

 **LEADING STRATEGIES**

# Strengthening Strategic Enrollment Management through Institutional Strategic Planning and Assessment

*By Tara Hornor*

Colleges and universities are increasingly seeking innovations to enhance their strategic enrollment management (SEM) outcomes and processes (Bontrager 2008, Bontrager, Ingersoll and Ingersoll 2012). Linking SEM with systemic institutional strategic planning and assessment processes can enhance those outcomes and processes through integrated planning, funding prioritization, synergies in data analytics, and capacity building in key areas such as undergraduate and graduate admissions, marketing, student retention initiatives, and data-driven financial aid. This article describes a four-step process and specific strategies for linking SEM with systemic assessment and strategic planning processes that keep the planning process effective and collaborative while promoting an institution-wide culture of SEM.

## **Linking Strategic Enrollment Management, Planning, and Assessment**

Colleges and universities can gain synergies and efficiencies when institutional processes are intentionally and thoughtfully integrated (Hinton 2012). This is especially true when the processes are far-reaching and as critical to organizational success as SEM, strategic planning, and assessment and when planners consider routines across diverse institutional functional areas. Commonal-

ities of purpose and process within SEM, strategic planning, and assessment make this integration even more powerful. For example, all these institutional processes focus on enhancing student success and student outcomes. At their most effective, SEM, strategic planning, and assessment processes are highly reliant upon and enriched by institution-wide collaboration and engagement (Bontrager 2012, Hinton 2012, Suskie 2018). These institutional processes have additional commonalities in their implementation, including operating on a sim-

ilar multi-year planning horizon, being data-rich and evidence-based, leveraging organizational learning and continuous improvement goals, and requiring broad and consistent campus-wide communication (Bontrager 2012, Hernon 2006, Strike 2017, Suskie 2018).

Linking student, program, and institutional-level assessment and strategic planning can be especially powerful for strategic enrollment management given the complexity of SEM as well as the criticality of getting strategic enrollment management right. SEM is critical to both student and institutional success as student outcomes and the financial health of the organization are highly dependent on careful enrollment and retention planning as well as strategy execution (Hundrieser 2012). SEM is inherently complex, coordinating the efforts of a broad array of campus units and initiatives that must collaborate seamlessly to move students through the enrollment funnel, from prospect to successful graduate (McLaughlin and McLaughlin 2007). For example, efforts to enhance academic student engagement and involvement in campus activities necessitate the collaborative efforts of faculty and staff. The intricacies of student development and college choice theories also impact the complexity of SEM processes, requiring institutions to recognize individual differences and meet students where they are developmentally. This heightens the need to use analytics to predict student behavior and college choice (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999).

Making intentional linkages among SEM, strategic planning, and institutional and program assessment processes can improve all of these processes. Including SEM prominently within the institution's strategic plan is critical in communicating its value and importance, and the benefits to SEM are especially impactful. Doing so can foster greater campus-wide collaboration and understanding of both the complexity and importance of SEM. Furthermore, gaining senior administration—and board of trustee—level visibility may favorably impact appropriation of resources, as strategic plans make powerful statements about institutional values, goals, and priorities.

