Strategic Enrolment Management Concepts, Structures and Strategies

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Highlights

- **From focusing on organizational structures that support Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM) to placing it in an academic context.**

While structural approaches are firmly rooted in SEM literature, the last three years have seen a significant shift to refocus enrolment management through the academic lens. The

Adoption of SEM tends to follows a predictive pathway, although the duration of the five stages varies across institutions.

Dolence's SEM Transition Model

| Stage	Enrolment Trend	Institutional Messages	Institutional Action
Denial	Down	- "The downturn is temporary." - "It's just (pick one) demographics/the economy/our competitors." - "<u>We are subject to forces beyond our control</u>."	- Form a committee - Discuss options

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Background

Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM) has evolved over the last three decades in higher education, but in the last 5-10 years it has taken on a new significance and more prominent role in post-secondary institutions, both in Canada and the United States. Generally, institutions that have turned to SEM do so as the result of declining enrolment. The factors that influence declines in enrolment can vary, but typically they are the result of changes in population growth and composition in regions that are an institution's traditional source of students, increased competition from private and public institutions, currency and relevance of program offerings, and strong economies that lure learners away from education. Higher education is like many complex systems and as such no single factor is the cause of an institution's decline in enrolment; therefore, no single solution can reverse the trend.

Core Concepts

The Admissions Funnel

From the 1970's to the mid-1980's, the perspective on enrolment management was grounded in the recruitment, admissions, and financial aid functions of post-secondary institutions. These front loading functions supported what is known as the Admission Funnel.

Prospects

Inquiries

Applicants

Admits

Enrolments
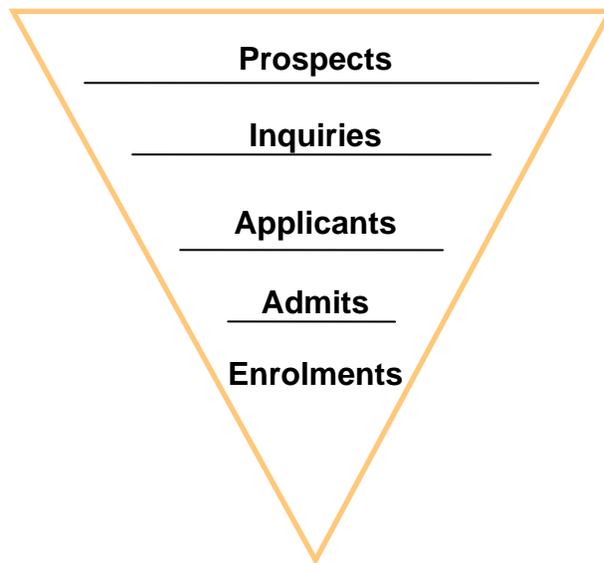
The Admissions Funnel

This model facilitated the identification of prospective students and the calculation of conversion rates as they moved through the funnel, from inquiry, to making program applications, to those deemed program eligible and receiving an offer of admission, to the actual enrolment of those receiving an offer.

While the Admissions Funnel makes mathematical sense, "conceptually it creates a false impression that students flow automatically through the funnel as if drawn downward by gravity. In reality, recruiting and retaining students is more like climbing a mountain. It requires careful planning, effective execution, and technical skills. Thus a pyramid may be a more useful graphic representation of the process (Bontrager)."

Essentially, SEM is a concept and process designed to facilitate the achievement of an institution's mission and the educational goals of the students it serves. It is also the recognition that an institution must move from enrolment by chance to enrolment by design – there is an inextricable fit between the purpose of an institution and the students it serves.

Common misconceptions about SEM

Common misconceptions and sometimes barriers to implementing or moving the SEM agenda forward within an institution are that SEM is:
> a quick fix;
> solely an organizational structure;
> an enhanced admissions and marketing operation;
> a financial drain on the institution;
> an administrative function separate from the academic plan and mission of the institution
> > (Bontrager & Kerlin, 2004)

To be sure, the success of any SEM plan and structure within an institution is largely determined by institutional commitment *within the academic context* as noted by Dolence.

