

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Influencing Institutional Expectations through Organizational Leadership and Contextual Data

By Alexis S. Pope and Susan Davies

As the competition for student enrollment has increased over the past several years, the pressure on the enrollment manager has increased proportionally. Managing enrollment expectations for institutional stakeholders requires effective communication, leadership, and the sharing of data with effective context. This article provides guidance on how to lead enrollment discussions with a wide range of institutional stakeholders.

According to a 2019 survey by higher education executive search firm WittKieffer, 35 percent of chief enrollment officers believe that expectations of their position are unreasonable. In a recent conversation regarding enrollment goals at public institutions in North Carolina, a director of undergraduate admissions commented in at least some degree of jest that he'd like his "next position to be less stressful, like an air traffic controller or a bomb squad disposal technician." This is the current world of enrollment management—a world that continues to align the limited resources of higher education to best benefit student success (at least we *hope* that is what we are able to accomplish).

Perhaps a lesson here is that many higher education executives expect to have control over what ultimately is uncontrollable. While some institutions admittedly have more control over their enrollment than do others,

everyone is playing in a field of butterfly effects. If a strong competitor decides to increase its incoming class by 10 percent in a single year by issuing more admission offers or financial incentives, the result for competitors could easily be a significant decrease in yield from one year to the next.

One thing will make or break today's enrollment managers: the ability to help executive leaders establish and maintain appropriate expectations of what can and can't be controlled while minimizing threats and maximizing opportunities. In a way, this makes the current role of enrollment managers all about risk management. All change is risky but absolutely necessary to keep meeting or exceeding the ever-changing expectations of the students we serve. Threats may come in the form of demographic changes and competitor growth while opportunities often come in the form of

new academic programs, efficiencies, and innovations. Missing opportunities to address either could result in missing enrollment goals for years to come. Change is absolutely necessary; one of the greatest keys to successful change is strategically sharing the risks involved to better position institutions to meet enrollment goals.

In the same WittKiefer survey mentioned above, 97 percent of chief enrollment officers acknowledged feeling that their skills are a good fit for the future demands of the position (n.d.). So while enrollment managers believe they possess the skills needed to meet the demands of the position, they also believe that expectations of them are unreasonable. Although the reasons for this discrepancy are complex and innumerable, two elements have significant potential to alleviate the tension: (1) how enrollment professionals relate to the highest levels of institutional leadership and (2) how critical enrollment updates and projections are presented with sufficient context—that is, in a way that is understandable given the perspectives of institutional leaders.

A Framework for Creating an Enrollment Management Culture on Campus

So how do enrollment managers communicate effectively with university stakeholders? Part of the answer relates to building a campus culture that understands current enrollment pressures. In a recent *Octane* article, Wesner (2019) presents guidance on establishing such a culture with boards of trustees: “Educating the board is a process, not a one-time event” (14). Wesner’s guidance is useful for framing any approach to establishing or enriching an institutional culture to better understand enrollment pressures. Therefore, his suggestions have been adapted to frame an approach to building a data-informed culture on your campus—in partnership with campus leadership and other stakeholders outside of enrollment management.

Assume Your Role as Chief Enrollment Educator

Making the shift to chief enrollment educator may be difficult at first. Yet thinking about your role differently

is key to building an institutional culture. First, determine your stakeholders. For many, the key stakeholders are the trustees. All of us have a president, provost, deans or academic leaders, faculty, and campus colleagues who are responsible for bringing in a class. Many of us also have an enrollment management committee.

If an enrollment management committee doesn’t exist on your campus, consider creating a strategic enrollment management team. Having such a team will position you to educate a broad range of stakeholders and engage them in the important role of influencing enrollment at your campus. Building consensus and buy-in around your enrollment education can unite your campus in strategic action. Thinking about how to build this consensus structurally will allow you to understand how enrollment conversations are occurring on your campus and to sustain those conversations into the future. Hossler and Kalsbeek (2013) suggest that this type of open collaboration and information sharing prevents the development of silos and enables enrollment management thinking to influence other decisions on campus.

