

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

A Professional Body of Knowledge for a Nascent Profession

By Jerry Lucido, Don Hossler, Katie O'Dowd, and Bob Massa

Little attention has been given to identifying the professional bodies of knowledge or expertise that should be possessed by entering, early career, or senior SEM staff members. Using a multi-method research approach that included both a national survey and a modified Delphi Technique involving senior enrollment and admissions professionals, we examine the domains of knowledge/expertise in which enrollment management personnel need more education and training. In addition, this study reports on the preferred levels of education for the preparation of enrollment management personnel. The results reveal that a master's degree in enrollment management, followed by a doctorate in enrollment management, are the preferred levels of educational preparation for gaining SEM expertise. The domains of knowledge garnered from these studies include: strategic planning, the analysis and use of SEM relevant research, marketing, admissions models and practice, financial aid, budgeting, campus leadership, diversity, student retention, and campus leadership. This study closes with a discussion of the implications for the formal educational preparation of future enrollment managers.

There is little doubt that the number of colleges and universities that have senior administrative positions charged with managing college enrollments has increased dramatically (Schultz and Lucido 2011). Enrollment management has evolved from a senior administrative position primarily at less selective private institutions that had to work harder to achieve their enrollment goals to a normative position found at most private and public institutions. As the presence

of enrollment management organizations has become commonplace, increasing attention has been given to the training and development of enrollment managers (Hossler 2014). These trends have also raised questions about the extent to which enrollment management is a profession (Henderson 2001; Ward and Hossler 2016). Indeed, having an identifiable body of knowledge that by implication becomes part of the formal education and training of individuals in a field of work is one of

the criteria that sociologists apply when determining what is considered a profession (Carpenter 1991, Henderson 2001, Lester 2010). Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) note that formal higher education graduate programs also play an important role in socializing novice employees into the profession. Thus, research of what experienced professionals think novices in the field need to know and how they view the formal education of enrollment managers is relevant to the nascent field of enrollment management.

To shed light on these important issues, the results of two studies that examined how senior enrollment management professionals view the educational needs of early- to mid-career enrollment professionals were combined:

- A national survey of experienced enrollment managers explored two research questions. First, what do respondents identify as the areas of knowledge and expertise required of enrollment managers? Second, what kind of formal education do experienced enrollment managers recommend for early- and mid-career professionals? More specifically, do early- and mid-career professionals need workshops, non-credit certificate/non-degree programs, master's degree programs, or doctoral degree programs?
- A session that took place at a national professional conference on enrollment management added detail. A modified Delphi Technique (Powell 2003) was utilized to identify the most pressing concerns of enrollment managers. These findings provide insight into the thematic content that should be part of educational programs for emerging enrollment managers.

Methods

This study was a multi-method study involving two research methods. First, a survey (*see* Appendix) was sent to 2,400 senior enrollment professionals; almost 15 percent (352) of those completed some but not all of the survey items, and 273 completed all of the items. All usable responses to individual items were included in the analysis. The response rate fell at the high end of normal response rates for online surveys according to a leading survey research company (Fryrear 2015) and at the low end ac-

cording to Nulty (2008); the response rate was lower than the authors preferred. The response rate, though credible, might give pause in the analysis if a second study (described in the methods section) had not also been conducted. The two studies enabled the data to be triangulated and substantive conclusions to be reached.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Tableau was used to display the results). Using a forced choice set of questions, respondents were asked to select from among a set of options to identify the topic areas they believed to be the most important knowledge domains for enrollment managers. The survey also asked questions about the delivery methods for courses in enrollment management and the appropriate degree level for students in an enrollment management program. Survey respondents were almost evenly split by gender; with regard to race, 73 percent identified as white, 6 percent as black, 6 percent as Latino, and 3 percent as Asian. (The remainder did not answer this question.) Only 12 percent held a bachelor's degree as the highest degree attained, 61 percent held master's degrees, and 26 percent had an earned doctorate. On average, respondents had sixteen-plus years of experience. Fifty-two percent worked at private, non-profit four-year institutions, and 27 percent worked at public institutions (the majority at four-year institutions).

