LEADING STRATEGIES

Managing Enrollment Strategically Both Formally and Informally

By Magdalena Hinojosa, Paula Luff, and PJ Woolston

The chief enrollment management officer (CEMO) is often responsible for optimizing institutional enrollment in ways that exceed the direct authority and responsibility of that office. To be successful, the CEMO needs to develop a high level of influence across the campus. Three particularly effective ways that the CEMO can exert influence to improve the student experience is by shaping institutional process, organizational structure, and overall culture.

The individual serving as the institutional chief enrollment management officer (or CEMO) might have any number of given titles. While the position level is generally more uniform (*e.g.*, vice president, vice chancellor, or executive director), the descriptor tends to vary more. The CEMO might be responsible for "enrollment management," "strategic enrollment management," "student and enrollment services," or more broadly "student success." Even more so, the direct responsibilities can vary greatly. While the CEMO is often charged with directly managing undergraduate admissions and financial aid, the purview for the role might also include the welcome center or one-stop center, orientation, the registrar's office, marketing, data and analytics, or other responsibilities.

Regardless, the actual expectation for the CEMO can be simultaneously specific and ambiguous. The CEMO is responsible for the size and quality of the enrolled student body through any number of activities involving both the direct authority and the more indirect collaborative needs for the position. These activities include growing enrollment, recruiting the new class of incoming students (for all student populations), improving retention rates, developing scholarship and other funding initiatives, adding and rolling out new programs (academic, co-curricular, extracurricular), facilitating the student experience, building the alumni base, and so on.

The challenge stems from the expectation that the CEMO is responsible for an institution's "enrollment," and this term can be unhelpfully all-encompassing. Everything at the university is related to its student enrollment. Consequently, in addition to the formal expectations outlined on the job description, the CEMO is often tasked with accomplishing work that spans offices and structural divisions, overseeing process and procedure that lacks clear authority or accountability, and really managing any issues that are ill-defined in terms of ultimate responsibility. Therefore, in order to be successful both on a personal and institutional level, it is imperative that the CEMO be effective not just within the scope of their official duties but also as an influencer on the *process*, *structures*, and *culture* of the institution.

Considering the broad institutional influence of the CEMO, it is not surprising that this role is soundly grounded in organizational theory. Consider for instance the four-frame model of Bolman and Deal (2021) consisting of the structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames by which leaders manage organizations. Influence is a consistent, if not explicit, theme pervading any approach to organizational leadership. A CEMO will find success to be a direct reflection of their ability to influence not just the people in the environment, but the processes and structures that make up that environment. It is for this reason that the term "collaboration" figures so prominently throughout CEMO job descriptions. The concept of influence is also common and popular throughout the business management literature. Note for instance the specific mention in a seminal title *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 2018) and more recently *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* (Patterson, Grenney, Maxfield and Switzler 2007), as well as other popular if less explicit works such as *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey 2013), *Good to Great* (Collins 2001), and any sampling of the works of highly-regarded authors as Peter Drucker, Simon Sinek, and Brene Brown.

This theoretical article will consider and exemplify the need for effective CEMO influence in terms of process, structure, and culture in order to realize student and institutional success.

Influence on Process

In the process of pursuing higher education, the paramount focus of students is on their studies, not the various processes related to taking advantage of a college education (*e.g.*, registering for class, procuring financial aid, graduating, etc.). Necessarily as organizations, institutions create process through which they can efficiently and effectively realize the various extracurricular parts of a student's education, and they regularly focus on making process intuitive and seamless for the student experience. Institutions run into difficulty when some campus process spans offices or divisions, necessitating multiple or coordinated efforts to realize a single aim. Examples abound in management of the various aspects of college, including for instance financial (procuring financial aid from one office to apply to a student bill generated by another office), curricular (determining and registering for the correct course sequence), and student affairs (coordinating multiple student services) matters.

