

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Working Smarter, Not Harder: SEM Participation Strategies That Work

By Irlanda Price and Brier Albano

Medicine Hat College implemented its first strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan in 2015/16. The implementation required a variety of stakeholders, and initially Medicine Hat College found it difficult to create a diverse cross-campus team. Recognition of the unique cultures within the organization advanced SEM efforts and supported college-wide participation in the process. Using work completed by the Canadian Foreign Affairs Institute (2005) as a framework, this article articulates how this college used intercultural communication strategies to increase their success.

Many changes occurred at Medicine Hat College (MHC) in 2014: installation of a new president, creation of two new senior executive portfolios, introduction of a new institutional philosophy, reorganization of various departments, and development of a new strategic plan. Prior to this major institutional shift, the culture at MHC had been focused on student success but protective of traditional methods and processes. It was in this context that a strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan was commissioned by the college's senior leadership.

As a comprehensive community institution in Alberta, Canada, MHC developed and implemented its first SEM plan in 2015–16. The departments critical to enrollment success at Medicine Hat College were not unfamiliar with the development of an enrollment plan, having previously invested extensive resources, time, and effort attempting to develop a plan. Unfortunately, due to various circumstances, the plan was never final-

ized or approved. The current plan would not have been created and approved if special attention had not been focused on the institution's *culture*. Leadership spent quite a bit of time getting to know the culture, norms, habits, and traditions of MHC and then identified three pillars to provide the basis of the plan: recruitment, retention, and relationships.

After the plan was approved by senior administration, the real work began. Three subcommittees were created to correspond with the plan pillars. Despite excitement that was beginning to build around the plan, one common thread among the three groups became evident: committees struggled to involve diverse elements of the campus in the implementation process. People supported the plan, but with the number of projects that faculty and staff do “off the side of their desk,” SEM was beginning to become just “another thing” for people to do.

Recognition of a variety of cultural components within MHC provided staff, faculty, and administrators the opportunity to work smarter toward the institution's SEM goals. Creating a shared language with which to talk about the SEM plan and using intercultural strategies helped the team gain a better understanding of the environment, increase participation, and create a cross-campus SEM culture. This article describes the experiences that led to strategies transferable to any SEM implementation and how MHC did so using an intercultural lens.

About Medicine Hat College

Located in the cities of Medicine Hat and Brooks in the province of Alberta, Canada, Medicine Hat College supports more than 8,000 learners in credit and community programming each year. More than 3,700 students engaged in full- and part-time credit programming including a variety of one-, two-, three-, and four-year programs in addition to pre-employment training and apprenticeships.

As a member of Campus Alberta, Medicine Hat College has a variety of transfer pathways and collaborative programs that allow students to take one or two years of university studies and, in some cases, a four-year bachelor's degree on site from other Alberta universities. More than 50 percent of Medicine Hat College students come from the city of Medicine Hat, with just under 10 percent coming from cities outside Canada. The college's students report higher than average satisfaction rates, with 95 percent indicating they were satisfied or very satisfied with their educational experience (Medicine Hat College 2017).

Medicine Hat College embraces the use of an appreciative inquiry philosophy to guide changes when they occur. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a powerful resource for the postsecondary environment. AI has been well received because it creates energy and generates positive change as people discover and build on their positive core and "life-giving forces" to co-create their futures (Cockell and McArthur-Blair 2012, 2). Using the work of Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2012), the college focuses attention on strengths through story-telling and inquiry which can support the discovery of innovative

opportunities to be more successful. AI was an important driver in discovering how we could "work smarter" across the college in order to increase SEM participation.

Our SEM Story

The college's SEM planning process was led by the associate vice president, student development and was designed over approximately one year with consultation across MHC's campuses and departments. Using the institution's strategic plan as its foundation, the SEM plan's main priorities were set by academic leadership after reviewing available data and engaging in discussions about goals. Strategies and tactics were then developed by a larger SEM team primarily comprising administrative staff. It was acknowledged in the development of the plan that "increased faculty engagement would be critical in order to effectively execute the plan successfully" (Price 2016).

