

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Lived Experiences of Chief Enrollment Officers in Ohio

By Aaron M. Berger

This study explores eight chief enrollment officers' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the eight chief enrollment officers at Ohio's public and private four-year institutions addressing two research questions. First, "what experiences influence a chief enrollment officer's ability to lead," produced six key findings: taking on more responsibility in their previous job, recruiting during COVID-19, working through a technological revolution, benefitting from professional development, embracing mentorship, and having time spent in the role. Second, "what competencies are essential for a chief enrollment management officer to be successful," produced eight key findings: understanding enrollment management trends and practices, understanding and utilizing data, having an ability to lead, providing successful supervision, being technologically savvy, working with presidents and campus partners, and recognizing one's own weaknesses.

Most university systems depend on student enrollment to fulfill budget requirements to keep institutions not only stable but to promote growth (Kretovics and Eckert 2020). A chief enrollment management officer is at the helm of leading this charge. This individual is responsible for deciding division goals, determining direction, and driving the culture of the recruitment team, including admissions, financial aid, and other key offices involved in enrolling and retaining students. The chief enrollment management officer's responsibility is filling

the class. Understanding the experiences of individuals serving in these positions will help others aspiring to the chief enrollment officer position.

Nationally, there has been considerable talk of a demographic cliff in recent years. One projection by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) claims the number of high school graduates will continue to rise slowly but will peak in 2025 with 3.93 million graduating (*see* Figure 1, on page 16). Ohio is among many states experiencing enrollment

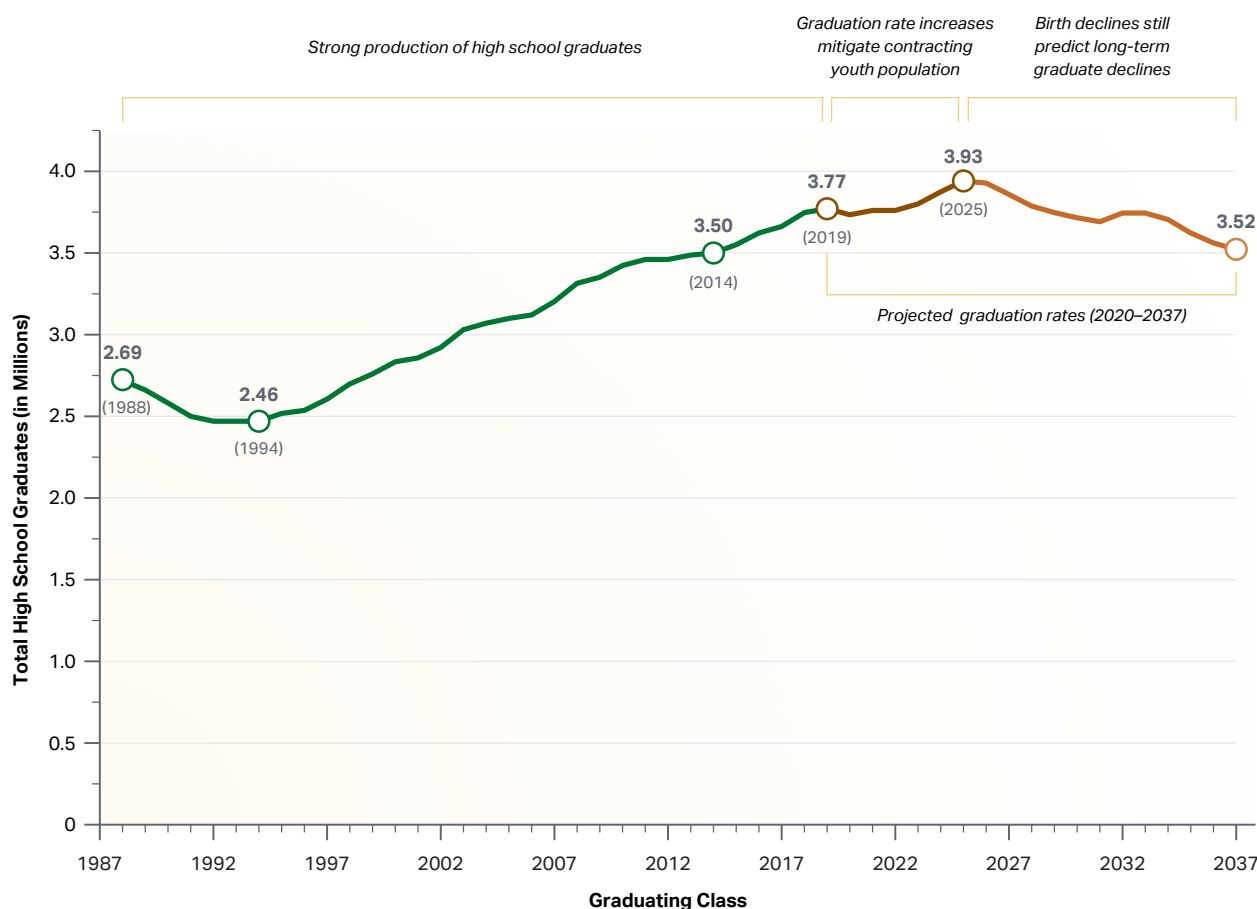


FIGURE 1 ► Projected Decline in High School Graduation Rate After Long Period of Strong Growth

