lenses, EMs in this study seemed to reflect a highly stressful, competitive, and complex environment where rational decision-making gave way to satisficing, or “good-enough” decisions as expectations to meet enrollment goals governed their motives. Decisions also appeared to be closely associated to the Garbage Can Model due to the ambiguity of goal setting and the mixture of participants, problems, and solutions where temporal proximity appeared to be more of a factor in terms of what received attention first. With multiple interruptions into an EM’s daily schedule, the ability for the enrollment manager to maintain consistent efforts on desired projects and plans was severely hindered. Enrollment managers in this study shared through multiple examples that they did not feel

they had enough time to accomplish their tasks as thoroughly as they preferred and often addressed their problems without full consideration of all possible options, much less the optimal one.

Although I did not begin my professional career working in higher education, I recognized my passion and enthusiasm for it when I began working as a recruiter over 15 years ago at a public, four-year university (which just happened to be my alma mater). As I have advanced in the field and been fortunate enough to hold various administrative positions, I am aware of the resounding need of quality data to guide decision making. To further my understanding and development in recruitment and admissions-related practices, I attended conferences specifically based on strategic enrollment management (SEM) principles sponsored by AACRAO. I distinctly remember one presenter offering this axiom as it applied to data gathering and analysis: “If it moves, track it.” This left an indelible impression on me as an enrollment management practitioner. I felt that not only should our institution amplify existing efforts to track recruitment, retention, and graduation strategies’ efforts, but that decisions were going to be more dependent on the amount and quality of all of this gathered data—a key fact of SEM.

The field of enrollment management has always advocated for strategic planning – incorporating multiple areas and individuals across a campus to develop a cohesive enrollment plan according to its mission. Designing a marketing or recruitment strategy to effectively represent a college or university should occur after decisions have been made concerning the preferred characteristics of the desired student. Regardless of the results of the marketing efforts, the strategies to attract the ideal student as well as the plans to retain them must be evaluated (Hossler, 1984).

Through discussions with colleagues at other colleges and universities (as well as individuals holding management positions at my own institution), it appears that we are all facing similar challenges when it comes to creating reporting strategies to “track” efforts and to take action necessary to address or implement them. Despite possessing the desire to use data, many of us encounter difficulty in utilizing (and in many

cases, gathering) the information to make sound, comprehensive, and rational decisions. In other words—do we really consistently make data-driven optimized decisions?

My own experiences combined with observations and conversations with enrollment managers (EMs) concerning the complexity of data used when making decisions spawned my interest in developing a qualitative study for my doctorate dissertation to investigate these issues. I discovered Simon’s model of bounded rationality while researching decision-making strategies and models, and Riley’s (2007) dissertation provided an enrollment management context that utilized both the bounded rationality/satisficing as well as the garbage can model for decision making.

In Riley’s (2007) dissertation, he suggested that administrative leaders, especially those in an enrollment management leadership role, have tremendous difficulty making effective decisions despite the availability and access to information and data as expressed above. Considering the complexity of the enrollment management environment, one that requires campus-wide communication and involvement, the possibility of fragmented information and inadequate preparation for effective decision-making exists. Both problems and solutions can become ambiguous as enrollment management leaders, who may have been placed into key decision-making roles without the proper background or experience in planning and implementation, become buried under the complexity of data elements, which leads to an uncertainty of action. While Riley’s study examined the effect of a particular decision made at a single institution, I preferred investigating the decision-making experiences of EMs located at various institutions to present a broader perspective.

Statement of the Problem

As a growing entity within higher education organizational structures, EMs are primarily tasked with projecting, recruiting, and retaining the student population of their campuses. These enrollment

managers are expected by institutional presidents as well as through industry standards to make data-driven planning decisions to reach their goals (Baldrige, Green, & Kemerer, 1982).

However, despite the availability of data, some enrollment managers revealed a different reality from traditional, rational decision-making models. Their experiences reflected incomplete, fragmented, and ambiguous solutions that impacted the overall quality and efficiency of decision making within the enrollment management areas (Riley, 2007).

Considering that EMs are expected to incorporate a campus-wide and collaborative effort in their plans, as well as the vast amounts of data in the decision-making process, this incongruence may exist due to complex factors within the enrollment management environment that may inhibit rational decision making.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that may contribute to or influence the decision-making process of EMs working in two- and four-year public colleges and universities located in the Midwestern United States; the study also looked specifically at how EMs use available data. Considering not every higher education institution contains bona fide enrollment management units, divisions, or teams, only those institutions that utilize those formal functions were explored in this inquiry.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are strategic enrollment management decisions made on a campus that utilizes an enrollment management system?
2. As enrollment management professionals make decisions, what do they consider?
3. How do expectations relate to decision making?

