CASES FROM THE FIELD

It Was SEM All Along: Strategic Enrollment Management Lived One Career at a Time

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As enrollment management marks 50 years, this analytic autoethnography examines a career spanning admissions, academic advising, advising administration, and the registrar function. By mapping roles to AACRAO competencies, the study illustrates how enrollment-related activities are interwoven with various roles in support of institutional strategic enrollment strategy, often without awareness or recognition.

As enrollment management celebrates its 50th year, the field has evolved from a recruitment-centered function to a comprehensive, institution-wide framework shaping student access, degree progression, and completion. This milestone invites reflection not only on SEM's conceptual development, but on how enrollment strategy has been enacted in practice, often across roles and structures before SEM was formally named or centrally organized.

SEM has evolved into an institution-wide framework, and SEM-related activities can be enacted as a distributed and unnamed practice across higher education roles. Many professionals engage deeply in SEM-aligned work without formal SEM titles or explicit awareness of SEM as a discipline. This misalignment blurs professional identity, limits intentional competency development, and constrains how institutions recognize and cultivate SEM expertise across the student lifecycle.

The purpose of this study is to examine SEM through an analytic autoethnography of a professional career spanning multiple enrollment-adjacent roles. Reflecting on career trajectory offers a meaningful lens for understanding SEM's evolution because it reveals how enrollment strategy is developed, enacted, and integrated across time, roles, and institutional structures, often prior to formal recognition of SEM as a defined discipline.

This manuscript contributes to SEM scholarship by offering a practitioner-scholar reflection on how enrollment strategy and related activities are lived across roles over time. Written for SEM leaders, AACRAO members, and higher education professionals, it invites field-level reflection on SEM's evolution, and affirms the value of

career-spanning experience in shaping effective, integrated enrollment practice.

Although these roles were experienced and understood as discrete professional roles at the time, this manuscript argues that revisiting them through a contemporary SEM lens reveals sustained engagement with SEM before it was named as such.

Conceptual and Scholarly Context

SEM has evolved over the past five decades from a recruitment-focused response to enrollment instability (Hossler and Bontrager 2014) into a "comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain optimum enrollment, where optimum is defined within the academic context of the institution" (AACRAO 2025). Early SEM emphasized admissions, marketing, and matriculation to stabilize and shape incoming classes. As institutions recognized the limits of recruitment alone, SEM expanded to include retention and persistence, shifting attention to student progression and completion. This lifecycle orientation reframed SEM as managing the student experience from entry through graduation. More recently, SEM has matured into an enterprise strategy, integrating academic policy, academic advising, data governance, compliance, capacity planning, and institutional decision-making (Woolston and Bridgen 2026). In this form, SEM functions not as a single office or title, but as a distributed practice embedded across institutional systems and roles. As SEM has matured into a distributed, enterprise-level strategy, understanding its practice requires attention to how enrollment work is lived across roles and time. Autoethnography offers a methodological bridge between theory and practice, positioning practitioner-scholar knowledge and lived administrative experience as analytically valuable (McGill, Gizerian, and Hagen 2022). Through systematic reflection, individual careers become sites for examining how SEM is enacted, integrated, and institutionalized beyond formal structures or titles. Reflection of delayed recognition, that what appeared as functional progression was, in fact, sustained engagement with SEM, shapes both the questions asked and the methodological choice of analytic autoethnography.

Methodology: Analytic Autoethnography

Research Design

This study employs analytic autoethnography to examine the professional career development of a higher education administrator whose roles in admissions, academic advising, advising administration, and academic registrar function are retrospectively understood as constitutive elements of SEM-related roles. Analytic autoethnography is particularly appropriate for this study given its emphasis on theoretical engagement, organizational analysis, and field-level contribution, rather than solely storytelling.

While grounded in personal experience, the purpose of this approach is not self-narration for its own sake, but rather to situate an individual career trajectory within the historical, functional, and competency-based evolution of SEM. This design aligns with the goals of SEM scholarship by illuminating how SEM is enacted across decentralized institutional roles and how practitioners often come to recognize their participation in SEM retrospectively.

This approach also reflects the practitioner-scholar tradition emphasized within AACRAO, wherein lived administrative experience is treated as a legitimate and valuable site of inquiry when examined systematically and theoretically. In the context of enrollment management's 50th year, analytic autoethnography offers a means to document how enrollment strategy has been practiced across roles even as the field's formal language and structures evolved.

