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REFRAMING STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT  
FROM THE ACADEMIC LENS: THEORY IN PRACTICE  
(PART 2)

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This article is the second in a series of papers based upon a 2007 study that was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the processes and procedures for success in building shared responsibility for enrollment outcomes with the academic community. This second paper provides practical tips for the chief enrollment manager in the application of the SEM theories that were substantiated in the research.

## Introduction

A fundamental tenet underlying the success of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) initiatives is the ability of institutions to adopt enrollment management as a shared responsibility that is rooted within the academic ethos. However, SEM practitioners frequently site tensions between the “academic-driven” culture of institutions and the “student-centered” culture that underlies effective SEM practice. In the first of this series of articles, I described a 2007 study that was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the processes and procedures for success in building shared responsibility for enrollment outcomes with the academic community. In this second paper, I provide a synopsis of the SEM theories substantiated in the 2007 study, as well as practical tips for the application of the theory in practice.

## I. Overview of the 2007 Study Results

The first article presented the results from a study involving a purposeful sample of five SEM practitioners who were reputed for effecting positive change by actively engaging the academic community in the SEM process. The results from this study substantiated many of the fundamental tenets underlying SEM-related theories, which are summarized below:

### SEM AS A PROCESS

*An institution's academic program is inexorably codependent on its enrollment management. The quality of academic programs can only be developed and maintained in a stable enrollment environment, and stable enrollments are only possible through sound planning, development, and management of academic programs. (Dolence, 1997)*

*Not all strategic plans address enrollment management, but enrollment management cannot work without strategic planning. (Massa, 2001)*

- **SEM as a Component of Strategic Planning**—The study substantiated that SEM is inherently goal-oriented and often takes one of four planning orientations as defined by Kalsbeek (2006)—academic, administrative, market-centered, and/or student-focused. In all cases presented by the study participants, the objectives underlying the SEM process reflected an *academic* orientation where the primary outcomes and measures of the planning process focused on the student profile, student preparedness, progress, and outcomes. However, other factors related to market positioning and/or

balancing “revenue, prestige, and access” were also important, and in some cases appeared to be more significant, depending on the institutional objectives at hand.

- **The Importance of Visible Leadership by the Provost and President**—The study substantiated the assertions of Dolence (1993, 1997), Henderson (2004), and others of the importance of actively engaging the academic community in the SEM planning process, and of the need for visible leadership of the President and Chief Academic Officer in linking the importance of SEM to the academic well-being of the institution.

## SEM AS A DRIVER OF CHANGE

*If Enrollment Management starts with institutional mission, it ultimately succeeds or fails based on the strength of its link to academics and student success. (Bontrager, 2004)*

- **A Compelling Reason for Change**—Consistent with change theory as articulated by Hossler (1990), and subsequently by Kotter (1995) and Owen (2001), an enrollment and/or an enrollment-related financial crisis was the catalyst for change in all situations. It was the connection between enrollment and institutional budget, and the relationship between enrollment and the institution’s national ranking (a quasi indicator for market positioning) that created the sense of urgency.
- **Grounded in Research and Data: The Language of Academics**—A recurrent strategy employed in the SEM planning process was the consistent use of research and data to communicate the need for change—a strategy Henderson (2004) associated with the ability of enrollment professionals to speak the language of the academic.
- **Linked to the Academic Context**—When queried about *how* the academic character and values of the institution had changed as a result of the SEM planning process, the following impacts were most frequently cited and in large measure, were consistent with Henderson’s (2004) characterization of organizations with an EM ethos centered within the academic context. Specifically, the study participants referenced:

- a heightened level of understanding and involvement of the institutions, particularly among academic deans and faculty, in achieving enrollment goals;
- an enhanced focus on longer-term strategic planning;
- a greater reliance on research and data; and
- and a stronger orientation and attention to key performance metrics.

## IMPORTANCE OF STRUCTURE

*Enrollment structure follows academic understanding, and therein lies the future of enrollment management. (Henderson, 2004)*

- **The Importance of Enrollment Planning Structures**—Although the mechanisms used for institutional discussion were less formal than suggested by many theoretical constructs, the Deans' Council and/or an Enrollment Planning Committee comprised of senior academic leaders and influencers tended to be the focal point(s) for strategic discussions on the enrollment challenges facing the institution and the strategic opportunities at hand. These structures were deemed to enhance participation, collaboration, and consultation within the academic enterprise.
- **The Importance of Engaging Academic Leaders at the Level of the Dean at Critical Decision Points**—Most frequently, Deans were involved in three of Bryson's (2004) ten strategic planning stages:
  - Identifying the organization's mandate and need for change
  - Identifying SEM issues and policy implications
  - Decisions on what SEM strategies to adopt

Deans were also most often engaged in four of the eight steps articulated by Kotter (1995) and Owen (2001) in introducing transformative change, these being in communicating a sense of urgency, in formulating a vision for the future, in forming a powerful coalition with key influencers in the process, and in institutionalizing new approaches to enrollment planning and management.
- **The Use of Incentives Tied to Accountability**—Study participants noted that incentives were used to leverage the engagement of academic Deans. Enrollment goals tied to financial incentives with accountability for outcomes were often a point

of negotiation between the Chief Academic Officer and individual Deans, in consultation with the Chief Enrollment Manager.

