

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Women in Leadership Series

Reflections on SEM Leadership: Evolving and Emerging Roles

By Kimberley Buster-Williams

In June 2018, the College Board assembled 31 enrollment leaders to consider the future of enrollment leadership over the next fifteen years and to imagine the roles enrollment leaders must play so their institutions can thrive. Feedback was compiled into a recently published monograph, *The Future of Enrollment Leadership*. The monograph provides great insights and is an enjoyable read. Each chapter is well-organized, and evolving and emerging roles for enrollment leaders are identified.

Shortly after reading this book, I was asked to write an article for SEMQ's women in leadership series. As I thought about what might resonate with SEMQ's readers, I kept coming back to the emerging and evolving roles of enrollment leaders shared in *The Future of Enrollment Leadership*. I also kept coming back to a book I am assisting my mother with: "*He Said...She Said*," a collection of sayings by my 98-year-old grandmother, Mary Hewlett Brown, and my grandfather, the late Milton K. Brown, Sr.

I don't think my grandmother envisioned that her eldest granddaughter would one day hold one of the most high-pressured positions on campus: vice president for enrollment management. She probably didn't think that her wise sayings, also known as "Lollie quips," would be the underpinning of her granddaughter's career in enrollment management. But indeed they have been.

In the next few pages I reflect on (1) my career progression and the early years, (2) how I have approached leadership using my grandmother's quips, (3) what I've

experienced, adjusted to, and learned along the way, and (4) how I would recommend SEM leaders prepare for the evolving and emerging roles shared in the College Board monograph.

Live in Hope, Ever, You Die in Despair

I began my career as a hopeful administrative assistant in the Office of Admissions at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia. I worked with great people at ODU and looked up to one person, in particular: Angela Nixon-Boyd. Angela was the interim director of admissions at Old Dominion University in the mid 1990s. My desk was located right outside of her door. I would answer the phone, make appointments, and greet visitors. I had a bird's-eye view of everything. During this time, ODU converted its student information system to Banner. The "ISIS conversion" was a big deal. I learned valuable lessons regarding how one leads during a major technology change. I also saw first-hand the pressures that the director of admissions faced (*e.g.*, calls from upset parents, urgent meetings with the president, faculty complaints, budget meetings, and more). I also noticed that our vice president ran with a small group on his lunch break. I asked him about this habit, and he remarked that running was wonderful for stress relief and that maintaining one's health was vitally important. I took advantage of this spontaneous gift and began my own lunch fitness routine, which included taking fit-

ness classes and/or running. Even though I knew that this field was high stress, the director of admissions position was the job I wanted.

As my grandmother often said, live in hope (or ever die in despair). With this hopeful outlook, I secured a position in 1997 as an admissions counselor at Johnson & Wales University—Norfolk campus. It was here that I had another life altering experience: working at an institution led by a female president, Debra C. Gray. She was a mom, a wife, a president, and a fitness instructor. Long before women were being encouraged to *Lean In* and *Dare to Lead*, I was working with transformational women leaders and loving every moment of it. Needless to say, I was very hopeful that I would finish graduate school and become a director of admission by age 30. I wanted to be just like Angela and Debra: smart, compassionate, stylish, and successful. I also wanted to be like Vice President Burnett: lean, fit, and healthy.

Be Not Simply Good, Be Good for Something

As enrollment managers, we are responsible for (among other things) revenue generation and creating an environment where sustained enrollment is possible. We use our carefully honed skills to navigate the choppy waters of fall, avoid the blind alleys of spring, and avoid known failure paths of summer. We have to be not only good but also be good for a specific “something.”

As an admissions counselor, I had to meet with prospective students about the culinary arts program and had to make many phone calls in the evening. I responded to inquiries from those who spotted the highway billboard sign with the call to action “Enroll at Johnson & Wales Today!! Call 1-800-244-CHEF.” Tuition at that time was \$12,000 plus \$7,000 for room and board. In 1997, that was expensive. Adjusted for inflation, \$19,000 in 1997 is equal to \$31,886 in 2019. Very few merit scholarships were available, so most families were paying the full amount (minus federal or state grants). Tuition included a uniform, a knife kit, and supplies.

As a recruiter, I had to be personable and persistent. Thankfully, these job requirements aligned well with my natural proclivities. I had to market the program to

traditional college-age students as well as to non-traditional students, degree seeking and non-degree seeking. The enrollment goal was 327 day students, 50 weekend/evening students, and as many students as possible in non-credit classes each term. As a twenty-something-year-old admissions counselor, I did not have to think about much apart from achieving my goal. I had a lot of fun leading tours through the various culinary arts labs and following up with each student afterward. I quickly discovered that retired Navy Mess Specialists were ideal weekend/evening program candidates. Because of their military specialty, they were eligible for transfer credits after submitting a military transcript. They typically would receive credit for Quantity Foods and Storeroom Management.

