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A Case Study of Purposeful Campus Enrollment Increases

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Given the current economics of public higher education, enrollment management plays an increasingly significant role in institutional strategy. This qualitative case study explores three leading public universities to understand the dynamics at work. Each institution’s relationship with the state, desire for a private enrollment model, and growing reliance on tuition contextualized enrollment decisions.
Tuition policy, which is a primary component of the privatization of universities, has challenged governance philosophies and student choice in institutions nationwide. Balancing competition for vital resources with public interest has been described by Geiger (2004) as an “incipient paradox for public universities” (p. 241) as the potential for public policy to yield to market forces and the private management model persists. All of these current trends suggest the need to better understand how strategic enrollment management decisions are influenced in public universities. The literature contains little examination of how the challenges of the market and privatization influence decision making and organizational behavior (Eckel and Morphew 2009). As a result, the research question we seek to answer is “How do campus leaders make enrollment management decisions within the context of institutional strategies to improve prestige and ability to recruit high-quality students?”

Related Literature
The literature and broader conversation within higher education in recent years have been dominated by the influence of increased competition and market forces as manifested by the pursuit of rankings, prestige, and resources (Brewer, Gates and Goldman 2002; Newman, Couturier and Scurry 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Zemsky, Wegner and Massy 2005). State governments increasingly drive public institutions toward a market orientation as appropriations decline (Benjamin and Carroll 1998). Discussion of enrollment management within this context focuses on attracting the most desirable students—whether desirable academically or for their ability to pay (see, for example, McPherson and Schapiro 1998). Institutions are beginning to examine differential tuition charges and fees according to a range of factors and academic program types (Hearn 2006). More specifically, enrollment management units are evolving to maximize institutional effectiveness in student revenue generation (Des Jardins, Bell and Puyosa 2006).
Although higher education traditionally received the majority of its financial support from the state (Mumper 1996), “state investment in higher education has substantially declined relative to changes in enrollment, in state wealth, and in the growth of institutional budgets” (McLendon and Mokher 2009, p. 11). State governments attempting to constrain appropriations for higher education have used privatization as the “means of achieving this broad policy goal” (Altbach 1999, p. 31). This change, coupled with ideological changes supporting higher education as a private rather than a public good, furthers these trends (Hossler 2006). As a result, “the market, rather than public policy, [becomes] the dominant shaper of the nation’s postsecondary institutions” (Zemsky and Wegner 1997). Geiger (2004) suggests that while enrollment management “first appeared to be a managerial technique, it actually ceded decision-making power to market forces” (p. 244). More specifically, tuition and fees will take on a larger role in financing public higher education that only magnifies the activities of enrollment managers (Lenington 1996). In effect, the “shift away from public funding has led to an increased emphasis on using strategic enrollment management to improve tuition revenue” (St. John and Priest 2006, p. 4). This also places pressure on institutions to grow in size, reputation, and prestige (Bok 2003). These changing internal dynamics occur in many areas of the institution, including technology transfer, research centers, distance education, and enrollment management.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The framework guiding this work is resource dependency theory, which contends that organizations rely on key sources of revenue for continued operations. In an environment of scarce resources, organizations engage in constant competition and increasingly focus their efforts on securing revenue streams (Pfeffer 1978). Resource dependency encourages public institutions to seek sources of support to improve institutional quality in an attempt to become
immune to the whims of the local statehouse. The efficacy of resource dependency in describing market-driven enrollment management continues to grow (Hossler 2006).

Resource dependency theory illuminates the motives of academic institutions to seek alternative external sources of financial support to improve institutional quality. Student enrollment forms an increasingly important source of institutional revenue and a focus of institutional decision making. As a result, institutions put a tremendous emphasis on prestige generation and the benefits that prestige can offer in increasing success in the student market (Brewer, Gates and Goldman 2002). In this context, increasing tuition revenue constitutes one of the most significant opportunities for gaining additional financial resources.

Institutions face challenges caused by decreases in traditional means of support, such as state appropriations. The theory helps to contextualize why an increasing number of universities have turned to student tuition as an alternative source of revenue and the increasing number of institutions investing in expensive marketing strategies such as those examined by Kirp (2003). Resource dependency theory also highlights the factor of competition for prestige. As Weisbrod, Ballou, and Asch (2008) contend in their aptly titled book Mission and Money, “the search for revenue is inseparable from the competitive environment” (34). From this perspective, universities compete with their peer institutions for research dollars, prominent faculty, and high-quality students to achieve academic excellence (Powers 2003). Such competition is especially intense among institutions that harbor ambitions for increased prestige, reflected in the pursuit of annual rankings by high-profile news magazines such as U.S. News & World Report (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole and Perez 1998). As the environment becomes increasingly competitive and market-like (Zemsky, Shaman and Iannozzi 1997), universities respond under the premise that state and federal funding are insufficient to pursue the margin of excellence along with the protection and desire to control essential revenue streams.

METHODOLOGY
This study utilized an interpretive perspective according to which we focused on the key decision makers at three elite public flagship institutions. Purposeful sampling led to the selection of three prominent public flagships based on their status as leading public institutions that to varying degrees demonstrated efforts to become more market oriented. The range of state financial support ranges from a low of eight percent to a high of 22 percent as a percentage of the overall institutional budget. This is consistent with recent study of public research universities (Hearn 2006). While prestige and significant resources afford these institutions the opportunity to engage successfully in strategic enrollment management, they still are susceptible to the challenges that all public institutions face, such as rankings, economic conditions, and a desire for increased quality. The following research question guided our study: How do campus leaders make enrollment management decisions within the context of institutional strategies to improve prestige and ability to recruit high-quality students?

We used a qualitative design, which was appropriate given the nature of the research question (Merriam 1998). We conducted interviews with a total of 26 senior administrators, eleven faculty, and five student leaders at the three institutions. In addition, we examined nearly 1,000 pages of institutional documents including internal memoranda; meeting agendas and minutes; mainstream and student media accounts; and public statements.

Interviews were conducted in person with an open-ended interviewing approach. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. We also used the snowball technique to find additional informants who could provide pertinent information for this study. As described by Bogdan and Bilken (1992), we asked each interviewee near the conclusion of the interview whether we should speak with anyone else in order to gain additional insight. Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, interpretation, and writing of the study (Merriam 1998). This aided in our adaptation of the interview protocol to follow up with other interviewees and corroborate data collected in prior interviews. The two primary modes of data analysis were: (1) searching for patterns by comparing results with patterns predicted from the literature; and (2) explanation building by identifying causal links and/or plausible or rival explanations in order to build an explanation about the case (Yin 1994). Coding into categories aided identification of the important categories and themes that our research uncovered. By examining multiple sources and types of data from all three institutions, we used triangulation to ensure the dependability of our data.
FINDINGS
This section highlights the three primary themes identified from the data, thus demonstrating the influences on enrollment management decisions. Each relates to the concept of resource dependency that served as the framework for this study. The three case studies revealed similar themes regarding these issues, despite their different financial situations, enrollment management structures, and locations:
- The pervasive influence of the university’s relationship with the state in which it is located.
- The desire to move toward a private model.
- The role of tuition as a significant institutional revenue stream.

University’s Relationship to the State
Although each of the universities in this study holds a different historical relationship with its respective state, that relationship proved a central point of the discussions about enrollment issues. There was particular sensitivity to serving the traditional mission of public service within a political environment that continually led to decreased funding. In the words of one finance administrator, “The state wants higher education to cost them less and they are realizing that multiple levels of bureaucracy are costing the state more.” Each campus included in this study would be considered elite by almost any definition—a characteristic evidenced as well in the way campus administrators described their institutions’ roles within the state and nation. One faculty member contended, “This university is increasingly a national or global institution. While we are certainly responsive to the state, we have other constituents as well.”

A common refrain for administrators, in particular, was the need to “watch out for ourselves” because they no longer had any faith that the state would do so. These three schools also seek—and have been granted—greater degrees of autonomy from state regulations. Despite what deregulation each has achieved, the trustees who are selected though a public process maintain an emphasis on public purposes and low tuition as a byproduct of that historical purpose of public higher education. One enrollment management director explained:

The trustees have said that as long as they are in power, we will keep our tuition [low]. We do it because we think we have a public obligation, and we think that we are enriching our state by keeping people at home and having them educated here. We think of it as a public service and a public good.

Only a few minutes later, the same administrator described the institution’s tuition philosophy—a philosophy gaining strength as administrators look to the future:

We have to look for ways to encourage those students who can pay for their education to pay a fair share while at the same time maintaining higher education as some kind of public good as opposed to an individual good.

There are clear tensions within each institution regarding how to reconcile public goals with desires to achieve the success of private institutional counterparts (and competitors).

Desire to Move Toward a Private Model
Each campus in this study has struggled extensively with the question of market orientation; one senior administrator described the struggle as a “vigorous debate.” Much of this discourse has centered on reconciling the long tradition of public purposes with the desire to be considered a top national university. A senior campus administrator argued that [we want]:

the best facilities, smaller classes, opportunities to study abroad, and to experience diversity of all types. I call it the difference between being educated and well educated. To provide those kinds of opportunities, I think [we] will continue to use the private model as a model that works very well.

Pressure over the last two decades to raise revenue to compete with elite private universities puts all three schools in a unique situation relative to most public universities. A finance administrator explained, “Our budget structure and our endowments and development programs are much more in line with private universities than public universities, and I think we will continue to do that.” However, such a strategy is not without risk—particularly for institutions without a history of this type of behavior. As a director of admissions stated:

Any time you aggressively increase tuition, you’re doing a live experiment in price-elasticity of demand, and that seems fairly risky to me. You really need to do the kinds
Role of Tuition as a Significant Revenue Stream
To varying degrees, the institutions in this study find themselves increasingly dependent on student revenue to meet strategic goals. An admissions professional described how the university “analyzed our appeal for students outside the boundaries of [the state], really to try and exploit...our ability to have nonresident tuition rates more like privates.” Virtually every decision maker we interviewed believed that the role of tuition as a main source of general operating funds would grow in coming years. An academic administrator described trustees’ changing philosophy regarding tuition:

I think the Board, as a group, has moved cautiously... [but] the harsh reality of, "Where do you find the financing to meet your goals?" is undeniable. We can certainly continue to charge lower tuition, but if we don’t have our superior faculty, what’s going to happen to the value proposition there?

As a result, enrollment management took a central place in the university, taking on as well the responsibility and burden of making sure student enrollment met projections. A senior administrator overseeing enrollment described the environment this created:

As our general fund has grown more toward tuition-based dollars rather than from state dollars, then you need to have a sacred cow someplace. Admissions may have been elevated to that because of the fact that admissions is one of those places that can increase the revenue stream.

The special emphasis placed on student recruitment has a significant impact on the decisions made by these institutions not only with regard to enrollment management but also with regard to funding priorities. Enrollment management has moved to a central function within the university, with many long-term goals and priorities almost solely reliant on the success of these endeavors.

DISCUSSION
The universities in this study conform to the claims of many critics who decry market-driven decisions by campus leaders. This study provides evidence of the influences on university leaders as they consider options regarding enrollment management. The interconnectedness of the relationship with the state; the desire for a private model; and reliance on tuition all provide a starting point for understanding how these various aspects influence institutional behavior. Moreover, privatization of these institutions raises a number of questions and concerns for public higher education in general.

Although the three institutions in this study exhibit traits of elite higher education and are nationally renowned, their history and mission as public universities contextualized discussions regarding enrollment strategies—and tuition rates, in particular. In an era of decreasing public support, the tension of preserving their institutions’ public purposes while pursuing increased prominence puts campus leaders in a predicament. Desires to limit tuition increases, grow revenue, and improve institutional quality conflict. Institutional leaders face the difficult decision of stagnation (or the perception thereof, which in fact may be worse) or increased reliance on a privatized tuition model. Enrollment management decisions move toward a private model as administrators believe tuition to be a source of revenue required to move the institution forward.

The shift toward reduced dependence on diminishing state support and control requires supplemental revenues from sources other than government funding. Compared to the fiscal uncertainties of government-supplied funding, student tuition provides institutions with greater autonomy and financial stability. Tuition revenues, along with the enrollment strategies used to obtain them, are powerful forces that assist market-driven universities in meeting budgetary shortfalls. Enrollment market segmentation by campus leaders allows for institutional strategies to be applied to specific niche markets, drawing public universities deeper into the competitive marketplace. However, such involvement has rallied critics who describe privatization as a moral compromise of public higher education’s obligation to serve a public purpose.

The leaders interviewed for this study clearly desire to foster the public purposes of their universities, but not at the expense of quality. As Zemsky, Wegner and Massy
(2006) contend, “What has come to matter most is the pursuit of quality and excellence—largely expressed in terms of competitive advantage enjoyed by its faculty and students.” While certainly we would not argue against the desire of institutions to pursue quality and excellence, the challenge is what happens to public higher education when the academic marketplace comes to dominate the landscape. In particular, the public policy implications of privatizing elite public higher education are profound. Historically, higher education institutions have served a variety of societal needs as they have educated citizens and the nation’s labor force (Grubb and Lazerson 2004). Decisions by state legislators to decrease funding and by university leaders to increase revenue through tuition result in less public control over higher education. In the future, “policy makers would have to adjust how they conceptualize their legislative activities...to incentivize institutional policies in the context of an academic marketplace” (Hossler 2006, p. 125).

Beyond these concerns, universities increasingly find themselves underprepared to compete successfully against private institutions that have engaged in these strategies for a number of years. Successful competition will require significant increases in admissions and financial aid staffing (Hossler 2006). Private universities spend far more on these operations, due in large measure to their significance to institutional goals and priorities. As student revenue plays an increasing role in the financing of public higher education, enrollment management services will need to be strengthened so as to achieve the academic and financial goals of the institution.

CONCLUSION

Our work supports the use of Pfeffer and Salancik’s (2003) resource dependency theory as an explanation of why institutions are making these decisions (see also Hossler 2006). Vulnerable to the external pressures of the marketplace, the public research universities in this study yielded to increased competition for scarce resources. Such susceptibility to market influences increases the risk that decisions that once were campus-based instead will be market-based. The continuing decline of state support will only exacerbate and accelerate these trends. Beyond their influence on enrollment management decision making, the themes identified in this study are at the root of many of the fundamental challenges facing public higher education today. Further exploration of strategic enrollment management may help us respond, improving both the research and practice of higher education.

While the institutions in this study competed for tuition revenue, their management styles were guided by varying principles and models. The institutions’ relationships with state government and their degree of dependence on scarce resources proved vitally important to understanding their management strategies. Decision making in response to political and economic contexts has distinct impacts on students, particularly with regard to access, tuition, and the utility of non-resident students. As enrollment management continues to evolve into an essential professional practice, so too must concepts for adapting to the changing demands of the marketplace. Institutions considering enrollment management practices similar to those of the three universities in this study should benefit from their experiences.

The challenge to enrollment managers is to elevate their role within institutional decision-making processes. Certainly we are predisposed toward increased public financial support as well as preservation of the public mission of higher education. Yet the greatest lesson from these three case studies may rest in the level and type of influence enrollment management can provide. Enrollment managers must look beyond yield rates and rankings to participate more fully in campus dialogue regarding the mission, financing, and quality of higher education. Indeed, few areas outside of enrollment management face such pressure from these competing influences. In today’s environment, active participation in the resolution of these issues will inspire a further shift, from enrollment management to enrollment leadership.

REFERENCES


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**About the Authors**

**BRADLEY BARNES** is an Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Alabama.

**MICHAEL S. HARRIS** is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Alabama. His research explores the policy and organizational influences of market forces on colleges and universities.
In recent years, the University of Alabama (UA) has increased enrollment and retention along with entering student credentials (as measured by ACT scores and high school GPA) through the combined effort of multiple campus offices.
Enrollment management is an institutional function that has enjoyed burgeoning attention since the 1970s. The primary function of enrollment management is to control the size and composition of students within an institution (Penn 1999). As the number of higher education institutions increased and as the number of high school graduates stagnated—particularly in the 1970s and then again in the 1990s (Dixon 1995)—the competition to enroll students (Healey and Schmidt 1997) and the pressure to retain them proved undeniable elements of institutional functioning. These very pressures ultimately gave rise to a more formalized field of enrollment management.

Compounding the pressures of increased competition and possible enrollment shortages have been reductions in state and federal funding for higher education (Breneman 1997). (This pressure is unlikely to ease anytime soon given the current economic climate.) In response, enrollment management offices have worked to increase enrollment and retention. Specifically, institutions have sought opportunities to further their control of their admissions rates, particularly of in- and out-of-state students, and they have developed and implemented tuition pricing strategies (Cohen and King 1995). For example, the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and the College of William and Mary all sought permission to alter their relationship with the Commonwealth of Virginia such that they would have more autonomy with regard to admissions and price-setting decisions (Jones 2005). Efforts to increase institutional autonomy in order to offset reduced state support have multiplied across the United States.

Another impetus for increasing enrollment and tuition autonomy has been the increased scrutiny of higher education institutions, specifically in the forms of increased demands for accountability (Cohen and King 1995, Penn 1999) and college rankings and ratings. While many institutions had desired to “move up” the Carnegie classification system, media rankings of higher education institutions provided a new way to measure prestige and comparative position (McCormick and Zhao 2005). Publications such as U.S. News & World Report became not only important accountability mechanisms but also marketing tools. In fact, multiple institutions now include in their missions aspirations to move up or into certain levels of the U.S. News & World Report rankings, which are based in part on retention and graduation rates.

Just as institutions have had varying success increasing their enrollments, so too have they utilized multiple institutional structural models. In fact, many institutions do not have a specific definition of enrollment management driving their work; instead, their enrollment policies are defined in de facto terms by various offices within the institution (Penn 1999). While the locus of control for enrollment management typically is in student affairs (Noel-Levitz 1996), it is essential for multiple offices to work together in support of overall campus policy to build and maintain desired class sizes and compositions (Dixon 1995, Hossler 1984, Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008). In a recent issue of College and University, Hossler and Kalsbeek (2008) note the variety of office arrangements that can
exist. Specifically, they mention efforts such as the use of honors colleges for recruitment. Given the variety of forms of these offices on campus, we are in need of case study approaches to identify which structures and styles are working effectively. This case study puts a face to many of the recommendations and approaches suggested in Hossler and Kalsbeek by presenting one university’s successful efforts to move up in ratings, as well as in size and scale.

