

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Organizational Structure, Strategy, and Coupling of Enrollment Management Divisions

By Kelley Lips

Enrollment management has been adopted by many institutions not only as a strategy, but also as an administrative division responsible for managing enrollment. This study aims to understand how institutional goals and environmental factors contribute to the organizational structure of enrollment management divisions, as well as how the composition promotes integration between individual subunits to achieve institutional goals. A comparative case study, with semi-structured interview questions, was employed to understand factors that impact decisions pertaining to the structure and composition of the enrollment management divisions. The findings suggest that structure can be influenced by the experience of personnel, revenue, the culture, and the desire to enhance prestige.

Enrollment management has been adopted by institutions of higher education as a strategy for managing enrollment to meet institutional goals, and it increasingly manifests as an administrative division that supports students. While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach, the divisional model requires significant resources, investment, and cooperation among stakeholders, and it often leads to stronger enrollment outcomes due to a greater institutional commitment (Bontrager 2004; Henderson 2005). However, within enrollment management divisions, institutions have created varying

organizational structures and compositions of administrative departments or functional units. Enrollment management provides a common purpose and strategy integrating individual units or departments that have significant impact on student enrollment—including student choice and the student experience. In a study conducted by Huddleston and Rumbough (1997), seven functional units were identified as the most prevalent under the enrollment management umbrella. Admissions, financial aid, and registrar were among the most common units, with the addition of institutional re-

search and planning, marketing, new student orientation, and retention and advising. The academic mission coupled with an emphasis on a student-centered approach should be paramount in determining which units connect within an enrollment management organization (Henderson 2005; Hossler and Bontrager 2015).

As institutional leaders approach issues related to rising tuition, a projected demographic cliff, and lingering disruptions from the pandemic, they are looking for creative solutions to enrollment challenges. Could a competitive advantage exist in how individual departments or units are combined to create synergy that has positive outcomes on enrollment? This study aimed to understand how institutional goals and environmental factors contribute to the organizational structure of enrollment management, as well as how the composition promotes integration between individual departments within the division. New managerialism and structural coupling provided the theoretical framework. New managerialism describes how colleges and universities have increasingly adopted business practices commonly associated with for-profit, corporate organizations to ensure access to resources. As an extension of new managerialism, the literature (Deem 1998; Meyer 2002; Weick 1976) reflects an emerging managerial philosophy within educational institutions moving away from organized anarchies (*i.e.*, loosely coupled units) to more predictable, responsive components that do not act independently (*i.e.*, tightly coupled units).

A comparative case study was employed to understand factors that impact decisions pertaining to the structure and composition of the enrollment management divisions at two mid-sized, private institutions. A total of sixteen semi-structured interviews with the chief enrollment officers as well as directors of the individual departments were conducted on institutional priorities, enrollment goals, and scope of operation to address the research question of what are the internal and external factors that shape how an enrollment management division is structured at an institution? To provide a visual, Figure 1 (on page 33) is an illustration of the organizational chart of the enrollment management division at Institution A. Figure 2 (on page 33) depicts

the larger, more comprehensive organizational structure of the enrollment management division at Institution B.

Four themes emerged to answer the research question of which factors are most influential in determining how institutional leaders choose to organize their enrollment management division: (1) structure could be heavily influenced by individuals in leadership positions and their experience, rather than derived from a strategic vision; (2) institutional culture influenced the function of the organizational structure; (3) revenue was often central to decision-making and at times contradictory to other enrollment initiatives; and (4) the pursuit of prestige to enhance the perceived value of the institution in order to better compete for students.

The Influence of Individuals on Structure

One of the recurring findings was the degree of impact that individuals had on the organizational structure at all levels within the enrollment management divisions, including the person to whom the chief enrollment officer reports, the chief enrollment officer, and the leaders of the individual departments. The experience and backgrounds of the people at the table influence the structure. One participant specifically described their portfolio as “a reflection” of who they were and of their “experiences.” Not only are the effects of individuals visible in the organizational structure and strategy, but they also determined where specific job functions lived within the structure.

