

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Reflections on Achievement, Hitting the Glass Ceiling and Breaking the Mold

by Susan Gottheil

There are two points in the year that always prompt me to reflect on where I have been, what accomplishments I have made, and what challenges I have faced. Such reflection spurs me to imagine how things might be different. Spring convocation—with its pomp and circumstance and celebration of academic success—is one such time. December, the end of the calendar year, marks another period of evaluation as we make promises to ourselves (and sometimes those closest to us) to live our lives a little differently and better.

Periodically I also engage in critical reflection on the state of our profession. Do our actions—and, more important, our outcomes—match the intentions we set for ourselves, our institutions, and the students and faculty we serve? Are we enablers and change agents...or gatekeepers? In our rush to embrace new technologies and implement organizational efficiencies, have we lost sight of the core values we embrace as student service and student affairs professionals?

A similar arc of achievement, planning, and reflection marks the paths of our careers. As I enter the final phase of my own work, the inevitable questions come to mind: Have I made an impact in my portfolio and in my profession? Have I helped enhance student access and success? Have I been a transformational agent of change? What more is left to be done? And if I can't do it all, what advice can I offer to those who will follow in my footsteps?

In the Beginning...

Like many of us, my path to higher education leadership was not linear and was serendipitous. Aspiring to be a registrar (a paper pusher?) or enrollment services professional (a crass marketer and pencil pusher?) was not top of mind as I crossed the stage at my own undergraduate convocation. I was happy to leave the hallowed halls to begin my “real life” filled with adventure, new friends, and unknown opportunities. I went off to hitchhike through Europe, bask in the sun on Crete and traipse through museums, cathedrals and archeological digs. When the money began to run out, thoughts turned to “what next?”

My graduate education was in a field that interested me (women's history) although I had no clear idea where it would lead. As a naïve feminist and student activist, I saw no barriers or challenges ahead; opportunities were sure to come my way, and I was certain my skills and abilities would land me an interesting position somewhere (where, exactly, was unclear).

My graduate degree led me to a teaching position at a community college. My disciplinary interests led me to coordinate an affirmative action project for women at my institution. The emerging field of employment equity in Canada landed me my next job at a university in a different city where I focused on broader educational equity issues, including broadening access and retention for racialized minorities, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities as well as female students

and staff. My vision for an inclusive and equitable postsecondary institution resonated with my peers, and the provost offered me a senior position overseeing academic and student services.

My Rise Through the Ranks

It was at this juncture that the postsecondary world in Canada underwent cataclysmic shifts—large cuts in provincial funding and big tuition increases, the introduction of the *Maclean's* university rankings, increased competitiveness, and the genteel “Canadian” approach to collaboration between universities gone. The university I worked for saw a 45 percent decline in enrollment over a five-year period (Gottheil 2013).

With a disastrous shift in enrollment patterns, I was suddenly thrown under the microscope. I had orders from the top to reverse the dire enrollment trend, increase admission averages, buoy plummeting institutional reputation and rankings, and listen to/take direction from faculty colleagues. I met resistance from my staff, who considered me an outsider and doubted that I had the knowledge and vision to manage and lead an enrollment services team. I had never worked in a recruitment, admission, financial aid, or records office. I did not look like a typical university registrar. I was not a gatekeeper: I believed bad rules should be changed, and I felt that building relationships with all academic and administrative units was imperative if we were to achieve our strategic goals.

I needed to learn fast, change processes and institutional culture, and produce dramatic results. Like a good academic, I began to delve into research studies and publications, attend workshops and conferences, and see whether I could turn to any colleagues for advice and help. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) had begun to emerge as a profession, and I drank in the insights and wit of trailblazers such as Michael Dolence, Stan Henderson, David Kalsbeek, Richard Whiteside, Don Hossler, and Bob Bontrager. (Notably, these SEM pioneers were all white men; I wondered why so few women were in the field.)

During those early, heady days I implemented a SEM organization and planning framework at my insti-

tution, relying on data and evidence-based analysis to help shape our tactics and strategies. Yes, it did help to have a crisis to get everyone on board. Academic and administrative units alike volunteered insights and elbow grease to ensure that our intentional planning produced positive results. And we succeeded (Gottheil 2015).

A Focus on Inclusivity

I was energized, yet...what happened to my commitment to build an inclusive community? In my enthusiasm and excitement about enacting change, had I forgotten my principles and commitment to open the doors of our institution wider to help those succeed who had traditionally been underserved? Was it possible to return to my commitment to educational equity and still be successful in reaching SEM goals?

It took another few years before the general SEM conversation expanded beyond achieving pure enrollment growth and increasing the bottom line. Financial leveraging raised ethical concerns relative to how SEM tactics had been implemented by some institutions (Bontrager, Espinoza, and Henderson 2007). The explosion of the myth of the homogeneity of our “traditional” student body spurred conversation about the need to focus on student success and not just access at colleges and universities. We began to set more discrete goals to increase specific segments of our student populations and to examine student outcomes and not just inputs.

As a Canadian I also began to understand the importance of situating the changes I needed to implement and the goals my institution needed to set within our cultural and historical context. This is a lesson all SEM professionals learn to take to heart: we must become scholars of our own institutions and experts on our own students. At my current institution, we have certainly set global goals of how big we wish to grow as a university and how many graduate and undergraduate students we hope to enroll. Yet we also have made a commitment to increase our indigenous student enrollment (as well as that of international students) and to ensure that the students who are admitted succeed. As a community, we are committed to providing the cultural, financial, academic, and social supports that students need to at-

tain their educational and career goals. In the process, we know that our success as an institution in helping all of our students will ensure that those “in the pipeline” will consider applying to our university, becoming part of our community and succeeding.

