

Integration: Ivory Tower or Tower of Babel

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Integration has become a cliché in enrollment management and student services circles. The term is used to describe everything from integrated marketing to seamless services. Often, it defines organizational structures, processes, student information systems, and even communities. However, for the purposes of this paper, integration will be narrowly defined to focus on student communications.

Integrated communications should begin with the first contact prospective students have with an institution and continue throughout their lifetime. When communicating to students, marketing messages and the design of publications, Web pages, stationary, multimedia presentations, advertisements, and the like should be consistent. Generally speaking, admissions and development offices have mastered the art of integrating the communication flow. Rarely, however, are these offices the only areas communicating with students. To the students, everything that comes in their mailbox or inbox is the university. They do not discriminate between academic and administrative offices. So, to truly be integrated, communications must be coordinated across the campus.

This, of course, is no easy feat. Integration can be mandated or induced; yet it never happens through serendipity. Broad-based buy-in is the best path to enduring integration. Such wide-scale alignment is difficult in any organization but is particularly allusive in the academy where dissonance and nonconformity are highly valued. To be successful in this environment, enrollment managers must possess political savvy as well as a deep understanding of the culture. Relationships built on trust and mutual respect are more important than a sound business case or

a “killer” design to achieving the lofty goal of integration. Others will believe the message only if they believe in the messenger. Consequently, invest in raising awareness of enrollment management accomplishments. This will simultaneously foster confidence in you.

In any project of this magnitude, you must have a cadre of dedicated, talented people. Developing skills such as design, writing, speaking, and multimedia improves the quality of communications while giving staff a sense of pride in their work. By nurturing individual interests that correspond with the strategic directions of the organization, you will build human capital, the most valued asset any enrollment management operation possesses.

Along with the necessary skill set, there must be an action plan. The plan should include written objectives that consist of a clearly defined purpose for the communication, a description of the intended audience, and the desired action to be taken by the recipient of the communication. For each objective, there should be a corresponding effectiveness measure. Did you achieve the desired objective? Communication plans also should convey the medium through which a particular communication will occur, the staff member responsible for implementation, a timeline for implementation, and the expected cost of the initiative.

Integrated communication plans are resource hungry. Financial and human resources for implementation and ongoing maintenance are essential. Knowing how to integrate and having buy-in are hollow victories if you cannot execute the plan. Few senior administrators understand the importance of integrated communications. For example, in today’s Internet environment, an institution’s Web presence does more to shape image than any other medium. Yet the commitment of staffing and to lesser degree, operational funding required to create and maintain a dynamic, coherent Web presence that flows from the homepage to every level beneath is

nonexistent on most campuses. A business case that looks at return on investment should be used to convince leadership that Web integration, for instance, is invaluable to the institution.

Lastly, you must have a clear vision for integrated communications. Viewed in isolation, each communication may not inherently seem to be part of a larger plan. Collectively, however, the communications should present a consistent image of the institution designed to synergistically motivate students to enroll, persist, or donate time or money. It is the cumulative effect of the communications plans that influences choice, not any single contact. Understanding how the plan is intended to move students through each stage of the enrollment funnel and on into the institutional development and fundraising cycle is critical.

Integrated communications will only become a reality if there is a vision, adequate resources, an action plan, staff skills, and campus-wide buy-in. If any of these elements are missing, integration will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Absent integrated communications, messages from the university are distorted and confusing. We choose whether or not to create our own Tower of Babel.