

Examining Higher Education Enrollment Trends and Contributing Factors Through the Lens of Strategic Enrollment Management

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Abstract

Strategic leadership and enrollment management are crucial factors in an institution's ability to meet students' needs and facilitate their success. Amidst shifting perceptions about the value of higher education, institutions need to reevaluate their offerings in order to promote enrollment and achieve long-term success. Enrollment leaders recognize the need for data to build sustainable enrollment strategies. To aid that process, this multiple case study analyzed enrollment data from six institutions of higher education, highlighting the factors that contributed to increasing or decreasing enrollment trends and the actions that institutions can take to meet their long-term goals. The results make clear that institutions need to be proactive in their strategic enrollment management, continually refining their offering to attract new students.

Keywords: strategic enrollment, higher education leadership

Introduction

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) professionals and leaders at higher education institutions (HEIs) need reliable data and research findings to form their strategic planning processes (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Student enrollment data assists SEM professionals in creating pattern-focused plans to promote sustainable enrollment outcomes for their institutions. Strategic enrollment management is rooted in elasticity, pricing responsiveness and revenue impacts, and consumer choice theory in order to develop effective plans (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Still, effective enrollment leadership requires campus-wide commitment and the integration of stakeholders into the planning process in order to effect changes necessary to reverse enrollment losses (Morrill, 2010). Further, despite documented and researched approaches to strategic enrollment, institutions of higher education are experiencing varied trends in enrollment numbers.

In order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of strategic enrollment leadership, a review of IHE data is necessary to understand what factors are contributing to current campus environment and enrollment trends. This multiple case study analysis reports the findings of enrollment data at six HEIs. Based on the results, we discuss the factors that contributed to the studied HEIs' increases and decreases in enrollment as well as proposed actions to meet long-term goals and remain sustainable in a fluctuating market.

Literature Review

HEIs are facing stagnation for reasons that are both within and beyond their control. As scholars such as Gilstrap (2020) have outlined, there are global trends that are reducing enrollment and forcing HEIs to adapt: socioeconomic or demographic shifts, changes in the legal or economic environment, competitors' tactics, technological innovations (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015), and ineffective funding models (Hector, 2016). Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends and created additional hurdles that institutions are still working to overcome. A 2020 American Council on Education (ACE) survey of college and university presidents reported lower enrollment for the Fall 2020 term compared to the year prior (Turk et al., 2020). When asked about the reasons for the enrollment decline, the survey respondents listed health concerns, financial hardships, shifts from in-person to virtual learning, and familial responsibilities (Turk et al., 2020).

That said, there are variables that give HEIs some control over their enrollment. Hossler and Bontrager (2015) outlined and described seven in particular: place, price, product, promotions, processes, people, and physical evidence. These controllable factors are firm, tangible, and can influence SEM policy and approach. For example, in the aforementioned survey of college and university presidents, 22% of surveyed leaders reported that they managed to increase enrollment during the Fall 2020 term (Turk et al., 2020) due to discounted tuition and fees (price), higher availability of student financial aid packages (promotions), the expansion of online course offerings (product), and most importantly, the leveraging of SEM tools (processes) (Turk et al., 2020). Controllable to an extent, the location of an IHE (place) can impact enrollment, and minority students from rural areas are disadvantaged due to a lack of equity and opportunity. Sansone et al. (2020) explained that prior research focused on geography as a sole factor when reviewing enrollment trends without analyzing the intersectionality of how race and ethnicity can also impact enrollment decisions (people).

Impactful SEM Strategies

Strategic enrollment professionals (SEPs) must know, understand, and be able to communicate with institutions' students (Hassanein, 2022; Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). For instance, they can leverage technology to interact with students, collect data, and develop collaborative opportunities across campuses. With a better awareness of trends and issues, SEPs can improve their decision-making and responsiveness (Hassanein, 2022). With those improvements, SEPs can develop an organizational structure focused on stakeholder input, data analysis, as well as the empowerment and guidance of key members of faculty and staff who can implement necessary tasks for goal achievement (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Enrollment projections, recruitment, admissions, students' journey, retention, as well as funding opportunities can serve to support institutions' post-pandemic progress (Hassanein, 2022).