- **Lateral and Horizontal Communication Structures to Extend the Discussions into the Academic Units**—In relation to the involvement of the faculty-at-large, the primary mechanisms cited were through governance bodies as well as through cascading discussion processes flowing from those at the Deans' Council level through to the academic units. An underlying success factor was that there was a willingness among the academic community to consider change.

## **ROLE OF THE CHIEF ENROLLMENT MANAGER (CEM)**

*Enrollment leaders serve many roles throughout the change management process, such as that of a visionary, encourager, storyteller, facilitator, arbitrator, problem solver, manager and coach. (Black, 2003)*

- **CEMs are Systems Thinkers Adept at Influencing Change**—Study participants confirmed that the types of roles served by the CEMs in the enrollment planning process were similar to those articulated by Jim Black (2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d) in applying Bolman and Deals' (1991) four dimensions of change for reframing organizations to the future EM agenda. They reflected that the CEMs roles were to communicate through evidence-based research and data the urgency behind the call to action, and that they did so through communicating both laterally and horizontally. The CEMs served as collaborators in working with the Chief Academic Officer, and as a resource to the Deans in extending the dialogue into the academic units for purposes of formulating enrollment strategies. Among the most salient advice provided by the study participants for the role of the Chief Enrollment Manager was the need to become, what Henderson (2004) referred to as being a “student of institutional culture.”

## **II. Practical Tips for Applying the Theory in Practice**

While many institutions subscribe to the theory-based concepts, few have actually embodied them actively and intentionally. This section presents practical tips for the application of the theory, based upon the sage perspectives of the five SEM study participants, as well as based upon my own experiences as a SEM leader/practitioner with more than thirty years experience within both a college and a university environment.

## SEM Challenges

Many institutions consider enrollment management an administrative function. The notion of enrollment planning is often not in the line of sight of the academic community. In this context, the challenges for enrollment managers are often twofold: 1) to influence a *change in culture* in introducing the “concepts” of enrollment management as a component of strategic planning, and 2) in building an enrollment focused organization at the operational level. On the strength of the results from the 2007 study, the following ten critical success factors were identified for building a SEM-focused organization and program:

1. A case for change: a sense of urgency
2. Visible leadership from the executive
3. Campus-wide awareness and willingness to challenge the status quo
4. Academic imperative
5. A SEM Champion
6. Engagement of decision leaders from across divisional borders
7. SEM Planning and decision-making structures
8. Incentives for academic engagement with accountability
9. A culture of evidence
10. Predictable level of resources

## Practical Approaches

- **A Case for Change: A Sense of Urgency**—The most effective source of communication regarding the case for change comes from the executive—the president and provost. The message must articulate the relationship between enrollment and the academic and financial well-being of the institution, and be accompanied by a *call to action* for the institution to adopt a more strategic approach to EM. For example, an announcement by the executive of the establishment of an enrollment planning committee with accountability to the president or provost would signal the strategic priority of enrollment. The designation of a respected and skilled senior officer as the enrollment champion to lead the work of the committee and be accountable for results would signal the urgency and need for action.
- **Visible Leadership**—The most visible forms of leadership involve the president and provost in leading focused discussions on institutional enrollment challenges. These

discussions often occur as part of the regular cycle of institutional planning that involve meetings or retreats with the board of governors, senate, and with academic and administrative leaders at the level of the dean, director, and chair. Visible leadership can also be demonstrated by articulating enrollment as an institutional priority in the institution's strategic plan, and by identifying enrollment as a critical success factor for maintaining the academic quality and financial stability of the institution as part of the annual budget planning process. The inclusion and active involvement of the designated CEM in facilitating the planning processes with members of the executive signals the important leadership role of the position.

