

An Enrollment Partnership: The New Model for Success

The art of matching the right student with the right college and the science of making sure they get together in the first place has been the primary concern of admissions and enrollment professionals at colleges and universities for decades. But that equation, never a simple one, has become increasingly complex. For most, the term “enrollment management” has generally referred to the process of developing a large enough pool of potential students that it would be nearly impossible not to obtain a reasonable catch of applicants so long as the college consistently kept a net in the water.

As the size of the potential student pool expanded and student selection evolved, so did colleges’ approach to enrollment management. At many institutions, that evolution prompted an expansion of programs, services and degree offerings that often blurred the distinctions among colleges. Filling seats has increasingly required significant additional resources and has nearly come to resemble advertising campaigns selling consumer products, like a gym membership or set of tires.

Rather than a mass-market approach, the art of recruiting the right students now requires a finely differentiated process — one that considers students’

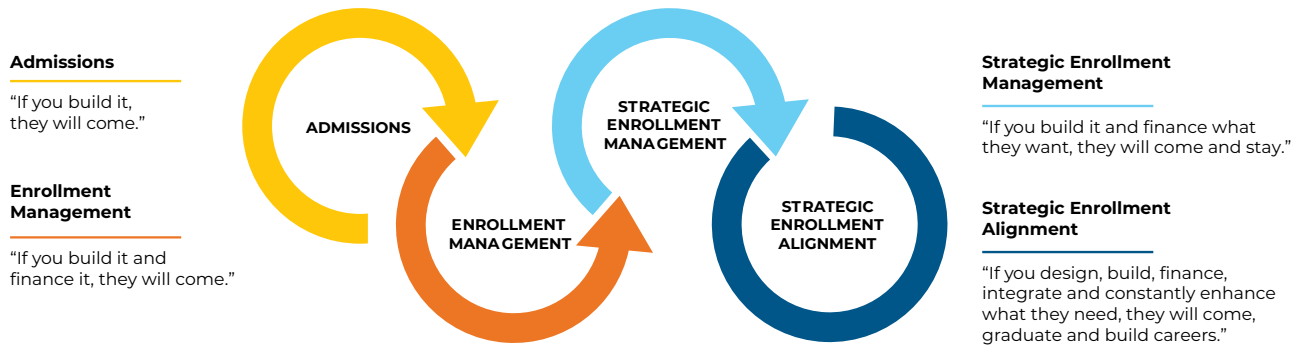
goals, societal needs and institutional objectives to create a new kind of partnership around enrollment we call “strategic enrollment alignment.” The evolution of these approaches to enrollment is illustrated in the following graphic. (See Figure 1)

At this point, many colleges and universities operate under either an enrollment management or a strategic enrollment management framework, focusing on the relationship between admissions and financial aid, sometimes integrating with other student-focused operations to enroll a class that responds to the institution’s brand identity, academic offerings, and service and support model.

With the financial pressures colleges and universities are facing, Huron believes the model needs to evolve to the next stage: strategic enrollment alignment. A new kind of partnership is needed to re-align enrollment practices — a partnership that brings a service orientation and focus to admissions and financial aid while aligning the creation of the class with the college’s academic mission and resources, administrative goals and strategic objectives. Strategic enrollment alignment requires a tighter integration of institutional functions than most colleges and universities have had to date.

To be effective, the enrollment process should involve departments from throughout the institution working together to develop a new approach to identify, attract, recruit, retain and graduate students. This process joins admissions and financial aid with analytic tools, support services, academic and financial planning, and a multidisciplinary

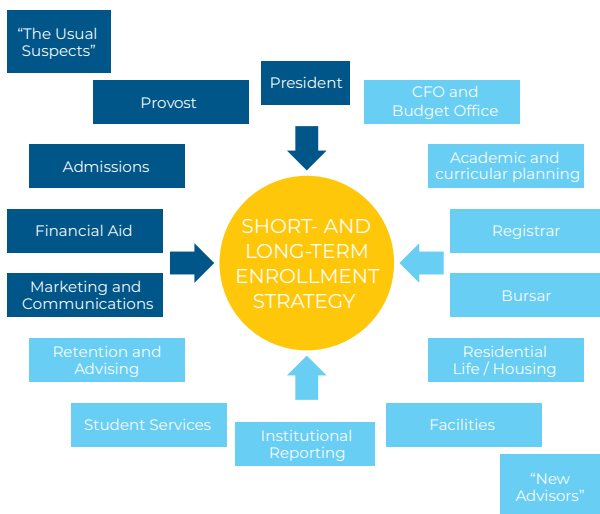
Figure 1: The Evolution of Enrollment Strategy



