

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The Need for Transformative Leadership in Strategic Enrollment Management

By Lisa Emery

Significant impending changes in the demographics of the college-going population will require higher education institutions to adjust admissions policies and student success initiatives in their strategic enrollment management plans. The role of the chief enrollment management officer (CEMO) will be examined for its potential to shape policies around access and equity within an institution using transformative leadership theory. It is predicted that there could be up to 750 vacant CEMO positions within the next few years, creating an opportunity for higher education institutions to bring transformative leaders into this role.

The first colonial colleges in the United States were founded with the mission to “identify and ratify a colonial elite” (Thelin 2004, 24). These colleges catered to the sons of wealthy Puritan families and produced the political, business, and religious leaders of the new colonies. The notion of a traditional student has evolved since then, but in many ways higher education still favors those with money, power, and resources. At the top-tier colleges, more than 60 percent of students are from the highest socioeconomic quartile, while only 4 percent are from the lowest socioeconomic quartile (Chetty, *et al.* 2020). The odds are stacked against lower-income students. Wealthier students have access to test prep classes, tutors, guidance from parents and school counselors, and the ability to go on college visit tours. The practice of favoring children of alumni,

known as legacy admissions, gives these often wealthy and disproportionately white students an advantage similar to adding 160 SAT points, while donations made directly to a college can give students a “VIP” status (Reeves 2019). These practices will “contribute to growing income and wealth inequality, which in turn will exacerbate these inequalities across future generations” (Haveman and Smeeding 2006, 128).

At a time when 61 percent of U.S. adults think that higher education is going in the wrong direction (Brown 2018), getting a degree still matters. A study conducted by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce looked at the return on investment (ROI) of a college degree after 40 years. They found that attending elite schools such as Harvard, Stanford, or Massachusetts Institute of Technology have

ROIs of close to \$2 million, while top flagship public institutions pay off at around \$1 million, and degrees from community colleges have ROIs closer to \$500,000 (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah 2019). Even when considering the loan burden that many middle- and low-income students take on, a college degree is still one of the best investments a person can make (Abel and Deitz 2014; Haveman and Smeeding 2006). Along with the impact on lifetime earnings, Deming (2019) states that other social problems such as declining male labor force participation, rising mortality rates, and opioid addiction disproportionately afflicts people without college degrees. Institutions of higher education need to find ways to provide inclusive, equitable, and high quality education to anyone wanting to pursue it.

Challenges Facing the Higher Education Industry

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of higher education, institutions will soon be facing a decade of challenges. A sharp decline in births between 2008 and 2013 (Grawe 2018; Johnson 2014; Lipka 2014) will hit colleges and universities in the late 2020s when fewer high school graduates leads to an unprecedented reduction in demand for higher education (Grawe 2018). According to the Higher Education Demand Index (HEDI), in aggregate, by the mid 2020s, community colleges can expect about a 13 percent decrease in enrollments while four-year institutions are likely to experience a 10 percent decrease in enrollments (Grawe 2018).

The declining birth rate is only part of the story. Migration patterns are also impacting the number of potential students. The 2018 U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage Population Estimates show that the Northeast and Midwest are declining in population while Florida, Texas, and the West Coast are increasing. The areas of increasing population tend to have less wealth, and students are less likely to enroll in college than the areas that are declining in population (Lipka 2014). College readiness is also an issue. The ACT's (2019) college and career readiness report for 2019 showed that only 37 percent of students met at least three of the four college readiness benchmarks, and just nine percent

of underserved learners, defined as minority students from low-income families whose parents did not attend college, met three or more readiness benchmarks. The percentage of graduates meeting benchmarks in math and English have been on a long-term downward trend, with the high school class of 2019 hitting a fifteen-year low. To achieve their enrollment goals, many higher education institutions will need to expand recruiting efforts into new markets and consider ways to support students who are not college-ready by developing programs and initiatives to help these students succeed.