One of MHC's greatest strengths is the abundance of data and reports that are available from its strategic research and analysis department. These data facilitated the process of identifying the overarching institutional SEM goals. The plan identifies an 8 percent increase in full-time equivalent enrollments by 2020 in addition to a retention increase of 1 percentage point per year for a total increase in overall retention of 4 percentage points by 2020. Aiding these enrollment and retention targets, sub-committee goals were developed for recruitment, retention, and relationships. The most significant goal from the relationships sub-committee was directly connected with the internal culture of the institution: focusing on investments to internally develop awareness and understanding of SEM.

Once the plan was approved, implementation started immediately at the committee level. On the recruitment committee, the single faculty member who had been part of the team through the initial planning stages left, and the committee struggled to find representation from the instructional side of the institution. At broader SEM meetings, it was noticed that this was a trend across committees.

Initial strategies to increase participation included mass communications using all means available and

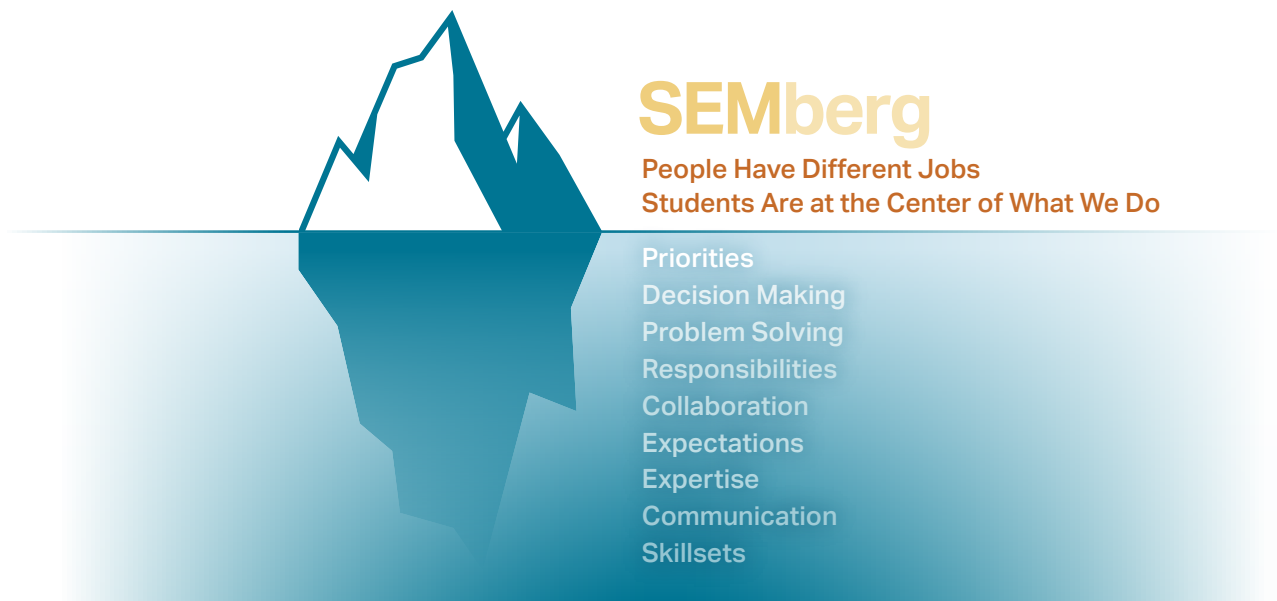


FIGURE 1 ► The Cultural SEMberg

asking institutional leaders to recommend faculty participants for the committees. Many faculty considered SEM to be an administrative effort and did not want to participate in additional work that would need to be done “off the side of their desk.” Overall, faculty did not understand either how the SEM plan had an impact on them or the importance of SEM. More important, administrative staff did not understand why faculty were not participating.

