

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A SEM PLAN—ONE UNIVERSITY'S JOURNEY

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Introduction

In 2013, in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada, at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) board of governors' meeting, a motion was passed that would have a significant impact on future planning at the university. The board of governors directed the president to develop a strategic enrollment management plan (SEM) for the university for the next five years. The chief student affairs officer (VP, Students and Enrollment Management) was tasked by the president to lead this process. Ten months later, we were standing before the board of governors with a completed SEM plan effective from 2014 to 2019. In those 10 months, we learned a lot about SEM planning at the institutional level as well as the significant impact an approved SEM plan can have on the planning cycle within the division of student affairs. We share those experiences here in a case study of one university's experience in developing and implementing a SEM plan and the impact that had on planning within student affairs.

¹Portions of this section of the paper were extracted from the University of the Fraser Valley Strategic Enrollment Management Plan, 2014–2019, as Jody Gordon was the primary author. See <http://www.ufv.ca/media/assets/institutional-research/planning/strategic-initiatives/UFV-SEM-2014-Plan.pdf>

The SEM Model Utilized¹

SEM first emerged in the 1970s at Boston College with a growing realization of market fluctuations and recruitment pressures. By the 1980s, tuition price sensitivity and the integration of financial aid with admissions expanded the SEM focus. By the 1990s, SEM had developed into a strategic component of institutional planning. However, the focus of SEM planning remained front-ended within the student life cycle, as seen in Figure 1 (Bontrager, 2014).

As institutions developed more sophisticated student information systems, a data-rich environment expanded the focus of SEM from recruitment and admissions to retention and the student experience. SEM planning now considers the entire life cycle of the student as depicted in Figure 2 (Bontrager, 2014).

UFV adopted a definition of SEM consistent with Figure 2:

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is a concept and process that [through strategic planning of enrollments] enables the fulfillment of institutional mission and students' educational goals. (Bontrager, 2004)

Figure 1. Traditional Enrollment Perspective



Figure 2. SEM Perspective on Enrollment



For the UFV process, this included viewing SEM within a larger planning process:

[Strategic] Enrollment management is a comprehensive and coordinated process that enables a college to identify enrollment goals that are allied with its mission, its strategic plan, its environment, and its resources, and to reach those goals through the effective integration of administrative processes, student services, curriculum planning, and market analysis. (Kerlin, 2008)

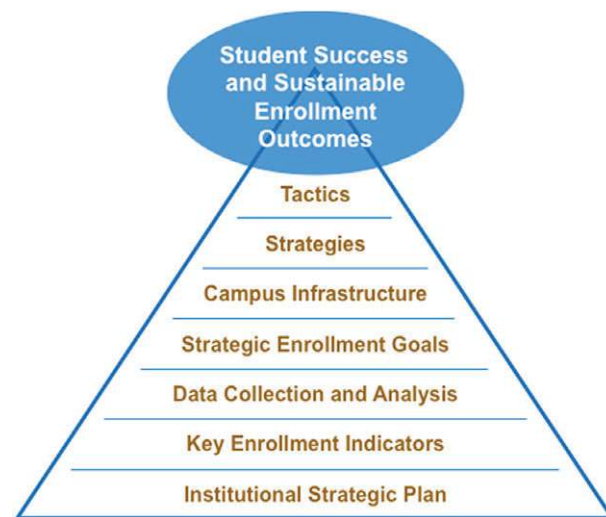
In addition to being grounded in our strategic and academic plans, the SEM plan was intended to be intentional, practical, data and goal driven, action oriented, and student success focused (Gordon & Sigler, 2012, 2013).

While SEM is not a quick fix or an overnight process, it is about establishing clear goals for the number and types of students needed to fulfill the institutional mission, and it is about promoting students' academic success by improving access, transition, persistence, and graduation (Gordon & Sigler, 2012, 2013).

The framework we utilized for establishing the SEM plan at UFV is described in Figure 3 (Bontrager, 2014).

Our strategic plan and our academic plan together formed the foundation for our planning process. What

Figure 3. SEM Planning Framework



we aspire to be as an institution and how our programming brings that vision to life grounded our entire SEM plan. Key enrollment indicators emerged from our strategic plan and were informed by our enrollment goals. They defined optimum enrollment mix and guided us in measuring the impact of our plan. Key enrollment indicators took into consideration the entire life cycle of the student (as noted in Figure 3).

