An Introduction to Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Planning

SEM Planning is used to develop a market-informed, strategy-aligned, data-driven enrollment management plan that includes tradeoffs, investments, and priorities to help achieve realistic enrollment goals. SEM Planning done well will result in an understanding of the market realities that will impact enrollment and the strategies needed to move forward.

Why Strategic Enrollment Management is Important

- Revenue growth is essential for financial sustainability.

- Enrollment will continue to be the main driver of revenue growth.

- Increasingly difficult to grow revenue from in-state undergraduate students.

- Demographic changes and increasing competition make it challenging to maintain current enrollment (i.e., the status quo is not an option).

- Retention is a critical lever for enrollment growth (i.e., retention is an enrollment strategy).

- Enrollment touches every aspect of mission: access, student success, academic quality, faculty numbers, research, revenues, costs.

What Most SEM Plans Include

- Current enrollment data.

- Local, state, national trends.

- Data on peers and 'aspirants.'

- High level enrollment targets (e.g., total headcount).

- Lists of tactical responses (Most common recommendation is "Develop a plan for…").

Common Pitfalls in SEM Plans

- Listing enrollment tactics is not the hard part—figuring out which ones to do and how much time and money to invest in each is the real strategic question.

- Without prioritization people feel overwhelmed, they do the ones that are easiest or most familiar or they focus on the radical new approaches even if bigger gains are to be had with less sexy tactics (like a reenrollment campaign).

- They tend to explain away underperformance (or frame it as the inevitable result of external forces) rather than frame it as an institutional issue requiring a significant shift in approach.

- They don't frame the options that were considered but discarded for good reasons.

- Unrealistic targets (i.e., not based on understanding of historical trends and reasonable projections).

- Led by stakeholders with little understanding of enrollment management.

- Failure to consider the current and future actions of competitors.

- Too narrow a scope (e.g., just new first-time full-time undergraduates).

- Too broad a scope (e.g., undergraduate, graduate, non-credit, retention).

- Too many unprioritized actions.

- Failure to clearly articulate and resolve hard tradeoffs.

- Assumption that large investments in branding and marketing will solve your enrollment challenges ("we just need to tell our story better").

What Strong, Differentiated SEM Plans do Differently

- Develop a real strategy—with clear perspective on priorities or unique approaches.

- Estimate the size of opportunity (e.g., what % of growth will come from retention, what % of growth will come from professional masters).

- Develop appropriate timing and staging (e.g., what do we have to do now to have the desired enrollment in year 5).

- Identify capacity constraints.

- Estimate cost of required investments.

- Address the competitive landscape, segmented appropriately.

- Incorporate job market data at both the regional and local level.

Exemplar Strategic Enrollment Management Plans

- [El Camino College](#)

- [Mesa Community College](#)

- [SUNY Onondaga Community College](#)

- [Lane Community College](#)

- [California State University Chico](#)

- [University of Hawaii Maui](#)

- [Winona State University](#)