The Face of Leadership: Where are the Role Models?

Much has changed since the end of the second World War: population booms and busts, the technological revolution, a focus on social justice and civil rights issues and an expansion of postsecondary enrollment that now includes many who had previously been “left behind.” Yet the face of leadership in our colleges and universities—and in our own profession—has not changed and does not mirror the diverse faces and lived experiences of the students in our hallways and classrooms. Can we achieve our inclusive SEM goals without addressing this inequity? Will we continue to admit students to what is still an essentially elite “old boys’ (white) club” and not face the more difficult questions of changing our pedagogy and curriculum, policies, and processes and interpersonal communication and relationships to embrace diversity in all its forms? It is time that we take a serious look at our organizational structures and management and aim for a truly inclusive postsecondary culture.

Changing the face of leadership cannot and will not happen overnight. The responsibility to ensure that the glass ceilings of college boardrooms are shattered rests with each and every one of us. Mentorship and encouragement begin in the daily conversations we have with students, listening to the barriers and challenges they face as they persist and succeed in their studies. Opportunities for young GLBTQ+, racialized minority and first-generation students to gain work-related skills that may lead to permanent careers begin in our offices with work-study positions and summer employment. We need to ensure that we tap a diverse group of staff to sit on committees and working groups and to work on “special projects” as these opportunities are stepping stones to other positions and career paths. If we include *all* staff in strategic planning and visioning retreats, then junior staff as well as management can be

exposed to wide-ranging ideas and opportunities and work together to collaborate on new models of service provision. Knowledge, skills and leadership are acquired over time. Equity and inclusivity need to be nurtured.

Reflections on SEM Leadership

As a young professional I stood in awe of the many SEM groundbreakers who have since become colleagues and peers. With grit, persistence, and resiliency I was successful at a number of institutions in building a collaborative culture that exceeded enrollment expectations and ensured a broad range of academic and student support services. My rise to the “top” appeared to be meteoric and serendipitous, but upon reflection, the meandering path was built on experiences and opportunities that were given to me by mentors who had faith in my abilities. My mentors saw beyond my gender and knew that I was curious, eager to learn, and wanted to make a difference.

One may argue that I am symbolic of a generation of women who have broken through the glass ceiling. And while it is true that there now are more women in our profession and in positions of leadership, they still look an awful lot like me-- white, highly educated academics. So, as I reflect on my own journey, what remains to be done?

Too few first-generation, Latino/a, indigenous, and racialized minority students see a place for themselves at our colleges and universities. Even fewer find the supports they need to persist and graduate and achieve their educational goals. We still have much work to do. But it is also time for us to recognize that these students will not understand that there is a welcoming place for them to learn and grow unless they can see themselves—and faces like theirs—on campus. It is time for us to open up and nurture a new generation of SEM professionals. We have a moral obligation to mentor the next generation of leaders who will reflect the demographics and identities of the students we now serve and bring new ideas into the academy and our work. As we consciously work to bring those who may be different from us into our work units, we need to remind ourselves that ours is a profession that is not just transactional (Seifert *et al.*); we are transformative.

About the Author



Susan Gottheil

Susan Gottheil is Vice-Provost (Students) at the University of Manitoba, where she is involved in strategic enrollment management planning and working with colleagues across campus to enhance the student experience. She has more than three decades of leadership experience in the Canadian postsecondary sector, helping institutions to promote and expand academic programs, increase student recruitment and retention, enhance learning and development, improve student and academic support services, and promote collaborative partnerships.

With an undergraduate degree from McGill University and an M.A. in Women's

History, Gottheil began her career at Vanier College Cegep in Montreal, where she spent nine years teaching before moving into senior administrative positions at Carleton University. In 2006, she moved to western Canada to help Mount Royal transition from a college to a university and roll out new undergraduate degree programs. Her background and experience cover a number of key areas including enrollment management, strategic planning, student and academic services, integrated marketing and communications, and employment and educational equity.

Gottheil is motivated by new challenges. She has inspired, managed and led cross-functional staff and faculty

teams to dramatically increase student enrollment and retention, improve student service delivery and student support programs, and enhance student success. Over the past few years, she has collaborated with Clayton Smith on the emergence and implementation of enrollment management in Canada. Together they have presented workshops at a number of professional conferences in the United States and across Canada, published articles, co-edited a book on SEM in Canada and organized the annual Canadian Strategic Enrollment Management Summits. Gottheil has helped a number of Canadian institutions develop strategic enrollment plans in her role as a senior consultant with AACRAO Consulting.

References

Bontrager, B., S. Espinoza, and S. Henderson. 2007. *Enrollment Management: The Ethical Debate*. AACRAO SEM 2007. Available at: aacrao-web.s3.amazonaws.com/files/WFibrRi8QQqw5D913PQZ_T0130p_B_Bontrager.pdf.

Gottheil, S. 2013. A leader with unexpected roots. *College and University*. 88(3): 58.
———. 2015. Walking the walk together: Implementing SEM to enhance the student experience. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*. 2(4): 58.

Seifert, T., K. Moore, J. Beaulieu, and C. Arnold. 2017. Paddling with purpose: Perceptions of student success and retention efforts. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*. 5 (1): 20–30.