A third challenge for higher education institutions is the continuing budget constraints. The Great Recession caused most states to make deep cuts to funding for their public institutions. It is estimated that states spent an average of 16 percent less per student in 2017 than they did in 2008 (Mitchell, *et al.* 2018), and more cuts are expected as a result of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic (Diep 2020). This has forced institutions to increase tuition, cut support services, limit course offerings, and reduce faculty positions. Data from the College Board (2018) indicates that average tuition and fees at a four-year public institution rose from about \$7,500 in 2008–09 to \$10,230 in 2018–19. Increased dependency on tuition revenue has institutions looking for more students from wealthier families who have the ability to pay the full price (Grawe 2018). Yet, these full-pay students will be harder to find. The socioeconomic characteristics of the rising generation will require significant financial assistance and large-scale investments in financial aid (McGee 2015). It is expected that the number of students with the ability to pay without aid will decline, and those who remain will be increasingly sensitive to price and look for discounts among their options. Institutions will be under increasing pressure to meet their targeted enrollment numbers in order to balance their budget (Tough 2019).

Declining birth rates, migration of students, and pressure to enroll enough students to meet revenue goals will all lead to increased competition for a smaller pool of students. Leaders of colleges and universities cannot afford to stick with the traditional approach to recruiting and retaining students. They need to create

a strategic plan that allows them to set realistic goals to ensure long-term viability while also seeking to equalize opportunities for students from traditionally underrepresented families. It will require a willingness to challenge the way educational opportunities are offered, who they are offered to, how they are credentialed, and how it is paid for.

Enrollment Management

To meet the challenges of recruitment and retention, many higher education institutions engage in the practice of strategic enrollment management. Enrollment management involves a systematic approach to pursuing an institution's goals and outcomes (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008). The concept was first introduced in the 1970s and used by private liberal arts colleges who were beginning to face increased competition as public institutions started offering more career-oriented education (Maguire 1976). Enrollment management integrates the areas responsible for admissions, funding, and student success to align goals of the institution in an intentional way, such as increasing the academic profile of the incoming class of students or ensuring economic, racial, and ethnic diversity (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008; Maguire 1976). Enrollment management goals often will also address persistence and graduation rates and set targets for tuition revenue. The work is data-driven and involves long-range planning with market research techniques and financial modeling (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008).

Driven by the belief that integrated efforts are greater than the sum of their individual parts, a hallmark of strategic enrollment management is collaboration among all those who have a role in attracting, instructing, and providing services to students (Maguire 1976; Paxton and Perez-Greene 2001). In the ideal scenario, faculty and deans alter their programs according to student interests; more tutors are hired in anticipation of increased needs; and facilities managers understand that beautiful landscaping can help attract prospective students and families when they come for college tours. Everyone at the institution should understand their role in recruiting and supporting students.

The person charged with leading the enrollment management efforts is the chief enrollment management officer, also known as the CEMO. CEMOs work with presidents and other senior leaders to develop a strategic enrollment management plan that takes into consideration the goals and mission of the institution along with financial projections and market research on prospective students. Once a strategic enrollment management plan is in place, the CEMO must ensure that members of the campus community understand their role in supporting the plan. The CEMO also needs to continually provide data and metrics to demonstrate whether the goals of the enrollment management plan are being met.

Who Are CEMOs?

The structure of enrollment management and the role of the CEMO varies according to institutional culture, climate, and character (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008), but there are many similarities in the enrollment management model. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers 2017 Chief Enrollment Management Officer Career Profile Report (AACRAO 2017) found that roughly half of U.S. institutions currently have an enrollment management structure. This is expected to increase as more community colleges and international institutions move to the model. Findings from the 2017 profile report show that about 75 percent of CEMOs report directly to the institution's president or provost, demonstrating that most institutions understand the high value of enrollment management to the vitality of their campus. The majority of CEMOs serve on committees related to recruitment, student success and retention, and strategic planning. As a top-level leadership position within the institution, CEMOs are well paid, with median salaries around \$100,000 at two-year institutions, \$150,000 at baccalaureate and master's institutions, and nearly \$200,000 at doctoral institutions according to the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. The median salary for women CEMOs is \$142,500 while the median salary for men is \$160,600, indicating a 0.88 cent gender pay gap that is likely due

to more men occupying CEMO roles at elite institutions (Bichsel and McChesney 2017).

