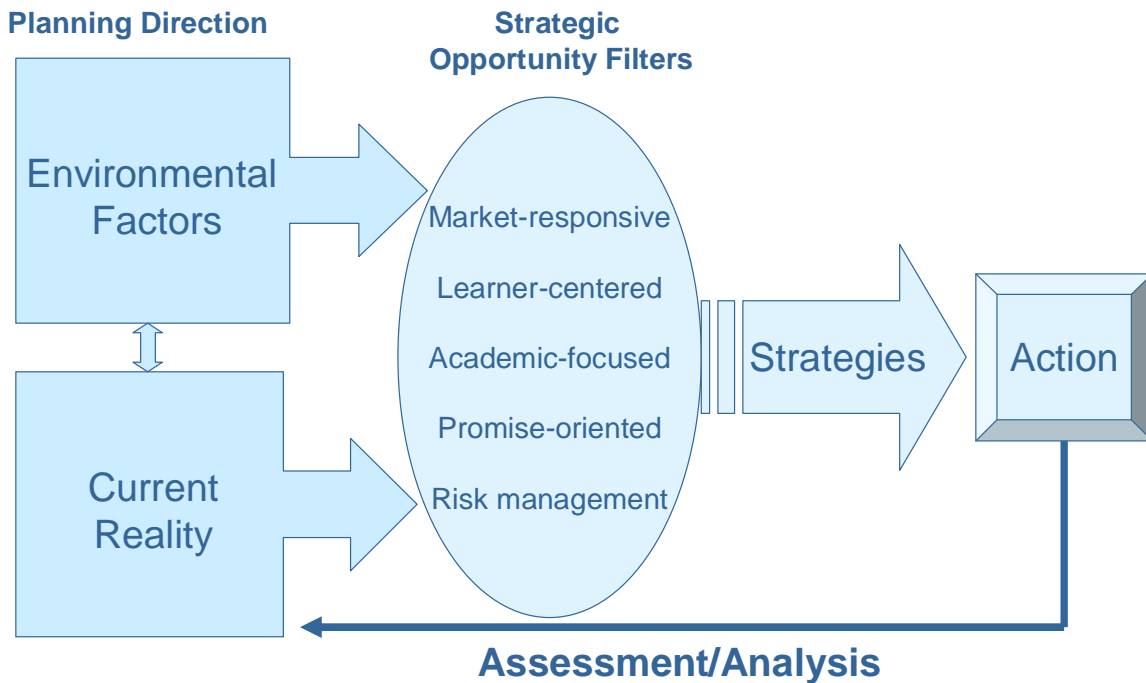# SEM▼WORKS

The Art and Science of Enrollment Planning

Mired in day-to-day operational issues and the ongoing implementation of tactics, today's enrollment manager scarcely has time to analyze, reflect, and plan. Even though urgent matters of the day tend to trump important activities such as strategic thinking and planning, all institutions need to make enrollment planning a priority. Kotler and Fox (1985) indirectly made a case for enrollment planning when they described strategic planning as "the process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the institution's goals and capabilities and its changing market." The very fact that every institution's market is constantly changing suggests enrollment planning is a mission critical activity. Market conditions such as the level and nature of competition, student expectations, college participation rates among high school students and adult learners, and program demand are fluid dynamics that must be monitored, anticipated, and responded to for an institution to achieve optimal enrollments over time.

Admittedly, however, many enrollment plans are gathering dust on a shelf. They were created out of necessity simply to have a plan rather than as an insightful management tool designed to impact enrollment outcomes. Enrollment plans of this ilk seldom guide strategic decisions, operational priorities, or enrollment actions. Likewise, enrollment planning that is inwardly focused or that engages few people in the planning process is inherently flawed. At best, this breed of enrollment plan is tactical in nature, not strategic. This kind of enrollment plan omits the changing market conditions previously referenced and in doing so, fails to be forward thinking. Contrary to the aforementioned enrollment plan types,

"enrollment planning must be strategic and should be institution-wide and dynamic" (Massa, 2001) to position a college or university for future success.

The enrollment planning model recommended here is one that looks outward and forward (Black, 2003). As illustrated in *Graph 1*, the enrollment planning model accounts for both internal (current reality) and external (environmental factors) planning directions. It assumes the identification of strategic opportunities related to established planning directions. In this model, filters are used to ensure strategies are aligned with identified strategic opportunities; strategies are accompanied by specific action items; and enrollment strategies are analyzed to assess their effectiveness in achieving strategic opportunities. As the model depicts, there is a continuous planning, implementation, and evaluation loop. In each planning cycle, the strategy effectiveness measures, in combination with a renewed assessment of the current reality and environmental factors, are used to improve, modify, or eliminate existing strategies. This continuous improvement and purging process focuses limited resources on the most effective and important institutional strategies.