A SEM plan must be evidence based. An environmental scan captured both external and internal factors

that influence enrollment and student success. This data influenced targets that were set within the strategic enrollment goals. Enrollment goals captured our institution's desired future based on our vision and was informed by the environmental scan. Campus infrastructure ensured that the necessary staffing, structure, services, and systems are in place to support the enrollment goals. Finally, strategies are driven by leadership and developed by faculties and support units, and tactics are how we will achieve the enrollment goals driven by faculties and support units (Gordon & Sigler, 2012, 2013).

Strategies and tactics are developed institution-wide. It is where the "heavy lifting" within SEM occurs. This is where support units find opportunities to collaborate, where faculties develop interdisciplinary studies and where support units and faculties come together in support of student success. Given the operational nature of strategies and tactics, they were developed upon the approval of the SEM plan. Assessment, to ensure that Strategies and Tactics achieved what they intended, was critical to the success of the plan.

From Theory to Practice—Developing an Institution-wide SEM Plan

Critical to the success of any SEM plan is the level of engagement by the academic deans. At UFV, the provost fully embraced the development of the plan and placed the SEM plan as a standing agenda item on the academic deans meetings (which the chief student affairs officer as VP, Students and Enrollment Management also attended) each month. Smaller working groups were also formed to assist in the development of the strategic enrollment goals consisting of representation from the deanery. An all-day retreat involving the deans as well as other members of the senior executive also occurred to review the data collected on key performance indicators and to further refine enrollment goals. While buy-in from the decanal group was critical, so, too, was the support from senior leadership. Without that, the SEM plan would never be implemented.

Throughout the development of the plan, the academic senate received regular updates on the formation of the enrollment goals, including targets

that were set. This allowed for broader input. The final SEM plan received endorsement by the academic senate and approval by the board of governors 10 months after receiving the charge from the board to the president. The SEM plan is one of three significant documents that drive budgeting at the institution, the other two being the academic plan and the institutional strategic plan. While the development of the plan required significant effort, time, and people resources, the true heavy lifting had yet to begin.

Implementing a SEM Plan in a Student Affairs Division

The board of governors approved the UFV SEM plan in September 2014. All academic faculties and all student affairs units were expected to incorporate the SEM plan into their yearly strategic and tactical planning. One such division, student affairs, fully embraced the SEM plan and developed yearly tactical plans based on supporting the nine strategic enrollment goals. Their journey began with having to overcome some organization inertia.

Merriam-Webster defines *inertia* as: "a property of matter by which it remains at rest or in uniform motion in the same straight line unless acted upon by some external force, [and] indisposition to motion, exertion, or change" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2016). In both of these definitions, inertia also represents a considerable challenge in the context of SEM planning and implementation. Many of our institutions have existed for decades, if not longer, and some of the people who are members of our institutions seem to have been here for just as long. These are the people who start statements with "that's not how we've done this before," or "we tried that about 10 years ago and it didn't work," and "I've heard this before." These are the same people who have seen multiple strategic five-year plans proposed, adopted, and shelved, with little lasting impact or buy-in.

In the fall of 2014, this was the situation at UFV when the SEM plan was approved by the board of governors. Many long-term employees planned to say what needed to be said and do what needed to be done to keep administrators happy, while quietly waiting for the day and time when SEM would disappear from the agendas and conversations that had already started. In

any other situation, their tactic and inertia may have been successful, but the SEM plan implementation at UFV used a slightly different trajectory and a modified “Kotter change model” (Kotter, 2012) to promote adoption, support, and achievement of the nine SEM goals included in the plan. The organization was segmented, using the student affairs division as a vanguard to create a swell of activity that no amount of inertia could resist.

Kotter’s (1995) original article suggested that there were eight critical steps to transforming an organization:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
3. Creating a vision
4. Communicating the vision
5. Empowering others to act on the vision
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
8. Institutionalizing new approaches

While originally designed for the business sector, the Kotter change model is broadly applicable and adaptable due to its foundational focus on the human response of the organizational change, rather than being subsumed with the change issue itself. This was particularly useful at UFV, as the institution has a sizeable long-serving and change-resistant employee population.

STEP 1: CREATE A SENSE OF URGENCY

Kotter’s first step is to create a sense of urgency. The best SEM planning is neither a magic elixir for waning enrollment nor a quick-fix marketing gimmick. Real SEM planning is data driven, institutional in scope, and student success focused. Luckily, these three factors were understood by the senior leadership team, and two primary groups were engaged to begin working with the data: the dean’s council and the student affairs division.

