LEADING STRATEGIES

Reframing Strategic Enrollment Management Through an Economic Mobility Lens

By Mayra Olivares-Urueta, Anabel Romero-Juarez, CyLynn Braswell, and Shawn Hulsizer

This article introduces Economic Mobility-Centered Strategic Enrollment Management (ESEM) as an evolution of traditional strategic enrollment management (SEM) practice. Grounded in regional, cross-sector enrollment and student success work, ESEM reframes enrollment as part of a broader continuum that includes early exposure, pathway development, postsecondary persistence, workforce transition, re-entry, reskilling, and long-term economic mobility. The article examines how fragmented educational systems, misaligned timelines, inconsistent communication structures, and uneven data use contribute to barriers in student progression despite strong institutional intentions. Through an asset-based lens, the authors argue for greater system alignment, intermediary leadership, data activation, and coordinated support structures capable of sustaining student momentum across transitions. Positioned as a forward-looking extension of SEM, ESEM offers a framework for rethinking enrollment management in ways that better support economic mobility, workforce adaptability, and community sustainability.

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) has long served as one of the most influential organizational frameworks within higher education. Over the past five decades, enrollment management has evolved from a primarily admissions-centered function into a coordinated institutional strategy that integrates recruitment, financial aid, advising, retention, persistence, and completion. In doing so, it has helped institutions move beyond fragmented decision-making and toward more intentional approaches to student success.

This evolution matters. SEM has strengthened institutional capacity, encouraged cross-functional collaboration, and expanded institutional understanding of the student lifecycle. It has helped colleges and universities respond to changing demographics, enrollment volatility, and increasing demands for accountability. Hossler and Bontrager (2014) note that SEM functions most effectively when enrollment strategy is intentionally aligned with broader institutional goals related to student success and organizational sustainability.

At the same time, the context in which SEM operates has changed significantly. Questions about the value of postsecondary education, growing concerns about workforce readiness, widening economic inequality, and increasing public scrutiny around outcomes have reshaped expectations for higher education. Institutions are now being asked not only to enroll students and support completion, but to demonstrate that students are ultimately able to translate educational experiences into economic opportunity, workforce adaptability, and long-term mobility. Access, while still essential, is no longer sufficient.

This moment presents an opportunity for the SEM field to reflect on its next phase of evolution. If enrollment management's first 50 years focused on building institutional systems capable of supporting access and persistence, what must the work ahead require? How might SEM evolve from a framework centered primarily on institutional enrollment outcomes to one that more intentionally aligns enrollment strategy with long-term student mobility, workforce participation, and community sustainability?

This article introduces Economic Mobility-Centered Strategic Enrollment Management (ESEM) as an asset-based evolution of traditional SEM practice. Grounded in regional, cross-sector enrollment and student success work, ESEM expands SEM beyond institutional boundaries and reframes enrollment as part of a larger continuum that includes early exposure, pathway development, postsecondary persistence, workforce transition, re-entry, reskilling, and economic mobility. Rather than positioning enrollment as the endpoint, ESEM positions enrollment as one stage within a broader ecosystem of opportunity.

Importantly, this article does not propose ESEM as a replacement for SEM. Instead, it argues that SEM already contains many of the structures necessary for this next phase of work: coordinated planning, data-informed decision-making, and cross-functional alignment. ESEM extends these strengths while broadening the definition of student success and expanding responsibility beyond any single institution.

ESEM is grounded in several interconnected principles explored throughout this article: system alignment across sectors, earlier and more coordinated intervention across the student lifecycle, data activation rather than data accumulation, asset-based engagement with students, and intermediary leadership structures capable of sustaining collaboration across institutions and transitions. Together, these elements reposition enrollment management as both an institutional strategy and a broader mobility infrastructure.

This article also reflects a key insight emerging from current practice: many systems are not failing because institutions lack commitment or students lack motivation. Rather, systems often struggle because they were not originally designed to operate in coordinated ways across sectors, timelines, and organizations.