Leaders’ influence on structure often starts with the influence of the president and the president’s interpretation of the mission and vision of the institution. The president’s previous experiences can heavily shape their view and the centrality strategic enrollment management (SEM) plays in moving the institution toward their interpretation of the mission. For example, the president of Institution B had an unconventional background compared to many in academia, and his prior experience is from the corporate world. His experience in business likely influenced his approach to strategy and preference for more centralized authority, top-down management, and a focus on the student experience. Because of this,

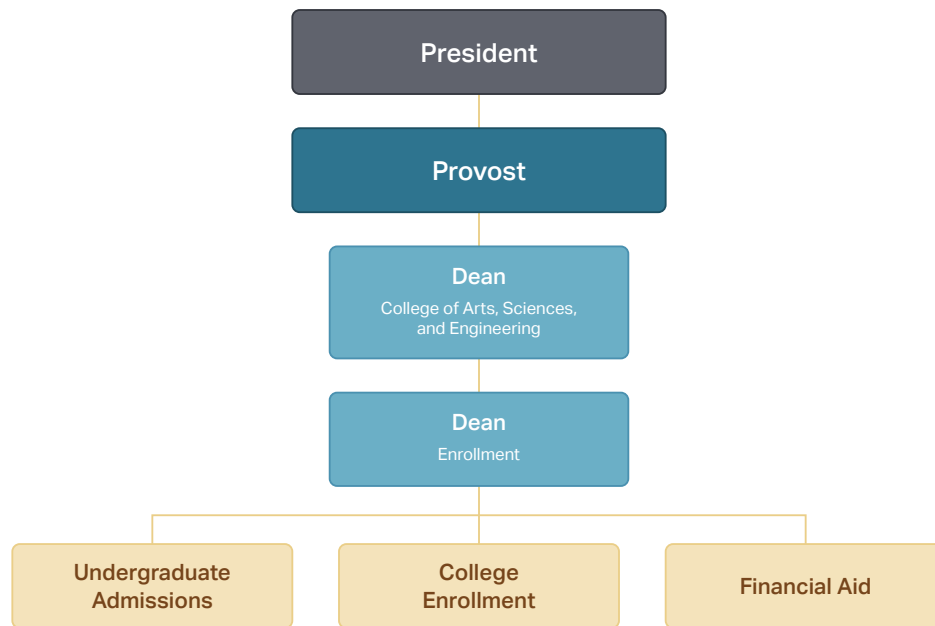


FIGURE 1 ► Organizational Chart for the Enrollment Management Division of Institution A

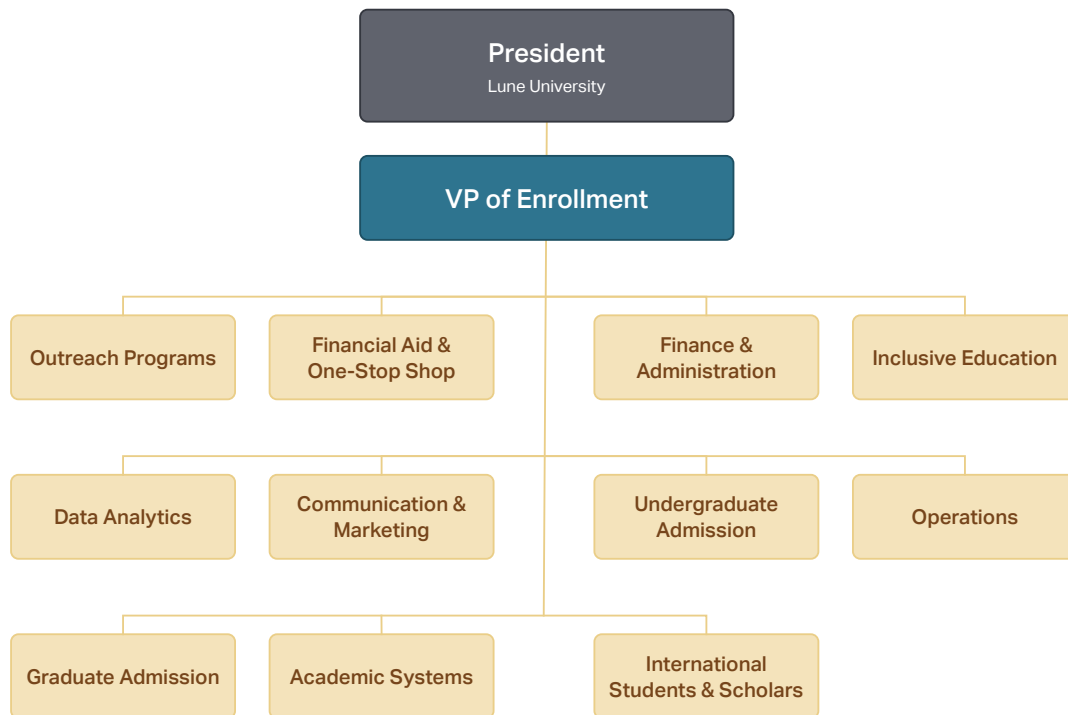


FIGURE 2 ► Organizational Chart for the Enrollment Management Division of Institution B

he not only made the decision to overhaul the Division of Enrollment Management, but he also positioned this newly created division to report directly to him. The VP of enrollment acknowledged that this reporting structure is not common at mid-sized universities and stated:

The president has just a couple more years under his tenure. It was his decision that enrollment management report directly to the president, but that might shift with a new president as we move forward.