Given the increased use of enrollment management offices in higher education, along with pushes from many institutions to improve melt, yield, enrollment, and retention numbers, the purpose of this work is to explain how The University of Alabama (UA) has increased enrollment, retention, and incoming students’ “quality” over the past five years through the combined effort of multiple offices on campus.

**METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative case study assesses how The University of Alabama has approached increasing enrollment and retention figures over the past five years. Because we sought information not readily available or attainable through statistical methods, our primary strategies included historical document content analysis and interviews of central campus administrators with responsibility for admissions, student retention, and orientation. Archival data provided much of the description needed to understand the nature and rationale for the changes at The University of Alabama. Interviews were used selectively and judiciously to garner information where underlying rationales were unclear or where we found areas of greatest change over the past five years.

Three of the present study’s five authors work at UA, in academic affairs, student affairs, and as a faculty member in a graduate program. The study’s additional two authors have worked in enrollment management, though not at UA. In addition to drawing on campus documents and our own expertise, we interviewed four upper-level administrators to gain insight into the rationales and cause-effect occurrences that have led to the recent changes and current environment at The University of Alabama.

**SITE CONTEXT**

To appreciate the changes that have occurred at The University of Alabama since 2003, it is important first to describe the state of the university in the years immediately prior. Enrollment from 1997 to 2003 had remained relatively stable, at 18,000 to 19,000 students. Retention rates also were fairly consistent. The admissions office was actively recruiting new students, but the pervasive attitude among staff and leadership was one of relative complacency: Prospective students were expected to be interested in the university on the basis of its historical roots and its position as the state’s flagship institution. The university touted its athletic and social traditions as central to the UA experience. Academic opportunities, however abundant, were rarely given top billing in admissions literature. The university was attracting and enrolling fewer students from the top quartiles of their high school graduating classes than in previous years.

In March 2003, The University of Alabama saw the introduction of a new president, Robert Witt, and with him a new set of institutional priorities. Having come from Texas, he had a background in business and made several ambitious claims, most notably that The University of Alabama would seek to enroll “the best and the brightest” high school students and that total enrollment would increase from 20,000 in 2003 to 28,000 by 2013 (www.strategicplan.ua.edu). Shortly thereafter, the president’s office gave the admissions office a clear message: Recruit top student scholars with the same fervor as top athletic prospects, and look beyond the state’s borders to find them. The president’s message spread rapidly; with a clear and universally shared vision, a team mentality developed among the major players in enrollment management. The pervasive attitude became one of considerable pride and ambition. And because the vision became so pervasive throughout the institution, enrollment management targets were reached ahead of schedule.

In the last five years, The University of Alabama has challenged itself to increase not only the number but also the academic credentials of its students—a difficult feat for a public institution. Nevertheless, UA seems to be doing remarkably well, already having gained national attention (see Table 1 for a summary of U.S. News & World Report Scores). UA’s student enrollment has grown at a rate twice the national average; UA’s total enrollment increased 22 percent from 2002 to 2006 while the national average was just nine percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2008). The largest student population in
the university’s history is now enrolled; the population has increased by more than 5,000 in the past five years. Aside from attracting a greater number of students, UA appears to be attracting more competitive students: The average ACT score of the incoming freshman class increased by almost an entire point; the number of merit scholars attending UA more than doubled from 2003 to 2008; and the number of students in Honors College has increased from just over 200 to more than 4,000.

**FINDINGS**

Our findings describe the changes to campus structure and functioning that were most effective in fostering and sustaining enrollment increases in terms of both magnitude and quality (see Table 2, on page 14, for a summary of UA statistics and sources). Although the University of Alabama lists an Office of Enrollment Management on its Web site (www.ua.edu/administration.html) and in its organizational chart, the office comprises individuals employed across the campus. The 2007 organizational chart (www.oir.ua.edu/~factbook) lists the following offices as being housed within the Office of Enrollment Management: Academic Advising/Athletics, Center for Teaching and Learning, Disabled-Student Services, Student Financial Aid and Scholarships, Testing and Data Management Services, Undergraduate Admissions, and the University Registrar. Rather than operate out of the same physical location, representatives of these divisions meet biweekly to ensure a cohesive effort. This effort extends even beyond these particular offices. Senior administrators in admissions, records/registrar, and financial aid meet regularly to discuss enrollment management issues. However, apart from the president’s overarching charge to recruit academically strong students and to increase total enrollment to 28,000, specific policies and methods for achieving these goals were left to individual academic divisions. One of the primary factors in UA’s success was faculty and staffs’ prevailing belief in and support of the growth at the university. The pervasive culture is that everyone involved with enrollment management takes individual and departmental responsibility for increasing enrollment and retention. The following sections describe six specific areas of The University of Alabama structure that have been particularly effective in increasing retention and enrollment in the past five years: Honors College, admissions, recruiting, retention, residential life, and campus grounds.

**Honors College**

A significant contributing factor to The University of Alabama’s success in meeting its enrollment and retention goals is the growth and initiatives of Honors College. Honors College is an autonomously functioning entity within UA which requires all members to maintain a certain GPA and/or ACT score. Participants in Honors College are required to take a minimum of eighteen hours of designated honors courses in order to graduate with the distinction. In recent years, Honors College has been in the national spotlight for having the most **USA Today** Academic All-

### Table 1

| U.S. News & World Report Rankings for The University of Alabama |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Overall ranking                 | 2nd Tier | 103 | T-91 |
| Academic reputation             | 2.1  | 3   | 3   |
| Freshman retention rate         | 80   | 83  | 85  |
| 1996 graduation rate            | 57   | 63  | 63  |
| 1996 Predicted graduation rate  | 51   | 55  | 58  |
| Value added (graduation rate minus predicted rate) | +6 | +8 | +6 |
| % of classes with enrollment < 20 | 43   | 44  | 43  |
| % of classes with enrollment > 50 | 12   | 13  | 15  |
| % Full-time faculty             | 93   |     |     |
| SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile    | 21-27 | 21-26 | 21-27 |
| Freshmen in top 10% of HS class | 21   | 27  | 39  |
| Acceptance rate                 | 77   | 85  | 70  |
| Alumni giving rate              | 29   | 23  | 27  |


Americans and for providing undergraduate students with unique research opportunities. Participants enjoy several additional benefits: Athletes and Honors College students register before all other students at UA; honors freshmen get first choice of housing; honors class sizes typically are smaller; and honors classes are taught by more prestigious faculty members. Enrollment in Honors College has more than quadrupled since 2003.

With such a significant increase in enrollment, Honors College has been able to offer more programs. For example, the Computer Based Honors Program (CBHP) admits only 40 freshmen each year. This program focuses heavily on the uses and research capabilities of technology. Students in the program form a bond with the faculty who work with them on major projects. Even more elite than CBHP is University Fellows, a program that gives 40 freshmen the opportunity to research and publish with top UA faculty. Other new programs in the Honors College focus on high school students or “rising freshmen.” Honors Academy works with AP and IB students and educators across the state in an attempt to help improve the Alabama’s secondary curriculum. Honors Academy also has a summer study component: Rising high school seniors spend one month on UA’s campus taking courses and learning from the best that UA has to offer. Students receive seven to eight hours of credit and a taste of life at UA. This has proven a successful recruiting tactic as close to half of all prospects who participate eventually enroll at UA.

Recruitment

One of the most effective strategies for increasing enrollment and retention has been an aggressive effort on the part of the Admissions Office to recruit and enroll the “best and the brightest” students. UA’s dedication to recruiting these students seems to be paying off: more than 250 National Merit Scholars are currently enrolled at UA—up from 85 in 2006. Part of the recruitment strategy focuses on telling the University’s academic story. In addition to full-time regional recruiters in Florida, Texas, Tennessee, and Georgia, regional recruiters have joined with UA alumni in the hosting of small, at-home receptions with a personalized feel—the same feel the University seeks to provide to enrolled students. Recruiters tell the story of an institution that is more than just a football school or a party school; they tell of an institution that is committed to academic success and that is on the way to becoming a tier-one research institution with a bright present and a brighter future.

### Table 2.
The University of Alabama Institutional Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average ACT—1st Time Freshmen</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Campus sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average HS GPA of entering freshmen</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Common data set/ campus sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer students from other in-state institutions</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>1,062</td>
<td>1,080</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Common data set/ campus sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>15,888</td>
<td>16,566</td>
<td>17,550</td>
<td>19,471</td>
<td>18,370</td>
<td>IPEDS enrollment report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention rate</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
<td>Common data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>IPEDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other Minority</td>
<td>2.66%</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
<td>3.05%</td>
<td>3.41%</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
<td>IPEDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>62.4%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>Common data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total baccalaureate degrees awarded</td>
<td>2,892</td>
<td>3,024</td>
<td>2,931</td>
<td>2,815</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>IPEDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># and % of out-of-state entering freshmen</td>
<td>776 or 25.2%</td>
<td>926 or 27.5%</td>
<td>1,054 or 28.2%</td>
<td>1,451 or 33.1%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>IPEDS Enrollment Report, Part C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># and % of residential students</td>
<td>3,685 or 23.7%</td>
<td>4,051 or 25%</td>
<td>4,516 or 26%</td>
<td>5,576 or 29%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Common data set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of nationally recognized scholarships</td>
<td>Fulbright – 1 USA – 5</td>
<td>Goldwater – 1 USA – 4</td>
<td>Goldwater – 2 Hollings – 3 USA – 6</td>
<td>Fulbright – 3 Goldwater – 3 Hollings – 4 Truman – 1 USA – 4</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Campus sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From: <www.uasystem.ua.edu/Administration/Performance%20Indicators/IndicatorsUA-Combined060707.pdf*
Regional recruiters are telling the story of UA in more states than ever before. From the arrival of President Witt in 2003 until fall 2006, the enrollment of out-of-state freshmen nearly doubled. In 2007, out-of-state enrollment for first-time freshmen increased to 32.55 percent. The school also has lauded its achievements in the media and on campus. For example, the Crimson Is marketing campaign uses students’ and alumni’s personal narratives to reaffirm the prestige and tradition of the university. Ultimately, stakeholders past and present encourage inactive alumni and/or prospective students to become part of The University of Alabama’s strong tradition. The message is clear: “Crimson” prestige “is” attainable.

Admissions

The culture of The University of Alabama changed in response to President Witt’s vision and initiatives. Seemingly unified in its effort to reshape the school’s image through an aggressive public relations campaign, the University began to focus on its academic strengths and its long-standing prestige and tradition.

Targeting academically stronger students became one of the school’s focus areas. Even with its stringent requirement that students score in the top five percent nationally on the ACT or SAT, the Honors College currently boasts record enrollment. The university is in the top ten percent nationally for National Merit Scholars and ranks eleventh among public colleges. Certainly, the school recruits heavily from its home state, focusing particularly on high schools with strong academic performance and high-achieving students. In-state students account for 67 percent of the 2007 freshman class; 81.7 percent of first-time, first-year, degree-seeking students in 2007 had a GPA in the top half of their graduating class.

Retention

Retention efforts begin early at UA and are being strengthened through a variety of activities. The desire to provide incoming students with a sense of community and belonging is evident in the advent of a two-day, small-group orientation experience that is offered multiple times throughout each summer. The increased focus on welcoming students and bonding them to the institution may well play a part in the University’s increased enrollment numbers.

The University has a strong focus on students’ academic success. The Center for Teaching and Learning’s (CTL) mission is to provide “support services for academically gifted students and for students who need to strengthen their academic performance” (www ctl.ua.edu/default.asp). To achieve its mission, the CTL offers an independent study lab, tutorial services, a mathematics learning lab, resources for freshmen and parents, a video library, and a resource database. The CTL also is responsible for providing various courses on learning strategies and skills, as well as computer-assisted instruction in the Math Technology Learning Center.

The CTL seeks to accomplish its mission by assisting less well-prepared students, not just the “best and brightest.” At-risk students participate in either of two programs: Shelton Bridge and Crimson Edge. The University of Alabama–Shelton Bridge program is a partnership between UA and Shelton State Community College. Specific program targets are students who do not meet UA’s regular admissions standards but who have demonstrated the potential for success at the college level. The program seeks to make such students unconditionally eligible for admission within a year by limiting their enrollment to twelve semester hours, including a study skills course. Once students successfully complete 24 hours and maintain a grade point average of 2.5 or better, they are considered for admission to UA. Incentives for enrolling in the program include access to certain University privileges, such as a UA student ID card, e-mail account, meal plan, parking permit, recreation pass, and health services. This encourages students to become part of the UA culture even as they work to improve their academic standing at the community college level.

The Crimson Edge program works in a similar way with students who do not meet unconditional admissions standards; it provides such students the opportunity to earn unconditional admission after a trial period. These students are limited to a maximum of fourteen credit hours of academic coursework per semester as well as an academic enhancement course. In 2007, UA restructured the program to ensure that the progress of “Crimson Edge” students is monitored. Students are assigned advisors; at the end of each term, an advising report for each student is e-mailed to the advisor for review. The program is designed to help students succeed on their own merit after a period of short assistance from the CTL. In fall 2007, 339
students entered the program; after the spring semester, 70 percent were in good standing, sixteen percent were on academic warning, and fourteen percent were on academic suspension (wwwctl.ua.edu/CTLReports/OtherReports/CrimsonEdgeReport0708.pdf).

Residential Life
A significant change affecting campus life was the new requirement that beginning with the entering class of 2006, all first-year undergraduate students enrolled for more than nine hours of credit must live on campus. Accordingly, the percentage of students living in student housing increased from 91.7 percent in 2004 to 96.3 percent in 2006. The rationale for this change included providing first-time students with the “perfect place to establish a social network with students who are going through a similar adjustment period.” However, the change has not been entirely positive.

Although the freshman residency requirement has yielded some success, it also has generated additional problems. The school’s facilities cannot meet the demand for the number of students who need housing; in fact, in 2008, some off-campus residences were deemed “on-campus” in order to accommodate the residency mandate. With the increase in on-campus residency, demand for parking spaces increased. And even though increasing social integration was cited as a primary reason for requiring freshmen live on campus, the housing requirement may adversely affect student retention rates: Whereas UA retained 85.7 percent of its 2005 freshman class, it retained only 85.3 percent of its 2006 freshman class.

Campus Grounds
In response to the belief that a student who visits campus is more likely to enroll, a concerted effort was made to improve the grounds. Increased student enrollment and the University’s efforts to increase retention have led to the building of three residential communities, a new student health center, new parking decks, and a new dining facility, and implementation of the CrimsonRide mass transit system. From 2003 to 2007, UA spent $345,882,173 on major construction projects. According to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education Fall 2007 Building Inventory and Space Data Report, UA has seen a 24.4 percent increase in total gross square footage since 2005. Plans for further development include a $69 million science and engineering complex, an additional residential phase, a new campus police department facility, and new parking. A thorough facilities master plan specifies landscape and architectural details that will enhance the campus’s archetypal look and feel.

CONCLUSIONS
Literature shows that defining elements for the success of enrollment management efforts are support at the top (Dolence 1996, Penn 1999), clear goals regarding tuition and enrollment, and a shared vision of how a campus will achieve those goals. Our findings reflect these statements. The success of UA’s enrollment management efforts gives credence to the suggestion that support and vision from the uppermost levels of the institution make all the difference (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2008).

Multiple areas of campus must be in agreement and must work together if enrollment management efforts are to be developed and sustained. Everyone with whom we spoke—faculty in academic programs and administrators in academic and student affairs positions—was familiar with the drive to 28,000 and knew the expectations of her office in achieving that goal. Enrollment and retention gains have widespread effects, demanding significant work in recruitment and admissions. They spill over into other areas, including the expansion of campus infrastructure and housing, possible changes in residential rules for on-campus living, and services such as advising, tutoring, and career preparation. All can affect an institution’s long-term ability to sustain enrollment increases.

Yet a concurrent increase in quality is a separate issue. At UA, it required development of the Honors College, a place to recruit and retain the “best and brightest.” Provided that all other elements are equal—or close to equal—financial aid efforts via scholarships can increase an institution’s ability to attract and matriculate students. Creating an appealing physical environment can create benefits as well as challenges relating to enrollment. Campus leaders will want to think carefully about the best combinations of enrollment-related efforts given their institution’s unique environment and context. The story of recent changes at the University of Alabama is instructive, particularly regarding the gains and pitfalls that can accompany such efforts.
REFERENCES

About the Authors

**CHRIS HUTT** is the Director of Health Professions Advising at the University of Alabama. His research to date has focused on institutional typography and academic programs.

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**JENNIFER JONES** is the Project Specialist of TRIO Student Support Services at the University of Montevallo. Her research to date has focused on academic/institutional culture.

**JEROME WARD** is the Advanced Placement (AP) English instructor at Hartselle High School. His research interests include the underrepresentation of minority and low-income students in AP and dual enrollment courses.
In the history of college admissions and enrollment management, there have been several periods when there was intense competition for students. As recently as the mid 1970s through the mid 1980s, there was intense competition among four-year institutions to enroll a sufficient number of students. Further, in the last two decades, there have been growing concerns about student persistence and graduation rates. Increasingly, federal and state policy makers are using persistence and graduation rates as measures of institutional effectiveness. State and federal policy
Institution Fit in College Admissions

Do Applicants Really Know What Is Good for Them?

Admissions committee members often speak of “fit” as an important consideration during the admissions process; however, empirical evidence documenting the efficacy of “fit” as a basis for admission is scarce. The purpose of this research was to test the validity of student-institution fit as a significant predictor of college success—specifically, first-year GPA, cumulative GPA, and college graduation. Using data from two large national samples, the congruence between a student’s preferred college characteristics and the characteristics of his or her attending institution was calculated across six dimensions (i.e., year, sector, campus, distance, gender, and size). No dimensions of fit were of practical significance. Implications are discussed.

makers, for example, are demonstrating a growing interest in student persistence and are advocating the use of student persistence and graduation rates as indicators of institutional quality. The Higher Education Act of 2008 requires institutions to report graduation rates. Both the recent Spellings Commission and statements from the Obama Administration have identified persistence and graduation rates as indices for assessing institutional quality (Carey 2008; Inside Higher Education 2009; SHEEO 2007). Several states, including Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Ohio, have enacted formulas or are considering the use of student persistence and/or graduation rates as part of their formulas to determine state funding levels.

