

# Revitalizing the Student Community at the University Of Wyoming

Across the higher education market, fluctuating budgets and student demographics are challenging traditional operational models. Higher education leaders are recognizing the need to transform their recruitment and enrollment approach to ensure mission and fiscal sustainability.

The University of Wyoming (UW) recently faced these challenges head-on. The institution had historically been well-funded by the state, and there was little pressure to change their recruitment approach even as student demographics started to shift.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, when tax revenues dropped, the institution faced a \$42 million budget reduction from the state and an enrollment

shortage of 600 students as compared to the previous year. UW lost 370 faculty and staff positions as a result, compelling leaders across the campus to come together and develop a new path forward.

## Assessing the Situation and Identifying a Path Forward

Following the 2016-2017 budget cuts, UW leaders developed a shared vision to become the institution of choice for students in Wyoming while incrementally growing their out-of-state population. They partnered with Huron to identify opportunities to improve their enrollment management strategy. To do so, the team collaborated on three assessments, including:

- **A current state assessment** of recruitment markets and practices, designed to establish the status quo and gain a shared, fact-based depiction of Wyoming's enrollment organization and history.
- **An organizational assessment** of the student enrollment management division to compare current resources with the potential future-state required resources.
- **A student success activity inventory** to catalog current retention activities and the student populations they serve.

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**ANNE ALEXANDER**, ASSOCIATE VICE PROVOST OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS FOR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

During a 12-week period, Huron conducted over 125 interviews with key stakeholders to understand UW's undergraduate enrollment strategies and primary factors predicting student success. The findings were used to identify and prioritize opportunities for transformation. These opportunities were then shared with a newly created UW strategic enrollment management taskforce.

## The Drivers Behind the New Enrollment Strategy

UW leaders recognized that the model they used for years wasn't optimal for the institution or the students anymore. Through the assessments, UW identified specific challenges to address, including:

- **Declining state support.** While institutional leaders were aware of this issue, they hadn't focused on the potential to grow net tuition revenue through targeted new student enrollment and improved retention.
- **Lack of clarity around UW's value proposition.** By strengthening the institution's position in the regional market, UW could appeal to a broader, more diverse student audience.
- **Intensifying competition for students.** UW would require a strategic and targeted recruitment approach to attract the best-fit students.
- **Shifting demographics and academic preparedness.** Attracting and retaining students would take ensuring that support services are appropriately resourced and aligned with changing student needs.
- **Need for community college partnerships.** As the only four-year university in Wyoming, creating stronger and mutually beneficial partnerships with community colleges would help grow and serve the transfer population.

With these challenges in mind, Huron and UW's strategic enrollment management (SEM) taskforce worked together to develop a comprehensive five-year SEM plan. This plan focused on increasing

the size of incoming undergraduate cohorts (both first-time full-time freshmen and transfer students) and improving undergraduate student retention and graduation rates. Anne Alexander, Associate Vice Provost of Academic Affairs for Undergraduate Education, described the collaboration with Huron: "It was a very inclusive process. We held multiple large meetings with people from across campus, including representation from the college deans, admissions, the registrar, athletics and student affairs, to pick targets where we should invest more time and resources. It was a long and arduous process, but it was quite rewarding because we hadn't thought about enrollment management in this way as an institution before."

By clearly socializing the assessment results across the institution, UW gained project sponsorship from the highest levels of the organization. Key campus stakeholders, including deans and faculty, participated in discussions on the assessment findings. This process fostered an initial groundswell of support and established passionate champions for change. These champions then distributed insights and findings through a campus-wide communication plan, effectively sharing their enthusiasm and the need for change with the rest of the community.

## The Moment of Truth: Implementing The Strategic Enrollment Management Plan



UW leaders, faculty and staff started implementing the plan in February 2017 — and have maintained a dedicated focus on enrollment management since. Some of the improvements implemented include:

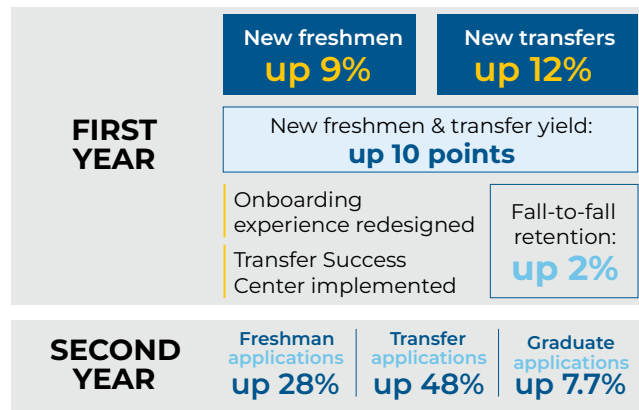
- Aligning enrollment management more closely to faculty and academic administrators by shifting the function from campus life to the provost’s organization.
- Creating a new role: associate vice provost for enrollment management.
- Reframing recruitment and retention as a coordinated partnership.
- Developing a multi-disciplinary team approach to manage academic ability, financial capability, wellness and a sense of belonging to ensure student success and progression.
- Reshaping orientation to focus on advising and building a sense of belonging.
- Updating UW advising systems and creating a Transfer Success Center to better support changing student populations.

“Huron helped us make the case to the whole campus that enrollment management, from recruitment to tutoring and supplemental instruction and more, couldn’t happen with departments working as islands. It would take all of us. Many people across campus wanted to help, but this plan matched the need to the desire,” said Alexander.

UW formed several cross-campus working groups centered around topics such as course management, student wellness and financial literacy, some of which still meet to this day to exchange ideas and identify opportunities to improve the student experience. This culture shift has created a lasting impact on UW’s approach to student recruitment and retention.

## Continued Strong Results Point to a Flourishing Enrollment Management Culture

UW’s enrollment turnaround has earned the institution local and national attention, including features in several Wyoming publications and [U.S. News](#). Year-over-year results are positive and include:



To create a responsive and forward-thinking enrollment management culture, UW faculty and staff view enrollment and retention as a campuswide responsibility. With an appetite for change now a part of its DNA, the University prioritizes creating and nurturing an industry leading student experience, from initial interest and admission through campus life, graduation, personal and professional achievement, and lifelong affiliation. UW is well on its way to achieving the vision it set forth as the university of choice for students in the state of Wyoming.

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