

 SEMQ REVIEW

The Signal Solution: How Smart Colleges Stop Chasing Applications and Start Converting Students

BAIRD, G. AND T. METTILLE. 2025. (INDEPENDENTLY PUBLISHED). 218 PP.

Reviewed by Christopher W. Tremblay

In 32 years working in higher education enrollment management, I have read countless books promising to transform our practice. Some gather dust on my shelf after reading or polite skimming. This past December, however, a book recommendation from a colleague I had never met (thank you, Amber Evans!) changed everything about how I understand our profession.

We were on a call—I was inviting Amber to showcase her enrollment management practices at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh for AACRAO SEM Endorsement Program learners at a future virtual field visit—when she told me I needed to read *The Signal Solution: How Smart Colleges Stop Chasing Applications and Start Converting Students*. I ordered it immediately. Two days later (thank you, Amazon Prime), it arrived. I started reading and could not stop. One-fourth of the book disappeared that first day, red pen in hand, underlining something on every single page. This was not just another professional development read—this was the articulation of everything that had been churning, unspoken, in my mind since the pandemic upended our work.

Three days. That's all it took to finish. Nine pages of typed notes extracted from my red-pen underlin-

ing. Immediate evangelizing to colleagues. And exactly seven business days after first hearing the title, I found myself on a Zoom call with co-author Geoff Baird, bursting with reactions and questions.

Why This Book Matters

I rarely write Amazon reviews. But this book compelled me to put my reaction into words:

This book is nothing short of transformative for anyone working in higher education enrollment management. It systematically dismantles the legacy playbook we have all been following and replaces it with a radically different framework built on behavioral intelligence rather than outdated metrics. It introduces a new vocabulary that finally articulates current life in enrollment management. The authors' central insight—that 'enrollment isn't driven by static events; it's driven by behavioral patterns'—fundamentally reframes how we should think about everything from CRM design to financial aid strategy to counselor time allocation. Reading this book felt like finally having language for problems I have sensed but couldn't articulate, and more importantly, having a clear path forward that

treats students as complex decision-makers rather than pipeline statistics. If you work in enrollment management and want to understand why the old approaches are failing and what actually works in today's market, this book is essential. It gave me both the intellectual framework and practical tools to completely rethink our entire operation.

Let me walk you through what makes each section so powerful.

Part I—The Storm

The authors open by diagnosing the crisis: a five-part storm system battering higher education. More importantly, Geoff Baird and Teege Mettelle introduce the foundational concept of “signals”—the behavioral breadcrumbs students leave that reveal their true intent far more accurately than our traditional metrics ever could. Their thesis is unflinching: the current admissions playbook is not just outdated for today's students—it's fundamentally broken.

Part II—Seeing Through the Noise

This section delivers the book's most paradigm-shifting insights, beginning with my favorite subheader: “FAFSA is Ice Cream.” The metaphor is perfect—we have been treating comfort metrics like FAFSA completion and campus visits as if they were the sweet reward of enrollment success, when in reality, they mask the behavioral truth of what students are actually experiencing and deciding. The authors dismantle the campus visit “trap,” revealing how our reverence for traditional indicators has blinded us to the richer, more predictive behavioral patterns students are actually sending. They provide three specific, actionable steps to help institutions evaluate these behavioral signs. One statement stopped me cold: “Something had changed in the behavior of students, which had broken the traditional math of enrollment” (41). Here's what they mean: the linear path to enrollment—apply, visit, deposit, enroll—is dead. Students no longer move through conventional milestones in a predictable sequence. What matters now is momentum over milestones. Are students accelerating toward commitment or drifting into silence? This is where the concept

of behavioral sequencing enters: the pattern of student actions reveals intent that any single action cannot. The section concludes with four critical insights on institutional alignment that directly connect to comprehensive strategic enrollment management. For me, this was the most important, relevant, and mind-blowing section of the entire book. It's where I realized how much we've been measuring the wrong things in recent years.

Part III—The New Operating System

Having diagnosed the problem, the authors now offer the solution: a completely reimagined framework for understanding student decision-making. They introduce the O-S-O model (Objective-Subjective-Objective), which maps the psychological choice path students actually travel. This isn't theoretical—it's grounded in how humans make high-stakes decisions, and college choice is absolutely high-stakes for students and families. The book details seventeen specific signals, categorized as objective (measurable actions) and subjective (emotional states), that together create a complete picture of student intent. The quote that hit hardest: “Stop treating the funnel like a factory line and start treating it like a decision cycle” (78). Think about that. We have been running enrollment like manufacturing—moving prospects through predetermined stages, applying pressure at predetermined points, and expecting predictable conversion rates. But students are not widgets. They're anxious, uncertain, overwhelmed decision-makers navigating a choice that will shape their entire lives, often with incomplete information and intense family pressure. And they are doing this while we collectively spend \$10 billion annually (yes, with a “b”) on marketing, admissions, and enrollment. The question this section poses: are we spending that money based on what actually influences student decisions, or based on what we've always done? The authors introduce three critical concepts: behavioral momentum (is the student moving toward you or away?), velocity (how quickly are they moving?), and persistence (how consistently are they engaging?). These are not captured in our current traditional metrics because we've been measuring static events—did they visit? did they submit FAFSA?—rather

than dynamic patterns. Another revelation: “Milestones are static...they measure compliance, not conviction” (90). A student can complete every milestone we’ve set and still not enroll. Why? Because the authors tell us we have been tracking the wrong thing. Compliance with our process does not equal commitment to our institution. The section also addresses how AI technology can alleviate the crushing burden on overworked, data-overloaded admissions teams. This is not about replacing counselors—it is about giving them superpowers to see patterns no human could track across hundreds of students simultaneously. Perhaps most valuable: the “10 Questions to Cut Through the Noise” (100) that every enrollment leader should ask themselves immediately. This alone is worth the price of the book.