Researcher Positionality

At the time of writing, the author serves as a senior enrollment-related administrator with extensive experience across multiple functional areas traditionally associated with SEM. Earlier professional roles were entered sequentially and were not initially labeled or fully understood as elements of a unified SEM strategy.

This positionality is central to the study. As a complete member researcher, the author brings insider knowledge of enrollment systems, student data gover-

nance, regulatory compliance, advising structures, and institutional decision-making. At the same time, this insider status necessitates ongoing reflexivity regarding professional socialization, organizational loyalty, and retrospective sensemaking.

The author's positionality mirrors that of many SEM professionals whose careers evolve across functional boundaries without formal SEM designation, highlighting how SEM is frequently practiced before it is named or recognized.

Data Sources

Analysis proceeded through iterative reflection and thematic alignment, wherein professional experiences were examined and reinterpreted using established AACRAO competency sets (Kitch and Mathern 2026) advanced and operationalized by AACRAO and the broader SEM literature. Career stages were mapped against the AACRAO competency set to identify patterns of skill development, epistemic authority, and strategic influence over time.

Ethical Considerations

Consistent with best practices in autoethnographic research, attention was given to relational ethics, particularly when recounting experiences involving colleagues and institutional decision-making processes. All institutional identifiers are omitted or generalized, and individuals are referenced only in ways that avoid attribution of evaluative judgment. Because these data consist of personal reflection and non-identifiable institutional artifacts, this study does not involve human subjects research as defined by federal regulation; however, ethical responsibility toward the profession and its practitioners remains paramount.

The institutional contexts in which this work occurred further illustrate how SEM-related activities are often embedded within organizational structures without being explicitly labeled or centrally coordinated.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness in this analytic autoethnography is supported through ongoing reflexivity, including critical reflection on professional roles, retrospective sensemaking, and positionality as a practitioner-scholar situated within enrollment-related functions. Transparency is established through clear identification of data sources, including position descriptions, institutional documents, policies, communications, and reflective narrative. Analytic rigor is reinforced by systematic alignment of career experiences with established AACRAO competency frameworks, providing a consistent interpretive lens. Rather than generalizability, this study emphasizes resonance and transferability, inviting recognition of shared professional experiences across contexts. Attention to relational ethics guided representation of institutions and colleagues, with care taken to anonymize settings and avoid attribution of evaluative judgment.

Context of the Study

The institutional context for this study is a large, public, land-grant university that is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU) and classified as R1: Doctoral Universities–Very High Research Activity. The institution's mission emphasizes access, research excellence, and public service, situating enrollment management within a complex environment shaped by scale, selectivity, and public accountability.

Over time, student demand for enrollment has consistently exceeded available capacity, reflecting the institution's academic reputation and broad appeal. As a result, when space limitations preclude direct admissions, the university has developed a number of alternative entry pathways for students, allowing enrollment management decisions to remain aligned with both access goals and instructional capacity.

Organizationally, enrollment-related functions operate across multiple administrative and academic units that serve distinct purposes, but are interconnected through shared responsibility for student progression, compliance, and degree completion.

The author's professional roles unfolded within this environment of sustained enrollment demand, regulatory complexity, and institutional scale. These conditions shaped how enrollment strategy was experienced

and enacted, often through operational decisions, policy interpretation, and systems coordination rather than explicitly labeled SEM initiatives. Understanding this institutional context is essential for interpreting career-spanning experiences examined in this study and for situating them within the broader evolution of SEM as a field.

Within this context, enrollment strategy was enacted across roles and units, often without a shared SEM designation, shaping how professional responsibilities were understood and experienced across career stages. The narratives that follow are not presented as isolated professional episodes, but as interconnected enactments of competency development over time.

Career Development in SEM

Career Stage: Admissions

Early professional work in admissions reflects SEM's historical point of origin, where enrollment strategy was primarily centered on recruitment, selection, and matriculation processes. This role in admissions represents engagement with SEM at its most visible and historically foundational stage, where enrollment strategy was enacted through recruitment, outreach, and matriculation activities. Responsibilities centered on advising prospective students and their families regarding admissions, financial aid, housing, scholarships, and related enrollment services, while also disseminating general institutional and departmental information about the institution.