Theoretical Framework

The guiding epistemology for this particular study was constructionism (sometimes also referred to as social constructionism). Contrary to an objectivist viewpoint,

which asserts that meaning exists without engagement with any external source, those who possess a constructionist epistemology posit that knowledge and meaning is constructed by the interaction and engagement of humans upon objects in the world (Crotty, 2003). Reality, meaning, and knowledge are therefore constructed by the individual and applied to an object or situation in one's life (Patton, 2002).

Crotty (2003) expands on the constructionist view through his description of social constructionism, or more specifically, the impact of one's culture on making meaning of experiences. Culture is seen as "the source rather than the result of human thought" (p. 53). Humans apply meaning through a social context, and all experiences are deemed as meaningful realities in social constructionism. One's behavior and evaluation of experiences can be traced back to cultural influences, and these influences provide the lens for assessing, valuing, and applying meaning to each context.

In its truest form, constructionism recognizes that there is no single reality. Multiple realities not only exist, but the same situation or occurrence can mean a tremendous amount of diverse interpretations and understandings (Crotty, 2003). Considering the varied realities experienced by assorted enrollment managers at their respective institutions, this epistemology reflected the range of interpretations upon their decision-making realities.

This study also utilized the theoretical framework outlined in Riley's study—Herbert Simon's model of bounded rationality and satisficing as the lens to help illuminate the emerging results from the study (Lehman et al. 2002). While Simon's bounded rationality theory helped illuminate how decisions are made by the individual, March, Cohen, and Olsen's garbage can model also served as an additional perspective for the types of complex and interrelated decisions made by enrollment management entities (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Lane, 1980). The applicability and usefulness of each theory was determined and discussed after data collection and analysis.

BOUNDED RATIONALITY AND SATISFICING

Herbert Simon became a staunch critic of the pure rational choice models when applied to the nature

of humans who do not always operate from a logical and linear approach toward making decisions. Simon argued that, realistically, humans do not possess full access to the complexity of the environmental factors nor do they have a fully effective cognitive system that can maximize every real-life decision (Campitelli & Gobet, 2010).

The theory of bounded rationality therefore suggests that individuals can and will make decisions with practical and available calculated factors, and this information will be incomplete in scope. Nevertheless, despite not having a fully stocked cache of data or information available at the time a decision is desired or required, reasonably solid decisions will be made. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect that humans have all possible alternatives calculated and evaluated for the purpose of selecting the most effective option (Campitelli & Gobet, 2010).

Simon suggested the additional concept of satisficing nearly a half-century ago and introduced it as a means of more accurately and realistically explaining how humans make decisions. His goal of maximizing choices to find an exacting and optimal solution was overwhelming unrealistic. Therefore, he claimed humans will actually look for a solution that is “good enough,” and that there is a great deal of variance in the levels of how that choice meets the expectations. The point is that it is met—even though it is often not the absolute best choice. Satisficers are not driven by the goal to discover the maximized and optimal solution but merely an adequate one (Lehman et al., 2002, p. 1178).

THE GARBAGE CAN MODEL

Despite the insinuation that garbage can implies discarded ideas, this model actually reflects a mixture among problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities. This model has often been used to describe higher education organizational structures (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Lane, 1980). The model suggests that organizations function in a manner of organized anarchy that allows for a great deal of ambiguity when attempting to define organizational goals as well as determining who is going to accomplish them. Utilizing this theory may help to understand the collective combination and mixture of problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities in addition

to the dynamics and complexities surrounding them (Padgett, 1980).

The two models balanced and complemented each other well as they both reflected the challenges individuals (and their organizations) faced in terms of meeting all the demands and expectations for a decision. An individual may feel compelled to make a satisfactory decision as opposed to a maximized one, and this seemed to be a very appropriate reality for some higher education systems (Lutz, 1982).

Each of the models was applied *a priori* in the design due to its applicability in understanding the decision-making processes of enrollment managers. Initially, they were held in queue contingent upon data analysis, and both reflected greater meaning by using these models as appropriate lenses. Riley's (2007) dissertation utilized these models in his study, and I considered viewing the data gathered through the perspective of these models as the evidence reflected substantiated meaning.

Data Collection and Procedures

I conducted one-on-one interviews containing open-ended questions (probing as necessary) and explored documents and artifacts including recruitment plans, enrollment and retention reports, organizational charts, mission and vision statements, and other tools employed to make decisions. In addition, I gathered observational field notes derived from site visits and investigated tools related to each EM's decision making for the respective institutions. The purpose of the varied methods of collecting, observing, presenting, and analyzing data was to develop triangulation, which Patton (2002) indicated would help strengthen a study.