Source: Wiche 2021

challenges, as its pool of potential students is shrinking. However, after 2025, projections show the number of graduating high school students decreasing moderately over the next decade (Bransberger and Michelau 2016).

Considering Ohio specifically, the reality of decreased potential student pools has already started to present itself. In 2020, the number of high school graduates was 3,000 fewer than in 2013 in the Midwest, where Ohio is located. This affects Ohio significantly because although the overall decrease is not disastrous, most of the decline is happening in the Midwest. Other regions of the United States, such as California and the Southern states, are seeing a stagnant supply of students or even slight increases (Bransberger and Michelau 2016). In 2020, Ohio was expected to have 123,075 high

school graduates, but by 2031 there will only be 109,570, an 11 percent decline (Bransberger and Michelau 2016). With Ohio's student supply shrinking, a chief enrollment management officer also has to contend with the other 98 four-year public and private universities. Ohio is tied with Texas for having the fourth highest number of colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education 2019; see Table 1, on page 17). This pivotal time in enrollment management, especially in Ohio, has inspired this study to examine the experiences of the individuals who are hired to guide institutions through the coming challenging years.

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of chief enrollment management officers in the state of Ohio. The author sought to make mean-

TABLE 1 ► Number of Four-Year Public and Private Not-for-Profit Post-Secondary Institutions per State as of 2019

State	n	State	n	State	n	State	n
NY	183	NJ	50	OK	27	VT	13
CA	140	IN	50	LA	26	SD	13
PA	129	VA	46	CT	25	MT	12
OH	99	TN	43	OR	24	ID	12
TX	99	MN	40	NE	21	NM	11
FL	93	WI	40	WV	20	RI	11
MA	73	SC	37	ME	19	HI	9
IL	66	IA	33	MS	16	DC	8
NC	62	CO	31	AZ	15	NV	8
GA	56	MD	31	UT	14	AK	6
MO	55	AL	30	NH	14	DE	6
MI	53	KY	30	ND	14	WY	1
WA	51	KS	28				
Grand Total							2016

Source: NCES 2019

ing of these individuals' lived experiences through the interviews, and the context of the author's research led to the following research questions:

- What experiences have influenced chief enrollment management officers' ability to lead?
- Through their experiences, what competencies are essential for chief enrollment management officers to be successful in this area of the country?

Literature Review

Literature around the genesis of enrollment management, admissions, and financial aid provides context around this study. Jack Maguire (1976) was the first to use the term "enrollment management" as he was describing efforts to recruit students to attend Boston College. Maguire (1976) defined enrollment management as "a process that brings together often disparate functions having to do with recruiting, funding, tracking, retaining and replacing students" (16).

Since then, several others have provided definitions of enrollment management. David Kalsbeek has contributed significantly to the field of strategic enrollment management (SEM) both in research and as a practi-

tioner serving more than 25 years in the industry. Kalsbeek (2013) defined SEM as "a comprehensive approach to integrating all of the University's programs, practices, policies and planning related to achieving the optimal recruitment, retention and graduation of students." Thematic in this definition is the idea of everything at the university working in concert with each other to achieve recruitment and retention of students.

Bontrager (2008) offered a different definition of SEM stating, "Strategic Enrollment Management is defined as a coordinated set of concepts and processes that enables fulfillment of institutional mission and students' education goals" (18). The marriage of the institution, including its mission and goals, to the student can be observed in Bontrager's view of enrollment management.

Beyond Maguire (1976), Kalsbeek (2013), and Bontrager's (2008) definitions, this study was conducted with the following definition in mind from Don Hossler and John Beam:

Enrollment management is both an organizational concept as well as a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert more influence

over their student enrollments and total net tuition revenue derived from enrolled students. Organized by strategic planning and supported by institutional research, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. These processes are studied to guide institutional practices in the areas of new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development and other academic areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college (revised in 2001 from Hossler and Bean 1990, 5).

From its original use to now, the term enrollment management showcases common threads involving the integration of multiple functions including admissions, financial aid, and student retention to achieve enrollment goals.