Using data, the deans were engaged and asked to consider academic responses to potential enrollment and therefore budgetary threats, while the student affairs division was engaged and motivated with the

vision of a more holistic, evolved, and recognized role in supporting the student experience. To start, the student affairs staff were given the task of identifying their current projects and practices that were aligned with the SEM plan goals. They were also challenged to think beyond the status quo and past any barriers to the types of supports that would provide meaningful, holistic support for students. Engaging the staff in these two channels of thought was an easy way to create momentum within the student affairs teams that had been engaging in SEM-type activity for years, without explicit direction or recognition for doing so. The first lesson was that student affairs staff philosophy and professional practice tended to naturally align with student-focused SEM goals. The ability to capitalize on the natural pool of activity of the student affairs staff allowed us to almost instantly show that there was already SEM supportive activity and broad institutional support for the SEM plan.

STEP 2: FORM A POWERFUL COALITION

Regardless of how good any SEM plan is, it needs leadership from influential members of the community to be successful. UFV benefitted from early and vocal support from our president’s executive team, which is composed of the president, provost, vice presidents, and executive directors. The engagement of the dean’s council was also an important early endorsement of the plan.

While the support of these two groups is critical to the success of any university-wide plan, we also quickly sought out opinion influencers who may normally struggle to find their place and contribution in a SEM plan. We had discussions about their specific roles, contributions, and importance to the plan’s success. These folks may not have direct student interaction roles at the university, but they included people such as directors and managers of facilities, marketing, security, finance, purchasing, and ancillary services. These people represent a powerful group of student affairs allies who are often forgotten when considering student success. The reality is that their cooperation and support can either facilitate otherwise difficult issues or can grind SEM efforts to a halt. Engaging them as allies early in the process put the SEM discussion at every significant table and committee at the university.

The last group that was quickly engaged was the long-standing staff members, who possessed reverent power within the institution. While it was known that a number of them would not become allies, only a small number were needed to understand what the SEM plan was and was not and how they could contribute or already were. In some cases, early staff allies did nothing new other than be recognized for the SEM and student success champions they already were. It rewarded staff by acknowledging that what they had been doing for 30 years were actually SEM tactics.

STEP 3: CREATE A VISION FOR CHANGE

Creating a SEM vision should be the simplest step. SEM, by design, focuses on and creates a vision of student success. Having high-level goals allows people in every part of the university to imagine and easily grasp their role in supporting student success. The only difficult aspect of this step is clearly articulating the goals of the SEM plan and having people strategically placed to help others see how their role contributes to the vision at the right moment. UFV found that examples of simple ideas that had high-level impact were especially effective. “Elevator speeches” and speaking points were developed for every opportunity to showcase the work we were doing and how it aligned with specific SEM goals; it went so far as to be embedded into interview questions for new internal and external hires. “Tell me what you are working on, and we’ll work together to figure out how it supports the SEM plan” was a favorite expression.

STEP 4: COMMUNICATE THE VISION

The effectiveness of communicating vision will largely determine success. This was the stage where the initial inertia could resurface, stalling any further progress. In order to preempt this possibility, SEM was discussed at every opportunity; it was added to every agenda, mentioned in every conversation, and showcased at every opportunity. The UFV SEM team became SEM evangelists.

Around this time, the university was beginning the annual budget cycle and the very simple act of adding one column to the “budget request document” sent reverberations through the units. The column title was simple: “SEM Goal Supported.” The implied

message was equally simple: if this column is blank, it should not be proposed, and even if it is, it will not be funded. Suddenly, UFV was making resource allocation decisions based on SEM utility. Long-stalled projects with SEM utility were approved, while projects without SEM utility were left unfunded. Plans that influence resources do not get dusty on shelves.

STEP 5: REMOVE OBSTACLES

Once people realized UFV was serious about SEM, and staff and faculty understood that they had a role to play in creating a vision of student success, things started moving quickly. People who were slow to adopt the SEM vision either engaged with the process or became increasingly isolated. Identifying those who were becoming isolated was important in order to eliminate any potential areas that could derail the work at this point. Extra efforts were made to integrate them and help them to understand their potential contributions to the plan; for some people, this looked like conversations to eliminate fears or misunderstandings around SEM; others were motivated by a challenge to contribute; and the remaining holdouts were so few that they quickly fell silent in meetings and lunchrooms.