Upon completion of data gathering, an analysis of the interviews, field observations, and documents and artifacts was commenced to assist with interpreting and coding the data (Wolcott, 2009). Emergent themes from the various data sources were identified through what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) described as pursuing members' meanings when coding the data. Assisting with the coding analysis and theme identification were the use of analytic statements, which helped connecting thematic elements with initial insights and fieldnotes to help answer, “What's going on with the data?” (1995, p.146).

Six institutions situated in the Midwest were selected for participation. This list was established based on purposive sampling strategies designed to reflect two-year, four-year, public and private college and university enrollment management contexts (Patton, 2002). Each of the six host site institutions had been determined to meet some variation of four mentioned models of enrollment management: (a) committee; (b) coordinator; (c) enrollment management matrix; or (d) division of enrollment management. Through information obtained through the SACRAO and related websites, as well as each institution's website, enrollment management leaders were contacted via email to request their participation in this study.

Methods of interpreting data included jottings and detailed notes, which combine to capture an accurate and natural representation of the participant's environmental surroundings (Emerson et al., 1995). Data was collected and maintained in a secure location at my home to prevent tampering with or altering the process. In order to demonstrate validity of the analyzed results, a trustworthiness table was supplied. Application of this table helped ensure credibility and dependability associated with the findings in the study as well as achieve appropriate evaluative credentials (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Thematic Findings

A number of themes arose from the data that help to illuminate the lived experiences of enrollment managers as they navigate within their decision-making environments. These themes were identified through a holistic review of all data sources and subsequent qualitative analysis. Major themes were identified within the interview data and are presented by sub-headers in the sections that follow. Theme labels are derived either from collective experiences or a direct quote from a data source that captured the meaning of these perspectives, events, or beliefs.

EVERY DAY VARIES

Some EMs had a difficult time describing a typical day. Most expressed that their days were full of various meetings, and one claimed his day was "just a series of meetings." One described a considerable portion of his day as "putting out fires." As one participant said,

"But there's no real day-to-day. I have an ongoing list of things that I need to get done, and I usually try to schedule, I'm going to work on this and I'm going to work on this, and these are the priorities. And sometimes I get to that, and sometimes I don't."

THERE'S NOT ENOUGH TIME

A common theme among all of the participants in this study was a feeling of not having enough time to achieve their goals. One voiced concern how her enrollment management area keeps adding programs and projects while "never take anything away." This participant elaborated, "People in general have an increasing desire for immediacy." Some participants expressed their preference for taking time to make decisions and responding or acting with more confidence knowing it was the "right" decision. One participant stated that she has grown used to "working with disruption" and claimed she often has to stop the planned activities or projects for the day and react, calling this issue "stopping and reacting." Another stated, "I think we're real good about solving a problem. We're not real good from a cooperative standpoint of 30 days later stepping back and saying, 'OK, let's look at these situations and say, what got us there, how do we fix what got us here, and continue to fix what we see in front of us.'"

Some EMs labeled interruptions as dealing with the "minutia of little things," as if it were a hindrance to what they considered their priority (and preference) of planning and dissecting problems. As one participant said:

And then, I get very little think time, is what I'm going to say. I spend a lot of time reacting to requests from administrators, faculty, whomever about how we can help them, what we can do, which leaves not as much time for actual planning as I would like.

ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT IS A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Competitiveness was a theme found through the data and expressed by many EMs in this study. While some mentioned that this competitiveness originated from the need to recruit students, others reflected with surprise at how EMs appears to be less helpful to one

another compared to other areas on campuses. One participant shared her story:

I found it very different than when I worked in student affairs. In student affairs, if somebody [from another institution] called and said “what are you doing on this?” You would copy everything that you have, send 14 digital files, and say, “Take whatever you need that makes your world better.” If you ask, “how is that you all are thinking about your financial aid leveraging around [state funding source],” you’re going to hear cricket, cricket, cricket, because that would be considered proprietary. ...

One EM was so protective of his enrollment data that he refused to offer any samples of his reports outside of his office during the interview. This same EM confessed to being a competitive person by nature and how being tasked to recruit new students suited him, “... but you’re always on stage. That’s a by-product of the job.”