Niche Market

A number of factors play into an institution determining its niche in the education market; they include a SWOT analysis, assessing the institution's range of influence, historical status, current competitive status, etc. For Community Colleges, the challenge lies in thinking beyond the traditional mindset about their niches (e.g., low tuition, small classes, convenient location, open admissions, etc.) and thinking about the not-so-obvious niches that will make the difference and set them apart from their competition, such as:

> **Distinctive Programs** – programs whose excellence "casts a glow over all programs" (Bontrager & Kerlin) at the institution. It is also a way to maximize the impact of limited marketing budgets;
> **Geographic reach** – promote programs with an appeal and market beyond the institution's typical catchment (e.g., nationally-marketable programs);
> **Special Populations** – Carve out special target markets that no one else is serving or doing so ineffectively, such as, Mature Adult Learners, First Nations, Persons with Disabilities, New Immigrants, etc. Grassroots communications strategies work most effectively for the equity groups.
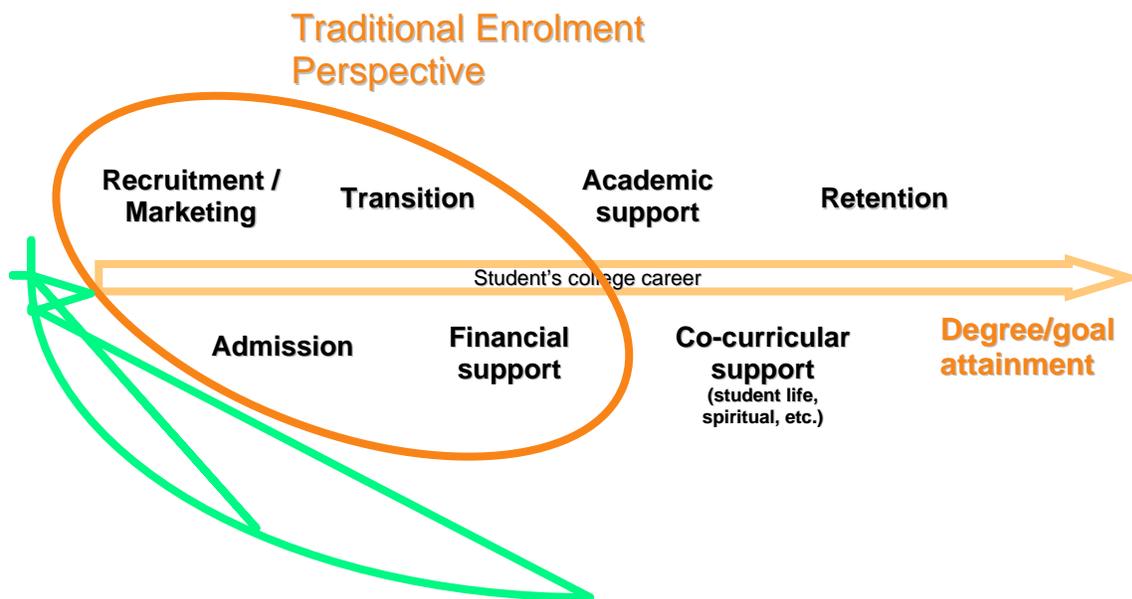
How are SEM outcomes achieved?

Establishing clear goals

An institution needs to set targets for the number and types of students it seeks to serve, each in alignment with the academic plan and institutional mission. The classic conundrum with setting enrolment targets is balancing internal stakeholder expectations of better vs. more vs. fewer students while achieving optimum enrolments. A clear enrolment plan with a focus on the academic mission of the institution will make evident the key metrics that the institution needs to monitor. Once identified, the institution will be able to establish benchmarks and set realistic, and even stretch, targets for each metric and start to measure and evaluate progress towards its goals.

Promoting students' academic success

The academic success of students served by the institution is achieved through improvements to access, transition, persistence, and graduation. The following graphic depicts the student success continuum:

The Student Success Continuum

Traditional Enrolment Perspective

Recruitment / Marketing   Transition   Academic support   Retention

Student's college career

Admission   Financial support   Co-curricular support (student life, spiritual, etc.)   Degree/goal attainment

The traditional enrolment perspective focussed on functions typically associated with the admissions funnel, whereas the SEM perspective captures all elements along the continuum. The SEM perspective also reflects current thinking around supporting students' academic success and the shared responsibility across functional units to fostering that success.