This work required early fluency in how institutional priorities, capacity considerations, and policy frameworks shape who gains access to higher education. This work positioned admissions as a primary site of institutional representation, requiring accuracy, ethical judgment, and alignment between recruitment messaging and institutional capacity, all skills which underpin effective access strategy. Admissions decision-making functioned as an entry point into a SEM tension between institutional mission, enrollment targets, and student opportunity, tensions that would reappear across subsequent career stages in more complex forms.

Recruitment Programming and Enrollment Outreach

A significant component of the role involved coordinating large-scale recruitment initiatives, including planning and supporting major prospective student programs. These events required coordination across enrollment services, academic colleges, and operational units, illustrating SEM's early emphasis on scale, messaging consistency, and access.

The role also included collaboration with colleagues to improve recruitment marketing strategies, including the creation of publications and informational materials. This work reflects early engagement with SEM practices related to enrollment communication and audience-specific outreach.

Leadership, Supervision, and Cross-Functional Collaboration

In addition to front-line recruitment work, the author supervised part-time employees, contributing to the development of leadership and management competencies early in the career trajectory. Supervision included coordinating daily operations, supporting staff development, and ensuring consistent application of admissions policies and procedures.

The role further required serving as a liaison to academic colleges, facilitating communication between admissions and academic units to support accurate advising of prospective students. Participation on hiring panels and involvement in new employee training reinforced exposure to organizational decision-making and talent development within enrollment operations.

At the time, the work was experienced as transactional and cyclical, bounded by admission seasons and application timelines. In retrospect, it constituted foundational SEM practice through translating institutional strategy into operational decisions that directly influenced enrollment composition and institutional sustainability.

Analytic Reflection: Admissions as SEM Foundation

Viewed through a contemporary SEM lens, this career stage reflects SEM in its most visible but narrow form, focused on entry rather than persistence or completion. Yet, the competencies developed here, policy interpretation, ethical judgment, institutional messaging, cross-functional coordination, supervision, enrollment communication, and data-informed decision making, formed the conceptual groundwork for later student lifecycle and systems-level engagement with SEM.

While initially experienced as transactional and event-driven, this work established an understanding of how institutional strategy is translated into enrollment action. As such, admissions served not merely as a starting point in a professional career, but as the conceptual and practical foundation upon which subsequent SEM maturity was built.

Transitioning from admissions into academic advising initially appeared to mark a departure from enrollment work. In retrospect, this move represented a shift from managing entry into the institution to shaping the conditions that influence students' ability to remain and progress, serving as an expansion rather than a departure from SEM practice.

(*See also* Table 1, on page 182, for this stage's competency set alignment.)

Career Stage: Academic Advising

Although institutionally defined as an academic advising role, this position functioned as a comprehensive lifecycle SEM appointment, integrating recruitment, admissions support, enrollment planning, student success initiatives, academic policy implementation, assessment, and program-level coordination across undergraduate and graduate populations.

Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Strategy (Undergraduate and Graduate)

Beyond traditional advising responsibilities, this role included active recruitment at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, positioning advising as an extension of enrollment outreach rather than a post-matriculation service. Recruitment activities involved direct engagement with prospective students, guidance on admissions requirements, degree programs, academic pathways, and professional and career goals. Advising extended beyond academic content alone to include financial aid, housing, scholarships, internships, job placement and professional preparation, which positioned advising as a primary point of enrollment decision-making.

In addition, this role coordinated transfer, readmit, post-baccalaureate, non-degree, and graduate application processes at the departmental level, including application review, processing, and communication of graduate admission decisions. Responsibilities also included coordinating graduate recruitment and visitation programs in coordination with departmental committees, as well as facilitating annual new graduate student orientation and onboarding.

Notably, this work included graduate enrollment planning, culminating in the development of a strategic plan for a graduate program that articulated target enrollment goals, recruitment priorities, and growth strategies that aligned with institutional capability, budgetary considerations and constraints, and employment market realities. Recruitment initiatives were not only implemented but systematically evaluated through assessment of recruitment activities and return on investment (ROI), reinforcing data-informed decision making as a core SEM skill enacted within an advising context.

This dimension of the role reflects SEM's historical shift toward a market-responsive and analytically grounded practice, demonstrating how enrollment strategy is often operationalized outside formally designated SEM units.

Academic Policy and Compliance

A significant portion of the role involved direct application of academic policy and records processes, including the processing and approval of course adjustments, curricular exceptions, Q-drops, changes of curriculum, force requests, and undergraduate degree planners. The position also coordinated academic

compliance and academic probation processes for both undergraduate and graduate students, reinforcing advising's role in institutional accountability and degree progression oversight.