Additionally, the experience, strengths, and philosophical approach of chief enrollment officers influences the structure as it pertains to their priorities and expertise in relation to the enrollment needs for the institution. Both institutions participating in the study had recent vacancies in the chief enrollment officer position, and the hiring of another provided a prime opportunity to shift strategic priorities. Within one of the institutions, in an effort to minimize disruption, the structure was modified to promote candidates internally and create a co-leader model based on each leader's strengths. Modifying the structure to accommodate a co-leader model versus a single leader kept the organizational structure intact and allowed strategic initiatives to continue moving forward with continuity.

Lastly, the individual department level is where the greatest fluidity was noted at both institutions in terms of the functional alignment and responsibilities. At this level, there was some shifting of the organizational structure based on individuals in each role, but it was more related to specific job functions and promotions into larger roles. The practice of filling vacant positions or shifting responsibilities depending on talent from within the division has an element of convenience, but it is also a way to create additional opportunities for those whom the organization wishes to retain.

At all levels of the organization, individuals have varying degrees of influence on the structure and the degree of coupling or interconnectedness within the division. The fluidity based on individual characteristics and strengths cannot be ignored and must work in tandem with both the structure and the strategy. As one interviewee stated:

You could step back and say this is the perfect structure for an institution and then struggle for decades hiring people to fill those roles... it's about moving the place forward today based on the financial resources and the talent available.

Two identical organizational structures are likely to interact differently and have varying results based on the individuals who fill the structures. Hossler, *et al.* (2015, 33) asserted that various organizational models exist, "but what matters is the particular institutional context and idiosyncratic character that dictate how such alignments function and evolve." While the structure helps to create the vision and strategy, the individuals within the roles determine the degree of coupling. The people matter.

Culture Embedded in Structure

While a singular definition of enrollment management or an ideal structure is absent from the literature, the complex interplay between strategy, structure, and culture has been observed (Bontrager 2004; Flannigan 2016; Penn 1999). Ultimately, the structure of enrollment management should reflect the strategy and take into consideration the institutional culture to create an effective enrollment management operation that supports the institution in achieving its academic and business goals as well as best supporting students. While the structure mirrored the strategy at both institutions, campus-wide culture within the structure influenced the overall functioning within the divisions. Interesting differences in relationships between the individual departments of each model emerged that reflect variances in institutional culture, and interviews revealed that combining administrative functions under a single structure did not necessarily result in integration.

At Institution A, decentralization puts the enrollment management division on the periphery and reflects the institutional philosophy of SEM as one that focuses on the point of entry with less emphasis on outcomes once the student enrolls. This strategic approach, combined with the historically-siloed culture, seems to have produced mixed results in terms of effective integration. Integration was most effective between

the dean of enrollment, the director of admissions, and the director of financial aid. However, when compared to the expansive enrollment management division at Institution B, there was not the same level of interdependence between the subunits at Institution A.

The integration of the various subunits under the enrollment management division was drastically different at each institution and reflected the way that individuals within the subunits tended to identify. Previous literature on loose versus tight coupling speaks to the potential of hierarchical controls to contribute to coordination and efficiency, but also the reality that individual and group self-interests that manifest themselves can undermine the top-down integration (Boyd and Crowson 2002). Hansen (1999) also discovered that strong inter-unit relationships and a high degree of communication lead to efficient sharing of “highly complex” knowledge. Improved communication, interdependence between subunits, and sharing of complex knowledge related to SEM was an outcome of Institution B. Those who had been at the institution prior to a significant reorganization that aligned more student services under enrollment management reported that culture today is stronger than prior to the creation of the larger division. Their perception of the changes in working relationships were dramatic, as one person described:

I might say fifteen years ago, it was kind of like every person for themselves. And, I think, now there's a bit more unity in terms of trying to move Institution B forward.