Gatekeeper or Salesperson

The history of admissions in American higher education is tied to the selectivity of an institution. A college's selectivity calls upon economic theories of supply and demand and scarcity, as well as theories of elitism and privilege (Ward and Hossler, 2016). Counter to a highly selective institution that might operate as a "gatekeeper," the admissions representative operates more as "a salesperson trying to attract prospective students to a college or university so that its budget will be balanced, its doors will remain open, and its faculty will be happy" (Ward and Hossler 2016, 63). It is within this second comparison that most of Ohio's institutions find themselves. Thelin (1982) labeled these differing ideas of the admissions professional as "the gatekeeper" and "the salesperson."

Technology's Rise Within Enrollment Management

The increased use of technology is important in the growth of enrollment management. Much as it has with other sectors outside higher education, technology has transformed the way admissions offices operate in every way. Gorr and Hossler (2006) pointed to issues around

the Y2K scare in 2000 where many organizations inside and outside of higher education moved to replace any stand-alone systems and embraced outside products from third party vendors who could provide better support for their needs.

From a practitioner standpoint, every aspect of an admissions professional's job now exists through technology in some way. Admissions files are now digitized. Any physical records the office receives are likely scanned and electronically added to an applicant's file. Long gone are the days of stacks of folders containing application materials, or stationery to send out handwritten notes. Instead, as long as the professional has their laptop and an internet connection, they can do their work. Beyond their computers, technological advancement happens so quickly that admissions counselors are more apt to use their smart phone to engage with potential students through other emerging mediums such as social media or texting (Kilgore and Gage 2015). The embracing of technology is pivotal to remain relevant for today's admissions professional.

It is important to note that not only are practitioners using technology, but students themselves have access to smart phones and have grown up with technology at their fingertips. This technology has helped them become savvier with their college search. They can reach out to more institutions and compare each of their choices easily. We are living in a time where information has never been more readily available. With big population shifts in the United States, the utilization of technology to reach, recruit, and enroll students in new areas will be imperative for admissions staff and the chief enrollment officers who lead them.

The History of Tuition Discounting and Financial Aid Leveraging

Hillman (2012) defined tuition discounting as "the practice of awarding institutionally funded financial aid in the form of non-repayable grants and scholarships to students" (p. 3). This practice started in the 1990s when the business-like uses of enrollment management started to take hold of the industry (Coomes 2000). Tuition discounting primarily helps offset the "sticker"

price, making the final tuition bill more affordable. Institutional monies are used as an enrollment management tool meant to entice students by making it a more attractive financial choice (Martin 2005; Behrman, *et al.* 1998; Weisbrod, *et al.* 2010).

The strategic use of tuition discounting to maximize revenue is referred to as financial aid leveraging. Hossler (2000) defined aid leveraging as:

An analytical tool that enables admissions and financial aid administrators to estimate the amount of financial aid (regardless of formal need formulas) that would be necessary to increase the probability that a student with a specified set of characteristics would enroll. (83)

There is an art to offering financial aid packages to students by effectively discounting tuition enough to ensure enrollment. If done effectively, an institution can maximize revenue by enrolling a large enough entering class.

Institutions in Ohio are already competing for fewer academically prepared, diverse students, but the practice of tuition discounting puts each institution in an escalating financial arms race to meet its enrollment goals, thus raising discount rates. According to an annual report written by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO 2020), tuition discount rates reached record highs in 2018–2019, with the average tuition discount rate being 51.2 percent for first-time undergraduate students at private nonprofit colleges (2020). Controlling an institution's discount rate is an imperative part of the chief enrollment officer's job.

With the history of enrollment management and the tactics of tuition discounting and financial aid leveraging in mind, understanding chief enrollment management officers and their experiences can help institutions gain better insight as to who the next leaders might be and how they might be prepared for the challenges that lay ahead.

Ohio is Shrinking

As mentioned previously, this study came at an interesting time in Ohio's history of higher education. As seen in Figure 1 (on page 16), WICHE shared that the national

supply of high school graduates will grow but then will decline post-2025 at a moderate rate over the following ten years, making it a more competitive landscape among colleges and universities to recruit those students.

Institutions in Ohio will likely feel the impact of fewer high school graduates more than other states because Ohio is tied for having the fourth highest number of institutions across the 50 states and the District of Columbia (see Table 1, on page 17) and combined with a smaller supply, demand for these students will be high amongst the 99 four-year public and private institutions.

The previous literature provided a working definition of enrollment management, fitting analogies of “gatekeepers” and “salespersons,” context around the rise of technology and the use of tuition discounting and financial aid leveraging, and the added knowledge that Ohio will become even more competitive considering the number of high school graduates and many institutions in the state.

Methods

The research design was in line with the execution of a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews.

