

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Building A Foundational Approach for Strategic Enrollment Management

By Boyd Bradshaw

Building a foundational approach for strategic enrollment management (SEM) is necessary to succeed in today's volatile higher education environment. It all begins with a mutual understanding of SEM and aligning the campus with the enrollment management organization. This article shares how to bring campus stakeholders together to optimize enrollment, meet enrollment and revenue goals, and advance the institution's mission.

Building a foundational approach for strategic enrollment management (SEM) is necessary to succeed in today's volatile higher education environment. Including the entire campus in the process can help leaders bring the campus together to optimize enrollment, meet enrollment and revenue goals, and advance an institution's mission. It all begins with a mutual understanding of SEM and aligning the campus with enrollment management organization.

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is a key concept in the administration of higher education institutions today. SEM provides a unique framework for improving student and institutional outcomes by jointly enabling student access to, and success in, higher education, best business practices, and comprehensive institutional planning (AACRAO 2022). There are three meaningful phrases in this definition that are critical for successful enrollment planning:

■ **Key Concept**—ideas that are applicable to the enrollment planning process;

■ **Unique Framework**—the model that institutions follow to engage the entire campus; and

■ **Comprehensive Institutional Planning**—long-term planning while looking at the campus through an enrollment lens.

These ideas can assist in educating a campus on the differences between enrollment services and SEM. While enrollment *services* involve the processes that focus on recruitment through matriculation, enrollment *management* involves comprehensive enrollment planning that is strategically focused on successful enrollment outcomes.

The illustration below, previously published in an Eduventures white paper, further explains these ideas (see Table I, on page 12). The white paper referred to four phases of enrollment management maturity with the goal of becoming fully integrated, meaning a more sophisticated approach to looking at the complete life-cycle of a student. It is important for enrollment leaders

TABLE 1 ► Phases of Enrollment Management Maturity

Initial	Operational	Strategic	Integrated
Beginning to integrate enrollment functions	Executing on top-down enrollment goals	Informed executive leadership of enrollment	Collaborative executive leadership of enrollment
Recruitment focused	Limited lifecycle approach	Expanded lifecycle approach	Complete lifecycle approach
Building data quality for enrollment	Limited data sharing and integration	Good data sharing and integration	Full data integration and utilization
Identifying enrollment goals	Delegated executive leadership of enrollment	Enrollment strategy within the context of institutional strategy	Enrollment viewpoint in co-creation of institutional strategy

Source: Eduventures 2016, 3

to assess where they fall within the model as *initial* and *operational* are more service driven, while *strategic* and *integrated* are more management driven.

Many enrollment management organizations fall between operational and strategic, with the goal of becoming more integrated. An interesting exercise with leadership teams is to present these four categories and ask them where they believe they are as an organization and to include specific examples. This helps set the baseline and goals for better integration.

A fundamental part of the process is to develop a set of objectives for the enrollment management team. Objectives should be clear, understandable, achievable, and used as a basis for overall planning efforts. Below are seven objectives I developed and am adapting with my current enrollment management leadership team. These objectives could be applied to any SEM organization.

- **Develop Continued Expertise in Strategic Enrollment Management.** It is important for the campus to see the division of enrollment management staff as the experts in everything relating to enrollment management. This includes being the team to provide enrollment trend data and best practices as well as being the leaders on enrollment strategy to drive enrollment success.
- **Provide Excellent Service and Consultation to Division Stakeholders.** A stakeholder is anyone who has a primary and/or secondary role to influence student enrollment. The most common enroll-

ment stakeholders are the academic schools and/or colleges (deans, chairs, and program directors), academic advisors, student affairs, institutional marketing, and communications. It is important to create a list of enrollment stakeholders and define who they are and their purpose in support of the overall enrollment plan.

- **Foster a Culture of Data-Informed Decisions to Guide the Development of Enrollment Strategies.** As mentioned earlier, it is more important than ever to move campus divisions from an operational approach to an integrated approach, which includes full data integration and utilization. What is lacking in many enrollment management organizations is the infrastructure, resources, and skill set to do this. Some SEM organizations rely on centralized institutional research and decision support offices that are tasked with other institutional priorities and are not able to give attention to the specific needs of an enrollment operation. It is critical to develop an enrollment analytics infrastructure that analyzes each stage of the enrollment funnel, from prospect to graduate.
- **Support Initiatives that Contribute to Promoting Student Success from Admissions to Graduation.** It is typical for the primary role of student success to report within academic and/or student affairs, rather than within enrollment management. Much of what happens with student success is instilled

in the beginning and continues throughout the entire lifecycle of a student. It is worthwhile to have SEM staff be a part of campus-wide structures to support student success. It is critical to educate the campus community about the role SEM plays in student success.