Institutional process improvement with the goal of improving enrollment outcomes exemplifies the need for effective enrollment managers to exert influence on areas outside of their direct control. Student service needs are often addressed through process that was originally built or that has evolved around organizational efficiency, almost always with student service in mind, but ultimately as a reflection of institutional limitations (particularly structural and resource limitations related to staffing, budget, etc.). Institutions are often less strategic about how they address process improvement because they already have some process in place that is "adequate," and it is difficult to justify the amount of work and risk involved in reinventing a process that appears to be serving needs, especially when the resulting improvement is ambiguous or uncertain. It might take something as disruptive as a global pandemic to compel institutions to address an existing problem and realize that a "good enough" process that is already in place may in fact not be good enough. The CEMO then is uniquely positioned in (and held to task for) optimizing process in ways that will minimize adverse impact on enrollment. Such processes are often relegated to the CEMO by default because, as noted earlier, the CEMO is ultimately responsible for any and all issues related to enrollment, most especially in areas of ambiguity.

For example, consider the process for "student drops," or dropping enrolled students early in the semester for non-payment of an outstanding bill (particularly tuition and fees). Inevitably an institution will have students register for class who do not end up attending for any number of reasons, including a change in personal circumstance, inadequate finances, or newer and higher priorities. A student's non-intention to attend is sometimes indicated by non-payment of tuition and fees. Similarly, some students will seek to continue enrollment despite an outstanding and increasing bill due to the institution, accruing an even higher level of financial obligation. Ideally students in a situation like this will drop or withdraw without incurring a charge; however, this is not always the case. It is generally agreed that it is in the best interests of everyone involved (the student and the institution) that the enrollment for a student who is unable to meet their financial obligation be discontinued very early in the term. This is a necessary business practice because it is not sustainable to allow students to carry an increasing balance from term to term without collecting tuition so that the institution can meet its own financial obligations. It becomes incumbent on the institution to drop the student's enrollment.

This is a classic case of a process that spans offices and that can "fall through the cracks" because of a lack of centralized ownership. Fundamentally, this is an issue for student accounts or student billing because ultimately it is a question of the student paying their outstanding balance. Often, it falls upon the registrar to generate the initial list of enrolled students. Other offices are deeply involved such as financial aid (managing third-party resources to help cover tuition costs), advisement (enrolling or registering students in the courses), and many other student services offices. This is a classic source of unintended consequences where activity intended to serve students generated by one office (*i.e.*, dropping a student for non-payment) can create unexpected work for another office (*e.g.*, a deluge of urgent questions to the financial aid office about expected aid to cover costs, or new questions to advisors about course load and implications for time to degree). Who better than the CEMO to oversee the coordination of a wide-reaching process?

Consider the experience at the University of Texas Permian Basin (UTPB), a medium-sized (about 7,000 students in an academic year) public regional campus in West Texas. UTPB had a relatively standard drops process that worked well enough without additional oversight when the registrar's office and the student accounts offices worked together to identify and drop about 200 students per semester who did not provide for an outstanding bill. A heightened risk and urgency developed unexpectedly in the summer semester of 2020, the first new term beginning after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all of the efforts to respond to and manage the novel implications of the pandemic, the student drops process manifested in delayed fashion because it was not until bills were well overdue and the semester was already underway that it became apparent that there was a significant increase in the number of students with an outstanding balance at risk of being dropped. During that summer semester, the number of students on the list more than doubled to 540, resulting in an all-hands-on-deck institutional response. After significant student outreach and the application of emergency funding (particularly from the CARES Act), staff were able to reduce the size of the list to around the normally expected number. Everyone was relieved to have averted crisis.

Unfortunately, this pattern repeated in the fall 2020 semester when the drop listed ballooned to more than 1,000 students (about 25% of the undergraduate student body). With the benefit of recent experience, staff now had a response in place whereby they could connect with the relevant students and delegate student response based on their highest needs. UTPB was able to rescue about 90 percent of the initial list, but the process was laborious.

It was now apparent that the institution needed a new approach, a new process altogether. Even while executing the immediately needed response, the enrollment leadership considered such questions as: Why is this happening? What else can we do to address this issue? What can we learn from our experience? And most importantly: How can we change our process to be more effective and student-centric?