- **Campus-wide Awareness and Support**—Effective strategies for socializing the concept of strategic enrollment management with the campus community include:
  1. Invite a third party SEM expert (e.g., SEM WORKS) to present a seminar to the campus community on the changing higher education landscape, trends that are impacting enrollment across the country, and innovative strategies introduced at comparator and competitor institutions in response to changing enrollment conditions (e.g., Web site developments, innovative marketing, first-year experience programs, policy renewal, application of technology in the delivery of programs and services).
  2. Host joint retreats between the board of governors and senate, and between the academic and student affairs leadership groups to engage institutional leaders in building awareness of the importance of their respective roles in addressing enrollment challenges. As part of this process, prepare briefing papers on the enrollment and competitive contexts, and on the importance of building shared responsibility for enrollment goals. Facilitate roundtable discussions to identify strategies for advancing institutional quality through the recruitment and retention of outstanding faculty, staff, and students (which are co-dependent); as well as to define the critical success factors to achieve these ends.
  3. Signal the importance of enrollment as an **academic imperative** within the budget planning process. Request each academic faculty/department to articulate their enrollment goals and strategies to achieve these ends. Use these plans as the basis of budgetary discussions between the provost and

deans to establish **enrollment targets linked to budget allocations with consequences** for falling short of enrollment over consecutive years.

4. Undertake a third party review of existing student recruitment and retention practices in order to identify high impact strategies to advance a more focused and intentional approach to SEM. Engage decision leaders and students across campus in the process.

- **SEM Planning and Decision-making Structures**—As part of the call to action by the executive, designate a **SEM champion** to lead the development and implementation of a strategic enrollment plan. The individual must occupy a position of influence, and therefore report directly to the provost or president. The individual must be well versed in enrollment management concepts and principles, be politically astute, and skilled in leading planning processes and in managing change.

In terms of decision structures, utilize an existing standing committee (e.g., deans' council)—possibly augmented by additional decision-leaders from across divisions—as the forum for enrollment planning. Alternatively, establish a **standing enrollment planning committee** (EPC) under the authority of the provost or president to be chaired by the SEM champion. Designate decision leaders from across organizational divisions to be members of the committee, including deans, executive directors, associate vice-presidents, director of institutional research, the CIO, and director of marketing. Demonstrate the importance of the committee by extending personal invitations from the provost or president to each member. Pre-establish the schedule of meetings as well as the goals for each meeting to demonstrate respect for the investment of committee members' time. Host meetings as extended lunches or as breakfast meetings to convey appreciation for meetings scheduled on the fringes of the day. To optimize the use of committee meeting time, prepare a series of white papers to inform and focus discussions on such topics as:

1. **FOUNDATIONS FOR ENROLLMENT PLANNING**—Prepare a brief overview of the institution's enrollment planning context and challenges. Present a framework for an enrollment management plan, and include draft foundation statements to clarify the vision, mission, and underlying principles for decision-making. Key questions to be addressed in the paper and posited for discussion with the committee include:



- **Enrollment challenges**—What are the primary enrollment challenges and associated risks of maintaining the status quo?
- **Foundational statements**—In considering the internal and external enrollment planning contexts, what is the central purpose (mission) and desired future state (vision) that should guide the institution’s enrollment planning process? What enduring values must be preserved and what best practice SEM principles must be adopted to guide decision-making?

**Sample Foundation Statements**

**SEM Mission:**

*To strategically strengthen the institution’s competitiveness in achieving its enrollment goals.*

**SEM Vision:**

*To foster a culture of shared responsibility for achieving enrollment goals, and for creating the conditions that enhance the student experience and the potential for academic success.*

**SEM Challenge:**

*To align programs and services with the changing higher educational enrollment context and student needs and expectations.*

| <b>Sample SEM Plan Content Areas</b>         | <b>Sample Principles</b>   |
|--|--|
| Recruitment marketing and communications     | <i>Adopt a campus-wide coordinated and consistent messaging strategy and Web site presence (concept of one university).</i>  |
| Student recruitment                          | <i>Adopt an enrollment strategy of “quality” enrollment, where quality is defined at the academic unit level, and is grounded in evidenced-based research on variables that characterize individuals with high academic potential.</i> |
| Diversifying the enrollment mix              | <i>Expand opportunities for non-traditional student segments (e.g., distance education, midcareer professionals) in program areas in which demand and capacity can be demonstrated.</i>  |
| Leveraging student scholarships              | <i>Allocate scholarship funds in alignment with student recruitment priorities, and with an emphasis on attracting and retaining quality students.</i>   |
| Building the capacity for enrollment growth  | <i>Invest in innovative programs and instructional delivery techniques (e.g., summer institutes) if pedagogically sound, appropriate to the needs of students, and financially sustainable.</i>  |
| Enhancing quality in the learning experience | <i>Front-load student retention efforts within the first year experience in high impact courses.</i>   |
| Enhancing service to students                | <i>Establish service standards that exceed student expectations for service quality, where “quality” is defined on the basis of relevance, responsiveness, and accessibility.</i>  |
| Building and sustaining a SEM culture        | <i>Incorporate enrollment planning within the institution’s strategic planning processes, and support enrollment planning with evidence-based research.</i>  |