These responsibilities required sustained fluency in academic regulations and procedures, reflecting AACRAO's emphasis on accurate policy interpretation and consistent application in support of student degree progression and institutional integrity.

Retention, Student Success, and Curricular Integration

The advising role included leadership in retention and student success initiatives, aligning closely with SEM's lifecycle orientation. Most notably, this work included assisting with the development of orientation activities and retention programs and included leadership in the creation and implementation of a first-year experience (FYE) program integrated into the undergraduate curriculum. This work included the selection and supervision of peer mentors, positioning advising as a curricular partner, embedding student transition support with academic coursework rather than treating student success solely as a co-curricular endeavor. The integration of FYE with curricular design illustrates advanced SEM practices related to aligning enrollment outcomes with teaching and learning structures.

One significant initiative was the creation of an academic success program for students on academic probation, operationalizing SEM's retention goals through intentional advising structures, academic skill development, and progress monitoring. Extensive work focused on identifying barriers to persistence and designing structured interventions that address student risk at critical academic junctures. This program reframed probation not as a punitive status but as an opportunity for guided re-engagement, aligning student support with institutional retention priorities.

In addition, the role coordinated departmental honors programs for two undergraduate curricula and supported student success through structured programming and ad hoc intervention, reflecting SEM's shift toward intentional lifecycle management.

Program Coordination, Assessment, and Capacity Alignment

Beyond individual advising, the position included extensive program-level coordination and assessment, including departmental scheduling of classes for two undergraduate curricula and one graduate program, coordination of departmental scholarship review, and assistance with program learning outcomes and assessments for multiple undergraduate and graduate programs and certificates.

The role also involved preparation of academic and advising reports for internal and external audiences, supporting data-informed decision making and accountability. The author coordinated departmental educational outreach functions, overseeing planning and execution of hundreds of programs reaching thousands of participants, which further extended advising's role into institutional engagement and enrollment pipeline development.

Leadership and Operations

In addition to functional responsibilities, the role included supervision of student workers and coordination of daily advising office operations, contributing to leadership development and operational management competencies. The progression of human resources (HR) titles associated with this role reflects increasing scope, responsibility, and institutional trust within this role.

Analytic Reflection: Advising as Lifecycle SEM Practice

At the time, these responsibilities were understood as advising work directed in part by institutional and programmatic needs. In retrospect, this advising role represents a robust enactment of lifecycle SEM, integrating recruitment, admissions support, policy application, retention, progression, and program-level coordination within a single position. While institutionally framed as advising, the scope of work aligns closely with AACRAO-supported skill development central to effective enrollment strategy.

This career stage demonstrates how SEM-related activities are frequently practiced without being named,

particularly within advising roles that span recruitment, admissions, enrollment planning, assessment, and student success. The work underscores advising's capacity to function as a strategic enrollment hub, working to bridge access, academic experience, and institutional sustainability, before such integration was formally recognized or structurally centralized.

This expanded scope of advising work marked a turning point, shifting enrollment strategy from individual student interactions to institutional systems requiring coordination, assessment, and administrative leadership. As recruitment planning, retention initiatives, and student success programming increasingly exceeded the scope of individual advising practice, the limits of role-based intervention became apparent. Transition into advising administration provided an opportunity for SEM work to be enacted not only through programs, but through systems, supervision, and institutional coordination.

(*See also* Table 1, on page 182, for this stage's competency set alignment.)

Career Stage: Advising Administration

Transitioning into advising administration marked a shift from individual and program-level SEM engagement to college-level coordination of enrollment strategy, with responsibility extending across advisors, academic departments, and academic programs, collectively serving over 2,000 students. This role functioned as an administrator of SEM-related activities, even when institutionally framed as academic advising leadership.

Leadership, Supervision, and Organizational Realignment

A defining feature of this role was the implementation of a structural reorganization, transitioning advising personnel from departmental units to a centralized, college-level advising model. This transition required managing personnel change, redefining workflows, and establishing consistent advising practices across previously decentralized environments. This necessitated balancing centralized expectations for consistency with decentralized academic cultures. Through this supervisory structure, advising administration became a mechanism for standardizing enrollment-related practices across units, ensuring that advising approaches supported institutional retention, progression, and completion priorities rather than program-specific variability alone. Personnel capacity and advising caseloads were monitored for equitability and utilized to support the creation of a new advising position. The work required sustained collaboration with faculty, department heads, and academic leadership, positioning advising administration as a mediator between SEM goals and academic autonomy, and aligns closely with AACRAO skill development in leadership, management, and organizational strategy.