MHC’s plan is continuously under review; it is important to recognize the impact of external factors beyond the control of any enrollment planning process—factors such as the economy, government mandates, funding structures, and world politics. By late fall 2016, enrollment in apprenticeship and trade training (which, in Alberta, is allocated by the government) began to decrease precipitously. The sub-committees had to refocus their efforts and energy on identifying strategies to directly impact programs that were under-subscribed. The academic leaders selected the program areas that were experiencing decreasing enrollment and high rates of attrition to participate in a full SEM review.

Defining Culture and Using Intercultural Strategies in SEM

Renowned cultural expert Geert Hofstede (n.d.) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (para 1). Understanding the effects of culture was critically important in building participation strategies that worked at Medicine Hat College. Building credibility for the administrative lead of the plan (who, incidentally, was a newcomer and thus had to learn how to find a place within the prevailing culture and build trust within it) was essential.

Understanding culture, in its more traditional sense, was deemed a priority. In early 2017, many administrative departments received intercultural assessments and training to aid in building a more advanced skill set for MHC’s growing international student population. Through the lens of intercultural development, a greater understanding emerged of the communication and participation challenges we were facing with SEM. Using intercultural strategies for communication, we had the ability to enhance our understanding of the

people with whom we work and an opportunity to reflect on the way in which we engage.

Using the well-known symbol of the cultural iceberg, we looked at the issues that were affecting our SEM strategies and created the “cultural SEMberg” (see Figure 1). On the surface of the SEMberg were the general understandings that MHC employees had different jobs and that students were at the center of what we do. Under the surface were a variety of priorities, understandings of authority, skill sets, expectations, and different methods of problem solving. As with culture, not taking time to understand all that lives below the surface was causing setbacks in our progress because we had a false understanding of the point from which we were starting. Mai Moua (2011) tells us that “culturally intelligent leaders are those that take the time to know about culture. They look for opportunities to learn about the cultural facts, the music, the history, the language, and the behaviors of people.” Not speaking the same language as the rest of the institution—particularly the faculty—and not asking for interpretations of the language being used led to many miscommunicated ideas and expectations.

SEM and culture being intertwined is not a new concept. In 2016, *SEM Quarterly* published “Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture in Strategic Enrollment Management,” which acknowledged the deep ties between the cultures of an organization in meeting its goals. Using the competing values framework, the article explores organizational culture and considers the differences between culture assessment at the division and department levels (Flanigan 2016, 123).

The realization that different work units on campus might be creating micro-cultures within the organization became the premise for how we could define where we were having success. Using a backwards discovery process, we recognized that the new successes with cross-campus participation were tied to strategies already used internationally to better connect and communicate across language, ritual, and other cultural barriers. Therefore, the use of intercultural collaboration strategies facilitated the ability to communicate SEM in a way that would support even greater participation.

Using seven issues the Canadian Foreign Affairs Institute (CFAI) identified in 2005 for effective intercultural collaborations, we started to dissect the strategies being utilized in our work. CFAI identified:

- Intercultural dialogue
- Shared tools, jargon, and work methods
- Knowing the stakeholders and the management context
- Shared understanding of expected results
- Clear process, transparency, and trust
- Knowledge and acceptance of cultural differences
- Learning while doing and iterative approach

Within the context of the seven issues for effective intercultural collaborations, we recognized that these strategies were linked to areas where we were achieving success. Following are the observations and examples that fit well in terms of using an intercultural framework for SEM participation.

Intercultural Dialogue

It was fitting that intercultural dialogue was the first issue identified by Canadian Foreign Affairs as it was part of a key event that transformed the way we looked at SEM participation and how we could modify our strategies in seeking faculty participation. Early in the implementation process, we had approached a faculty member from an under-enrolled program. The faculty member listened to the request to join the SEM committee then politely declined, saying, “I have no time to work on SEM; I have to focus on recruitment and retention.” This was our ‘a-ha’ moment.