Throughout that process, SEM professionals must work to cultivate institutional trust by developing a vision built around transparency, collaboration, and leadership—thereby upholding the HEIs' identity while identifying achievable steps toward an established enrollment goal (Morrill, 2010). Typically, these goals are featured within strategic plans focused on data analysis of topics such as student persistence, effectiveness of instruction, and student costs (Flores & Leal, 2023).

Method

We employed multiple case study analysis to examine and understand enrollment increases and/or decreases at six HEIs. Guided by the principles of strategic enrollment management outlined in Morrill (2010) and Hossler and Bontrager (2015), we evaluated the HEIs' publicly available enrollment data for the academic years 2021 and 2022. Notably a short time period and proximity to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data revealed stark differences in enrollment trends at a time when schools were equally challenged with public health and societal concerns. We analyzed HEI strategic plans, student handbooks, recent news releases, and university websites to identify factors that contributed to those enrollment trends. The HEIs, all within the one state, were randomly selected from an annually published enrollment report which details enrollment trends for all public institutions of higher education in the state. For purposes on analysis, we selected three institutions of higher education with an increase in enrollment, and three with a decrease in enrollment.

Results

Between fall 2021 and fall 2022, three of the institutions (Campus A, Campus B, and Campus C) experienced a decrease in enrollment, while the others (Campus D, Campus E, and Campus F) saw an increase. Table 1 describes the sample group. We used pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality for each college or university.

Table 1*Descriptive Facts- Institutions of Higher Education in Case Study Analysis*

Institution	Trend	Percent Change
Campus A	Decrease	13%
Campus B	Decrease	12%
Campus C	Decrease	18%
Campus D	Increase	7%
Campus E	Increase	23%
Campus F	Increase	8%

Note. Data derived from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, assembled by the authors.

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus A (Decrease)

While the mission of Campus A focuses on high-quality research, teaching, and cultural awareness, the university did not offer public information explaining how this mission will be achieved, potentially making its strategic plan ineffective (Flores & Leal, 2023). The goals identified by Campus A include research growth, retention, recruitment, graduation rates, and finding funding revenues that won't increase student tuition. However, there is no indication that stakeholders have been consulted, while recent budgets point to tuition increases in response to reductions in state funding. Thus, the institution's strategic plan may not provide sufficient guidance on how to achieve goals that would prove effective for increased enrollment.

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus B (Decrease)

Campus B's enrollment decline is likely due in part to ineffective and absent leadership. The division of enrollment management has not received guidance on how to handle external factors such as the pandemic and national downward enrollment trends at four-year institutions. Likewise, the department lacks the agency to conduct internal data analysis, address enrollment structure, and revise strategic plans. Without quality leadership that can facilitate collaboration between internal and external stakeholders (Morrill, 2010), Campus B lacks the foundation to enact Hossler and Bontrager's (2015) pyramidal SEM planning framework, which seeks to support sustainable enrollment outcomes via the following steps: institutional strategic plan; key enrollment indicators; data collection/analysis; strategic enrollment goals; enrollment infrastructure; strategies, and tactics (p. 541). Senior university management needs to be more proactive in order to build this foundation.

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus C (Decrease)

At Campus C, first-generation college students from low socio-economic backgrounds comprise a large portion of the student population. Because of the university's rural location, many of its students have less access to resources such as financial aid and the institution cannot easily attract metropolitan students to compensate (Sansone et al., 2020). Amidst rapidly escalating educational costs, rural campuses can encounter an affordability problem that then creates a competitive disadvantage. In the case of Campus C, price and promotion variables coupled with the uncontrollable variable of competitors' tactics (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015) may have contributed to the institution's enrollment decline. This is exacerbated by the reactive implementation of financial aid programs at Campus C, which were found to be almost a year behind other IHEs in the region, and may have created a market disadvantage contributing to its decline in enrollment.

