

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Developing the Two-Way Practitioner-Researcher Loop for Enrollment Management

By John M. Braxton and Don Hossler

The scholarship of practice entails the use of findings of empirical research to guide the development of institutional policy and practice. Accordingly, engagement in the scholarship of practice by enrollment management (EM) officers precludes them from “shooting from the hip” or trial-and-error forms of professional action. Engagement in a scholarship of practice involves reliance on the work of the research community to generate research findings useful to practice. Research findings will be more useful if EM practitioners can identify topics for research to guide their day-to-day work. This article describes approaches to the development of a needed pathway from EM communities of practice back to the EM research community. In turn, a pathway from the EM research community back to EM practitioners is also needed. Issues pertinent to this pathway are also presented in this article

Practitioners often view theory and research as irrelevant to their day-to-day practice (Kielhofner 2005). However, the two primary goals of a scholarship of practice for administrative work in higher education strive to make theory and research relevant and useful. The development of a knowledge base for administrative work in higher education and the improvement of administrative practice in higher education constitute these two primary goals of a scholarship of practice. Moreover, the improvement of administrative practice

also involves the use of empirical research findings to develop institutional policy and practice by practitioners at individual colleges and universities (Braxton 2017).

Administrative work functions is an umbrella term for the various segments of the administration of colleges and universities (Braxton 2005). Bucher and Strauss (1961) contend that professions consist of various segments loosely assembled under an umbrella profession. The function of enrollment management constitutes one of these segments of administrative work.

Like higher education practitioners of other segments of administrative work, enrollment management (EM) officers should work toward the use of empirical research findings to guide their professional practice. This would preclude EM officers from “shooting from the hip” or trial-and-error forms of professional action (Braxton and Ream 2017). Consistent with these observations, AACRAO’s 2013 SEM Conference included a strand on empirical research relevant to enrollment managers that includes a financial award. Accordingly, EM officers who engage in this form of scholarship of practice act as stewards for the field as they safeguard its welfare and that of the institution as well as the enrolled students they serve.

Although many large universities have created enrollment research offices, use of their findings by EM officers still involves reliance on the research community’s generation of findings useful to practice. Such findings would be even more useful if EM practitioners could identify the types of research they need to guide their day-to-day work. Consequently, the field of enrollment management needs a pathway from the communities of practice of enrollment management back to the EM research community. Such a pathway depends on the development of research agendas by EM practitioners.

This article offers approaches to the development of a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. This agenda may focus on the substance of findings as well as the introduction of new research techniques that generate more robust findings. The dissemination of research findings by EM researchers to practitioners establishes a pathway—from practitioners to researchers and from researchers back to practitioners. Accordingly, this article’s second purpose is to delineate issues pertinent to the pathway from EM researchers to practitioners. These issues include the role of graduate preparation programs, the desired characteristics of research to be conducted, and the format of manuscripts that describe the research and findings. In the loop from practitioners to researchers, the identification of research topics by practitioners can advance the EM research agenda.

Approaches to the Development of a Practitioner-Defined Research Agenda

This article presents three approaches to the development of a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. The first is a periodic study to delineate the topics and issues confronting EM officers in their day-to-day practice that need an empirical treatment. Such studies would produce a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. Development of a survey instrument that asks EM officers to briefly describe studies that address the day-to-day issues and concerns they face constitutes an essential aspect of such a study. Respondents would be asked to describe needed studies for various categories of issues and concerns pertinent to enrollment management. This approach would culminate in the administration of a survey to a sample of vice presidents, deans, or directors of enrollment management and perhaps senior associate EM leaders at a range of colleges and universities. Selection of the types of colleges and universities to be included is an important issue for consideration. Researchers who focus on topics related to enrollment management—as well as professional associations such as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)—could take responsibility for implementing this first approach. In addition, the annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) now includes research and data visualization sessions that are relevant to the practice of enrollment management. All of these organizations can play a role in defining the research agenda for the field of enrollment management.