Several dissertations have explored the CEMO role. Snowden (2010) identified enrollment management as an institutionalized organizational field and an emerging profession. One CEMO she interviewed described the role as requiring facilitation, coordination, and bringing people together to take a wide view within the institution. They also are responsible for providing data to help others operationalize issues and make good choices.

Studies by Liedtke (2013) and de Leur (2007) revealed that CEMOs need to be visionary and possess problem-solving skills. Further, de Leur's (2007) study found that CEMOs are collaborative, analytical, resourceful, and participative. Liedtke's (2013) research found that CEMOs need to have character, initiative, competence, and communication skills. Collectively, these studies portray the ideal CEMO as a leader with an eye on the horizon who can bring key constituents together for strategic planning and motivate all those involved with serving students to do their part of the plan.

Insight into the challenges of the CEMO position can be found in AACRAO's 2017 Career Profile report. It indicates that there is high turnover, with almost 40 percent of current CEMOs planning to change positions in the next four years, leaving almost 750 vacancies across the United States (AACRAO 2017). Respondents to a 2018 survey of CEMOs by the executive search firm Witt/Kiefer (n.d.) cited "pressure," "high stress," "heavy workload," and "burnout" among reasons for leaving the field. Many also say conflicting expectations to balance quality, quantity, and revenue create a challenging environment that requires managing expectations.

Opportunity at the CEMO Role

Discussions with representatives of executive search firms reveal that the CEMO role is one of the most difficult roles to fill among higher education leadership positions. The pool of skilled candidates is small; numerous experienced CEMOs are approaching retirement; and according to one recruiter, many younger professionals are not interested in moving beyond mid-level positions.

The pressure to meet enrollment goals is high and likely to become even more difficult in the next decade with changing demographic and socioeconomic conditions. CEMOs will face increased competition for a shrinking pool of academically qualified high school graduates with the ability to pay the full price of tuition. They will encounter more students in need of remedial education and academic support programs. Dwindling state and federal support will lead to more pressure to increase tuition revenue. It is easy to see why the role may not be appealing to those who see these dismal conditions.

Yet, a reframing of the CEMO role shows the potential to bring transformative change to higher education. CEMOs are in a position to deconstruct existing knowledge frameworks and implement innovative initiatives to create opportunities for nontraditional students. The next decade will be a time when visionary leaders in the CEMO role will be needed to challenge the status quo. Bringing a social justice approach to recruiting, admissions, financial aid, and student retention programs could start to close the gaps for students from disadvantaged families and ultimately improve social mobility. Leaders of higher education institutions need to recognize the importance of the CEMO in fulfilling the mission of the institution. When hiring a new CEMO, institutions need to consider how the leadership styles of their candidates can either positively or negatively impact their ability to execute their strategic enrollment management plan.

Evolution of Leadership Styles

The field of educational leadership has seen the evolution of three theories: transactional, transformational, and transformative leadership. The roots of transactional leadership theory developed from Max Weber's 1947 writings on bureaucracy and rational-legal leadership, where "the purest type of legal rule is that effected through a bureaucratic administrative staff" (Weber 2019, 347). Staff work within a hierarchy and are motivated to do their jobs because they are paid a salary. The leader exercises control through an exchange of benefits. This style of leadership values fairness and responsibility. Burns (1978) describes transactional leadership as a

bargaining process where “each party to the bargain is conscious of the power resources and attitudes of the other” (19). He goes on to define transformational leadership as a relationship between the leader and follower where leaders “shape and alter and elevate the motives and values and goals of followers through the vital *teaching* role of leadership” (425). Both the leader and followers need to move beyond their individual goals and unite in the pursuit of change that represents collective interests. The group is working “as mutual support for a common purpose” (20) with a goal of ultimately improving the environment of their organization. While similar because of their focus on promoting equality and social justice, Shields (2010) differentiates transformative leadership from transformational leadership. Transformative leaders go beyond the needs of their specific organization to seek out “deep and equitable change” (22) within the community, nation, and world.