Participants

There were eight participants, each from a different Ohio four-year college or university. Three individuals worked for small private institutions. Five individuals worked for large public universities in Ohio. The amount of time they had spent in the profession ranged from ten to 30 years. (See Table 2.)

Procedure

Each participant was selected following the building of a database of every chief enrollment officer at every four-year college or university in the state of Ohio and sending emails to the 58 possible participants in the database. Of the 58 emails, 20 replied with an interest in participating. Of the 20, twelve individuals were selected. A level of data saturation was met after conducting eight interviews, thus concluding participant recruitment. Interviews were held between June 2021 and September

TABLE 2 ► Participant Profiles

	Name	Institution Type	Gender	Years in Profession	Years in CEMO Role
1	Carl	Large Public University	Male	10	1
2	Cathy	Small Private University	Female	21	4
3	Molly	Large Public University	Female	19	0 (6 months)
4	Neil	Small Private University	Male	25	1
5	Randy	Small Private University	Male	27	10
6	Rich	Large Public University	Male	30	2
7	Samantha	Large Public University	Female	18	7
8	Timothy	Large Public University	Male	18	1

2021. Interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for member checking. Once the transcripts were shared with the participants, they were analyzed using NVIVO qualitative research software. It should be noted there was no incentive to take part in the study.

Results

Through the interviews, the author sought to provide answers to the previously stated research questions. The author found six key findings regarding research question one, “What experiences have influenced a chief enrollment management officer’s ability to lead?” Those findings were:

Taking on More Responsibility as One Works Toward the Role

Several participants mentioned experiences taking on more responsibility while they were young in enrollment management or offered thoughts about the importance of it. Randy talked about continually volunteering for more opportunities saying that eventually he would be rewarded for it, but at the moment it made other co-workers resent him. He said, “And for me, that was how you grow, and I got rewarded every single time with promotions, and more money, and more opportunities.” He continued, “And so people would look at me and go, ‘That’s just not fair.’” Randy said that if you are willing to learn, you will be rewarded for it.

Carl seconded Randy’s thoughts and stated that individuals aspiring to the role should be patient and

not to expect a promotion every year. But in that patience, do the work to learn as much as you can about your own role and be proactive about having conversations with others, including people in leadership roles to expand your understanding of enrollment management.

Carl stated, “I would en-

courage people to reach out to chief administrators or chief enrollment folks at other campuses even or even their own campus and go to lunch once in a while.” Further, he said, “Call on some other colleagues and just start to learn about the different, either career paths or experiences.”

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Without question COVID-19 has influenced this study and so there was intentionality on the author’s part to ask how it has affected each participant’s ability to lead. Specifically, Rich talked at length about how colleges and universities are trying to prepare to support a group of current students who at any other time would be behind academically. He said, “But the bigger issue for us, and I think the one that is getting ignored, and that I think is going to be a huge kind of slap in the face for folks is retention and success data.” Also, Rich stressed the importance of working with potential students who are not academically prepared for college-level coursework. He said:

We rely on you doing really well in things like Math and English your senior year because you’re going to use those skills when you get into college. Math and English may have been 15 minutes a week over Zoom. And so yeah, at the end of the school year, you got an A in Math, you got an A in Calculus. You don’t know calculus.

Regarding the pandemic’s effect on a chief enrollment officer’s ability to lead, Timothy said the pandemic

prevented him from connecting with people physically on campus, which he took for granted. Specifically, he mentioned the informal conversations he was able to have previously that now had to be intentional video calls. He said:

As hard as it was to be separated from staff, we worked through ways to keep the staff connected whether that was Zoom meetings with 170 people in them or whatever it might be. But it was really hard to be disconnected from the students in that way. I think that was one of the biggest challenges.

There is no question that the pandemic affected the participants' ability to lead. Rich and Timothy each had formative experiences adapting their leadership styles as their worlds changed in March 2020.

The Technology Revolution and Push Toward Automation

Another impactful experience that the participants mentioned was how much technology has revolutionized enrollment management since they first began working in the field. Although multiple participants mentioned technology, Rich shared an experience that showcased how much technology has changed enrollment management. Rich mentioned the rise of the third-party technology sector and the number of solicitations he receives constantly. He said:

I think the other one that has changed that I think we don't mention as much because we always think of the more philosophical is, frankly, all of the vendors, all of the technology, all the consultants that can help you. And I think in some ways, that's great, because there's some that are invaluable. But that ends up also being exhausting... because I get somewhere in the neighborhood of probably 30 to 40 solicitations a day.

Vendors who can assist with technology can be helpful as we see technology's lasting impact; however, enrollment management leaders may not be keen on hiring them. At this point, almost every component of the recruitment process is touched by technology.

Professional Development Opportunities

Another key finding was the participants all benefited from professional development opportunities throughout their careers. Each mentioned several professional organizations outside of their universities that have been a part of their journey.