Graph 1: Enrollment Planning Model

Planning Direction

Strategic Opportunity Filters

Environmental Factors

Market-responsive

Learner-centered

Academic-focused

Promise-oriented

Risk management

Current Reality

Strategies

Action

Assessment/Analysis

Planning Directions

Before the advent of the Internet and the Information Age, it was painstaking to find reliable intelligence regarding **environmental factors**. Today, however, the challenge is to sift through volumes of information to identify and extract nuggets of strategic insight into market conditions that may impact enrollment outcomes positively or negatively. Narrowing the scope of an environmental scan by determining the right research questions on the front end will make the process manageable. According to Kotler and Murphy (1981), there are three critical questions to explore:

1. What are the major trends in the environment that may impact institutional enrollments?

2. What are the implications of these trends for the institution?

3. What are the most significant opportunities and threats?

In producing environmental scans for a multitude of colleges and universities in the United States, the author has found a finite number of sources that provide useful information for enrollment planning. These information sources include:

- American Association of Community Colleges (Trends and Statistics)

- American Demographics

- Association for Institutional Research

- Batelle Forecasts

- Bureau of Economic Analysis

- Community College Survey of Student Engagement

- Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP Freshman Survey and College Senior Survey)

- FedStats (International, National, State, County, and Local Comparisons)

- MDRC (K−12 Education and Higher Education)

- National Center for Education Statistics (High School Projections and State Education Data Profiles)

- National Survey of Student Engagement

- Society for College and University Planning

- Stratfor Decade Forecast

- The College Board (*Trends in Student Aid*)

- The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning

- *The Futurist*

- The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

- The Trends Research Institute

- U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Employment and Unemployment)

- U. S. Census Bureau (Population Projections and Characteristics)

- U. S. Congressional Budget Office

- U.S. Department of Education (Research and Statistics)

- Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education

In addition to these information sources, valuable environmental scan trend data can be gleaned for regional, state, and local resources. Typically, the state department of education, the state office of research statistics, the local chamber of commerce, the local economic development board, and local school district Web sites provide trend data. For narrowly targeted research questions, niche publications also may provide valuable insights.

Gathered information should include key findings and institutional implications related to demographic trends, labor market trends, economic trends, social and lifestyle trends, technology trends, education trends, and competition trends. Each of these trend categories should be arranged under subheadings such as global, national, regional, state, and local.

The assessment of **current reality** can take many forms. Ideally, this assessment will include a self-assessment as well as an external, objective audit of existing practices and strategic issues. Fundamental to a review of the current reality is an analysis of existing marketing and communications, outreach strategies, recruitment events and activities, the campus visit experience, financial aid practices, retention strategies, student services, enrollment processes, workflow, response time, organizational structure, staffing levels and patterns, technology optimization, space utilization, capacity management, planning and evaluation practices, vision, goals, and the development of human capacity. By scrutinizing these areas, opportunities and performance gaps can be identified.

Upon completion of a current reality assessment, findings and related recommendations should be reported to key decision-makers and planning groups. Recommendations are then prioritized for future implementation—usually through a phased-in approach. Each accepted recommendation should be reviewed to determine the necessary antecedents for success. Antecedents may consist of funding, staffing, technology, space, structure, buy-in, leadership, program development, and the like. You are discouraged from proceeding with implementation until the antecedents for success are in place.

Environmental factors along with current reality findings and recommendations provide a framework and direction for enrollment planning. In essence, the internal review of existing strengths and weaknesses combined with the external assessment of opportunities and threats results in a SWOT analysis that serves as a summary of key findings and implications as well as a foundation for identifying strategic opportunities.

Strategic Opportunities

The most critical element of any enrollment plan is the identification of the "right" strategic opportunities. This should not be an exhaustive list of potential enrollment opportunities but rather five to ten opportunities that will move significant "institutional needles." Identified strategic opportunities will drive strategy development, so the number of opportunities selected must be manageable. To prioritize and possibly eliminate strategic opportunities identified early in the planning process, two evaluation criteria should be adopted: (1) the degree to which a strategic opportunity will impact institutional enrollment objectives, and (2) the probability of a successful implementation. The former assumes enrollment objectives exist. If said objectives do not exist, consider using the following template to define objectives.

