Enrollment Management: Key Elements for Building and Implementing an Enrollment Plan

This article provides the basic elements for constructing a comprehensive enrollment management plan. While enrollment professionals develop and implement plans, it is important to recognize that the campus climate and institutional leadership impact the enrollment plan’s development and implementation.

Janet Ward

Enrollment management is as much an art as it is a science. Just as every institution has a mission statement that expresses its purpose (educational goals and market segment), there needs to be a road map that shows where you’ve come from, where you are, and where you are going. The enrollment plan serves as the road map for achieving specific institutional goals, typically connected to student body size, enrollment mix, and revenue, while also providing specific indicators on the effectiveness of the learning environment (e.g., first-year persistence, graduation rates, etc.). It also involves departmental leaders understanding one another’s unique contribution towards achieving the institution’s goals. This article will focus on three components that determine the ease with which a comprehensive enrollment plan may be created and implemented:

- Institutional Traits
- Individual Traits
- Enrollment Plan Elements

Institutional Traits: The Campus Climate

While creating a comprehensive enrollment plan requires a total-institution commitment, the campus climate sets the tone for creating and supporting an enrollment plan. The first step is to determine if there is an institutional vision statement.

- What are the goals and aspirations of your institution?
- What market niche are you serving or hope to serve in the future?
- What sets you apart from your competitors?
- Where do you hope to be in five, ten, or twenty years?

Vision and President’s Leadership

The president is the institution’s vision champion as she constantly reinforces its message to key stakeholders (board of trustees, donors, alumni, parents, students, faculty, and staff). The vision must become part of the branding strategy, which builds consistency and momentum across various messages.

One way of knowing whether or not your institution has a clearly defined vision statement is by seeing whether faculty and staff are able to articulate how their work contributes to the vision’s achievement.

At Seattle Pacific University, the vision statement is brief and to the point—Engaging the Culture, Changing the World. While simply stated, faculty and staff across the community have been able to latch on to this statement and express how their work supports the vision. In the various academic, administrative, and enrollment (admissions, registrar, financial aid) departments, each has spent time exploring and clarifying the various ways they contribute to the vision.

Key Leaders Buy-In; Commitment to the Vision and Goals

While the president’s sponsorship is the crucial first step in articulating a vision, its fulfillment relies on it becoming part of the cultural fabric. The “rubber hits the road” when various departmental plans with their unique goals, strategies, and resource requests merge into one strategic plan (e.g., academics, enrollment, facilities, fund-raising, etc.). When leaders begin to compete for finite resources, the level of buy-in to the institutional vision is tested, as choices will be made about where to invest these resources. The annual budget planning cycle tests the resolve of the administration to fund the vision and make choices among competing priorities.

Will funding be available to increase financial aid to students, or should funding be directed to hire new faculty, or should it be directed to help purchase new technology to enhance the learning environment?

How may you determine if your college or university has the institutional traits that support the development and implementation of a comprehensive enrollment management plan? Hopefully, the following three elements would be evident:
Key Benchmarks are Established and Reviewed During the Annual Assessment Process:

- The strategic institutional and enrollment goals are known by campus leaders. The plan includes goals at strategic points into the future (next year, five years, ten years). Table 1 illustrates strategic undergraduate enrollment indicators from Seattle Pacific University.
- Goals are annually monitored and strategies assessed to determine whether adjustments to strategy or resources may be required to improve performance. An assessment plan by the enrollment management departments should occur annually.

Collaborations Among Institutional Plans Develop Shared Understanding and Synergy:

- Take time to discuss the enrollment plan with academic affairs, facilities, student life leaders, and other key stakeholders. It is important to understand how enrollment goals, such as growth, will impact the resources and services of other core areas.
- When enrollment growth is under discussion, the primary question may be whether growth can be accommodated within existing resources or if additional resources will be required. For example, if the plan is to increase new student enrollment by 200 more students over five years, how will this impact other institutional resources such as faculty FTE, campus housing, special services (counseling, tutoring, etc.), and parking?

Through Budget Planning Decisions, Resources Are Committed to Vision Priorities:

- How will the institution support the goals and strategies outlined in the enrollment plan? What about the impacts that will occur in other units, such as academic departments or housing?
- While effective managers re-engineer operations annually in order to keep departmental resources focused on priorities, at times an investment of new dollars may be required. To move forward, what items must be funded in the next budget cycle? If not funded, how should the enrollment plan be revised?
- You have heard the phrase “follow the money.” This expression applies when seeking to understand the administration’s commitment to vision and goals; resources will be committed to fund priorities.

