

 SEMQ REVIEW

SEM Core Concepts: Leading Toward Learner Success and Campus Enrollment Health

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Reviewed by Tammy R. Johnson

SEM Core Concepts: Leading Toward Learner Success and Campus Enrollment Health (2024), by Jody Gordon and Stanley E. Henderson, is the latest and foundational volume in AACRAO's strategic enrollment management (SEM) planning trilogy. Positioned as an update to Wayne Sigler's *Core Concepts of SEM* (2017), this volume leverages the authors' combined decades of experience in SEM consulting, strategy, and implementation. Gordon and Henderson navigate a wide array of SEM-related concepts, discussing both the theoretical tenets and practical applications essential for campus enrollment health and learner success.

The book progressively builds understanding of SEM concepts across seven chapters. Beginning with Chapter One, "What is SEM?", the authors thoroughly explain the history and basic tenets of strategic enrollment management within the context of academia, highlighting its potential value to many different constituencies. They share in plain language what SEM *is* and, more importantly, what SEM *isn't*—a crucial distinction that clarifies common misconceptions for any higher education leader who is directly involved in enrollment-related work. Chapter One also introduces the four key areas of SEM (structural management, planning, leadership, and community) as an important framework

for viewing the evolving requirements of an effective SEM enterprise.

Chapter Two delves into the process, organization, and planning frameworks associated with SEM, providing a thorough description of various SEM planning models. For college and university officials in the early stages of developing a SEM plan, this chapter is a rich resource, detailing common SEM planning structures and outlining roles and responsibilities across all institutional levels. The authors include a detailed diagram of the SEM planning process, which is both comprehensive and easy to understand, serving as an excellent visual guide for those embarking on this important endeavor.

A critical yet often overlooked aspect of any SEM enterprise—campus culture—takes center stage in Chapter Three. The authors powerfully argue that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to SEM planning. What works well for one institution may fail at another, even when both schools share similar attributes. Successfully navigating an institution's campus culture is paramount for SEM planners and managers to develop appropriate goals and strategies, and to consider the nuanced cultures that exist even within a single institution. As Gordon and Henderson assert, "The SEM leader, especially, must also be able to weave the threads of these

cultures together into a coherent SEM plan that will represent the *composite* culture of the institution.” (44). Chapter Three encourages SEM leaders to recognize and understand the four primary cultural orientations of institutions, as put forth by Kalsbeek (2006): student-focused, administrative-focused, academic-focused, and market-focused. But effective SEM leaders must also actively discern their institution’s *real* culture. This requires looking past official statements (mission statements, marketing, and formal pronouncements, etc.) to understand what the institution genuinely prioritizes and where resources are actually directed. Steering an entire campus toward an effective SEM plan hinges on deep cultural understanding, thus enabling experienced SEM leaders to bridge the gap between what an institution *is* and what it *aspires* to be.

Chapter Four stands alone as a comprehensive roadmap for SEM plan development. Any college or university SEM planning group will benefit from reviewing this chapter before creating a new plan or evaluating an existing one. This roadmap includes a clear overview of the seven essential steps for developing an effective SEM plan:

- Setting the course
- Key performance indicators
- Data
- Strategic enrollment and learner success goals
- Strategies
- Tactics
- Assessment

In Chapter Five, the authors make a compelling case for cultivating universal ownership of the SEM plan, asserting that SEM is everyone’s job and highlighting the importance of diverse roles and responsibilities for its overall success. This chapter also provides crucial insights into the foundational skillsets and behaviors vital for SEM leadership. Such information is useful for institutions seeking new SEM leaders, experienced professionals aiming to refine their professional development, and aspiring leaders focusing on essential competencies.

Chapters Six and Seven conclude the book by addressing crucial forward-looking aspects of SEM. Chapter Six examines significant societal shifts in the United States, including evolving attitudes toward higher education and changes in learner demographics. Chapter Seven closes with a succinct but powerful reminder of the continuous nature of SEM planning and implementation, emphasizing that completing a SEM plan is merely a beginning, not a finish line.

Overall, *SEM Core Concepts* is comprehensive yet highly digestible. Future editions, however, could benefit from expanded coverage of additional contemporary SEM-related issues. The book details the current national climate of declining enrollments, waning demand for higher education, and falling enrollment rates across demographic groups. This context highlights the fiscal pressures facing institutions and the resulting pursuit of enrollment gains, sometimes at significant cost. These realities pose considerable professional challenges for even the most experienced SEM leader. Given the booming industry of SEM-related products and services—including consultants, proprietary technology, artificial intelligence, and for-profit partnerships—SEM professionals in this high-stakes field would greatly benefit from case studies and guidance on conducting cost-benefit analyses for such initiatives. Furthermore, a deeper examination of the ethical questions arising from evolving technology and recruitment/retention strategies that prioritize institutional enrollment success over student access and success would be invaluable.

SEM Core Concepts: Leading Toward Learner Success and Campus Enrollment Health offers substantial value across the higher education landscape. It serves as an accessible guide for those new to SEM, elucidating the core tenets and objectives of effective enrollment enterprises. At the same time, it provides experienced SEM practitioners with a comprehensive tool for evaluating and strategically reimagining their existing structures and strategies. The book is very well-positioned to become a definitive reference in the field.

About the Author



Tammy Johnson

Tammy Johnson, Ed.D., currently serves as Program Director and Assistant Professor of Leadership Studies in the College of Education and Professional Development at Marshall University. Prior to her current faculty appointment, Dr. Johnson served in multiple leadership roles, across a variety of areas within higher education. Previous administrative experiences include broad oversight of student service functions, such as undergraduate, graduate, and international admissions, as well as immigration, international student services, student financial aid, and various compliance-related areas of responsibility.

Dr. Johnson has served as an American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) national caucus co-chair and, twice, as chair of the national AACRAO Admissions Policies and Practices Committee. She has presented widely on a variety of subjects, at state, regional, national, and international conferences, including AACRAO, WACRAO, NAFSA, NASPA, SRCEA, WVASPA, WVTESOL, NABCA, and AESA. Her primary areas of research interest include higher education administration and leadership, and issues related to expanding access to post-secondary educational opportunities for all students. Dr. Johnson's published

work appears in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the NASPA-sponsored book *Increasing Adult Learner Persistence and Completion Rates: A Guide for Student Affairs Leaders and Practitioners*, the AACRAO-sponsored book *Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Student Body*, *College and University Journal*, *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, and the NACAC textbook: *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling*. She is a current member of the Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly (SEM) Editorial Board and holds earned degrees from The University of Charleston (B.S.), Texas Woman's University (M.Ed.), and Marshall University (Ed.D.).