Streamlining Retention and Student Success Efforts

A central focus of this role was the intentional streamlining of retention and student success initiatives that had previously emerged in fragmented or duplicative forms. Rather than treating retention as a series of disconnected programs, advising administration emphasized coherent systems, aligning early alert mechanisms, probation interventions, advising touchpoints, and referral processes.

This systems-level approach reflects SEM's evolution toward coordinated lifecycle management, wherein student success outcomes are not left to individual discretion but supported through shared expectations, processes, and assessment practices.

Academic Policy, Compliance, and Progression Oversight

Advising administration required sustained engagement with academic policy application and compliance, including processing and approving course adjustments, curricular exceptions, Q-drops, changes of curriculum, force requests, and undergraduate degree planners. In addition, the role coordinated academic compliance and academic probation processes for undergraduate and graduate students, in conjunction with academic departments. By standardizing these processes across units, advising administration supported consistent

application of policy and clearer pathways for student academic progression.

Student Transition and Retention Coordination

The role included coordination of new student conferences and facilitation of annual new graduate student orientation and onboarding. These responsibilities positioned advising administration as a central node in student transition and retention efforts, connecting recruitment promises with ongoing academic experience.

Regular information dissemination and communication to students, along with assistance in developing and revising information and recruitment materials, further reinforced advising administration's role in managing enrollment messaging across the student lifecycle.

Institutional Capacity and Course Availability

Advising administration also required attention to institutional capacity constraints, particularly as they related to course availability, scheduling, and academic bottlenecks that impeded student progression through their academic program. Through analysis of advising data, course demand patterns, and student enrollment behaviors, this role contributed to conversations about curricular sequencing, seat availability, and instructional capacity.

This work demonstrates advising administration's role in aligning academic infrastructure with enrollment strategy, reinforcing the idea that retention and progression are not solely matters of student behavior but are profoundly shaped by institutional design decisions.

Analytic Reflection: Advising Administration as SEM Infrastructure

Viewed through an AACRAO-informed SEM lens, advising administration functioned as a critical integration point supporting SEM efforts, translating institutional enrollment priorities into scalable academic practices. The role required balancing student advocacy with institutional sustainability, and local program needs with college-level consistency. It required fluency across recruitment impacts, student success theory, curriculum structures, and organizational dynamics, all components of evolving SEM leadership.

Although the position was not formally designated as a SEM leadership position, this stage of the career reflects advanced SEM maturity and exemplifies SEM's shift toward enterprise-wide coordination, where success depends on aligning people, policies, and capacity across institutional boundaries and enrollment strategy is enacted through supervision, structural alignment, and cross-functional coordination. This stage of the career further reinforces the manuscript's central argument: SEM-related work is often practiced in roles where it is not explicitly named.

The move into the associate registrar role further extended this career trajectory, positioning SEM within the academic infrastructure that governs curriculum, enrollment patterns, and degree completion. What had once been addressed through initiatives and coordination now required stewardship of policy, data, and institutional rules, making explicit how deeply SEM-related work is embedded in academic systems. In moving into the associate registrar role, SEM became most visible not through recruitment or messaging, but through the academic structures and policies that govern student progression.

(*See also* Table 1, on page 182, for this stage's competency set alignment.)

Career Stage: Associate Registrar

Service in the associate registrar role represents the most structurally embedded form of SEM engagement, where enrollment strategy is sustained through academic governance, data stewardship, regulatory compliance, and institutional trust. In this role, the author's responsibilities center on safeguarding student education records, overseeing compliance with state and federal law, and ensuring the integrity and accessibility of the academic systems that undergird enrollment decision making. These functions define the institutional conditions under which recruitment, retention, and completion strategies succeed.

Oversight extended to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) operations, including ensuring timely response to reported FERPA violations or data security breaches, maintaining records of reported incidents, and documenting response actions in accordance with office procedures. Preparation and dissemination of annual FERPA notifications further reinforced the role as a guardian of institutional compliance and student rights. These responsibilities align directly with AACRAO competencies related to legal compliance, data stewardship, and ethical practice, illustrating how SEM effectiveness depends on the credibility and reliability of our academic records systems.