Over the course of the recovery effort, while proactively asking these questions, the staff learned several things, including:

- Students were changing their course registration up until late in the process (an advisement concern)

- Students were paying their bill at the last possible moment (a student accounts concern)
- Students were having trouble accessing payment plans (a student accounts concern)
- Financial aid verification was taking more time than anticipated (a financial aid concern)
- Students had access to funding (particularly student loans) but had difficulty taking advantage of that funding (a financial aid concern)
- Students often did not have a *current* student cell number for text message outreach as opposed to email (an IT concern)
- Students were feeling poorly served by being dropped with little warning (a student services concern)

This list alone involved staff from five separate and distinct divisions with separate reporting lines within the university. Underlying all of these lessons was the role played by a thorough investigation of both the quantitative and qualitative data that staff gathered during a very short period. It was critical to understand what was going on and to get to the reasons behind the issues, and only a sound analysis of data could provide that understanding. The CEMO was perfectly positioned to explore, request, and investigate the relevant data as well as, especially the connections between those data.

Through these efforts, the staff at UTPB were able to reduce the list for actual student drops to a number consistent with previous semesters (*see* Figure 1, on page 23). More importantly, the CEMO used this period to simultaneously develop a new calendar with a far more proactive communication cycle, and for the spring 2021 semester the university launched this new process involving fourteen distinct communications leading up to the census date (including six prior to the start of class) and a series of drops that happened in three phases. Both student accounts and financial aid adjusted their process to post bills and financial aid in more timely fashion prior to the start of the semester.

At first glance, this new process might appear to be highly labor-intensive; however, given the focused oversight by a single individual (the CEMO) with the ability to exert influence over many various offices as well as the eager ownership of each office for their respective part, this new process proved to be surprisingly easy. Even more importantly, the new process proved to be effective. UTPB has seen student drops even out to pre-pandemic levels without the level of concern and panic brought on by a heightened volume. The institution learned in implementing this new process that student behavior was highly responsive: As staff were more proactive about notification and followed through on action, students reacted almost immediately. For instance, when the staff considered why students were having trouble accessing payment plans, they realized that they were dropping students after payment plans were no longer available. When the staff investigated why verification was taking more time than expected, they observed that students were submitting required documentation at the last minute and expecting instantaneous processing. The CEMO realized that the institution had made the mistake of setting a deadline for others that was the actual institutional deadline, thereby providing staff with absolutely no margin for error. This new process was designed to conclude entirely the student drops process by the end of the second week of class, which still gave them time before census to clean up any loose ends. UTPB now had a calendar for new process built on data and empirical evidence and grounded in better student communications to keep everyone posted about every step that needed to be taken. The institution had effectively implemented a new process that better met student needs.

Influence on Structure

The structure of the enrollment management organization can vary greatly from institution to institution and can have a significant impact on the culture of a unit. Admissions, financial aid, recruitment, registrar, and scholarship offices are the most common units within the enrollment management structure. Advising, marketing and communications, and veteran and military affairs are other departments that may or may not be part of the enrollment management structure.