Examples of all three leadership styles can be found within the context of admissions and enrollment management. As the field of enrollment management was first developing in the 1970s, it was common to see transactional leadership play out in schools with rigid admissions processes, such as setting a quota on weekly phone calls for admissions counselors.

In the 1990s, transformational leadership was demonstrated through the practice of tuition discounting, which became a popular way to target and attract new types of students. Tuition discounting can involve setting high tuition rates and strategically redistributing excess tuition revenue to allow the institution to offer grants and other types of financial aid to middle-class and low-income students (Johnson 2019), allowing for more diversity of the student body. Another example of transformational leadership is implementing practices that involve holistic review of admissions candidates to look beyond test scores and GPA and take into consideration other unique talents or evidence of resilience and grit. Both examples demonstrate deliberate strategies that attend to the needs of students from a variety of backgrounds.

Transformative leadership practices go beyond seeking benefits for the organization and focus on how

decisions can lead to equity reform and an impact on broader society. An example of transformative leadership can be found at institutions that partner with communities to fund pipeline programs in K-12 schools. These programs, often aimed at middle school and high school students in under-resourced school districts, are designed to boost students’ academic preparation and engage them in college-readiness activities. While some of the students may opt to attend that institution, the goal is for the students to have multiple options and select whatever institution is the best fit for their goals (Love 2019). Ultimately, these types of programs increase the number of students who are better prepared to succeed in college.

The Need for Transformative Leadership

The anticipated challenges of the next decade due to declining birth rates, declining federal and state support, population migration, and growing socioeconomic gaps brings higher education into a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous reality. Shields (2017) uses this description, referred to as VUCA, to explain the chaos of primary and secondary education globally. Higher education is in a similar state and will require transformative leaders who “ensure a more equitable, inclusive, and socially just opportunities for all” (Shields 2017, 5).

Transformative leadership theory is not prescriptive, and instead calls for consideration of goals and priorities. It includes eight tenets for leaders to incorporate in their leadership framework. First is the mandate to affect deep and equitable change. This involves understanding of the mission of the institution and an understanding of the students it serves. Second is the need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice. Leaders must examine their current policies and practices to address racism and other prejudices that exist and ensure they are meeting the needs of all students. Third is the need to address the inequitable distribution of power. This can include examining policies within admissions that traditionally favor students from wealthier backgrounds, but also considering how academic

policies could be adjusted to give students more power to choose their learning experiences. Fourth is an emphasis on both individual and collective good. This tenet serves as a reminder that institutions are educating individual students but also contributing to the broader goal of strengthening democratic society by providing engaged and educated citizens. Fifth is a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice. Leaders need to consider what they and their institution can do to support underserved populations, refugees, and other marginalized groups. Sixth is an emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness. Leaders should strive to create a campus environment that brings together a diverse set of students and provide opportunities for them to learn from one another. They also need to collaborate with community leaders, the private sector, K-12 administrators, and politicians to develop new approaches to funding education.

The last two tenets of transformative leadership theory acknowledge the difficulty in challenging existing practices and enacting change. Tenet seven is the necessity of balancing critique with promise. Leaders need to be willing to critique the current practices of their institution. “Social justice, democratic community, and global awareness do not and cannot happen at a distance” (Shields 2017, 108). They must also propose ideas to move forward. The challenges facing higher education institutions will require radical solutions to open access to new populations of learners while also addressing the critical issues around budgets and funding. The final tenet is the call to exhibit moral courage. Radical change will face pushback. Leaders need to believe deeply in their vision for a better future, anticipate the pushback, and find ways to move their vision forward.