DATA IS CRITICAL WHEN MAKING DECISIONS

In nearly every meeting with an enrollment manager, large binders, stacks of reports, surveys, inventories, budgets, graphs, and charts resided on credenzas, shelves, or piled on top of desks. Each participant referred to these institutional, regional, or national sources as containing valuable data including enrollment-related statistics or projections. Some spoke very passionately about the particular kinds of data desired for decision making and the need for increasing enrollment or, as one participant stated, the “focus on the numbers,” may be the motivation for this value placed on collecting and reviewing data.

The apparent attachment and reliance toward getting and using data by enrollment managers was prominent among the participants. Despite this dependence, one EM did caution, “Data is only as good as how you plan to use it.”

GOOD, USABLE DATA CAN BE DIFFICULT TO GET

While all participants stated they use data to make decisions, few of them stated they personally generate the data needed. Most relied on either an employee within their operational unit or their Office of Institu-

tional Research to produce desired reports. Some EMs seemed to be frustrated with their student information system in terms of being too complicated for their already understaffed employees to generate reports.

Gaining access to information may not be the problem for some, but getting usable, correct, and timely information was. One participant stated, “. . . all of us I guess have a tremendous amount of data if we can just (laughs) get it out in the form that we need it!” Another participant lamented over the lack of resources to analyze the data and stated, “So, in my opinion, we don’t have the resources to work through the existing data we have to collect, to compile, to synthesize, to aggregate into usable numbers to help us make decisions. So data is too little, too late in my opinion.”

Apparent frustration over trusting the information produced from these reports was expressed by many EMs. One stated, “Since I have come into this position, the one thing that causes, well, eats up a lot of my time and causes me great heartburn is quality data.” Participants who were responsible for branch campuses seemed to echo this frustration as multiple campuses meant additional opportunities for error or miscalculation, and one stated, “My fear is sometimes we send stuff out that’s 90% accurate.”

SOMETIMES, YOU MAKE DECISIONS ON INSTINCT AND EXPERIENCE

Although all participants preferred data for making decisions, several EMs admitted they also made decisions by trusting their own intuition or previous experiences. On occasion, data and experience may collide as one EM stated, “I won’t say that I go against or would go against data, but there are certain things that I feel strongly about because I know they worked.”

One EM’s response offered a possible contradictory perspective by stating, “I am absolutely convinced that one should not make decisions based on whim or anecdote. I like to see that there is some validity to the thought process, and it’s not just emotion or whim. I also make decisions within the knowledge of the culture and personalities and what’s acceptable to the institution.”

Some EMs offered an almost apologetic admittance when they stated they use instinct to make decisions while others seemed to accept it as a reality. One EM

said, “I guess I rely heavily on my gut. [laughs] I know that’s probably not the most formal way to make decisions, but it has steered me correctly for many years, so I listen to it a lot.”

REACTIVE VERSUS PROACTIVE DECISION MAKING

Another common theme was the tendency to make reactive decisions as opposed to deliberate and intentional decision-making practices. Rather than pensively crafting a decision based on confident expectations of results, some EMs tended to react by attempting multiple solutions in the hopes one may address the issue. One EM likened decisions to a shotgun, “You just hope that you hit something ... we just throw out a whole bunch of things sometimes. ...”

Whether having to respond to each day’s trivial matters or be forced to respond to issues, projects, or difficulties imposed upon them by a supervisor, EMs were forced out of necessity to forego planning and preparations in their decision-making. One of the participants elaborated, “We need to be proactive versus reactive. We’re not seeing the fly balls popped up in the air. We’ve got to be able to catch those versus just assume that everything is running fine.”

WE MUST HAVE STRATEGIC PLANNING

Many of the participants suggested the importance of having strategic plans in place to guide decisions. One EM’s statement captured this theme well:

The institution should have a plan, and you should be making decisions that are aligned, I’ve seen from time to time, not necessarily here, but I had seen institutions where you have a very disjointed planning process. Everyone’s doing their own thing, and there’s no holistic direction from the institution. So there should be an enrollment manager is implementing his or her plan, there should be a bigger plan in play with that linked to it.

“EVERYTHING COMES BACK TO THE NUMBERS”

Another prevalent theme was the focus on recruiting new students to ensure enrollment increases. One participant was especially emphatic with his assertive

proclamation of, “... you can’t ever lose focus of the numbers.” This same participant shared the feeling of pressure that comes with the expectation to meet enrollment goals each year by stating, “Enrollment management is twenty-four/seven, three-sixty-five pressure cooker. Because it’s a lot like football coaching. You’re only as good as last season, and there’s always the need for more wins.”

