Enrollment Management: An Introduction to Concepts and Structures

- In the increasingly complex world of managing enrollments, success or failure hinges on building a solid foundation of concepts, structures, and strategies. This first of a two-part series reviews the core concepts and structural considerations that underlie successful enrollment management organizations.

by Bob Bontrager

Introduction: Historical Forces, Current Challenges, Future Realities

Strategic enrollment management: This three-word phrase is increasingly used throughout higher education. However, the more it is used, the more apparent is the range of interpretations surrounding this deceptively simple concept. The purpose of this article is to summarize the core concepts and organizational principles that form the infrastructure of successful enrollment management organizations.

Enrollment management as we know it today was born in the anticipation and impact of a demographic downturn. From the 1950s through the 1970s, colleges and universities enjoyed a steady stream of students fueled by a succession of societal and demographic changes from the GI Bill in the 1950s, to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, to the last vestiges of the baby boom generation in the 1970s. Higher education saw an expansion of interest, access, and sheer numbers that provided a steady stream of students. Even in those boom times, and indeed throughout the history of higher education, colleges and universities have been concerned not only with enrollment itself, but also with the types of students they are able to attract. Thus, efforts to more effectively recruit targeted groups of students through enhanced market segmentation, improved recruitment services, and merit aid were employed well before the modern enrollment management era (Henderson 2001).

By the early 1970s, however, astute observers of the higher education landscape could see difficulties looming in the future as they noted the projected drop in high school graduates. This decrease in the number of students graduating from our high schools began as the last members of the baby boom generation finished high school in the early 1980s. From that point through the mid-1990s, the number of high school graduates was in free-fall, dropping nationally by 700,000 students, or over 20 percent, by 1995 (National Center for Educational Statistics). In this environment, colleges and universities began to employ more comprehensive approaches to enrollment, which moved beyond marketing, recruitment, and financial aid to include sophisticated financial aid strategies, institutional research, and retention efforts.

This shift varied among institutions and regions of the country. For many colleges and universities, the decrease in high school graduates was balanced through the 1980s by increases in the number of nontraditional students they enrolled, especially adult degree completers and students of color. Enrollment of these new groups allowed many institutions, especially public schools in urban locations, to maintain or even increase their enrollments. Institutions in the South and West were aided by population shifts to those regions. By the early 1990s, however, the sheer weight of the demographic downturn caught up with virtually every segment of higher education.

While enrollment management gained momentum initially in response to demographics, it has been nurtured in an environment of increased accountability and, in a growing number of cases, constrained resources. Criticism of the rapid rise in college tuition costs over the past two decades is especially applicable to the enrollment management enterprise. Many institutions have fallen into the trap of throwing money at their enrollment problems, with too little planning and lack of accountability to achieving the desired outcomes. At the same time, economic forces have become increasingly challenging, and are limiting the resources available to fund enrollment efforts on many campuses, especially in the public sector.

Thus, in the current context, enrollment management is characterized at many institutions as resource management. In addition to traditional recruitment and retention strategies, enrollment managers have expanded their tool kits to include "efficiency" strategies such as geodemographic research, financial aid leveraging, information management, and a broadening array of educational outcomes assessments.
These tools and many others are woven together into comprehensive, long-term enrollment programs that often are as much about using resources efficiently as they are about achieving enrollment goals. Indeed, these tools have developed and gained prominence as primary contributors to the enrollment management movement.

The future of enrollment management remains to be determined. At present it is a broad concept applied differentially at a subset of colleges and universities. A review of enrollment management structures reveals a seemingly endless array of unique organizational alignments, strategies, and tools that have evolved on an ad hoc basis on individual campuses. Many institutions have dabbled superficially with the concept, making isolated structural changes and then, often, reversing those decisions depending on the persons available at a particular time and their respective competencies. Part of this is a natural consequence of a concept that is by its very nature contextual. That is, there is no one enrollment management operation that fits every organizational structure or set of institutional circumstances.

Yet there is a very real sense that enrollment management is emerging as a profession, having already achieved a number of the required components—a research base, experience over a significant period of time, a growing body of professional literature, graduate study programs (Henderson 2000). Increasingly, institutions are mastering the concepts and structure of enrollment management.