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus D (Increase)

Campus D has documented efforts to reverse prior trends of declining enrollment arising primarily from retention issues (i.e., students opting for and transferring to other HEIs). Recent growth can be attributed to its renewed focus on ample personnel to better connect with its prospective and existing student population, and due to its focus on creating a strong sense of belonging and community on campus (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015). Mitchell (2019) posited that two factors impacting enrollment numbers are (1) a decline in transfer students and (2) larger classes graduating, leaving behind smaller student bodies.

The strategic plan for Campus D includes six major goals structured in the form of a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analysis. For example, Campus D plans to focus on internal strengths like the institution's positive reputation, niche educational setting, and student-centric approach to decision-making. The university openly acknowledges that many incoming students are underprepared for college-level work, which can lower their chance of academic success and potentially impact retention numbers, especially for at-risk populations. Campus D further recognized that it must market beyond its region in order to achieve growth; thus, the institution committed to an annual 10% increase in its marketing expenditure. Further, Campus D moved 15 degrees, three post-master's certificates, and 361 courses to a fully online setup in order to reach students beyond its region. In doing so, Campus D found a way to maintain its culture and niche offerings while serving a wider scope of students. The university also created an enrollment plan to better cater to these learners, offering financial incentives, attendance support, and online/hybrid courses for students with part- or full-time employment. Campus D has also sought to beautify the campus, renovate student residence halls and other campus facilities, and increase support services and resources in the classroom.

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus E (Increase)

Interestingly, Campus E showed an astounding 23% increase in enrollment, despite having a similar vision and mission statement as Campus A (with a 13% decrease). Notably, however, Campus E went a step further to clearly delineate its commitment to community partnerships and resources. Additionally, the institution not only specified its goals, but how it planned to achieve them, which is a vital step in creating alignment between enrollment and the strategic plan (Flores & Leal, 2023).

Potential Contributing Factors: Campus F (Increase)

Campus F increased its enrollment in the studied time period by not only leveraging its geographic location, but also by prioritizing discounted tuition and fees, the greater availability of student financial aid packages, and the expansion of online course offerings (Turk et al., 2020). Because of its metropolitan location, Campus F faces stiffer competition from a large number of universities. Recognizing this reality, Campus F has planned for aggressive growth through its campus master plan and physical expansion into satellite campuses (Niland, 2019). The institution's strategic plan also supports student access and affordability, including program offerings to cover the tuition of not only students with financial need, but high achievers.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Using enrollment data sets to identify enrollment trends helps elucidate the effectiveness of enrollment and student success efforts from year to year. Enrollment data provides for a never-ending array of analyses; exploring trends such as resident vs. non-resident student retention, graduation rates for women vs. men, first year student retention, scholarship needs for minority vs. non-minority students, and student-to-faculty ratios. Each of these analyses can be used to evaluate specific student success initiatives. According to Morrill (2010), "the use of comparative data can lead to the development of common benchmarks in which certain measures come to be associated with a best practice and thereby take on the character of a norm" (p. 102). If first year student retention is not meeting expectations, per the strategic plan, then a reevaluation can be completed to determine if student success programs and efforts should be reorganized.

Student success initiatives have been more intentional in recent years. These initiatives can be as simple as encouraging faculty to work with a student who is struggling. The student can be guided to various campus resources for tutoring in coursework, setting reasonable accommodations or other support programs that help faculty retain their students. By noting student financial or food insecurity, institutions can implement initiatives to alleviate these stressors enabling focus on course assignments. Even if enrollment data show a significant increase in enrollment rates, the quality of service will need to be reevaluated. This internal evaluation should measure whether that the institution is delivering the same quality of customer service, maintaining or improving the faculty-to-student ratio, and ensuring equity and adequacy of learning space? Reevaluation of the quality of service will need to be addressed and new initiatives implemented to ensure the students' service expectations are met.