At the campus level, there often is unspoken tension between academic administrators, faculty members, student affairs professionals, and enrollment professionals regarding student persistence and graduation rates. A frequent assertion is that admissions personnel are too concerned about simply meeting their enrollment goals and are not sufficiently concerned about recruiting students who fit the college or university at which they have matriculated.

Concerns about persistence and graduation rates are not unfounded. At four-year institutions, approximately
25 percent of freshmen do not return for their sophomore year; the attrition rate increases to approximately 50 percent when the criterion is degree completion (ACT 1998; Whitbourne 2002). The problem is even more severe at two-year institutions. It is not surprising that institutions should want to target students they believe are most likely to select the institution, stay, and succeed. A current trend in college admission is for institutions to direct recruitment efforts at individuals whose values fit with the institution’s characteristics; the hope is that such “fit” will result in an increase in retention rates (Hossler 2007; Schertzer and Schertzer 2004).

In fact, the concept of student-institution fit is frequently invoked by enrollment managers, admissions officers, and student affairs professionals. Theories of fit are used to explain admissions strategies; to explain the goals of student affairs and orientation programs; and to examine student success and persistence. Critics argue that institutions are so intent on increasing their student market share or their institutional rankings that they no longer worry about trying to attract students who fit with the campus environment. They assume that student-institutional fit is an empirically valid concept and that it can be measured and used to help shape institutional policies and practices in a number of areas. However, evidence documenting the efficacy of student-institution fit is scarce and largely anecdotal (Hossler 2007). Thus, in this study, we examine whether the concept of student-institution fit, operationalized as a set of institutional characteristics which prospective college students have identified as important during the college decision-making process, is a viable predictor of persistence and other measures of college success, and subsequently, the extent to which it should be a component of the admissions process or other policy-making processes at colleges and universities.

**Enrollment Management, College Choice, and Fit**

Prospective college students and their parents now have practically universal access to the Internet during the college search process. No longer are students limited to the information provided by their high school teachers and counselors; instead, information about any institution is “only a click away.” With this free exchange of information, students can “shop around” and choose the “best deal.” Students have more options and potentially can make more informed decisions. That said, however, the college choice process has become exponentially more complicated. There are thousands of colleges and universities from which a student ultimately may choose. How is he supposed to make sense of the information and effectively pare down the list of institutions to a manageable few? What can colleges and universities do to improve the likelihood they will make the “short list” of institutions to which an applicant ultimately applies?

Students consider many factors when choosing the right college. Characteristics include private or public, co-ed or same sex, two-year or four-year, distance from home, institutional size, and campus setting (e.g., rural, urban) (see, e.g., Litten 1982). Use of these dimensions as the basis for selecting one’s college has been widely accepted by the general public. For example, several free, online college search engines use these parameters to help students locate colleges that match their preferences. Students who sign up to take the SAT are asked to complete the SAT Questionnaire (SAT-Q), which includes items that ask students to indicate their preferred college characteristics. However, the notion that students are more likely to be successful at institutions that reflect their preferred characteristics remains largely anecdotal with little empirical evidence.

The literature on student-institution fit stems from the more general person-environment fit paradigm. “Person-environment fit” is defined as the compatibility between a person and the environment that occurs when her characteristics are well matched (Pervin 1968, Schneider 1987). Characteristics of the person include, but are not limited to, abilities, values, and personality whereas characteristics of the environment include such things as rewards, demands, cultural values, and environmental conditions. This body of literature asserts that a match between a person and the environment leads to positive outcomes in general but also to positive higher education outcomes. For example, Borden (1993) found that the match between student priorities and the campus environment was positively related to student satisfaction. Taylor and Whetstone (1983) found support for a positive relationship between student-institution fit and retention based on a relatively small and homogeneous sample of engineering students. However, we note that this conceptualization of fit is not the same as suggesting that students are able
to discern the most important attributes of an institution at the time they are making their college choice decisions and that this in turn will enhance student fit and lead to greater satisfaction and greater levels of persistence.

Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) proposed a model of student satisfaction and retention with academic fit as the main determinant of whether a student will be satisfied at an institution and, ultimately, stay or leave. They argue that academic fit comprises two components: student-institution values congruence and student-faculty values congruence. Although their model is purely theoretical, they conclude by suggesting that in order to assuage the current attrition problem, institutions should target students with the right fit.

There is an inherent methodological flaw with the literature described above: The majority of research on student-institution fit has assessed enrolled students rather than applicants. Such a line of inquiry of course undermines the basic assertion that admissions professionals should recruit students who will find a good fit between themselves and the institution. We suggest that if the goal is to recruit student applicants who are likely to fit, then assessing fit after students have matriculated is too late.

In order to test the validity of student-institution fit in terms of student recruitment and enrollment, we examined the match between a student’s preferred college characteristics (obtained prior to college enrollment) and the characteristics of the institutions they ultimately attend and their relationship to college success—specifically, GPA and graduation. Some critics might argue that SAT-Q items are not good theoretical measures of student characteristics that determine fit. We argue, however, that while better measures may exist, the SAT-Q items represent the types of data to which most admissions offices would have access during the recruitment process. Indeed, many enrollment management organizations have research staffs that use these types of data to help them determine which prospective students to actively recruit. College Board products such as the Enrollment Planning Service and ACT EOS use analytic techniques such as cluster analysis to help institutions identify prospective students who possess a set of related characteristics that are similar to those of students currently enrolled, the implicit assumption being that such students will be more likely to matriculate and persist.

METHOD

We note at the outset that multiple archival datasets were merged to test our research questions. For Sample 1, data obtained from the College Board’s Capability Project (which included college grade point average data for undergraduate students from 41 colleges and universities) were matched to their responses to the SAT-Q as well as to institutional-level variables obtained from The College Board College Handbook. Having eliminated cases with missing values and having focused only on those students who clearly evidenced a strong preference for certain college characteristics, the sample size used in our analyses was 21,004 for Sample 1. Similarly, for Sample 2, student-level graduation data for four-year institutions were obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse and were matched to students’ responses on the SAT-Q as well as to institutional-level variables obtained from The College Board College Handbook. The sample size used in our analyses was 87,507 for Sample 2.

CREATING STUDENT-INSTITUTIONAL FIT VARIABLES

Measures of student characteristics included the following variables: parental income; SAT scores; students’ preferences for college, including (1) campus size, (2) location, and (3) distance from home, as well as type of institution, e.g., (4) four-year versus two-year, (5) co-educational versus same-sex, and (6) public versus private; and institutional characteristics (including number of enrolled undergraduates, location, type [two-year versus four-year], gender make-up [coed or single sex]; and sector [public, private non-religious, and private religious]).

“Fit” variables were created by determining whether students’ preferences for college matched the characteristics of the postsecondary institutions at which they ultimately enrolled. For example, if a student indicated that she wanted to go to a private religious school and then attended a private religious school, she would be assigned a “1” for “sector fit.” For each of the six dimensions, students were assigned either a “1” for fit or a “0” for misfit.

As noted above, only students with a “strong” preference were used for the fit analyses. We defined students with a strong preference as those who selected only one response option per SAT-Q question about college choice. For example, students who indicated that they were considering unisex as well as coeducational colleges were not
Table 1.
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Sample 1 Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Freshman GPA</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Overall GPA</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.88*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parental Income</td>
<td>8.64</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.08*</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. SAT</td>
<td>1078.71</td>
<td>159.25</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Campus Fit</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Distance Fit</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.02*</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Gender Fit</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>8. Sector Fit</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.04*</td>
<td>-0.07*</td>
<td>-0.08*</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Size Fit</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.08*</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Year Fit</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.01

Note. Freshman GPA and overall GPA were standardized within college. Means of fit variables indicate percentages of those who have “fit.” Listwise N = 21,004

Table 2.
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Sample 2 Study Variables

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<td>2. Parental Income</td>
<td>8.32</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0.16*</td>
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<td>3. SAT</td>
<td>971.01</td>
<td>238.20</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
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<td>4. Campus Fit</td>
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<td>0.49</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
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<td>5. Distance Fit</td>
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<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Gender Fit</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
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<td>7. Sector Fit</td>
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<td>8. Size Fit</td>
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<td>0.08*</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>9. Year Fit</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
<td>0.09*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
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*p < 0.01

Listwise N = 87,507
included in the analyses. The college outcome measures we utilized were first-year GPA, overall GPA, and college graduation.

**RESULTS**

A summary of the research findings is provided below. (For a more detailed analysis, refer to Tables 1 through 5.)

In terms of the percentage of students attending an institution that matched their preferences, we found that essentially all students (98–99%) “fit” in terms of gender and year. For the other four dimensions, there was more variability. For example, less than half of students reflected campus or size fit, whereas 70 percent “fit” in terms of distance, and 77 percent “fit” in terms of sector across the two samples. The results suggest that many students who indicated a clear preference for the type of institution they wanted to attend did not actually enroll at an institution that matched those characteristics.

Next, we examined the relationship between fit and subsequent college success. Among the six “fit” variables (i.e., campus, distance, gender, sector, size, and year), none was of practical significance in terms of first-year GPA, overall GPA, or graduation. In fact, correlations were very small, ranging from -0.01 to 0.06 (see Tables 1 and 2). Thus, data suggest that students who attend an institution that matches their preferences neither earn higher grades nor are more likely to graduate than students attending an institution that does not match their preferences.

Finally, we examined whether fit variables were related to college grades and graduation after controlling for SAT scores and parental income. As with previous analyses, the results indicated that fit variables did not explain a significant amount of additional variance in college outcomes (see Tables 3 through 5).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Student-institution fit as operationalized in the current study was not a viable predictor of college success. Our investigation, particularly in light of other efforts to operationalize the concept of student-institution fit, suggests that the match between a student’s preferred institutional characteristics and the characteristics of the institution he ultimately attends will not provide such information. Part of the problem is that it is difficult for high school students to know in advance of matriculation what they truly seek in a college or university. As Harnqvist (1978) noted more than four decades ago, the college choice decision is the first non-compulsory educational decision that students in western industrialized countries make—and one for which they have had little experience. Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999) found in their longitudinal study of college decision making among Indiana high school students that many said they wanted to attend a university where the faculty were more interested in teaching than in research and where classes were small. Yet many of those same students said

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Income</td>
<td>0.023*</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>0.019</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.058</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>0.002*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>0.046</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Fit Variables</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Income</td>
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<td>0.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>0.002*</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Fit</td>
<td>-0.110*</td>
<td>0.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance Fit</td>
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<td>Gender Fit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sector Fit</td>
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*p < 0.01

Note. N = 21,004. b = regression coefficients; SE = standard error of estimates; ΔR² = changes in R².
they wanted to attend an institution with many athletic and social programs. Eventually, many of these students ultimately attended large public research universities.

Table 4.
Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Overall GPA with Fit Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>( R^2 )</th>
<th>( \Delta R^2 )</th>
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</thead>
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<td>0.019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2: SAT Scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Income</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-1.705</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3: Fit Variables</td>
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<td>0.058</td>
<td>0.003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Income</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Fit</td>
<td>-0.092</td>
<td>0.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance Fit</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Fit</td>
<td>-0.044</td>
<td>0.091</td>
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<td>Sector Fit</td>
<td>0.023</td>
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<td>Size Fit</td>
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<td>Year Fit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>0.124</td>
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</table>

* \( p < 0.01 \)

Note: \( N = 21,004 \). \( b \) = regression coefficients; \( SE \) = standard error of estimates; \( \Delta R^2 \) = changes in \( R^2 \).

In other words, how would high school students know the “right” college for them? Overall, students responded very similarly to these SAT-Q items, suggesting that rather than selecting characteristics that were “right” for them, they instead were selecting characteristics of an “ideal” and perhaps stereotypical college. Specifically, in the National Student Clearinghouse database of 1.28 million students, 89 percent stated that they wanted to attend a four-year institution; 63 percent indicated that they wanted to attend an institution in an urban area; 52 percent wanted to attend an institution in their home state; 90 percent wanted to attend a coeducational institution; and 73 percent stated that they wanted to attend a public institution. The only item that resulted in a roughly uniform distribution across response options related to institutional size.

The notion of whether one “fits” would seem to require students to become immersed in the culture and everyday activities of a college before they could know whether they “fit;” however, that could occur only after the admissions decision had been made and the student was actually enrolled at the institution. Thus, the best solution prior to enrollment might be for students to do more in-depth research on the colleges they are interested in attending—for example, by scheduling campus visits, meeting with faculty and current students, and perhaps by sitting in on a class. It is worth noting that on such relatively short visits, a faculty member who does not smile or a dirty hallway in a residence hall can prove the deciding factor in the prospective student’s impression of the institution (Host and Tucker 1999). Yet we posit that even these kinds of experiences are not necessarily good predictors of fit. Brief campus visits often are too idiosyncratic for students to gain a good understanding of an institution. More important, these recommendations are more to aid the student in choosing a college compatible with her needs than to provide a conceptual model of student-institution fit that can be used as a criterion for marketing, recruitment, and eventual admissions decisions.

These findings lead to interesting speculations about the concept of student-institution fit. We offer these to advance theory and practice in the administrative areas of enrollment management, admissions recruitment, and student affairs work.

- While intuitively appealing, the concept of student-institution fit has consistently failed to explain student outcome measures. Theories and models based on student-institution fit should be rejected as devices for examining student outcomes and student experiences.
- Scholars have not yet successfully developed an adequate explanatory model of “student fit.”
In reality, except perhaps at very small special purpose institutions, most colleges and universities have sufficient variability in the types of students who attend and offer a range of micro-student environments such that most students can fit at a surprisingly large range of institutions.

These findings also beg intriguing observations about current admissions practices. While critics of too much consumerism may be rightfully concerned about the excessive focus on marketing, the use of financial aid to alter students’ choices of colleges, and the “winner take all” mentality being created, our findings raise the possibility that current admissions practices may not negatively influence subsequent outcomes associated with student satisfaction, persistence, graduation, and the illusive concept of student-institution fit.

There is some evidence that some of the measures of student background characteristics, student values, and their perceptions of desirable institutional characteristics may influence the types of institutions to which students are more likely to apply and at which they are more likely to matriculate (Kelly, Nunley and Kneplfe 1997, Murray 1986). Thus, this kind of information still may be useful to enrollment professionals who attempt to develop efficient and effective recruitment plans. Using students’ self-identified interests may help colleges and universities identify those students who are more likely to be responsive to their marketing messages. Indeed, admissions marketing products such as Enrollment Planning Service from The College Board and EOS from ACT have found favor among admissions professionals because they utilize these kinds of data elements to help institutions target their recruitment efforts more effectively. Nevertheless, as this study suggests, they are not good predictors of outcomes measures such as persistence and graduation—or, it seems, of student-institution fit.

### REFERENCES


There’s always an opportunity for Change...

Jobs Online

AACRAO’s Jobs Online is the only employment site specialized for registrars, admissions, enrollment management, student service and other higher education administration professionals.

To find or post a job, visit at
www.aacrao.org/jobs or
e-mail us at jol@aacrao.org
The first article in this two-part series focused on the need for enrollment management conceptual and organizational models to focus more intentionally and purposefully on efforts related to improving student learning, success, and persistence. Time and again, SEM is viewed from a conventional lens comprising marketing, recruitment and admissions, financial aid, and registrar-related student services functions. Part I intentionally connected dialogue about improving student learning and persistence to an institution’s SEM efforts. Part II of this article, concentrates on what institutions can do to improve student progress and persistence.
Editor’s Note: This is the second in a series of two articles by Yale on SEM for College and University.

WHAT CAN INSTITUTIONS DO TO IMPROVE STUDENT PROGRESS AND PERSISTENCE?

“Expanding the Conversation about SEM: Advancing SEM Efforts to Improve Student Learning and Persistence—Part II,” concentrates on what institutions can do to improve student progress and persistence through improved student services. The article was shaped and inspired by the research cited in Part I of the article, by my work at Slippery Rock University, and through consultations with a number of other institutions. Apart from improving institutional selectivity and admissions requirements and lowering the cost of obtaining a higher education degree through improved financial aid programs and scholarship opportunities, institutions still have much control over the outreach and support services provided to students once they are admitted and enrolled. Rather than provide a fragmented laundry list of recommended support services or best practices identifying specific programmatic experiences, I provide some helpful strategies, questions to ponder, and thoughts for reflection on how an institution may work to enhance efforts to improve student learning and persistence.

Each of our institutions is accountable for improving student learning and success. We can achieve these goals by using strategies to engage more with our students; to identify their needs earlier; to track student progress and persistence; to measure and assess the impact of these
efforts; and to use evidence to justify the need for additional resources. At the institution by which I am employed, we have worked collaboratively, intentionally, and purposefully to find ways to improve student engagement, involvement, and student learning. First- to second year retention rates have increased from 70 percent in 2000 to more than 80 percent in 2009. Improved student persistence has led in turn to increased graduation rates. Given today’s economic conditions, which pose even greater fiscal and operational challenges and which limit the use of already scarce resources, it is even more important for our institutions to channel energies toward improving student learning and success. Doing so will lead to positive outcomes with regard to student progress and persistence.

The following strategies, questions, and thoughts for further reflection are intended to help us focus on ways we can improve student learning and success on our campuses.

Articulate a Collective Vision and Mission

How student-centered are your institutional vision, mission, and/or core value statements? Do these represent more than statements preserved either on a bookshelf in a well-written document or on your institution’s Web site? In what ways can you provide evidence that your campus is committed to improving student learning and success? Are specific groups or individual(s) on your campus responsible for coordinating programming and service initiatives related to improving student learning and success? How do departments and individuals work in partnership with one another?

