The old model drew a circle: Inside the circle was the university, and outside the circle was the public. But we are moving from the real to the virtual; we are moving into cyberspace. The Internet is leading us to a connected world in which the circle is so permeable and so permeated that it is losing its efficacy to think of it as a boundary that distinguishes internal from external. And when you start erasing that boundary and mind-set, you begin to open the internalities of the university to operate by the rules of the externalities. Externally you’re run by the economic laws of the marketplace. Internally, you’re run by laws of power, status, psychology and academic culture. The public marketplace changes so fast that in order for an internal organization to change that fast, it has to operate by external economic rules, not by power, status and psychology.

futurist Stan Davis paraphrased

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When one thinks of strategic planning the most common focus is on the development of an overall focus, direction, and effort for the university. Few will dispute the importance and significance of a strategic plan. The reality for many institutions may be that strategic planning will be fraught with risks and may ultimately fail. There are numerous pitfalls associated with strategic planning. For example an effort to be inclusive can produce a result so broad that very little is left out or will be accomplished. The process may become so heavily structured and bureaucratic that it drags out incessantly, producing a document that bears little relationship to reality and will be of limited or little practical value. Strategic planning can become a political battlefield with the potential for splitting an institution apart and creating an environment where one area seeks to control or eliminate another.

In some instances it may be well advised to work on components of a strategic plan rather than the entirety. Although some might not consider it a strategic planning effort, careful attention and emphasis on enrollment management can provide the vehicle to shape an institution’s strategic direction without some of the potential pitfalls mentioned above. Consider the following. Thoughtful enrollment efforts allow shaping of institutional inputs. Most states fund growth, meaning this effort can generate increased funding to carry the university forward. Enrollment management can be a mechanism to facilitate cross-divisional cooperation, create institutional momentum, improve morale, and build positive campus recognition throughout the state. Finally while college campuses feel strongly about enrollment, it is not an area where faculty feel ownership. As a result it can be less risky than other areas of strategic planning.

This paper is designed to present enrollment approaches and ideas adaptable to a variety of situations, opportunities, and challenges. It builds upon the premise that authority for enrollment management should be the responsibility of the provost. While chief academic officers may not have a strong background in student recruitment or enrollment management, there is almost always experienced thinking on retention combined with a background in facilitation skills. Finally if enrollment does decline and budgets must be cut, it is the chief academic officer who will face the largest and most difficult challenges in terms of eliminating positions and meeting instructional needs.

Define the problem

A realistic approach to enrollment management begins with defining and understanding the problem. Fortunately, enrollment figures are some of the best-kept and most easily accessed data about a campus. Important variables to consider in data analysis include geographic considerations, class level at entry, and success at converting students at each level of the process, from prospect to applicant, applicant to
registrant, and finally to attending student. It is a relatively simple process to identify trends and to focus analysis in these areas. In all likelihood there will not be one single characteristic, but rather a variety of reasons for enrollment trends to be found in the data.

Considered in isolation, data analysis can be abstract. Enrollment ultimately does not deal with numbers, but rather people, their behavior, and how it can be influenced. It is both useful and insightful to humanize and qualify these trends. Develop lists of students, including those who decided to attend and more importantly those who did not. Develop a list of questions and talk to these people. With students who did not attend, try to develop a rapport to probe beyond quick answers of finances and discover if there is a way this student could have been recruited. With current students listen for how they were welcomed, introduced, and treated early in the process. Use a team, but call students yourself. This sends an important symbolic message to the campus on the importance of the issue to you. The effort should produce three results. The first is an understanding of the problems behind enrollment trends. The second is an idea of where students are lost in the recruitment process. Finally there should be some initial ideas about how the campus can become more student friendly.

**Develop a process**

Enrollment management is a time-specific, cyclical process. The window of opportunity to make a difference for next year’s recruiting class can be relatively small. For changes to have a chance to succeed, decisions must be made relatively quickly. In an enrollment or economic downturn the possibilities for additional funding for these changes will be limited by budget constraints.