Cathy had extensive experience working in NACAC and its regional chapters, even serving as an executive officer at the national level. She said she was lucky to have a university president who valued her involvement. Molly talked about when she first joined enrollment management and she went to her first OACAC conference and was surprised at how close the colleagues were with each other. She talked about not just learning a whole new industry but that she was learning it with colleagues who knew each other for a long time and there was comfort in that.

Lastly, Neil, coming from the graduate recruitment world, had spent a lot of his time with NAGAP, an organization devoted to professionals in graduate recruitment. He said that is where he met his mentors, and serving on the executive team taught him how to be a leader when the time came for him to be applying to institutional leadership positions.

Being Mentored

Another influential experience provided by each of the participants was that each have been mentored in their professional life at some point. Mentorship has many benefits, but one specifically is that pairing a new team member with a more seasoned employee who is a strong member of the team can help build an even stronger team, as the newly hired sees and is surrounded by a pattern of success (Stone 2003). Mentorship can also happen across different institutions where colleagues who may know each other through a shared professional organization or previous work experience can call upon each other to seek advice and connect over shared issues or experiences.

The community of higher education in the state of Ohio demonstrated its close-knit nature when two participants mentioned the same mentor. This was a key

person in these two participants' professional journeys. Of the mentor, Randy said:

John was really the person who pulled me into these conversations that I had no interest—or had no reason at that level based on title to be in, but he knew my interest. And he made a passing comment, “Hey, if you ever want to sit in on one of these meetings with the consultants, let me know.” And I sat in on every damn meeting after that.

Rich said of John, “I was at a really good spot, frankly, that in some ways enrollment management as a field was kind of invented or one of the inventors was ...[John]...who I worked with.” It was clear that John, and people like John, shaped these individuals' lives positively.

Just like John, Cathy yearned to have that impact on new professionals entering today's enrollment management field because that was given to her when she entered the field. She said:

I feel like I'm providing some of that education to the staff similar to ways that was provided to me. Again, ...I had I think good mentors in the profession who saw in me this interest and ability to be successful.

With mentoring, the participants shared experiences tied to how their mentors, both at their institutions and at others, have helped them through the years, and participants, like Cathy, take those experiences seriously enough they feel obligated to serve in that same capacity to others.

Length of Time Spent in Their Role

The last influential experience related to research question one was the length of time each participant has served in either their current role or the chief enrollment management role at another institution. Molly and Neil all had one year or less experience in their roles, and they spent parts of their interviews talking about acclimating, with much of the process being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Neil mentioned his background being graduate recruitment and that the more time he spends in the CEMO role, the more he expects to learn about the undergraduate

world. Lastly, Molly started her position right before the pandemic and admitted that sometimes she cannot tell what is pandemic stress versus the stress brought on by the role.

Others who have been in the role for years were also dealing with challenges. Rich, Cathy, Samantha, and Randy had all served longer than one year in their positions. Randy's challenges were connecting with a younger staff, as he acknowledged he is closer to retirement than most. Samantha was serving year eight in a chief enrollment management role she did not even want in the beginning. Samantha has had a history of being talked into applying for positions after initial hesitancy by colleagues but growing to love them once serving.

Regarding the second research question, “Through their experiences, what competencies are essential for chief enrollment management officers to be successful in this area of the country?” eight key findings were established.

Understanding Enrollment Management Trends and Practices

A reality of Ohio's higher education market is that most of institutions are tuition dependent, meaning they rely on tuition payments from their students to remain financially solvent (Kretovics and Eckert 2020). Therefore, understanding key enrollment management practices is paramount for chief enrollment officers to be successful in their role.

One of today's trends and practices within enrollment management is the scrutiny surrounding the value of higher education. As Molly indicated, she believes there is a loss of confidence in the value of a degree. She said it was because higher education got greedy, saying, “We had that whole wave of lazy rivers, and, you know, resort-style education provision by higher ed that became marketing influenced instead of mission driven.” She continued by speculating that if an institution, especially a publicly funded one, tried to build a lazy river, there would be a lot of unrest. Therefore, today's enrollment management trends are moving away from an amenities-based pitch and are encapsulated in a values and outcomes-based conversation.

The competition to attract students can be seen through specific enrollment management practices of tuition discounting and financial aid leveraging, which was mentioned by the participants. Samantha discussed financial aid leveraging, saying “I think the field has... become more competitive.” She continued, “It’s just caused some crazy money out there. I mean, we’re seeing—I’m seeing our sister institutions give dollars that I’ve never seen before.”