Institutional vision, mission, and goal statements should articulate and address our desire to enhance student learning and success. Our desire to graduate students and to create an educated citizenry should be inherent in everything we do. Vision, mission, and goal statements often include language related to “providing educational excellence,” “advancing students’ intellectual growth,” “connecting students to a diverse world,” and “offering outstanding undergraduate and graduate academic programs,” all of which are intrinsically related to student persistence. Teams in the AASCU study (2005) frequently reported that the institution’s “mission” was seen less as a written document than as a shared belief system and code of conduct embraced by faculty and staff. Central to these institutions was a clear sense of institutional purpose focused on fostering student learning and success. Many of the institutions noted that this sense of shared purpose helped reinforce a culture focused on serving current students.

Invest in the Culture and Leadership

Does your campus have a culture focused on student learning and success? What evidence do you have to demonstrate this across departments and divisions? In what ways can you develop the culture to enhance its efforts to improve student learning and success? How does your institution engage leaders (e.g., faculty, administrators, support staff, and students) across campus in the effort to help improve student learning and success?

Each of our campuses has a distinctive and multiple cultures. Ask yourself whether your campus culture embodies a value for improving student learning and success. At least three key elements of campus culture could be distinguished at the institutions in the AASCU study (2005): First, the AASCU study teams noted a pervasive attitude that all students can succeed; this belief was reinforced by a wider culture that was not content to rest on past success. Second, the study teams found a sense of inclusiveness on the part of all members of the campus community—a group they frequently characterized as a “family.” Finally, the study teams found a strongly held sense of institutional mission that recognized the campus as “distinctive” or “special.” Investing in the culture to nurture and support a student-centric environment is critical to enhancing efforts to improve student learning and success.

Leadership at multiple levels of an institution can help shape the culture by valuing and recognizing institutional, departmental, and individual achievements and successes as they relate to improving efforts focused on student learning and success. The process is represented through a responsibility that is shared at each institutional level and that is deeply embedded in the way an institution works on a day-to-day basis. The AASCU study, in particular, has shown that presidential qualities needed to build and sustain a campus’s culture and organizational processes are more about listening than talking and more about consistent personal modeling. At many of the campuses in this study, top leaders had held their positions for a long time and had been very consistent in their actions. Reflecting on the idea of shared responsibility across departments
and divisions, boundary spanning was simply part of the way the institution did business, commonly without a great deal of visible organization or authority.

Campuses making a difference in improving student learning and persistence to graduation seem to do everything in their power to provide students with the support they need to succeed and to build students’ sense of personal responsibility for their own achievement (AASCU 2005). Leadership across these institutions set targets that can be met; provide support and examples to meet them; then raise the bar yet another notch. The AASCU study showed that institutional leadership can alter the way people look at their own institution. Presidents, especially, can raise a topic like building and improving a student learning success-oriented culture. Various levels of leadership across an institution can help by keeping people talking about it long enough to foster a shared sense of ownership and responsibility; they also can help make the process work by focusing on specific interactions and behaviors that lead to increasing collaboration and partnership for improving the student experience.

Plan and Act Strategically

Does your institution have a plan for improving student learning and success? How is this plan used as a measure of institutional performance? How are the goals communicated across campus? How are the results of assessments and measures of student learning outcomes, persistence, engagement, and satisfaction reflected in the plan? How are these types of assessments used at the department level? For example, if you are using measures of student engagement, how are experiences created to facilitate student-faculty engagement outside of the classroom, and how are faculty encouraged to participate in these types of activities?

Perhaps the most typical institutional response to an identified need or challenge is to add a new program or activity to address it. The resulting additive actions affect many areas of college and university life, but perhaps most of all, programming directed at retention and student success. Planning an effort designed to improve student learning and success is a complex process and should include integrated review of student recruitment and persistence goals, learning outcomes goals, engagement goals, and satisfaction goals. Have you ever participated in a strategic planning retreat in which retention goals were set as annual numerical increments despite the lack of defined, agreed-upon strategies or tactics for achieving the goals?

The AASCU study noted two questions that leaders should ask before adding a new program: First, how will the initiative help build or reinforce the wider culture of student success the institution has to sustain? Second, how will the proposed initiative position the institution to take the next step? Successful academic, social, and personal intervention initiatives require a comprehensive planning effort. Current services and programs should be reviewed on a regular basis to determine their effectiveness. Services that matter or that seem to have a positive impact on student learning and success should be improved and supported. And meaningful assessment and outcomes results should guide future directions and should be made transparent to the campus community.

Use Data and Meaningful Assessments as Sources of Evidence

How does your institution collect and share student information, including: (1) new and continuing enrollment data; (2) student pre-enrollment characteristics, attitudes, and behavior; (3) student persistence and progression data; (4) student engagement, involvement, and satisfaction results; and (5) student learning outcomes? Does your institution use peer comparisons and national benchmarks for examining the data, assessment, and survey results? How does your campus use the assessment outcomes and results to inform decisions and specific actions?

Institutions must have easily accessible and accurate information if they are to strategically manage student enrollment data and assessment and survey results. Our institutions have massive amounts of information available, but if that information can’t be used to personalize services, strengthen relationships, support processes, or make decisions, then the value of the data is diminished. Today, an increasing number of colleges and universities are depending on portal-based reporting solutions so that key individuals across campus may access student information and communicate it to key users. Different levels of personnel have specific and differing needs to accurately identify trends, pinpoint areas that need improvement/intervention, and build relationships with students.
In older technology systems, data often are quickly outdated and incomplete, especially by the time a report is produced in response to a specific query. Frequently, good information is not sought if it is difficult to obtain. At other times, institutional data may not be “clean,” with the result that common queries result in disparate answers. In these circumstances, floods of static print reports pile up on an individual’s desk, resulting in confusion rather than insight. Using timely data on students at crucial college transitions is important for determining successful academic and student life experiences and challenges, including the progress of different student groups (e.g., first year, transfer, non-traditional, residential, commuter, underrepresented, honors, underprepared, etc.). Institutions today can monitor student persistence earlier and throughout students’ entire college experience.

So how do we use technology solutions today to process and to measure meaningful outcomes and to foster organizational and financial efficiency? We see increased interest in “actionable intelligence” (Kilgore 2009), which includes business intelligence tools such as dynamic reporting and dashboard reports needed to inform evidence-based decision making. Kilgore (2009) notes that this need exists in a dynamic environment where the technologies we use are constantly evolving, as are student, faculty, and staff expectations of service. Many institutions today are seeking technologies and processes that use data to understand and analyze their performance. These types of tools provide insight into institutional performance rather than an account of its transactions.

Often referred to as Business Intelligence (BI), these tools include data access, reporting, and analytics. They commonly draw data from multiple sources (e.g., institutional data, national survey results, department assessments, and other data sources) and provide users with sophisticated models for analysis. Analytics refers to extensive use of data, statistical and quantitative analysis, explanatory and predictive models, and other fact-based reporting used to drive decisions and actions. Older data systems had tools that were more transactional in nature. They answered questions such as “What happened, who did it, and when did it happen?” Newer BI tools answer questions such as “Why did it happen, how will it happen in the future, and what can we do about it?” The answers to these types of questions help us improve institutional effectiveness, service, and performance.

Some colleges and universities are beginning to use newer portal reporting systems to disseminate information on student persistence, academic progress, engagement and involvement, and satisfaction. Such systems provide users at all levels of the institution with the information they need, in the format they need, at the time they need it. Newer business intelligence software enables data to be leveraged in existing systems and combined with other data sources; as a result, key personnel across multiple levels of the institution can access, analyze, and glean greater value from the data as they improve their decision-making processes.

Important data points should be compared with peers’ benchmarks. Programs and services can be improved through the identification of strengths and challenges.

Examples of Using Data and Communications as Evidence for Making Programmatic and Service Decisions and Creating a Need for Interventions

Pre-Matriculation Questions:

- How does your institution communicate its emphasis on student learning, success, and persistence with students and families throughout the recruitment and pre-enrollment processes? How do you work across departments and divisions to provide a comprehensive message that meets the needs of a number of departments so that students and families perceive the enrollment process as seamless?
- During the summer prior to fall enrollment, what percent of your institution’s first-time, full-time students participated in your orientation programming (insert any program used by your institution to orient students to campus)? How does your institution engage with students and families (if appropriate to your institution) to encourage their participation in the programming experience? Does your institution use multiple strategies to communicate the value of this programming to a new student? Do you know what percent of students who attend orientation matriculate to the institution in the fall? Does your institution experience a “melt” from orientation? How does your institution communicate with students who attended orientation and registered for classes but who do not matriculate in
the fall semester? How does your institution determine why such students do not matriculate? How does your institution work with students who matriculate in the fall but who did not attend orientation? Do incoming students have schedule loads and course selections that meet their needs and abilities?

**Early Intervention and Support Service Questions**

- During the fall semester, what percent of your institution’s first-time, full-time students (insert any group of students, *e.g.*, transfer, residential, commuter, under-prepared, underrepresented, part time) participated in your freshman seminar program (insert any program determined to have a relationship with connecting the student to campus or improving student engagement/involvement, *e.g.*, participation in tutoring, learning community program, academic advising assistance, early intervention experiences, academic support services, living/learning community experience, leadership programming, athletic study experiences, and other student support programs)? What impact does this program have on a student’s academic and/or social integration? How do you study the differences between those students who engage in your institution’s freshman seminar program (insert any program, as above) and those who do not? How do you determine the impact of these programs on specific groups of students (academically underprepared, underrepresented, student athletics, residential, commuter, online, traditional, and non-traditional)? Do students who participate have a higher rate of persistence, progress, credits earned, engagement and involvement?

**Academic Progress Questions**

- What type of early intervention strategies does your institution use to track academic, personal, or social challenges? Does this strategy focus on class attendance, participation, and academic progress?
- Do you review periodically the D, F, W, and I rates for the highest enrollment courses for your first-year students?

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*STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT = ADMISSIONS = INTERNATIONAL ED = LEGAL = NEW TECHNOLOGIES = RECRUITMENT = AND MORE...*
How does your institution track withdrawals? Course withdrawals?

How often does your institution track persistence throughout the term? Does it track mid-year persistence each year of a student’s experience?

Does your institution assign mid-term grades for first-year students? Who receives copies of the grades, and who is responsible for intervening with students at risk? How do you intervene with students who have lower grades? Does your academic support services program reach out to students with lower grades?

Once your registration period begins for the next term, how does your institution track persistence to the next term through the registration process? How does it intervene with students who have not registered?

Once final grades are assigned, who intervenes with students who have experienced academic challenges during their first semester? Who reviews their scheduling for the second semester to determine appropriate course selections (e.g., repeating courses, altering course load, etc.)?

If economic conditions result in students’ stopping out, how does your institution maintain a relationship with such students so they consider re-enrolling in the future?

Does your institution advise students who have stopped out to enroll in online courses or courses at less costly institutions, such as local community colleges, in order to stay connected to higher education?

How might your institution advise students with lower grade point averages to consider enrolling in online or community college courses in order to improve their academic performance and obtain credits?

How do you connect with students who have withdrawn from your institution in an effort to support their further pursuit of higher education?

Overall Support Program Assessment Questions:

How does your institution assess the programs and services determined to have an impact on improving student learning and success, engagement and involvement, and progress and persistence? What are the specific measures used to assess the program’s effectiveness and efficiency? How does your institution use assessments which measure specific student learning outcomes related to program goals? How are the results used for improving program effectiveness? How are the results communicated across campus? Are regular program reviews in place? How often do they occur? How are the results used to improve program success or to redistribute resources?

These questions reflect only a sample of the types of data and assessment information that can be used for decision making and the types of proactive positive interventions that can be made with students to intentionally and purposefully improve their learning and success. It is at least as important to move from mere data-based evidence to using the evidence to intervene with students to improve their engagement, involvement, and learning; this in turn leads to students’ improved performance and persistence. Building an information infrastructure capable of simultaneously monitoring progress and providing detailed feedback about what is working for which student populations is critical to improving student learning and success. By assessing the impact of each program, service, or activity, an institution can allocate its scarce resources in ways that best meet students’ needs.

It also is important for campuses to build a transparent and visible “culture of evidence” which requires attention to data and student progress and achievement. It is crucial to determine who needs assistance on campus—academically, socially, or financially—and to target these students for services early in their collegiate experience. It is important to link the evidence gained on persistence and progress with resources and budget and to invest in experiences that contribute to student engagement, involvement, and learning.

An institution can do many things to improve student learning and success. It is imperative that institutions provide the necessary programming, strategies, and interventions to help students succeed not only in their first year of college but also in each and every year the student is enrolled. Because the issues and needs of students evolve throughout their college experience, strategies should not be duplicated each year. Today, it does not seem to be a question of whether institutions are providing such services; many do. Rather, the question to be asked is whether institutions ensure that their services of high quality. Does your institution deliver services to the students who need them at the time at which they need them? For example, hanging
a sign that reads “academic advising,” or “student leadership programs,” or “retention services,” or “career counseling” doesn’t do the job. Instead, institutions must work to identify students who can benefit from the high-quality services and programming available at the time students need them in order to improve their learning and success.

Engage and Partner with Faculty

*How does your campus promote excellence in undergraduate teaching? How does your institution develop faculty for instruction, advising, and engaging with students outside of the classroom? How do out-of-classroom programs and services which are determined to have an impact on student learning and success partner with faculty?*

A significant influence on a student’s engagement and involvement in school is interaction with faculty. As Austin (1993) explains, increasing student and faculty interaction both inside and outside the classroom fosters student development and increases the likelihood that students will be satisfied with their experience at the institution. Student-faculty engagement encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities (Kuh and Hu 2001). Faculty become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous lifelong learning (Kezar and Kinzie 2006).

There are a number of potential positive outcomes of linking faculty involvement to efforts to improve student progress and persistence. While a single encounter is unlikely to forge a meaningful relationship, creating a culture for faculty engagement in the total SEM experience is critical. Because they are the content experts of our institutions’ academic programs, faculty can and should become integral partners in your efforts to improve student learning and persistence. Many campuses already use strategies designed to connect faculty to recruitment efforts by involving them in marketing initiatives, on-campus interviews, small group department sessions, large visitation information sessions, informational fairs, open houses, academic camps and summer enrichment programs, and early summer college experiences. Because faculty are engaged directly in students’ in-class experiences, it seems consistent and natural to involve faculty in an effort to advance SEM efforts toward improving student learning and persistence.

Outside of the classroom, faculty can serve an important role in an institution’s student retention efforts. Following are a dozen recommended strategies designed to connect faculty to retention efforts: Faculty can (1) participate in new student orientation activities by leading advisement and academic transition sessions; (2) lead small-group discussions related to a summer reading provided through the orientation process; (3) interact with students at a reception following a new student convocation in order to provide students with information about their disciplines and related careers; (4) serve as advisors and mentors to first-year students; (5) serve as sponsors or advisors to student clubs and organizations; (6) serve as sponsors of department clubs for new students interested in or majoring in their field; (7) sponsor service-learning experiences for students in areas relating to their academic discipline; (8) visit student residences in order to conduct small-group discussions related to course content, test-review sessions, tutoring, or academic advising; (9) avail themselves as interviewees for new students enrolled in a first-year experience course; (10) create opportunities for faculty-student research teams; (11) meet with other faculty advisors who work with exploratory students to identify the key features of their majors and minors; and (12) meet with residence life coordinators/advisors to discuss strategic study tips and active learning strategies that may be useful to students.

What else can campuses do to involve faculty in student retention initiatives? First, avoid 800-pound gorilla language (i.e., retention) and connect faculty and all of your retention efforts to improving student engagement, involvement, and learning outcomes. High-level administrators need to be involved in and must support these efforts. Public comments in faculty assemblies, campus news and communications, and student retention–related committees need to highlight the importance of these efforts. It is important to engage faculty in retention-related activities that leverage their passion and knowledge base in their discipline. It is important to show that their contributions to improving student learning and success makes a difference. Provide data demonstrating the results. Share data on student engagement (NSSE) and student satisfaction surveys; make such data are relevant and meaningful by preparing them at the department or program level (whenever appropriate). Share thank you letters from
students and families. Nominate a faculty member for an all-star award or special recognition, or support faculty from departments to attend national conferences related to improving student learning and success. Meaningful recognition of faculty contributions is significant. What do faculty on your campus consider to be meaningful recognition? Consider how your campus recognizes and rewards faculty for their involvement. In addition, consider how your institution assists faculty in improving their teaching and learning practices. Does your institution have a place on campus where faculty can learn about different pedagogies, teaching practices, learning styles, and assessment tools? Faculty are busy: They need to know that their engagement is highly valued and that it is in the best interest of the institution and its students.

Consider How Your Institution Might Draw on Best Practices and Strategies

What programs, activities, and support services comprise your institution’s efforts for improving student success? How do these services meet the needs of specific student groups (e.g., residential, commuter, traditional, non-traditional, first year, upper division, underrepresented, academically underprepared, and others)? How does your institution connect students to these programs? At which points in students’ experience are they connected to these programs? How do students connect with their major departments and academic advisors? How are students’ academic advisement needs met on your campus?

Take stock of the programs, activities, and support services that comprise your institution’s focus on improving student learning and success. A number of benefits stem from this process, as the AASCU study (2005) demonstrates. First, it might reveal a healthy, student-centered culture. Second, it may reveal pockets of success in relatively unconnected programs or initiatives. Finally, taking stock may reveal a campus culture that does not fundamentally value graduation as a goal. Depending on the findings at your institution, campus leaders will need to nurture and sustain success, work to integrate the successful pockets, or promote the value of a culture of student success.

In considering best practices, it is important to find out what other institutions are doing and how they are assessing these efforts. Borrow as much as possible, but stop there. Each college and university is unique. Strategies used to improve student learning and success should be tailored to each particular campus’s culture and students’ needs. While, you don’t need to reinvent the whole wheel, it is important to consider how best to adapt the new program or service to meet the needs of your students and how to engage the campus culture in this process. Simply identifying best practices somewhere and “plugging them in” is not likely to prove effective.

Experience has led me to believe that the best programs are intentional and purposeful in design and delivery, integrated in effort, and collaborative with other departments on campus. These strategies need to meet specific students’ needs at the individual institution. While I have avoided including a laundry list of best practices in this paper, it is clear that many campuses rely on best practices to enhance student learning and success. These practices certainly play a significant role on our campuses, and they do consume valuable resources, so it is even more critical given higher education’s current economic condition that these practices are evaluated regularly to be certain that they are meeting students’ needs.

