Where is the Evidence for Student Success?

The Enrollment Management Disconnect

Enrollment Management has become an emphasis in most North American Institutions of Higher Education. While definitions of Enrollment Management are varied, a common thread is the focus on managing "cradle to grave" relationships with prospects, students, and alumni.

Many Institutions have spent a great deal of time and money on enhancing the admissions process. As a result, most of those institutions have experienced measurable enrollment growth, especially in target populations that improve student diversity. Alumni relations is also a common strong point, due to a consistent focus of senior administration on fund raising and maintaining a dialogue with "friends" of its institution. Less, however, has been done to improve student outcomes in the middle of the Enrollment Management "client" life-cycle.

The irony, of course, of the focus on admissions and alumni relations is that improved student outcomes should make everything stronger. Regarding admissions, wouldn't it be much easier to sell an institution to prospects and their parents if it had a reputation for helping students succeed? Regarding alumni relations, shouldn't improved access to required courses make for more alumni, and happier ones?

Why don't institutions do more to maximize student access to the courses they need to complete their academic careers? The answer appears, in large part, to be based on two factors: the complexity of the problem, and campus politics that restrict necessary schedule changes.

Complexity

Predicting what all of your students need to take, conflict-free, in an upcoming academic term is an incredibly complex problem. Thousands of students with unique academic histories, goals, and interests make it very difficult to do more than study the historical course selections of past students. While this is a good start that many ambitious schools have taken, it is not enough to provide the complete picture of student demand for courses.

Politics and Culture

Academic departments have always controlled the schedule development process. This decentralized process and the lack of good data on students' course needs have limited schedule changes to minor tweaks resulting from changing faculty composition or interests. A comprehensive analysis is needed to implement student-centered change, yet this is difficult to accomplish within the schedule-building culture of most institutions.

The Problems: Lower Student Success and Higher Costs

The Director of The Education Trust, Kati Haycock, expressed these concerns to the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education in May 10, 2004: "Though higher education as a whole has made important progress on access, it has made far less progress in translating access into success." Her organization conducted a recent study of first-time, full-time degree seeking college freshmen. Their findings: only 63 percent graduate within six years, and only 37 percent obtain a B.A. in four years. A U.S. Dept. of Education study pegged the four-year graduation rate of private institutions of higher education (IHEs) at 48.6 percent, and the public IHEs at 26 percent. Haycock goes on to report that student mobility (transferring to another four-year institution) is not the primary culprit for low graduation rates. Eighty percent of students who start at a four-year institution and get a bachelor's degree earn that degree at the institution where they first enrolled.

The cost of higher education is rapidly increasing as fewer students are reaching their academic goals, and even fewer on reaching them "on time."

These are problems that can be solved. It is true that institutions can't do anything about students who change majors, take a reduced load to accommodate work, or party more than they study. It is also true that politics and culture make it challenging to efficiently schedule courses so that course seats match changing student needs. There is a growing group of innovative institutions, however, that believe that better information on their students' course needs is arming them to address both of these problems.

The Solution: Evidence for Change

Improving access and reducing waste relies on a much better understanding of students' course needs and a system for responding to those needs through high-impact schedule changes.

Understanding Students' Course Needs: Demand Analysis

Your Student Information System probably has the data that is needed to analyze student demand, such as historical schedules over the past several years, student academic history, degree audit information, and data about your active students. The hard part – which has been a focus of our firm for the past few years – is turning all of that raw data into usable information.

Here are the steps that we take in this process:

1. Historical analysis – A study of what individual students have taken in the past. This methodology has been used by many institutions for years. We have added analysis of demographic sub-population tendencies and trends. While historical analysis is a good start, it is inherently limited by past schedule offerings - if you didn't offer it, there is no historical demand. Put more simply, this analysis tells us more about what students settled for than what they needed.

2. Program analysis – A study of individual, active students' academic career progress so as to assess what should/might be taken next. This approach requires access to a degree audit system that defines the rules and requirements of your various programs. Program analysis is an excellent way to discern student needs, especially as a student approaches the end of his academic career.

3. Student Academic Planner – An online survey of individual students as to their desired courses and their availability for upcoming terms (this step is optional, but highly recommended). This tool leverages the program analysis, enabling students and advisors to plan academic careers while modeling the feasibility of various paths. For students that complete this process, there is a clear answer to the complex questions of what to take, in what order, and over how many terms. Institutions get demand data on both program requirements and desired electives in addition to elusive information on students' academic career goals. This intent can be used to measure student success against student goals on a student-by-student basis.

A New Student Service: Roll-forward Schedule "Realignment"

Most IHEs roll academic schedules forward from the previous "like" term. The roll-forward schedule has its merits – it's easy to do and it minimizes change in a change-resistant culture. Like anything that rolls, however, an academic schedule periodically needs realignment.

The idea of a roll-forward realignment is simple: periodically adjust your academic schedules in response to resource shortages and changes in student needs. Adjustments should only be made when the impact of the change outweighs the political "cost" of the change. For example:

- Adding a course offering so seniors can graduate on time

- Removing an unneeded course offering to free up faculty resources to teach an important under-supplied course

- Changing an offering time to correspond with the availability of the students who need it most

- Changing an offering time to reduce conflicts between other offerings that students need to take in a given term

High impact course offering changes fall into two categories: under-supply and over-supply.

1. Under-supply is when the number of students needing the course exceeds available seats in the roll-forward schedule. Courses in this category must be prioritized by the following factors: How many students are impacted? Is the course a degree requirement for these students? Are these students near the end of the program?

2. Over-supply is when the number of students needing the course is less than available seats in the roll-forward schedule. Courses in this category must be prioritized by such factors as: How many unneeded offerings are there? Is the instructor listed as TBA or part-time? Could the instructor teach an under-supplied course? Do these offerings occur during prime time hours or in highly sought after rooms?

High impact time changes also fall into two categories: wrong time of week and student conflict.

1. Wrong time of week is scheduling offerings when the students who need them are not available. You might find that half of the students needing the course are night students and all of the offerings are scheduled during daytime hours. Prioritizing these disconnects involves the same factors as under supply, since the net effect is the same – students can't get courses that they need.

2. Student conflict is when groups of students want to take two or more sections that are offered at the same time. If those sections have always been in conflict in roll-forward schedules, this problem may remain undetected (unless students complain). Prioritizing these disconnects, like wrong time of week, involves the same factors as under supply.

The Implementation: Evidence-Based Consensus Building

There will always be resistance to change, especially when dealing with a politically charged area like academic scheduling. Improving student access to courses and reducing waste from unneeded offerings can only be accomplished with better evidence on student need and support from senior administration to act on that evidence. We have found that better information is the key to "selling" change. If you are only recommending high impact changes wherein you can create a compelling case for that change, the discussion can be rational and objective.

Various stakeholders from scheduling, academic departments, the provost's office, institutional research, finance, information technology, and facilities collaborate on evidence-based decision making to improve student success and reduce waste.

Tom Shaver is the Founder and CEO of Ad Astra Information Systems, which has more than 600 higher education clients.