Carl talked about financial aid leveraging, stating that it is not an effective long-term strategy. He said:

They’re [other institutions are] buying students and when I say that, what I mean is they’re just so heavily discounting students’ cost. That fiscally, it’s just not sustainable I don’t believe. But they want to meet a head count, they want the optics to be positive. They want to portray this healthy environment. And I think for too many campuses they’re just keep digging the hole deeper and deeper.

This key finding identified the need to understand enrollment management practices and trends at universities and colleges in the state of Ohio, specifically key trends and practices like the skepticism of higher education in general and tuition discounting and financial aid leveraging.

Understanding and Utilizing Data

A key competency that emerged is the need to understand and utilize data in the everyday operation and long-term goal setting of the division of enrollment management. Samantha’s journey has long involved data. She said that running the systems and being a systems expert allowed her to get comfortable with data. She talked about switching the culture of her division when she took over as the CEMO to a data-driven culture. She said, “And so we switched the culture here, which was completely different to a data-informed—and I provide information up and across, and I taught—I taught people how to look at the numbers and adjust the numbers.”

Molly captured the importance of not only having data at the ready but also having the ability to interpret the data. She said:

And what I would advise somebody now, I’ve still got to figure this out for myself, I’m not good at visualization of data. In admissions we spend a lot of time in data, data, data, data. That’s super, even more true in financial aid and registrar, data, data, data. And what I’m learning is our—leadership opportunity happens when you can take data and turn it into information.

Molly also indicated that in everyday use, relevant data should be at the ready whenever attending a meeting, based on advice she got from a previous boss. She said,

And then a really good boss once told me, “Never walk into a meeting empty handed, ever.” So, if it’s three bullets that you put on a piece of paper, or an update on data since the last time, or a chart.

The Ability to Lead

Another key competency that emerged from the data is that the chief enrollment officer needs to be able to be an effective leader. Leading a division is important because not only is that person at the top of the organizational chart and is visible to every person in the division, but the specific direct reports who interact with that individual model their behavior after the chief enrollment officer, and that trickle-down effect has a significant impact on the culture of the division.

Neil described his leadership style as transformational leadership, defined as “you’re not the most important person in the room, you’re not the smartest person in the room, but you’re moving people toward common goals, and you’re getting a lot of your input from shared collaboration and motivation.” Neil said this comes in handy when he has to oversee a department that he does not have much experience in. He said:

I don’t claim to be the expert at undergraduate admissions, but I need to be able to provide direction and leadership to that director. Same thing with, you know, I oversee marketing. Well, that’s—marketing is not my area of expertise. I’ve done it, but it’s not my area of expertise. So I need to be able to step into that role and lead that director, who has more experience than I do, but to make sure that we’re

all on the same page moving towards common goals. And some leaders just can't do that. Right?

Randy shared similar sentiments related to leadership especially around the notion that he does not desire to be the smartest person in the room. Randy shared:

I have no desire to be the smartest person in the room, that makes me have to work too hard. I'd...much rather not be the smartest person in the room. And I tell my team, I want them prepared so if there's a day—I'm 60, I'm going to retire sometime, but you know, if there's a day I choose to leave, I want them to be legitimate candidates for my position. So I share stuff with people. I go, "Here's a job you should look at."

Successful Supervision

A key competency that arose from interviewing the eight participants was a need to provide excellent supervision to their direct reports and others in their division. Belker, *et al.* (2012) pointed out that often leaders are selected for management positions because of their knowledge and expertise, instead of their ability to provide supervision and management, which is viewed as a secondary consideration. Neil takes his role as a supervisor very seriously. During the interview, he said he views it as one of the most important aspects of his job. Neil said it starts with how you hire. If you hire the right people, then supervising is not too much work. He said:

And that's what my goal is here... you get the right directors in the right positions, and then my goal at that point is to help them figure out what direction to head it. Right? So—and as a director, I've only got [sic] ten percent left to do, and that's just to encourage, and nudge, and empower, and, you know, resource. That's my job.

Neil said that he meets with every one of his direct reports regularly. He said, "I meet with them weekly, and I probably spend the first 10 minutes of every meeting with them just asking them how they're doing." He is then able to connect with his staff by understanding that their lives are more complex than the job the university pays them to do.

Samantha also talked about the importance of hiring the right individuals and warned that choosing the wrong individuals will just cause more work as everyone works around that person's inadequacies. Regarding hiring, Samantha said:

In the hiring process, we fill an incredible team here, and I'm tough—I'm tough in hiring. I really make sure we find people who are the right fit, because then I want them to be—I want them to create a great team, and I hold people accountable.

From there, once the right people are in the roles, Samantha said she sets clear expectations and is not afraid to have the hard conversations if that individual is not meeting them. She said:

You have to be really good at hiring, because you're taking the resource of the salary, which is your greatest resource, and the benefits, and that's like—and you've got to get the right person there, because if you don't, you're going to spend all your time managing that issue.