Smith et al. (2020) identified key elements of successful SEM implementation: developing strategies for change at all three institutional levels; reviewing institutional nimbleness and culture; developing a plan for long-term, sustainable change; adopting institution-wide commitment to change; establishing accountability for actions; establishing an approach that is collaborative. IHEs need to focus on utilizing an effective planning process that leverages community resources for student support (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Morrill, 2010).

Bradshaw (2023) outlined three critical components of successful strategic enrollment: key concepts (ideas applicable throughout the enrollment process), unique framework (model that engages the entire campus), and comprehensive institutional planning (long-term planning for the campus as whole but, for SEM, looking through an enrollment lens). These components align with Hossler and Bontrager's (2015) assertion that successful SEM builds an enrollment framework for

the institution, incorporating its goals, missions, and values while catering to the specific needs of the current and potential student populations. Perez-Vergara (2019) note the need for additional research because enrollment predictors identified in previous studies of Generation X and Millennials may not be directly applicable to modern student generations.

In order for Campus A to increase enrollment, a system-wide change in structure is needed (Birx, 2019). Campus A should focus on non-traditional avenues of enrollment recruitment. For example, the IHE can focus on adult learners who may need different support than traditional students. In order to implement this change, Campus A would need to identify assistance for issues related to cost of attending and scheduling, and could increase its enrollment by providing flexible disbursement of financial aid or developing additional certificates for professional growth that are highly valued in the workplace (Bellare et al., 2023). Campus A will also have to consider its location in order to close the enrollment gap. Rhodes (2022) explained that rural students are likely to accrue 60% more debt than their more urban counterparts at IHEs, and the additional lack of rural employment requiring advanced degrees may mean learners will seek employment farther from home.

Campus C must re-evaluate program offerings and promote new financial aid strategies. Campus D is a good example of a unique framework that engaged the entire campus, incorporated strategies (i.e., marketing) that benefited university enrollment as a whole, and created measurable, data-driven initiatives. Conversely, Campus B collected data and incorporated enrollment into its strategic plan, but the framework did not encompass the institution as a whole nor did it take into consideration geographic location or student population.

Bradshaw (2023) also noted that initiatives should proactively support student success from admissions to graduation by integrating diversity and inclusivity to create a warm, welcoming, and supportive culture. Both Campus B and Campus D incorporated practices to improve retention; however, the two had contrasting environments which might contribute to their differences in enrollment over the last few years. While Campus B was facing internal turmoil that fractured relationships and caused tension within the institution, Campus D was beautifying its campus and creating an open, collaborative environment for students and faculty.

Conclusion

It is imperative that institutions develop campus strategic plans that can guide strategic enrollment management. That framework will empower professionals to collect and analyze more useful enrollment data that can then be used to achieve both general growth and more specific enrollment goals. Strategic enrollment managers need to maintain a vigilant assessment of external and internal factors, as well as how they apply data-driven strategies, in order to plan for long-term, sustainable enrollment outcomes (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015).

Looking forward, universities will be under mounting pressure to not only make more strategic decisions during planning and implementation, but also communicate their needs and successes to internal and external stakeholders in order to achieve buy-in on various resources, including money, time, energy, and opportunities. As argued by Attaran et al. (2018) and Kisling et al. (2021), institutions should embrace big data and data analytics for not only their operational aspects (e.g., student retention), but also for their predictive and analytical utility for student learning and academic success. Meanwhile, leadership and enrollment managers will need to hone their leadership skills and knowledge of practices (Hossler & Bontrager, 2015; Morill, 2010),

including a heightened awareness of internal and external factors, data collection and analysis, and institution-wide collaboration. Importantly, these components need to be paired with a commitment to accountability, transparency, and planning—or else institutions will find themselves unable to stop declining enrollment despite doing everything correctly on paper.

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