Systems Security, Policy Communication, and Procedural Integrity

The role included ensuring that FERPA-related resources, including websites, catalogs, and institutional publications, were accurate, current, and relevant. The author worked with staff to create, document, and maintain service procedures, reinforcing consistency, transparency, and accountability in registrar related operations. Guidance and oversight for incorporating FERPA information into university communications and assistance with developing compliant forms and templates for campus use are efforts highlighting the role in translating regulatory complexity into accessible institutional practice.

Training, Communication, and Institutional Capacity Building

Beyond compliance and systems oversight, the role emphasized education, training, and institutional capacity building. The author developed and delivered FERPA training resources and facilitated university-wide training on registrar-managed systems and processes. This work positioned the role not only as a compliance authority, but as an educator and facilitator of institutional understanding.

The role also included leadership of a team responsible for strategic and tactical communication dissemination, website content, training, development, and outreach related to registrar systems and functions. A data-informed approach was used to secure additional full-time equivalent (FTE) positions to support efforts, demonstrating alignment between operational need, institutional risk, and resource advocacy.

Ensuring that registrar-related digital content met federal and state accessibility requirements, including remediation of digital documents, further reinforced the role in advancing equitable access to information critical to enrollment and student degree progression.

Professional Development and Organizational Leadership

The author supported professional development for internal personnel, reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement and regulatory fluency. Through leadership, documentation, training, and outreach, the role functioned as a stabilizing force within SEM, ensuring that enrollment strategies were supported by compliant processes and informed institutional personnel.

Analytic Reflection: Associate Registrar as SEM's Invisible Architecture

From a SEM perspective, this registrar role operationalizes AACRAO's long-standing assertion that enrollment strategy is inseparable from academic rules, data integrity, and governance structures. Recruitment, retention, and student degree progression depend on the accuracy, security, and credibility of academic records and data systems. Without this infrastructure, SEM cannot function at scale or withstand regulatory scrutiny. The role makes visible how progression, timely completion, and institutional accountability depend on coherent academic infrastructure.

This career stage reflects the highest level of SEM maturity, where enrollment strategy is no longer enacted through programs or coordinated alone, but sustained through governance, compliance, and institutional trust. Although often perceived as back-office or regulatory, registrar office work emerges here as central to SEM's long-term viability and affirms the manuscript's central argument that SEM-related work is exceedingly powerful where it is least visible.

Taken together, these experiences invite reinterpretation, not as a nonlinear career path, but as a cumu-

TABLE 1 ➤ Career Stages and Alignment with the AACRAO Competency Set

Career Stage	AACRAO Competency Set Alignment	
Admissions	▸ Service Excellence ▸ Operational Logistics ▸ Leadership ▸ People and Team Management	▸ Policy Development and Implementation ▸ Project Management ▸ Compliance
Academic Advising	▸ Service Excellence ▸ Operational Logistics ▸ Organizational Management ▸ Data Reporting and Analytics ▸ Leadership ▸ Policy Development and Implementation	▸ Academic Innovation ▸ Systems Management ▸ Project Management ▸ Student Success and Enrollment Management ▸ Strategic Professional Development ▸ Compliance
Advising Administration	▸ Service Excellence ▸ Operational Logistics ▸ Organizational Management ▸ Data Reporting and Analysis ▸ Leadership ▸ People and Team Management ▸ Policy Development and Implementation	▸ Academic Innovation ▸ Systems Management ▸ Project Management ▸ Student Success and Enrollment Management ▸ Strategic Professional Development ▸ Compliance
Associate Registrar	▸ Service Excellence ▸ Operational Logistics ▸ Organizational Management ▸ Data Reporting and Analysis ▸ Leadership ▸ Policy Development and Implementation	▸ Academic Innovation ▸ Systems Management ▸ Project Management ▸ Student Success and Enrollment Management ▸ Strategic Professional Development ▸ Compliance

lative enactment of SEM as it has evolved over the last five decades.

(*See also* Table 1 for this stage's competency set alignment.)

Analysis and Interpretation

Viewed through a contemporary SEM framework, the author's professional career reflects the broader evolution of SEM over the past 50 years. What initially appeared as a series of discrete roles—admissions, academic advising, advising administration, and associate registrar—emerges through analytic reflection as a coherent engagement with SEM's expanding scope and increasing institutional centrality.