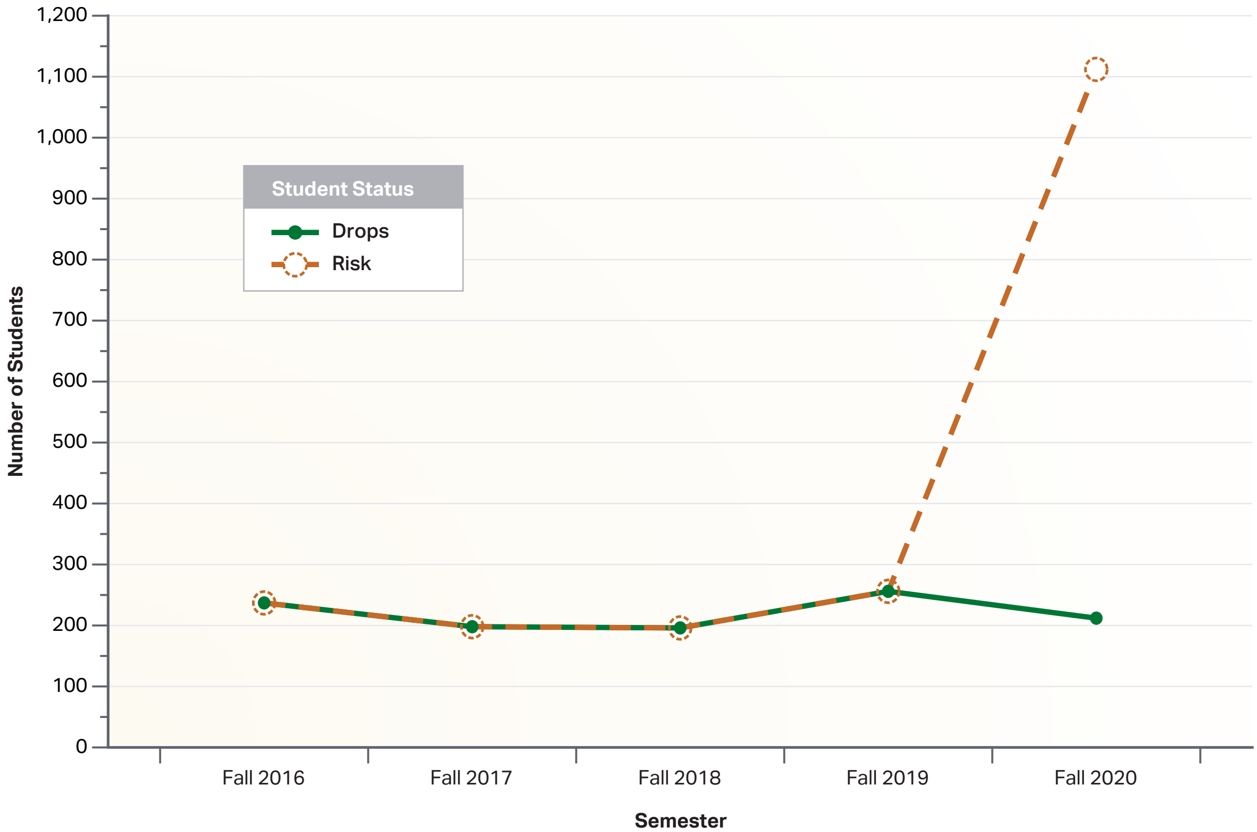

FIGURE 1 ➤ Fall Semester Student Drops

The structure within these offices also varies. For example, admissions may or may not include undergraduate, graduate, or international admissions processing. Recruitment may also be separated by student type. Scholarship functions are often embedded within financial aid operations, and veterans and military affairs may or may not be included within the registrar's office.

There is no "one size fits all" approach or absolute right way to determine which structure will work best for any one institution. Researching other institutions with similar student profiles, size, location, and type is a beneficial part of the decision-making process, but the most important aspect of redesigning and redefining an organization structure is the *people* who make up the units. Beware of taking the proverbial plopping of an organization structure from school A to school B simply because school A appears to be having, or has had, success. The strengths, skills, and leadership abilities of the current staff should play a significant role in the decision-making process. The success of an organizational structure is made possible by the people within that structure and not the structure itself.

By way of example, the enrollment unit of the the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), a large public Hispanic-Serving Institution on the United States/Mexico border, has evolved since enrolling its first class in 2015. At inception, the staff of UTRGV's two legacy institutions (The University of Texas at Brownsville and The University of Texas Pan American) were brought together to form the Office of Student Enrollment. Joining the staff and culture of two institutions into a new cohesive unit took time, patience, and communication. Going back to the basics was key in creating the new enrollment unit at UTRGV. The goal was to establish an enrollment structure that would meet the needs of a distributive institution with students on multiple campuses spread across the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Departments included in the initial structure were financial aid, recruitment and scholarships, data analysis and support, student service centers, undergraduate admissions, and registrar. The next critical step was the review and development of job descriptions to ensure that efficient and effective student service was at the foundation of all essential job functions. Positions were opened and all legacy employees went through a formal application process that included interviews. The goal was to place staff in positions where they could be successful based on their knowledge, skills, and abilities. There were some definite growing pains, but everyone maintained focus and a culture was set that we were better together than we ever were apart.