A chief academic officer is unlikely to possess all the skills, knowledge, or background needed for some mechanics of the enrollment process. To gain the needed expertise or assistance, it is possible to use one of the large national consulting firms who specialize in this. This tends to be expensive and will use funding needed for recruitment. An alternative approach is to seek help from a member of the faculty with expertise in marketing, focus groups, or customer service. The cost of this approach can be significantly less and begins to build connections with the faculty on enrollment.

Beyond this personal advisor a group is needed which can coordinate and mobilize campus efforts for recruitment. It is unlikely that an effective group of this nature exists on campus. Think through the constituencies needed to make this happen, and the speed at which the effort needs to evolve. Choose people less for their position and more for their ability to work and make a difference. Don’t forget to include active students in this group. Think of this task force as an ad hoc think tank
and mobilization group. The enrollment task force should cut across the university and be empowered to move quickly.

A chief academic officer can effectively draw and focus attention on enrollment. Choose it as the centerpiece of messages to campus, soliciting feedback and ideas from across campus. Communicate efforts underway and ask for help. Project confidence in the future and create a positive expectation for change. The message is that enrollment is everyone’s responsibility and that working together we can make a difference. Set modest expectations so that they can be surpassed rather than missed. If enrollment has impacted on the campus budget it should be relatively easy to create significant support and assistance.

Danger Signs and Pitfalls

Academics tend to analyze decisions, sometimes to the point of paralysis. Additionally there is a tendency to be risk adverse. If enrollment is declining, change will require action. With enrollment there will be no certain answers and no guaranteed results. The potential exists that enrollment changes may result from serious erosion in what may be core recruitment areas for the institution. If this is the case it is critical to address these first.

The tendency may be to create a grand, ambitious and well-meaning plan. Unfortunately enrollment does not result from one big thing, but rather from the combination of five hundred little things well done. Focus on efforts that have the greatest promise of yielding results. Consider an approach that tries a number of small efforts as expeditionary processes. Scale and increase those efforts that show initial promise and begin to net results.

The temptation may be to ask for significant increased funding support. While funding will help, throwing money at the problem may not solve fundamental issues of cooperation and service. Additionally increased spending will place more strain on scarce resources and potentially create backlash if the activities do not succeed. Consider an approach which requests modest initial support, but then seeks additional support based on a record of success.

The academic community will place much of the blame for enrollment on student retention, often including a message that this results from the poor quality or preparation of entering students. Undoubtedly the enrollment analysis will reveal retention problems. However most successful retention efforts require three or more years to show difference. If the campus is hemorrhaging enrollments, there will not be the luxury of three years to show a difference. Go first for quick changes in recruitment and student welcoming efforts. Create a longer-range effort on retention when time pressures diminish.
There are two obvious ways to increase enrollment numbers, have more students, or count them better. Learn the mechanics of how enrollment is calculated and classified. Combine that with a clear understanding of how enrollment growth is funded by the state. If the state funds only certain types of enrollment, it is a worthwhile activity to consider if self-supporting classes can be converted to budget-related enrollments.

If enrollment is a significant campus concern think through the public relations aspects carefully. While it is important to be upbeat and positive about the future, never use anything other than conservative and accurate figures. With attention focused on enrollment it will be tempting to announce early returns. Avoid speculating about early, incomplete student counts. This prevents what can be embarrassing corrections later. If enrollment figures do not reflect what was instinctively expected, have them checked. Work with the institutional research office and enrollment service personnel to understand and explain the data. When enrollment does go up, remember to thanks faculty and staff for their hard work and effort. This is not your success but rather their success.

**Ideas that Work**

It is likely that short-term efforts will focus upon fixing home base students, increasing the size of the applicant pool, student centeredness and improving success at moving students along through the admissions process. In developing initial approaches consider some of the following as potential areas of effort and interest.