Structure, Responsibility & Authority

The operational and political climate on a campus may either support or hinder the achievement of the institutional vision and/or enrollment plan. While I have worked under several

### Table 1: Strategic Enrollment Indicators—Tracking History and Projecting Future Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Indicators</th>
<th>Actual</th>
<th>Projections/Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Size—New Students, Fall Headcount</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Grads</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfers</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual Growth Rates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPU Undergraduate Enrollment (%)</td>
<td>(-11.07)</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA State HS Grads (%)</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>5.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT Scores (Avg.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPU Incoming Students</td>
<td>1110</td>
<td>1142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>1020</td>
<td>1017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA State</td>
<td>1047</td>
<td>1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS GPA (Avg.)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence (%)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Year Attrition Rates, Sophomore to Junior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS (%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfers (%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New HS Students (%)</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate, 6-Year (%)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Indicates baseline figures
different administrative structures, I have found that while structure is important, it is the integrity, competence, and team spirit of key leaders that determine how easily goals may be attained. Lines of authority and responsibility need to be clear, so it is understood who should be involved in the conversation before decisions are rendered. Questions to ponder when reviewing your structure:

- **For Individuals:** Are the key leaders prone to be team players or lone wolves? Are they willing to work toward the institutional goals or are they more focused on personal victories? Is communication multilateral and transparent or are there communication roadblocks that hinder the easy transmission of vital information? Are actions and words in sync, or is there a disconnection that leads to misunderstanding or mistrust?

- **For Decision-making:** Is there a clear understanding when decisions are yours alone vs. when it should be a shared decision made with colleagues vs. the decision being the responsibility of your supervisor? Truthfully, as my career has progressed up the career ladder and my scope of responsibility has broadened, I have found the more critical the decision, the less likely the decision is made unilaterally.

**ENROLLMENT LEADER’S CHALLENGE**

Having spoken at several conferences on this topic, the most challenging question raised by someone in the audience has been, “What if my institution does not have a clear vision? What may I do to promote the development of an enrollment plan?” Even without direction from the administration, an enrollment leader may begin to develop the contours of a plan that may be adopted by the institution as its enrollment plan. While difficult, it is possible if you are able to:

- **Focus on building collaborations among key stakeholders.** Find common ground and discover shared goals. Build understanding among stakeholders in order to value one another’s unique contributions to the organization.

- **Build an enrollment data tracking mechanism** on strategic enrollment indicators. The data will suggest areas of success along with areas for improvement (e.g., the difference in the student profile for those who persist and graduate vs. those who drop out).

- **Create a “draft” enrollment plan** based on your data and gain the support of your colleagues. The plan should outline the current state, next year’s goals, and short-term future goals, along with the key strategies, tactics, and resources required for the plan’s implementation.

- **Annually assess the plan and provide to key stakeholders and decisionmakers** a high level summary of progress towards the goals outlined in the “draft” enrollment plan, along with the challenges.

By providing this information, over time decisionmakers may understand your department’s significant contribution to the institution’s vitality and financial health, along with understanding the added value a comprehensive enrollment management plan brings to institutional strategic planning.

**Individual Leadership Traits: Unlocking the Door to Success**

While the vision may be clearly articulated and embraced by the campus community, to achieve institutional goals rests upon the actions of individual leaders within the organization and their teams. The following characteristics apply to all leaders within the organization, whether a program manager, lead counselor, associate director, or vice president. When hiring opportunities arise, look beyond the technical expertise or professional experience for:

**ABILITY TO FORGE COLLABORATIONS ACROSS THE INSTITUTION**

The enrollment plan requires input from different areas of expertise within enrollment departments (e.g., admissions, financial aid, registrar, etc.) as well as across the institution (e.g., academic, student life, facilities, etc.). The following are keys to building effective collaborations:

- **Take Time to Build Relationships:** While achieving tasks and assignments are important, it is just as important to spend time on building relationships. Identify those individuals who will help you achieve the goals in the enrollment plan, and take time to get to know them as individuals as well as what they hope to achieve on your campus. By understanding their hopes and aspirations, you may find a way to help them achieve their goals, and in the long run, they may be more willing to support your goals.

- **Build Your “Trust” Bank Account:** Your track record will speak volumes, as it is based on your integrity and the consistency of your actions. Ways to build trust include helping others achieve their goals, giving away the credit for successes, meeting commitments and deadlines, and insuring that your actions support your words.

- **Be Proactive:** Take the initiative rather than waiting for things to come to you. In building collaborations, step out of your comfort zone and meet with a colleague to discuss a new idea, seek someone’s support, or ask another to join your project.

**HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE**

While understanding your operation is important, it is also necessary to understand the big picture and the long-term goals. Look for the inter-relationships among goals and tactics, and strive to find ways where your operation may support others.