The people who understood SEM and their role wanted to act, and UFV wanted to encourage and support that energy and momentum but quickly found that the university was not necessarily structured to support SEM activity. Our business processes and policies were not flexible, responsive, or student centered. Those in leadership positions had to quickly shift from forming coalitions and communicating the vision, to clearing barriers and obstacles, to the staff’s work. There is no quicker way to kill passion and momentum than with bureaucracy; the process moved into a period where staff were identifying long-standing obstacles as quickly as they could be cleared.

Two things happened at this point: The identification of relatively simple-to-solve obstacles, such as eliminating onerous and repetitive forms and clarifying difficult funding processes, resulted in a reduction of overall obstacles. As we cleared a problematic business process, we shared the precedent with others, and suddenly dogmatic processes were falling around us in the name of SEM. The second thing that happened was that the university created the SEM

oversight committee with the expressed mission to identify barriers to SEM goal attainment. This cross-institutional committee inventoried every SEM tactic proposed by every department at the institution and documented any barriers to the tactical attainment. UFV was identifying challenges that were so big, the university didn't know where to start.

STEP 6: CREATE SHORT-TERM WINS

UFV went back to what had originally worked in the student affairs departments, but on an institutional scale. People were asked what they were already doing, and they talked a lot about how they were contributing to student success, and therefore SEM. Tactics were inventoried across the institution, highlighting projects and tactics that became showpieces for the power of the plan and demonstrated the power of data and student success focus.

UFV also talked with people about what projects they had planned and were ready to implement but had stalled for some reason. The university was seeking things that would be early and easy wins and would continue to keep the conversation going. So we sought out projects that had been stalled due to funding or process. For example, adding a desktop printer in one area dramatically improved service to students with disabilities, and changing one space booking form increased the speed at which we were able to process student university space usage requests. People were understandably enthused when long-stalled projects suddenly had new life.

STEP 7: BUILD ON THE CHANGE

The creation of the SEM oversight committee was critical to institutionalize the change of the SEM plan. It took SEM planning and tactical efforts from a departmental level to an institutional one, but within six months' people were no longer questioning the need for a SEM plan, and they were looking for help to continue to develop and implement projects and programs. Many of the easy-to-implement projects had been implemented, and many of the easy-to-remove obstacles had been removed. The committee was at the point where the really hard questions needed to be asked, and serious work needed to be done to shift

systems and long-held processes in order to continue building on the work done to this point. For example, we had to ask questions about the implications of our course-scheduling process shifting from a faculty-centric to a student-centric model, the assignment of space on campus, and the role co-curricular learning plays in student success.

The solution was to create SEM implementation committees that focused on functional areas such as recruitment, retention, transitions, and marketing. These committees have been tasked with continuing to clear obstacles and with continuing to seek constant improvement in the student experience. Their membership is composed of cross-institutional administrators, faculty, staff, and students, and they report directly to the provost and vice president, students, and enrollment management.

STEP 8: ANCHOR THE CHANGES IN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

In a relatively short period of time, the university has been able to move from SEM as a dream to SEM as guiding reality. There have been many early wins and number of complex projects have started that will require long-term determination and focus. UFV is also at a point where our actions are starting to show data outcomes as activities are assessed. It will become increasingly important to use that data to refine the SEM plan goals and the tactical approach to addressing them.

Many of UFV's previous plans had an end date or some completion indicator; it is important to reinforce understanding that the goal of SEM is not the finish line, it is the journey and that the plan is iterative and responsive to the environment in which it exists. Therefore, the greatest future challenge is not planning for the post-SEM era, but creating an understanding that the SEM era is ongoing. Additionally, since the adoption of the SEM plan, other institution-wide plans have been undertaken and adopted. As UFV continues with the SEM plan, there is an increasing complexity surrounding integration and congruity with a newly approved education plan and a strategic plan that is now over eight years old that will need attention.

Final Reflections

The UFV SEM Plan was developed within the parameters set by the strategic plan and the academic plan. The development and implementation of the plan engaged both student affairs and academic affairs. By integrating the SEM plan into the budget process and into the overall integrated planning cycle at the institution, SEM, or more rightly student success, has become a significant agent of change for student affairs at UFV. In the meantime, the university continues to gather data; celebrate projects completed, obstacles removed, and goals attained; and keeps focused on the fact that SEM, at its heart, is about student success.

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