The Core Concepts of Enrollment Management
Enrollment management is a complex of concepts and processes that enables fulfillment of institutional mission and students' educational goals by:

- establishing clear goals for the number and types of students needed to fulfill the institutional mission
- promoting academic success by improving student access, transition, persistence, and graduation
- determining, achieving, and maintaining optimum enrollment
- enabling the delivery of effective academic programs
- generating added net revenue for the institution
- enabling effective financial planning
- increasing process and organizational efficiency
- improving service levels to all stakeholders (e.g., prospective and current students, other institutional departments, other institutions, coordinating agencies)
- creating a data-rich environment to inform decisions and evaluate strategies
- creating and continuously strengthening linkages with functions and activities across the campus

Contrary to prevailing myths, enrollment management is not:

- a quick fix to achieve higher enrollment
- solely an organizational structure, though restructuring is a key consideration in implementing enrollment management
- an enhanced admission and marketing operation

- an administrative function which operates separately from the academic mission of the institution

Enabling Institutional Mission
Every institution operates in a unique context that drives the enrollment management enterprise. This involves understanding the unique role an institution plays in the environment it operates in and how to translate that role into attracting and retaining students. An institution cannot be all things to all people. Not every institution can or should seek to become more selective or expand its reach to a national scale, though there is sentiment on many campuses to do so. Any enrollment effort must begin with an understanding of what an institution is trying to achieve, based on the niche it fills in higher education marketplace. From there the enrollment manager begins to address what that means in terms of the optimum size of the student body, the types of students desired, and how to achieve those goals.

Academics and Student Success
If enrollment management starts with institutional mission, it ultimately succeeds or fails based on the strength of its links to academics and student success. Whatever its broader purposes, every institution’s mission is based on the academic enterprise. Similarly, achieving enrollment goals depends on an institution’s ability to effectively promote students’ academic success. The ability to deliver programs and build relationships which enhance student access, transition, persistence, and individual goal attainment will determine whether the institution is able to recruit and retain students in sufficient numbers to achieve optimum enrollment.

Effective enrollment managers take every opportunity to support and promote the academic program of their institutions. The wisdom of doing so is clear. Research on student college choice consistently ranks perceived academic quality among the most influential factors in students’ decisions of which institution they will attend (Braxton 1990). Successful student transitions to college and their persistence to graduation are directly linked to their affiliation with academic departments and individual faculty members (Bean 1990). In many cases, and especially when finances are tight, the vitality of individual academic departments will depend on enrolling a steady stream of students, sometimes requiring targeted promotional and retention activities. Further, the need for program-specific efforts will shift over time in response to changing career opportunities, expansion into new geographic markets, and emergence of new niche opportunities where public demand and institutional expertise converge. For all these reasons, it is critical that enrollment management is directly linked to the institution’s academic mission and programs.

Optimum Enrollment
Many institutions operate on the simple premise that they want more students than they have now. Many such institu-
tions would have difficulty stating how many students would be "enough." In fact, determining an institution's optimum enrollment is an extraordinarily complex undertaking, requiring careful and thorough analysis of multiple data points (Dolence 1993). The outcome is not one enrollment goal, but many. Depending on institutional type, there are any number of optimum enrollments based on a wide range of variables, including:

- academic ability
- academic program interest
- special skills (fine arts, leadership, athletics)
- ethnicity
- undergraduate/graduate
- financial status
- resident/non-resident
- program and facility capacities

It would be difficult to argue the wisdom of establishing clear goals around these and other variables. Yet institutions often lack specific enrollment goals, or, if such goals do exist, they represent more of a wish list than objective goals derived from careful data-gathering and analysis. A precursor to any effective enrollment plan must be a detailed analysis of the institution's enrollment opportunities and subsequent establishment of specific goals. This task should be assigned to a high-level group reporting to top-level decision-makers with broad campus representation.

**COMMITMENT TO TOP-QUALITY SERVICE**

The mantra of customer service has been spoken for years now in all sectors of society, from the corporate sector to higher education. Over the past 20 years, virtually every college and university has implemented a quality initiative of some sort. Many institutions can point to more than one such initiative, with varying results. Effective enrollment management requires that institutions take their commitment to top-quality service to a higher level.

**FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITIES**

From the beginning, enrollment management has been hard-wired to an institution's financial well-being. In its early stages, enrollment management was essentially defined as increasing enrollment to regain financial stability for tuition-driven private institutions. By the mid-1990s, when financially challenged institutions had either increased their enrollments or otherwise adjusted to their new economic realities, there was a shift in focus from not only increasing student numbers, but also improving efficiency. This trend toward efficiency has gained momentum as public institutions increasingly find themselves in the same tuition-driven boat as their private counterparts, while at the same time experiencing significant budget limitations. Indeed, efficiency in the enrollment enterprise has gone from being secondary to enrollment numbers, to being of virtually equal importance on many campuses. The overarching goal is not simply to increase total revenue, but at the same time to reduce institutional costs in order to improve net revenue.

The focus on efficiency begins with basic enrollment management operations. The stark reality on many campuses is that enrollment professionals are being asked to maintain or improve enrollment results with fewer resources to hire staff and implement programs. Efforts to improve efficiency must begin with analysis of core business practices. There is little benefit to be gained by employing new recruitment and retention strategies if basic processes are unduly cumbersome and leave students feeling poorly served. Once basic business practices have been analyzed and reengineered, a variety of efficiency and revenue enhancing strategies may be employed.