Review Institutional Policies and Procedures

How often does your institution review policies and procedures related to student success, persistence, and progress? What specific policies and procedures on your campus have an impact on student learning, progress, or persistence?

Often, specific institutional policies and processes are not examined for their impact on student learning and success. Can you think of an academic policy or process on your campus that may not contribute positively to improving student learning and success? What evidence can you provide that this specific policy or practice does not have a positive impact on student learning and success? What is the process for changing the policy or process?

Strategies for improving student persistence and graduation rates can be influenced by our institutions’ academic policies. Consider the following questions:

- What is the impact of your institution’s registration practices on student progress? Are sufficient courses available to meet students’ major program and general education needs? Are students advised as to specific college requirements and appropriate course scheduling?
What impact do your drop/add policy, course withdrawal policy, repeat policy, and incomplete grade policy have on student progression? What impact do your academic probation, suspension, and readmission policies have on student persistence?

How useful and reader friendly is your college catalog with regard to institutional policies, practices, and procedures?

Such information should be located in a central place and/or on your institution’s Web site; its logical order or sequence should enable students, faculty, and staff to locate information easily.

Consider How Your Institution is Organized and Your Use of Resources and Facilities

How is your institution organized for improving student learning and success (e.g., through a specific organizational structure, committee(s), or other coordinated approach)? Do your facilities promote opportunities for enhancing student learning and success?

Institutions differ greatly from one another. Internal organizational features may include program structures, reporting functions, delivery models, staffing, budget, and facilities. Decisions can influence the way faculty, staff, and students view services, thereby affecting the campus culture. Collaboration and partnerships across divisions, units, and departments are critical to efforts to improve student engagement and involvement. The silo mentality is out of date and virtually extinct as an effective model for improving student engagement.

Resources also play a huge part in the ability of a campus to provide the support services necessary to engage and connect students. Many institutions work hard not only to provide resources to ensure that students have all the tools they need to successfully navigate the maze of higher education, but they also work strategically to reach out to specific students in need. For example, these types of programs will intentionally connect students to tutors rather than wait for students to seek them out. They will seek relationships with faculty and staff in order to improve the quality of the services offered. They may provide smaller study and discussion sessions for larger course sections. They provide extensive and proactive supplementary support services. They monitor student progress at critical time periods in a student’s undergraduate experience and create positive interventions as needs warrant.

Finally, it is important to note that the physical characteristics of your institution’s learning and living environment also are important to improving student learning and success. Consider how your institution’s learning and social environments invite interactions and enhance different types of learning. What impact do you think your facilities have on improving student learning and success? Reflect on the physical characteristics of your classroom buildings, student union, recreation centers, support services, and service offices. Are these areas inviting and conducive to student learning, engagement, and involvement? If your campus includes residential facilities, how do they—and their staff—foster student learning?

Consider How Your Institution Develops Faculty, Staff, and Student Leaders’ Understanding of Student Attitudes, Behaviors, and Aspirations

How transparent is your institution in terms of providing the campus community with data and information on students, student engagement survey results, student satisfaction results, and other important survey data? How do you use this information to understand students’ attitudes, aspirations, and behaviors? How is this information used by faculty, staff, and students who serve in leadership positions? How does your institution communicate student persistence data to the campus community, and how is this information used? Does your institution support attendance at national conferences related to SEM, first-year experience, student transition, academic advising, orientation, etc.? How is information gleaned from such experiences shared with colleagues?

TAKING IT FORWARD: NEXT STEPS

As you move forward with SEM initiatives on your campus, use the questions and issues articulated in this article to consider how you may enhance efforts to improve student learning and success. The results of these efforts often are reflected in improved student engagement, involvement, and learning, which together lead to improved student persistence and graduation.

“Expanding the Conversation about SEM: Advancing SEM Efforts to Improve Student Learning and Persistence—Part I and Part II,” gave attention to the essential
need for enrollment management models to focus more purposefully on efforts related to improving student learning, success, and persistence. By design, these articles were intended to connect dialogue about improving student learning and persistence to an institution’s SEM efforts. Ultimately, advancing SEM efforts systemically through increasing college completion rates contributes to an institution’s overall effectiveness and creates an educated citizenry for the nation.

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About the Author
DR. AMANDA YALE serves as the associate provost for Enrollment Services at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. Areas of responsibility in her position include Undergraduate and Graduate Admissions, Orientation, Financial Aid, Academic Records and Summer School, Retention Services, Academic Services (Academic Advisement, First Year Seminar, Learning Communities, Tutoring, Supplemental Instruction, EOP and TRIO programs, and developmental coursework), Career Services, and Services for Students with Disabilities. She has spent about two thirds of her tenure in higher education working as a faculty member with first year programs and academic advisement services. As a leader in enrollment management, she guides a division focused on improving student learning and success through a process of considering best practices for recruiting and retaining students at the university.

Dr. Yale presents nationally on issues related to first year advisement, first year transition, early-alert and intervention services, freshman seminar professional development, learning communities, academic support services for at-risk students, orientation programming, strategic enrollment management planning, leading an enrollment management division, and Millennial student characteristics. She piloted several initiatives which produced national awards and recognitions for exemplary programs and services related to marketing and recruitment initiatives, retention programming, first year initiatives, and academic advisement for Slippery Rock University.

Dr. Yale has serves as a senior AACRAO consultant in these areas for higher education institutions interested in improving SEM efforts.
Identification of students at risk of poor academic performance is the first step in designing effective student progress and success interventions. An early alert initiative is reviewed to determine how well the system is able to identify underachieving students.

**BACKGROUND**

*Student Engagement, Metacognition, and Retention*

Early alert strategies are an increasingly common way to address students’ ongoing needs for greater academic and social engagement by enabling a positive campus environment and appropriate academic support; Kuh et al. (2007) find these to be necessary engagement conditions. Young and Fry (2008) show the benefits of student metacognition, or awareness of learning, something to which an early alert program can contribute. As institutions attempt to provide the conditions necessary for student success, many are finding that pre-enrollment indicators alone are not always sufficient to predict student persistence. Many students who need the support of the institution to be successful do not present such needs until they are on campus, enrolled, and living the life of a college student (Davidson, Beck and Milligan 2009).

**Critique of Midterm Grades**

Cuseo (2006) provides a critique of use of midterms as an effective early alert. Midterm grades arrive too late to allow time for change; assume the student will be sufficiently motivated to take effective action on his own; provide limited information; and, on most campuses, are not purposed to be reviewed and systematically acted upon by anyone other than the student. However, of the fifteen registrar’s offices responding to an informal statewide survey conducted in 2006, nine were using midterm data; one had an alert whereby the instructor would send a note to an advisor; one asked that “no-shows” be reported after two weeks; one targeted a specific group with a paper form; and two made a portal available for faculty and staff to make optional student progress notes.

**CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT**

The concept for an early identification (EI) system at the University of Cincinnati (UC) began with an assessment of: desired outcomes, institutional culture/campus type, and infrastructure.

**Desired Outcomes**

The president formed a university-wide task force to identify strategies aimed at improving retention and
graduation rates. A web-based early warning system was recommended. Institutional goals included student satisfaction, engagement, learning/development, and implementation of a new comprehensive academic plan.

Institutional Culture and Campus Type

Each organization has its own culture—a culture that will determine what new system will work best and how it can be implemented. Cameron and Freeman (1991) identify four cultures: clan, characterized by loyalty and tradition; hierarchy, defined by rules and policies; adhocracy, which thrives on innovation and development; and market, which focuses on goal accomplishment. Because graduation and retention were among our main institutional goals at the time of the proposal (market culture), we went about designing and explaining the rationale in those terms. We reflected further on more basic questions: What makes our students unique? How do faculty, staff, administration, and students routinely interact? What does our institution expect from faculty and staff? How ready is our campus for change? We also thought about how this new project might fit our campus type (urban, public, large, decentralized, many Web services) and mission (research, teaching, service).

Infrastructure Inventory

In order to determine whether our campus had the technical, teaching, advising, and assessment capacity needed, we inventoried a number of areas, including: frequently used communication channels, built-in functionality of student information system(s) and course delivery platform(s), faculty/staff professional development forums, easily accessible assessment data, support from institutional research (IR) and related faculty researchers, and in-house IR expertise. Effective communication channels were identified as a challenge while our ability to program custom Web applications emerged as a strength.

IMPLEMENTATION

With regard to implementation, we asked ourselves these common “reporter” questions:
- Who: which students, faculty, staff?
- What: mechanism and measures to use?
- When: to alert and intervene?
- Where: with whom should the alert originate?
- How: online, in person? and
- Why: what outcomes do we desire?

System Types

Having first completed some background research nationally, we were able to categorize system types into eight commonly used approaches: midterm report, advisor notes software, commercial retention software, social networking software, online course delivery platform (such as Blackboard), commercial customer relationship management (CRM) system, commercial Web survey system, and home-grown solution. We determined that our system’s purpose was to facilitate communication regarding classroom performance and support needs among instructor, student, advisor, and student services offices. We decided to develop a home-grown system that would link to the existing online instructor class roster.
The UC “Early Intervention” (EI) System

To initiate a request, instructors can access an EI Form online using a custom Web application built onto the instructor class roster. The early intervention form’s contents (including student and performance and course data) are stored on a central database which generates e-mails directed to the student, the advisor, the learning assistance center (if specified), and, in the case of varsity athletes, athletics student services. The instructor has the option to send a copy of the EI request to the disability services office regarding identified accommodations. Advisors, instructors, and administrators each use a portal to the database for e-mail communications, request tracking, notes, and reports (see Figure 1, on page 40).

Role of the Registrar

The UC EI system is funded and coordinated by the Registrar’s office, which provides oversight particularly in terms of support of the Web application (web-based class list), advisor/administrator user access control, FERPA, and records retention enforcement.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

The UC system has been evaluated in two ways, the first with data from a user survey of instructors and advisor users. Secondly, to determine the system’s ability to identify underachieving students, quantitative indicators were collected—on identified students as well as a control group—including number of intervention requests and students, courses (number of courses, course sections and instructors), registration activity (drops, withdraws), and academic progress (first year retention and grade point average).

Feedback from Instructors and Advisors

Survey responses revealed that it was important to instructors that some resulting action with students was taken, that the system should be integrated (i.e., fewest possible logins), that student privacy (especially on confidential issues) was respected, and that it has a noticeable impact on student performance. Advisors commented that the system should easily handle data entry and reporting. With regard to student performance measures comparison groups were used to determine year-to-year

<p>| Table 1. 2008 First-Time, Full-Time Cohort |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AY 2009</th>
<th>EI¹ FTFT</th>
<th>Non-EI FTFT</th>
<th>Control²</th>
<th>EI FTFT Associate</th>
<th>EI FTFT Baccalaureate</th>
<th>Control Associate</th>
<th>Control Baccalaureate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Students</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>4,464</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year GPA</td>
<td>2.112</td>
<td>2.953</td>
<td>2.657</td>
<td>2.009</td>
<td>2.238</td>
<td>2.635</td>
<td>2.915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Credit Hours Earned/Carried</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year Retention</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average High School GPA</td>
<td>2.749</td>
<td>3.188</td>
<td>2.782</td>
<td>2.516</td>
<td>3.072</td>
<td>2.606</td>
<td>3.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average ACT Composite Score</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Early Intervention students flagged by course instructors for poor class attendance and progress
² Control groups based on High School GPA, ACT score, and degree goal (Associate or Baccalaureate)
retention, number of credit hours completed, GPA, and D/F/W grades.

STUDENT SUCCESS METRICS

Retention

We compared the one-year retention, grades, and progress of those students identified by classroom instructors to a control group of similar students who were not identified.

DISCUSSION

With regard to first-year college GPA and academic progress (success earning credits), the data reveal differences in academic performance between those flagged for an intervention and similarly prepared students not so identified. Those students who were identified by an instructor exhibited behaviors such as poor class attendance, poor assignment completion, and poor test performance. However, it is most interesting to note that while there were noticeable differences in first-year college performance between EI and non-EI students, the entering profiles of the two groups in terms of ACT and high school GPA were quite similar.

CONCLUSION

With the help of classroom instructors, we were able to identify those students who performed poorly—even students who were not predicted to show such underachievement. Systems which allow the classroom instructor to communicate student attendance and participation can go beyond the traditional preparation measures such as test scores and high school GPA to help identify students who eventually underachieve in their first year of college. Underachievement could be due to a host of reasons which students themselves may not anticipate until they are on campus and have the opportunity to participate in their classes and campus life. The first step in designing an intervention for underachieving students is to determine an accurate identification method. Notification of student progress by classroom instructors throughout the academic term is a simple way to go beyond traditional measures of college preparation to predict student success. An early alert system can be an effective tool for the registrar’s office to utilize in support of important institutional student success goals.

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Where do students find out about courses they might take? Potentially, from just about anywhere: friends, bulletin boards, department Web sites, advisors, e-mails, or flyers posted in the halls. Of course, some of these sources are more trustworthy than others.

Where should students go to get reliable information that can help them make wise decisions about which courses to take? This is the need that a course guide seeks to meet. The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and the University of Wisconsin—Madison have taken two different approaches to building online, centrally accessible course guides. Both institutions had common goals in building course guide systems: to create a single source of rich course information connected to the online class schedule and to minimize time and effort expended by faculty and staff on information dissemination and course registration. The universities’ solutions demonstrate the range of possibilities available to institutions seeking to provide detailed course information to students.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA COURSE GUIDE

The University of Minnesota Course Guide has evolved from a grassroots, student-run print publication to a PeopleSoft-based system that integrates with the University’s online class schedule. Through several format and system changes, the goal of the Course Guide has remained constant: to provide instructor-specific course information to students so they can make good registration choices.

In a December 2009 interview, Susan Van Voorhis, Registrar and Director of Academic Support Resources (ASR) reported that student Michael Handberg began publishing the Course Guide in the 1990s to “help students make good choices and [to] balance the workload of the courses they were choosing.” Van Voorhis continued, “When Michael was about to graduate, he didn’t want to see the Course Guide go, so he came and talked to us to see if we could keep it going.”

In response, the University began publishing a printed Course Guide, moving the content online in 1996 when the class schedule first appeared on the Web (Web registration followed a year later). The Course Guide has been an essential component of the University’s online registration experience ever since. Each listing in the online class schedule links to a corresponding Course Guide entry, which provides instructor-specific course information. Behind the scenes is a University-developed, self-service Web application that is integrated with PeopleSoft and the online class schedule. A recent, comprehensive upgrade added convenience and flexibility for faculty, instructors, and staff members who enter Course Guide
data. It also created the capability to include a course syllabus, instructor bio and photo, and a video clip with each Course Guide entry.

Prior to the upgrade, the system was fueled primarily by staff dedication. Course Guide data moved into PeopleSoft with the University’s 1999 implementation of the software, but the process of collecting Course Guide data was far from user friendly. Instructors or staff would enter their course descriptions into a Web form that sent an e-mail to the central scheduling unit. A scheduling staff member then would copy and paste the text into PeopleSoft. “It was time consuming,” said Sandie Carlson, in a December 2009 interview, as she described how the team would enter approximately 2,000 course descriptions into PeopleSoft each term. “Several of us worked on it every semester.” According to a February 2010 interview with Nancy Peterson, manager of the scheduling group, it would take about two weeks for all of the descriptions to be entered into PeopleSoft so that they could display online. Because the descriptions did not roll forward from term to term, instructors had to submit their descriptions each time they taught a class, with scheduling staff having to repeat their part of the process. The time required was significant.

With the support of the Twin Cities undergraduate deans, ASR and the University’s Office of Information Technology (OIT) began a comprehensive Course Guide upgrade in 2005. The primary goal was to create a more efficient system that would facilitate a higher participation rate among faculty, instructors, and staff. The new Course Guide system addressed this need by allowing instructors and departmental staff to enter data directly into PeopleSoft. Instructors enter Course Guide information through a user-friendly, self-service Web application. Appropriate department staff have access to corresponding PeopleSoft pages, through which they can edit or enter their instructors’ Course Guide data. Staff users also can create a single entry for a course with multiple sections that should share one standard description.

The new system also made Course Guide data entry more efficient by carrying information forward from term to term. As ASR business analyst Terri Tuzinski recalled in a December 2009 interview, one common “complaint from faculty was that they would provide the information once, and it wouldn’t copy forward.” The new Course Guide matches the course description to both the primary instructor and the course, so the instructor enters the information once, and the Course Guide entry appears online automatically each subsequent time he teaches that course. The information can be updated, or the instructor can keep the same description.

In addition to creating efficiencies, the upgrade addressed several system shortcomings. First, the benefits of the Course Guide were expanded to more students, year round. Because maintenance had been so labor intensive, the Course Guide had only been available for undergraduate courses offered during the fall and spring semesters. The upgrade allowed for the inclusion of summer courses and courses associated with other PeopleSoft “careers.” The Course Guide now includes graduate-level courses—an important benefit for an institution that enrolls one of the highest numbers of graduate and professional students in the country.

The student interface for the Course Guide remained largely the same, except for one significant new benefit: instructors and staff can now attach a recent syllabus, an instructor photo or biography, and even a video clip to any Course Guide entry. While student access to the attachments is relatively seamless, OIT Web developer Chris Crosby-Schmidt sees the upload, storage, and access of attachments as one of the most technically challenging (and rewarding) parts of the development process. First, the team had to decide where to store the attachments. Ultimately, NetFiles was selected because it is the University-supported document storage and sharing tool, and it already had the necessary security functions. To upload attachments from the PeopleSoft interface to NetFiles, the developers created a small, custom Web application. Videos required an additional step: transcoding into a standard flash format so that students can view the videos without downloading numerous players. The team reviewed many options for this function and ultimately chose to install the On2 Flix Engine on a newly purchased server. Students can access the attachments as soon as they are uploaded; the other Course Guide data move from PeopleSoft to the online Course Guide via a nightly XML extract. Each piece of the Course Guide application performs an essential task. According to Crosby-Schmidt, in a December 2009 interview, “The larger challenge was integrating all of those pieces.” For students and their advisors, all of the pieces come together in one central, intui-
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tive tool. Each entry in the online class schedule has a link to its corresponding Course Guide entry. Where instructors have included attachments, students click on an icon to view them. If instructors have not entered any Course Guide information, students are directed to the instructor or the department.

