Shifting to an Active, Student-Centric Model to Drive Enrollment Growth

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Colleges and universities that implement active, student-centric business models that are consciously applied to all aspects of the institution will be more likely to succeed in today's postsecondary environment, where the goalposts to success are shifting rapidly.

All of us who work at colleges and universities understand the critical role that enrollment plays in the sustainability of our institutions of higher education. I sometimes think of it as comparable to industry. The number of students we admit represents the successful "sales" of our institutions, and are required so that our organizations may conduct their normative operations and fulfill their role of educating society. When we fail to achieve our enrollment goals—or when we lose students through attrition—the ramifications can make life uncomfortable for our organizations. The high-end elite universities don't typically have this problem, but most of the rest of our institutions do.

As times change and the supply of traditional students wanes (as is happening currently), institutions of higher education are forced to come up with innovative ways to achieve their enrollment goals, both as they relate to admissions and retention. Both of these are important aspects of enrollment management and their unique but critical goals are met at higher rates when their processes are designed with students first and foremost in mind.

When I was at Long Island University, we grew one of our degree completion programs to generate over a million dollars in a single year because the staff transformed a department that had been operating as a low-functioning office to one that was an active, efficient enrollment machine. The team met weekly on Monday mornings, to review the success of lead generation tactics, conversion rates, application numbers and registration data—for every student. This was new, and not how business had been conducted previously. The office became a one-stop shop for adult learners completing their bachelor's degrees, and these were custom designed to accommodate the complex backgrounds adult learners often bring. Our model was blended, so students could rely upon online learning and instruction for the bulk of their learning and only came to campus occasionally. The staff saw that the flipped class model worked well for our adult cohorts and helped them to remain in the program. We got more involved with the students and focused our operation on reducing the many inconveniences that often drive students away from degree study, and consistently sent the message that we were there to enable their degree completion and to remove obstacles in the way of that goal. Such student-centric messages and behaviors instilled trust in our students and served as the glue in a high-touch model that rapidly grew our degree completion program.

Administrators would benefit greatly from recognizing and embracing the critical importance of funnel management in the success of our campuses, which includes vigorously promoting programs, generating abundant leads, establishing tight-knit teams to cultivate those leads aggressively and make convincing cases for students selecting their particular college, and then tracking the inquirer-to-applicant-to-admit-to-registrant conversion rates with solid CRM technology dedicated to this purpose. We must also be able to adjust recruitment strategies based upon the collection and analysis of data by implementing data-driven strategies. It can be frustrating trying to explain that students don't just appear by themselves and that academic program directors and faculty are not necessarily the best sources of funnel management skills. Nonetheless, many campuses place pressure on academic directors to fill programs and recruit students successfully when they have never studied or practiced enrollment management as a profession.

Once a college or unit implements a successful CRM, builds a high-functioning enrollment and funnel management system and team and can successfully recruit, then it must shift to a different challenge of building a back office team of administrators, advisors and faculty who are of a single mind and determined to provide an excellent educational experience and high levels of customer service to these students. In other words, now that recruitment has been achieved, the other side of the coin, i.e., retention, persistence and completion now become priorities and opportunities for high-touch, student-centered strategies. Such current innovations as those regarding predictive analytics being implemented by Civitas Learning and the Education Advisory Board that track the students' footprints through their university journey and pinpoint when and where they succeed and fail, with appropriate and timely interventions to ensure that they don't fall off track, are breaking new ground in the field of student-centered enrollment practice.

This focus on the student, rather than on the institution, shifts the paradigm and highlights the real reason that we work in universities—i.e., to serve the student. Marie Cini, Provost of University of Maryland University College, once said at an education conference in 2014 that she knew the composition and performance levels of her freshman class before they even stepped foot on her campus. The massive amounts of student data that we store but don't analyze, that we compile but never use, are a gold mine for educators. When we employ to full capacity the excellent technology systems we are building to investigate

and bring to the surface the true value of the student experience we are providing, whether bad or good or needing to change, then we will improve our retention rates. Students need to know that we on campus care about their development as individuals, and knowing this can make the difference between holding onto students and watching them drain away from our campuses.

Universities must thus shift from a passive business model to an active, student-centered one, and yet not every college or university can make that shift. Some endanger themselves by assuming that students will apply to their institutions no matter what, and there will always be a supply of applicants. But those days have passed. Now in the US, we are seeing a flat to diminishing supply of traditional high school graduates. The numbers of student that are now predicted to grow significantly are students from diverse backgrounds who are of color. The book, *Who Moved My Cheese*? is an illustration of what we see happening now, i.e., a sudden shortage in the supply of traditional high school students whose numbers admissions and universities have counted on and long taken for granted, and a monumental demographic shift represented in the new student supply, comprised of students with markedly different values, customs, language patterns, ethnicities and preferences.

Still, many colleges lack the flexibility to shift their business processes accordingly. Faculty by and large are not business nor organizational experts, but teachers. University administrators get to the top of their institutions not by virtue of having had management training, but by virtue of having acquired a Ph.D. For many, the concepts of enrollment management, funnel management, CRMs, etc. can be just like a foreign language.

It's a conflict and collision of cultures, a watershed moment of change and opportunity. Nonetheless, our institutions of higher learning must change and adapt to the times if they wish to survive. Tuition-driven private institutions of higher education especially, who cannot fall back on public funding, must find ways to alter and adapt their business models. Renowned Harvard Business Professor Clayton Christensen warns:

"…higher education is just on the edge of the crevasse. Generally, universities are doing very well financially, so they don't feel from the data that their world is going to collapse. But I think even five years from now these enterprises are going to be in real trouble."

It should be clear that using active, student-centric business models that are systemized and a regular part of our day-to-day operations can significantly increase enrollment growth and keep students happy and in class.

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