focus consistent with a institutional mission and strategic objectives. This integrated approach unites institutional resources to concentrate on the core mission of educating students and preparing them to be successful in their academic careers and in the workforce. We believe this new approach helps better align goals for assembling the right class with strategic objectives that further institutional mission and identity.

The following graphic illustrate offices typically involved in setting enrollment strategy, and points out other offices and functions that should be part of the discussion in an integrated approach to strategic enrollment alignment.

Figure 2: A Future Steering Committee for Setting Enrollment Strategy



This integration also incorporates the notion of reviewing and "renewing" academic programs. Colleges and universities should undertake rigorous

data-driven analyses of existing programs to determine where to invest more resources and where, perhaps, to pull back. This process is different from program prioritization. It is meant to correlate enrollment objectives with marketing strategies to package existing programs — and even create new ones — in ways that consider student demand, economic need and institutional strengths. This integration can highlight new curricular paths that are more interesting to students, and more market-relevant for employers, yet still consistent with the mission of the university.

A New Paradigm for Lasting Success

How can colleges and universities begin to move to this more integrated alignment of academic offerings, financial resources and institutional mission in order to increase their focus on student success? The first step requires stakeholders throughout the institution come together to understand inherent barriers to enrollment and retention success and to define actions and investments necessary to ensure long-term institutional success. The challenge is for leaders to recognize that for most institutions, this kind of shared understanding is very different from business-as-usual. The leadership team must develop a deep, shared and realistic understanding of the institution's record for enrollment, persistence and student graduation and its position relative to its peers. Only with that understanding can leadership begin to accurately identify specific challenges and opportunities to help drive enrollment success.

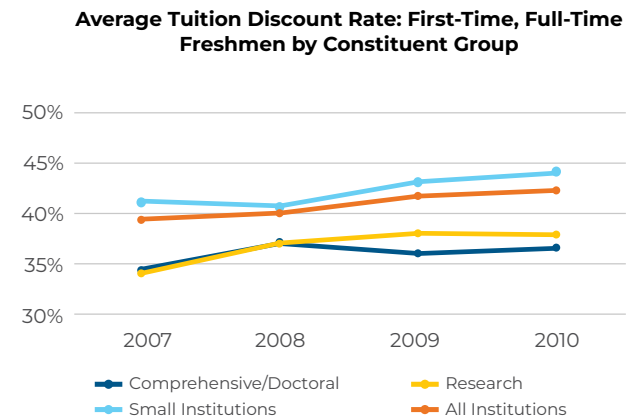
The next step is for the leadership team to define an institutional enrollment philosophy that serves as the guiding principle for all future strategic decision-making. At many institutions, this requires a commitment to the mission and holding it up as a way of determining institutional direction. The resulting strategy should help clarify goals and objectives for enrollment, provide guidance to the admissions and financial aid staff, match enrollment goals to academic and mission objectives, and build a consistent brand and image for current and prospective students. At the same time, the process of defining the enrollment philosophy helps align institutional leadership perspectives, promoting a more integrated approach to decision-making that can help leadership focus resources quickly to address challenges and create greater understanding across campus about the shared responsibility for ensuring student success.

What has led to this point?

As students and their parents have faced the reality of the climbing cost of college tuition and an increasing out-of-pocket contribution, they have become more aggressive in negotiating financial support. Families in the highest income bracket paid 18 percent less for college in 2011-12 than they had two years earlier, according to a recent report.¹ In part, that may reflect the fact that more colleges are shifting financial-aid resources toward merit aid in order to attract the best students or more full-pay students. Yet, even with that, the number of students running up debt is increasing. In 2012, 34 percent of students used federal student loans, compared with 25 percent in 2009.² With the growing anxiety over tuition costs and student debt, a consumer mentality has increasingly invaded the higher education marketplace, leading more students to shop for the best deals, introducing a new and often uncomfortable competition, even to many highly-selective colleges and universities. The result is that the tuition discount rate continues to rise (See Figure 3).