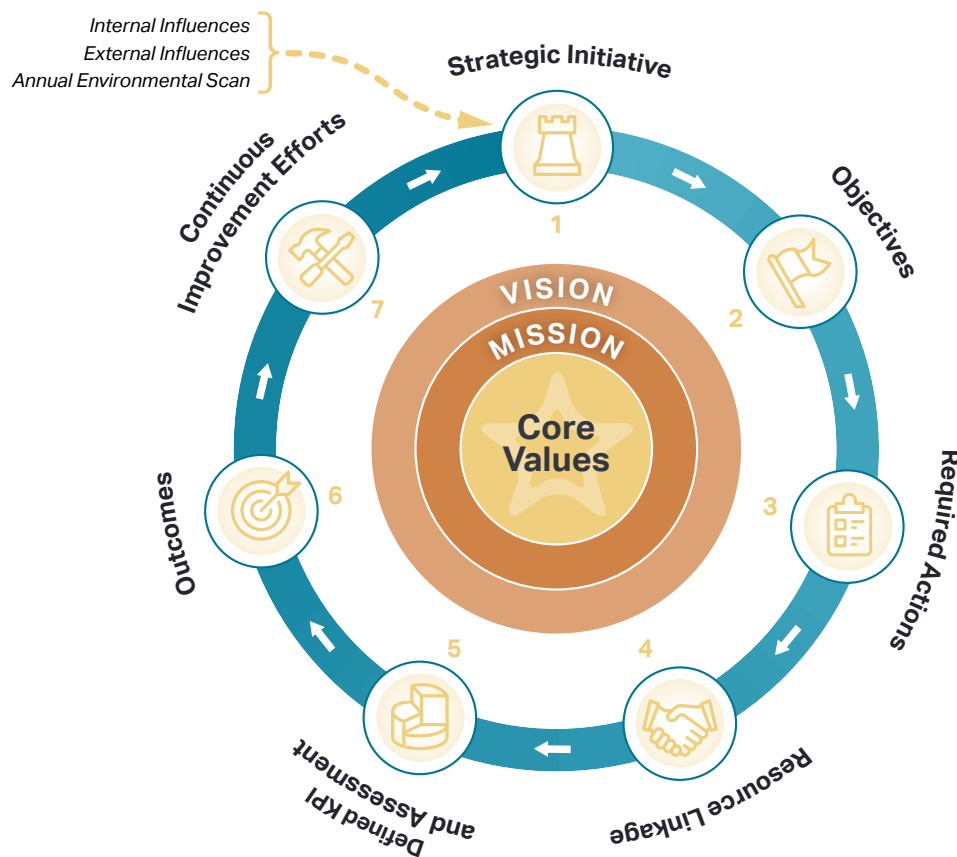
Four steps are essential to linking SEM, strategic planning, and institutional and program assessment processes:

1. Create a planning architecture that makes systemic linkages and processes transparent.
2. Integrate campus planning efforts.
3. Prioritize and fund institutional priorities.
4. Integrate assessment data to strengthen institution-wide SEM collaboration and the culture of continuous improvement.

### ***Step One— Create Systemic Linkages Among SEM, Strategic Planning, and Assessment: Design the Architecture for Action***

The first step is to create an infrastructure that makes transparent connections between processes and enables stakeholders across functional areas to view the planning process holistically. Once apparent, these intentional linkages can be made across institutional processes that are currently in place. Actors will be able to identify missing routines and link the implementation of new processes. Cyclical strategic planning processes provide a valuable architecture for viewing planning holistically and for differentiating specific planning steps that lend themselves to the insertion of assessment and key SEM initiatives. Adopting cyclical strategic planning processes can facilitate intentional linkages among major strategic initiatives, smaller objectives, and the actions it will take to achieve not only them but also budgeting, assessment, and continuous improvement efforts.

Figure 1 (on page 23) illustrates seven stages in a cyclical and progressive planning and implementation process. Alignment of process can be embedded into each stage. Higher education strategic plans commonly are structured around five to eight overarching goals or strategic initiatives with a myriad of supporting objectives nesting underneath (Strike 2017). Greater planning synergy is achieved when the institution's strategic plan reflects an overarching goal that is consistent with the strategic enrollment management plan. For example, two common goals of an institution's strategic enrollment management plan are increasing student access to the institution and student success; both of these



**FIGURE 1** ► Cyclical Strategic Planning Process

could easily also serve as strategic initiatives in the institution's overall strategic plan. (Such an approach is discussed in greater detail below.)

Consider the planning horizon timeline when developing the planning process. Typical higher education strategic plans range between three and six years in duration. Two important considerations in determining the planning horizon timeline are the length of other planning efforts on campus, such as the strategic enrollment management plan and academic school strategic plans, as well as the timeline of the strategic financial plan. Consistent timelines aid in planning integration and help ensure stronger financial resourcing. For example, if the institution is at the end of a fundraising capital campaign and has significant new resources, a

shorter plan may be executable. However, if a capital campaign is just beginning and major funding will derive from donor pledges, with payments staggered over a five-year period, a longer five- to seven-year planning horizon may increase the likelihood that the goals of the strategic plan will be achieved.