For example, an enrollment planning council (EPC) was developed to connect six disparate enrollment-related committees that were already meeting regularly but were not communicating with one another and did not necessarily include executive leadership for decision making. To solve this problem, a new EPC was formed that included seven members of executive leadership as standing members and six representatives from each of the disparate sub-groups. The EPC charged the sub-group representatives to share information from the EPC with their sub-groups and also from the sub-group back to the EPC. Thus, when the chief enrollment educator shared data at EPC, rather than only thirteen people learning from the experience, nearly 100 campus stakeholders were engaged in the conversation about enrollment. Developing a strategic enrollment plan is also a way to build consensus around your understanding of data as well as your direction.

Second, understand that there are basic concepts that each of these stakeholders needs to understand about enrollment. For example, they may need to understand how you build your enrollment projections based on mar-

ket trends, competitor activities, decreasing high school graduation rates, and prior enrollment performance. They also may need to understand the basics of how enrollment becomes tuition revenue on your campus and of opportunities and limitations relative to financial incentives. Of course, there are additional unit-specific concerns, too. For example, deans may need to understand how trends in student program interest might impact class seats while the director of housing needs to understand the specific mix of projected undergraduate students in order to determine housing assignments.

Third, create a cascading list of things that each group needs to know, remembering that they cannot know everything you do. What do they need to know to best understand enrollment on your campus and to act upon that understanding to best support enrollment goals? Be patient with the time it will take to determine what they need to know; for you as the educator, the process will be iterative. What your stakeholders need to know will grow as they become more adept as partners in the process.

As you take these steps, you'll assume your role as chief enrollment educator by completing this needs assessment and constructing learning outcomes for your stakeholders. In education literature, this concept is referred to as "meeting learners where they are." Only then will you be prepared to share and contextualize data in a way that will impact institutional culture.

Build Your Case (or Lesson Plan)

Once you have made the list of whom you are educating, what they know already, and what you need them to know, you're ready to teach. The most effective way to present information about enrollment is through the data. Strategic and empirical research and data analysis guide the efforts of enrollment management (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2013). Your challenge is to ensure that data are presented consistently, accurately, and with context.

In an April 2016 article in *Forbes*, Brent Dykes differentiates data from information and describes how insights are built on the bases of both. Imagine a pyramid with data on the bottom and information and insights stacked sequentially on top. Data alone, "in the

raw," are neither informative nor insightful. They are simply unprocessed facts, statistics, or items of information. Examples of data could be counts of campus visitors, applications, and even the rates of change in these metrics over time. Information, however, is "data that has [sic] been processed, aggregated, and organized into a more human-friendly format that provides more context" (Dykes 2016, par. 3).

It is likely the experience of many enrollment managers that data that reside on aggregated spreadsheets or charts are considered to live "higher" on this pyramid than they are intended to by the creators of these reports—in other words, insights are often made prematurely. This occurs because every individual sees through a lens of personal interests, experiences, and anxieties, which results in a nuanced context. A report may detail the number of applications received—perhaps a line for "submitted" applications and "complete" applications—and it may not occur to the reader of the report that only "complete" applications are "decisionable" because at the reader's previous institution, there was no difference between "submitted" and "complete" applications for changing academic majors. A report of campus visitors may be construed to be a count of all individuals who happen to venture across campus boundaries—as if they were retina-scanned from Starlink satellites—or, perhaps more realistically, only those who sign up on an online form for a campus tour.

So, though it may be tempting to have just one report that summarizes progress toward making the next class, consider segmenting reports based on the relevance or "action-ability" of each data point.

It is important to provide metadata that consider the backgrounds and experiences of the readers. Perhaps it is best to consider this as the story the data presents. Metadata are commonly defined as a set of data that describes and gives information about other data. Metadata may take the form of information provided in the report but also may reside in iterative reminders or trainings involving key readers of the reports. The metadata provided should consider the perspective and capacity of each audience. Even though a provost might ultimately be held accountable for enrollment, specific

meetings about enrollment may take place only during five percent of the hours in a particular week.