The implications of this fragmentation are significant. Students today must navigate multiple systems simultaneously—K–12 districts, colleges, universities, financial aid processes, workforce systems, and community organizations—each operating with different timelines, communication structures, and expectations. Even when institutions perform well independently, students may still experience disjointed pathways, missed opportunities, and breakdowns in continuity. As this article argues, improving outcomes increasingly requires not only stronger institutional practice, but stronger system alignment.

Increasingly, postsecondary participation is no longer a singular event but a recurring process that occurs across a learner's lifetime. As workforce demands continue to evolve and the shelf life of skills continues to shorten, students are likely to move in and out of educational systems repeatedly across decades. In this context, ESEM must account not only for first-time en-

rollment and completion, but for re-entry, reskilling, and lifelong engagement with learning.

Enrollment Management at 50: Honoring the Field's Contributions

The evolution of enrollment management over the past half century represents one of the most important organizational shifts in higher education administration. Historically, enrollment work was often decentralized and reactive. Admissions, financial aid, retention, and student services frequently operated independently, with limited coordination around institutional goals or student progression. SEM changed this dynamic by encouraging institutions to think strategically and holistically about enrollment.

SEM introduced several enduring strengths to higher education practice. First, it established the importance of intentional alignment across institutional divisions. Rather than treating enrollment as solely the responsibility of admissions offices, SEM emphasized the interconnected nature of recruitment, financial aid, academic advising, retention, and student support.

Second, SEM normalized the use of data-informed decision-making. Enrollment projections, yield analysis, retention metrics, and student progression data became central to institutional planning.

Third, SEM elevated student success from a series of disconnected departmental efforts to a coordinated institutional priority.

These contributions remain foundational. However, SEM's historical emphasis has largely remained institution-centered. Success has typically been measured through metrics such as application volume, enrollment yield, retention rates, persistence, credential completion, and revenue stabilization.

These measures continue to matter deeply. Yet they do not fully capture the broader outcomes now shaping conversations about postsecondary value. Increasingly, students, families, policymakers, employers, and philanthropic organizations are asking different questions: Do postsecondary pathways lead to economic mobility? Are students obtaining credentials of value that translate into living-wage opportunities? Are students developing transferable skills that support workforce adaptability over time? Are systems helping students move effectively across transitions? Are institutions aligned with workforce and community needs? Is institutional alignment reinforced with strategic funding and program quality?

These questions require a broader framework.

From Enrollment Metrics to Economic Mobility

Economic Mobility-Centered Strategic Enrollment Management (ESEM) expands SEM by reframing enrollment as part of a longer-term mobility pathway. At its core, ESEM asks: How do systems align to support students from aspiration through economic mobility? The difficulty of achieving this alignment is not accidental; it is structural. Olson's (1965) economics of collective action theory offers a clarifying lens: even when all actors in a system share a common interest in student mobility outcomes, no individual institution, district, or employer has sufficient incentive to bear the full cost of producing those outcomes alone. Federal legislation such as the Carl D. Perkins Act has attempted to address this through selective incentives tied to compliance and funding, yet research demonstrates that incentivizing compliance does not automatically produce quality outcomes or equitable access (Braswell 2021). Achieving mobility at scale requires not just aligned incentives but coordinated infrastructure.

This reframing shifts both the timeline and the scope of enrollment work. Traditional SEM often begins at the point of recruitment and ends at completion. ESEM expands the timeline both upstream and downstream.

Upstream, ESEM recognizes that postsecondary trajectories are shaped long before students submit applications. Exposure pathways, access to advising, college-going cultures, academic preparation, dual-credit participation, and family awareness all influence postsecondary outcomes. Research on secondary career and technical education programs demonstrates that the quality, breadth, and alignment of K–12 programming directly shape the postsecondary readiness and occupational identity students carry with them into higher education—and that systems optimized for compliance

rather than outcomes can satisfy accountability requirements while leaving students substantively underprepared for the transitions ahead (Braswell 2021). Perna's (2006) multilevel model of college access establishes that the decision to enroll is not a singular moment of individual choice but the cumulative product of social, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions that compound across a student's educational experience.