**Recruitment software** - Invest in a computer program that assigns an individualized communication plan, strategy, and time line for each student and then provides complete tracking of each student. A program of this nature can help maximize the use of printed recruiting materials and letters, making certain students receive them in a carefully sequenced approach and eliminating duplicated mailings. If this is stand-alone software it needs to be integrated into the student administrative software package so data are shared. While there are a number of packages and some integrated systems contain their own bundled application, an effective example of this software is the Enrollment Management Action System from Noel Levitz.

**Admissions Ambassadors and Telecounselors** - An effective way to increase the number of people working on student recruitment is to hire outstanding students for campus tours, greeting prospective students, envelope stuffing and other functions. This is relatively low cost, uses people who know your university, and demonstrates the types of graduates campus education can produce. A productive approach to interaction with prospective students is to have

The Art and Science of Enrollment Management, page 4
ambassadors telephone and visit with them. This should be an integrated portion of the prospective student’s communication plan.

X Convert Prospects to Enrollees - Quite frequently the weak link in student recruitment efforts happens during the period from admission to the beginning of classes. It is important to remember that student recruitment does not end with admission, but rather continues until new students are in class and have paid their bill. Continue the information flow during this period and provide scholarship/financial aid information in a timely fashion. Consider carefully efforts in advising, orientation, and registration. New students can be very concerned about major selection, class schedules, and quite fearful of the new college environment. This is the time to reach out and help students, but it requires more than kind words and good intentions. If a student cannot get the classes he or she needs, no amount of goodwill will overcome this. Orientation is a wonderful opportunity to resolve these concerns, make students a part of the university family, and to seal the deal that they will be students when classes start.

X Student Centeredness - Consider who interacts first and most often with prospective or new students. With some prospective students, if the first experience is unpleasant there may never be a second chance. Front line people get to deal with students when they can be at their most abrasive, insulting, obnoxious worst. Platiitudes about student centeredness from administrators will do little to change poor behaviors. Look for symbolic actions that may make a difference. Spend a day working at the admissions or financial aid window and schedule time to listen to front line people. Try to make their job easier, rewarding, and more satisfying. Improve university systems so that they allow multiple means of interaction, are user friendly, and reliable. An excellent example of an effective symbolic activity is to spend the first two days of classes in the student registration area, answering questions, providing information, solving problems, and interacting with students.

X Improve Class Schedule - With the assistance of deans review the class schedule. Are classes arranged to meet student need and demand or for faculty convenience? Is the right mix of classes offered, or are students being turned away from core or general education classes while specialized classes are under enrolled? Look at class start times. Are they standardized so that one class does not conflict or impose on another?

Intermediate Efforts

Hopefully initial efforts in enrollment management will create a change in enrollment trends and result in some small gains. Part of the challenge of enrollment management...
management is that it is a continuous, cyclical process. There is little time to celebrate successes before beginning anew. With initial success it is time to consider how to expand, refine, and perfect the process. Potential components of an intermediate enrollment management plan may include the following.

X Improve on previous efforts - Take time to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the previous year's work. Which efforts should be expanded, reduced, or eliminated? Take a look at the past year's data and compare it to earlier work in this area.

X Get good people and appreciate them - The pace of the previous year's effort may have provided little time to consider staffing for enrollment. Begin a thoughtful process to hire, promote and retain outstanding staff. Student recruitment is competitive and grueling. It can require significant travel and it is easy for staff to feel unappreciated. Spend time with recruiters, ambassadors, and front line people, expressing thanks and continued support for their efforts.

X Do not declare victory too soon - Campuses can have short attention spans. After a year or two of success it is possible for the campus to assume that the enrollment problem has been addressed and fixed. This may never be the case. It is important to continue to place importance and focus on recruitment.

X Retention efforts - Create a second high profile group to consider retention issues and to improve student success. It is far less expensive to retain a current student than to recruit a new one. Look especially at the first year experience and consider intervention strategies on how more new students can be retained. Consider possibilities for reenrolling students who have dropped or stopped out.