This consumer mentality has led in part to an “arms race” among colleges to differentiate themselves in some way. For example, many universities are seeking to demonstrate the most comfortable

Figure 3: Increasing Tuition Discounting



surroundings for potential students: hotel-like residence facilities, enhanced support services and other amenities. Although the current economic climate has changed many aspects of higher education behavior, the forces driving institutions to enhance services and facilities in order to maintain market share remain. Furthermore, the nomenclature of this competitive investment is telling. When universities talk about this “arms race” and say they have these amenities in their “arsenal,” it reflects the siege mentality under which many colleges find themselves.

Recent projections by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education predict that after peaking in 2011, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. will slowly decrease through 2020. At the same time, college cohorts are rapidly becoming more ethnically diverse, increasing the need for services and programs that help students persist and which also maintain academic ratings.³ As a result of these pressures, many institutions have begun to look outside their historical catchment areas to recruit students from new geographic, demographic and academic strata. For some, this practice reflects a conscious effort to enhance diversity and increase access. A focus on recruiting from new groups of international students, out-of-state students, transfer students, and students with lower price sensitivity presents a revenue opportunity to offset the severe fiscal challenges nearly all colleges and universities are facing.

Educating Students vs. Other University Priorities

Achieving the “right” enrollment and attracting the “right” student has always been the goal of colleges and universities. The challenge for most institutions; however, has been balancing those goals with their other key performance objectives:

- Enhance student quality and performance
- Ensure engagement of all students
- Seek revenue enhancement opportunities
- Improve operating efficiencies
- Provide competitive and high-quality support services, facilities and infrastructure
- Build sustainable economic partnerships in nearby locales
- Deliver graduates positioned to become contributing members of society

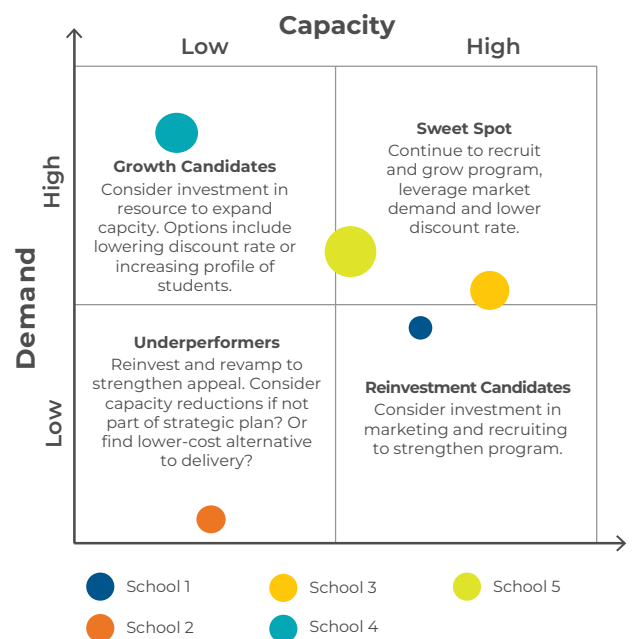
The first two goals are largely left to the faculty to satisfy. Any number of approaches and coaches can train (i.e. the “how”) students to complete a variety of tasks, but it takes a skilled and thoughtful approach to educate (i.e. the “why”) college students so that they gain a mastery of subject matter and are positioned to see connections and make linkages to continuously improve and expand their skills. The faculty, likewise, is entrusted to ensure students become engaged in their studies and persist to graduation — colleges can and do provide support services, but it is the commitment to the academic partnership from both faculty and student that matters most.

The remaining five objectives require a more integrated approach internally and externally. To be successful, an institution should model various tuition pricing strategies and aid approaches, working with the operations and finance offices to find ways to improve the institution’s efficiency, and having all workers at a college prioritize providing good support and service to the entire community. Colleges are increasingly working with external partners to identify and implement new operating models that make better use of scarce resources and to ensure that they are providing economically relevant education that prepares students to participate in the workforce or move on to academic careers.

