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When Enrollment Strategies Cross Traditional Boundaries: Opportunities and Challenges
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Successful institutional goal attainment requires visionary leadership that remains focused on institutional goals while encouraging energetic partnerships across traditional departmental boundaries. This article outlines an approach to strategy development and implementation that relies on creating partnerships across traditional departmental lines to both confront challenges and exploit opportunities that may emerge on the way to goal attainment. Why commit to a collaborative approach across traditional boundaries?

- An effective enrollment management program is complex and requires the commitment of leaders with specialized areas of expertise across the institution to pull together. By sharing ideas, energy and resources, and selecting appropriate joint actions, you can more effectively attract and retain students. This approach should lead to:

- Stabilizing revenue streams. Enrollment management is as much about achieving head-count goals (e.g., total head-count, mix) as it is about net revenue (e.g., enrolled credits, tuition and fees, financial aid). When enrollment and revenue goals are consistently achieved, the administration has the ability to invest in institutional priorities to improve the curriculum, student programs and facilities. Conversely, when revenue streams are disrupted, the administration scrambles to manage a dwindling budget through budget cuts and/or staff layoffs. So it is in everyone’s best interest to pull together to achieve enrollment goals.

Three basic questions are addressed in this article:

- What critical enrollment strategies would benefit from a collaborative process?
- What are the management implications for leadership with this approach?
- What are the long-term benefits to the institution?

Critical Enrollment Strategies
Recruitment and Retention: Recruiting Satisfied Graduates
Traditional enrollment departments (admissions, registrar, financial aid, student accounts, student services) possess specialized knowledge and essential skill sets for achieving departmental objectives. In a collaborative model, leaders from various departments outline together the goals, strategies, policies and processes by which a shared investment of time and resources could result in improved services to students. For example, although admissions takes the lead in developing recruitment strategies and messages, other departments bring to the table valuable perspectives about the interactions students and parents have with these parts of the operation. Although achieving the new student head-count goals is critical, all need to keep sight of the long-term goal of enrolling students who will persist until their educational goal is attained. The advantage to this approach is increasing the number of institutional leaders who understand the various components that drive a successful enrollment management plan. All of these leaders can be expected to come to the decision-making table with departmental expertise now coupled with an appreciation and understanding of the critical aspects that influence outcomes within other enrollment departments.

Coupling recruitment and retention strategy development naturally brings together leaders from various enrollment-related departments. Topics that would benefit from developing a shared understanding of the core recruitment and retention issues include:

- What students will come (yield) and stay (persist) until their educational goal is attained?
- What services do students need during their various enrollment phases? Before they apply for admission? After they are admitted? After enrolling and during their first year? What is needed to keep them on track all the way through graduation?
- What messages are communicated throughout the enrollment continuum (from prospective student until educational goal is attained)? By whom and when are these messages corresponded? Would a collaborative communication plan that seeks input across departments improve our relationships with students?
• What research tools are used that provide a student satisfaction inventory of the college experience, core services and policies?
• What research is needed to understand what really makes a difference in the decision to come to our institution and to stay?
• What plans exist to educate staff in core service areas about enrollment goals, strategy, policy and procedures?
• Does a cohesive approach to customer service exist within and among departments? What would this look and feel like to the student? to staff? to faculty?

Enrollment Mix and Access
Tightly coupled with recruitment and retention issues are enrollment mix and student access issues. Enrollment mix relates to the various kinds of students within the enrollment continuum (e.g., percentages by gender, age, ethnicity, part-time versus full-time, undergraduate versus graduate; residential versus commuter), whereas access refers to any underrepresented student population that the institution has explicitly stated it wants to enhance (e.g., numbers of female engineers, low-income students, ethnic students pursuing doctoral degrees). Understanding past trends, the current state and future aspirations tied to enrollment mix goals will bring departments to the same discussion forum to hear perspectives toward the development of a comprehensive plan of action. For example, it may be learned that although new student men and women have a similar yield rate, graduation rate trends show a significantly lower percentage of women graduates. What research may be required to explain the difference?