Promoting institutional success

Facilitating effective strategic and financial planning are the cornerstones to institutional success. According to Bontrager and Kerlin, the key elements to financial planning are:

> Pricing
> Targeted, strategic investments
> Improving efficiencies
> Financial Aid leveraging
> Planning for the long term

Further, that net revenues realized by the institution should be used as seed money for new initiatives, enhancements, contingencies, etc.

Creation of a data-rich environment

A data-rich environment enables data-driven decision-making and supports timely evaluation of strategies. Generally, educational institutions already are data-rich operations, but investments need to be made in systems that enable data mining and analysis so trends and relationships can be revealed and leveraged to improve the student experience at each level of the pyramid.

Streamlining business processes

Business practices need to align with an institution's academic mission and the operational processes tied to SEM initiatives. "Students do not see enrolment as a railroad track with a number of stations where they must stop… [they] see enrolment as a seamless process, non-stop rather than stop and go… [and they want] to customize access, eliminating those unneeded services. (Henderson)"

*Strengthening communications and internal collaboration*

Vertical communications (top-down) convey the institution's vision, while horizontal communications (across and among staff) open up dialogue and complete the feedback loop necessary to support and enable institutional success. Vertical and horizontal communications emphasizes the relationship that every member of an institution plays in enrolment management.

Special considerations for Community Colleges include "open door" or open enrolment programs, and accommodating flexibility in program development and delivery in the context of other institutional initiatives and support services.

Core Structures

The 4 Structural Approaches

In 1982, Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green developed what are known as the 4 Structural Approaches to Enrolment Management in higher education. The four structures are: Committee, Coordinator, Matrix and Division (see Appendix A for structures.) Each structure reflects the level of SEM organizational effectiveness along a continuum in terms of institutional commitment to change, internal expertise and achieving optimum enrolment outcomes.
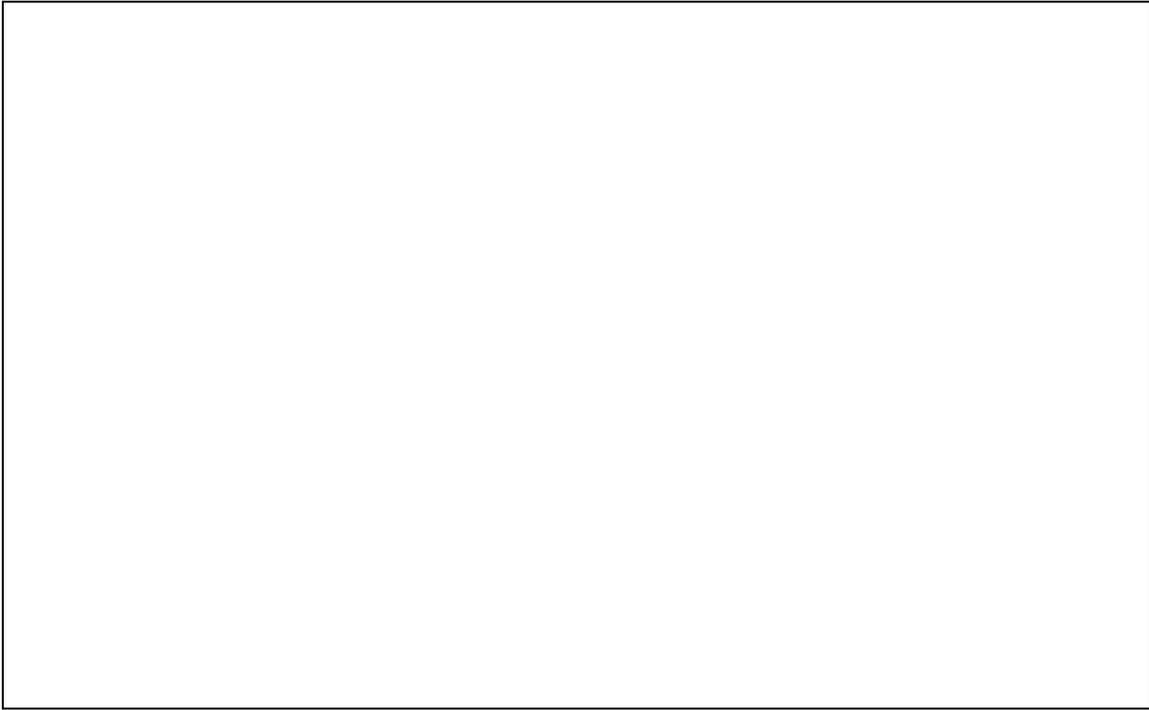
Generally, the Division model is seen as the most effective structure, but committees can also be effective in the short term. The effec