Most enrollment managers in this study expressed a concern over meeting enrollment projections, and promotional materials, pamphlets, booklets, and even office décor reflected this theme of efforts to attract students to their campuses. One EM offered this statement about the recruiting students:

It’s just fascinating to me that year after year it’s well, you need to be doing this, well now you need to be doing this, and at the same time nothing’s coming off the plate. I mean, we’re still sending letters, right? That was the way it used to be done, was we sent letters. Well, we’re still sending letters, now we’re sending emails and we’re sending texts and we have social media sites, and we have our internal portals, and all of these things we’re doing, and nothing ever seems to go away. ...

“WHO’S SCREAMING THE LOUDEST”

Enrollment managers listed a variety of influencers that impact or direct their decision-making processes. Some listed coworkers or their staff; others listed staff all the way through their president up to their governing board. One participant articulated, “Well, if the president wants it, that’s first [laughs]. Um, if my vice president wants it, that moves up on the priority list.” Another EM was more direct in his response, “You know, I have two jobs. First is to take care of the students, and the second is to make our president and anybody I report to look good. And it’s hard to do both sometimes. ...”

When asked about the various influencers to help direct prioritization of projects, one participant replied, “Who’s screaming the loudest.” This phrase was a common sentiment among participants who iterated the notion that some decisions that get made come from their superiors as a “have to” decision.

CONSULTANTS AREN'T THE ANSWER

Many EMs in this study relayed their experiences and/or perceptions concerning the use of consultants related to enrollment management. Some had experience using the same prominently known firm and offered negative comments related to the outcomes. One participant had this to say about his experience:

I always feel like they're not really listening. I think that they do some great work. Honestly, I think that they're able to put a lot of information in and spit out what should come out of it. I don't think that they're realistic in thinking about our clientele ... from a statewide perspective they don't get ... first-generation college students, I don't think they get adult students ... they're very myopic in [thinking] if that student is going to come to you, you can figure out exactly how much money to give 'em, and that's going to make their decision.

Another offered a similar opinion of the return on investment, "People like [name of firm], and others, that's their business. They, if there's not an ... emergency on your campus, they need to create one. Otherwise, why do you need them? They're very, very expensive. To me, you're being much better off bringing in someone you can trust. Someone that doesn't have to create an emergency that's going to give you an objective opinion, and there aren't many of those people."

FACULTY NEED TO BE OUR PARTNERS

Several participants spoke of their desire to include faculty in enrollment management strategic decision making but voiced few successful examples. One stated, "If you are really looking at how you can grow enrollment, you're going to have to get into the academic business." Some seemed to voice concern regarding the lack of authority or control to make faculty recognize the importance of aligning enrollment goals, as one participant expressed, "They just don't like being told what to do." Another EM said, "I get a little frustrated with scheduling because we have developed a culture [of] scheduling ... for the needs of the faculty not for the needs of the student."

One participant voiced his concerns over the faculty's lack of knowledge of enrollment management fundamentals as well as overall communication between both

areas, "... but when I talk to the faculty, they still have no idea of what we do. But I've talked to a lot of our people about the faculty, and they have no idea what [the faculty] do. And so we're trying to help the student, but we all don't get the big picture."

ENROLLMENT EXPECTATIONS AREN'T ALWAYS REALISTIC

The theme of enrollment expectations flowed both into recruitment of new as well as returning students. While some participants expressed feelings that their campus leaders' incoming enrollment expectations were somewhat realistic, the opposite appeared true for retention of current students, calling it a "complex" issue. Some also expressed the desire for immediate results, and one EM commented:

I mean it takes time for that, to see results. I mean, when a student starts ... they don't go into your success bucket until four years later ... or six years later, and then there's the whole philosophical question: Is it really realistic to expect a student these days to start at one institution and stay there and finish in four years? Probably not.

One EM discussed the expectation of predicting enrollment and related his experience, "... the easiest prediction to give is 'break even,' because what you want to do is under promise and over deliver. Your own worst enemy is huge success." Another participant voiced her thoughts on pressure from the entire campus when she stated:

I think it's just hard. I think this is hard work. It is not all recruitment and fun, you know, it is making big decisions about the university with lots of people counting on you to make it work and not always having realistic expectations about what that could mean.

WE HAVE GOOD EMPLOYEES, BUT THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH OF THEM

A reoccurring theme among participants was a strong reliance and supportive view of their respective staffs, not just in their individual work but also in overall planning and incorporation into EM decision-making. One EM voiced this view of her trust and faith of her staff, "I think my people are fantastic. I think

they do great work, and I think they work very well together. You know, I couldn't be any happier with my direct reports. [I] would fight to the death to keep them together even if I wasn't their leader—I think they are that strong a working unit."