Guided pathways research similarly reinforces the importance of structured alignment and coordinated student support across educational transitions (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015).

Downstream, ESEM recognizes that completion alone is no longer an adequate endpoint. Economic mobility, workforce participation, long-term sustainability, and lifelong learning increasingly shape how educational value is understood. This shift also expands the scope of responsibility.

No single institution can independently produce economic mobility outcomes at scale. Students move across systems—and back again repeatedly throughout their lives—including K–12 districts, community colleges, universities, workforce training providers, employers, community organizations, and state agencies. As a result, enrollment management increasingly requires cross-sector alignment. This represents one of the most significant conceptual shifts within ESEM: enrollment management becomes a system-level endeavor rather than solely an institutional one.

Structural Realities and System Fragmentation

The challenges described throughout this work are not simply operational. They are structural.

The U.S. educational system was not originally designed as a cohesive, nationally aligned system capable of seamlessly supporting all students across the full educational lifecycle. Rather, it evolved over time as a collection of independently governed systems shaped by local priorities, funding structures, policy decisions, and institutional autonomy.

These structural realities continue to influence student outcomes today. As Olivares-Urueta (2022) argues in her commentary *From At Risk to At Promise*, educational narratives too often frame students through deficit-oriented perspectives while overlooking the broader structural conditions shaping their experiences.

This insight is particularly relevant within enrollment management. Across institutions, students are frequently completing applications, submitting financial aid documentation, meeting eligibility requirements, and engaging with advising support. Yet many still fail to enroll or persist.

Viewed through a deficit framework, this may appear to reflect lack of student readiness or follow-through. Viewed through an asset-based lens, however, the issue becomes more complex: students are often navigating systems that are themselves fragmented and misaligned.

This fragmentation appears in multiple ways: misaligned institutional timelines, college credit transferability challenges, variability in academic calendars and program structures, inconsistent communication practices and response timelines, limited visibility into missing documentation and next steps, differing enrollment cycles, limited visibility into student progression across systems, lack of shared accountability between partners, and inconsistent follow-up during transition periods.

In many cases, students are required to navigate complexity that institutions themselves are not coordinated to manage. This insight has significant implications for how enrollment work is understood. Rather than asking solely how students can better adapt to systems, ESEM asks: How must systems evolve to better support students?

Coordinating a Regional Enrollment Pipeline

One of the clearest manifestations of system fragmentation emerges in regional enrollment ecosystems. Across many regions, school districts, higher education institutions, workforce organizations, and advising partners often work toward similar goals while operating through independently developed structures. Initial coordination efforts frequently begin with practical concerns: aligning calendars, reducing duplication of events, coordinating outreach, and improving communication.

However, deeper engagement often reveals more significant structural challenges. Partners frequently operate on entirely different timelines, both within and across institutions. Institutional deadlines for financial aid packaging, housing, orientation, registration, and enrollment confirmation may occur at very different times across institutions.

At the same time, communication strategies vary widely. Some institutions rely heavily on automated communication systems, while others emphasize individualized advising. School districts and advising organizations may also operate with different assumptions regarding student readiness, timelines, and next steps.

The result is often a fragmented student experience. From an institutional perspective, processes may appear effective. From a student perspective, however, pathways can feel inconsistent, delayed, and difficult to navigate.

Regional partnership work demonstrates that addressing this challenge requires more than coordination. As reflected in the partnership alignment work led by Romero-Juarez (2021), alignment depends on sustained relationship-building, structured dialogue, and shared inquiry across organizations. Through recurring cross-partner conversations grounded in student progression data, institutions are able to examine where students are falling off, validate assumptions about timing and communication, identify shared barriers, and develop coordinated responses.