This unity and cross-collaboration of administrative units has allowed for a more cohesive approach to resource management, as the VP of enrollment explained:

For example, as a unit, we would very quickly identify times in the year where the response rate to students' inquiries was too slow. So the whole unit would come together and say, OK, how do we solve? Who has resources right now that we can apply to this, to this solution, et cetera?

Not only has the integrated structure allowed the enrollment management team to remove barriers for students, improve communication among the enrollment management division, and elevate the student

experience, it has also allowed individuals to be better at their roles.

This elevated collaboration and interconnectedness has resulted in a shared vision for the enrollment management division, as well as the larger university. Additionally, it created a shared vernacular that serves to connect the subunits to the enrollment management division and has had positive effects on staff morale. The leaders of the individual subunits were more likely to identify with the larger enrollment management division than they did with their individual unit, which promoted communication. Lastly, multiple participants reported feeling supported by the institution, as well as valued for their input in the decision-making processes of the enrollment management division.

The Central Role of Revenue

In this study, the importance and priority for the enrollment management divisions to generate revenue to maintain, and ideally elevate, the fiscal health of the institution was critical to the overall institutional strategy as it relates to SEM. The emergence of enrollment management in the 1970s was in response to declining demographics, market competition, and the need to align enrollment goals more strategically with the financial needs of the institution (Bontrager 2004; Hossler and Bontrager 2015). These same factors are on the minds of many institutional leaders today, resulting in the evolution of enrollment management to encompass a broader perspective around resource management. Bontrager (2004, 13) wrote, “The overarching goal is not simply to increase total revenue, but at the same time to reduce institutional costs in order to improve net revenue.”

One could consider the finding that revenue influences strategy and structure unremarkable, but the heightened degree to which decisions are made surrounding revenue and resource management was significant at both institutions. It should be noted that both institutions use responsibility center management (RCM) as the budgeting model, which tends to promote decentralization because revenue-generating units are responsible for managing their own revenues and expenditures. Despite different organizational

structures and enrollment strategies, yet both using an RCM approach, led to the assumption that the differences were not a product of the budgeting model. The organizational structures that the universities implemented leverage resources to eliminate some areas of duplication and create more efficiencies, specifically in the areas of marketing and communications, data analytics, and some HR-related functions. Ultimately, though, the strategy each institution executed to achieve revenue goals differs. While one institution has limited the reach of enrollment management to primarily new students at the front end of the enrollment funnel, the other institution has leveraged SEM to encompass the complete student life cycle. One justification for a more robust enrollment management division that spanned the majority of student services was the belief that providing a high-quality student experience would improve retention and graduation rates, create devoted alumni, and attract more students to the institution, but all of these connect back to generating additional revenue and improving market position. As the need to manage resources and to increase revenue plagues institutional leaders, studies show that more and more institutions are centralizing their enrollments to compete for resources, and the structures are shaped by revenue considerations (Schulz and Lucido 2011). Despite differences in the structural approaches, the main priority of the divisions at both institutions in the study is to leverage resources and secure revenue.

The Quest for Prestige

Kalsbeek and Zucker (2015, 90) stated, “In general, stronger position schools demonstrate a broader market range and greater geographic diversity, while lower-tiered schools almost invariably are tied to a more localized or regional territory.” In addition, this emphasis on market position emphasizes tenets of new managerialism and the focus on performance indicators, competition, and student choice. In the 1970s, colleges and universities began utilizing marketing techniques to stand out from their competitors and to attract students. This was among the first dimensions of new managerialism when more traditional business

approaches, such as marketing to specific audiences, began to evolve within the industry of higher education. Hossler, *et al.* (2015, 34), noted that it is becoming more common, especially at private institutions, for the organizational structure to be one where the chief marketing officer reports to the chief enrollment officer. When this is not the case, there is potential for tension between the marketing division and the enrollment management division, or the admissions unit, as to strategy and prioritization of audiences. This tension reflects the marketing challenges that interview participants from Institution A, who did not have marketing within the enrollment management portfolio, disclosed. However, at Institution B the marketing function lived within the enrollment management division and seemed to be advantageous in creating consistent messaging and branding to key constituencies such as prospective students, parents of prospective students, high school counselors, and alumni.

Marketing is critical to most enrollment management operations, especially for the admissions office, but the right technology must be in place to allow for the dissemination of the institutional messages and then the ability to gather feedback in the form of data points that can help inform the overall communication strategy. Technology has become critical in an effective SEM operation (Kilgore and Gage 2015) and touches many aspects of enrollment management from communications to segmented populations, to providing predictive analytics, to creating efficiencies that enhance the student experience. Kilgore and Gage (2015, 432) underscored, “It is now the norm for multiple systems with high levels of functionality to be interwoven to meet the needs of SEM and student expectations.” Both marketing and technology can be considered an asset or barrier for any enrollment operations, and it must be factored into the larger decisions on strategy.

