

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

From SEM Planning to Implementing: Quality Control Strategies

By Josh Hibbard and Ediz L. Kaykayoglu

This article examines effective strategies for transitioning from strategic enrollment management (SEM) planning to execution. It offers insights into project organization, KPI measurement, leadership alignment, and budget considerations, providing practical guidance for higher education professionals to successfully implement and sustain SEM initiatives.

In today's ever-evolving higher education landscape, strategic enrollment management (SEM) is paramount for institutions to thrive. However, many institutions complete a SEM plan but fail to execute these plans. Effective SEM planning requires meticulous quality control processes to ensure success. The following will delve into key aspects of Quality Control in SEM planning, shedding light on tactics, pitfalls, and strategies for seamless implementation. It is said that strategy without execution is hallucination. This article draws from the authors' collective 35 years of experience in enrollment management at both public and private institutions across the United States. This collective experience includes successes and failures in strategic enrollment management and strategic enrollment planning (SEP) initiatives.

We provide a brief overview of various models before sharing practical and insightful practices that go beyond planning, focusing on execution and implementation. Topics include project assignment and

organization, measurements and KPIs, planning and progress reporting, budget alignment, leadership connection, and consensus building. The insights presented are ideal for higher education professionals involved in enrollment management, including enrollment directors, administrators, and strategists. It is suitable for institutions at various stages of SEM planning, from those starting the journey to those seeking to enhance their existing processes, and is particularly valuable for those who are in the implementation stage of their institutional SEM plan.

Three Common Models for SEM

In our experience, there are three main general models for SEM planning. The first model focuses on institutional goals, such as specific new student enrollment targets, increasing retention, or improving the overall stature and reputation of the institution. Once these goals are established, this model focuses on identifying tasks to achieve those goals.

The second model tends to be financially driven, identifying enrollment initiatives that have a high return on investment (ROI). Crockett (2023) suggests the rise in this model is partly due to the increase in reliance on net tuition and fee revenue of both public and private institutions. In this model, institutions conduct a business plan that calculates the expenses required to implement the initiative and ensures the gains in revenue are within acceptable ranges of ROI. In this model, existing academic and co-curricular programs may also be evaluated for elimination to support stated SEM goals.

Finally, the third model is a combination of these two models, in which the overarching goals within the plan are turned into a “project.” Tasks and initiatives that require no additional resources to implement are identified and included in the project plan. Tasks and initiatives requiring additional funding are developed into a business plan, vetted through the institution’s governance structure, and, if approved, included in the project plan.

No matter what model an institution has adopted, we contend that the most important aspect of strategic enrollment planning is implementing and executing. The strongest model is the one that accomplishes the institution’s goals and enhances its enrollment management strategies. The following provides our collective best practices on how to move from planning to implementing, regardless of where an institution is in the SEM planning process.

Project Assignments and Organization

Effective SEM planning requires clear ownership and accountability. One way to successfully implement a SEM plan is through a SEM advisory council that deploys sound project management principles to manage the implementation plan (Smith 2001). Most SEM plans are multi-year, ranging from three to five years. We recommend developing an annual implementation plan that clearly articulates the scope of work for the year. Ideally, the SEM Advisory Council will include leaders and shared governance groups from across the institu-

tion who have the oversight and authority to commit to the various projects, initiatives, and activities needed to achieve the long-term goals of the SEM plan. Using project management tools such as Asana, or well-configured MS Excel worksheets, each goal will be identified. Goals will include multiple initiatives (also referred to as “objectives”). Initiatives often require multi-year efforts to complete and may run through future years of SEM implementation plans. Initiatives are supported by projects, activities, and/or tasks, depending on their level of comprehension and complexity.

What does this look like? Let us consider a SEM goal of “increasing first-year domestic student recruitment from 2,000 to 2,500 by 2030.” The goal may have multiple initiatives, such as “increase market share of in-state high school graduates by 2 percentage points” or “enhance engagement to family/guardians of prospective students.” Each of these initiatives might have multiple projects or activities. For instance, the latter initiative might include a *project* to “launch new prospective parent portal” or a *task* to “build a communication campaign within the CRM to families for prospective students.”

The keys to success at this stage are organization and ownership assignment. Each project, task, or activity should have a due date, a measurement that indicates when it will be completed, and an assigned “owner” or “captain.” It is recommended that the project, task, or activity be assigned to an individual rather than a “co-captain.” This will allow a single point of contact for updates and responsibility for the project team. The “captain” should be empowered to lead the project, task, or activity to completion, as well as have the ability to communicate progress to the SEM Advisory Council in terms of measurements and KPIs.