The second study was conducted at the ACT Enrollment Planner's Conference in July 2016. Approximately 60 enrollment managers represented an array of two- and four-year, public and private institutions. The study was based on a two-step process: Before the data-gathering process began, they were organized into groups numbering between eight and ten. Using a modified Delphi Technique, members of each group were asked to identify the five most pressing issues with which they were dealing. Group members shared their lists and used a consensus process to determine top priorities. The facilitators then grouped the priorities according to similar themes; participants were asked to vote for their top five concerns.

Considered in their entirety, these two studies provide a robust understanding of the professional education needs of early- to mid-career enrollment managers. They

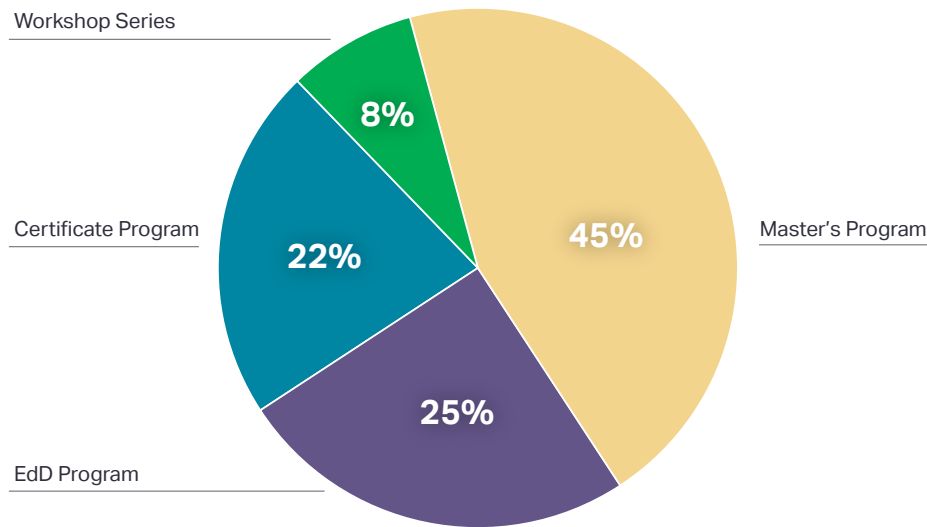


FIGURE 1 ► Preferred Education/Training for Enrollment Managers

also enable us to present the results of these data with confidence and to make summative statements about the educational and professional needs of individuals aspiring to careers in the field of enrollment management.

Results

What Level of Education is Needed?

As Figure 1 demonstrates, almost 70 percent of respondents indicated that aspiring enrollment managers should earn a graduate degree; 45 percent said that a master's degree was the appropriate level of education, and 25 percent thought a doctorate was the right degree for an enrollment manager to have earned. Twenty-two percent indicated that a certificate program was desirable while only 8 percent thought workshop training was sufficient. This demonstrates a clear preference for formal education as the appropriate training for aspiring senior enrollment managers.

In rank order, the five most important areas that respondents thought should be addressed in an educational program for enrollment managers were:

- Strategic planning
- Enrollment research
- Higher education finance
- Marketing in higher education
- Admissions models

To gain deeper insights into the educational needs of enrollment managers, two related questions were asked: in what areas of responsibility did senior enrollment professionals spend most of their time, and in which areas did they feel they needed more training. (See Figure 2.) Those areas in which respondents spend most of their time (in order of greatest time spent) include recruitment and admissions, personnel management, budgeting, campus leadership, and data collection and analysis. The areas in which senior respondents needed the most training (in rank order) include data collection and analysis, student retention, campus leadership, marketing, and financial aid.