X Improve materials - Take a careful look at recruiting materials. How effective are the search piece, view book, catalog, and web pages? Use focus groups of students and prospective students to solicit feedback on current and future materials. Are there less costly materials that will be just as or more effective?

X Consider new markets - Are there potential student needs that are unmet or could be better met in your area? Together with the continuing education unit, look at ways to survey for potential interest or demand. There could be a need for different scheduling - evening, weekend, or short-term. It might be that different delivery mechanisms are required - off-campus, distance education, correspondence classes, Internet based classes, or hybrid combinations. In some cases there may be a need for new programs, degrees, or certificate efforts. Consider especially the opportunity to expand summer offerings. The agrarian background of the semester calendar is no longer a factor for most students. With the increased work schedules of students the summer provides an opportunity to work toward graduation and improve retention.
Long-term Efforts

The continued success of enrollment efforts will create the need for long-term efforts. These begin with a reemphasis of the cautions for intermediate efforts and can include the following considerations.

X Develop an integrated marketing effort - With outside assistance the campus can develop, test and refine the message it projects off campus. A concentrated, integrated approach to university marks, tag lines, advertising styles and efforts can repeat and emphasize the message. This can help scarce promotional dollars go much further, but requires the cooperation of student recruitment, media relations, athletics, fine arts, and others. Properly done this can effectively shape public perceptions and aid recruitment.

X Create incentives for growth - Unless fueled by significant population growth or special factors, over time enrollment efforts may lose effectiveness or be viewed less positively by the campus community. It is important to build incentives for faculty, departments, and offices resulting from growth. This reinforces campus commitment to the continuing effort.

X Shape the pool - Once student numbers seem assured on an annual basis, attention can be directed for specific efforts. If lower division and general education courses are full to capacity, recruitment can focus on transfer students or students who have “stopped out” without completing a degree. Targeted efforts can focus on specific areas with capacity or intentions to expand. The challenge is to create new efforts without allowing existing processes to slip.

X Work the web - The possibilities for electronic communication can be very exciting. These include the use of e-mail (including variants with audio and video) to replace printed mailings. Colleges are already creating direct-to-the-web efforts where students receive a personalized web page or portal. Electronic interfaces for prospective students can be expanded beyond online admissions to include financial aid (application, tracking and notification), and to create electronic communities.

X Institutionalize the process - By this point much of the pain from enrollment decline is forgotten. It is important to structurally embed student recruitment and retention efforts within academic affairs so they receive the continuous attention needed for success.

Be careful what you wish for
For a campus experiencing enrollment declines there appear very few potential negatives to reversing this process. However over time enrollment gains can create significant challenges. The bottom line is that more students means that everyone on campus works harder. There are increased numbers of students in classes. The need for student services can go up significantly. More students can create a variety of facilities concerns including parking and traffic problems. These and other factors may require continued efforts and reinforcements on the need for kindness and student centeredness.

Some potentially dangerous side effects of enrollment efforts should be watched very carefully. A process should be developed to ensure that at least a significant portion of enrollment growth dollars flow back to colleges to hire additional faculty. If not carefully monitored the instructional dependence on adjunct faculty or graduate assistants can increase quickly. Less obvious is the need to create additional funding for student and facility support. Carefully considered, additional students can be accommodated on campuses, but it is important to be vigilant regarding quality issues.

Concluding Thoughts

The chief academic officer is uniquely positioned to create successful mechanisms for both student recruitment and retention. It is not necessary that the provost has a special background in the area, but rather that he or she is able to assemble a team, focus attention, and address the challenges in the unique context of that university. The ability to mobilize the campus community to address enrollment concerns can be a pivotal factor in the viability, vitality, and overall campus morale.

Enrollment management can be a powerful approach to create and sustain strategic institutional change. To succeed it requires a chief academic officer with the capacity to focus attention, set goals, and be an advocate for change. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. -

*We must combine the toughness of the serpent with the softness of the dove,*  
*a tough mind with a tender heart.*

This paper and accompanying resources may be accessed at http://weber.edu/deisler/enrollment.htm
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