This work shifts the conversation from isolated institutional performance toward collective system responsibility.

We Are Optimizing Too Late

Perhaps the most significant insight emerging from this work is deceptively simple: many enrollment systems are optimizing too late in the student lifecycle. Across institutions, strong performance is often observed in early stages: applications submitted, financial aid completed, and eligibility confirmed. Yet substantial drop-offs frequently occur between eligibility and enrollment.

Students arrive at postsecondary institutions already shaped by years of accumulated experience—opportunities received or denied—that determine enrollment readiness, career clarity, and economic aspiration long before any institution engages them (Yosso 2005). When K–12 systems are structured around compliance metrics rather than mobility outcomes, students can move through an entire pipeline receiving the minimum the system was designed to deliver rather than the maximum they needed to thrive (Braswell 2021).

The downstream effects of that experience are real, yet invisible to accountability systems that treat the application portal as the starting line. The question is not why students fail to complete the required steps. The question is why systems continue to wait until that moment to engage them.

Priority deadlines for housing, financial aid packaging, orientation registration, and course enrollment may already have passed by the time students receive targeted support or eligibility notifications. Additional complexity emerges for students navigating transferability of Advanced Placement, dual-credit, or prior coursework, as well as students participating in fully online programs with multiple enrollment starts throughout the year. These increasingly common enrollment patterns further challenge systems still designed around more traditional academic cycles.

As a result, students may technically remain eligible while simultaneously losing access to important opportunities. This reframes the enrollment challenge: enrollment outcomes are not simply about participation. They are deeply connected to timing, clarity, and access to opportunity.

Improving outcomes requires earlier intervention, shared timelines across systems, coordinated communication, real-time visibility into student progression, clear and timely admissions communication, and structured follow-up during transition periods. In other words, it requires alignment.

High-Intensity Enrollment Efforts and the Limits of Execution

Recent high-intensity enrollment efforts provide important insight into both the possibilities and limitations of operational execution. In coordinated enrollment

initiatives across multiple districts and institutions, partners worked collaboratively to move students from application to full registration within compressed timeframes. These efforts demonstrated that when systems align around a clear goal—full enrollment rather than general engagement—results can improve significantly.

Several important lessons emerged. First, clarity of purpose matters. When enrollment events are explicitly designed for students to leave fully registered, institutional preparation changes. Communication becomes more targeted. Advising becomes more intentional. Operational barriers become more visible.

Second, real-time problem-solving matters. When students encounter issues related to documentation, financial aid, holds, or incomplete applications, immediate intervention can dramatically improve conversion.

Third, execution alone has limits. Even highly effective operational models cannot fully compensate for upstream fragmentation. Students who arrive without critical information, who missed earlier institutional deadlines, or who lack continuity of support may still encounter barriers despite strong event execution.

This reveals an important distinction: execution can accelerate outcomes, but it cannot independently resolve structural misalignment.

Sustaining Momentum Through Transition Periods

Another recurring challenge emerges during transitions. Students frequently make significant progress during periods of high engagement: completing applications, submitting financial aid, participating in advising, and attending enrollment events. Yet many still fail to complete the final steps necessary for enrollment. These breakdowns often occur during moments when responsibility for support becomes unclear, including following major events, during summer transitions, between advising handoffs, and as school-based staff reduce on-campus presence. At these moments, multiple organizations may still be supporting the same students, yet communication pathways are often inconsistent. This creates gaps in continuity. Students may receive fragmented messaging or lose momentum altogether.

Importantly, these breakdowns are rarely caused by lack of effort. Rather, they reflect systems that were designed to initiate progress but not always sustain it across transitions. Maintaining momentum requires clear ownership of next steps, coordinated communication structures, shared visibility into student status, timely follow-up, and defined accountability across partners. This work highlights an important shift within ESEM: enrollment management is not only about initiating movement; it is about sustaining momentum across the full pathway.