Part of EM's vocal backing of their staff members related to their perceptions of the amount of overload certain staff members shoulder. One EM shared, "... it's been about six key people working every weekend, eight to ten hours on the weekend, extra hours every day to keep up with the Records job and trying to do this." Later, this same EM stated, "I'd say we have enough money, not people. Don't have enough people, don't have enough time."

EMs in this study seemed to commiserate with the challenges and demands of their staff as well as being powerless to make decisions to alter undesirable situations. One participant stated the following concerning his financial aid office:

They're good people. There's a lot of tenure, there's a lot of skills. It's just a set of rules that are totally beyond my ability to affect. And I feel badly for an office that I believe is overworked, that a lot of anger is vented at them from internal and external constituencies and have little ability to change it.

STABLE LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

Nearly all EMs in this study related situations and perspectives on how executive-level leadership has either positively or negatively impacted their enrollment management efforts. One participant shared his perspective regarding his institution's president who was nearing retirement, and the next level leadership were all simply "waiting for new blood and energy" before attempting new strategic directions. One EM felt the instability of having nearly a revolving door for both the resident and the provost during a seven-year span that stalled "all the momentum as a unit."

For those who felt that their institution had stable leadership, EMs felt their institution was moving into a positive direction. One participant described the collaborative nature of his president as opposed to a previous one, "I like the collaborative style. And she's been here two years, and I would say there's been a lot of energy and a lot of very positive steps."

Word Association Exercise Observations

Each enrollment manager was asked to participate in a word association exercise during the interview process. The words chosen were rooted in enrollment management, higher education, and/or decision making and were used as an elicitor to assist the participant's own self-awareness and thereby generate richer responses. The process began with a word or short phrase to which the respondent echoed back the first thought (also a word or short phrase) that entered his or her mind. In Table 1, the 10 elicitors along with each of the 6 participants' responses are listed.

Certain observations about the behaviors of participants during the exercise provided additional meaning and context for their responses. Applying this exercise toward the front of the interview appeared to prompt the participant into a more authentic and faster descent into their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences on the subject matter. Some participants followed directions exactly while others seemed to feel the need to justify every response with a detailed explanation as if to assure the credibility of their answers. When advised that the exercise was about to begin, most participants broke eye contact with me and locked eyes on particular focal point; some repositioned themselves in their chair perhaps as a means of preparing themselves for the unknown.

The word exercise appeared to work well in terms of generating a summative interpretation of the word or phrase offered to the participants. As shown in Table 1, most of the participants' responses could be categorized as negative. One participant was so surprised by the self-labeled "negative" responses he gave that he paused to call attention to this observation, "... I'm listening to myself as you're asking as you're giving me these phrases, and I'm feeling like I've got negativity. ..."

In one instance, another participant chose not to offer a response and merely smirked as if he did not wish to reveal his true thoughts. When I probed further, that participant asked to be recorded as "smirk." One participant used the word *complex* as her response for 3 out of the 10 questions. Others used the word *challenging* in multiple categories. These responses may suggest that EMs view their environment as complicated and perplexing as the limits of

Table 1. Word Association Exercise and Responses

Enrollment Management	Decision Making	Campus-wide Teams	Recruitment	Retention
Daunting	Churning stomach	A nice thought	Demanding	Very frustrating
Numbers; increase	Strategic	Challenging; slow	Critical	Very important Somewhat overlooked
			Collaborative	
Misunderstood	Data	Fractured	Brand	Unsolvable
Challenging	Could be better	Silos	Good	Poor
Challenging	Thoughtful	Hit and miss	More difficult	Hard
Enrollment; broad	Contemplation	Complex	Competitive	Huge; complex
Graduation	Data	Resources	Time	Enrollment Expectations
Joyful	Critically important	Short supply	Only 24 hours in a day	Instantaneous
Critical	Absolutely imperative; tool for decisions	Adequate	Challenging; I go 100 mph all the time	Unreasonable
(Participant wanted his “smirk” as his response)	Necessary	Limited	Little	Uncommunicated
Rates are good	Under lock and key	Exceptional financially; HR not bad	Never enough	Achievable with strategic changes
Out of our control	Infuriating	Limited; scarce	Not enough	Outrageous
Complex	Overwhelming	Good	Not enough	Challenging; always be up 1

their answers obligated them to encapsulate their perceptions into a shortened observation or definition of the elicitor. When taken collectively, responses such as “very frustrating,” “demanding,” “churning stomach,” “fractured,” “poor,” “unreasonable,” “daunting,” and “overwhelming,” among others, imply a pessimistic perception of those enrollment management elicitor words and phrases.