This interaction started a conversation about how we, as administrators, create our own micro-culture and language that have the power to alienate other areas of the institution. As leaders of the plan development, we assumed the entire institution understood the language of SEM in the same way we did. Had we been engaged in intercultural dialogue, we would have understood earlier in the process that we needed to change how we were speaking about SEM and that this change in language could then encourage the campus commu-

nity to engage in SEM. Not recognizing this earlier hindered some departments' understanding of what SEM is, what it is for, and how it is used. It also demonstrated that while we had been vocal and excited about SEM, the particular words with which we were familiar did not resonate among the larger campus community. We needed to better understand the needs of the faculty in lieu of demanding that they enter what they considered "administrative space."

The SEM recruitment subcommittee recognized that micro-cultures existed and refocused the plan tactics on only a few low enrollment programs to support the overall SEM goals. This allowed for better dialogue with stakeholders as we could focus on a limited number of needs in our communications. Partnering with three programs allowed for more focused sharing of administrative and faculty tactics and supported the faculty need to see the relevance to their day-to-day work. Using the phrase "recruitment and retention of students" rather than "SEM" while focusing on specific activities to support the plan goals helped to increase faculty participation to one-third of the overall committee at any given meeting.

Shared Tools, Jargon, and Work Methods

Once we began to understand the language that other cultures within our organization were using, it became easy to expand to shared tools, jargon, and work methods. Each time we interacted with faculty members, we worked to develop a shared institutional understanding of the meaning of SEM. We were continuously ensuring that time was saved for the sharing of different understandings of best practices relative to students' in-class learning. Once they realized the value of their contribution, faculty were prepared to help us understand how we could gain their participation. Faculty also reminded us, as administrators, where we needed to listen.

One work method that changed almost immediately after recognizing our differences was meeting times. Non-teaching units almost always were the schedulers of meetings, many of which were between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.—the peak time for teaching classes at our

institution. Shifting subcommittee meeting times to accommodate instructors immediately yielded better participation.

Shared tools were also identified quickly. Our institution produces a weekly newsletter called *OnCampus* that is sent to all faculty and staff e-mail addresses. Through this process, we learned that faculty do not perceive *OnCampus* as having relevant information and instead prefer their faculty association newsletter. In order to reach a wider audience, we started publishing information in both newsletters.

Jargon was also identified quickly and was not always what we expected. For example, words like "admitted," "enrolled," "confirmed," "registered," and "applied" not only were misunderstood by faculty but also held different meanings for those who had worked at other institutions. To promote mutual understanding, the terms were explained at meetings with every program and the admissions office. In addition to creating a common language, the meetings also helped some program faculty access data they had wanted but to which they had limited access.

We also started promoting "shared jargon"—for example, the term "SEMhug." Initially used to describe the way in which SEM envelops all of the important areas in a program, SEM committee members began using the term to refer to programs that would receive focused attention as part of the SEM process. The concept of the "hug" seemed to appeal across the institution, with faculty proudly announcing that they were part of a "SEMhug" program. Later that year, the vice president, academic used the term at a senior leadership meeting. Creating our own word, even ironically, helped facilitate SEM conversations.

Knowing the Stakeholders and the Management Context

Every culture has its leaders, whether with formal titles or simply having earned the community's trust and respect. The importance of knowing the team with which you are working should never be underestimated, particularly when you are new. As a newcomer to the culture of MHC, I had to get to know key individuals

within the college; doing so proved important and personally rewarding.

Get to know the natural leaders within the institution—those who are passionate and driven regardless of the titles on their business cards. Identifying key stakeholders within the institution—those who already had established trust and rapport within the college culture—helped with the development and implementation of the SEM plan at MHC. They were able to share insight, history, and lessons learned from past attempts at creating a plan. They offered lived experiences and shared cultural norms, some of which prevented the senior lead from committing cultural faux pas that could have potentially undermined any progress in the development of the plan.