Respondents were asked in which areas their more junior colleagues spend most of their time and in which those colleagues need more training. (See Figure 3.) The

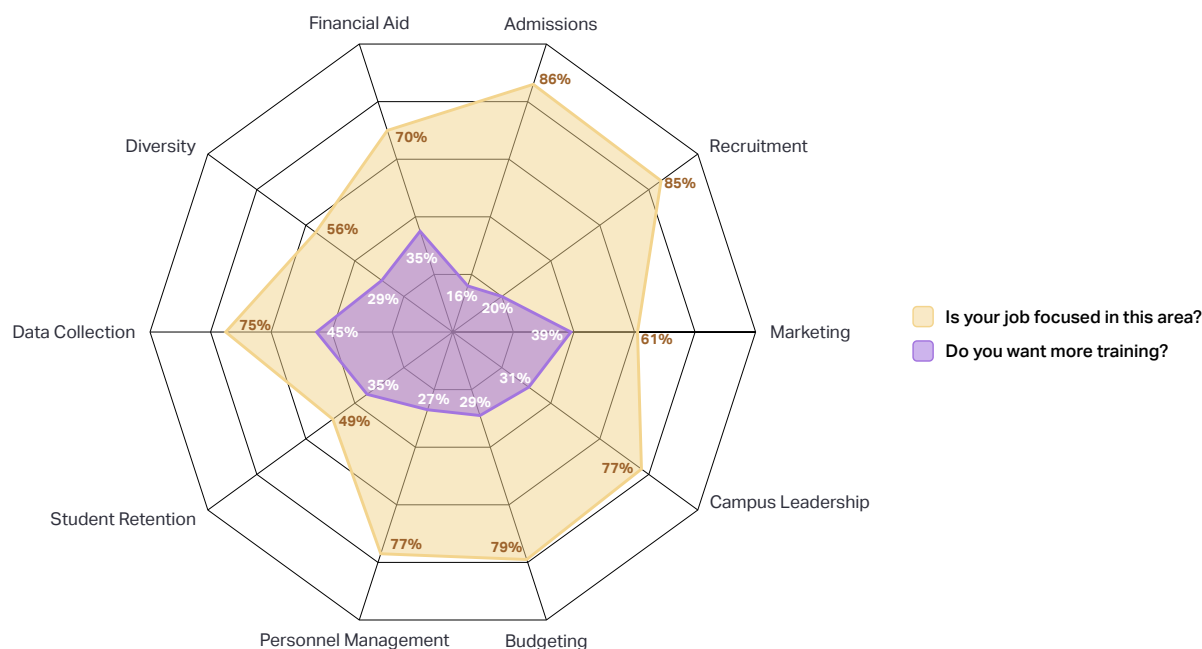


FIGURE 2 ► Areas of Focus and Areas Where Enrollment Managers Need More Training

areas where they spent the most time included recruitment, admissions, marketing, financial aid, and marketing; the areas where they needed the most training were data collection and analysis, student retention, marketing, and personnel management.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present some clear patterns in what senior enrollment officers believe to be important domains of knowledge for early career professionals. Triangulating the responses, the researchers asked where domains of knowledge were most frequently mentioned. (Domains include the ability to use and understand enrollment research, higher education marketing, higher education finance, and—closely linked with finance—financial aid.) In addition, the researchers posited that strategic planning could be combined with improved exercise of senior leadership roles at the campus level. Other areas of responsibility (mentioned less frequently but still of importance) include student retention and, because respondents reported spending a great deal of time on staff supervision, personnel management.

Thus far, the results suggest that student recruitment and admissions models are important; however,

senior enrollment managers must believe that they gain expertise through practical experience. Respondents indicated that both they and their staff members spend large amounts of time focused on these areas, but for the most part, they do not rate them as important areas regarding which their staff (or they themselves need to gain more knowledge.

Results from this survey were triangulated with the five themes that enrollment managers identified through the modified Delphi Technique. The themes added more detail in the areas of leadership and as catalysts for change at institutions' senior levels. Because of concern that a survey that was too lengthy would reduce response rates, some items of interest could not be included. As noted in the methods section, approximately 60 enrollment professionals were asked to identify the five most pressing issues they faced. The five that emerged from the Delphi Technique included price and perceived value; how enrollment managers can be catalysts for change; regional decreases in the number of high school graduates; the role of enrollment management in outcomes; and getting buy-in from senior campus administrators and trustees.