Samantha knew that if the wrong person is in the job, that can jeopardize a division's chance at being successful.

Being Technologically Savvy

Another key competency was the ability to be technologically savvy. Technology is an important component of modern-day SEM. In today's environment, students expect anytime access to information and parents are also consuming information as their children have more options than they ever have before (Kilgore and Gage 2015). With the advent of CRM systems, several participants discussed how their ability to embrace technology has helped them.

Samantha came to her position through running the admissions operations and systems team. It was here where she learned how she could make the system work for her in order to move her department forward. She said that if you want to be in enrollment, "you have to be a systems expert."

Neil discussed the need to embrace technological changes in enrollment management through the im-

plementation of a CRM and how it will help automate efforts that would previously tie up staff for prolonged periods of time. He said, “In my role, one of the things that I have to champion is telling faculty, or telling staff, ‘Look, ...we’re going to develop the efficiencies using the technology.’” He mentioned Slate, a specific enrollment CRM, saying:

Utilizing Slate and telling people that I appreciate the fact that you like the old way, but we will be automating communications in Slate. We will be automating admission decisions in Slate. We will be doing those things, not for efficiency to eliminate jobs, but for efficiency to allow our team to do things we can’t otherwise do.

Lastly, Neil succinctly summed up how a CEMO needs to embrace technology by stating, “You know, technology is here to stay, and we have to figure out how to leverage it if we can afford it.”

Collaboration with Cabinet and Senior Leadership

A key competency for CEMO emerging from the data was the ability to effectively manage relationships with the university’s president, often the CEMO’s direct supervisor (Schulz and Lucido 2010). If the president does not understand current enrollment management practices, then it might be difficult to achieve enrollment goals. On the flipside, if one finds themselves working for someone who understands enrollment management, then they will likely find success or at least an empathetic ear while navigating through tough times.

Cathy shared the positive experiences she has had working with presidents. One of Cathy’s experiences was with her then current president, who had previously served in the role of chief enrollment officer for five years. She talked about how he knew the value of professional development organizations like NACAC. He helped her through a crisis that arose while she was serving in a leadership capacity in the organization. He helped her prepare some answers to questions that would likely be asked because of the situation.

Timothy shared that he had a different relationship with his president. A difficult aspect of their relation-

ship was the expectation that the president believed “you’ll know every single thing that is going on at all times.” Timothy believed that to be impossible saying, “I can’t know how 150 people spend every minute of every day.” He admitted, “Sometimes you get burned and sometimes the president asks...about something and I say, ‘I’ll have to get back to you.’”

According to Timothy, another frustrating aspect of their relationship is a lack of understanding of basic enrollment management principles. Timothy said educating your president is a tricky endeavor, saying:

You’re trying to educate someone who is highly educated but you’re trying to educate someone about your field and area of expertise. Particularly, when it comes to enrollment, presidents are on the hot seat around enrollment from boards of trustees and so they want to be highly involved and highly informed around those issues.

Because of how quickly leadership can change, it behooves the current CEMO to develop a positive relationship with the president as soon as possible.

Collaboration with On-Campus Partners

Another competency that emerged was having the ability to work with campus partners across the university to meet enrollment goals. According to Wohlgemuth (2015), working with on-campus partners is important in SEM. These partners can include but are not limited to the institution-wide research department, university marketing departments, academic departments, and faculty members (Pollock 2012; Schulties 2013). When referencing on campus partnerships, participants Rich and Carl each mentioned working with faculty to achieve enrollment goals.

Rich discussed the climate of his institution upon his arrival two years prior and said he spent a lot of time meeting with the various academic units listening to their concerns because, according to the units, they felt ignored by the previous CEMO saying, “And with the deans especially, I felt like it was a counseling session.” Rich’s experience when he first got to his institution involved reaching out to the academic departments where they unloaded all of their frustrations, which proved to

Rich they wanted to be involved in enrollment management efforts.

At Carl's previous institution, he got to be a part of a strategic enrollment planning process. One of the reasons it was successful was the removal of silos, both placed on his own division and across different divisions. Carl said of his previous institution and its culture, "We operated very much in a silo, and part of it, it all came back to relationships. It came back to there was an ownership, and in some ways, a control, and an unwillingness to allow others in." Carl continued, "We actually brought in a third-party consultant to help guide us through a strategic enrollment process." He said of that experience, "I think it was one of the greatest professional development opportunities I had was to work with this group."

Recognizing Your Weaknesses

The last key competency that arose was recognizing one's own weaknesses as they move forward in their role. Several of the participants mentioned things they need to improve about themselves as they move forward in their role.