For fall 2009, Course Guide information was available for 4,419 Twin Cities courses—more than double the number available in fall 2007, the last semester with the old entry system—but still only half of the eligible courses. Van Voorhis recommended that you work to “get support from faculty, as well as administration, from the beginning” if your institution would like to provide instructor-specific course information to students.

Because Van Voorhis, and others, see the Course Guide as an essential tool for student success, the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities continues to work toward full implementation. “If we can provide students with detailed information, they can make the proper choices when selecting their courses and ultimately be more successful,” Van Voorhis said.

To explore the University of Minnesota Course Guide, go to onestop.umn.edu and click on the Course Guide Quick Link.

MY COURSE GUIDE—UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

“Bring order to the chaos!” Conversations with students made it clear to University of Wisconsin–Madison administrators that there was a need both to aggregate course information into one place and to ensure the accuracy of that information. Student advisory boards, focus groups, and peer advisors expressed frustration in determining the best source of up-to-date, accurate course information. So many disparate systems, Web sites, and publications provided course information that students were beginning to wonder which were trustworthy. “My Course Guide” was envisioned as bringing order to the chaos and serving as the single source of rich course information for UW–Madison.

FOUNDATION RELEASE

The Office of the Registrar and the Middleware, Academic Technology, and Application Development groups of the Division of Information Technology joined forces to sponsor the course guide project. The foundation release of My Course Guide was launched in June 2009 during the orientation of the incoming first-year students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. New students, along with orientation and peer advisors, used My Course Guide along with current tools to find classes. The basic browse feature with filtering capabilities unfolds the breadth and level of all active catalog courses at UW–Madison. Browsing options include choosing by academic subject, school, or college; course title; and instructor name. A filter feature works like a search to reduce course results by more detailed attributes, such as general education requirement, course level and breadth, honors, and term offered. Course results appear in grid format, providing the ability to sort results by “last taught,” course number, and subject. Users can select a course to receive additional information, such as course description, level, breadth, credits, and honors. In addition, term schedule information including time, day, room and building, textbook, and class note information is displayed. My Course Guide also is interconnected with students’ self-service Student Centers so they can select a class from My Course Guide, be logged into their Student Centers, and submit the class for enrollment. The University online undergraduate catalog and My Course Guide are also interconnected, allowing a user to move easily between them.

Valuable feedback was gained during the two-month summer orientation period for incoming first-year students. The initial release of browse functionality was a bit risky; we wanted new students to use My Course Guide and to find enough value in its foundation release that they would continue to use it throughout their academic career. Survey results indicated that students and advisors wanted a search feature. Having anticipated that users would want the program to have search capabilities, design was already under way, and developers were investigating new search engine technologies. A robust search feature is slated for release in spring 2010, complete with an open text search, section-level information, and expanded views of course titles, descriptions, and credits on the results page.

A “Plan Courses” feature released in October 2009 enables students and advisors to find courses and save them either in user-determined lists or by personalized, term-based plans. The personalized plans are designed to help students and their advisors plan for the next few years.
Students also have been requesting assistance with scheduling lecture and discussion options for the courses they wish to take the following term. A “schedule builder,” which would accept courses from a student’s personalized plan and generate possible schedules, is being considered. A student then could select a particular schedule and send it directly to the enrollment system.

Endless possibilities exist for the future of these lists and personalized plans. Lists could be shared between students and advisors; advisors could use them to publish new lists, such as ‘Math Courses for the Non-Math Major.’ Students seek to integrate their degree audit reports with planned courses in order to estimate their time to degree and so they can discuss their plans with their advisors. As utilization of plans and lists increases, statistics can be gathered and reported to academic departments for use in planning future course offerings.

STRATEGY AND ARCHITECTURE
The vision for My Course Guide is broad, and the underlying architecture required technology that had not yet matured at UW-Madison. A goal of early decision making was to ensure flexibility in development in preparation for forthcoming technology that would support enhancements. One such enhancement is ‘instructor-provided content’—allowing instructors to upload syllabi, video clips, supplemental course descriptions, and information about their teaching styles. During the early planning stages for the Course Guide, the University was in the process of obtaining a Web content management system and was pilot-
formation that would be extracted from the student information system several times a day. Applications such as course management systems request class roster information using Web services according to their respective refresh schedules. The data store handles performance more efficiently than multiple application extracts pulling from the student information system at all hours of the day. Led by an Enterprise Information Technology Architect, a team of data experts from the Office of the Registrar created a set of curricular object models that are the foundation for the ongoing design of Web services for data delivery to CRIS, My Course Guide, and beyond.

Strategic guidance was sought in many ways. In order to learn student needs, the project team met with a variety of student advisory groups and gathered information from past student surveys. Campus forums were held to introduce the Course Guide concept and to learn about the needs of campus advisors, faculty, and administration. A Course Guide Advisory Committee was established to champion the concept and to provide guidance on content and feature releases, design feedback, and unique usability scenarios. The advisory committee includes members of the faculty, the advising community, academic administration, continuing studies, the library, university communications, academic planning and analysis, undergraduate admissions, and the Office of the Registrar. The advisory committee will be more essential than ever as we embark on the next major challenge of encouraging instructors and departments to contribute content about their courses.

VISION AND BENEFITS
The vision for My Course Guide is limitless. Many ideas have been generated for new features and integration, including searching for courses by an area of study or key words, marketing new courses and guest instructors, searching for first-year and residence hall interest group course clusters, sharing favorite lists and course plans with other students and advisors, and connecting course plans to the degree audit report.

My Course Guide is for everyone, and it offers many long-term benefits. For example, it:

- Provides instructors the ability to “paint the full picture” of the courses they teach by presenting the syllabus, video clips, and learning outcomes and expectations, as well as information about the research in which they are personally engaged and their academic accomplishments;
- Enables students to easily find current and reliable course information so they can choose courses that best suit their interests and instructors whose teaching styles align with their learning style;
- Enhances the advising experience by sharing consistent information and providing planning tools for students, advisors, and departments;
- Assists in student recruitment and academic career planning;
- Initiates a cleanup of obsolete courses that have not been taught in seven or more years;
- Provides departments with statistics related to students’ course interests so they can better plan future course offerings; and
- Offers opportunities to prospective students and their parents, high school counselors, and the general public to discover the breadth of curriculum, programs, and instructor experiences offered at UW-Madison

Experience “My Course Guide” and follow its growth at http://mycourseguide.wisc.edu/.

About the Authors

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This article is a case study about how Kennesaw State University (KSU) met the challenges of institutional change in managing its campus visitation program. Relocation of an office of admissions off the main campus created a need to reevaluate and reconfigure the campus visitation program. This case study provides useful generalizations and suggestions for other universities.

“High-tech” operations alone will not produce a successful admissions program if traditional “high-touch” operations are not up to speed. Thus, consideration must be given to fine-tuning high-touch operations that are affected by institutional change.

For years, the KSU Office of Admissions has pursued traditional “high-touch” operations overlaid with an array of 24 x 7 electronic, web-based tools. In fall 2003, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia recognized KSU’s Office of Admissions with its Best Practices Benchmarking Award. The award recognized the following accomplishments: the Electronic Application & SAT Data Push, Document Imaging Systems (used not only for archival purposes but also for front-counter handling of student inquiries), the web-based Georgia High School Directory, the Freshman Admissions Predictor (a self-administered web-based screening that provides an advisory opinion as to an admissions decision), the High School Guidance Counselor Service Center (online admission and student records are provided to high school counselors through a secure Web page), and the Registration “TRIED” Report (a listing of students who tried to but could not register for any course). Naturally, recruiting and processing efforts also include e-mail broadcasts, chat sessions, Telecenter activities, and an array of 24 x 7 interactive, self-help web-based tools.

**IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH**

Many factors affect an institution’s ability to provide campus visitors a high-quality experience: traffic, parking deterrents, street people, navigation mazes, concrete facades, and political agendas, among others. These challenges can be particularly significant for large public, metro, or suburban institutions. Changes as simple as the relocation of campus offices can raise significant challenges. Similar factors have had an impact on KSU, Georgia’s third largest university. These dynamics reconfigured the “One-Stop Shop” Enrollment Services model previously in place and...
have particularly strained the Office of Admissions in its efforts to provide prospective students and the general public with meaningful campus visits.

Like many metropolitan universities, the KSU campus was landlocked by hotels, fast food restaurants, service stations, office parks, and retail stores. As a result, university expansion occurred as a result of lease agreements or real estate purchases beyond the original campus boundaries. University facilities now are located on three non-contiguous corners of the I-75 interstate junction.

The decision by the president’s cabinet to relocate undergraduate and graduate admissions from the main campus to one of the newly leased corporate buildings had a tremendous impact on the office’s operation of campus tours. KSU’s Office of Admissions now is located across a four-lane roadway in an office park hidden behind a major hotel. The building itself is owned by the KSU Foundation.

The decision to relocate admissions operations enabled the enrollment suite of services to expand. The President’s Cabinet believed that the student services of financial aid, registration, testing, advising, and counseling could be maximized if the offices of Graduate and Undergraduate Admissions ceded key space to these units. Admissions operations were viewed as “external” compared to other enrollment services believed to be at the heart of enrolled campus students.

The relocation decision profoundly affected campus tours. The information session called “INSIGHT” now is conducted off-campus; visitors travel to a second location, on the main campus, for a tour. Because each event is geographically separated, a prospect may choose to schedule her information session and tour on different days, or she may opt not to schedule one or the other. Relocation thus presented an opportunity to reevaluate the campus visitation program.

Relocation of the Admissions Office has dramatically improved its accessibility to prospects who want to “run in to ask a few questions on their lunch break or between
classes;” to “quickly drop off a transcript;” or to “rest after escaping the hustle and bustle of campus.” The office now affords ample parking only steps away from an admissions counselor.

**FUNDAMENTALS FOR ORGANIZING AND IMPLEMENTING CAMPUS VISIT PLANS**

**Dedicated Campus Visit Manager to Supervise Guides, Content, and Program**

The need to tightly manage the campus tour experience became painfully evident following a number of incidents with implications for public relations. STRIVE, the student recruitment volunteer organization that conducted campus tours, was managed by admissions counselors. However, it soon became clear that admissions counselors who traveled and had other conflicting duties could no longer manage the campus tours. Further, the program was too reliant on student volunteers; it needed focused leadership. In response to evaluation, responsibility for the campus tour program was reassigned to the full-time supervisor who also supervised front-desk student workers. Resources were provided to arrange for paid tour guides through the campus student-assistant work program. Thus, the concept of unpaid student volunteers was abandoned. The reorganization of STARS (STudent Alumni Recruitment Society), INSIGHT, and campus tours proved to be a winning partnership under a central supervisor. The office manager administering STARS and INSIGHT sessions implemented a system that tracks how many students attend each INSIGHT session and campus tour. The Office of Admission’s internal Web-master helped develop an online reservation system to enable more focused preparation for prospective students’ visits. The Office of Admissions strives to add a “personal touch” to every prospective student’s visit. Such efforts include student testimonials, a special video that depicts campus life, and soft drink giveaways sponsored by Alumni Affairs. Lastly, visitors may choose to have a special picture taken and e-mailed to commemorate their visit.

**Creation of a One-Stop Shop Web Page for Enrollment Services Offices**

Even though the Admissions Offices were separated physically from the other enrollment services offices, a decision was made to recover and re-create a one-stop KSU Enrollment Services Web Page. Prior to the decision to centralize all admissions operations, the offices of the Registrar, Financial Aid, Graduate Admissions, Undergraduate Admissions, Bursar, Counseling/Testing, Housing, and International Admissions each maintained an independent Web page. Creation of a virtual “one-stop shop” structure for Web pages enhanced individuals’ ability to find information about campus visits and other topics. A new unified enrollment services calendar provided prospects with links that targeted key points of interest within the Web pages of various campus offices and departments. Such centralization better served a wider audience than had the previous configuration of separate Web pages.

**Insight Room: Convergence of “High –Tech” and “High –Touch” to Impress Visitors**

Within the new admissions offices, a dedicated INSIGHT room equipped with smart-room technology accommodates up to 50 people. (The technology includes a theater room projector/screen and a touch-screen computer linked to the projector as well as to the Internet.) Admissions counselor rotations host the program Monday through Thursday at 9:00 am and 1:00 pm and on Friday at 10:00 am. Because the room seats only 50 guests, a reservation system is used to manage attendance.

INSIGHT is a well-organized 45-minute presentation featuring a ten-minute promotional DVD, student testimonials, and a dynamic PowerPoint presentation. A review of available interactive Web tools covers academic admission standards, financial aid, and other campus services. (Note: The Web review demonstrates self-help tools so that prospects can be more self-reliant in seeking information.) Time is also allocated for questions. Special INSIGHT sessions are conducted for military veterans.

Visitors may participate in the information session and may meet with an admissions counselor before or after the session. They also may participate in the campus tour that follows the INSIGHT session; alternatively, they may forego the INSIGHT session and attend only the campus tour (though INSIGHT enhances the experience of visitors who opt to tour the campus). Visitors who attend INSIGHT are provided soft drinks; those who attend the campus tour are also given free parking passes and maps to the KSU Campus Welcome Center.
Listen to Consultants: Be Authentic in Information Sessions and Tours

Authenticity is what consumers demand. Campus consultants contend that many college administrations and marketing/admissions departments have yet to embrace being “authentic.” Consultants hold that these institutions are too obsessed either with what they want to be or with being like an admired institution up the road or across the state. Rather than ask, “What is being done that is authentic in the admissions/marketing program,” the $1 million question in fact may be, “What is the most inauthentic thing being done in the admissions/marketing?” Posturing as an institution with high academic standards is a common inauthentic marketing/admissions approach. The result is that students enroll but are not retained because the curriculum proves intellectually boring. Another common inauthentic marketing/admissions approach is to hype an athletic program as outstanding when it is in fact lackluster. This also results in retention issues. In any case, discussions of authenticity should generate intense discussion and heightened awareness of an institution’s true aspirations.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE—MAKING A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

KSU’s Insight Room is located within an upscale office park featuring fresh paint, new carpet, granite countertops, tile floors, glass reception walls, walnut moulding and brass trim, and ample, convenient, no-fee parking for visitors. Initially, the room was described as “boring” and “sterile.” The Admissions Office was confronted with the challenge of presenting a collegiate atmosphere despite the corporate décor.

One admissions counselor suggested painting a 360-degree mural on the walls in order to produce a warm, welcoming surrounding. Along with a long list of improvements to the visitor experience and campus tour, a one-of-a-kind mural spanning four walls evolved. As it depicts many KSU traditions from the vantage point of the center green of the campus, the mural provides storytelling and talking points for presenters. The mural transformed a boring, sterile corporate room into a gathering place with a fun, collegiate feel. The President’s Cabinet even paid a special visit to inspect the room once it was completed.

Contract with Consultant Services to Critique Campus Visit Experience

Consultants conducted two “secret shopper” pre-visits as part of an effort to improve visitors’ experiences; they returned after the Admissions Offices were relocated in order to help address issues resulting from the move. Immediate findings prior to the move revealed that the “housing stop” during the campus visit was unsatisfactory; the recommendation was that Admissions should discontinue this stop. Housing at KSU is privatized, and housing staff viewed daily tours as an interruption. According to the consultant, housing staffs’ negative attitudes were too apparent and needed to be addressed. He reported further on issues of access and delay in entering the residence halls and on poor presentation manners (the consultant did note, however, that KSU tour guides compensated for housing staffs’
negative attitudes and were commended accordingly). During the follow-up visit, the consultant explained the value of selecting tour guides with the ability to communicate “campus life stories” during tours. His theme was that guides should not be timid in sharing stories about life at KSU; such stories help prospects and their parents “feel the spirit of KSU.” Rather than read from scripts telling about the history of the campus, guides instead should become “experienced tour evangelists,” drawing on their storytelling skills. Consultants recommended that guides walk forward rather than backward as this facilitates conversations with participants. (We are not convinced that walking forward is necessarily better than walking backwards. KSU guides wear belt microphones, so tour participants can hear information regardless of which direction the guide is facing.) Consultants also suggested that the term “walk” be substituted for “tour” as it is more inviting (see Steinberg, J. 2009, August 18. Colleges seek to remake the campus tour. *The New York Times*.). The consultants are contracted to provide another training seminar for tour guides and staff.

**Off-Campus Visits to Sister Institutions to Observe Campus Tours**

“Scouting parties” visited Georgia State, Auburn University, Georgia Southern, and Georgia Tech. The visits were conducted in such a manner that “secret shopper” observations could be made. KSU’s tour experience needed a lot of finessing: We became aware of a need to develop a special INSIGHT brochure. We observed that some campuses provided special shirts for tour leaders and promotional items (such as Frisbees or pens) for visitors. We learned that our tour guides need to be more open and expressive in sharing personal information—for example, they should explain what attracted them to the campus; what high school they attended; what major they declared; whether they are commuter or resident students; whether they work on campus; as well as other campus life stories. We found that in other areas, we were far ahead of other institutions. Among KSU’s strong points were its INSIGHT PowerPoint presentations and the INSIGHT smart room, which is well-equipped to use Web tools to showcase the campus and services. Unlike guides at the institutions that were visited, KSU tour guides use belt microphones to ensure that participants can readily hear the information—and, now, stories—being communicated.

**Internal Analysis of Current Visit Program Using Survey and Focus Groups**

Web-based survey tools such as Survey Monkey make it easy to evaluate campus visits. Following INSIGHT sessions and campus tours, each participant is sent an e-mail with a link to Survey Monkey. (In addition to the link, the e-mail contains a digital photo of the visitor standing in front of the mural in KSU’s Smart Room.) Survey Monkey helped clarify the need to provide visitors with maps and to place directional signs indicating North, South, East, and West on campus.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Large suburban universities face unique challenges in maintaining campus visit programs. Prospects and their families bring certain expectations to their campus visits—visits often believed to have a certain mystique. The defining issue for the university is how to compete with traditional campus tours in order to deliver an authentic experience that communicates critical aspects of life on campus.