Finally, it is important to clarify the difference between correlation and causation. Historically, ice cream sales increase alongside crime rates. While some parents may want to use this as a fear tactic to keep their kids away from sugar, it is the heat of summer—not the sugar in ice cream—that exacerbates crime. In higher education, decreasing tuition can increase enrollment; yet institutions with the highest tuition are often the most selective. While there are some direct causes, much of this is *correlation*, not causation. Failure to clarify this dichotomy can lead to misconceptions that will preclude optimal decisions.

Attendance at admitted student events is a key example of this. An admitted student event was praised by one unit at an institution as one of the most effective events on campus. Of the 120 prospective students who attended, 87 percent enrolled (much higher than the institution's overall average yield of 33 percent). Yet review of event registration and deposit dates revealed that the majority of these students had already deposited by the time they registered for the event. So in fact, this event was really a pre-orientation. Adjusting the invitation population to only those who had not yet deposited reduced the size and changed the dynamic of the event, as very few students had already confirmed their enrollment. Equipping event faculty and staff with information to help align their expectations was key to the new event's success. Enrollment managers are constantly teasing out what *correlates with* versus what *causes* enrollment behaviors.

Prepare Campus Leaders

If campus leaders (formal and informal) are only reviewing enrollment data for a short period of time each week, then you—as chief enrollment educator—need to position them to understand enrollment data before you present to a larger group. Whenever you meet with stakeholders, the leader of that stakeholder group needs to know more than everyone else. They need to be prepared for the conversation so they can support you, ask informed questions, and help frame the conversation.

For example, before presenting to the dean's council, ensure that you have reviewed your presentation with the provost—formally or informally—so that colleague is also positioned as an enrollment educator.

Sometimes the leader by title is not a formal leader of a group. For example, the associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences was an informal leader. Because hers was the biggest college at the university, we would be much more successful in presenting data to other associate deans if she understood the data and could help field or frame questions. She could also educate and influence her dean. Determine who the informal leaders on your campus are, and talk with them directly—thereby preparing them to work alongside you as an enrollment educator. You may be surprised by how much that partnership can help.

Remember also that you are not alone: Other enrollment educators are your team members. Ensure that you and your institutional research team have a shared understanding. If you are the chief enrollment officer, bring your institution's directors of admission and financial aid and registrar to meetings. Create opportunities for them to present their data.

Inviting your director of admissions, for example, to present to the provost will demonstrate her competence and build trust in your organization. It will also engage your team in the important matters of setting appropriate expectations, providing sufficient context for the data, building a data-informed culture on your campus, and answering difficult questions. When a new provost or dean joins your institution, organize meetings for each member of the leadership team to meet with her and present their data. Such a meeting will position your team member to delve into the operations of enrollment leaders on campus—and to meet each of them. That way, the next time you share a report with the provost or dean, she will be prepared to understand it—and to comment on how well your director of admissions performs her duties.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Keeping stakeholders informed requires repetition. At the beginning of this article, we suggested that you

make a list of everything you need stakeholders to know. Now narrow that list down to three or four basic concepts that you share every time you give a presentation about enrollment. Remember that they do not do your work regularly, and many of them will not remember the presentation you gave as recently as last month. As the chief enrollment educator, repeat key messages, and create different opportunities for your stakeholders to learn themes.

Send regular reports—ideally, weekly—to key stakeholder groups. (No one looks at enrollment reports more than enrollment managers do.) One effective report was a daily report showing year-over-year comparisons. This report had 61 rows and twelve columns, and we read each cell every day. But delivering a report like this to a provost or dean is not optimal. While it may assure others that important-looking elements are being monitored, few provosts or deans will have the capacity to review such a detailed report on a daily or even weekly basis—even during an enrollment crisis. Ensure that the reports you share have a specific purpose and change in content based on the time in the enrollment cycle, including information you need them to know at that particular time.