Part IV—The Investment Discussion

This section speaks directly to the budget-holders and skeptics. The authors introduce Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC)—a metric borrowed from business that forces uncomfortable questions: What does it actually cost us to enroll one student? Are we spending efficiently? Could we achieve better outcomes with the same resources if we worked smarter rather than harder? They frame this in the context of “strategic enrollment transformation” (112), positioning AI-driven behavioral intelligence not as a nice-to-have technology upgrade but as an existential competitive necessity. A particularly compelling chart compares traditional marketing strategic efforts to enrollment strategic efforts, revealing how far behind enrollment has fallen in adopting proven approaches to customer understanding and engagement. Essentially, this section arms you with the business case to convince your chief enrollment officer, CFO, and president that this is not experimental technology—it is the competitive baseline for enrollment success in 2026 and beyond.

Part V—Precision in Practice

The final section moves from theory to application, and it is where the book delivers its most jaw-dropping insight. It begins with various levels of personalization, then drops a bombshell that gave me chills: the students we’re trying to recruit have been shaped by

algorithms their entire lives. Netflix knows what they want to watch. Spotify knows what they want to hear. TikTok knows what will hold their attention. Amazon knows what they will buy before they know themselves. And then they arrive at our enrollment funnel, where we send the same email blast to 10,000 prospects and wonder why response rates are plummeting. The cognitive dissonance is stunning once you see it. The main thesis: modern personalization must be behaviorally precise. The authors share that one institution using AI-powered behavioral intelligence evaluated more than 800 signals per student. Eight hundred. That is not personalization—that’s precision at a scale impossible for human counselors to achieve manually, no matter how talented or dedicated. Perhaps the most controversial section challenges our near-religious reverence for the financial aid package, calling our relationship with aid offers “cult-like.” As someone who has worked in financial aid, that stung. It was also necessary. We have been treating aid packaging as if it were the singular moment of truth, when behavioral data shows students are making enrollment decisions based on factors that have nothing to do with whether we gave them \$500 more in merit aid. A substantial portion of this section examines need-based versus merit-based aid through the lens of what the authors brilliantly term “pricing choreography” (168)—the intricate dance of discounting, packaging, and positioning that either builds or destroys trust with students and families. The insights here are immediately actionable for anyone involved in aid strategy. The section closes by systematically busting myths that have governed our profession for decades. Most readers will spend the most time digesting this part of the book. It is certainly where I had the most red-pen underlining, and where I expect the most vigorous debates among enrollment teams.

A Note on Transparency

Full disclosure: Geoff Baird is the founder of EnrollML, a company that developed an AI-powered deep reasoning platform for enrollment management. Reading a book by a vendor naturally raises skepticism—is this just an extended sales pitch?

Here is what impressed me: it doesn't read that way at all. Yes, the book makes the case for AI-driven behavioral intelligence. But Baird and co-author Teege Mettill focus far more on the why and the what (why traditional approaches are failing, what behavioral science reveals about student decision-making, what a modern framework should look like) than on the who (you should buy our product).

The book succeeds because it balances Baird's outside perspective—he came to higher education from enterprise technology and brings fresh eyes unburdened by “this is how we've always done it”—with Mettill's insider practitioner credibility. The result is a book that's simultaneously visionary and grounded, theoretical and practical. They wrote this book to diagnose and solve a professional crisis, not to close sales. The fact that EnrollML exists as a solution is almost beside the point—the framework stands on its own.

One Critique

My single substantive criticism involves layout and structure. Throughout the book, “Teege's Take” sidebars offer practitioner perspectives that complement Baird's analytical framework. These are valuable—often they're where abstract concepts become concrete and actionable. The issue: there's no introduction establishing who Teege Mettill is or why his perspective matters. We encounter “Teege's Take” long before we have context for his credibility. The authors' bios are relegated to the final pages, which I didn't reach until after finishing. A

simple two-paragraph introduction of both authors at the beginning would have solved this completely and strengthened the authority of the dual-perspective approach throughout. This is a minor formatting issue in an otherwise excellently structured book, but it's worth noting for a potential second edition.

The Bottom Line

Every admissions and enrollment management professional needs to read *The Signal Solution*. Not eventually. Now. This is no hyperbole—this is pattern recognition. The enrollment cliff is here. International student restrictions are tightening. Traditional metrics are misleading us. Students are ghosting us in record numbers. We can either keep doing what's always worked (until it stopped working), or we can adopt frameworks and tools that actually match how students make decisions in 2026 and beyond. This book provides both the intellectual framework to understand what's broken and practical tools to build something better—a system that treats students as complex decision-makers rather than pipeline statistics, that measures momentum rather than compliance, that delivers precision rather than mass communication. The change in mindset and practice Baird and Mettill describe is not coming—it is already here, and it's accelerating fast. The only question is whether you will lead that change or scramble to catch up. Consider this review your signal: read this book. And then transform how your institution thinks about enrollment. That's a pretty loud signal for you.

About the Author



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Christopher W. Tremblay, Ed.D., has been Editor-in-Chief of *College and University* since 2020. He is the Executive Director of Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. He also serves as Director of AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM)

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