**About the Authors**

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AACRAO’s Retention of Records: Guide for Retention and Disposal of Student Records 2010 Update

The 2010 Retention of Records Guide provides standards in student records management, and is designed to help you craft an effective institutional retention policy in compliance with Federal and State law. It places greater emphasis on electronic records and expands recommendations regarding the security of those records. It also expands its recommendations for record retention schedules and for the first time offers differentiated retention periods for community and technical colleges alongside four-year schools. Contact information for state records management agencies has been included, as well as a case study to help you develop a retention and disposal policy for academic department offices.

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Strategic Enrollment Management’s Ambassadors: The Changing Role of Admissions Counselors

By Daniel Mathis

WHO IS THE ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR?
Road runner. File jockey. Advisor. Public speaker. Recruiter. At any given time, an admissions counselor fits one, some, or all of these descriptors. And while all of these descriptors indicate an important function within a college or university, none reflects the increasingly complex nature of the role of an admissions counselor in strategic enrollment management (SEM). SEM is a comprehensive process for helping an institution achieve and maintain optimum recruitment, retention, and graduation rates (Bontrager 2004). In a SEM-centered environment, an admissions office has more responsibility to educate various audiences about the nature of recruitment in relation to retention and, ultimately, graduation. Existing literature connects this task to the work of senior enrollment managers and director-level administrators. But what about admissions counselors (Kalsbeek 2006, Bontrager 2004)? The role of the admissions counselor must evolve from front-line recruiter and application decision maker to SEM ambassador: an individual who intentionally positions herself to inform multiple constituencies about the academic context of the institution.

THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE AND STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT
Discussing the evolving role of the admissions office, Stanley Henderson (1998) traces its historical journey from “gate-keeper to strategic partner.” Notably, he writes,

...an increasingly complex higher education environment would dictate a new role for the admissions office in enrollment issues, a role at once more comprehensive, more collaborative, and more strategic.

For admissions, this means increasing attention to the recruitment of students whom the college or university can support and graduate. In addition, it requires the admissions office to collaborate with institutional stakeholders through new, meaningful, and SEM-centered activities.

Enrollment management theorists and practitioners articulate the importance of enrollment managers and the efforts of the institution. With the institution as the focus, Adams (2009) writes, “Institutions accomplish these objectives [enrollment management goals] by providing students with focused, frequent, and content-specific information that maintains and enhances the student’s connection to—and impression of—the institution.” The
term ‘institution’ reflects the complex array of individuals in the admissions office and across campus who communicate with prospective students. While many stakeholders contact prospective students, the admissions counselor is central to any attempt to provide “focused, frequent, and content-specific information” (Adams 2009). On the road, responding to e-mails, and counseling walk-ins, an admissions counselor serves as a clearinghouse of information regarding the admissions process, financial aid, and academic programs. Referring to the work of the ‘institution’ in recruiting students does not provide sufficient guidance to the admissions counselor as she attempts to frame her work in the context of strategic enrollment management.

**RE-FRAMING THE ‘ROAD-RUNNER/FILE-JOCKEY’ MENTALITY**

There is a noteworthy lack of literature that speaks to the role of the admissions counselor in SEM. While this may be due to the recent emergence of SEM literature in general, it also may be a result of the ‘road-runner/file jockey’ mentality. The daily grind of being an admissions counselor—visiting three high schools in the morning, eating McDonald's for lunch, reviewing applications in the afternoon, and trekking to a college fair in the evening—essentially drains away any time for sharing new ideas with co-workers, let alone engaging in scholarly inquiry. An admissions counselor must simultaneously develop and leverage his evolving knowledge of SEM principles and the academic context of the institution (Henderson 2005). To develop an academic orientation, an admissions counselor must understand both the institution's academic values and, thus, how to inform students about those values.

**Connecting to an Institution’s Academic Values**

The higher education community values research, teaching, integrity, and academic freedom. Policies and practices created by faculty members and academic administrators reflect these values. Thus, an admissions counselor simply reciting an academic program’s requirements to prospective students does not fully represent the institution’s academic core. An admissions counselor should think beyond the courses: What is the rationale that underlies a program’s curriculum? Why are certain classes required? How does a major prepare a student for practice and/or research in the field?

On the other side of the proverbial coin, what value do faculty members find in the recruitment process? At a SEM-centered college or university, responsibility for recruiting, retaining, and graduating students is implicit in every stakeholder’s job description. An admissions counselor interacting both formally and informally with faculty members can gauge whether a recruitment mindset is viewed as a priority or a burden. If academic value is not placed on recruitment, then an admissions counselor facilitates connections between the academic context and SEM—elements inextricably linked through inquiry, assessment, and budgetary concerns, recruitment, and academic units.

To engage faculty members in conversations about recruitment and to speak to prospective students about the academic enterprise, an admissions counselor must understand the inquiry process. The opportunity to create and advance knowledge is not limited to academic units. The nuts and bolts of inquiry—reflection, research, data collection, and analysis—are important, but they are not nearly as important as the intentionality behind such efforts. Speaking to the rationale for research and data synthesis raises the level of discourse in an admissions office and legitimizes an admissions counselor’s ability to communicate about the academic context—a context of which he is a part through the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

The tendency to create solutions without regard for actual problems is a significant barrier to engaging faculty members in the academic context. “Pet” solutions threaten the integrity of an admissions office and shape a perception among faculty members and administrators that the admissions office is unaware of the college's challenges. For example, an admissions counselor decides to develop a campus visit program for kindergarteners. Ideas are generated, and plans are put in place. Though the program may serve a worthwhile cause, why does it exist? Are elementary school students unaware of the college? Do the region's youths have low educational aspirations? Is K–8 outreach truly an institutional priority? In this scenario, the admissions counselor searches for current problems to attach to his pet solution. Instead, the process must be reversed: thoroughly identify problems and then create programs and policies that solve them. Without a rationale supported by intentional research and inquiry, admissions professionals flounder in the academic context.
Communicating with Prospective Students About the Academic Context

By engaging in the academic context, admissions counselors can provide valuable information to prospective students about the nature of the institution’s programs of study, research endeavors, and academic values. This perspective aids prospective students in determining how an institution’s unique academic core “fits” their professional and personal goals. Perceptions of “fit” may shift from general identification with a university, perhaps based on a sports program or brand, to a more specific match with an institution’s unique academic core. An adaptation of organizational socialization literature provides a framework for clarifying the information students require to determine their “fit” with a college or university’s academic context. The information can be divided into three categories: referent, appraisal, and relational (Miller and Jablin 1991).

Admissions counselors are well versed in referent information—that is, requirements. What are the requirements for admission, scholarships, and financial aid? What are the requirements for completing a major and graduating? These requirements are important to prospective students and their parents. Referent information about the admissions process facilitates access to the academic context of the institution. Academic values can be inferred on the basis of these requirements, such as an institution’s commitment to providing access to students from a lower socioeconomic background, or the level of competitiveness within the student body. For example, a minimum GPA and test score, typically established by faculty members, reflect the caliber of students expected to fill the college’s classrooms. Although it is important to consider these inferences, they represent an incomplete picture of the academic context and so compel an admissions counselor in SEM to grasp appraisal and relational information through inquiry in the academic context.

In the academic core of the college or university, what validates performance and determines success? Which experience receives the most praise: receiving an “A” in a course, obtaining a valuable internship, or completing a study abroad program? Appraisal information varies from institution to institution and offers a lens into the unique values of the academic contexts of different colleges. An admissions counselor who can provide appraisal information to prospective students offers them an opportunity to determine whether the institution’s measures of success are compatible with their own. Success in the academic context is constructed by faculty members, academic administrators, and current students, adding extra weight to new students’ relationships with these groups. Thus, relational information is a necessary companion to appraisal information. Relational information centers on the question, “What is the nature of relationships with others?” (Miller and Jablin 1991). For instance, the nature of students’ relationships with faculty members is predicated upon the size of classes and the number of course sections faculty members teach. Students may enjoy a peer-to-peer relationship with faculty, a strict superior-subordinate relationship, or some variation of these. Understanding such dynamics empowers an admissions counselor to communicate to prospective students how to build and maintain relationships with faculty members; therefore prospective students gain additional insight that can aid them in determining the “fit” of a particular institution.

An admissions counselor in SEM forges relationships with prospective students based on communication of appraisal and relational information even as she guides students through the admissions process and into the college via referent information. The intersection of these three categories of information provides prospective students with a window into the academic context of the institution. By classifying information for prospective students into these three categories, an admissions counselor discharges two responsibilities: (1) to educate students about the type of information they should compare and contrast during the college search process; and (2) to provide referent, appraisal, and relational information for her specific college.

BECOMING A SEM AMBASSADOR

Some would compare an admissions counselor to an account manager who sells a product and closes a deal. While a reasonable (if depressing) analogy, it disregards all connection to the academic context of the college or university. It is better to view the admissions counselor in a nonprofit environment rooted in a traditional discipline in academia: political science. If the enrollment manager is the president of the United States, the admissions counselor is an ambassador. She communicates with diplomats from various countries (some more hostile than others) who possess a variety of differences, preferences, and interests. Developing
common ground is central to successful negotiation and shared meaning.

An admissions counselor strives to communicate with students about the academic context—how it is unique, distinctive, and desirable. An admissions counselor exchanges information with faculty members in the academic context by sharing research efforts as well as engaging on issues of curriculum and the student experience. In their interactions with one another, admissions counselors strengthen their connection to the academic context by positioning learning and inquiry at the heart of their work.

Admissions counselors have an opportunity to be SEM ambassadors who connect the human elements of learning and experience to the management of college and university enrollments, making strategic enrollment management more than a numbers game.

A SEM Ambassador:

- Utilizes research to guide recruitment strategies and program planning.
- Engages faculty and other stakeholders in conversations about the importance of recruitment, retention, and graduation.
- Educates students about how to classify and interpret information during the college search process.
- Provides referent, appraisal, and relational information to prospective students and parents about one’s college or university.

REFERENCES


About the Author

DANIEL MATHIS is the Assistant Director of Constituent Relations in the Office for Alumni Relations at Eastern Michigan University. He was previously employed as an admissions counselor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and as a graduate assistant in the Office of Admissions at Michigan State University. Mathis earned his bachelor’s degree at Eastern Michigan University and master’s degree from Michigan State University in Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education.
The purpose of this article is to describe how one institution in the Southeast used data from historical records and focus groups to inform a one-stop service model. The investigation was guided by two primary questions: (1) What do students mean when they say they experience the “runaround” with student services? (2) What actions can be taken to improve services and thereby mitigate such experiences? Research techniques are described for gathering and analyzing data, and findings are presented to show how information was used to enhance student services.

INTRODUCTION
Institutions of higher education, like other large organizations, can have complex and complicated administrative structures. Nowhere is this more true than in the area of student services. Internal systems and processes that have become almost second nature to the individuals who staff administrative units can seem confusing and frustrating to the customers who utilize these services. For example, why should a student apply for financial aid in one location, register for classes in another location, and receive a financial disbursement in yet a third location? Of course, there are reasons for this division of services, but to the student, these boundaries can seem artificial if not completely nonsensical. One way that institutions have attempted to streamline processes is through a one-stop model for enrollment services.

One-Stop Concept
The idea of a one-stop service model or “one-stop shop” is not new. The term originated in the retail industry at the turn of the 20th century to communicate the ways in which vendors could offer customers the convenience of satisfying their needs “in one stop” by providing many services in one location (Martin 2009). In higher education, the term has referred to the consolidation of services either through a physical restructuring or through an improvement in technology infrastructures, with the ultimate goal of providing interactions that are both positive and consistent (Johnstone 2007). The implications for the kinds of information and services students receive can indeed be of great consequence to the institution. According to Burnett (2007), “The degree to which institutions meet—or exceed—those expectations has an impact on recruitment, retention, and alumni loyalty” (p. 61).

BACKGROUND
In spring 2009, managers and representatives from a variety of student service offices at a comprehensive research institution in the Southeast were brought together as a work
group to investigate the feasibility of creating a one-stop shop to improve services for students. Due to budget constraints and limitations with regard to the physical layout of offices, as well as the availability of technology, the team recognized that a “physical” one-stop shop was not feasible. Discussions and planning for improving services for students therefore focused on a “virtual” one-stop presence.

Managers on the one-stop team had been hearing anecdotally from students and staff members that students felt they were getting the “runaround” in student services. Managers provided examples of situations in which the phrase had been used and agreed that it indicated some level of poor service; however, there was no consensus among the staff regarding what exactly the “runaround” meant. The investigator of this study suggested to the team that a review of historical data might provide clues regarding the ways in which students used the phrase over time.

The two primary questions that guided this investigation were: (1) What do students mean when they say they experience the “runaround” with regard to student services? (2) What actions can be taken to improve services and thereby mitigate such experiences? Despite widespread support for the one-stop concept, little research was found regarding the ways in which service providers used student data to shape student service programs (Bouman et al. 2006; Westman and Bouman 2005). The focus of this article, therefore, is to describe the research techniques that were used for investigating and addressing service issues and to share relevant insights regarding the one-stop service model.

By comparing previous perspectives on service with contemporary perspectives of students as well as service providers, managers gained a better understanding of the root causes of student dissatisfaction and thus were better prepared to formulate strategies to ameliorate concerns. The techniques described for collecting and analyzing data should encourage managers in the areas of enrollment services and retention to conduct trend analyses of historical data as part of an effort to learn more about the progression of their services and to inform their current practices.

**METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used to gather data from students and service providers in order to more fully understand students’ experiences with student services offices. Student comments were collected through historical data and were filtered using a data reduction technique. Qualitative sampling was used to verify the themes that emerged from data analysis. Service providers were afforded opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas through a series of structured focus group sessions. Member checking was used to ensure the “trustworthiness” of the data (Patton 1980).

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

**Study Sample**

Qualitative data were drawn from the open-ended comments sections of the *Graduating Student Survey* (GSS) that were collected from spring 2004 through fall 2008. The GSS was a locally developed assessment instrument designed to measure student satisfaction with the programs and services available in Student Affairs. The instrument was administered electronically to graduating seniors approximately five weeks prior to commencement and included scale measures and open-ended comments. Due to the qualitative nature of the investigation, the focus of this article is on the textual data.

Over the course of the eight semesters in which the GSS was administered, hundreds of responses were received each semester, with response rates fluctuating between a low of 27 percent (spring 2004) and a high of 45 percent (spring 2005, fall 2005), with an average response rate of 37.4 percent. (Due to an administrative error, the GSS was not administered in fall 2007.) As an incentive to complete the survey, students could elect to be entered into a drawing for one of 25 cash awards of $25.00 each.

Student responses were grouped by functional area, and analysis was conducted for the areas of Financial Aid and Registration and Academic Records. Specific questions addressed students’ experiences of: (a) walk-in registration, (b) web-based registration, (c) transcript request, and (d) financial aid in person and financial aid through ACCESS (a web-based application). Comments were managed through a text-to-table application and were designated positive, negative, or neutral.

Through an iterative process of data reduction, positive and neutral comments were removed, and negative comments were coded using an emergent schema. Based on the content of the comment, a unit of text was placed under one or more of the following headings: (a) people,
(b) process, (c) information. Due to the complex nature of programs and services, it was not uncommon for a comment to reflect both a “people” issue and a “process” issue. Data were sorted and displayed in descending order to highlight the number of comments in a particular section and areas of overlap.

Because data were collected through an historical record, it was not possible to confirm the verisimilitude of those who had completed the GSS in previous semesters. Instead, a student focus group was conducted to compare the accounts of current students who had not yet graduated with those of their predecessors. Invitations were sent to 80 undergraduate students who were currently receiving financial aid. Invitees were contacted twice prior to the scheduled focus group session; three students ultimately participated. The lack of participation by students in the focus group may be considered a limitation of this investigation.

Focus Group for Service Providers
In spring 2009, three focus groups were convened for front-line staff in the areas of Registration and Academic Records, Financial Aid, Student Accounting, Admission, General Studies (academic advising), and Academic Programs and Policy. Staff members from these units were assigned such that each focus group would have a representative cross-section of the various administrative functions. Eighteen front-line staff members participated in these focus groups ($n=18$).

The purpose of the staff focus groups was to involve front-line employees in discussions about service to students both within and across offices. Managers invited their employees to participate in the focus groups as a way to share honest and open feedback about their specific responsibilities and the challenges inherent in serving students. Though strongly encouraged by the managers, participation in the focus groups was not required. Steps were taken to ensure equal treatment regardless of an individual’s level of involvement.

The Executive Director of Human Resources facilitated all three focus groups using a structured protocol with questions focused on the areas of training, communication, and formal and informal channels for effective and/or efficient service. Handwritten notes from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and were grouped by theme. Themes were shared with managers and staff members as a way to validate the findings (Creswell and Miller 2000; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

FINDINGS
Through GSS responses, students expressed frustration and concern about the quality and consistency of service they received in the offices represented by the one-stop group. Based on the coded text, the findings describe the multiple meanings ascribed to the term “runaround” and examine the root causes of dissatisfaction. Further, findings include the results from the focus groups conducted with the service providers in the various administrative offices.

Defining the ‘Runaround’
Students expressed the “runaround” as both a metaphor and an actual occurrence in which they were physically “running around” campus to get the signatures, approvals, or documentation necessary to complete a transaction. Students described their experiences as “frustrating” and “confusing” as they sought answers to their questions; they used words like “lost documents” and “misinformation” to describe specific situations that required additional steps on their part to complete a transaction.

While these responses were not new to the service providers, it confirmed their initial suspicions about students’ perceptions of poor service and the subsequent labeling of these services as below par. Despite the low attendance at the student focus group, all three students indicated that the summary of student experiences from the historical data was consistent with their own experiences.

Virtual ‘Runaround’
An unanticipated outcome of the data analysis was the way in which students used the term ‘runaround’ to communicate their negative experiences navigating the university Web site for answers related to student services. By assigning new meaning to the conventional phrase, students in essence described a “virtual runaround” in which they encountered dead links, confusing pages, ambiguous or incomplete information, and poorly defined search terms.