**COMMUNICATION STYLE — BECOME A FACILITATOR**

The challenge for many is that as we have progressed up the career ladder, our promotions were based on individual achievements. However, to gain the respect and confidence across campus, a more collegial style may serve you better.
Ask Probing Questions: Explore what is behind various viewpoints or ideas. Be open to new ideas.

Synthesize Information: When listening to diverse perspectives, develop the ability to synthesize what has been shared and then re-state the key ideas in a way to help others understand the salient points.

Teachable Moments: When things are not going well, instead of losing patience, use these times as teachable moments. Instead of judging others, use this as a moment to expand the team’s or individual’s knowledge.

Communication Conduit: Become a transparent communicator by sharing information in all directions across the organization. Only personnel actions and confidences should not be revealed.

ENERGY COMMITTED TO INSTITUTIONAL GOALS VS. PERSONAL ADVANCEMENT
While career advancement is sought by many, wise organizations promote the person focused on understanding institutional priorities, and who chooses to commit time and energy to their attainment. This is the person who willingly goes the extra mile for a student, or sees a problem and then pursues a solution that permanently removes the difficulty so others need not experience it.

Enrollment Management Plan: The Elements
The enrollment management plan outlines the key performance indicators to be achieved over a five or ten year timeline in support of the institution’s vision and priorities. At Seattle Pacific University, the key enrollment planning and assessment documents are:
- The Enrollment Plan
- Executive Summary with Strategic Enrollment Indicators
- Ten-Year Fall Term Projections (Headcount, Facilities, Strategic Indicators—inputs/outcomes)

THE ENROLLMENT PLAN
The enrollment plan outlines strategies, tactics, and resources required to attain specific enrollment goals. The goals should be closely tied to the institution’s vision and cover next year and future years. The enrollment plan should be comprehensive and clearly articulate the key performance indicators (goals).

The plan should cover each enrollment area for which you are responsible—undergraduate admissions, financial aid, advising—and state specific inputs and outcomes to be achieved.

The plan should include:
- Current state (e.g., most recent Fall term)
- Goals to be achieved next year
- Goals to be achieved in five and/or ten years

To be effective in guiding decisions on strategies, tactics, and resources, the plan needs to be supported and understood by all enrollment leaders as well as key stakeholders on campus (e.g., academic affairs, student life). Buy-in is critical. Enrollment goals may include:

1. Size: Is the goal growth or to have the student population remain the same size? What’s the impact of this decision on other units of the institution?
   - What is your Fall headcount goal for new and continuing students? For other terms? What is the goal in five years?
   - From where will the growth come—undergraduate, graduate, continuing education, or other programs?
   - Will growth come from increasing new student headcount and/or improving retention of currently enrolled students?
   - What percentages of your students are full time vs. part time?
   - What are other institutional factors that need to be considered when determining whether or not to grow enrollment?

2. New Student Profile: Student demographic information at entrance (inputs):
   - What percentage of the undergraduates is entering directly from high school? What number is entering with advanced placement scores or college credits that will result in advance standing at your institution?
   - What percentage of the undergraduates is transferring from another college? What number has earned a two-year transferable associate degree, a non-transferable two-year degree, or a number of credits?
   - What are the intended majors or program of study? This information may impact the classes offered and/or advising sessions for the incoming class.
   - Gender, ethnicity, age, state resident or non-resident status, home address (may influence commuter vs. residential status), financial profile (may influence financial aid status, and ability to pay), etc.
   - What are the current entrance scores for new students? What would you like them to be in five years?

3. Enrollment Mix: Overview of entire student population; may break down by undergraduates, graduates, continuing education students, etc.
   - Student demographics—number and percentage of men/women; ethnic diversity, age, live on-campus vs. commuter.
   - Percentage of the students who are full time vs. part time; average number of credits taken by full-time and part-time students.
   - Continuing student flow patterns by student level (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.) from one term to the next (e.g., flow pattern of spring quarter sophomores who return the subsequent Fall).
   - It may be useful to know the enrollment mix for selected academic programs or majors.
**Student Outcomes:** While the student profile focuses on “inputs,” this category is looking at key factors that provide evidence that progress is being made on achieving educational learning or outcome goals.

- Persistence rates for first-time full-time freshmen
- Graduation rates
- Degrees and/or certificates awarded by major, minor, and/or program
- Time to degree (number of terms)
- Student debt load at graduation
- Student default rate

**Net Revenue:** This is a key concept for enrollment leaders to understand and embrace. One definition is noted below as an equation:

\[ \text{Net Revenue} = \text{Gross Tuition} - \text{Discount} \]

the discount is any institutional tuition dollars or other funding sources used to support student financial aid.