Once the architecture of the process and the planning horizon timeline are established, the campus community can begin generating ideas. Whether the institution uses a proposal submission process, strategic planning workshops or off-sites, or town halls or surveys asking stakeholders to identify their aspirations for the institution, SEM teams can collaborate to ensure that the most impactful enrollment ideas are submitted for consideration.

**TABLE 1 ► Seven Stages in a Cyclical Strategic Planning Process**

| Stage                                                     | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | SEM Example(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1</b> Strategic Initiatives                            | The centerpiece of the strategic planning effort is the ongoing development and implementation of strategic initiatives. Strategic initiatives are typically five to eight broad, significant goals that guide the institution's planning, budgeting, benchmarking, and assessment activities. | ► Increase student access and success.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>2</b> Objectives                                       | Objectives are strategic targets that provide pathways and mechanisms to achieve each strategic initiative. These objectives are especially powerful when paired with a strategic initiative goal and used as a mechanism to accomplish both the strategic initiative and SEM goals.           | ► Double the number of transfer student applications.<br>► Increase four-year graduation rates by 5 percent.                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>3</b> Required Actions                                 | Each objective corresponds with a series of specific actions or tasks that are necessary to achieve the objective. Required actions are associated with a timeframe for completion.                                                                                                            | ► Implement a new communications campaign and outreach strategy for transfer student inquiries.<br>► Create an academic coaching program, pairing all online and degree completion students with a dedicated academic coach.                                                                              |
| <b>4</b> Resource Linkage                                 | Linking resources to each required action helps ensure the sustainability of the planning process and accomplishment of the actions.                                                                                                                                                           | ► Communications campaign cost: \$30,000 total (\$15,000 year 1, \$10,000 year 2, \$5,000 year 3).<br>► Total labor cost for new team of academic coaches: \$200,000 annually.                                                                                                                            |
| <b>5</b> Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and Assessment | KPIs specify what is measured, and assessment techniques detail how and when it will be measured.                                                                                                                                                                                              | ► Volume of transfer student applications (started, incomplete, completed) as of each term's census date via CRM analysis.<br>► Yearly retention per cohort as of each term's census date via student information system and student satisfaction critiques of academic coaching via end-of-term surveys. |
| <b>6</b> Outcomes                                         | Measuring and understanding outcomes helps identify areas of accomplishment and areas where continuous improvement is necessary.                                                                                                                                                               | ► Actual number of transfer student applications (started, incomplete, completed)<br>► Actual retention and graduate rates; percentage of students reporting satisfaction with academic coaching                                                                                                          |
| <b>7</b> Continuous Improvement Efforts                   | Implementing continuous improvement efforts completes the planning cycle and lays the groundwork for great ideas for the next planning cycle.                                                                                                                                                  | ► Add new media outlets to the communications campaign based on results.<br>► Implement professional development trainings for academic coaches.                                                                                                                                                          |

### **Step Two— Integrating Campus Planning Efforts: Illuminating the Centrality of SEM**

College campuses have numerous decentralized strategic plans disbursed throughout academic, student affairs, and administrative units (Strike 2017). For example, many institutions have a strategic enrollment management

plan, a strategic financial plan, facilities and campus master plans, an athletics strategic plan, an information technology plan, a student affairs strategic plan, advancement or development strategic plans, communications plans, strategic plans in each academic school or college, as well as strategic plans within some units or departments. Unit-level strategic plans are so plentiful on col-

lege campuses that it may seem that it would be difficult to locate them all. Yet the overall institutional strategic plan, SEM, and assessment processes can all benefit not only from a concerted effort to *locate* these plans but also to integrate many of their goals and initiatives.

Such integration is especially important for SEM given how many different functional areas collaborate to implement effective enrollment management. Given the decentralized nature of institutional plans, there is an overwhelming likelihood that each of them contains goals and strategies that would not only impact but enhance SEM knowledge and processes. For example, academic school strategic plans are likely to include aspirations of new degree programs; plans emanating from athletics are likely to feature goals for increased scholarships and student support; and communications plans are likely to include new website or social media initiatives. All of these are helpful to integrate with SEM planning.