- **Proactively Integrate Diversity and Inclusivity Principles into All Aspects of the Division's Culture and Practices.** The commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion is critical in today's environment. It is important for SEM organizations to create a campus community that is welcoming, vibrant, and supportive of all individuals. SEM organizations have the opportunity to actively remove barriers and create systems and services that educate, empower, and elevate opportunities for all.
- **Enhance and Support Partnerships That Provide Students with a Seamless Transition from High School or Community College.** This can be complicated as many institutions have established partnerships that naturally work based on proximity and/or degree offerings. Extending other partnership opportunities and promoting what is unique and valued at your institution, can increase recruitment and enrollment. Many times, partnerships in EM organizations are solely focused on college readiness and do not take into consideration the student journey. Providing a seamless transition in collaboration with multiple campus partners is a key to enrollment success.
- **Cultivate Innovation, Change, and Entrepreneurial Mindsets and Approaches.** It is all about the approach and the importance of looking forward. Public recognition that an institution's SEM organization is responsible for innovation, change, and entrepreneurial approaches gains instant credibility. But words alone are not enough; it is important to see action, including how information is shared in a meeting and/or how strategies are formulated and operationalized. Keep in mind the importance of creating the infrastructure and identifying the needs to support an integrated approach as well as setting some foundational elements for mutual understanding.

Whether a specific office is reporting directly or indirectly to the enrollment management division, an infrastructure that supports collaboration is most important. The most familiar reporting lines include admissions and recruitment, financial aid and scholarships, and the registrar's office. Some reporting lines have been expanded to include special populations such as veterans, transfer, returning adult, graduate, and international students. Others have added student success pieces such as academic advising, new student orientation, and student success centers including tutoring, writing, coaching, and mentoring. Whatever the reporting line, it is important to develop a common understanding of some basics across campus. It's essential for colleagues to know what the priorities are for the organization to be successful and share those to ensure everyone is on the same page. Creating a common understanding will drive enrollment success. Here are some foundational elements that will enhance enrollment planning:

- **Setting realistic enrollment goals, working across campus:** This is always a challenge because the tendency is to want to set goals based on desires, rather than data. Goal setting needs to be data informed, looking back as well as forward, to better understand environmental factors that impact enrollment.
- **Identifying and securing sufficient resources to meet enrollment objectives:** Institutions are increasingly asked to do more with less. Planning up front and setting a strategy *before* setting goals, will ensure there are proper resources to meet the objectives.
- **Creating strategies at each stage of the recruitment and enrollment funnel:** We are all trying to better understand student behavior and how best to move a student from prospect to matriculant, and each stage needs a strategic approach. This includes strategies focused on first year, second year, and third year through graduation.
- **Campus-wide collaboration on retention and completion:** It is typical for an office or individual to have the word "retention" in their title, but it is not typical for all the responsibility to be placed on that one office or individual. Strategies are needed

to support a campus-wide effort around retention and completion work. It is common for campuses to establish councils and/or committees that assist in bringing the campus together.

■ **Strategic use of financial aid and scholarships to maximize net revenue and enrollment yield.** This is necessary in today's environment. With increasing costs and the value of higher education being questioned, a good financial aid and scholarship strategy is critical. This includes merit, talent, and need-based strategies.

■ **Creating a culture of recruitment and retention campus wide:** The phrase "recruit to retain to graduate" provides real strength to campus-wide collaboration. It is the entire campus community's role to help meet enrollment goals. The key is making sure each person knows their responsibility.

■ **Ensuring the ability to continuously track the impact of adopted strategies:** Technologies have advanced, and it has become much easier to track the impact of our work. The challenge is measuring the depth of each strategy to understand and continue (or change) the course for the strongest impact on enrollment.

All these elements embody AACRAO's approach to successful enrollment planning. Establishing a core group/team consisting of enrollment, academic, and student affairs representatives who can support as well as articulate the concepts of strategic enrollment management is an initial step. By utilizing these foundational approaches, institutions can bring the campus together to optimize enrollment, meet enrollment and revenue goals, and advance the institution's mission.

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About the Author



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