The SEM Transition Model

Dolence's SEM Transition Model

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Denial	Down	- "The downturn is temporary." - "It's just (pick one) demographics/the economy/our competitors." - "<u>We are subject to forces beyond our control</u>."	- Form a committee - Discuss options
Nominal	Down	- "We have to <u>do</u> something." - "We need a 'silver bullet' recruiting/marketing strategy."	

move to a Division structure to achieve an institution's goals – but case studies from the field demonstrate that doing so is easier said than done.

During the 2004 the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) SEM Conference, representatives for Everett Community College and Oregon State University described their journeys through structural change at their institutions. For instance, Everett Community College in

Integrated institutional planning – if enrolment management does not align with academic and strategic planning, institutional functioning is compromised
Focus on service – business practices need to align with the academic mission and be student-focused
Key performance indicators – an internally developed mechanism for measuring institutional health
Research and evaluation – use the tools of the academic enterprise (data, surveys, research) to help identify successes and areas that need attention
For the long haul – enrolment management is a long-term commitment and it evolves as the institution does

The bottom line is that the structure or organization of enrolment management within an institution "is not as important as how it connects with academics. The debate over where EM should be [located] misses the point that it cannot succeed unless it is part of the academic fabric of the institution (Henderson)." The right structure will not work if the wrong people are in those roles/positions, and the "wrong" structure can work if the right people are in those roles/positions.

Core Strategies

Core Strategies generally fall into two categories: Academic Success Strategies and Operational Strategies and Tools.

Academic Success Strategies

Academic success is arguably one of the most important enrolment outcomes for an institution and the students it serves. In 1993 Dolence noted that "it is the curriculum, academic policy, and the corresponding choices students make to attend, persist, and drop out that drive the planning, implementation, and evaluation of an institution's recruitment and retention programs." Effective management of these issues will influence institutional enrolment levels and competitive placement within the education market.

Recruitment
The first strategy typically employed under the banner of academic success begins with the recruitment of students that fit with the institution. In this sense, the recruitment process plays an important role in retention as it seeks students whose academic preparation, educational goals, career objectives and personal preferences fit with what the institution has to offer and its culture. Recruitment is also the starting point of building a relationship with students and influencing their decision to apply, enrol and later to remain with the institution. Creating meaningful interactions and experiences is an important element at each stage of a student's experience, but particularly so in the initial stages.

Marketing and Communication
Targeted marketing and communications strategies occur at each level of the enrolment pyramid. At the outset, the main strategy is to create and/or raise awareness of the

institution, differentiate it within the marketplace and aid recruitment. As noted by Bontrager:

> "… marketing efforts are built on three main components: image management, market segmentation, and relevant communications. Image management and market segmentation emanate directly from institutional mission. It is the mission that provides direction to the way the institution portrays itself in the higher education marketplace. Consistency of the content and visual representation of institutional image is critical in these times of intense competition and massive amounts of stimuli in the marketplace."

The institutional mission enables identification of the market segments the institution should be pursuing. To identify viable markets it is necessary to conduct market research to assess whether a market is a fit with the institution:

> Does the target market have needs that fit with the institutional mission and expertise?
> Is there interest in the market for what the institution has to offer?
> Do societal needs converge with what the institution is able to provide?
> What is the size of the market?
> Are there any barriers to reaching the market if deemed viable?

Ideally, the best kind of market to pursue is the one where its needs naturally converge with what the institution is able to provide. Pursuing students that do not align with institutional strengths and abilities will result in an unnecessary depletion of resources and could potentially hurt the image of the institution in cases where students' expectations are not met. Certainly, there may be markets to which the institution can respond with minor adjustments.

Another tool used in marketing and communications strategies is predictive modeling. "This tool uses the characteristics of students who have chosen an institution in the past

support academic preparation (e.g., remedial studies, training in study skills, etc.) These types of programs "have a powerful effect in relieving pre-college anxieties for both students and parents (Bontrager)." These types of orientations are also seen as critical elements to student retention. Some institutions even extend transition programs throughout the first year experience via leadership development, peer mentoring, faculty mentoring, etc.