Issues tied to enrollment mix and access lend themselves to a highly collaborative process of strategy development, action plans and research tied to measuring outcomes. From there the dialogue across traditional boundaries would flow. Other topics to examine include:

• What research is needed to understand what matters in the decision to enroll in the institution and to stay for various subsets of the student population?
• What learning assistance programs are available and do they effectively support students during their first year at the institution?
• What are the first-year persistence trends for selected subsets of the student population? Which populations are significantly below the average? What research is needed to understand the variances? How do need and financial aid strategy decisions influence persistence and drop-out rates?
• How do the subsets of student populations perform in specific general education courses or prerequisites for specific majors? Are there significant differences in the grades earned or the number of withdrawals? What interventions should be explored and deployed?
• How is student progress (academic, financial aid) monitored and communicated to students? What interventions have been deployed to work with students before reaching dismissal status?
• In what subsets of the student population would increased collaboration across departments improve retention and satisfaction?

Stable Revenue Streams: Year by Year, Term by Term, Program by Program
A stable revenue stream provides the foundation for the administration to make investments in institutional priorities (e.g., increase the institutional financial aid budget, invest in academic programs, improve facilities, enhance information technology). A stable revenue stream requires annually achieving head-count goals (enrolling new students, retaining continuing students) and credit count goals across a variety of programs. Each enrollment department interacts with students and their families, so each plays a critical role in a student’s decision to stay or leave. One of the best methods to strengthen revenue streams is to improve student retention. Not only will it increase the institution’s overall head count over time, but also the need to replace stop-outs or dropouts with new students will decrease and reduce the pressure on admission departments. Typically, it costs more to attract and admit a new student than it does to retain members already in your student body.

Also, revenue streams rely on departmental directors to optimize resources (e.g., personnel, the budget, institutional financial aid) to achieve institutional goals. In recent years most departmental operational budgets have not increased, while many institutions are demanding improved services. A collaborative approach among departments in which the focus is on improving service at the same or less cost relies on everyone pulling in the same direction. Benefits can be achieved with a cross-functional team approach by asking questions in the following areas:

• What is the customer service strategy among the departments that serve students? Are all staff on the same page or would a staff development plan provide greater cohesion? Do students feel as if they receive quality services, or the runaround?
• What socioeconomic factors influence a student’s choice to come and to stay? How is affordability defined? What groups are most impacted by price increases? What changes would improve yield and/or retention rates?
• Does our need-based aid strategy support recruiting eventual satisfied graduates? Does the
strategy support our students throughout their time at the institution?
- For continuing students, what is the debt load and is it reasonable?
- Are students enrolling as projected, and if not, what are the reasons behind the variances?
- Are the reasons within institutional control? If yes, who should work through the issues?

Management Implications for Leadership: Opportunities and Challenges
Staff Education and Development Plan
Staff members who engage in a collaborative process for strategy, policy and procedure development will need to cultivate interpersonal skills for the cross-functional team to succeed. Members will need to listen to different perspectives with an open mind while agreeing to work thoughtfully together to make decisions that best serve the student and that can be managed within existing departmental resources. Skills in meeting facilitation, the art of negotiation and compromise are essential. An idea that is viewed as highly innovative during a discussion within the registrar’s office may be viewed by financial aid as difficult to manage or as setting unreasonable student expectations. If all staff have the shared goal of recruiting satisfied graduates, the registrar’s representative on the cross-functional team would be able to listen to the concerns and work with others to create a modified proposal that still attains the goal, yet is implemented in a different way. This type of working relationship takes time to develop because trust and understanding must be built across departments. The benefit is a cohesive enrollment plan understood and supported by all.

Abundant communication needs to flow between leadership and staff so that everyone feels they have a voice in the decision-making process. The decision-making process should be viewed as rational and transparent by the staff. The result of this open process tends to improve trust in leadership within and among departments, and trust is a critical element in a successful organizational structure.

To create opportunities for staff to value the contributions made by other departments, leadership may need to invest time and resources into team-building opportunities within and across departments. Investment in both departmental leaders and staff should occur through training programs, because all employees need to learn to appreciate each other’s talents and expertise while working together to solve emerging challenges. The bottom line for everyone is that the enrollment management strategy focuses on achieving net revenue and enrollment goals (both inputs and outcomes), and it takes the entire team with multiple gifts and responsibilities to achieve these goals. And how we choose to work together is just as important as the end result.