CEMOs can think about their own transformative leadership qualities by asking themselves several questions. What is my institution’s mission, and is it being carried out through our admissions practices? What communities do we want to serve? Is our campus prepared to serve these students in a culturally responsive

manner? How inclusive are our policies and practices? What opportunities do we have to redistribute power?

Higher education is notoriously slow to enact change. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that it is possible to rapidly shift to policies and procedures that support changing conditions. Examples include implementing test-optional admissions, expanding pass/fail grading options, and allowing more flexible transfer credit policies. More classes are being offered remotely or in formats that are more flexible. CEMOs should be closely monitoring these changes and consider how some of these policies might help to attract and support new types of learners in the future. Would higher education be more accessible to these new types of learners if courses were more modular and flexible? What if instructors were freed from the burden of assigning letter grades and instead issue pass grades to students who have mastered the material? Would this reduce anxiety and issues of grading bias? Extending this further, could smaller, stackable credentials provide a more flexible pathway for nontraditional students? Transformational CEMOs will be instrumental in reimagining the future of higher education.

Conclusion

The impending demographic and socioeconomic changes will require transformative CEMO leaders to break down the existing knowledge framework of a traditional college student and rebuild a new model that supports adult learners, first generation students, refugees, and other types of nontraditional students. They need to re-examine the inequities in the distribution of power within current practices to find ways to open up access to marginalized populations. The numerous openings for CEMOs create an opportunity for institutions to hire more transformative leaders to make a significant difference in the way admissions, financial aid, student success, and other programs impacting SEM will evolve over the next decade.