Enrollment Target:	
Current Enrollment:	
Required Change:	
Population Segments	❑ In-state Students ❑ Out-of-state Students ❑ International Students ❑ Direct from High School Students ❑ Adult Students ❑ Underrepresented Students ❑ First-time Freshmen ❑ New Transfers ❑ Continuing Freshmen ❑ Sophomores ❑ Juniors ❑ Seniors ❑ Master's Students ❑ Professional Students ❑ Doctoral Students ❑ Undergraduate Students ❑ Graduate Students ❑ Continuing Education Students ❑ ESL Students

Level of Analysis	❑ Inquiry ❑ Application ❑ Matriculation ❑ Persistence (Retention, Graduation) ❑ Headcount ❑ Student Credit Hours ❑ FTEs
Program Level/Type	❑ University/College Level ❑ Academic School/College/Division Level ❑ Academic Department/Program Level ❑ Section Level ❑ Delivery Method (Classroom/Lab, Online, Hybrid)
Strategy	❑ Lead Generation ❑ Application Completion ❑ Applicant Conversion ❑ Marketing ❑ Recruitment ❑ Financial Aid ❑ Service Delivery ❑ Educational Delivery ❑ Retention ❑ Graduation ❑ Capacity Management
Return on Investment	❑ Benefit to Students or the Institution ❑ Impact on Enrollment Targets ❑ Potential Revenue vs. Cost

When a final list of strategic opportunities has been approved by senior management, the next step is to establish key performance indicators (sometimes referred to as critical success factors) and related metrics for each strategic opportunity. These measures are necessary to assess the degree to which the institution has been successful at capitalizing upon strategic opportunities. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are global measures of success while underlying metrics serve as more granular benchmarks along the way to achieving KPIs. Like strategic opportunities, the measures drive strategy development.

Strategic Opportunity Filters

As the planning process evolves, it is relatively easy to get lost in the details and lose sight of the planning directions and strategic opportunities that should guide the entire planning process. Strategic opportunity filters are designed to keep planners focused throughout the process. They provide a system of checks and balances against which all strategies should be compared. In other words, any strategy that does not align with one or more strategic opportunity filters should be carefully examined to determine its validity as a strategy in the enrollment plan. While cumbersome, this level of scrutiny is imperative to prevent strategy drift.

Some common strategic opportunity filters are described here:

1. **Strategic Plan-aligned:** The institution's strategic plan sets the direction for the enrollment management plan and related strategies. Each strategy is designed to impact the institution's strategic directions and as such, success or failure is determined by the degree to which strategic objectives have been met.

2. **Objective-based:** The objective-based filter may or may not be aligned with an institution's strategic plan, but it is always driven by enrollment objectives. These are high-level objectives with "tightly coupled" strategies and more granular, strategy-based effectiveness measures.

3. **Student-centered:** Through this filter, strategies are focused on the needs of students. Whether the student is the recipient of learning, services, communications, or other institutional experiences, each interaction with the student is viewed as a "moment of truth" where the student determines the degree to which his or her needs have been met and makes corresponding educational and enrollment choices.

4. **Promise-oriented:** Based on the institution's brand promise to students, every aspect of the educational and service experience is designed to fulfill the promise. The promise is viewed as a covenant between the student and the institution. A trust relationship and institutional loyalty expand or erode based on the perceived degree to which the promise has been met.

5. **Market-driven:** A market-driven approach reflects market conditions such as program demand, market share, competition, price, and perceived

value in the marketplace. The primary objective of this filter is to shape the institution's image in order to gain or sustain competitive advantage and often to reposition the institution.

6. **Net Revenue-driven:** This filter, frequently adopted by private colleges and universities, is designed to ensure that the institution's revenue production outpaces costs associated with financial aid offers (e.g., merit awards, tuition discounting) and instructional delivery. Sophisticated leveraging models are used by some institutions to affect enrollment decisions, optimize the use of institutional aid, and monitor net revenue outcomes associated with aid offers and subsequent enrollment decisions.

Regardless of the filters selected by an institution, it is important for the chosen filter to be consistently applied in strategy development, priority setting, resource allocations, measurements of success, as well as the continuous improvement of enrollment management efforts. If applied consistently, these filters provide a compass during the planning process. They also provide a common lens through which enrollment management stakeholders can view their contributions to the cause. Without such guiding conceptual underpinnings, even the best enrollment management plans may generate an exhaustive array of strategies yet fall short of achieving institutional objectives.