Some campuses have reporting and analytics software that allows for weekly reports to be distributed to stakeholders or even run on demand. While this facilitates the consistent sharing of accurate data, it significantly limits your ability to create that important institutional context and manage expectations for those interpreting the data. Consider an accompanying weekly enrollment update with talking points or action items for stakeholders. Providing this context will further position you as an enrollment educator and leader.

Ready Your Campus for Strategic Action

At the very top of the pyramid of data and information are insights. What should we do about the information presented? Why monitor data that no one can control? Why monitor whether the weather during a campus tour affects the yield rate if we are not willing to cancel tours on rainy days? What is the result of being down in year-to-year deposits by first-generation students?

While it may affect messaging at key times of the year, it is unlikely that additional funding would be requested mid-cycle to curb such a trend. Being down in deposits overall, however, would warrant an increase in attention—if not additional resources.

In North Carolina, we are preparing for fall 2022, when fewer high school students will graduate than did in 2012. If the state's public institutions happen to present data showing a decrease in first-year applicants or deposits from North Carolina, enrollment managers can provide the insight that this was a threat for which we had been preparing. Though unable to alter birthrates eighteen years prior, enrollment managers can help institutional leaders understand the nature of threats so adjustments can be made accordingly. Adjustments could include improving the financial stability of the institution through smaller enrollments; expanding online programs or reducing costs for out-of-state students; or increasing marketing and outreach efforts in the hope of netting a larger percentage of the decreased number of students pursuing higher education. (Most will recognize the last of these as the most popular.) At some point, however, institutions will experience diminishing returns, especially if services don't evolve to meet the needs of more students. These discussions must take place early and often and involve all key stakeholders.

If a reader can take no strategic action on the basis of information included in a report, there really is no need for it. The data at best will burden and at worst will distract the reader from those that warrant action. For example, rolling up the categories of state of residency into "out of state" and making this information "drillable" will minimize read times related to exactly how essential the information is to an institution's enrollment goals. Also consider the scale of the data elements. If populations are very small, it may be distracting to view the data as percentage changes rather than raw change in number given that percentages of small numbers vary widely.

A common example of a report that does not offer actionable information is that of the number of applications received last month compared to this month. Is the

desired outcome an increase? Is a decrease necessarily bad? Variation in the numbers of applications received is to be expected; rarely, if ever, do groups of people behave in a linear fashion. Comparing the number of applications received during October of the current cycle to the number received in October of the previous cycle is not as helpful as one might think: Because this approach would not show cumulative results, it wouldn't afford credit for getting students to apply earlier than October of this cycle. One of the best methods is to compare cumulative applications or deposits by date, year over year. How many applications have been received, and how does that compare to the number and nature of applicants by the same date last year? Even this can be unreliable, especially given the effect of day of the week (think holidays or college application events at feeder schools) on application numbers. Such metadata are important to contextualize the report for stakeholders.

Lead With Trust

As you incorporate these suggestions—to assume your role as an enrollment educator; to build your case; to prepare your institutional leaders; and to ready your campus for strategic action—you work to create trust. At the core of this effort is consistent, reliable, and ac-

curate data. Institutional leaders depend on accurate information. These same leaders often significantly underestimate how much time is required to produce reports in a way that is accurate and representative of reality. Inaccurate data inevitably dismantle confidence in an operation and are not readily forgiven.

If your stakeholders know you to be trustworthy, they will turn to you with questions and return to you often for new insights. If they see you as an enrollment educator and an enrollment leader, they will trust you.

Conclusion

As enrollment leaders, it is our responsibility to create an enrollment management campus culture. A framework for creating that culture starts with seeing yourself as an enrollment educator and leading with trust. Then, through sharing data contextually and, in effect, telling a story, you can build your case, prepare campus leaders, and ready your campus for strategic action. In these efforts, you will relate to the highest levels of institutional leadership to strategically and candidly share critical enrollment updates and projections along with the context sufficient for decision making in a very unforgiving environment.

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