Earlier efforts to simply increase revenue by enrolling more students have given way to far more sophisticated strategies designed to enhance net revenue. Through the use of market segmentation, geodemographic research, predictive modeling, and other tools, institutions are increasingly able to target recruiting efforts more precisely to those students they have the best chance of attracting. In this process they avoid expending staff time, recruitment materials, and other resources on prospective students who ultimately will choose to attend elsewhere.

Enrollment management has also ushered in an era of highly developed financial aid strategies. Previously exclusive to the private sector, institutions of all types are employing finely honed approaches to their disbursement of student financial assistance, especially institutionally-funded grants and scholarships. Rather than offering aid of equal value to all students who meet certain academic qualifications, institutions increasingly tailor financial aid packages to tweak the college-choice sensibilities of individual students, taking into account their financial need, geodemographic characteristics, and institutional goals for enrolling students with specific attributes. Often, such strategies involve making smaller awards to a larger number of students.

**CREATING A DATA-RICH ENVIRONMENT**

Enrollment management is a performance-based, outcomes-oriented enterprise that requires copious amounts of data to operate effectively. While referred to in a variety of ways—performance indicators, success indicators, and outcomes assessment to name a few—enrollment management relies on a broad array of metrics to assess the achievement of goals, evaluate program effectiveness, and benchmark operations and strategies with other institutions. Examples include:

**Recruitment metrics**

- Number and characteristics of prospects, inquiries, applicants, admits, deposits, enrolled students
- Percentage of students moving from one recruiting stage to the next
- Number and percent of students from each identified target group (ethnic groups, high ability, particular high schools, geographic areas)
Marketing and communication metrics
- Percentage increase in recruitment activity in targeted marketing areas
- Differential results based on type of media (e.g., TV, radio, newspaper) and combinations of media (e.g., radio or newspaper only, radio and newspaper combined)
- Market share percent of potential students in target market who enroll

Retention metrics
- Percentage of students persisting from one class level to the next
- Graduation rates after 1, 5, and 6 years
- Degree progress and completion for each identified target group
- Percentage of students on academic probation
- Persistence rates for students who participate in optional orientation programs
- Persistence rates by target group
- Persistence rates by college/academic program

Financial metrics
- Tuition revenue
- Amount of institutionally-funded financial aid
- Average institutionally-funded financial aid award
- Discount rate
- Net revenue

CAMPUS COLLABORATION
Enrollment management depends on the creation of strong and effective working relationships with virtually every department on campus. Recruiting and retaining students hinges on a series of individual encounters, which define the quality of the student experience. These encounters can range from the ability of a campus visitor to find a parking spot to an advising appointment with a professor, to an encounter with a receptionist. Communicating enrollment goals and assisting each member of the campus community to understand their role in achieving them can avoid potentially negative encounters. This requires regular communication and feedback loops.

Creating an Effective SEM Organization
It seems there are as many organizational structures as there are colleges and universities. Structures vary among institutions for a number of legitimate reasons. This certainly has been the case for enrollment management organizations, as such structures only recently have been part of the higher education landscape. Enrollment management organizations vary along four dimensions: structure, composition, institutional type, and philosophical alignment.

STRUCTURE
Traditionally, four types of enrollment management structures have been identified (Dolence 1996, Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green 1982). The enrollment management committee brings together a group of faculty and administrators to focus on enrollment issues. This approach has the advantage of rapid and relatively easy implementation. Indeed, enrollment management committees often crop up in the wake of a drop in enrollment and the resulting sense that “we need to do something.” However, this approach requires the least institutional support or commitment and therefore is the least likely to succeed. The enrollment management coordinator model assigns an individual to coordinate departments and activities to achieve enrollment goals. This model also requires minimal institutional commitment since the coordinator usually has little formal authority.

The enrollment management matrix model is similar to the coordinator model, except that in this case the person in the coordinating role is a top-level administrator. Thus, there is a higher degree of authority and the potential for greater institutional support. Finally, there is the enrollment management division, in which the key offices and functions related to enrollment management are brought together under the leadership of a senior-level administrator. This model reflects the highest degree of institutional commitment to influencing enrollments. Additionally, it increases the likelihood that enrollment management efforts will be led by an enrollment specialist, i.e., an individual with experience and training specific to managing college and university enrollments.

As enrollment managers have sought to gain a foothold within their institutions, they typically have downsized the differences between these four organizational models. In the earlier stages of the emergence of enrollment management, it often was difficult to convince top-level decisionmakers of the need to create formal structures in support of enrollment efforts. As enrollments dropped and institutions developed a greater sense of urgency, it became easier to make the case for the more significant changes required of the matrix and division structures.

