

 LEADING STRATEGIES

The Enrollment Relationship Model

By Angelique Saweczko

The relationship between central and academic units can cause tension within an institution as there is a desire to define ownership over activities, policies, and processes associated with enrollment management (e.g., recruitment, admissions, academic scheduling). This article proposes a new enrollment planning model that can be used to navigate these shared responsibilities to achieve goals at both the academic unit and institutional level. The Enrollment Relationship Model is intended to help thought-processes and considers the roles of central and academic units at a tactical level. The model is highly adaptable to meet the needs of different institutional structures.

A relationship is defined as the way two entities behave toward each other or work together (Oxford University Press 2023). Relationships are necessary in daily lives, across and within business. Relationships are essential for ensuring that a strategic vision is carried out. Given the importance of strategy in enrollment management, building and developing relationships should be a key component of an enrollment management model.

Several articles have addressed the importance of relationships in enrollment management (Dolence 1993; Gottheil and Smith 2009; Henderson and Pollock 2021; Hinton 2012; Hossler and Bontrager 2014; Nicholas and Dorsey 2021; Schultheis 2013, Smith and Harris 2021). While most literature speaks to the importance of relationships, few provide frameworks or structures that institutions can leverage to foster and develop these relationships. Four articles that offer insight to the importance of relationships include:

- Henderson and Pollock (2021) address the importance of relationships between the student and the institution in a variety of ways, especially with faculty. They note the significance of faculty relationships with student service areas.
- Schultheis (2013) highlights the importance of relationships to help with specific enrollment management functions. Schultheis details the importance of partnerships across an institution, such as developing partnerships between the enrollment management team and institutional research, academic services, student government, and central marketing.
- Nicholas and Dorsey (2021) provide insight on the role of collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility. They highlight key roles for these approaches and how they can support an institution in a post-pandemic era by bringing experience and

expertise from several areas. They highlight challenges with power struggles and the importance of ensuring clear goals are identified.

- Smith and Harris (2021) emphasize the value of including faculty in enrollment management activities. They stress the importance of faculty in activities related to the planning, development and review of curriculum, and how faculty can support recruitment and marketing activities.

The relationship between central and academic units, is not well documented. There are a few articles that address centralized and decentralized relationships in higher education; however, they focus on consortiums or collaborations across higher education institutions (Coombe 2015; Patterson 1970). Lepchenske (Coombe 2015) notes that academic units prefer decentralization to protect their autonomy and promote their subject matter expertise. Patterson (1970) highlights that centralization can create efficiencies through standardization and reduced administrative costs. While both Patterson (1970) and Lepchenske (Coombe 2015) do not indicate a preference for centralization or decentralization, they indicate that blending aspects of centralization and decentralization can benefit an institution.

While Lepchenske (Coombe 2015) and Patterson (1970) focus on institutional collaborations, the concepts they highlight around centralization and decentralization can apply to inter-institutional relationships. Specifically, they emphasize the importance of central and academic units working together to balance institutional and faculty goals to recruit, retain, and graduate students. Without balance, the tension between central and academic units can result in an either/or approach toward specific tasks. In an either/or approach (Markides 2001), one tactic is considered over another, creating the perception that one direction is better than another. Using an either/or approach can reduce creativity and idea sharing and disengage staff who have a keen interest to participate in enrollment management activities.

Considering the work required to achieve institutional goals, there is an opportunity to reframe the dialogue between academic and central units to consider

an and/or approach (Sharp 2019). The and/or approach considers multiple tactics and approaches to a solution. It can generate creativity and engage staff across multiple portfolios. The and/or approach can create greater agency with staff and incorporate the concept of shared responsibilities with other units (Nicholas and Dorsey 2021; Smith and Harris 2021).

An example of this tension can be seen in enrollment management functions such as student recruitment. In the author's experience, central units are responsible for developing institutional recruitment strategies to identify markets of interest, methods of outreach, communications plans, and more. The central team takes a coordination role and acts as the primary contact for external stakeholders (*e.g.*, high school counsellors, agents, etc.). Academic units typically develop plans that focus on unit-specific messages and markets of interest. They are responsible for relationships focused on subject matter expertise and industry connections. Academic units have a very focused approach to their outreach.