There is also growing evidence that timing itself matters significantly in enrollment decision-making. Research and institutional practice increasingly suggest that the first institution to admit a student often becomes the institution in which that student ultimately enrolls. This further reinforces the importance of streamlined processes, rapid communication, and coordinated support structures capable of helping students move quickly from application to enrollment.

From Data Access to Data Activation

These transition breakdowns also reveal another critical challenge within ESEM: visibility.

Sustaining momentum across systems requires institutions and partners not only to coordinate processes, but to share timely, actionable information about where students are in the pathway. Without this visibility, even well-intentioned interventions may occur too late or fail to reach students altogether.

A central challenge within cross-sector enrollment work is translating data into coordinated action. Many institutions now have access to increasing amounts of student information. However, access alone does not guarantee impact.

Across partners, the ability to interpret and operationalize data varies significantly. Common challenges include delayed data updates, inconsistent reporting structures, limited staff capacity, unclear ownership of students, and difficulty translating dashboards into action. This creates a critical gap between visibility and execution. As a result, effective practice increasingly

depends not simply on providing data, but on activating it. Data activation involves identifying high-impact student groups, clarifying ownership of students, aligning outreach strategies, structuring recurring conversations around progression, and using data diagnostically rather than retrospectively.

Importantly, this work also reveals that partners vary significantly in operational capacity. Some institutions are able to independently interpret data and execute coordinated outreach strategies. Others require more structured support and clearer operational guidance.

This insight led to the development of differentiated engagement approaches that recognize variation in partner readiness while still encouraging movement toward deeper ownership and alignment over time.

The broader lesson is important: data does not create alignment on its own. Alignment requires structured interpretation, coordinated response, and sustained engagement.

Asset-Based Practice and ESEM

One of the defining characteristics of ESEM is its asset-based orientation. As Olivares-Urueta (2022) argues, educational systems too often define students through deficit-oriented frameworks that emphasize barriers while minimizing strengths, resilience, and existing capability. ESEM challenges this framing. Rather than beginning with assumptions about student deficiency, ESEM recognizes that students frequently demonstrate significant agency: completing complex applications, navigating financial aid systems, engaging with multiple institutions, and persisting across fragmented pathways. When students fail to enroll or persist, the issue is not always lack of motivation or preparation. Often, systems themselves are not aligned to support sustained progression.

This reframing has important implications. It shifts the focus from "fixing students" to strengthening systems. It also changes how responsibility is distributed. Under an asset-based approach, institutions become responsible for reducing friction, systems become responsible for alignment, partners become responsible for continuity, and leaders become responsible for coordination. This perspective fundamentally reshapes enrollment management.

The Role of Intermediary Leadership

Within fragmented systems, intermediary leadership becomes essential. Organizations operating across K–12 systems, postsecondary institutions, workforce organizations, and community partners play a unique role: they serve as bridges. Their value lies not in replacing institutional work, but in connecting systems that were not originally designed to operate together.

Increasingly, philanthropic organizations and regional leaders recognize this reality. They understand that improving outcomes at scale requires investment not only in institutions themselves, but in the connective infrastructure between them. This includes facilitating alignment, supporting cross-sector communication, creating shared visibility, and sustaining collaboration over time. When done effectively, this work creates conditions for systems to function with greater coherence and responsiveness. Importantly, this work is not simply technical. It is relational. Trust-building, facilitation, and shared accountability become central components of enrollment strategy.

Leadership Implications for the Next Era of SEM

The shift toward ESEM carries important implications for leadership. Leaders increasingly must operate beyond institutional boundaries. This includes the ability to facilitate cross-sector collaboration, interpret data across systems, align timelines and communication, build shared accountability, and sustain momentum across transitions.