That early experience helped me understand how important time to completion and costs are, especially to adult students. Students in high school culinary arts programs were great prospects, as were those attending various food-related events (including wine-tasting events). Because this was before the era of e-mail and social media, we connected with prospective students face to face and via phone (landlines). I would travel with student ambassadors who would give “demonstrations” and talk about program benefits as well as their internships and future plans. Campus visit days included in-depth discussions about Johnson & Wales’ “upside-down” curriculum and the 2+2 options with the campus in Providence, Rhode Island.

In the summer, staff from each Johnson & Wales campus would travel to Providence for a summer enrollment planning retreat at which we would hear from senior leadership. I remember being so impressed by their marketing knowledge and their resoluteness. When goals were not met, we were reminded of the budget implications and were encouraged to think of new ways to build our inquiry and applicant pools. To say that my time at Johnson & Wales was formative would be an understatement. This is where I learned how to be a salesperson, a market strategist, a financial aid advisor, a communications expert, and a data guru. It was at Johnson & Wales that I first began to track steps toward enrollment. Each week, I would col-

lect data from various departments and would identify which students had completed *all* steps, *some* steps, or *no* steps toward enrollment. One day, President Gray asked how we were doing with enrollment. I shared the new tracking report I had created, and she was enthusiastic. Word of our new report traveled fast. It felt gratifying to be able to use data to answer the seemingly nebulous question “how are we doing?”

As I have grown in my career, I have embraced the notion of “being good for something” at both the macro and micro levels. I have grown from being someone simply carrying out plans to someone who understands the true importance of the work. I have grown from attending SEM institutes and pre-conference workshops to teaching SEM as part of AACRAO’s Endorsement Program and presenting at conferences on a regular basis. I have used 360 review feedback to grow and address shortcomings. *Being good for something* has meant not only helping institutions fulfill their mission and meet revenue targets but also helping students—my favorite part. Sometimes this has meant creating access programs from scratch; at other times, it has meant making sure that first-generation students have the tacit knowledge needed to understand the entire process. *Being good for something* has also meant helping families navigate the financial aid labyrinth and removing institutional policies and procedures that can be roadblocks. When I worked at the University of Michigan-Flint, *being good for something* meant helping an entire community grapple with the decline in car manufacturing and the rise of emerging industries (*e.g.*, health care). As a leader, I hold this axiom near and dear to my heart. I have tried to instill in teams the importance of serving the greater good. It is such a simple concept—one we should not lose sight of in our fast-paced, Twitter-frenzied world. Do not be simply good; be good for something.

Wear Life’s Troubles Like a Loose Garment

As I near my 25th year in enrollment management, I see the wisdom in “wearing life’s troubles like a loose garment”—that is, in “trying to be comfortable when life throws you curveballs.” As a firstborn high achiever,

I find this can be difficult. I am a planner, and I do not like surprises—yet enrollment management is full of them. As a leader, I believe it is important to set the tone and not overreact when circumstances are difficult. Like many in senior leadership roles, I have experienced a great deal during my career and have adjusted and learned valuable lessons.

Managing enrollment can be challenging and stressful—even more so at an institution that has experienced (or is experiencing) enrollment “challenges.” Like many, I have had to adjust to new technologies and to create new positions (*e.g.*, CRM manager and data analyst). As I have moved into more senior positions, I have had to build more time into my schedule for “deep thinking” and strategic planning. At larger institutions, I have had to adjust and adapt to larger recruitment and media markets and automation (to include auto admission decision, adaptive filtering on Web pages, and more). At smaller institutions, I have had to do more with less. At institutions large and small, I have had to adjust to the body politic. All the while, I have maintained the fitness habit I started years ago thanks to Vice President Burnett: I run, walk, or spin most days and try to eat a balanced diet. (My grandmother would say “Eat it today, wear it tomorrow.”)

In senior roles, I have had to be diplomatic when trying to effect change; I’ve tried to use humor whenever possible. One Saturday morning, a colleague shared a news headline about a product we were considering purchasing: “Hackers Broke into Admissions Databases at Three Colleges—and Then Offered to Sell Applicants Their File.”

With a little humor, I responded:

On days like this, I’m sure folks like me who’ve been in admissions for a while miss the simpler times. Postcards and viewbook mailers (no e-mail, no CRM), paper applications and paper folders (no imaging), students applying to one to three schools (not ten to 30), no predictive models, students sending one school a deposit (not two or three), no cell phones (no need to text), tuition rates that didn’t require a “discount” (no leveraging needed), etc. Those were the days. Thanks again for sharing.

I was definitely “wearing life’s troubles like a loose garment.” Thankfully, the following week what had appeared to be a “doomsday story” was something else entirely. Progress toward purchasing the particular technology continued. Disaster was averted.