Graduation and Beyond

Graduation does not signal an end to the relationship that an institution has built with a student. In fact, it's the beginning of nurturing an alumni relationship for a variety of reasons. Typically, alumni have been viewed as donors to their alma maters, but they can also be engaged for promotional purposes highlighting their professional achievements and how their education enabled their success. Also, alumni, as parents or mentors, can influence future generations to enrol with the institution.

Operational Strategies and Tools

Pricing Strategies

The management of pricing strategies revolves primarily around price elasticity, net revenue, and financial aid leveraging.

Price elasticity speaks to how much the market will bear in terms of what it is willing to pay for a commodity – in higher education this concept relates to the cost of tuition. When tuition becomes or is perceived as too high for the value, this generally leads to lower enrolments and a decline in revenues. "Price elasticity refers to this interplay of the cost of tuition and willingness of students to pay (Bontrager)." Control of tuition pricing is generally not an issue with private institutions, but most public institutions have little control over the setting of tuition levels and associated increases are generally legislated by state or provincial governments.

"The concept of net revenue recognizes that the process of attracting and retaining students requires significant investment in recruitment and retention efforts, including grants and scholarships that are funded from institutional resources (Bontrager)." For this reason, an institutio

negative net revenue results over time (Bontrager)." Utilization of regular evaluations and adjustments is key for financial aid leveraging to be an effective pricing strategy for public institutions.

Information Management

Enrolment management strategies are highly dependent upon market research, customized communications with students, calculations of conversion rates and net revenue and understanding the dynamics that affect student attrition. In order for an institution and its enrolment managers to effectively monitor and respond to changing conditions in a timely manner they must have access to large amounts of data. However, a data-rich environment is not enough, having the tools and people with the skills and ability to analyze and interpret the information into meaningful knowledge is essential to decision makers. This makes enrolment management "highly dependent on institutional research and information technology" (Bontrager) to enable the provision of information and transform it into the knowledge needed by decision makers.

Business Processes and Customer Service

"Successful SEM operations place a high premium on the analysis and continuous improvement of business practices, seeking to provide the highest level of service in the shortest time possible. This issue is less a management issue than a cultural one (Bontrager)." It just makes good educational and fiscal sense to develop an integrated system that reduces or eliminates duplication of effort in planning and delivery of programs, courses and services. To do this, critical business processes must be identified, examined, streamlined and monitored to ensure continuous improvement of services to all stakeholders (students, parents, staff, etc.). An institution needs to anticipate and respond to learner needs in order to retain them. In order for SEM initiatives to be successful, the personnel who are the keepers of these critical busineined, sb-0.0.0eal b-0.0002 Tc l0.000u<s

Post Registration Strategies

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Concluding Remarks

Within the planning cycle, SEM informs, enables, and evaluates institutional goals, structures, and strategies against defined outcomes and associated metrics. The SEM implementation cycle as noted by Bontrager is as follows:

CLARIFY GOALS
 Link to institutional mission
 Number of students
 Types of students
 Net tuition revenue

CONDUCT RESEARCH
 Performance indicators
 Student outcomes assessment
 Market research

CREATE A SEM ORGANIZATION
 Structure
 Composition
 Philosophical alignment
 Direct/dotted-line relationships

ASSESS STAFF RESOURCES
 Staff alignment
 Staff development
 Reward systems

REVIEW, RENEW, AND INITIATE CAMPUS COLLABORATIONS
 Coordinate student success strategies
 Link to academic policy and program
 Link to institutional finances
 Link to strategic planning

ASSESS STRATEGIES
 Outcomes assessment
 New, replacement strategies

EVALUATE AND ADJUST
 Feedback loop
 Continuous evaluation and change

In the final analysis, SEM is not a "quick fix." Rather, it is a systematic approach to deployment of strategic responses to institutional enrolment challenges. "One of the most important SEM disciplines is patience in allowing the implementation cycle not only to play out once, but multiple times. This allows hunch-driven, 'silver-bullet'

strategies to give way to the sound planning and careful evaluation required of effective enrolment management. Only then will an institution realize the power of SEM and the potential for charting a stronger future (Bontrager)."

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Appendix A