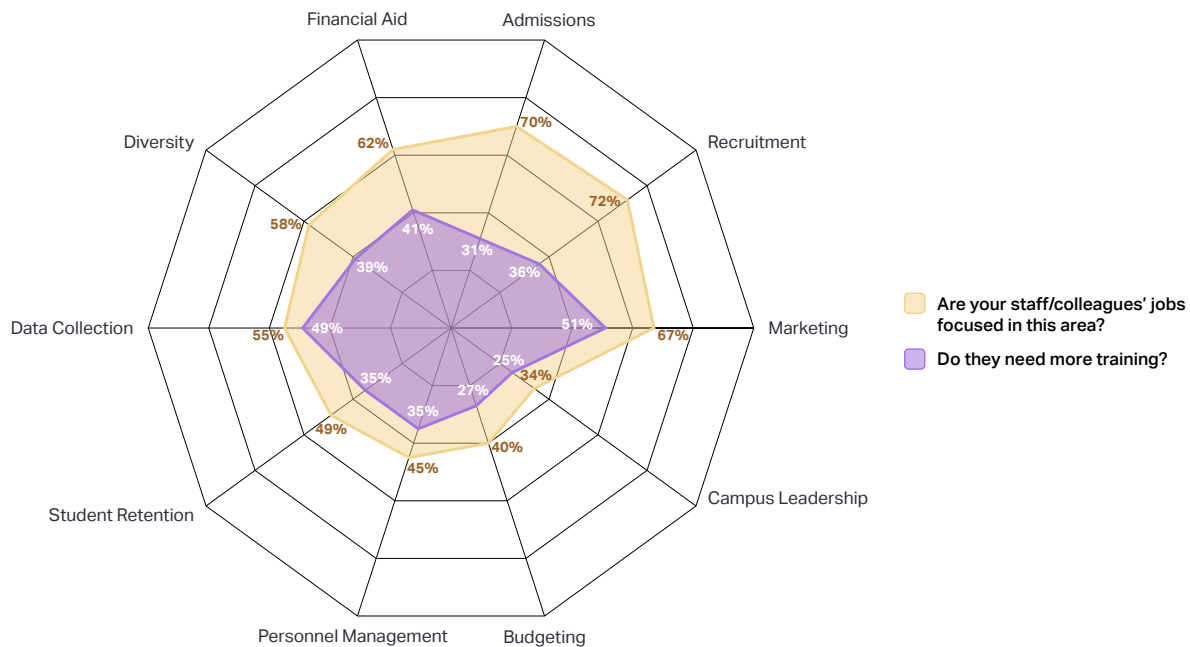


FIGURE 3 ➤ Experienced Enrollment Managers' Perceptions of Where Early Career Enrollment Professionals Spend Most of Their Time and Where They Need More Training

- Price and perceived value: States are simultaneously constraining tuition increases at public institutions and reducing levels of student debt for public and private colleges and universities. Institutions are also under pressure to demonstrate the value of the college experience and student outcomes—including lifetime incomes.
- Catalysts for change and getting buy-in: After reviewing these two themes, the researchers suggest that participants were raising many of the same issues—for example, too often enrollment managers are not included when key decisions are made; that they need to build coalitions with faculty and administrators; that they need to be represented at meetings of the board of trustees; and that they need to develop working relationships with chief financial officers.
- Demographic trends: Concerns related to this theme include the projected decreases in the numbers of high school graduates in most regions of the United States, increasing proportions of Latino and Asian high school graduates, the need to undertake more

market segmentation, and the need to increase the number of non-traditional and international students.

- The role of enrollment management in outcomes: In order to demonstrate the value of attending a specific institution, participants offer suggestions such as having career services report to enrollment management; reminding faculty of the importance of career-relevant degrees; and the career office taking special care to serve students in fields that do not lead directly to specific careers—to include ensuring that such students participate in internships.

