

10 Things Every College President Should Know about Enrollment Management

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All too often throughout my tenure as an enrollment management practitioner and consultant, I have observed how well-meaning college presidents have failed to support or even unknowingly sabotaged their institution's enrollment efforts. Hence, this article is designed to help presidents avoid common pitfalls, become increasingly knowledgeable about enrollment management, and focus on the issues and opportunities that matter most in regard to producing desired enrollment outcomes. The article also will provide guidance for those who advise presidents on enrollment management. Ten essential guideposts follow:

About the Author

Dr. Jim Black is the president and CEO of SEM WORKS, one of the world's leading enrollment management consulting firms. Black was a practitioner in the field for more than twenty years, has consulted with over 300 colleges and universities as well as technology companies such as Microsoft, SAS, and Blackboard. He has contributed significantly to the literature by writing four books and numerous book chapters and articles on enrollment issues.

- 1** As the institution's president, you have an obligation to monitor enrollment data. You should receive routine reports or have access to enrollment dashboards designed specifically to provide the key information you need for decision-making. That said, continuously asking the seemingly benign question, "How are the enrollment numbers?" is often counterproductive. To be blunt, you should already know the answer, and each time you inquire about the numbers you have inadvertently signaled to the enrollment staff that you care more about the bottom line than the capacity to produce enrollment results--your people. Nurturing that capacity is the key to yielding optimal results.
- 2** Expecting strategies, especially panic-driven, last minute strategies, to "carry the day" is misguided. There is no competitive advantage in a strategy per se. Moreover, there is not a strategy that your enrollment team can create that cannot be replicated by a competitor. To capture and sustain a competitive advantage the focus must be on the quality of execution--and execution depends largely on people and supporting infrastructure.
- 3** Another common error is assuming that the enrollment management organization is broken if there is a dip in enrollment. There are a multitude of factors that can lead to enrollment declines (e.g., increased competition, shifting demographics, the economy, an erosion in institutional image, a stale academic product) and failure to consider all viable alternatives can lead to costly solutions addressing the wrong problem.
- 4** It is fairly common for enrollment targets to be established based on anticipated expenses versus per student or per FTE revenue projections, presidential aspirations, or political pressures. While these are all legitimate criteria in setting targets, none of these should be used without data-driven enrollment projections that account for external and internal factors that may impact enrollment outcomes positively or negatively.

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- 5 Admittedly controversial, is the practice of hiring inexperienced, low paid, recent college graduates as Admissions counselors. Few companies in the private sector would trust sales to inexperienced personnel. Nor would they place sales people before customers without adequate training or accept the kind of staff attrition that is common among Admissions professionals. It is imperative to invest in those who represent the college and who to many are the institution personified.
- 6 Gradually, college presidents are beginning to understand the power of the web as a marketing and recruitment tool. This medium has become far more influential in the college search process than guidance counselors, guidebooks, recruitment fairs, expensive publications, and general advertising. Most colleges have experienced significant increases in the number of applicants who have never inquired directly to the institution prior to submitting an application. These applicants are the silent shoppers--perusing information on web sites prior to self-identifying. Institutions that relegate their web site to a part-time person or a distributed model of content ownership are ill-prepared for tech-savvy shoppers who expect to be engaged and entertained. You need to invest in a talented team of individuals to manage the institution's web presence (e.g., web designers, graphic designers, web content writers, information architects, database administrators, and compliance experts).
- 7 Enrollment trends by population often fluctuate over time. Placing the institution's focus on a single population, first-time freshmen for example, is a strategic mistake. Diversify your enrollment portfolio by investing in the recruitment and retention of your top five-to-seven key enrollment segments (e.g., adult learners, transfers, formers, graduate students, non-credit students, dual enrollment students, online learners). Diversification will protect the institution from falling prey to environmental shifts such as a decline in high school graduates.
- 8 Enrollment management is essentially a relationship continuum that begins with the first contact with a prospective student through graduation and beyond. Focusing on one part of the enrollment continuum will yield minimal results. Your institution's approach needs to be holistic--addressing every stage of the continuum with emphasis on the weakest conversion points (e.g., inquiry to applicant, first-year to second-year retention).
- 9 Don't get caught "asleep at the wheel." Most enrollment crises are completely avoidable. Signs of pending enrollment challenges are everywhere. Ensure someone on campus is charged with scanning the environment and monitoring the effectiveness of existing strategies. Don't wait to a crisis occurs to react. Be prevention focused.
- 10 Invest in an enrollment champion. In today's competitive environment, the chief enrollment officer must be more than a "glorified" Admissions director. This individual must have a command of data, the ability to energize and focus the campus community around enrollment imperatives, strategic planning skills, an understanding of how to leverage technology, the capability to motivate and mobilize the enrollment team, strong communication skills, vision, influence with the academic leadership in order to guide decisions regarding the academic program mix, marketing expertise, and a commitment to student success. Currently, there is a high demand for such individuals and a low supply. This is one area where you may have to buy talent.

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