As UTRGV has matured so has its enrollment structure. Over the last seven years, new departments have been created, and other areas have been moved within the enrollment structure. The Office of Student Enrollment has grown into the Division of Strategic Enrollment and Student Affairs (SESA). Departments included in the initial structure are still part of the division; new departments have been created; and others have been added. Degree Audit Systems and Support is an example of a new department that was created, and other areas like college access and K–12 partnerships (Testing, Gear Up, Upward Bound, etc.), student affairs, residence life, student union, and university recreation were moved under the SESA structure over time. The skills and abilities of the team and enhancing student services have been the guiding priority for every change. The inclusion of areas like college access and traditional student affairs departments within one division has allowed for a more holistic view of the student experience. This structure provides stronger collaboration and communication throughout the student lifecycle.

The physical location of units can also be taken into consideration when reviewing an organizational structure. This can and should include areas that don't necessarily report to the same division. For example, the bursar offices at the two large UTRGV campuses are housed within the student service centers. The student service centers fall under the reporting structure of the SESA division, and the bursar offices report to the Division of Finance and Planning. This allows for better communication, coordination, and service to students. Creation of a physical location often requires two very valuable and potentially scarce resources at many institutions, space, and funding. Therefore, it is important to remember that an institution can have what looks like the best structure within the most appealing space, but *people* are the ultimate key to success.

Influence on Culture

The job of a CEMO can be made less stressful, or more challenging, depending on the culture they operate in, contribute to, and create. As Peter Drucker noted "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." While process and structure are critical aspects of influence for CEMOs, navigating an institution's culture and creating a positive culture within enrollment management (EM) is equally important, yet often overlooked.

Merriam-Webster defines culture as: "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization." Other descriptions of office culture include attitudes and behaviors of employees, how and why things get done, and the character and personality of an organization.

As a CEMO builds processes and organizational structures, they should be building an effective culture alongside those efforts. The culture of an enrollment management unit/division influences the effectiveness of that unit across campus. CEMOs could start by asking themselves: What is the culture of my unit? Is it a culture driven by mission? Authentic and honest? Collaborative and inclusive? Positive? Open to constructive feedback? Or is it a culture that promotes silos, ambiguity, and/or negativity?

The way each member of an EM team approaches their work and interacts with students and campus partners (culture) contributes to the reputation of the area. This ultimately aids or hinders how much buy-in a CEMO can achieve for new initiatives as well as the effectiveness of policy implementation, process improvements, and structural changes. Several factors contribute to the culture of an organization, including leadership, goals, values, mission, policies, work environment (space), and the frequency and style of communication.

Naturally, leadership sets the tone and serves as a model for the culture of an area. Ideally, the CEMO should work with their leadership team to determine and promote a culture that will support the efforts of EM and the institution. If this does not happen, the culture will organically evolve or remain stagnant (as in, "this is the way we've always done it"). An organically evolved or stagnant culture can create the perception that the group is unwilling to adapt to change or take into consideration different viewpoints or perspectives. This ultimately makes it difficult for EM members to get a seat at the table for important discussions where critical decisions are made. Hence, being intentional about setting and/or creating an engaging, positive culture is key for a CEMO in becoming a campus influencer.

Additionally, outlining clear goals for an EM area and tying those goals to the values and mission of the institution helps team members feel connected to a larger purpose and can have a positive impact on culture. When employees are reminded that the work they do (whether it's answering phones, processing applications, meeting with students, or leading a service or operational area) contributes in a meaningful way to changing the life of the students at their institution, they are more likely to be fully committed to achieving the goals set out for them.