The second approach involves either the charging of existing committees or the creation of ad hoc committees by AACRAO, NACAC, or NASFAA and AIR to develop a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. Both AACRAO and NACAC embrace enrollment management as a domain of concern. Institutional leaders within the field (*e.g.*, admissions,

financial aid, student success, registrar, institutional research)—from vice presidents to directors—could be asked to serve on such committees.

As for the third approach, *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly* (SEM Q), which AACRAO sponsors, the NACAC-sponsored *Journal of College Admissions*, and the *Journal of Student Financial Aid* sponsored by NASFAA could crowd-source topics for a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. For example, NASFAA could request topics from its journal's readership; NACAC sponsors a listserv (the "NACAC Exchange") for the purpose of sharing information and ideas. A message posted on "NACAC Exchange" could invite subscribers to suggest studies that address the day-to-day issues and concerns they face in their practice of enrollment management. The Strategic Enrollment Management Conference sponsored by AACRAO provides another venue for crowd-sourcing topics for a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. A conference session could be dedicated to the identification of topics by part of a search to determine session attendees. The conference could also make available a suggestion box where participants could propose topics. Similar approaches could also be used at the annual meeting of the Association of Institutional Research, the College Board Forum, and the American College Testing (ACT) Enrollment Planners Conference.

Once data were gathered from these sources, responses would need to be analyzed either by the professional association or by an external group. Data analysis would focus on descriptive statistics and would need to categorize the frequency with which topics were mentioned—including determining frequency by institutional type. This would help determine whether there were noteworthy differences in the needs of different sectors/types of postsecondary institutions.

Completing the Loop From the Research Community to EM Practitioners

The EM research community includes faculty members affiliated with graduate programs in higher education, doctoral students engaged in dissertation research, in-

stitutional research officers, and researchers associated with the American College Testing Program, the College Board, the Educational Testing Service, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, as well as myriad enrollment consulting organizations. Other members of this community include EM officers who conduct research on enrollment management.

Topics delineated in a practitioner-defined research agenda will likely be pursued by individual researchers in the EM community. Completion of the loop from the research community to practitioners depends on individual researchers selecting topics, designing and implementing studies, and disseminating findings to EM practitioners. Professional associations could also sponsor research grants that would encourage graduate students (and their faculty members) to undertake more research relevant to the field. The timely dissemination of findings to practitioners is a critical juncture in the completion of the loop from the research community to practitioners. Other critical aspects are the role of graduate preparation programs, the desired characteristics of research conducted, and the format of manuscripts that describe the research and its findings.

Graduate Preparation Programs

Like doctoral programs in other fields of study, those in higher education socialize graduate students to acquire the attitudes, values, norms, knowledge, and skills required for the research role (Austin and Wolff 2004). Doctoral programs in higher education should socialize students to value the scholarship of application. Boyer (1990) defines this domain of scholarship as the use of disciplinary knowledge and skill to address important societal and institutional problems. His definition of the scholarship of application includes the use of disciplinary knowledge and skill to center attention on topics of the practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. Accordingly, some doctoral students may choose to conduct their dissertation research on one of the topics of the research agenda for enrollment management. Graduate programs in higher education that feature faculty members who specialize in the study of college students constitute the most likely setting for

doctoral students to select such topics for their dissertation research.

Desired Characteristics of Research

The audience for research on the topics of practitioner-defined research agendas should determine the desired characteristics of such research. This audience may include higher education faculty members, EM professionals, members of the EM research community, institutional research officers, and researchers associated with the American College Testing Program, the College Board, Educational Testing Service, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Regardless of the audience, some desired characteristics pertain to the studies' design. The use of theory is one design issue: Theory may or may not apply to certain topics selected for inquiry. Conceptual models grounded in theory enable researchers to more readily define variables, determine analytic design considerations, and interpret findings (Cabrera *et al.* 1992). Nevertheless, because enrollment management is an applied field, there are likely to be some studies (evaluation studies, for example) that may not lend themselves to existing theories. Use of a theory or of theoretically derived conceptual models will help ensure fidelity to the implementation of recommendations (Braxton *et al.* 2014). Moreover, theory and models may serve as a guide for alterations in the implementation of a recommendation based on theoretically grounded findings (Braxton *et al.* 2014). While the use of research methods constitutes a design issue, clearly defined and contextualized methods would also be a way of enhancing campus-based applied EM research. Although a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods may be used, the method finally selected should suit the topic of the study and meet prevailing standards.