Timothy recognized that in order to lead his division he needed to have some experiences that he was lacking, most notably recruiting a territory for admissions purposes. His previous work experiences in the systems and operations facets of the office precluded him from having that experience, and he knew that to effectively empathize with his supervisees he would need to experience recruiting a territory for himself. From there, Timothy said he had newfound respect for admissions counselors. He said:

I absolutely loved it. Couldn't believe how much I enjoyed meeting with students and parents. It positioned me well in a way that early in my career, I kind of took what admission counselors did for granted because I was like 'no, no, no. It's all the marketing technology that does all this.' I was probably a jerk about it.

Carl mentioned battling the urge to micromanage as a weakness that he tries to work on. He said:

I don't want to micromanage, but I typically have a high need to know. And some of that's just the reassurance that I know things are happening. And so, it is a balance.... I mean I truly entrust the staff that we have, the people that we hire for roles. I want them to do their jobs. I want them to have the autonomy to do their jobs to be kind of the managers of their realm, if you will, or their area.

Carl went on to say:

I just like to know what's going on. And so, it's not that I want to get into the weeds and tell you, "Here's how I want you to get from A to B to C." I just want to know that you're going to get to C. And you'll be effective in it, and just let me know how it's going. So, I think that's probably the one area that...I continue to question sometimes of like, "Okay. Am I coming across as too much of a micromanager?" It's not what I want to be.

Through their interviews, the eight participants shared their experiences from before and while sitting in their chief enrollment officer role. Through those experiences, the participants shared which ones influenced their ability to lead and shared what competencies are needed in order to find success in their competitive market.

Conclusion

Based off previous research that outlines how the concept of enrollment management has become a preferred approach to managing and growing enrollment and retention, the emergence of the role of either vice president of enrollment management or chief enrollment management officer has taken shape. This study adds to a growing area of literature around not only the concept of enrollment management but the people who practice it as a profession.

In this study, six key findings emerged for the first research question. The participating chief enrollment management officers said collectively that of their experiences, the following has provided the biggest impact:

- Taking on more responsibility in their previous job roles in enrollment management better prepared them to serve;

- Their experiences dealing with recruiting during the COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on their ability to lead;
- Utilizing education was also a key finding related to identifying experiences leading to their success;
- Expansion of technology through time;
- Working for other supervisors; and
- Time spent serving in their current role, which varied across the participants.

In response to the second research question, eight different competencies emerged that could be used to become a successful chief enrollment management officer within the study's context:

- Needing to understand the current landscape of enrollment management trends and practices;
- Needing to understand and utilize data in their everyday operation;
- Being an effective leader;
- Being a successful supervisor;
- Being technologically savvy;
- Having the ability to work effectively with other campus partners;
- Working effectively with senior cabinet officials; and
- Recognizing their own weaknesses.

This study came with certain delimitations and limitations worth acknowledging. Delimitations included the choice of only studying four-year public and private colleges and universities because that is where the author's work experience lies. Another delimitation is the author never gave participants an opportunity to self-identify race or ethnicity. Therefore, inferences of data related to differences in race cannot be made. The first limitation of this study, as with much qualitative work, comes with a certain level of bias, since the author is directly involved in the study as the selector of participants, interview questions, and the inference of data. Another limitation worth stating is the time it took to perform the study. This study took more than two years to complete, including the time to recruit, sched-

ule, and conduct interviews as well as the time needed to analyze the data.

With delimitations and limitations stated, this study has hopefully laid the groundwork for more research to be done with similar groups of individuals. With the lack of a diverse group of individuals studied, a future study could look to purposefully select a more diverse group of chief enrollment management officers to study. This proposed study could explore how people from different races faced similar or different experiences ascending into the position. A study comprised of solely individuals from historically oppressed groups, such as minority groups or women, might result in the sharing of experiences laced with higher degrees of adversity that others in the actual study had not faced.

This study not only explored the experiences of specific individuals but also spotlights a growing concern of a diminishing supply of potential students facing those individuals. This study could be used as a resource to promote future research in similar but different settings to provide context and meaning to different areas of higher education. Specifically, this type of study, a phenomenological study of chief enrollment officers, could be conducted in various segments of the country to get a clearer idea of how experiences of individuals in the same position are similar or different. This type of study could also be conducted at different institution types, such as community colleges or for-profit institutions, to capture similarities and differences of the experiences of chief enrollment officers. Another option for future research could be to study other key senior leadership administrators such as other cabinet members, presidents, or provosts. Lastly, if one wanted to pursue this from a quantitative approach, one could consider the development of a survey that had chief enrollment officers answering questions about their experiences using scales and other quantifiable methods. This study demonstrated the experiences shared by various chief enrollment officers and identified some key competencies that will allow someone in a similar position to be successful as they embark on a journey to recruit students in the increasingly competitive market of Ohio higher education.

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