Getting to know these leaders, who became known as SEM champions, included learning about their passions, motivations, and interests. Supporting their personal and professional goals came naturally. They were so invested, committed, and enthused about student success at Medicine Hat College that it was impossible not to share their excitement. Investing time and professional development opportunities in these champions only resulted in their greater dedication.

Think strategically about how the passions and drive of cultural champions can impact the development and implementation of your plan, especially if you are a newcomer to the culture.

Shared Understanding of Expected Results

Language and communication are perhaps the most critical elements of culture. Communication—verbal and non-verbal—is meaningful and can be misinterpreted if one is unfamiliar with cultural norms and expectations. During the development of the plan under the leadership of a new senior lead, special attention was paid to not assuming everyone understood the direction in which the plan was going. Assumptions that everyone shared a common understanding created some setbacks as well as opportunities for reevaluation.

It was important to clarify the expectations of the committee, the sub-committees, and their respective

chairs throughout the process. This helped maintain understanding throughout the processes of plan creation and implementation. Time not spent reevaluating the approach or listening to champions can set institutions up for failure such that shared understanding of expected results will never truly be achieved.

Clear Process, Transparency, Trust

In conjunction with establishing a common language, the simultaneous establishment of trust was beginning to occur. As an outsider, building trust within any culture can be a very slow process, but its significance cannot and should not be underestimated. Without trust, nothing can really be established.

Being clear about intentions, process, and decision making is mandatory. Do not leave any questions unanswered, and be available to respond to potentially difficult questions. Clearly articulate the intended outcomes of the plan. For example, MHC's plan was not intended to identify low-enrollment programs so they could be cut and so faculty and staff would lose their jobs; rather, it was to refocus and redesign the way in which MHC focused on those program areas.

Medicine Hat College is recognized for having one of the highest student satisfaction rates in the province of Alberta. It has had this recognition for many years, since long before the arrival of the college's current leaders. Naturally, after the significant changes and shifts that occurred as part of the reorganization, a lot of questions arose as to why they were necessary, especially since MHC already had highly satisfied students.

When working with existing cultures, newcomers must pay attention and acknowledge and respect their history. This is particularly true for administrators who are new to their institution and who are charged with implementing SEM. In order to establish relationships, build trust, and develop credibility, it is critical to recognize past efforts. For our team, it was important to the culture of the institution to celebrate all the work and effort that had already been accomplished and to acknowledge that processes that were already successful should be maintained. Prioritizing integration and acceptance into the introduction of SEM efforts and

incorporating past experiences at former institutions helped guide the approaches taken at MHC. When communicating in a culture that is new, be it a different department or a new institution, it is critical to maintain a personal mindset that acknowledges, supports, and celebrates history and past practices.

It may seem basic to establish a transparent process as part of the effort to build trust, but it is necessary. Establish a process that will facilitate the attainment of SEM goals, but remain open to the possibility that the process may need to be changed to best meet the needs of the institution. Be honest and open about expectations and direction, and always make yourself, as a leader of this initiative, available for questions and to hear comments.

As you build trust, community members' trust in the plan you are leading will grow. This takes time; SEM planning is not a process that happens overnight. Positioning yourself within a culture requires time, energy, and connection. The requirements for building a SEM plan are exactly the same.

Knowledge and Acceptance of Cultural Differences

In "A Separate Peace: Strengthening Shared Justice," Borrows (2004) writes, "If each group in an intercultural relationship did not have the space to define, interpret, and apply its own culturally appropriate dispute resolution principles, the intercultural aspects of its association would eventually disappear" (343). This is an important aspect of intercultural communication and understanding that is often forgotten.

In creating SEM culture, institutions do not want to lose the unique, important elements of our organizations that help us grow. It is important to ensure that our divisional and departmental micro-cultures remain intact in order to support the teams and needs in those areas, but SEM has the opportunity to be the "place" where ideas are shared and our uniqueness is considered in order to think strategically about student enrollment.