2. **STRATEGIC CHOICES**—Prepare a situational analysis based upon available institutional research (benchmarked where possible) and data that profiles trends in:
- the student body (e.g., academic preparedness, demographics, mix, diversity, geographic origin, program, year of study, etc.)
  - Admission and conversion rates to registered status by student segment
  - Student year-to-year persistence, performance, retention, and completion rates
  - Course attrition/retention rates and grade performance
  - Outcome research on graduates and leavers
  - Student satisfaction and engagement indicators
  - Enrollment and financial projections

Present a synthesis of the research and data that highlights areas of strength, areas requiring improvement, and areas where there are information gaps. Articulate objectives for performance improvement and associated high impact strategies based upon best practice principles in enrollment management. Strategies should stand the test of being student-focused, learning-oriented, and mission-centric. To illustrate:

**Objective on Student Persistence:**

The university will improve its student persistence rate from years 1 to 2 from x% to y% by 2010.

**Priority 1–3 Year Strategies (illustrative only):**

- Implement three personal contacts with every first semester non-declared student in 2007.
- Introduce student success interventions in courses with high attrition, with particular attention to (list course disciplines)

- 3. DRAFT STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT PLAN**—Consolidate the feedback from each of the discussion papers into a draft enrollment plan. Present the draft as a multiyear “living” plan, in recognition that it requires a sustained effort to change culture, and that the plan itself needs to be adjusted on an ongoing basis in response to rapidly changing environmental conditions. Garner commitment from the executive for a **predictable level of resources** to seed development work and new initiatives over the plan period. In order to build commitment to the plan and shared responsibility for effective use of resources, adopt a cost-sharing arrangement whereby academic and service units participating in the implementation process contribute to the costs.

## Multi-year Plan: Not A Silver Bullet

**Year 1 Focus:**

- High-Impact Recruitment and Marketing Strategies
- Organizational Structures: right people on the bus
- New systems
- Faculty-based Enrollment Planning Pilot

**Year 2 Focus:**

- Build on Year 1 Experience
- Policy Reviews
- Focus on Student Retention

**Year 3 Focus:**

- Build on Years 1 and 2
- Develop Research and Enrollment Reporting Capacity
- Create Physical and Virtual Welcome Presence

Attach accountability metrics to each initiative to demonstrate the value-added impact and to foster a **culture of evidence**.

In order to build confidence in the plan, it is imperative that **short-term gains** be made. Therefore, identify “quick hits,” or “low hanging fruit” that have the potential to realize positive results in a relatively short timeframe.

Develop an implementation plan that establishes:

- who is the primary sponsor for each initiative (normally a member of the EPC),
- cross-divisional team members to be involved in the initiative,
- timelines by which the work will be undertaken, and
- communications plan to keep the campus community apprised of developments.

An example of a short-term initiative is the development of an event such as a *campus visit program* that is aimed at improving the conversion of admitted to enrolled students. Such a program could be launched within a relatively short period of time (3–4 months), and be designed to engage the campus community (faculty, academic advisers, student services providers). The objectives for the program could be framed in terms of the numbers of participants in the event, as well as the achievement of targeted conversion rates.

An example of a **longer-term strategy** is the redevelopment of a Web site or marketing campaign that is targeted to improve the quality, diversity, and/or volume of applicants.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presented an elaboration of the results from a 2007 study that substantiated the theories behind effective SEM practice in building shared responsibility of the academic community in the process; as well as practical tips for applying the theory in practice. While there is no *cookie-cutter* approach to engaging the academic community in assuming shared responsibility for enrollment outcomes, results from this study and the experiences of seasoned professionals in the field identify the following as core planning principles and critical success factors in their application:

### ***Core Planning Principles***

- Right people at the table
- Involvement of faculty, staff, and students from across divisions
- Interactive and participatory process

- Respect for leadership style of the academic dean and unit heads
- Evidence-based decision-making

***Critical Success Factors***

- Visible support of executive leadership
- CEM in a position of influence
- Investment in quality research and analysis
- Readiness for change
- Tolerance for challenging the status quo
- Accountability tied to resources

The institutional culture, resources, expertise, and will of the organization to challenge the status quo shape the enrollment planning process and resultant plan. I wish you well on your journey, and would welcome feedback and learning about your successful strategies in reframing SEM from the academic lens.

**About the Author:** Lynda Wallace-Hulecki is a seasoned professional with over thirty years experience in higher education. Lynda has provided leadership in strategic enrollment management at both a research-intensive university and a four-year comprehensive college in Canada. Lynda also served for twenty-three years at the college as director of institutional analysis and planning. As a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lynda has focused her graduate research on the evolving field of SEM, and the application of learned concepts on leadership, change management, and strategic planning to the advancement of SEM as a professional field of practice. In November 2007, Lynda joined SEM WORKS as a Consultant.