Early work in admissions aligns with SEM's historical origins in the 1970s, when enrollment strategy focused primarily on recruitment, selectivity, and institutional survival during periods of demographic uncertainty. At that stage, enrollment work was often operationalized through admissions offices, with limited integration across academic or student affairs domains. This framing mirrors how the author initially understood the work: essential, but bounded.

Subsequent transition into academic advising marked a shift consistent with SEM's late-twentieth-century evolution toward retention and persistence. Advising practice highlighted work in student progression, policy navigation, and academic momentum, all of which are core SEM concerns that were not always explicitly named as such. This period illustrates how SEM expanded beyond entry points to encompass the student experience across time, even as institutional structures continued to silo enrollment-related labor.

The move into advising administration represents a critical inflection point in SEM's maturation. Here, responsibilities transitioned from individual student outcomes to system-level coordination, assessment, and

cross-functional collaboration. This mirrors SEM's development into an institution-wide strategy, requiring alignment among admissions, advising, faculty governance, and data systems. The author's experience at this stage underscores how leadership in SEM-related activities often emerges without formal SEM titles, particularly in advising and academic affairs contexts.

Finally, service in the associate registrar role situates SEM within its most structural and regulatory domain. Registrar functions, frequently characterized as compliance oriented, emerge through this analysis as foundational to SEM effectiveness. Curriculum rules, degree audit systems, enrollment reporting, and data integrity shape the parameters within which recruitment and retention strategies can succeed. This reframing aligns with AACRAO's long-standing argument that academic records and policy governance are not peripheral, but central, to enrollment strategy.

Across these stages, the author's career exemplifies a distributed model of SEM practice. Rather than entering SEM through a single designated pathway, the author enacted career-spanning SEM development progressively, often before recognizing development as such. This realization contributes to contemporary SEM discourse by highlighting how the field's growth has been accompanied by increasing role complexity, functional integration, and delayed professional recognition.

In the context of SEM's 50th anniversary, this analysis suggests that the future of the field depends not only on new analytical tools or organizational structures, but also on naming and valuing the full range of professionals whose work sustains enrollment strategy across the student lifecycle.

If SEM-related work was, in fact, present throughout this career trajectory, then the implications extend beyond one professional story to how the field recognizes, cultivates, and values SEM expertise.

Implications for Strategic Enrollment Management Leadership and Practice

This analytic autoethnography offers several implications for SEM leaders, AACRAO members, and institutions reflecting on 50 years of enrollment strategy. Collectively, these implications emphasize the need to recognize SEM not only as an organizational framework, but as a professional practice enacted across roles, time, and institutional boundaries.

Implications for SEM Leadership

First, SEM leaders are encouraged to broaden how SEM expertise and leadership potential are identified within institutions. As demonstrated through this career trajectory, competencies are often developed incrementally through admissions, academic advising, policy, compliance, and records functions, many times before individuals are formally designated as SEM professionals. Leaders who recognize this distributed development are better positioned to cultivate internal talent and foster succession planning grounded in lived institutional knowledge rather than solely positional titles.

Second, this analysis highlights the importance of integrating registrar and advising functions more explicitly into SEM strategy and discourse. While admissions and matriculation metrics often dominate SEM conversations, the structures that enable student progression—such as academic policies, curricular governance, degree audit systems, and data integrity—shape the conditions under which enrollment strategies succeed or fail. SEM leaders who partner intentionally with registrars and advising administrators strengthen institutional coherence and strategic alignment.

Third, this manuscript underscores the value of career-spanning SEM professional development. While SEM leadership may be acquired through administrative appointment rather than developmental experience, this study suggests that SEM leadership formation benefits from sustained exposure to multiple enrollment domains, allowing professionals to understand how decisions reverberate across the student lifecycle.

Implications for AACRAO Members and the Profession

For AACRAO members, this study reinforces the association's long-standing assertion that academic records, policy expertise, and compliance stewardship are

central, not peripheral, to SEM effectiveness. As SEM continues to evolve, registrars and academic services professionals are uniquely positioned to shape enrollment strategy through their command of institutional rules, data systems, and governance frameworks.

Additionally, this autoethnography suggests that professional identity in SEM is often retrospective rather than immediate. Many AACRAO members may already be practicing SEM-related work without naming it as such. Making SEM-related competencies visible, particularly in academic advising and registrar work, can support professional affirmation, cross-functional collaboration, and more inclusive SEM narratives.