The main point about enrollment management organizations is that enrollment results will generally depend on the structure adopted and institutions should adjust their expectations according to which. When enrollment issues are less pressing, institutions may be well served by the committee or coordinator models. Institutional politics also may dictate adoption of these less intrusive models, though in those cases decisionmakers need to be prepared for more modest results. A desire for greater influence over enrollment results requires implementation of more significant structural changes. Figure 1 illustrates the interplay between structure, institutional change, and enrollment results.

As enrollment management emerges as a profession, there is growing acknowledgement that implementation of the more significant structural changes required of the matrix or division models will lead to stronger enrollment results. Institutional commitment to the concept of enrollment management is far greater with these models. They also take advantage of the emergence of enrollment professionals—individuals who have direct experience with one or more core
enrollment operations, who have studied the growing body of enrollment management literature, have been involved with the SEM community, and thus are uniquely qualified to lead campus enrollment efforts.

**COMPOSITION**

Composition is another key dimension to be considered when establishing an enrollment management organization. That is, which departments and functions will be included under the enrollment management umbrella. Basic enrollment management organizations commonly include admissions, financial aid, registrar's offices, and orientation. However, such structures suggest a limited view of the enrollment management concept, characterizing it as a grouping of services rather than management of goals and strategies. The conceptual framework of student success suggests that the "reach" of the enrollment management organization should be extended chronologically at both ends of the student experience. Thus, student preparation, pre-college programs, retention, and career services are part of the enrollment management structures of many campuses. The most highly developed enrollment management organizations extend their reach still further, taking an institutional advancement perspective that includes community and alumni relations. (See Table 1.)

Whatever the organizational model, managing enrollments requires involvement of departments and functions from across the campus, not all of which can or should be part of the enrollment management structure. For example, academic advising is critical to enrollment management, but usually remains under the purview of a more traditional academic model. Similarly, student affairs units perform many important retention-related functions, but more often are organized as a separate division. Where formal reporting lines do not exist, strong communication links must be established. These cannot be left to chance or good intentions. Rather, formalized relationships must be established within the committee structure of the institution. Further, links must reflect the core understanding of the enrollment management concept with direct ties to institutional mission, academic program, and student success. Required organizational links are diagrammed in Figure 2, with choices to be made as to whether solid or dotted-line relationships exist among the departments and functions listed.

**INSTITUTIONAL TYPE**

Enrollment management organizations tend to vary by type of institution. Private institutions often have more elaborate enrollment structures. The demographic downturn, which led to the emergence of enrollment management, hit private institutions first, and thus they have a longer history with its implementation. Also, private institutions are typically smaller, can implement changes more quickly, and require administrators to take on a broader array of functions. For these reasons, the enrollment management organization at a private institution will generally have more direct reporting lines, whereas at public institutions there will tend to be dotted-line relationships facilitated through committee work. Another private/public difference is the titles held by chief enrollment officers. Vice presidents often head enrollment management divisions at private institutions, with direct reporting lines to the president. At public institutions, enrollment division heads typically have roles as assistants or associates to provosts or vice presidents.

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**Table 1: Composition of Enrollment Management Organizations**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Expanded</th>
<th>Comprehensive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td>Pre-College Programs</td>
<td>Institutional Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>Academic Support Programs</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Academic Advising</td>
<td>Community Relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registration and Records</td>
<td>Career Services</td>
<td>Alumni Relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrollment Research</td>
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PHILOSOPHY

Finally, when creating enrollment management organizations, a decision must be made regarding philosophical alignment. This decision is complex due to the cross-functional nature of the enrollment enterprise, such that enrollment management does not "fit" neatly within traditional institutional structures. Because of the important student services provided by enrollment management departments, some members of the campus community, especially at public institutions, are inclined to align enrollment management organizations with their student affairs divisions. Even though enrollment management and student affairs professionals have many common interests and perform similar student service functions, aligning them under the same organizational structure generally will not serve enrollment managers as well as alternative structures. The integration with academic programs, accountability to quantifiable goals, and importance of achieving the institution's academic mission all point to alignment with top-level decisionmakers. Reflecting these realities, institutions more often align enrollment management organizations with the president or academic affairs divisions, rather than student affairs, with variances in the private and public sectors as noted above (Huddleston 2001).

Preview: Core Strategies and Best Practices

An infrastructure of foundational concepts and structural alignment is necessary to build successful enrollment management organizations, but it is not sufficient. Achieving optimum enrollments requires that institutions use their carefully-developed infrastructure to launch leading-edge strategic initiatives. In the next issue of C&U, the second part of this article will discuss core strategies and best practices in key areas including:

- Recruitment
- Irivating the student/institution relationship
- Marketing and communications
- Student transition and retention
- Graduation and beyond
- Pricing strategies
- Information management
- Business practices and customer service
- Technology

References and Resources


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