Lastly, as this study has explored, strategy and structure are intertwined, and the structure must support the strategy. A similar symbiotic relationship can be seen between revenue and the quest for prestige. To move ahead in market position, large financial investments are typically essential; however, resources are

also a premium and finite. At Institution B, one of the perceived internal barriers for improving the market position or the prestige is the retention and graduation rates, which affect both revenue and enrollment. At Institution A, their strong retention and graduation rates are not of concern and, therefore, resulted in a more limited approach to SEM. This outcome suggests that the focus of the enrollment concern at a particular institution factors into the design of the structure and the strategy, which are derived from a desire to enhance institutional effectiveness and provide financial stability commonly associated with higher rankings and strong market position.

Implications

With more than 4,000 institutions of higher education, it is more critical today than ever that institutions be able to create sustainable enrollment models. The difference in structure of the enrollment management divisions at two institutions reflected the institutional strategy and the culture. In this study, one institution focused strategy on a frontend, input-focused approach with a less-integrated model once a student enrolled. The second institution has a more comprehensive approach to the student life cycle, beginning with prospective student through alumnus, that informed the strategy. Both institutions are tuition dependent and revenue-focused, so a logical question may be: if structure reflects strategy and each institution has revenue as their number one priority, then what determines strategy?

Institutional leaders and practitioners of enrollment management need to create a structure that aligns with strategy while also allowing for the flexibility to leverage talent available, create an open system of communication, and prioritize goals clearly in conjunction with a strategic approach for moving toward those goals when considering the organizational structure of an enrollment management division. According to Hossler, *et al.* (2015, 42), “The fact remains that structure should follow strategy, and the optimal approach is likely the organizational integration and alignment that best fits the institution’s particular strategic situation and strategic intentions and its existing strengths, achieving the inte-

gration of core activities...”. This statement connects to the findings in this study that support that the culture of an institution, the philosophical approach to enrollment, and the strategy must be in alignment with the organizational structure and composition of the enrollment management model.

Firm, but Flexible Structure

Based on the findings from this study, there are implications regarding how set an organizational structure should be and when compromises should be made to alter the structure based on an individual’s strengths and past experience. Shifting the organizational structure frequently to accommodate the talent pool could result in a misalignment with the strategy and derail progress of initiatives. However, it could be equally problematic to create a structure without considering the current talent pool or the likelihood of being able to find and secure the ideal candidate from outside of the organization. Finding the right balance of creating a structure that aligns with strategy, but also allows for a degree of flexibility when new challenges or situations arise, seems to be the best approach. This is also supported by the existing literature, which reports that hybrid models of organizational structure can harness the benefits of coordination produced by centralization, and simultaneously allow the flexibility of decentralization (Meyer 2002).

As in any profession, enrollment management services must be equipped to adapt to changes in personnel. When turnover occurs, it is important to take inventory of the current status of the organizational structure and the progress of both current and future initiatives in relation to strategy to assess strengths and limitations of functions. In addition, in the event turnover is significant, either in terms of volume or key leaders within the structure, it is important for the culture—if it is a strength of the organization—to be intentionally reinforced. It is especially important for the chief enrollment officer to create a shared vision that people can understand and identify their role in moving the institution toward achieving its enrollment goals, which support the larger strategic plan.

Creating an Open System

This study supported findings in literature from the field of SEM that an open system is best to facilitate a shared vision, promote collaboration between subunits, and involve other constituencies in the challenges and efforts related to enrollment. Hossler, *et al.* (2015, 33) spoke to the importance of “open systems environments to encourage the broad sharing of information and decision-making and discourage the creation of organizational silos that operate independently of one another.” In this study, the two enrollment management divisions differed in structure and composition, and interviews revealed the importance of culture as it relates to integration and communication. More knowledge sharing occurred in a culture of centralization with tighter coupling of subunits, promoting a deeper level of integration that could ultimately lead to a higher degree of effectiveness.