Likewise, it is important to take time to review a unit's policies and procedures on a regular basis. Policies should make sense, be easy to understand, and be as streamlined as possible. Policies that require several "sign offs" to get a process done, convey the message that team members cannot be trusted to do their work appropriately, or that unnecessary bureaucracy is an acceptable part of the culture. Additionally, policies that are more complicated than they need to be can contribute to the impression that the EM area is out of touch with the needs of students and campus partners. CEMOs can address this issue by questioning "why" things are done the way they are and challenge their teams to find better ways to create policies and implement procedures.

People often learn how to fit into an organization's culture through observing and interacting with co-workers. This is usually an informal, unwritten process. Hence, the physical environment of an organization is another contributing factor in culture. During the pandemic, the need to move to remote work changed many of our cultures forever. It became more challenging to manage culture as people had fewer opportunities to interact beyond Zoom meetings. This difficulty was particularly evident for new hires. CEMOs who want to intentionally create an engaging, effective culture create opportunities for their teams to interact with each other on a regular basis. This can be accomplished through division meetings (preferably in person), with pre- or post-meeting social opportunities; through retreats of leadership or the entire team—taking people off campus, or to a building on campus that they do not normally work in; and through social events, such as meeting up after work for some snacks or drinks.

Building an internal culture that supports EM goals and strategies is only one step toward influencing larger campus goals, strategies, and policies. Sharing that culture with campus partners both formally and informally is another method for achieving influencer status. As administrators, CEMOs sometimes forget that campus partners (especially academic advisors, and faculty) are unaware of the processes, rules, and regulations that CEMO units have in place to achieve their goals or must follow to remain in compliance with federal and state program requirements. To be fair, that is not the primary job of the academic side. Hence, providing educational and information sessions (such as a Training Day and Information Fair event) can help bridge those knowledge gaps.

Additionally, regular communication with key stakeholders (cabinet members, deans, program directors, academic advisors) about what is happening in EM and plans for future events or efforts promotes a campus awareness of the importance of enrollment and recruitment efforts. By sharing regular updates with campus partners, CEMOs can create a sense of transparency and collaboration with colleagues they may rarely, if ever, meet with in person.

Finally, CEMOs should do their best to eliminate a culture of "no" in their divisions. Make it a goal, an expectation among your EM team, that they don't say "no." Instead, team members say: What are we trying to achieve? How might we make that work? Although the solution might not be implemented the way the person asking for the change originally requested, their willingness to find an alternative solution can positively affect their role as a campus influencer.

Conclusion

The chief enrollment management officer is most effective when relying on more than just direct authority alone to meet the overall enrollment goals of the institution. While important, that direct authority will only go so far. By exerting influence on process that spans multiple areas, on structure that maximizes the impact of the enrollment work, and on culture that bridges the people across the entire institution, the CEMO can positively and profoundly impact the enrollment efforts of the school.

This case study has examined an illustrative instance of each influencer category, although as a case study, the scope is limited in nature. The field of enrollment management would benefit from a study on each of these, in turn, exploring the impact of influence on process, on structure, and on culture for a variety of institutions of various sizes and from varying sectors. Additional research expanding the scope of each topic, exploring for instance several different student services processes (*e.g.*, financial aid awarding, advisement and registration, etc.), institutional structures (*e.g.*, institutional enrollment management operations, small schools versus large schools, etc.), and office cultures (*e.g.*, highly collaborative, risk averse, authoritarian, etc.) would also be beneficial.

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Dr. Woolston has conducted extensive proprietary research on a wide range of topics, including best practices in higher education recruitment and marketing, enrollment and admissions policy and process, financial aid and discounting, tuition modeling, and institutional accreditation. He holds a Doctor of Education from USC, a Master of Music from the University of Michigan, and a Bachelor of Arts in French from Brigham Young University. He has been a frequent presenter for organizations such as NACAC and multiple state affiliates, NACUBO, NAFSA, and multiple specialist organizations.