Finally, for a field commemorating 50 years of development, this manuscript invites AACRAO and SEM scholars to expand the historical record of SEM by incorporating practitioner reflections that capture how enrollment strategy is operationalized across time and role transitions. Autoethnographic scholarship offers one avenue for documenting SEM's lived evolution alongside its theoretical and organizational history.

Implications for Supervisors and Professional Development Facilitators

This analysis also carries implications for supervisors, leaders, and professional development facilitators responsible for cultivating enrollment-related talent. As this career trajectory demonstrates, AACRAO competency set skills are often developed incrementally across roles that are not formally labeled as enrollment positions. Training and professional development efforts that focus narrowly on position titles or functional silos risk overlooking the SEM knowledge and skills already embedded within academic advising, administrative coordination, and registrar work.

Supervisors and facilitators are therefore encouraged to intentionally surface and name AACRAO competencies within onboarding, training, and leadership development, particularly in areas such as policy interpretation, data stewardship, student progression, systems coordination, and enrollment capacity alignment. Making these competencies explicit can strengthen role clarity, support professional identity development, and more effectively prepare staff for cross-functional enrollment leadership. In this way, professional development becomes not only skills-based, but also field affirming, helping practitioners recognize that they are already participating in SEM-related work as it is lived across the institution.

Implications for the Future of SEM

As SEM enters its next phase, institutions are increasingly called to balance analytics, regulation, and student success within complex organizational environments. This study suggests that the future effectiveness of SEM will depend not only on new models and technologies, but on the intentional recognition and integration of the professionals who already sustain SEM through fragmented yet deeply strategic work.

Limitations

This analytic autoethnography reflects a single professional trajectory and is not intended to represent all pathways into SEM. The analysis is shaped by retrospective sensemaking and interpreted through contemporary AACRAO competency set frameworks, which may differ from how these roles were understood at the time they were enacted. Additionally, institutional contexts are necessarily generalized to preserve confidentiality, limiting the specificity with which organizational dynamics can be described. As with all autoethnographic work, the value of this study lies not in generalizability, but in its capacity to invite recognition, resonance, and reflection among SEM practitioners and scholars.

Conclusion

Tracing this career across admissions, academic advising, advising administration, and the registrar function reveals not a series of role changes, but a progressive deepening of engagement with SEM. What began as entry-point enrollment work evolved into lifecycle support, systems coordination, and ultimately stewardship of the academic infrastructure that undergirds institutional sustainability.

At each stage, SEM-related competencies were developed and enacted, often without realization or being

named as such, reflecting the field's historical evolution from front-end recruitment toward integrated, enterprise-wide strategy. This delayed recognition underscores a central insight for enrollment management at its 50th anniversary: SEM-related work is not confined to a position, unit, or title, but lived through professional practice over time.

For SEM leaders and AACRAO members, this analytic autoethnography affirms the value of recognizing enrollment expertise where it already exists, within advising, administrative coordination, and registrar work, and of cultivating leadership in SEM activities as a developmental, career-spanning process. As SEM enters its next phase, recognizing and cultivating such career-spanning expertise may prove as consequential as any model, metric, or technology. In retrospect, the question is not when SEM entered this career, but why it took so long to be named.

It was SEM-related work all along.

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About the Author



Rebecca L. Hapes

Rebecca L. Hapes, Ph.D., serves as the Associate Registrar in the Office of the Registrar at Texas A&M University, where she leads initiatives related to student records administration, FERPA compliance, academic records policy, and registrar communications. Her portfolio includes oversight of registrar website content and maintenance, commencement program production, digital accessibility compliance efforts, stakeholder training, and internal professional development programs. Drawing on experience spanning admissions, academic advising, and registrar operations, Hapes brings a strategic enrollment management perspective to policy implementation, records stewardship, organizational effectiveness, and student success. She works collaboratively with academic and administrative stakeholders across the institution to advance process improvement, accessibility, and compliance initiatives that support accurate, efficient, and student-centered services. Hapes earned a bachelor's degree in kinesiology; a master's degree in agricultural education; and a doctorate in agricultural leadership, education, and communication, with a specialization in educational human resource development from Texas A&M University. She also holds graduate certificates in advanced pedagogy in agriculture and leadership education, theory, and practice. Throughout her career, Hapes has been committed to developing higher education professionals, fostering collaborative partnerships, and advancing practices that enhance both institutional effectiveness and the student experience.