Understanding Enrollment Drivers and Setting Benchmarks
Leadership should understand the critical components of the enrollment plan and the time points when key performance indicators should be reported and compared with past trends. Whereas admissions may be interested in the weekly admission funnel statistics, other departments are interested in other types of information about the potential incoming class of students. Housing may be interested in the gender mix because the housing inventory may need to be modified to provide adequate beds for men and women. Academic leaders may be interested in the number of students expressing interest in their programs, which may influence the number of first-year sections offered. Critical key performance indicators (e.g., number of new students who filed the FAFSA; number of incoming freshmen who have submitted all application materials, have a complete file and are ready for an admission decision; number of students registered for the next term) should have established benchmarks to correspond with specific time points when progress toward goals is measured, and the results should be shared across departments. By setting specific benchmarks, leaders will see in what areas students are not behaving as predicted (e.g., significantly lower number of applications received to date compared with past trends), which provides an opportunity to adjust strategy, revise processes and recommend change to policy to gain the best outcome for the institution.

Implementing changes effectively within organizations takes a clear vision, strong leadership commitment and buy-in from key stakeholders. It takes time to educate staff throughout departments to embrace new directions, change past practices or work outside their current comfort zone. The challenge is finding the time to invest in leaders and staff. One major shift in thinking may involve moving to a student-centered focus from a department focus. Another shift may involve all relevant leaders thinking together about the potential redeployment of personnel and/or budget to focus finite resources on achieving critical institutional enrollment goals.

Culture of Evidence: Shared Understanding of Data
How are decisions reached? In a collaborative approach the discussions should be based on the information presented coupled with the insightful observations by the experts at the table. The key for developing a culture of evidence depends on the quality of the data (accuracy, completeness and timelines) and whether historical enrollment trends may be placed into context to create meaningful insights. Time needs to be spent up front on data management issues, research, key performance indicators and benchmarks to provide useful analysis to decision makers, which also requires a commitment of personnel to work through all issues tied to assessment. If these time and personnel investments are made, the payoff to the organization will be a reliable data source.

How complex building a culture of evidence is can be determined by assessing how institutional data are managed across departments. Data integrity is critical—data must be accurate and complete, with departments establishing shared definitions and metrics. Maintaining a metadata dictionary as a source for documenting shared definitions (e.g., freshmen new students are defined as FTE ) and metrics (e.g., how to calculate student FTE (full-time equivalents) is an essential step for effective data management. See an example of a metadata dictionary, for the Office of Information and Data Management at Seattle Pacific University, at www.spu.edu/depts/idm/.

By establishing benchmarking dates, data may be extracted from student information systems on a regular basis for further
analysis. Over time, historical trends may develop that allow leaders to compare the current year’s performance. When student behavior deviates from past patterns, the team can determine why this is true (e.g., a change in policy, a change in processes) or they may realize that additional research is needed and whether specific interventions need to occur to get back on track for goal attainment.

### Long Term Benefits: Building Institutional Stability and Legacy

For organizations to not only survive but also thrive requires competent and dedicated leaders and staff who commit their creative energies toward fulfilling institutional goals. While individuals are hired to fulfill existing vacancies, a wise administration seeks to educate the next generation of leaders. Those who demonstrate the talent and desire to learn new ideas and methods, and are able to collaborate with others, become the cornerstones of the organization. These individuals should be sought out and provided with various professional development opportunities because they will become the institution’s future administrators. Retaining the best and brightest within an organization will:

- provide stability within the administration during periods of transition (promotions, retirements)
- promote a common understanding of institutional goals and what it takes to maintain stable revenue streams
- acknowledge the value of the unique contributions of all departments and show appreciation for the unique role each individual plays, which is a basis for keeping staff morale high
- value the collaborative way of doing business, which embraces the culture of evidence, with decisions focused on the potential benefits or impacts to students (a student-centered rather than department-centered approach).

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