Strategy Development

As previously stated, strategies should flow from strategic opportunities and related KPIs and metrics. An example of one strategy development framework is depicted below:

Strategic Opportunity: Increase Market Share	
KPI #1: Increase headcount / FTE	
Metrics	1. % increase of recent HS grads from previous years 2. Market share by high school 3. % increase of adult learners (first-time freshmen) from previous years 4. % increase of adult learners (transfers) from previous years 5. % increase of online learners from previous years 6. % increase of dual enrollment from previous years 7. % of full-time vs. part-time enrollment 8. Enrollment between credit and non-credit courses 9. Enrollment in undersubscribed programs

Using this example, strategies would be developed for each metric. Strategies related to these metrics would likely include a combination of marketing and recruitment strategies. Metrics 3−9 also might include scheduling and program development strategies.

Strategy development should consist of a description of the strategy, the antecedents for a successful implementation, assignment of implementation

responsibility to a lead unit or individual, a timeline for implementation, a target audience for the strategy, a strategy delivery method, an objective, and an effectiveness measure. When all strategies have been developed, they should be prioritized. A sample prioritization template is presented here, but each institution should select its own prioritization criteria. Ideally, the prioritization criteria will mirror strategic opportunity filters.

Enrollment Strategy:					
Prioritization Criteria	Substantially Exceeds Criteria	Exceeds Criteria	Adequately Meets Criteria	Minimally Meets Criteria	Does NOT Meet Criteria
Meeting market demand 1. Student needs 2. Industry needs 3. Community needs					
Supporting the institution's mission and academic objectives					
Maximizing return on investment 1. Benefit to students or the institution 2. Impact on enrollment targets 3. Potential revenue vs. cost					
Enhancing the student experience 1. Student satisfaction 2. Student engagement 3. Student success					

Documenting the probability of a successful implementation and outcome 1. Antecedents for success are in place (e.g., funding, human resources, infrastructure, technology, leadership support) 2. Data supporting the probability of a successful outcome					

Evaluator Comments:

Action

Strategy implementation should begin with the creation of detailed action steps designed to ensure quality execution. Even the best enrollment strategies can fail to produce desired results if they are executed poorly. Your capacity to execute is largely determined by the people charged with implementation. They must have the antecedents necessary for a successful implementation, and they must be held accountable for delivering on the potential of the strategy they have been assigned.

Among the strategies selected for early implementation, there should be some that are "easy wins"—that will yield immediate, visible results. Success with these strategies will foster confidence in the overall enrollment plan and provide momentum for implementing more complex enrollment strategies. With complex, protracted enrollment strategies, it is often prudent to begin with "proof of concept" pilots. Prove the worthiness of long-term strategies early in the implementation phase.

Assessment and Analysis

This is the stage of the planning process that is nonexistent at most institutions. Yet, for the institutions with the appetite for continuous improvement, it provides enrollment managers with actionable intelligence to gain and maintain a competitive advantage. The cruel irony of enrollment planning is that there is no competitive advantage in a strategy per se. It is the continuous evolution of strategies given implementation effectiveness, the current reality, and changing environmental factors that produces a high performing enrollment organization.

To be positioned for using actionable intelligence to continuously improve strategies, enrollment organizations must have the capacity to systematically collect, analyze, and use data. For most institutions, such capacity means having at least one person dedicated to this task. With dedicated time and the right skill set, a research analyst can supply actionable intelligence to decision-makers for

the distinct purpose of improving strategies aimed at institutional strategic opportunities.

Conclusion

A **strategic** enrollment plan is rare. It requires an intense focus on strategic opportunities and the institutional will to stay the course. Stryker (1997) explains this type of planning as a dynamic means of describing an enrollment enterprise, its goals, gaps to achieving them, and ways to overcome the gaps for long-term, viable success. From the author's experience with more than 300 colleges and universities, it takes three to five years to fully execute and refine an enrollment plan. Enrollment planning is not a "quick fix" for an enrollment problem but rather a journey toward a sustainable competitive advantage. It is a process for achieving long-term enrollment vitality. Furthermore, enrollment planning should be integrated with academic, student development, facilities, budget, and human resource planning (Sandmeyer, Dooris, & Barlock, 2004).

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