This work requires new competencies. It also requires a shift in mindset. Historically, SEM has often operated through competitive institutional frameworks. ESEM introduces a complementary perspective: student success increasingly depends on how effectively systems coordinate, not simply how individual institutions perform. The work is complex. It requires infrastruc-

ture, sustained partnership, and long-term commitment. Yet it also represents an important opportunity.

Conclusion: Toward the Next Era of SEM

SEM already contains many of the strengths necessary for this next phase of work. Its emphasis on alignment, data-informed planning, cross-functional coordination, and student progression provides a strong foundation. ESEM builds on this foundation by extending enrollment strategy beyond institutional boundaries and toward long-term economic mobility. While ESEM offers a useful framework for rethinking enrollment strategy through a mobility lens, its implementation will necessarily vary across institutional contexts, regional ecosystems, and resource environments.

This work is still emerging. Its success depends on context, infrastructure, and the ability to sustain alignment across organizations over time. However, the implications are significant.

As the field reflects on the past 50 years of SEM, there is an opportunity not only to continue improving institutional enrollment outcomes, but to rethink how systems themselves support student opportunity.

The urgency of this next era of SEM lies not decades in the future, but in the immediate need for systems capable of supporting increasingly complex student pathways today.

If enrollment management's first 50 years were about opening doors, the work ahead is about ensuring students can successfully move through them—repeatedly, seamlessly, and in ways that sustain long-term opportunity, adaptability, and mobility.

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A scholar-practitioner, Dr. Olivares-Urueta's research and writing explore higher education leadership, community colleges, student success, and leadership development. In addition to her institutional work, she consults with colleges, universities, nonprofits, and school districts on leadership development, organizational effectiveness, strategic planning, and student success, while mentoring the next generation of community college leaders through national leadership development initiatives. Whether advising executive leadership teams or serving her local schools, Dr. Olivares-Urueta approaches every role with the same commitment: strengthening communities through education, service, and opportunity. While she is passionate about developing leaders and strengthening communities, the role she cherishes most is coaching the two future leaders she gets to come home to every day—her daughters, Isabel and Olivia. Together with her husband, Alejandro, and Luna, the family's beloved Cavapoo, they are her greatest joy and daily inspiration.



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Prior to joining the Economic Mobility Center, Dr. Romero-Juarez spent ten years at Dallas College, where she most recently served as the institution's inaugural Dean of Recruitment and Retention. Throughout her career, she has held leadership roles across higher education in Washington, Louisiana, and Texas, overseeing initiatives in recruitment, financial aid, academic advising, federal TRIO programs, and regional partnership development, including her work as a GEAR UP Site Director. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and History, a Master of Public Administration, and a Doctor of Education in Learning and Organizational Change from Baylor University. Recognized for her collaborative leadership and unwavering commitment to student success, Dr. Romero-Juarez continues to champion innovative partnerships that expand educational access and drive long-term economic opportunity.



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CyLynn Braswell, Ed.D., is a visionary leader with more than two decades of expertise in strategic leadership, educational technology, and organizational development. She holds a Doctorate of Education in Leadership from the University of North Texas and is dedicated to advancing innovation and collaboration that expand opportunity. Raised in rural East Texas, Dr. Braswell developed a deep appreciation for the power of access and education. She has served as Vice President of Customer Experience at SchoolData, leading customer success and implementation teams, and as Senior Analytics Advisor at Frontline Education, where she leveraged data to drive strategic planning and organizational improvement.

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Before joining EMC, Hulsizer served as Regional Vice President of Partner Success at Wiley Education Services, where she led the partner success division in supporting corporate learning strategies and higher education incumbent worker training programs. She established the vision and structure for a new client success division, helping strengthen organizational impact and client outcomes. Hulsizer holds a Bachelor of Journalism from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and has served on several nonprofit boards, including the City of Peoria Arts & Library Commission and the Women's Crisis Center. She is passionate about building the partnerships and technology that turn learning into lasting economic opportunity.