Format of Manuscripts Reporting Studies and Findings

Members of the research community who focus on topics relevant to the practice of enrollment management should identify multiple outlets for their work. They

may choose to submit their manuscripts to high-status research journals, but they would do well to also report their findings to practitioner-oriented journals such as AACRAO's *SEM* and *College and University (C&U)*, NACAC's *Journal of College Admissions*, and NASFAA's *Journal of Student Financial Aid*. The *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, in particular, is seeking the right balance between the research community and student financial aid administrators (see <publications.nasfaa.org/jsfa/about.htm>).

Publishing guidelines set forth the basic elements of the format of manuscript submissions. Faculty members who are affiliated with graduate programs in higher education as a field of study should strive to influence the research community as well as the practice of enrollment management (Braxton and Del Favero 2002). For practice-oriented journals, authors should provide sufficient detail about the aspects of a journal article that follow. The institutional setting for the study enables practitioners to assess the extent to which the characteristics of their college or university bear some similarity to the institution or institutions selected for the study. If they perceive some similarity, practitioners may be more likely to consider the findings and recommendations. Realistic recommendations for institutional policy and action should be clearly stated and prioritized. Provide enough contextual information about the organizational culture and unique challenges that enrollment managers might confront. Avoid recommendations that would be difficult for institutions to implement. It is notable that these two suggestions for the presentation of recommendations emerged from the reactions of college presidents and chief academic affairs officers of independent colleges to recommendations offered by higher education scholars on topics relevant to independent colleges and universities (Morphew and Braxton 2017). The likelihood that EM practitioners will make use of empirical research findings to develop institutional policy or practice increases with their perception that the institutional setting of the research resembles their own and that feasible and prioritized recommendations for institutional policy and practice are published in journal articles reporting the findings of studies of practitioner-defined research topics.

Members of the EM research community can play another important role: They can identify outlets for reporting the findings of studies of practitioner-defined research topics and foster their rapid dissemination. In addition, they should insist that all recommendations provide sufficient detail about the institutional setting of the study as well as clear recommendations. Manuscripts—including descriptions of methodologies—should be written in a reader-friendly way; they may include an appendix or a link to a website that describes the qualitative and quantitative data analysis procedures and the details of other methodologies.

Closing Thoughts

A pathway from practitioners to scholars merits serious consideration by the communities of practice of enrollment management as well as the corresponding EM research community. Such a pathway would enhance the ability of EM practitioners to engage more fully in the use of the findings of empirical research to guide professional practice. EM practitioners who engage in the scholarship of practice act as stewards for the profession as they safeguard the welfare both of the field

of enrollment management and of the institutions they serve—including potential and enrolled students. Such safeguarding averts EM practitioners from “shooting from the hip” or trial-and-error forms of professional action (Braxton and Ream 2017). Moreover, an identifiable body of knowledge is one of the hallmarks of a field practice becoming a profession (Eraut 2002).

A necessary first step in the formation of a two-way EM practitioner-researcher loop is the creation of a pathway from practitioners to scholars through the development of a practitioner-defined research agenda. Readers of *SEM Quarterly* thus are invited to suggest studies that address day-to-day EM issues and concerns in the real world of practice. The result will be one version of a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. Members of the community of enrollment practitioners are also invited to consider the implementation of other approaches to the development of a practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management. Use of all of these approaches will ensure that a comprehensive practitioner-defined research agenda for enrollment management will emerge.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The intent of this article is to actively engage current practitioners in new and useful research in the field of enrollment management. Many readers of this publication are SEM practitioners and thus are in a unique position to assist with this project. Your input is key to stipulating valuable, relevant research. Please consider sharing this article with colleagues, and send feedback and ideas for needed studies as suggested above to Heather Zimar, Managing Editor, at <heatherz@aacrao.org>.

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