Getting All Parties to Work Together

Colleges and universities should evaluate — in the most objective and data-driven way possible — the relative strengths and weaknesses of their academic programs. Aligning administrative and academic priorities is paramount for the best decision making. When evaluating their programs, we suggest colleges follow a framework such as the one pictured below to understand the demand for the program and to compare it with the institution’s capacity.

Figure 4: Aligning Enrollment and Academic Programming



* Size of bubbles is representative of school discount rates

* Demand could be measured by Draw (Yield / Selectivity)

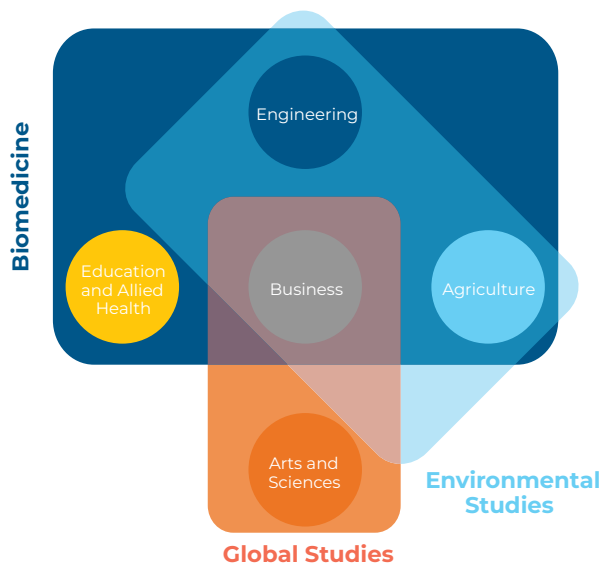
** Capacity measured by enrollment capacity (teaching, space)

Investments in capacity should be considered where demand is highest. Investments in program quality and reputation should be considered when capacity exists but demand is not as strong. Among programs where capacity and demand are both low, reinvestment can be considered after university leaders evaluate whether the program is aligned with the strategic priorities of the institution and whether the program could be taught using less expensive modalities or approaches.

Universities should also consider repositioning or combining existing programs into new offerings with more market relevance.

Consider a university made up of five colleges working to create new interdisciplinary programs that respond to the economic and social needs of its community. One way in which redesigned programs might be coordinated for this university is pictured in Figure 5:

Figure 5: A New Programmatic Partnership to Alignment



By bringing together external stakeholders, faculty and academic administrators, student services, career placement professionals, and budget and finance staff, a college or university can best explore opportunities to re-package and market existing programs. Or, more accurately, existing programs can be modified to reflect an enhanced, interdisciplinary approach to the institution’s learning objectives — to create market relevant, attractive and timely programs speaking to the goals and objectives of today’s students.

Yes, it will take some work to revise the curriculum. Yes, it will take some investment in marketing and social media. Yes, it will take some in-depth collaboration with industry partners. But in the end, a university can use this to work toward its academic quality and financial goals, improve its ability to engage its students in academic work they find interesting and challenging, and find ways to build channels for internships and employment for graduates.

Conclusion

Everyone on a college campus has a stake in attracting the right students but also keeping the ones that come. A 2009 study showed it costs, on average, \$6,000 to identify, recruit and enroll each college student.⁴ For colleges to attract and retain the right students, it takes an increasing level of commitment and coordination across financial offices, admissions, student services, alumni affairs and academic leaders. Keeping students challenged while also assuring they are satisfied is everyone’s job. This has not been a preoccupation of many colleges. But with the increasing financial pressure on them, colleges and universities must analyze on a repeated basis whether they are presenting themselves to students in the right way, offering the right academic programs and emphasizing the ones most critical to their mission and possibility of success, and offering classes in the correct formats.

This level of coordination will require the breaking down of many walls that have traditionally divided college campuses, such as between faculty members and administrators. But colleges can no longer afford to live with such standoffs if they are to remain competitive in a fast-changing marketplace.

1. SallieMae. How America Pays For College 2012. Ipsos, 2012. <<https://www.salliemae.com/assets/Core/how-America-pays/HowAmericaPays2012.pdf>>.
2. bid
3. <http://www.wiche.edu/pub/16556>
4. <http://www.universitybusiness.com/article/retain-students-retainbudgets-how>



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