While achieving headcount goals are important, from a business perspective, and particularly for private institutions that are tuition driven, it is more important to hit the net revenue goal than the headcount goal. When the fiscal net revenue goal is exceeded, then new resources become available for re-investment in institutional priorities. When the net revenue goal is missed by a significant margin, then central administration is likely to reduce expenditures to make up the difference, which may result in faculty or staff downsizing.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND STRATEGIC INDICATORS**

While the enrollment plan outlines the strategies, tactics, resources and key performance indicators, an executive summary provides a high level overview of the plan’s most critical components and clearly identifies each area of the plan (e.g., undergraduate, continuing education, graduate programs, etc.). The audience for the executive summary is typically senior administrators and should be written succinctly, drawing attention to the key factors of the plan.

**Enrollment Drivers:** On what will success be measured?

- Enrollment drivers will be unique for each institution, depending on its vision statement and market niche.
- At Seattle Pacific University, the undergraduate enrollment drivers are managed growth, new student profile (selectivity), six-year graduation rates, and net revenue.

**Situational Analysis:** What internal and external threats, challenges, and opportunities face your institution? Consider how the following areas may impact the enrollment plan if there are significant changes in the:

- Local economy
- State or federal regulations
- Curriculum (may lengthen or shorten time to degree; alter quality of learning experience, etc.)
- Competition for prospective students

**Planning Assumptions:** Outline the planning assumptions for achieving next year’s enrollment goals. Any assumption that will influence key strategies should be articulated and the impact explained, such as:

- Price increase and its impact on new student and continuing student enrollment
- Price increase factored into the planning for financial aid awarding and net revenue projections
- Headcount goals—new student, continuing student, etc. and impacts on faculty resources, facilities, student services, etc.

**Key Strategies:** State the key strategies that support the enrollment goals. This informs various departments of critical tactics to be employed for achieving enrollment goals along with where their contributions are important to the plan’s success. Strategies may include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate Enrollment</th>
<th>Graduate Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Admissions</td>
<td>Marketing (by Program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Strategies</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Consider creating a spreadsheet that will allow you to track key performance indicators. Table 1 on page 8 is an extract from the strategic enrollment indicators spreadsheet of undergraduate cohort data from 1995 through 2013. This multi-page document provides at my fingertips the historical data/trends, present state (Fall 2004), and future projections (five and ten years) for key performance indicators.

**Assessment Process:**

**Closing the Enrollment Planning Loop**

After Fall term statistics have been finalized, enrollment leaders begin to analyze what transpired, and to answer the questions:

- Were the goals achieved?
- If not, why not? Should there be special actions implemented in the coming year to improve the result? Should the goal be altered?

When annual assessment becomes part of the institutional fabric, the results will be used to inform and influence decisionmakers. This information may result in the redistribution of existing resources or the investment of new resources.

**HOW DOES THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS WORK?**

**Decide What Is to Be Assessed:** Review your enrollment plan and look at the items listed as goals. If critical for achieving the institutional vision, then the goals and
accompanying strategies should be assessed. Table 2 provides an example of one key performance indicator that is annually assessed—size. Through the strategy of managed growth, the university’s goal is to increase the undergraduate Fall headcount to 3,000 matriculated students.

The subsequent cells demonstrate how frequently this goal is assessed, what is assessed, and the methodology or tool used in the assessment.

### Develop the Assessment Process
After deciding what goals and strategies are to be assessed (remember, not everything needs to be assessed), then identify:

- How frequently will the assessment occur?
- What will be assessed?
- What methodology or tool will be used to conduct the review? Be sure these documents are maintained to demonstrate that your institutional process was followed.
- What results will influence future decisions about the enrollment plan? In the case of size, missing or exceeding the Fall headcount goals impacts faculty FTE, university housing, campus parking, etc.

### Recording the Assessment Results
This information should be maintained for the annual accreditation visit. Decide how to document the process and record the outcomes.

- Were the annual enrollment goals outlined in the plan achieved? If goals were missed or exceeded, why did this occur?

- Based on the overall assessment, how are the goals and/or strategies to be revised? Whose approval is required to make changes to the plan?

## Enrollment Management: Staying Focused to Achieve Goals
Regardless of whether you are creating your first enrollment plan or revising your current plan, challenges await for all of us as we navigate new ideas through our campus communities.

No matter where you are on your path, I encourage you to:

- Focus on what’s important—Be Vision Centered
- Build strong working relationships with key leaders
- Focus on strategic indicators (institutional and enrollment)
- Annually assess and update enrollment plans
- Communicate successes to the community
- Finally, make a personal commitment to remain energized and open to change; take time to invest in yourself and others, including your staff.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Janet Ward is Associate Vice President for Information and Data Management at Seattle Pacific University (WA), and has been at SPU since 1988. She has over 20 years of experience in higher education administration, has been active in AACRAO since 1989, and was Past-President of the Pacific Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (PACRAO).