Factors Impacting Relationships

Several factors have emerged over the past few years that have caused shifts in the interest of academic units toward enrollment management functions.

There are changing financial landscapes in higher education. Institutions are considering different budget models such as activity-based or performance-based models (Auerbach and Edmonds 2013; Ontiveros and Blanco 2020). These models create incentives for academic units. Other institutions are experiencing enrollments changes (Binkley and The Associated Press 2023; Knox 2022), which can have a direct impact on revenue. These are strong drivers for academic units to ensure they achieve enrollment targets.

The structure of a higher education institution can also impact the relationship between academic and central units. Centralized structured institutions typically have a team that leads on various functional aspects for the entire university (Patterson 1970). In decentralized-structured institutions these functions rest within the academic unit (Lepchenske in Coombe 2015). Considering these concepts from an enrollment manage-

ment lens, an institution that is decentralized can have multiple enrollment plans that may not be connected. An institution that is centralized may not include academic units in enrollment-related activities and may be more directive in their approaches as opposed to building a culture of trust and collaboration. Regardless of the organizational structure, there is a benefit to creating a balance in approaches to build trust and to gain a deeper understanding of needs across the institution (Lepchenske in Coombe 2015; Patterson 1970).

Lastly, federal and state/provincial governments have introduced key performance indicators (KPIs) or mandate agreements that include a variety of compliance and reporting requirements (Government of Alberta 2021; Government of Ontario 2020; Miao 2012). This has required many institutions to formalize annual enrollment plans or to achieve enrollment targets within a specified corridor. These agreements can directly impact the amount of government funding an institution may receive.

The Idea

The idea of the Enrollment Relationship Model started a year ago while preparing a presentation on how a culture change around enrollment management was implemented at a former institution. This institution was on the enrollment roller coaster, going over or under enrollment targets from one year to the next. Due to this, there was a lack of trust and transparency around enrollment planning that prevented the institution from achieving its strategic goals. Over a two-year period, there was a concerted effort to build trust and understanding and to stabilize enrollments.

While developing the presentation, the author wanted to include a visual to help explain the process and how it could be leveraged by other institutions. A literature review identified three models related to enrollment management: the traditional enrollment funnel, the SEM Planning Model (Gottheil and Smith 2009) and the SEM Planning Framework (Bontrager and Green 2012).

The enrollment funnel is a tool that identifies the stages of student intake from a prospect to a registered

student. The funnel helps explain the flow of students entering the university, however; it did not provide the details required for this specific task.

The SEM Planning Model introduced by Gottheil and Smith (2009) and the SEM Planning Framework developed by Bontrager and Green (2012) take similar approaches by identifying the relationship between institutional strategic goals and enrollment outcomes, then outline the phases or requirements to meet goals (see Figure 1, on page 24). Both models support SEM planning; however, they did not adequately convey the desired outcome for the presentation.

Considering the components of SEM—coordinated, collaborative, goal-based, data-driven, focused on student success, financially-viable, and process-driven (Bontrager and Kerlin 2004; Gottheil and Smith 2009)—there was an opportunity to develop a new model focused on relationships. The Enrollment Relationship Model, depicted in Figure 2 (on page 25), is a concept to highlight the importance of campus relationships and partnerships and how different units can work together to support enrollment goals. The model can be used to help develop action plans. It is intended to be a tool to work through tactics to help identify roles throughout a process that involve multiple partners.

The Enrollment Relationship Model builds on the concept of and/or to reframe discussions around what could be implemented to address the needs of various campus partners as opposed to approaching tasks where decisions result in one direction (Sharp 2019).

The Model

The author created the Enrollment Relationship Model to help identify the component needed for a specific task (*e.g.*, to register students, build a student-centric timetable) that includes roles for all campus partners. (See Figure 2, on page 25.)