Measurements and KPIs Recommendations

Without metrics, progress remains elusive; therefore, measurement frameworks are essential to assess SEM success. Much has been written on the development of key performance indicators (KPIs) and key performance results (KPRs), focusing on developing indicators that are specific, clearly define what is being measured,

achievable, and relevant to the goal, assigned ownership, and time-bound. Next, we focus not on the development of KPIs and KPRs, but rather recommendations that will help aid in the quick implementation of the SEM plan.

A common term among institutional researchers is “data analysis paralysis.” This phrase describes a situation where someone is so overwhelmed by the data or complexity of analysis that they are unable to make a decision or take action. In the same manner, enrollment leaders can become overwhelmed with the time-consuming effort to establish KPIs and measurements, and their implementation planning can become stalled. Therefore, we recommend a balanced approach to establishing KPIs for the implementation process of an institutional SEM plan.

Enrollment experts know much about the field and often have a clear sense of what works and what does not work. Establishing a culture of KPIs can help move the institution forward, gaining alignment in how goals, objectives, and initiatives will be monitored and measured for success. Involving other key stakeholders outside of the enrollment management division to develop specific KPIs requires thoughtful and often an extensive time commitment. Yet the process is vital to enable key stakeholders to accept the responsibility for the development of KPIs and accountability for achieving results. In academia, we often spend considerable time in deep thought and conversation when approaching problems and identifying solutions. However, we encourage leaders to be mindful of the time spent in developing KPIs and avoid “paralysis” in developing the often elusive “perfect KPI.”

Ultimately, the executive leadership will expect progress and outcomes from any project within the university. SEM plans require detailed KPIs for political and accountability purposes. Evaluation of each area of the SEM plan makes a positive impact on overall understanding, buy-in, and commitment. There are multiple external and internal challenges during this process. Unforeseen obstacles, changes in program markets, FAFSA delays, and regional and national economic challenges could lead to unexpected results. Clarification to KPIs is an integral part of the SEM plan process.

Transparent approaches and needed communication could engage and inform the university community.

Planning and Progress Reporting

Timely planning and progress tracking are pivotal for a successful SEM plan and implementation process. It is vital to develop a structure that supports implementation work, while also providing a regular reporting system to nurture stakeholder buy-in.

The authors recommend the establishment of a SEM Advisory Council comprising key stakeholders from across the university. The SEM Advisory Council plays a key role in tracking progress on the plan and providing updates to the president’s cabinet, board of trustees, and the university community. Holding regular update and progress meetings, attending, and sharing insights in shared governance meetings, and updating executive leadership groups are key avenues for keeping everyone involved, enhancing transparency and adaptability. Communication is a key component of success in implementing any large-scale project. Colleges and universities differ in their organizational structure and culture, requiring a unique approach to effective communication. However, the following examples provide a list of potential communication opportunities that the authors have found successful in their work:

- Annual SEM implementation plan kick-off reception. A kick-off reception can successfully celebrate the year’s wins and set the direction for the upcoming year. Including a variety of representatives from the SEM Advisory Council is encouraged.
- Quarterly progress reports to the university community. We recommend a minimum of four newsletter throughout the year to provide updates on the SEM implementation project. The newsletters serve as an effective means to celebrate wins, recognize faculty and staff, and communicate challenges.
- Monthly written and verbal updates to the president and/or chancellor’s cabinet.
- Annual in-person presentations to various stakeholders and associations, including deans, department chairs, faculty governance, staff governance, and open forums for all other members of the university.

- Presentations at student governance meetings are important as they allow students to understand the direction of the institution, while also providing an opportunity for student voice into the project.

Budget Alignment

One of the most frequently cited reasons for SEM implementation planning is lack of resources (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2013). SEM implementation plans must identify the objectives, initiatives, projects, and activities that can be implemented with the current resource allocation, as well as those that require additional resources for successful implementation. Often, we hear enrollment leaders citing the purpose of their SEM plan is to increase the bottom line from a budgetary perspective. Some plans start with a specific budget for funding new initiatives. Other SEM plans shape the list of tasks and action items to form a budget for the plan, then submit the proposal through the institution's budget allocation process. Each initiative that proposes a budget request should be carefully discussed by the budget committees, including the chief enrollment and chief financial officers.

