



Strategic Enrollment Alignment:

Making Enrollment and Student Success Everyone's Job

The Issue: Changing demographics, increasing price competition, rising student debt, shrinking state funding, and questions related both to graduates' job prospects and the market relevance of certain degree programs are fundamentally changing the nature of enrollment operations at many colleges and universities.

For many years, colleges have competed for new students with expanded services and facilities. The industry could afford to add capacity and capability because demographics, tuition increases, and a growing economy provided the resources needed to fuel the education machine. Retention has always been an objective for higher education, but, for the most part until recently, a secondary one. An increasing supply of potential students enabled higher education to lavish attention on the admissions end of the student lifecycle with less focus on seeing students through to graduation and then engaging with alumni.

Huron Education's point of view

The time has come to move from simply managing the application funnel to a more holistic approach: aligning enrollment activities—from recruiting to retention to graduation—with institutional mission.

"We once had an implicit social contract in which college graduates reasonably expected to get good jobs with compensation at levels seen as appropriate relative to net cost of attendance, but that has changed," said Timothy Fournier, a Managing Director with Huron Education. "With a challenging economy, dramatically increasing debt loads for some students, and excess capacity across higher education, the value proposition of higher education for many students and parents has changed, and we're seeing a shift in the power dynamic that favors students and parents forcing institutions to compete on price. To succeed, institutions will need to focus on their strengths and their core identity to demonstrate value."

The notion of enrollment management has long been associated with integrating admissions and financial aid activities to target and enroll the best class for the institution. With the changes to the higher education environment that have emerged in the last five years, many colleges and universities have found it more difficult to meet recruiting goals. As student selection behaviors change and the national dialogue increasingly turns to employment-related outcomes, many enrollment managers have noticed that the old predictive models have lost much of their power.

"Colleges and universities have been forced to turn to new geographic markets, both domestic and international," said Rosemaria Martinelli, a Director with Huron Education. "They have to consider overall enrollment composition—including the number of undergraduate, transfer and graduate students—and increase tuition discounting in order to fill some of that excess capacity built up over years of population growth. Many colleges can no longer anticipate with any level of precision exactly how large that incoming fall class will be. New techniques for gathering and analyzing relevant data have become essential."

Case Study

The **University of Alabama in Huntsville** is primarily known for its programs in science and engineering, programs that should be in great demand. For the eight years ending in 2013, however, the university's enrollment had been essentially flat and students were being drawn from a smaller geographic area.

As part of UAH's strategic enrollment alignment, university leaders re-evaluated the marketing of the university, how it was perceived among students and the community, and how it wanted to be known. UAH also studied the structure and effectiveness of its enrollment functions.

The university has seized on building a new identity that capitalizes on its strengths, focusing on such critical messages as:

- It is the smallest public top-tier research university in the nation.
- Its co-op program gives students an advantage in the job market.
- Graduates earn the highest average starting salary among all Alabama public universities.

Fall 2014 enrollment at UAH increased 11.9 percent over the previous year, with a 0.9 point increase in average ACT scores for incoming freshmen.

Strategic Enrollment Alignment uses a data-centered process to link enrollment operations with academic objectives and resources. The purpose is to develop an institutional approach that:

- capitalizes on institutional strengths,
- builds on prospective students' existing perceptions of the institution,
- supports students throughout their academic career to completion, and
- aligns academic programs with future employment needs.

The goal of strategic enrollment alignment is to provide an academic path for students that prepares them with the skills and abilities they need to begin, build, and sustain long-term careers whether in the academic community or in the commercial world.

An approach that aligns institutional identity and capabilities with academic programs that prepare students to build future careers attracts and retains today's students better than programs which expect the student to make those connections. For example, an institution with academic strengths in natural resources, mechanical engineering, and marketing can prepare its students for careers in environmental sustainability fields that meet both student interests and market demand.

"You need to really understand your institutional brand from the perspective of both students and future employers to be able to deliver academic programs that are meaningful and which motivate students to complete," said Fournier. "Strategic enrollment alignment brings together academic and administrative leaders from across the organization to analyze institutional identity, enrollment data, and future societal need to capitalize on the institution's strengths and opportunities."