The model is a stacked Venn diagram to show the relationship of segments as progress is made toward a goal. The goal is the focal point, intentionally placed at the top of the diagram. The circular shape represents the cyclical nature of enrollment management and the need for re-evaluation. This reinforces the process aspect of

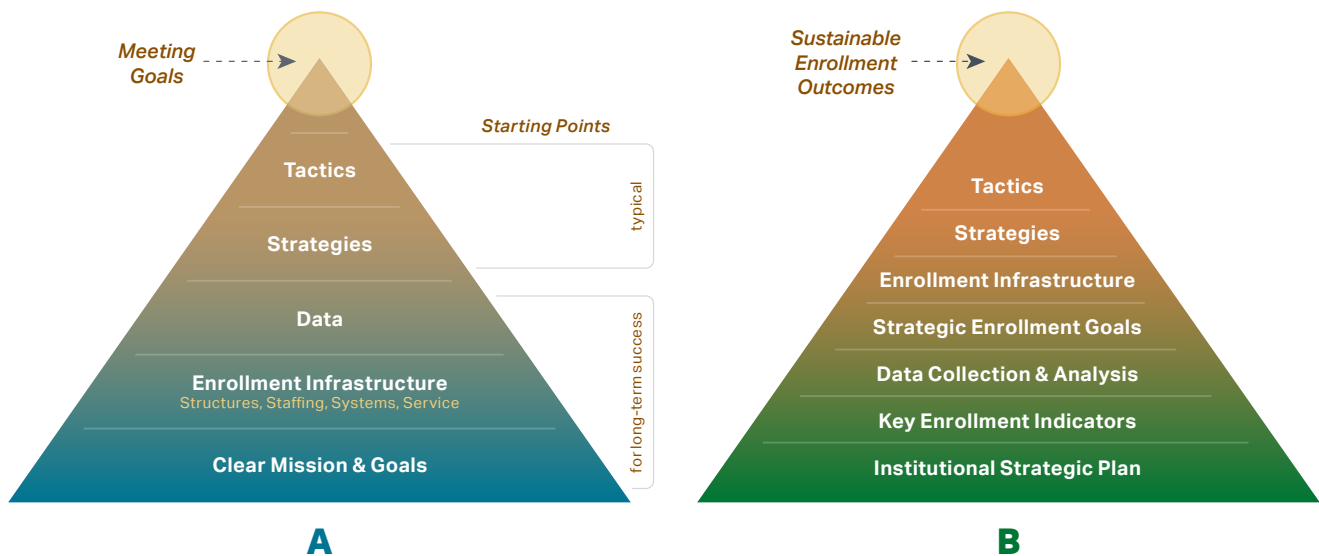


FIGURE 1 ► SEM Planning Model (A) and Framework (B)

Source: Gottheil and Smith 2009 (A); (Bontrager and Green 2012) (B)

enrollment. The segments are stages of the process that transition into each other, connectors to transition between segments.

The segments stages include the goal, specialist approach, and generalist approach. The specialist and generalist approaches connect tactics to the goal, encompassed in the overall strategies or policies. The use of generalist and specialist labelling is intended to signal the expertise required to achieve a goal. At times, a unit could be the generalist while at other times, the unit could be the specialist.

The model is intended to be adaptable. The number of segments needed can be modified based on the task at hand or the institutional structure since each institution is different.

Overview of the model:

- The enrollment goal is the focus of the model
- The model takes a tactical approach to achieving a goal
- Segments are the stages of the process that blend into each other
- The dashed lines between segments signal a transition; they are connectors

- Generalist/specialists are interchangeable depending on where expertise rests related to the goal
- The model is adaptable to a specific goal or institutional structure

The model is intended to support thought-processes when operationalizing a task and considers the different partners involved. By starting with strategy or policy and working toward the goal, units can think through the process, incorporate the needs of partners, share responsibilities, and open lines of communication to help create transparency.

Application of the Model

In the author's experience, academic units seek to play a more prominent role in recruitment and admissions activities. This can cause confusion for both the central and the academic units. Central admissions teams become frustrated when multiple units from the same university attend an event or reach out to external stakeholders, as these stakeholders become uncertain as to who to contact at the institution. Central teams



FIGURE 2 ► Enrollment Relationship Model

coordinate recruitment activities, deliver broad institutional messages, and provide detailed information on the admissions process. The central team sees their role as the primary contact for external stakeholders. While central teams are specialists in recruiting and institutional messaging, they are generalists when it comes to courses and programs information.

Academic units focus on their areas of expertise, their programs and services, and the experiences they provide students. Students register with an academic unit; thus, this relationship is important to foster (Smith and Harris 2021). In the author's experience, academic units wish to connect with their future students through program specific outreach; they are specialists with program information and generalists when it comes to best practices in recruitment and admissions.