One challenge in the SEM planning process is the identification of what initiatives can be conducted with existing resources and which require additional resources (Smith, *et al.* 2020). Yet, when initiatives requiring additional resources are identified, a new challenge arises: the inability to acquire the funding for new initiatives. In our experience, this is often the most cited frustration in the SEM implementation process. We offer two recommendations based on our experience.

The first recommendation is to identify the resources within the existing level of funding. This often requires assessing areas where resources can be redirected. To effectively do this, one must assess the return on investment (ROI) for current and new initiatives and resource allocations. Understanding the ROI on an activity can help budget leaders better determine where to direct their financial resources. Colleges and universities often struggle to reallocate resources toward new initiatives because of the uncertainty involved in the process. It is seldom that resource allocation produces zero return on investment. Discerning the difference

between “good” return and “great” return on investment is no easy task and often involves a level of risk. This risk can be mitigated through a practice of assessing return on investment.

The second recommendation is to develop a strong proposal that demonstrates the impact of the investment and the ROI to the university. This proposal can then be presented to the budget allocation process. Involving budget experts during this process is crucial for the proposal's success. Sharing the enrollment impact is crucial to justify and satisfy the spending on the plan. Preference for multi-year initiatives and clarifying short and long-term ROIs to the community encourages the importance of the SEM initiative. Presenting a robust proposal will provide confidence in the plan and help maintain trust should the initiative be implemented, yet not produce the stated result. It is recommended that newly funded initiatives should include an assessment plan that identifies what will happen should the initiative not produce the expected results.

Leadership Connection and Consensus Building

In our experience, failed SEM implementation efforts are often correlated with a lack of buy-in from executive leadership. Successful implementation begins with fostering strong connections with top-level administrators. The SEM Advisory Council and key must develop a compelling case for SEM initiatives. Developing a strong implementation project structure and organization, identifying key metrics and KPIs, aligning planning and progress tracking methods, and conducting consistent communication are essential.

We recommend membership of the SEM Advisory Council be appointed by the university president or members of the president's cabinet to support buy-in from executive leadership. Although each university structure is unique, membership on the SEM Advisory Council should include, but not be limited to: Enrollment Management; Academic Affairs, including provost's office, dean's offices, and key faculty contributors; offices including Student Business Services or Bursars; shared governance leaders; and departments that could have an

impact on recruitment and retention goals. The council's main objective is the development and implementation of the plan. They are part of the process and provide constant feedback to enhance the goals and targets.

The most significant challenge in building consensus and buy-in among top-level administrators is turnover. According to CUPA's (n.d.) annual HR survey of university administrators, the median tenure of college presidents is five years, and the median tenure of college provosts is three years. As SEM plans typically span three to eight years; this means most SEM plans will experience a new college president or provost who was not part of the SEM planning process. These new leaders may feel the pressure to develop their own agendas and priorities, which may conflict with the established SEM plan.

Leadership turnover may also introduce new cultural dynamics as new leaders bring different management and communication styles. It is essential that the SEM Advisory Council works to integrate the new leader into the institution's culture, while also considering any necessary adjustments to ensure buy-in from the new leader. Without intentional onboarding efforts, new leaders may become disengaged or resist the SEM efforts and initiatives.

The turnover of key leaders may also disrupt the continuity of SEM plan initiatives. Existing efforts can lose momentum as stakeholders shift focus to accommodate new leadership priorities. In addition, faculty and staff who are charged with executing difficult aspects of the SEM plan may feel uncertain about the future of their work, delaying progress toward SEM goals.

While turnover poses significant challenges, it also presents an opportunity for reflection on the SEM plan and refreshing tactics. New leaders often bring new ideas and fresh perspectives that have the potential to support progress and improvement of the SEM plan. The challenge of the SEM Advisory Council will be to maintain the core aspects of the SEM plan and ensure progress toward the long-term SEM goals.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have explored essential components of effective SEM implementation, from planning and project organization to measurement, leadership, and budget alignment. The ability to translate these strategies into action is what will differentiate institutions that thrive in the evolving landscape of higher education from those that struggle.

Conner (2006) describes change management and offers two differing responses, stating, "The magnitude of change today can prompt a doom-and-gloom vision, or it can be seen as an opportunity for a fundamental shift in how we humans define ourselves, where we are going, and how we will accomplish our goals" (5). As higher education enrollment leaders, we have two responses to the future enrollment landscape: we can approach our work with worry, anxiety, doom, and gloom, or we can approach our work with optimism, opportunity, and vision. Those who choose the latter will only be successful through strong strategic enrollment management principles and even stronger implementation and quality control strategies.

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