One way to translate this is to use differences to encourage participation. By recognizing the unique perspectives of certain faculty members and, more impor-

tant, acknowledging certain weaknesses in that area, the overall perceived value of participating in the process can be increased. At MHC, this increased participation in other activities outside of SEM, as well, including faculty attendance at key events throughout the year and invitations from faculty for administration to participate in key learning activities in which they had not had a part in the past (for example, the recruitment sub-committee was put on the art program's events mailing list).

Learning While Doing and Iterative Approach

Using intercultural approaches and techniques and focusing on intercultural issues continues to challenge our literacy relative to cultural norms across our institution. Even within micro-cultures, further divisions exist that can grossly impact how communication and collaboration are perceived. We continually focus on learning and building shared understandings while continuing to make space for new ideas, work methods, and strategies to grow our SEM implementation. Focusing on institutional growth as well as the changes that occur because of intercultural efforts being made can assist in bringing institutions closer to their goals and is recommended in order to ensure that learning and growth continue to propel SEM forward.

Just as intercultural strategies are always developing, so we continue to develop our own strategies working within our institution as the culture changes. Making note of where we are having success and growing that success is a key part of our strategy. As with any communication strategy, there is no "stop date" by which all communication will be complete, so constant review and learning from mistakes will continue to support SEM growth.

Conclusions

Any time we move or visit a foreign country or even begin a new job, "learning culture" is an inevitable part of our transition. Implementing a well-researched strategic enrollment management plan for the first time can be supported by the inclusion of a shared cultural space

in which all the unique micro-cultures at your institution can come together. Develop your shared language; ensure understanding; communicate clearly; and invite people to participate in the exploration. Celebrate and

continue to encourage leaders, and always be aware of the culture you are trying to influence. The development of a new SEM plan tends to create a new culture all its own.

About the Authors



Irlanda Price

Irlanda Price is Associate Vice President of Student Development at Medicine Hat College. A proud

alumna of the University of Northern British Columbia, she has a bachelor of social work and a master's of social work from UNBC. Irlanda is the administrative lead

for MHC's SEM plan 2016–2020. She plans to begin her doctoral studies in fall 2018.



Brier Albano

Brier Albano is Associate Registrar and Chair of the SEM Recruitment Subcommittee at Medicine

Hat College. She holds a bachelor of arts in religious studies and a bachelor of arts (honors) in communication studies—both from the University of Calgary. She is cur-

rently in her last year of a masters of public administration program at the University of Victoria.

References

- Borrows, J. 2004. A separate peace: strengthening shared justice. In *Intercultural Dispute Resolution in Aboriginal Contexts*, edited by C. Bell and D. Kahane, (pp. 343–363). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Canadian Foreign Affairs Institute. 2005. *Strengthening International Development Projects and Programs Through Effective Intercultural Collaborations: Lessons Learned and Principles to be Applied*. Retrieved from: <intercultures.gc.ca>.
- Cockell, J., and J. McArthur-Blair. 2012. *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Flanigan, M. 2016. Diagnosing and changing organizational culture in strategic enrollment management. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*. 4(3): 117–129.
- Hofstede, G. n.d. *National Culture*. Retrieved from: <hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture>.
- Helsinki, Finland: Hofstede Insights.
- Medicine Hat College. 2017. *Student Satisfaction Survey 2017: Report of Results*. Medicine Hat, Alberta: Medicine Hat College.
- Moua, M. 2011. Culturally intelligent leadership matters. In *Culturally Intelligent Leadership: Leading Through Intercultural Interactions*, edited by J. Phillips and S. Gully. New York: Business Expert Press.
- Price, I. 2016. *Medicine Hat College: Strategic Enrollment Plan*. Medicine Hat, Alberta: Medicine Hat College.