There are many ways for institutions to address this dynamic by working together and considering multiple approaches and ideas to achieve a task.

In the Figure 3 example (on page 26), admissions policies outline the requirements that a student must achieve to be considered for admission. This has an impact on the students an institution will recruit and ultimately admit to the university. At the recruitment

level, the central office could be the specialist who would coordinate and conduct major events, and the academic unit could be the generalist supporting the central recruitment activities.

The admissions process will depend on institutional structure. At many institutions, this is led by the central unit with support from the academic unit. The academic unit would develop the policies that would guide the processes developed by the central team.

Conversion activities are typically led by the academic units as newly admitted students are seeking detailed information about the programs and the services offered by the academic unit. While a central unit may support these activities, they are more of a generalist supporting the specialists in the academic units.

Benefits of this Approach

The Enrollment Relationship Model is designed to help navigate shared responsibilities around enrollment activities to achieve goals at both the academic unit and institutional level. Institutions seeking to change the campus culture around SEM planning can leverage this model to identify the roles of various stakeholders and to help identify opportunities for participation and collaboration.

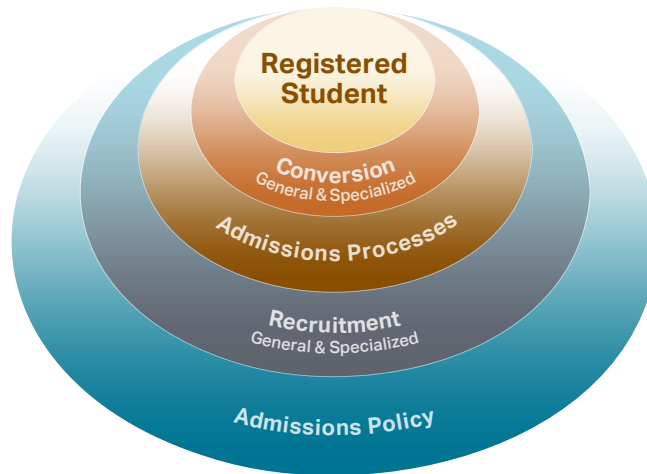


FIGURE 3 ► Enrollment Relationship Model: Admission Example

Key benefits to this approach include:

- The goal is the focus
- It identifies tactics
- It identifies opportunities to build collaboration through communication
- It is an iterative process that encourages review and renewal
- It creates transparency

With resource restrictions and increasing workload, this model can help institutions distribute workload across existing resources, reduce silos between campus partners, and build a culture of shared responsibility. The use of the model is limited by the willingness of campus stakeholders to come together and to trust each other; trust is essential.

Conclusion

Developing and implementing a SEM plan can be a daunting task. Part of implementing a plan is to identify several tools that can be used to help determine the best way to approach a particular task. It is important to explore various options to find what works within the context of an institution. As a starting point, it is

helpful to identify and highlight the goals in an enrollment plan and ensure the goals can be measured. It is also helpful to approach opportunities from multiple perspectives. Institutions are encouraged to discuss and evaluate suggested tactics to see how they can be leveraged (Bontrager and Green 2012; Gottheil and Smith 2009).

The Enrollment Relationship model can be a helpful tool to support thought-processes when attempting to operationalize a task. The model helps stakeholders focus on the goal and ensures the goal connects to strategies or policy. The and/or approach (Sharp 2019) considers both generalist and specialist experiences, thus enabling units to think through a process, incorporate the needs of partners, share responsibilities, and open lines of communication to help create transparency.

Institutions looking to leverage the Enrollment Relationship Model should rethink existing approaches. For leaders, this could mean incorporating a different leadership approach, forming new partnerships, or rethinking how work is distributed. It is important for leaders to build relationships with campus partners to establish trust and a dynamic communication channel and reduce the perception of domains or barriers.

Lastly, the Enrollment Relationship Model supports (surviving) and enables planning and thriving to emerge. strategic thinking. This shifts the reliance on reactivity

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Angelique Saweczko, M.Ed., H.B.A., is an experienced postsecondary leader with more than 25 years in higher education. Her expertise spans domestic and

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