Open systems that promote communication between all levels of the organizational structure can identify problems and adjust more quickly. Clagett (1995, 18) purported, “Successful enrollment management depends on an information base that is comprehensive, targeted, and continuously updated to inform enrollment management policies and to monitor their effectiveness.” It is incumbent upon the chief enrollment officer to create infrastructures that promote enrollment information sharing and data exchange at and between all levels of the division, as well as relevant constituencies outside of the division. Additional improvements to technology systems that combine information from various departments and provide pertinent data to all members can provide greater responsiveness and customer service.

Prioritization of Goals

As a growing number of institutions, both public and private, adopt models of enrollment management to align enrollment and fiscal priorities, it should not be seen as the solution to all problems. Bontrager (2004, 13) found that “institutions often lack specific enrollment goals, or, if such goals do exist, they represent more of a wish list than objective goals derived from careful data-gathering and analysis.” Institutional leaders must

be realistic in their expectations and concrete in their prioritization of goals. It is the role of the chief enrollment officer to educate leadership about the complex, often diametrically opposing forces of pursuing any enrollment outcome. For example, if promoting access to under-served populations by enrolling more minoritized students is a goal, then institutional leaders should be aware of potential unintended consequences such as increases to the financial aid budget or decreases in tuition revenue. If multiple goals exist, then prioritizing these goals is essential to manage expectations and create shared vision.

SEM is based on performance, so outcomes should be tracked and measurable. Data-informed decisions are critical to any model of SEM, and it is important that institutional leaders invest in the infrastructure that allow for tracking and retrieving of data. It is the role of the chief enrollment officer to set realistic expectations prioritizing which outcomes are most important based on the institution’s mission, the vision of the president, and how to achieve goals, as it relates to both institutional outcomes and student outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

This study examined different structures and compositions of enrollment management divisions at two mid-sized, private institutions to shed light on the question of how institutions organize, the relationship of subunits, and how external factors can influence structure. Limitations should be acknowledged, such as time constraints that limited the amount of interview participants. Additionally, generalizability may be limited based on the qualitative approach and the focus of the site selection (Stake 1995). Each institution was selected because of some broad similarities in an attempt to reduce variables and strengthen validity; however, generalizability to institutions that do not fit into the category of private, mid-sized, and focused on undergraduate education may find the outcomes are not applicable to their challenges or environment. Before broader generalizations can be applied, additional research with a larger and more diverse set of institutions is needed. In this study, differences in the integration of the subunits

were observed, as well as differences in the degrees of centralization and structural coupling that raise questions of correlation or causation in the outcomes.

To extend the research further, interviewing mid-level and frontline staff could help further the understanding of the impact of structure, as well as talking to faculty about their perceptions of the efforts of the enrollment management division. As enrollment management continues to evolve in scope and greater attention is placed on the student life cycle, measurable performance indicators should be defined to determine if a more centralized approach to the structure of administrative units results in a greater degree of student satisfaction and the effect on retention and graduation rates. Also connected to the topic of centralization, studying the relationship between structural coupling and staff morale could generate beneficial findings. More specifically, does tighter coupling of administrative units result in more connection around a common vision that integrate units to encourage a team approach? Hautala, *et al.* (2018) point to findings of Vuori (2015), which suggest that if higher educational organizations stay loosely coupled, then organizations will be further away from the ideals of modern and efficient educational organization.

Conclusion

As higher education faces significant challenges related to its funding model, then it is expected that the pressure to identify new revenue streams will increase. Meyer (2002, 516) wrote, “More conventional control-and command-oriented managerial thinking (frequently originating in the world of private enterprise) seems to be back, welcomed under labels such as ‘new managerialism’. We notice a stronger emphasis on organizational effectiveness, accountability, capacity building, and standardization....” The findings from this study support the literature that structure, composition, institutional type, and philosophical alignment are important considerations when establishing an enrollment management division, but the results contribute to the existing literature by suggesting that the degree of coupling between subunits within the division is also an important consideration. Structural alignment, as well as an infrastructure that supports an open system by removing silos can help institutional leaders to think creatively and leverage resources to best support enrollment and student success.

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About the Author



Kelley Lips

Kelley Lips, Ed.D., serves Emory University as the Assistant Vice Provost & Dean of Enrollment Services at Oxford College. An alumna of Oxford and Emory Colleges, Lips earned her bachelor's degree in psychology and educational studies. She

then completed a M.S. in mental health counseling from Mercer University in Atlanta, GA, and then continued her education to receive her doctoral degree in higher education management from the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education. In her current role, Lips serves as a member of the univer-

sity's enrollment leadership team and is responsible for admissions, financial aid, and the registrar at Oxford College. As a first-generation college student, Lips believes in the power of education to change lives and generate opportunity.