References

- AACRAO. See American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.
- Abel, J. R., and R. Deitz. 2014. Do the benefits of college still outweigh the costs? *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Current Issues in Economics and Finance*. 20(3): 1–9.
- ACT, Inc. 2019. *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2019*. Iowa City, IA: Author. Retrieved from: <act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr-2019/National-CCCR-2019.pdf>.
- American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. 2017. *2017 U.S. Chief Enrollment Management Officer Career Profile*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from: <aacrao.org/research-publications/research/career-profile/2017-us-chief-enrollment-management-officer-career-profile>.
- Bichsel, J., and J. McChesney. 2017. *The Gender Pay Gap and the Representation of Women in Higher Education Administrative Positions: The Century So Far*. Knoxville: CUPA-HR. Available at: <cupahr.org/wp-content/uploads/cupahr_research_brief_1.pdf>.
- Brown, A. 2018. Most Americans say higher ed is heading in wrong direction, but partisans disagree on why. *Fact Tank*. July 26. Retrieved from: <pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/26/most-americans-say-higher-ed-is-heading-in-wrong-direction-but-partisans-disagree-on-why/>.
- Burns, J. M. 1978. *Leadership* (1st ed). New York: Harper & Row.
- Carnevale, A., S. Rose, and B. Cheah. 2019. *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings*. Washington, D.C.: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from: <cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/collegepayoff-completed.pdf>.
- Chetty, R., J. Friedman, E. Saez, N. Turner, and D. Yagan. 2020. *The Determinants of Income Segregation and Intergenerational Mobility: Using Test Scores to Measure Undermatching*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. Retrieved from: <papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3539315>.
- College Board. 2018. *Trends in College Pricing 2018*. New York: Author. Available at: <research.collegeboard.org/pdf/trends-college-pricing-2018-full-report.pdf>.
- De Leur, R. L. 2007. An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Enrollment Management Models and Description of Enrollment Management Leadership (doctoral dissertation). Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Information and Learning Company. Retrieved from: <search.proquest.com/docview/304732637/abstract/811101ABBD3B4B14PQ/1>.
- Deming, D. 2019. The economics of free college. *Economics for Inclusive Prosperity* (blog). June 2019. Available at: <econfp.org/policy-brief/the-economics-of-free-college/>.
- Diep, F. 2020. If the coronavirus collapses state budgets, what will happen to public colleges? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. March 26. Retrieved from: <chronicle.com/article/If-the-Coronavirus-Collapses/248359>.
- Grawe, N. 2018. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Haveman, R., and T. Smeeding. 2006. The role of higher education in social mobility. *The Future of Children*. 16(2): 125–150.
- Hossler, D., and D. Kalsbeek. 2008. Enrollment management and managing enrollment: Setting the context for dialog. *College and University*. 83(4): 3–9.
- Johnson, K. M. 2014. The hidden cost of the recession: Two million fewer births and still counting. *Carsey Research*. National Fact Sheet No. 26. Available at: <scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1230&context=carsey>.
- Johnson, S. 2019. Private colleges set new record on tuition discounts. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 10. Retrieved from: <chronicle.com/article/Private-Colleges-Set-New/246281>.
- Liedtke, R. 2013. The Indispensable Leader: The Study of Leadership Qualities of the Chief Enrollment Management Officer (doctoral dissertation). Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
- Lipka, S. 2014. Demographic data let colleges peer into the future. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. January 19.
- Love, L. 2019. College ready: Wolverine pathways paved way to higher ed for kids unsure how to get there. *University of Michigan News*. September 9. Retrieved from: <news.umich.edu/college-ready-wolverine-pathways-paved-way-to-higher-ed-for-kids-unsure-how-to-get-there/>.
- Maguire, J. 1976. To the organized go the students. *Bridge Magazine*. 39(1).
- McGee, J. 2015. *Breakpoint*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Mitchell, M., M. Leachman, K. Masterson, and S. Waxman. 2018. *Unkept Promises: State Cuts to Higher Education Threaten Access and Equity*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Available at: <cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/10-4-18sfp.pdf>.
- Paxton, B., and M. Perez-Greene. 2001. A transformational enrollment management plan. *Community College Journal*. 72(1): 49–51.
- Reeves, R. V. 2019. It's not just corruption. Entrance into elite US colleges is rigged in every way. *The Guardian*. March 12. Retrieved from: <theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/12/us-college-admissions-scandal-corruption-rigged>.
- Shields, C. M. 2010. Transformative leadership: working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*. 46(4): 558–589. Retrieved from: <doi.org/10.1177/0013161X10375609>.
- . 2017. *Transformative Leadership in Education: Equitable and Socially Just Change in an Uncertain and Complex*

- World. New York: Routledge. Retrieved from: <doi.org/10.4324/9781315207148>.
- Snowden, M. L. 2010. Enrollment Logics and Discourse: Toward Professionalizing Higher Education Enrollment Management (doctoral dissertation). Ann Arbor, MI. ProQuest Information and Learning Company. Retrieved from: <search.proquest.com/docview/847038882/abstract/E602EA66FE364948PQ/1>.
- Thelin, J. R. 2004. *A History of American Higher Education*, 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Tough, P. 2019. What college admissions offices really want. *The New York Times*. September 10. Retrieved from: <nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/10/magazine/college-admissions-paul-tough.html>.
- Weber, M. 2019. *Economy and Society: A New Translation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from: <doi.org/10.4159/9780674240827>.
- WittKieffer. n.d. *Chief Enrollment Officers in an Era of Great Expectations*. Oak Brook, IL: Author. Retrieved from: <wittkieffer.com/webfoo/wp-content/uploads/Chief-Enrollment-Officers-in-an-Era-of-Great-Expectations_Survey-Report.pdf>.

About the Author



Lisa Emery

Lisa Emery serves as the Senior Associate Registrar at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. She is the co-chair of the Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars

and Admissions Officers (MACRAO) Enrollment Management committee and a member of AACRAO's Information Systems and Technology Committee. Emery is currently pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership at East-

ern Michigan University with a research interest in the impacts of the Chief Enrollment Management Officer position. She holds a B.A. in economics and an M.S. in information policy, both from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor.