VIEW FROM THE TOP

# Designing the Next Era of Strategic Enrollment Management

*By Brian Gann*

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is entering a new era. Fifty years after the field began to take shape, enrollment leaders face demographic contraction, affordability pressures, rising expectations for credential value and student outcomes, constrained resources, and accelerating technological change. This article argues that SEM must evolve from functional coordination to systems design, integrating strategy, structure, data, technology, and practice. The author concludes by proposing a framework to envision the next era of SEM around four cross-institutional design pillars: clarity; momentum; affordability and value; and capacity.

## SEM at an Inflection Point

Strategic enrollment management has always been more than a set of enrollment techniques. At its best, SEM has served as a disciplined institutional practice for aligning mission, market, student need, academic capacity, financial strategy, and long-term sustainability. It has helped colleges and universities move beyond fragmented recruitment activities or isolated admissions targets toward a more integrated understanding of enrollment as an institution-wide responsibility.

As the field marks 50 years of development, however, the conditions surrounding enrollment management have changed in ways that require more than refinement of existing practice. Enrollment leaders operate in an environment shaped by demographic contraction, uneven regional population change, rising public skepticism about the value of higher education, affordability pressures, constrained resources, and accelerating technological change. At the same time, institutions are being asked to enroll a wider range of students, retain and graduate them, demonstrate higher levels of successful outcomes, and connect their credentials more directly to the economy and the workforce.

These pressures do not affect all institutions in the same way. Community colleges, regional public universities, private colleges, graduate and professional schools, and global institutions each face distinctive market conditions and mission obligations. Yet across sectors, one common reality is increasingly clear: the next era of SEM will require institutions to think less

about enrollment strategy as a linear pipeline and more about enrollment as a complete and complex system.

The visuals of pyramid and pipeline have been useful and valuable metaphors in enrollment management's first 50 years. They helped institutions understand inquiry, application, admission, yield, enrollment, and persistence as connected stages rather than disconnected activities. But the metaphors are increasingly insufficient. Fewer students move through institutions in a straight line. They stop, swirl, transfer, change goals, balance work and caregiving, encounter financial challenges, respond to labor market signals, and make decisions based on the clarity or complexity of the systems they encounter. Institutional structures are also not linear. Admissions, financial aid, registration, advising, academic programs, institutional research, marketing, student accounts, career services, and academic departments influence enrollment outcomes together, whether or not they are designed to do so.

This article argues that the next era of SEM must be understood as a shift from functional coordination to systems design. Functional coordination remains necessary. Institutions still need strong admissions operations, effective marketing, accurate financial aid processes, sound registration practices, and reliable data. But coordination alone will not be enough for the next 50 years of SEM.

A systems-design approach to SEM asks different questions:

- How does a student understand available pathways before applying?
- How does an institution convert interest into informed choice?
- How do financial aid, advising, academic planning, and registration systems work together to create a clear, supportive student experience that helps students stay on track to completion? Where do students experience friction, ambiguity, delay, or repeated handoffs?
- How do institutional policies create or remove barriers?
- How does technology extend capacity without weakening human connection?
- How do leaders align enrollment goals with student success, equity, workforce relevance, and financial sustainability?

The future of SEM depends on the field's ability to keep its core strategic discipline while expanding its operating model for ever more complex environments.

## Literature Review: From Enrollment Activity to Strategic System

The SEM literature has long emphasized that enrollment management is not simply a recruitment function. Bontrager and Kerlin (2012) describe SEM as a broad institutional strategy that requires alignment across planning, student success, academic affairs, finance, and institutional mission. This framing helped move the field beyond narrower understandings of admissions and toward a more comprehensive model for institutional enrollment health.

Early and continuing SEM scholarship stresses the importance of cross-functional collaboration, data-informed planning, and sustained institutional commitment. SEM planning requires institutions to define enrollment goals, understand student markets, assess internal capacity, and connect strategies to measurable outcomes. In this sense, SEM has always had system-level implications, even when institutional practice is organized around separate offices and functional responsibilities.

The challenge is that many institutions adopted SEM structures without fully redesigning the student experience those structures were intended to support. Institutions may have SEM committees, enrollment plans, dashboards, recruitment campaigns, and retention initiatives, yet students may still experience the institution as fragmented. Admissions may communicate one set of expectations, financial aid another, advising another, and academic departments still another. A student may be admitted but not registered, registered but not financially cleared, enrolled but not connected to a program plan, or progressing but not on a path to completion.

Student success literature has increasingly highlighted the importance of structure, clarity, and early

momentum. Guided pathways and momentum frameworks emphasize that students benefit when institutions clarify program options, help students enter a pathway, support early academic progress, and monitor completion-oriented milestones. Complete College America identifies early credit accumulation, gateway course completion, entry into a program of study, and enrollment in program-relevant credits as important momentum indicators (Complete College America 2019). These approaches are not separate from SEM. They are central to the next era of SEM because they connect enrollment strategy to student progress after the point of entry.

The demographic and economic context further strengthens the case for a more integrated SEM model. Projections by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) are well known among enrollment professionals and familiar to the broader public. Colleges and universities feel these patterns with significant variation by region and student population (Lane, Falkenstern, and Bransberger 2024). Institutions will need to serve a changing student population more effectively, reduce avoidable attrition, reengage adult learners, strengthen transfer pathways, and connect educational offerings to student goals and labor market realities.

Recent enrollment patterns demonstrate both recovery and instability. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reporting showed renewed growth in postsecondary enrollment in 2025, including notable gains at community colleges and public four-year institutions, but the broader environment remains uneven across sectors, age groups, credential types, and student populations (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2026). Enrollment leaders in the next era of SEM will need frameworks that account for volatility rather than assuming stable year-over-year patterns.

Technology change adds the next layer of complexity. The *2025 EDUCAUSE Horizon Report* describes a higher education environment in which artificial intelligence (AI), changing learner behaviors, political and regulatory uncertainty, and new expectations for digital engagement are reshaping institutional practice (EDUCAUSE 2025). For SEM leaders, AI is often discussed through the lens of automation. Use cases such as agentic AI tools, predictive analytics, communication workflows, content generation, and operational efficiency will continue to grow in impact. The strategic question is whether AI can help institutions redesign capacity, responsiveness, and personalization in ways that advance student success rather than simply accelerate existing processes.

Taken together, the SEM literature, student success frameworks, demographic projections, enrollment data, and technology trends point toward a common conclusion: the field needs a more explicit systems-design orientation. SEM must continue to manage enrollment performance, but it must also help institutions design the conditions through which students choose, enter, persist, complete, and achieve outcomes.

## Why the Next Era Requires a Systems-Design Lens

The next era of SEM is likely to be defined by the interaction of pressures that cannot be solved through isolated initiatives. Five forces are especially important.

First, demographic change will make student recruitment more competitive in many regions, but its effects will not be uniform across states, institution types, or student populations. WICHE projects that the number of high school graduates will decline by approximately 13 percent between its 2025 peak and 2041, with 38 states experiencing declines from 2023 levels even as parts of the South follow a different trajectory (Lane, Falkenstern, and Bransberger 2024). Yet the future enrollment market cannot be understood solely through the number of traditional-age high school graduates. Nearly 43.1 million Americans have attended college without earning a credential, including 37.6 million working-age adults, representing both a substantial opportunity and a significant reengagement challenge for institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2025). Institutions will therefore need to understand their markets with greater precision and rely less heavily on historical assumptions about who their students are and where they will come from. They cannot

simply recruit harder from the same populations and expect sustainable results.

Second, affordability and perceived value are central enrollment questions under growing external pressure. Students and families are evaluating not only price and debt, but also time to completion, employment outcomes, transferability, and the opportunity cost of enrollment. Recent research illustrates how directly these considerations can shape student trajectories. Chakrabarti and colleagues found that an additional $5,000 in tuition increased student debt by $1,480 and reduced the probability of eventually earning a graduate degree by 3.1 percentage points (Chakrabarti, *et al*. 2022). Ecton and colleagues found that 62 percent of Tennessee community college students worked while enrolled and that working students were 4 to 7 percentage points less likely to complete college, with stronger negative associations at higher levels of work intensity (Ecton, Heinrich, and Carruthers 2023). For adult learners, these tradeoffs are especially acute because enrollment often competes directly with work, caregiving, and immediate financial obligations. SEM strategies that do not engage affordability and value as conditions shaping student choice and persistence will be incomplete.

Third, student success is now understood through a broader set of outcomes than enrollment alone. Institutions are evaluated through measures such as retention, completion, transfer, learning, employment, licensure, and longer-term post-college outcomes. In an analysis of strategic plans from 55 North Carolina community colleges, Eddy and colleagues found that institutional goals most often emphasized labor-market outcomes, transfer and completion, and student learning, illustrating the breadth of outcomes now associated with student success (Eddy, *et al*. 2023). This broader standard is especially important for access institutions. Although community colleges provide broad access to postsecondary education, only 31 percent of first-time, full-time credential-seeking students who begin at public two-year institutions graduate within three years (Weiss, Bloom, and Singh 2023). Enrollment growth has limited meaning when students do not make sustained progress toward their educational goals. SEM planning must therefore encompass the institutional conditions that enable students to persist, complete, transfer, and realize the value of their education.

Fourth, institutional expectations are rising faster than institutional capacity. Many colleges and universities face the dreaded mandate to do more with less: serve increasingly complex student needs, comply with changing regulations, maintain evolving technology systems, respond to workforce demands, and improve outcomes without proportional increases in staffing or funding. In a 2025 national survey, 51 percent of higher education employees reported regularly working beyond full-time expectations, 61 percent had assumed duties outside their original job descriptions, and 53 percent had absorbed responsibilities left by departing colleagues (Schneider and Bichsel 2025). Research on community college reform similarly identifies financial pressures, institutional structures, leadership challenges, and limited change-management capacity as barriers to sustaining student-success efforts at scale (Miller and Harrington 2023). Under these conditions, SEM cannot rely solely on adding programs, people, initiatives, or campaigns. It must help redesign work by aligning roles, processes, technologies, and decision-making with the activities that have the greatest impact on student access, progress, and completion.

Fifth, artificial intelligence and related technologies are resetting expectations for responsiveness, personalization, and institutional capacity. Policy and political leaders may call on institutions to perform like Amazon, but without Amazon's profits. Students increasingly expect information to be available when they need it, in formats they can use, and connected to their individual circumstances. In a survey of 4,800 university students, most respondents wanted AI integrated into their studies, even as they expressed concerns about the reliability, accuracy, and potential bias of AI-generated information (Balabdaoui, *et al*. 2024). A systematic review of 67 studies similarly found that AI chatbots can provide immediate assistance, personalized support, and time-saving capacity for educators and institutions, while also raising concerns related to accuracy, privacy, and ethical use (Labadze, Grigolia, and Machaidze 2023).

The peer-reviewed evidence base remains nascent, however, and research findings must be considered alongside the rapid evolution of both the technologies and their institutional applications. SEM leaders must pursue advancing technological opportunities while preserving meaningful human connection and establishing safeguards for privacy, transparency, and accountability. AI should expand institutional capacity and strengthen human work in service of a clearly defined strategy.

These five forces do not operate independently. They converge in the student journey and within the institutional systems built to support it. A systems-design lens shifts attention from whether individual offices are performing their assigned functions to whether the institution as a whole is creating the conditions students need to make progress. It also helps leaders distinguish between visible symptoms and the structures producing them. Among more than 1.2 million students who created a Common App profile and began at least one application during the 2018–19 cycle, nearly one in four ultimately submitted no application (Odle and Magouirk 2023). Low application completion may reflect communication gaps, confusing program choices, unclear next steps, financial aid information and support disconnected from admissions, or digital environments that make required actions difficult to find or understand. Admissions instructions collected from 949 U.S. community colleges averaged near a fourteenth-grade reading level, demonstrating how institutional communication can create barriers within the application process itself (Taylor 2024). Research has also shown that personalized outreach connected to students' completion of specific pre-enrollment requirements can improve timely enrollment (Page and Gehlbach 2017), while integrating Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)-status information with clear guidance and access to assistance can increase financial aid completion and college matriculation (Page, Castleman, and Meyer 2020). The same systems logic applies to retention, which may be shaped by the interaction of academic difficulty, financial stress, lack of belonging, schedule availability, program requirements, and advising capacity. A systems-design approach resists assigning each problem to a single office and instead examines how policies, processes, technologies, incentives, communications, and human supports work together across the student journey.

## Reframing SEM: Evolving Pipeline Management to Systems of Momentum

The enrollment pipeline remains an important operational tool. Institutions still need to understand inquiry generation, application behavior, admission patterns, registration conversion, financial clearance, and census outcomes. But pipeline management should be understood as one component of a broader student momentum system.

A student momentum system begins before application. Students form impressions about institutional value, program clarity, affordability, belonging, and feasibility long before they submit an inquiry. SEM leaders therefore need to ensure that institutional messaging is not only persuasive but clarifying. Marketing and recruitment should help students understand options, costs, outcomes, timelines, and next steps. In a complex environment, clarity is a competitive advantage and a student success strategy.

The system continues through entry. Application, admission, financial aid, placement, advising, orientation, registration, payment, and first-term planning are often managed by different offices, but students experience them as one journey. When the journey is fragmented, students fall out of the process. When the journey is coherent, students are more likely to build early confidence and momentum.

The system extends into persistence and completion. SEM cannot stop at census. Course availability, academic planning, advising caseloads, financial aid renewal, satisfactory academic progress, transfer planning, career alignment, and timely intervention all influence enrollment outcomes over time. Retention is not merely a student affairs concern or an academic affairs concern. It is a central SEM concern because returning students are part of the enrollment portfolio and because student progress is inseparable from institutional mission.

A student momentum system also includes reengagement. Many students leave with credits but no credential. Some leave because of financial pressure, academic barriers, work obligations, family needs, or institutional complexity. SEM leaders should treat stopout reengagement not as a marginal campaign, but as a strategic responsibility. This requires data systems that can identify near-completers, communication strategies that are respectful and relevant, policies that reduce barriers to return, and academic structures that make completion feasible.

Finally, a student momentum system connects to post-completion outcomes and into alumni engagement. Students increasingly evaluate higher education based on whether it helps them transfer, advance in work, earn family-sustaining wages, or achieve personal and civic goals. SEM strategies that align program exploration, career information, academic planning, experiential learning, and outcomes data will be better positioned to demonstrate value. Integrating alumni engagement into this system would further expand SEM's reach by connecting graduates to career networks, continued education, and opportunities to support future students who follow them. Alumni experiences and outcomes can also provide institutions with essential feedback about program relevance, employment pathways, connection to internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities. Strong alumni engagement can show the long-term value students realize from their education, support continued student momentum, and serve as a source of intelligence for the institution.

This reframing does not diminish the importance of recruitment. Rather, it repositions recruitment within a larger promise. Institutions should recruit students into systems designed for progress.

## Cross-Sector Implications of Next-Era SEM

The next era of SEM, and a systems-design approach to the next 50 years, will apply across higher education, but the expression will naturally differ by sector. A systems-design model should not produce a uniform structure or model. It should help each institution align its mission, students, markets, resources, and pathways within a coherent enrollment system.

For two-year colleges, next-era SEM should build upon the sector's long history of expanding access, responding to workforce needs, creating transfer pathways, reengaging adult learners, supporting dual enrollment, and addressing barriers outside the classroom. The next task is not simply to introduce more programs or practices, but to make existing efforts more coherent, scalable, and sustainable. Karp's recent examination of holistic student-support redesign at five California community colleges found that institutional transformation developed through a series of intentional and interconnected efforts, supported by collaborative problem-solving and adaptation over time (Karp 2025). Similarly, a study of guided-pathways implementation in Ohio, Tennessee, and Washington found that only a minority of participating colleges had implemented at least one practice at scale in each of the model's four major areas (Jenkins, Myers, and Matin 2023). Community colleges may have pioneered many elements of systems-oriented student support, but the work of integrating and sustaining them across the full institution remains unfinished.

That integration is especially important because community colleges serve students pursuing widely varied goals, including associate degrees, transfer, short-term credentials, incumbent worker training, high school dual enrollment, English language learning, and personal enrichment. This breadth is one of the sector's greatest strengths, but it also creates substantial navigational complexity. A systems-design approach reduces friction at the front door, connects recruitment with guided pathways, financial aid with basic-needs support, advising with career and transfer goals, and dual enrollment with continued postsecondary opportunity. It creates clearer connections among nondegree education, credit-bearing programs, recognized credentials, and future learning so that students entering through workforce or short-term programs are not isolated from longer-term educational mobility.

For four-year public institutions, the systems-design challenge centers on balancing access, affordability, academic capacity, student success, workforce needs, and public accountability. In fiscal year 2025, enrollment at public colleges and universities increased by 3.6 percent, while inflation-adjusted state and local appropriations per student declined by 1 percent because funding growth did not keep pace with enrollment (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association 2026). These conditions require SEM leaders to look beyond the number of students an institution can recruit and consider whether academic programs, course availability, housing, advising, financial aid, and student-support systems have the capacity to serve them successfully. Recruitment goals and program-level capacity planning should be developed as parts of the same institutional system.

Transfer represents a particularly important point of connection between two-year and four-year institutions. Although nearly 80 percent of community college students report aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree, only about one-third transfer to a four-year institution, and only 16 percent earn a bachelor's degree within six years of beginning community college (Velasco, *et al*. 2024). Transfer outcomes are not produced by the sending or receiving institution alone. They reflect the interaction of program maps, curricula, credit applicability, admissions policies, financial aid, advising, course availability, and student support across institutional boundaries. Next-era SEM should treat transfer as a shared system of student mobility with joint responsibility for access, transition, progress, and bachelor's degree completion.

For four-year private institutions, the systems-design challenge is to connect mission, market position, price, financial aid, academic portfolio, student experience, outcomes, and long-term financial sustainability. The *2025 NACUBO Tuition Discounting Study* estimated that participating private nonprofit institutions awarded 57.1 percent of potential tuition and fee revenue as institutional grant aid to first-time, full-time undergraduates in 2025–26 (NACUBO 2026). Discounting may improve affordability and remain necessary for recruitment, but its sustainability depends on whether the broader institutional system produces sufficient enrollment, retention, net tuition revenue, and demonstrated student value.

A systems-design approach therefore places financial aid strategy within a larger value proposition. It asks whether academic offerings reflect student and market needs, whether students can understand the pathways available to them, whether the institution delivers the experiences promised during recruitment, and whether graduates realize meaningful educational, professional, personal, and civic outcomes. Intensified recruitment and increased discounting may generate short-term enrollment, but institutions that recruit students into unclear pathways, weak support structures, or poorly aligned academic portfolios may undermine both student success and institutional sustainability.

For graduate and professional education, next-era SEM must respond to a market increasingly differentiated by institutional scale, field of study, career relevance, cost, modality, and international mobility. The Council of Graduate Schools found that large institutions generally experienced stronger application and enrollment patterns in 2024 than small and medium-sized institutions, while international first-time graduate enrollment declined across institutional sizes (Council of Graduate Schools 2025b). Its recent work on graduate education costs also identifies the need to balance affordability, access, program quality, and student success as costs place increasing pressure on both institutions and learners (Council of Graduate Schools 2025a).

Graduate SEM must consequently extend into program and portfolio design. Enrollment strategy should connect employer and workforce needs, program modality, scheduling, pricing, financial support, admissions processes, student services, professional development, and career outcomes. Graduate and professional students are often choosing among degree programs, certificates, employer-based learning, and other credentials while balancing work and personal obligations. A coherent system should help them understand the investment required, the flexibility available, and the educational and career value they can reasonably expect.

For institutions outside the United States, next-era SEM must be grounded in the national, regional, and cultural systems in which higher education operates. Governance, public funding, admissions, tuition, qualifications frameworks, vocational pathways, language, and student mobility differ substantially across countries. A systems-design approach should therefore connect enrollment strategy with public policy, workforce and community needs, educational capacity, learner mobility, and institutional mission. Canada illustrates this complexity. International students represented 21.2 percent of Canadian higher education enrollment in 2023, up from 13.8 percent in 2018 (OECD 2025), but subsequent federal policy changes contributed to sharp enrollment declines, particularly in colleges (Blain, *et al*. 2026). Canadian SEM leaders must connect forecasting, program capacity, financial sustainability, immigration policy, student support, and contingency planning.

Across national contexts, next-era SEM must also strengthen the recognition and portability of learning. More than 7.3 million students now study outside their home countries, increasing the importance of credential evaluation, credit transfer, recognition of prior and partial study, qualifications frameworks, language support, and student transition (UNESCO 2026). The same systems-design principle applies to domestic learners moving among universities, colleges, polytechnics, apprenticeships, short-cycle programs, microcredentials, and workplace learning. SEM should help institutions make these varied pathways understandable, connected, and portable so that learners are not left to navigate educational complexity on their own.

Across all institution types, coherence does not mean sameness. Each sector has a different mission, resource structure, market position, and mix of students. The common principle is that next-era SEM must help design the relationships among these elements rather than manage them as separate activities. Students should not have to understand institutional boundaries, funding structures, organizational charts, or interinstitutional agreements to make progress. The institution must assume responsibility for making its complexity navigable.

## Artificial Intelligence as Capacity-Building Infrastructure

Artificial intelligence is likely to be one of the defining tools of the next era of SEM, but its value will depend on how institutions frame and govern it. If AI is treated only as a way to automate transactions or reduce labor, it may produce efficiency without transformation. If it is treated as capacity-building infrastructure, it can help institutions redesign how they support students at scale.

Capacity is one of the most persistent constraints in enrollment and student services. Staff are asked to respond to thousands of questions, monitor student progress, personalize outreach, interpret policies, support families, manage compliance, and solve complex student problems. Many institutions cannot simply hire their way to the level of responsiveness students need.

AI can help address this capacity challenge in several ways. It can support around the clock responses to common questions, assist staff with drafting communications, identify patterns in student behavior, help personalize nudges and reminders, summarize complex records, and support proactive outreach. It can also help leaders see where processes are breaking down by analyzing student inquiries, service patterns, and workflow bottlenecks.

However, AI should not be understood as a replacement for human judgment, care, or institutional accountability. Many student situations require empathy, discretion, policy interpretation, and cross-functional problem solving. The most promising SEM applications of AI will likely be those that allow human staff to spend less time on repetitive information delivery and more time on complex advising, relationship-building, problem resolution, and strategic improvement.

AI also raises important ethical and operational questions. Institutions must address data privacy, algorithmic bias, transparency, accessibility, record accuracy, and appropriate human oversight. Predictive analytics can be useful, but risk models can also reinforce inequities if they are poorly designed or used without care. Automated communication can improve responsiveness, but it can also create confusion or distrust if

messages are inaccurate, impersonal, or disconnected from student context.

For these reasons, SEM leaders should place AI within a broader governance and strategy model. The key questions move well beyond the technical. What student problem is AI intended to solve? What institutional process is being redesigned? What data are being used? How will accuracy be monitored? When will staff intervene? How will students know when they are interacting with AI? How will bias impacts be assessed? How will the institution avoid simply automating a flawed process?

The strategic opportunity is significant and potentially era-defining. AI can help institutions build more responsive enrollment and student success systems, but only if leaders connect it to mission, ethics, process redesign, and student momentum.

## Leading SEM as Institutional Change Work

If next-era SEM is systems design, next-era SEM leadership will be defined as change leadership. Enrollment leaders must be able to convene, translate, align, and sustain work across institutional boundaries.

This requires a different view from the traditional image of the enrollment manager as the person responsible for hitting "the number." The number still matters, of course. Institutions need enrollment targets, revenue forecasts, capacity plans, and accountability. The work required to achieve those outcomes increasingly depends on influence across systems that enrollment leaders may not directly control.

SEM leaders must operate as institutional diplomats, connectors, educators, and culture-change leaders. They need to bridge academic affairs and student affairs, finance and financial aid, marketing and advising, institutional research and front-line practice, and technology and human service. This work requires more than convening colleagues around enrollment priorities. SEM leaders must help teams understand how their decisions influence student choice and student success, develop the capacity of their colleagues to use data and systems thinking, and create shared accountability across organizational boundaries. Through training, mentoring, coaching, and sustained relationship-building, they can cultivate a culture in which enrollment and student success are understood as institution-wide responsibilities, including by colleagues who do not traditionally think of themselves as part of enrollment management.

This kind of leadership depends on shared language. Terms such as inquiry, admit, yield, retention, persistence, progression, completion, and student success can mean different things in different offices. The next era of SEM leaders will help institutions define common metrics and connect them to shared purpose. Without shared definitions, data can become a source of confusion rather than alignment.

A systems-design approach requires leaders to identify the leverage points where change will produce the greatest strategic effect. That judgment cannot be made through data alone. It requires an understanding of institutional priorities, organizational culture and history, available capacity, and market conditions. For some institutions, the most consequential opportunity may be program clarity. For others, it may be financial aid completion, schedule availability, transfer credit evaluation, first-term advising, adult learner reentry, or gateway course success. SEM leaders must determine where change can matter most, and where the institution is prepared to act, sustain improvement, and build momentum. The specific leverage point will vary, but the skill of identifying it and advancing it will be essential.

SEM leadership also requires attention to culture. Institutions often reproduce complexity because each unit optimizes for its own responsibilities. Admissions optimizes for application volume, financial aid for compliance and packaging, advising for caseload management, academic departments for curriculum and schedule needs, and finance for revenue predictability. Each of these goals, inherently, is valid and makes sense within the responsibilities of an individual unit. But when they are pursued separately, students experience the gaps between them. SEM leaders must help institutions move from local optimization to system optimization.

Finally, SEM leaders must keep student-centeredness from becoming a slogan. Student-centered design

should be informed and, where possible, co-created by students, especially for students who have historically been least well served by institutional systems. Meaningful partnership gives students voice and agency in interpreting their experiences and redesigning the policies and processes that shape them (Omland, *et al*. 2025). It should also create conditions in which students know that they matter: that they are noticed, valued, supported, and consequential to the institution. Recent research connects mattering-rich environments with student engagement and persistence, particularly for commuter and first-generation transfer students (Hallam 2023; McCarron 2026). This work requires listening to students, disaggregating outcomes, mapping processes with the people who experience them, reviewing policies, and redesigning practices that may make sense internally but create barriers externally.

## A Framework for Next-Era SEM

The next era of SEM can be organized around a framework of four design pillars: clarity, momentum, affordability and value, and capacity. As institutions think about organizing SEM on campus in the future, developing cross-functional collaboration around these pillars can remove silos and drive adaptive systems-level thinking. The framework is intended to serve as both a diagnostic and a design tool. It can help leaders identify where institutional systems are creating friction, determine how weaknesses in one area affect other parts of the student journey, and organize cross-functional work around shared outcomes. Clarity supports momentum. Momentum influences affordability and the value students ultimately realize. Each of these depends on sufficient institutional capacity. When one pillar is weak, the others are more difficult to achieve.

While structure will vary based on institutional sector, mission, student population, underlying market conditions, and culture, these four pillars provide a common lens through which institutions can examine whether their enrollment systems are understandable, supportive of student progress, attentive to cost and to outcomes, and capable of delivering what students need at scale.

### *Design for Clarity*

Students should be able to understand their options, costs, requirements, timelines, and next steps. Clarity is especially important for first-generation students, adult learners, transfer students, international students, and students navigating complex financial or family circumstances.

Moving beyond simplifying individual communications, institutions should examine if information and pathways are consistent across recruitment materials, program pages, admissions communications, financial aid instructions, academic maps, orientation programs, and advising tools through the eyes of students. Designing for clarity will mean students experience a clear and cohesive pathway across their institutional lifecycle.

The central question is whether students can clearly determine their available choices, what each choice requires, and what action they need to take next. Opportunities for improvement may be found in abandoned applications, repeated inquiries, missed deadlines, avoidable program changes, conflicting or outdated communications, registration delays, or students moving between offices without resolution. Designing for clarity should result in students experiencing a coherent pathway across their lifecycle, even when many functions contribute to that pathway.

### *Design for Momentum*

SEM systems should help students move from interest to application, from application to enrollment, from enrollment to early progress, and from progress to completion. Momentum should be understood as more than speed through a given process. Momentum is defined by sustained movement toward goals that students understand and value.

Designing for momentum is achieved by ensuring students have a meaningful next step when they interact with the institution. Prior to enrollment, that can mean completing an application, receiving timely financial aid and advising support, making an informed choice on program of study, and registering for first-semester courses with program value. Later momentum markers can be credit accumulation, gateway course completion,

financial aid renewal, developing a semester-by-semester plan for graduation, receiving needed career supports, and timely progress to credential, transfer, or the workforce. Opportunities for improvement may be found in admitted students who do not register, students enrolling or continuing without a clear academic success plan, repeated withdrawal in gateway courses, excess credit accumulation off pathway, delayed entry into required courses, preventable stop-outs, and near-completers who are not effectively engaged to persist.

Momentum indicators should be built into enrollment planning, not treated as separate student success measures and not belonging to any one division of the institution alone. Institutions should monitor early registration, credit accumulation, gateway course completion, program plan completion, financial aid renewal, progress toward credential requirements, persistence, reengagement when needed, transfer-out rates, and graduation.

## *Design for Affordability and Value*

Affordability is obviously about price point but extends well beyond it. Time to credential, credit mobility, schedule availability, advising and wraparound supports, and completion rates all create a total value. Excess credits, unclear requirements, unavailable courses, poor transfer applicability, and delayed financial aid all increase cost.

Designing for affordability and value requires institutions to ask whether students can reasonably complete their chosen pathways with manageable financial and opportunity costs. It also asks whether students can understand the educational, career, transfer, personal, and civic outcomes associated with those pathways before making an enrollment decision.

Opportunities for improvement may be found in students being removed from schedules for nonpayment, reducing enrollment because required courses are unavailable, accumulating excess credits, losing credits during transfer, stopping out for financial reasons, exhausting aid eligibility before completion, or expressing uncertainty about how their programs connect to future opportunities.

SEM leaders must work with academic, financial, student support, and career services leaders to connect aid strategy, program design, scheduling, basic needs supports, transfer policy, program outcomes, and academic planning to student affordability. Critical measures can include unmet financial need, financial aid completion, payment-related attrition, time to credential, excess credits, credit applicability, transfer efficiency, completion rates, employment outcomes, licensure results, and student perceptions of value.

Institutions should also communicate value, including transfer outcomes, employment pathways, licensure connections, and long-term opportunity, clearly and up front. Students need accessible information about cost, time, transferability, employment pathways, continued education, and likely outcomes. A coherent value proposition depends on the institution delivering an experience that is aligned with the promises made during recruitment.

## *Design for Capacity*

Institutions need operating models that match the scale and complexity of student need. Capacity should consider staffing, technology, workflow, data, organizational structure, partnerships, and the ability to coordinate across functional boundaries. Capacity analysis should reflect whether institutional resources are sufficient and are organized to deliver timely, accurate, and appropriately personalized support.

Capacity design asks which work should be automated, which processes should be simplified, which responsibilities require human judgment, and which activities should be eliminated because they reflect unnecessary institutional complexity. AI may be part of the capacity solution, but it should be embedded in redesigned processes rather than added into inefficient or fragmented systems. Opportunities for capacity improvement may be found in long response times, unmanageable advising caseloads, processing backlogs, repeated handoffs, inconsistent information, delayed transfer evaluations, limited course availability, staff burnout, and uneven service across campuses, programs, or student populations. Institutions may have

substantial capacity that remains underused because data, technology, and organizational structures prevent staff from coordinating effectively.

Institutions should also examine whether technology investments are reducing friction and allowing staff to devote more time to advising, relationship-building, complex problem-solving, and strategic improvement.

## The Pillars in Practice

Consider an adult learner attempting to return after several years away from college. Clarity determines whether the student can understand how prior credits apply, which program fits current goals, what the program will cost, and what steps are required to reenter. Momentum determines whether the student can move efficiently from inquiry to readmission, advising, financial aid, registration, and early academic progress. Affordability and value determine whether the schedule is compatible with work and caregiving, whether the remaining credits are financially manageable, and whether the credential supports the learner's goals. Capacity determines whether staff, data, technology, policies, and course schedules can support the student without unnecessary delays or repeated handoffs.

A failure in any one pillar can undermine the others. Clear information has limited value when required courses are unavailable. Financial aid may be insufficient when excess credits extend time to completion. Technology may increase response speed without creating momentum if it directs students into a fragmented process. Strong advising cannot compensate indefinitely for policies or systems that repeatedly create avoidable barriers.

The four pillars of clarity, momentum, affordability and value, and capacity provide a shared lens for institutional diagnosis and design. They do not determine where SEM should sit on an organizational chart or assign each responsibility to a particular office. They help leaders examine whether students encounter understandable pathways, sustain meaningful progress, receive value proportionate to their investment, and experience systems with sufficient capacity to support their goals. The work of next-era SEM is to strengthen each pillar and, equally important, to design the relationships among them.

## Implications for Practice

Moving toward next-era SEM may require institutions to make practical changes in how they view their SEM plans and architecture. For institutions already mature in SEM planning and structure, the next evolution may be to evaluate their SEM architecture through the design principles of clarity, momentum, affordability and value, and capacity.

First, SEM plans should include student success and momentum metrics alongside recruitment and enrollment metrics. Applications, admits, yield, census enrollment, and net tuition revenue remain important, but they should be connected to persistence, credit momentum, program progression, completion, transfer, and post-completion outcomes.

Second, institutions should map the student journey across offices. This mapping should focus on the lived student experience, not only internal process steps. Mapping should also consider differences in student persona; residential students of traditional age will likely have a different map and different experience than part-time adult learners. Leaders should identify where students wait, repeat information, receive conflicting messages, encounter unclear requirements, or fall between offices.

Third, SEM governance should include academic affairs, student affairs, finance, institutional research, technology, marketing, and front-line practitioners. SEM cannot be owned by one division if enrollment outcomes are produced by the whole institution.

Fourth, institutions should review policies that affect student momentum. Examples include placement rules, registration holds, payment deadlines, satisfactory academic progress communication, transfer credit practices, academic standing policies, schedule cancellation processes, and program change procedures. Policies designed for administrative order can sometimes create unintended enrollment barriers.

Fifth, AI and technology investments should be evaluated based on their contribution to student mo-

mentum and institutional capacity. Institutions should avoid adopting tools simply because they are new or efficient. The better question is whether the technology helps students make progress and helps staff focus on higher-value work.

Sixth, SEM leaders should communicate enrollment strategy as mission work. Enrollment is not merely the pursuit of institutional numbers. Behind every enrollment goal is a student deciding whether college is possible, whether the institution is understandable, whether the cost is manageable, and whether the path is worth pursuing.

## Conclusion: The Future of SEM as System Stewardship

The first 50 years of enrollment management helped institutions understand that enrollment does not happen by accident. It is shaped by strategy, data, communication, planning, and institutional coordination. That contribution remains essential and the foundation of enrollment management. The next 50 years will require SEM to go further. The field must help institutions design systems that are coherent enough for students to navigate, flexible enough to serve diverse learners, disciplined enough to sustain institutional health, and empathetic enough to keep student purpose at the center.

SEM has always been about aligning institutional action with student choice and institutional mission. The complexity of the environment and the stakes of the work have continued to evolve and increase. In the next era, successful enrollment leaders will not be only recruiters, analysts, marketers, financial strategists, or retention advocates. They will be system stewards. They will help institutions see how decisions connect, how students move, where friction accumulates, where resources are misaligned, and where design can create momentum. The future of strategic enrollment management will belong to institutions that can move beyond managing the pipeline to designing the system. Those institutions will be better prepared not only to enroll students, but to help them succeed.

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## About the Author



**Brian Gann**

Brian Gann serves as Vice President of Enrollment and Student Services and Chief Campus Officer of Southern Wake Campus at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, North Carolina. Gann is the incoming Director of the AACRAO SEM Annual Conference. A first-generation college student and proud community college graduate, he has dedicated the past 24 years of his career to advancing student access, success, and support in the community college sector. Gann earned an Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts from Bevill State Community College and later completed his Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration from The University of Alabama.