The Future of Enrollment Leadership

The Future of Enrollment Leadership (College Board 2018) describes the evolving and emerging roles of enrollment leaders and demonstrates that while one must “wear garments loosely,” one will have lots of garments—or at least lots of hats—to wear in the future. The “garments” being worn here today are very different from those when I began my career in college recruiting and enrollment management. As I read the introduction to each of the book’s chapters, including their lists of emerging roles, my grandmother’s quips immediately came to mind. Here are the emerging and evolving roles and associated quips:

Chapter 1: Capacities Inherent in Enrollment Leaders

Evolving Roles of Enrollment Leaders:

- Market strategist and expert
 - Demographic and financial forecaster
 - Long-range planner
 - Data-driven influencer
 - Financial expert and adviser
 - Access and affordability driver
- (College Board 2018, 15)

Quip: “To be forewarned is to be forearmed.”

According to consultants at Attain (2019a), “maintaining an efficient, compliant, and service-oriented financial aid operation is no small task. Yet the need to do so has never been greater. Having a high-functioning financial aid office plays a key role in helping institutions meet their strategic enrollment and retention goals while also avoiding potential costly liabilities.”

Understanding and mastering these skills (“being forewarned”) will enable one to go into each recruitment season forearmed.

Chapter 2: Data and Analysis

Emerging Roles of Enrollment Leaders:

- Business intelligence expert
- Data steward
- Privacy expert/advocate and ethicist
- Social media expert
- Big data strategist (College Board 2018, 19)

Quip: “He is sitting on top of Fool’s Mountain.”

No matter how well you climb or move through a recruitment season, there will be times when you will wonder if you are climbing Fool’s Mountain. When one becomes a strategist and builds a team that thinks strategically about data, she will reduce the number of times the team sits atop “Fool’s Mountain.” Enrollment teams will succeed or fail depending on how well its people, processes, and technology work together. Evolving roles require that SEM leaders organize around outcomes rather than tasks. This enables greater efficiency, collaboration, and accountability.

Chapter 3: Economic Leadership in Higher Education

Emerging Roles for Enrollment Leaders:

- Demographic/economic expert
- Revenue and budget modeler
- Budget model revolutionary
- Scholarship designer and promoter (College Board 2018, 31)

Quip: “Cut the garment according to the cloth.”

Align your aims and activities with your resources and circumstances. These are indeed emerging roles for SEM leaders, in part because institutions rely more heavily on tuition (and enrollment) than they did in the

past. Given declining demographics of the traditional-aged college-going cohort, the demand on skills outlined in this chapter will be substantial. SEM leaders will have to move quickly from assessment to action. SEM leaders are not clairvoyant, yet every day we must make decisions about how, when, and where to invest time, energy, and resources. What worked well at one institution may not work as well at another. One must “cut the garment according to the cloth” to be effective.

Chapter 4: Admissions Risks and Opportunities

Emerging Roles for Enrollment Leaders:

- Access advocate
- Chief information officer
- Social media expert
- Statistical genius
- Student of culture (College Board 2018, 41)

Quip: “That’s your little red wagon. You may push, pull, or shove it.”

It is your responsibility (as the wagon owner) to make your situation work by embracing these truly emerging roles. This chapter discusses innovation and the need to think outside the box. From financial information gathering and analyses to implementing an achievable strategic plan, SEM leaders must make accurate assessments and determine the overall return on investment for any number of initiatives. One must be able to push one’s own wagon.

Chapter 5: Student Success

Emerging Roles for Enrollment Leaders:

- Boundary breaker
- Champion of students
- Communications expert
- Data advocate
- Forward thinker
- Institutional strategist

- Pattern tracker
- Retention evangelist (College Board 2018, 51)

Quip: “Every shut eye ain’t sleep.”

Some people who seem not to be paying attention actually are paying attention. I have found this to be true of governing boards. Always address the risks and requirements presented by large-scale, complex initiatives so that stakeholders can rest assured of high-quality outcomes. Attain (2019b) consultants point out that “by their nature, mission-critical recruitment programs are high-stakes undertakings; when one factors in the significant budget considerations, multiple stakeholders, and teams that typically are involved, risks can be even greater.” Stakeholders—including but not only board members—will want to know that the emerging roles identified in this chapter are covered.

To SEM Leaders of the Future

At age 98, my grandmother continues to say things that are both hilarious and profound. I think of her sayings often. When I speak with an unreasonable parent, “wouldn’t be satisfied in Heaven” sometimes comes to mind. When staff are planning yield events, I long to tell them that it’s time to “put on the royal dog.” After a long board meeting, I think “ain’t no rest for the weary.” When I’m having a rough day, I think “be mad ‘til you get glad.” When my office is in need of cleaning, I think “your room looks like the wreck of the Hesperus.” One of my favorites is “life is too short at best.” The list goes on.

The steady march of globalization will continue and even accelerate. Enrollment teams will require tedious labor to obtain successful outcomes. As women, we will be expected to *lean in*, *dare to lead*, and more. My best advice is to always be curious, maintain a thirst for knowledge, have a mentor, treat others how you would like to be treated, maintain healthy eating and fitness habits, and *read, read, read. Onward...and upward!*

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