### ***Step Three— Prioritizing and Funding Institutional Priorities: Linking Internal and External Funding Opportunities to Enhance SEM***

Institutional strategic planning is central to advancing or propelling a college or university along the trajectory toward goal achievement. Planning processes typically generate a wealth of great ideas, making prioritization critical. The prioritization process can be useful in determining which great ideas make the overall institutional strategic plan, the sequence in which ideas are implemented, and their funding. Given what is at stake in the prioritization process, using the best evaluation criteria is critical and can help build consensus among the campus community about institutional priorities.

Common evaluation criteria include centrality to the institution's mission, anticipated impact, return on investment, revenue generation or cost savings, as well as how realistic, obtainable, or measurable a proposal is perceived to be (Hinton 2012). The nature of SEM lends itself well to the prioritization process. For example, SEM's focus on attracting, enrolling, and retaining students is central to the institutional mission

and, through retention, delivers a return on investment, revenue generation, or cost savings unlike most other initiatives in a strategic plan. Therefore, when SEM initiatives are prominent in institutional strategic plans, it helps stakeholders visualize and gain a more holistic understanding of the importance of SEM. Effective SEM processes have significant impact; communicating the ways in which a SEM initiative can propel an institution from point A to point D is invaluable.

Embedding major SEM initiatives within the institutional strategic plan can expand access to funding sources and resources. Strategic plans are often supported by multiple funding sources, including fundraising, state funding requests, grant writing, and internal fund reallocation. Therefore, the presence of important SEM initiatives in the overall strategic plan can increase visibility and opportunity for internal and external funding sources. Often, institutions prioritize strategic plans by both internal and external sources, anticipating which initiatives will be of interest to potential donors and which must be funded internally.

### ***Step Four— Integrating Assessment Data and Communicating Progress: Strengthening Institution-Wide SEM Collaboration and a Culture of Continuous Improvement***

Just as there are an abundance of strategic plans on college and university campuses, mountains of data are distributed throughout college offices and divisions. As familiarity with items in other campus planning efforts can spark synergies and collaboration in strategic planning, different units' familiarity with SEM-related data can represent an opportunity to distribute important knowledge and increase efficiencies by reducing duplicative efforts. For example, a university planning and assessment office's use of the Society for College and University Planning's annual higher education trend reports to inform the overall university strategic planning process may also be valuable in planning efforts in the admissions office or an academic unit (Society for College and University Planning 2018). The registrar's office's use of National Student Clearinghouse data that

depict where admitted students chose to enroll may help inform marketing department planning. The registrar office's subscription to a transcript service that depicts win-loss rates by the institution for the percentage of matriculating students may be useful to athletics recruiting as well as the financial aid office. The institutional research office's analysis of data from the IPEDS Peer Analysis Center showing comparisons of financial aid discount rates across institutions may provide helpful information to fundraising, athletics, and financial aid. Annual assessment reports from academic degree programs and student affairs units often provide evidence of student excellence that can be valuable in SEM communications to prospective students and families. Strategic plans present an opportunity to integrate assessment data from many different functional areas. This makes it even more critical to embed SEM within the institution's strategic plan, providing a centralized pathway for the cross-communication of assessment data and strategic planning progress metrics throughout the institution.

## Conclusion

Creating effective enrollment, transition, and retention pathways, programs, and environments requires sig-

nificant institutional commitment—including engagement and resources. Embedding SEM into institutional strategic planning and assessment processes will spur campus-wide engagement, administrative- and board-level visibility of the issues, and appropriate resources. Effective strategic planning requires institutions to engage in an ongoing, integrated, and campus-wide research-based planning and evaluation process that systematically reviews the mission, goals, and outcomes, integrating data-based reporting of results to ensure continuous improvement and demonstrate that the institution is achieving its goals (Strike 2017). Research on enrollment patterns, utilization of services and benefits, and perspectives during the college choice process suggests that there is significant work ahead in enhancing student outcomes and transition experiences. Utilizing an ongoing cyclical strategic planning process that creates intentional linkages and integration among environmental scanning, goal setting, the constructing of implementation action plans, budgeting, assessment, and continuous improvement efforts can be especially important to SEM processes given their complexity, linkages to college choice theory, and campus-wide impact (Hossler and Bontrager 2014).

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