Although particular enrollment goals differ by institution, expectations placed on enrollment managers to reach these objectives existed for every EM in this study. However, the perception for enrollment managers to reach their respective enrollment goals seemed to contrast between what they discussed during the interview compared to their immediate responses during the word association exercise. Most EMs stated their immediate supervisor offered reasonable expectations as to what could realistically be achieved during the next enrollment cycle. When attempting to forecast enrollment for an upcoming term, EMs would often share conservative numbers. One enrollment manager stated he would routinely “underpromise and overdeliver,” and several EMs would predict they would come

close to “breaking even” when compared to previous semesters.

However, during the exercise when all EM participants in this study were asked for a simple response to “enrollment expectations,” nearly all of their replies were stated negatively. Answers such as “outrageous,” “unreasonable,” “challenging,” and “instantaneous,” among others, were given, suggesting that perhaps the expectations from the campus at large to sustain beating enrollment goals was not as reasonable as those shared by their direct supervisor.

The utilization of the word exercise seemed to provide additional context to the interview responses by participants. Not only did some of the participants vocalize their acknowledgment of how their responses could be construed, especially from a negative outlook, but the short answer responses also served as a barometer of sorts to compare more detailed response with a simpler, concise enveloping perception of the enrollment management-based words given as elicitors. The longer answers to interview questions combined with these shortened replies from the exercise aided in the effort to give voice and meaning to the participants’ realities.

Summary of Findings

EMs in this study possessed an assorted range of degree attainment and reached the director-level of a higher educational unit prior to leading their respective enrollment management areas. Reporting structure and titles varied among participants, as some EMs reported directly to their president, while others reported to various vice presidents.

Participants reported a high-pressure environment, and whether their focus was on recruiting new students or retaining and graduating current ones, EMs seemed to agree that the enrollment expectations placed on them were not always realistic. Reportedly repeating through the mind of an enrollment manager is the mantra, “It’s all about the numbers.”

Lack of sufficient or even adequate time was a very common theme shared by participants as EMs seemed to be impacted by “daily disruptions” that affected their daily routines and schedules. Enrollment managers in this study felt this dynamic and the unpredictable environment channeled them into making more reactive versus proactive decision making. Most EMs greatly appreciated and trusted their staff members while sympathizing with how much they were “overworked.”

When it came to decision making, EMs were unanimous in their predilection toward accurate, quality data. Considering their inclination to primarily be focused on numbers, EMs placed a substantial amount of value on data in their decision-making processes. However, they expressed frustration when data may be either untrustworthy or difficult to obtain. They seemed to somewhat reluctantly acknowledge the realities of having to use “instinct” or “gut feelings” to make decisions in the absence of data.

Perceptions toward utilizing professional consultants in the decision-making process varied somewhat, but most felt those organizations did not cater enough to “their” students. Regardless of quality data or consultant-based recommendations, EMs demonstrated a tendency to make decisions on “who’s screaming the loudest.” These “have to” types of demands included others besides their superiors—including fellow staff, faculty, and of course, students—but EMs relayed these interactions as factors that would disrupt or interfere with their current prioritization.

EMs also expressed a willingness for faculty to be involved in their strategic processes, but it appeared to be a challenge for most, and there were few examples given of successful collaboration. An essential element to effective enrollment management decision making, as expressed by EMs in this study, was stable and effective leadership. Coupled with the need for strategic planning that should govern the overall direction of the campus and from which all subsequent decisions should flow, enrollment managers relayed several examples of how both effective and poor leadership efforts had either propelled or stalled their momentum.

When viewed in totality, the findings in this study point to specific conclusions concerning enrollment managers’ decision-making practices. Enrollment managers work in a stressful, highly competitive and complex environment where expectations to meet enrollment goals govern their motives. Whether imposed on them by their president or vice president, or a self-imposed mandate, the desire to attract and enroll new students remained a primary objective that rendered all other priorities to a secondary status.

With multiple interruptions in an EM’s daily schedule, the ability for the enrollment manager to maintain consistent efforts on desired projects and plans was severely hindered. Enrollment managers in this study shared through multiple examples that they did not feel they had enough time to accomplish their tasks as thoroughly as they preferred and often either put projects on “back burners” or addressed the problem without full consideration of possible options. Describing daily interruptions as “minutia,” enrollment managers acknowledged that their time was stretched thin but also felt a duty to the students, parents, and staff, who may be the source of the disruptions.

The manner in which EMs seem to make decisions appears to closely match the theory of bounded rationality proposed by Dr. Herbert Simon, who suggested that humans do not possess full access to the complexity of the environmental factors nor have a fully effective cognitive system that can maximize every real-life decision (Campitelli & Gobet, 2010). The enrollment management environment itself exhibited characteristics suitable to allow EMs to make decisions in the context closely associated to the garbage can model. This was largely due to the ambiguity of goal

setting and the mixture of participants, problems, and solutions in a figurative “can,” of which temporal proximity appeared to be more of a factor in terms of what received attention first.

Although entrenched in their stance of valuing data in their decision making, enrollment managers also used their own experience-driven intuition to help guide their decisions. Even when they were able to obtain the desired data, not all of them fully trusted it due to either an understanding of the technological system used to generate the data or because they were unable to acquire sufficient amounts and sources of data. Their ambivalent views toward data match the limitations EMs have in terms of feeling confident and certain about their decisions as part of a larger strategic direction. When stable and effective leadership is absent and EMs possess fragmented data sources, they are left to fill the gap with their instinctual awareness of enrollment management practice. In these cases, they seem fairly confident in their reliance on personal experience. Nevertheless, this reality forced EMs to take action reactively instead of proactively. This ultimately left the EM feeling behind and anxious, almost as if s/he were in a constant chase where the prey remained just out of reach.

The concept and practice of enrollment management remains fluid and diverse in its application, and the evidence gathered in this study, particularly by the comments made by the EM participants, seem to suggest a preference toward this notion. As demonstrated by the EMs’ comments concerning their apparent irritations toward consultants who claim individual application but seem to recommend tactics attempted and employed at many other institutions, a one-size-fits-all approach toward enrollment management decision making is neither realistic nor preferred. The individuality of each institution, especially concerning its enrollment goals and objectives, appeared to be of high value to EMs in this study.

The competitive environment within enrollment management may also be predisposed toward having its leaders exhibit feelings of isolation. Considering many of the participants appeared to use the interview process itself as a means to express personal opinions, frustrations, and passions—as if our interaction served as an outlet for them to articulate their perceptions—EMs

may be internalizing stress associated with enrollment expectations and feel somewhat removed or in solitude compared to other administrative leaders across campus.

Final Summary

The practice and philosophy of enrollment management has been and remains in flux. New or revised approaches toward recruiting, retaining, and graduating students seem to be announced or presented through national associations, conferences, and consulting organizations at a hastening pace. Operational structure and format for enrollment management units vary and change seemingly as much as a new recruitment trend is proclaimed. Considering the debatable best practices that do not apply to every institution in a “one-size-fits-all” approach as well as the fluctuating and potentially capricious institutional practice of enrollment management, how could one expect a decision-making effort by any means other than satisficing through a garbage can model?

It is my hope that enrollment management practitioners may in fact find some solace in their efforts to make diligently researched decisions (which often fall short of these expectations, as found in this study) by understanding there are additional managers who are faced with the same challenges to effective decision making. I also realize that enrollment managers are not the only ones to make satisficing decisions in complex environments, but institutional presidents, vice presidents, and governing entities over enrollment planners should be mindful of these realities and limitations, which may relieve some of the stress levels in this already high-pressure working environment with managers who let the worry and concern over meeting enrollment goals creep into their subconscious.

Author’s Note

The contents of this article stem from work conducted through research from my dissertation and may not delve into a specific focus on which the reader may be interested. More current SEM-related publications may provide an updated or alternative perspective to compliment and/or fragment the assertions made in

the research into additional findings. As my qualitative results reflected the environment and perspective through the lens of each participant in the study, time and scope limitations prevented further exploratory efforts. Therefore, additional avenues of potential study may be researched to help reveal an expanded analysis into specific points of interest.

For example, many of the participants voiced the types of data used for decision making. However, a follow-up study could investigate which sources were deemed most relevant, helpful, impactful, and so on, to help achieve a desired outcome. Additionally, how were those outcomes assessed? Would employing a decision-making instrument help evaluation of decisions? Do core data elements exist that SEM practitioners would find more useful than others, which may serve as more as an “interesting” data element rather than truly informative to help make key decisions that affect enrollment?

While recognizing and gathering the data may be viewed as critical, how do they manage data analysis? Do they employ data or research analysts to help drudge through the numbers and develop a strategic plan? How would that work operationally? If the implication that EMs can be submerged and weighted by massive amounts of data, what are some best practices that may assist SEM planners in achieving and meeting their objectives through outsourcing some of the data analysis efforts?

The evidence presented in my dissertation reflected realities by select enrollment managers; however, the subsequent research into effective data analysis and effective decision making could yield tremendous guidance for practitioners to employ best-practice techniques to leverage optimum decision making to achieve their institutional strategic management enrollment goals.

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