Most of these themes are consistent with and reinforce results from the survey. For example, “catalysts for change” and “getting buy-in” are companion themes to the desire for enrollment managers to have more education in the areas of strategic planning and campus leadership. By its very nature, the strategic planning process involves working with other senior campus administrators. Serving as catalysts for change also implies working with a range of campus administrators, faculty members, and trustees.

The first theme, price and perceived value, connects with two findings from the survey: First, it speaks to the need for research to better understand an institution's position in the marketplace. It also raises another type of research not addressed in the survey: It suggests that enrollment managers need to systematically study shifts in state—and federal—policy as it relates to the funding of public colleges and universities as well as efforts to control tuition at public institutions. In addition, enrollment organizations need to monitor federal and state financial aid, which affect public and private institutions. This theme reinforces another finding from the survey: that enrollment managers need education and training in the domain of student financial aid. The third theme from the conference—declining numbers of high school graduates and downward economic trends—also speaks to the importance of research, though not to directly gathering institutional enrollment data but rather to be constantly tracking publicly available demographic and economic trend data. It is worth reiterating the importance of monitoring state and federal policy trends that could have an impact on the number and destinations of students enrolled in postsecondary education.

The only theme from the Delphi process that was not related to the survey results was the role of enrollment management in student outcomes, including career placement, internships, and the value added of earning a degree from a particular college or university. Overall, however, the results from these two different methodological approaches to understanding the educational needs of aspiring enrollment managers are both consistent and revealing.

Making Meaning for a Nascent Profession

The results from these two studies are informative regarding preferred educational pathways and curricula for aspiring and professional enrollment managers. Senior enrollment professionals demonstrate a clear preference for formal graduate education over certificates or workshops: Nearly 70 percent indicate that they believe that a graduate degree in enrollment management is the appropriate level of training for early- and mid-career

enrollment professionals. These findings suggest that graduate programs in enrollment management should become more common. In addition, the research demonstrates that the high degree of consensus about the knowledge domains in this field of work will result in a more consistent pattern of socialization for new and mid-career enrollment professionals (Lester 2010; Weidman, Twale and Stein 2001).

According to triangulation of the range of survey responses and the modified Delphi technique, senior enrollment officers recommend five knowledge domains for graduate programs:

- working with campus leaders, faculty, and trustees to develop and implement strategic plans;
- higher education finance: Build strong relationships with the campus CFO and the office of financial aid;
- enrollment research techniques and the ability to interpret data, identify institutional markets, and track demographic trends and federal and state policies that could affect postsecondary enrollments;
- higher education marketing; and
- student retention.

Student retention was the only one of the five domains that did not also emerge from the Delphi process. However, it was a strong emphasis in the survey findings and is consistent with the work of Coomes (2000), Hossler and Bontrager (2015), and Huddleston (2000). An additional area that emerged from the Delphi process was the role and/or responsibilities of enrollment managers in helping to enhance institutional outcomes. While this is important in the present age of accountability and concern about the employment outcomes and income earned by college graduates, this is not an area over which enrollment managers should have primary responsibility. (Student outcomes are tightly connected to the campus curriculum and student life experiences; for enrollment management to oversee these would create too expansive a role for the senior enrollment officer.) Rather, it is an area with regard to which enrollment managers should be concerned,

should help provide data to inform discussions, and should have a voice in discussions at senior policy levels.

Overall, there was consistency between the responses to the survey and the insights gleaned from the Delphi process. The findings indicate high degrees of agreement regarding both the formal training of enrollment managers through graduate programs and the knowledge that should constitute the curriculum of those programs. Indeed, graduate programs have begun

to emerge: The University of Miami offers a residential master's program, and Drew University offers online master's and doctoral degrees in enrollment management. These findings suggest that more graduate programs with an emphasis on enrollment management are likely to emerge in the near future. The next step will be for senior professionals in the field to recommend these programs to early- and mid-career professionals.

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