Strategic enrollment management. This three-word phrase is increasingly used as colleges and universities search for effective responses to today’s enrollment and financial challenges. However, the more it is used, the more apparent is the range of interpretations surrounding this deceptively simple concept. Often perceived as merely realigning administrative reporting lines, strategic enrollment management is a complex amalgam of concepts and processes that enables fulfillment of institutional and student goals.

Strategic enrollment management, or SEM, was originally conceived as institutions struggled to cope with declining demographics. More recently it has gained prominence in response to increased institutional accountability and constrained resources. Higher education is facing unprecedented scrutiny regarding the ability of institutions to facilitate students’ academic achievement. At the same time, economic forces are more challenging than ever, resulting from the combined effects of increasing costs and diminishing financial support from federal and state sources. Implementation of SEM is an effective means of responding to these challenges.

The Core Concepts of SEM

The core concepts of SEM may be summarized as:

- 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
The core concepts can be understood within the contexts of several overarching goals of SEM:

**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 in which it operates and how to translate that role in a way to attract and retain students.

**Increasing academic quality 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 the right type and mix of students in sufficient numbers to achieve optimum enrollment.

**Achieving optimum enrollment.** Many institutions operate on the simple premise that they want more students than they have now. Many such institutions would have difficulty stating how many students would be "enough". The concept of optimum enrollment takes into account desired student demographics, academic program demand and capacity, mission-based target groups, and many other variables. The outcome is not one enrollment goal, but many.

**Establishing 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, with varying results. Effective enrollment management requires that an institution take its commitment to top-quality service to a higher level.

**Optimizing 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, the focus was broadened so that it encompassed improving efficiency in addition to increasing student numbers. The trend toward efficiency has gained momentum as public institutions increasingly find themselves in the same tuition-driven circumstances 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 tuition dollars, but at the same time to reduce institutional costs in order to improve net revenue.

**Creating a data-rich environment.** SEM is a performance-based, outcomes-oriented enterprise that requires copious amounts of data to operate effectively. Whether they are referred to as performance indicators, success indicators, or outcomes assessment – a broad array of metrics are essential to assess the achievement of enrollment goals, evaluate program effectiveness, and benchmark operations and strategies with other institutions.

**Ensuring and coordinating campus collaboration.** SEM depends on the creation of strong and effective working relationships with virtually every department on campus. Recruitment and retention of students hinge 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 all members of the campus community to understand his or her role in achieving them requires regular communication and feedback loops.

Thus, in the current context, strategic enrollment management is as much about managing educational processes and resources as it is about managing enrollments. In addition to traditional recruitment and retention strategies, enrollment managers have expanded their tool kits to include efficiency and effectiveness strategies such as geodemographic research, student outcomes assessment, student aid leveraging, and institutional financial models. These tools and many others are woven together into comprehensive, long-term enrollment programs that seek not only to enroll the right number and mix of students, but also to improve educational attainment, put institutions on firmer financial footing, and enable effective planning.