Students and service providers observed further that information on the university Web site was displayed by unit rather than by function and lacked appropriate navigation tools to connect service units. Despite the university’s expectations that students complete more of their
transactions online, students indicated that they could not find the information for which they were searching. Students also described the system as “counter-intuitive” and “not user friendly.”

The People

Students’ number one complaint with regard to the “runaround” was dealing with “unfriendly,” “unhelpful,” or “rude” individuals. Text coded as “people” outnumbered “process” and “information” concerns, both individually and in combination with one of the other two codes, by a margin of two to one. Students used a wide variety of descriptors—ranging from “unpleasant” to “evil, evil, evil people”—to communicate their experiences with individuals. More often than not, students commented on how they felt they were treated in a particular situation rather than on the actual results of the transaction.

In addition to in-person visits, students were extremely critical of the service they received when they attempted to contact an office via telephone. Students expressed frustration regarding the number of their calls that were left unanswered and resentment for the length of time they were put on hold. If and when students’ calls were answered, students felt they were treated poorly by the service providers. Students described the “bouncing” of their telephone calls back and forth between offices as another way in which they received the “runaround.”

Perspectives from Service Providers

In each of the three focus groups, front-line staff members discussed the types of services they provided for students and the important roles they played in recruiting and retaining students. Service providers acknowledged that they often are the “face of the university” to prospective students and parents and recognized that students’ impressions of their office often were directly related to their interactions with front-line staff.

In the first focus group, one of the front-line staff members asked if participants could introduce themselves and the areas they represented. Head nods and other nonverbal communication made it apparent that even though these individuals had worked together, they had not developed personal connections with one another. One front-line employee admitted that although she had talked to an individual on the phone for years, she had never put a face to the name; others shared similar observations.

Front-line staff members described both positive and negative experiences in their attempts to assist students. They said that overall they felt “empowered” by their managers to respond to questions, seek additional answers, and make suggestions to improve the systems in place. Collectively, front-line staff members identified resources that would help them perform their jobs more effectively, including training sessions on customer service, improved methods for internal communication, and enhanced Web capabilities and presence.

IMPLICATIONS

By examining student responses on the GSS and gathering feedback from the front-line staff focus groups, managers in the one-stop group were able to use verifiable data to inform their decisions regarding the one-stop model. Based on students’ concerns and staff recommendations, the one-stop group created subcommittees to address specific issues.

Training

The training subcommittee partnered with the University’s Office of Training and Development to develop a curriculum that would address specific needs articulated by the front-line staff. Emphasis was placed on the areas of greatest need, including telephone etiquette and defusing distressed customers. In addition to these monthly training sessions, the one-stop group piloted the use of a self-paced, online quiz to test individuals on the content knowledge of their specific unit. As this concept gains wider use, the team will consider its use for cross-training employees.

Communication

As part of an effort to minimize unnecessary referrals, the communications subcommittee compiled from all of the one-stop units a set of frequently asked questions that could be used by any of the service providers, regardless of their specific area of responsibility. To connect individuals with their counterparts in other offices, the group implemented a secure instant messaging system so that top-tier questions could be answered immediately rather than by referring a student to another office.
The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) welcomes you to the AACRAO EDGE, a web-based resource for international credentials evaluation. You and your staff will benefit from the knowledge provided by AACRAO’s team of experts on country educational systems. The database is populated by the most current educational information from over 80 countries. EDGE will be expanded until every educational system is included, and continuously updated thereafter. To ensure consistency, educational equivalents will follow the placement recommendations approved by the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials (CEC).

To start your subscription to the AACRAO EDGE, visit www.aacraoedge.aacrao.org, or call us with questions at (202) 296-3359.
ommended that front-line staff be encouraged to network with one another in order to build stronger relationships across units. As the initial staff focus groups made clear, just because individuals work in the same division does not mean that they know—let alone trust—one another.

Web Site
As reported in the GSS data, students’ complaints about customer service decreased as more information became available online. Students indicated a preference for accessing resources in this easy and convenient way. However, frustrations arose when students either could not find or could not access the Web pages they needed. A third one-stop subcommittee was identified to address issues related to access and navigability of the Web site. The consensus was to reorganize web pages according to function rather than unit, as previously suggested by student feedback.

The issue of technology arose in all three focus groups. From the service providers’ perspective, improved online systems resolved many of the issues inherent in face-to-face interactions with students but created a new set of problems. Staff indicated that as the University was making more resources available to students online, staff members were receiving more requests for assistance in completing transactions and navigating the system. Many front-line staff said that they responded by “walking” students through the necessary steps over the phone. However, if other students were lined up in the office, front-line staff did not feel they could give the caller the time and attention he might need.

Staff suggested that enhanced Web pages might help minimize the number of phone calls, but consistent policies would be more effective in “normalizing” behaviors among offices. By handling requests in a coherent and professional manner and having a more precise protocol for forwarding calls, staff members felt they could serve students more effectively and decrease the level of frustration as previously described.

CONCLUSIONS
The goal of this article was not to share school-specific responses to a locally developed assessment instrument. Rather, it was to illustrate a process that was used to gather data from a variety of sources in order to address specific questions about service. Historical data were used to better understand students’ needs and to inform the process of developing a one-stop service model. Focus groups with service providers created opportunities to collaborate across units and to assess staff training needs.

For some, mining historical data for new insights may seem like a fool’s errand. However, information gleaned from the GSS and from staff focus groups provided the one-stop team with authentic data that could be used confirm hunches, initiate dialogue, and prioritize steps toward improving services for students. By analyzing data trends, the one-stop team was able to quantify complaints and listen to students’ voices in a setting that was free from the distractions of an emotionally charged and/or urgent situation.

The one-stop model for service provided front-line staff and managers with a platform for exchanging information and responding to students’ needs in a more systematic and effective way. Individuals discovered that by working together—rather than in isolation—they could effect greater change resulting in more cross-unit collaboration and, ultimately, in greater student satisfaction.

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About the Author

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THE CHALLENGE OF BOLOGNA: WHAT UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION HAS TO LEARN FROM EUROPE, AND WHY IT MATTERS THAT WE LEARN IT

PAUL L. GASTON, STYLUS PUBLISHING, LLC, 2010, 224 PP.

Reviewed by Chris J. Foley

In publishing, a book’s title is critical, and with The Challenge of Bologna, Paul Gaston is spot on. Challenge and Bologna—as in the Bologna Process—are words that have gone together for ten years now. Challenge, of course, has multiple meanings, but two are of particular interest when talking about Bologna: One is struggle, hard work, and difficulty. Ask anyone who has worked with implementing Bologna or understanding its details, and that’s the definition that comes to mind. To others, a second meaning comes to mind: being invited to a contest, as in “throwing down the gauntlet.” Bologna was meant to make European education more competitive in the global environment; in this sense, it challenges the primacy of U.S. education. However, there is a variant to this latter definition: “rising to the challenge”—that is, challenge as a means to incite all contestants to perform their best.

Gaston’s book explores all the above definitions as he investigates the effects of Bologna on its tenth anniversary. The year 2010 is of significance for Bologna not only because it provides an opportunity to review the results of the Process after a decade of implementation but also because it marks the realization of one of its most ambitious goals—the creation of the European Higher Education Area, a space that spans two continents and extends from Dublin to Vladivostok. It is fitting that Gaston has given us, the community of educators and policy makers in the United States, a superb summary of the Process from a U.S. perspective.

The Bologna Process is not unknown to the AACRAO membership. AACRAO has hosted a symposium on the topic and has published a resource guide for its membership. Presentations about Bologna are frequently on the agendas of national and regional meetings. However, our attention typically has been focused on the nuts and bolts of the Process: What do we do with those three-year Bologna compliant degrees? Certainly these are important areas of discussion (a fundamental premise of Bologna is fostering student mobility), but they revolve around questions that are primarily functional in nature.

Gaston considers more than the functions of the Process, asking an altogether different set of questions. He considers not the evolution of European education but that of U.S. higher education. Gaston is far more interested in the macro issues at stake: the fundamental goals of higher education; its future; questions of equity and
access; and economics. Utilizing the opportunity of Bologna as a tool for evaluating U.S. education, Gaston’s findings, in general, are not pretty.

In the mirror of Bologna, Gaston sees a U.S. education system that is failing to adapt to the 21st century at the necessary pace. The upcoming generation will be the first in U.S. history to be less educated than the generation preceding it. The unified vision of Bologna and the immense amount of resources countries are devoting to educational metamorphosis stand in stark contrast: one cannot help being shocked—and impressed.

Gaston is insightful in his identification of the similarities in the challenges confronting Europe and the United States. Many of the issues with which we struggle—credit transfer, quality assurance, transparency of content, maximizing research capability, and ease of mobility—have counterparts in the efforts of Bologna. The challenges are not unique; the attempts at solutions are.

This is not the first work to juxtapose U.S. and European higher education policy in light of Bologna. Cliff Adelman has done so in a series of policy papers written for the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Gaston acknowledges this work and builds upon the emerging body of literature. As former provost of a public university, Gaston has particular understanding of the complexities and bureaucracies of U.S. higher education—a fact that lends credibility to his arguments.

Though clearly a proponent of the Bologna Process, Gaston remains convinced of the strength of U.S. education: He gives credit for preserving a liberal arts education, fostering broad access to higher education, and maintaining a strong system of accreditation. These are strengths he does not wish to see diminished so much as increased. In sum, Gaston states, “While joining the Bologna club is an option well worth considering, a better idea may be to strengthen the U.S. club, one whose members may draw on the strongest elements of the Bologna Process while maintaining values that continue to distinguish higher education in the United States” (p. 203). That is, keep what’s already working and steal from Bologna what could make us stronger.
A quick and easy read, Gaston’s book is an excellent introduction to and analysis of Bologna. The first half of the book is an explanation of Bologna and the volumes of documentation and the players who have taken part in refining its goals; the second half is an even-handed commentary on the Bologna Process, particularly as it contrasts with U.S. higher education.

This is not a book that describes what’s happening “on the ground.” Rather, Gaston depends most heavily on government documents available on the Web. Though not necessarily a weakness, this reliance limits the work. For example, it is apparent that Gaston—like most others—does not fully understand the actual effects of the Process on students. (Then again, the Process is only a decade old, and there may not yet be sufficient evidence to demonstrate the impact of Bologna.) We are just now beginning to see the fallout as many of the participating countries enroll and graduate their first classes through the new degree structures. Data that more accurately tell the “new” story of European education are just beginning to be collected. It would be reasonable to expect acknowledgment of these issues in Gaston’s book, but fundamentally, they are not the point. The book does not constitute an attempt to analyze the success of the actual national implementations of Bologna’s precepts. To Gaston—as to this reviewer—the very creation of a unified vision for higher education constitutes success. Any proponent of Bologna must be perceived as not a little starry eyed given the daring and immensity of the Process.

With this book, Gaston challenges the United States not to accept Bologna but to face its own future. I support him in this: U.S. higher education needs once again to pull itself up to meet the challenge of the future. We cannot simply muddle through. Bologna is a wake-up call. For us, it is also a learning experience; Gaston provides a primer for discussion of how to begin; like Gaston, I hope we engage the discussion.

About the Author

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In economics, information and efficiency underlie market behavior. After all, for any market to function properly, parties to an exchange must have complete, accurate information about what they seek to buy or sell. Further, efficiency has both internal and external components. Internal efficiency relates to effective managerial and control systems while external efficiency describes whether the prices of products and services bought and sold reflect complete information about them. A noted economist of education, McMahon uses information and efficiency to build his arguments about appropriate levels of private and public investment in higher education. Specifically, higher education markets do not function as they should because of a dearth of accurate information, which leads to inappropriate investment levels in the higher education system. While many have a general awareness of the market benefits of higher education (i.e., higher monetary earnings), the private non-market and social benefits of a college education are given relatively scant attention. Thus, regardless of the internal efficiency that some colleges and universities achieve, external efficiency suffers when individuals and society fail to invest in higher education at levels commensurate with its full benefits.

In Chapter two, McMahon articulates several key concepts that ought to inform higher education policy debates, especially education as human capital formation and the market, non-market, and social benefits of higher education. By viewing education as a way to build human capital, one begins to view investment in education as an investment in productive capacity. After all, by embodying the knowledge and skills acquired as a result of education, people produce value for themselves, their employers, and for society. Further, understanding the full benefits of higher education leads to an understanding that investment in higher education reaps both monetary and valuable non-monetary returns. Not only does an investment in education (and, thus, in human capital) contribute to higher earnings for private individuals, but it also produces private non-market benefits (e.g., better health) and social benefits (e.g., reduced crime rates). In suggesting
how higher education policy debates might shift so as to take these benefits into account. McMahon begins to work toward the goal of providing better information and, thus, maximizing efficiency in higher education markets.

In Chapter three, McMahon introduces private and social rates of return to education in order to address the question of whether higher education contributes to economic growth. A private rate of return takes into account only the education costs borne by individuals and the monetary earnings that accrue to those individuals as a result of higher education. By contrast, a social rate of return considers the full costs of educating a student, as well as the earning benefits attributable to higher education. The dollar value of the return in each case would be equivalent. However, the social rates of return are generally lower than private rates because the former account for the full costs of educating a student. By way of illustration, suppose that a student pays $20,000 out of pocket to attend four years of college and in the process forgoes a job that would pay $112,000 total over the four years. We could compute her private rate of return based on her own costs ($20,000 in institutional costs plus $112,000 in forgone earnings) and her additional earnings after college. Now suppose that the true costs of educating the student come to $80,000 total. The social rate of return to the student’s education would have its basis in these true costs ($80,000 in institutional costs plus $112,000 in forgone earnings), but because the dollar value of the return would be the same (i.e., the student’s additional earnings as the result of having a college degree), the social return rate would be lower than the private rate. Even though astronomical tuition and fee costs make headlines, McMahon notes that both private and social rates of return have increased since 1980 as demand for more educated workers has risen. Does higher education contribute to economic growth? McMahon answers with a definitive yes, because investment in education leads to a better trained workforce and increased national productive capacity.

As already suggested, the benefits of higher education extend beyond monetary earnings. Chapters four and five discuss the private non-market and the social benefits of higher education in greater detail, as well as techniques for estimating their value and the amount of that value attributable to a college education. Private non-market benefits include positive outcomes to education that individuals enjoy but that do not relate to increased earnings. For example, college graduates often enjoy better health and have better household management skills than non-graduates. Higher education also results in social benefits by extending into the broader society and benefiting others in addition to those who earn degrees. Social benefits include political stability and lower crime rates.

In Chapter six, McMahon argues that the benefits of the higher education system do not result only from instruction but also from research. McMahon’s discussion of research further clarifies his human capital perspective: Research certainly increases knowledge, but without human capital (in the form of graduate degree holders) to apply and disseminate that knowledge, it has limited value. McMahon attempts to fill a gap in the literature on research benefits. While research has some private benefits—especially when researchers patent results—it also has many social benefits, the value of which remains poorly understood in the academic literature and in society. McMahon estimates the social rates of return to research at 20 to 30 percent, with the highest returns on engineering research. Because of poor knowledge of these return rates, the markets for research—like those for higher education more broadly—do not function at optimal efficiency.

McMahon concludes his book with recommendations in Chapters seven and eight for policy and for financing higher education. Drawing on such policy themes as access and affordability, he continues the discussion from Chapter two by using his findings to suggest specifically how policy debates might change. Whereas such debates have tended to look toward internal management issues (e.g., the development of inter-institution information systems that can track student progress), McMahon calls for more outward-looking policy discussions that consider what higher education does for individuals and for society. Based on such a renewed focus, policy at federal, state, and campus levels can encourage private and public investment levels in higher education that are commensurate with private and public returns, thereby maximizing efficiency. In summary, McMahon finds that 52 percent of the benefits of higher education are social while 48 percent accrue privately to individuals. Such proportions in the returns to higher education suggest that investment in similar proportions will lead to maximum efficiency, though McMahon notes a disturbing trend toward privatization.
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of higher education funding. He closes his book by reiterating calls for more accurate information on the benefits of higher education, as well as greater public investment in human capital formation. While years may pass before individuals and society fully realize the extent to which investment in higher education pays off, few other investments can generate such handsome returns.

Because an in-depth critique of McMahon's methodology would require much greater familiarity with econometric technique than this reviewer possesses, I limit myself to more overarching and theoretical comments. First, many of McMahon's models seem to hinge upon a static version of the way in which students progress through college: One's course of study has a definite beginning and end, with higher returns realized after completion. Yet those of us in higher education know that linear progress toward an undergraduate degree has become less common in recent decades. Present-day college students—many of whom fall well outside the traditional eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old age range—take courses as their life commitments allow and often "swirl" en route to a degree, if they finish an academic program at all. While McMahon did not set out to address changing student demographics or patterns of attendance, future research that draws on McMahon's work ought to investigate the market, non-market, and social benefits that stem from such changes. Such research can further inform policy debates by addressing at what age and in what manner students should go to college. For example, if benefits are greatest when students finish college after a single continuous period of study, then institutions and state and federal governments can devise funding strategies and support programs that encourage continuous attendance and degree completion.

While McMahon leaves no doubt that higher education generates great private and social benefits, I question whether current higher education institutions represent the most efficient mechanisms for delivering such benefits. Market, non-market, and social returns arise from private and public investment in human capital formation, but is it ideal for such investment to be made via colleges and universities? Alternatively, workplace training and mentoring programs could bring about at least some of the benefits of formal higher education—and probably at much lower cost. In his policy discussion, McMahon alludes to the need for campus leaders to examine rates of return for their campuses and for individual programs. It might make sense to examine the effectiveness of a given type of campus organization in bringing about education benefits. Does a particular constellation of academic programs serve to maximize a campus's external efficiency? What impact does the mix of full-time and adjunct faculty have on external efficiency? Future research should focus on how the internal organization of campuses and other education providers serves to maximize external efficiency.

While McMahon's book provides less technical detail than works intended for economists, it is a challenging read nevertheless—even for a well-informed audience. Still, McMahon makes a compelling, persuasive argument for the use of information to understand appropriate levels of public and private investment in higher education. Further, the book is useful to enrollment managers and other student service administrators, who often stand on the front lines in providing information about the benefits of higher education. The book arms us with even more information. I would caution readers that McMahon's conclusions are based on analysis of extensive data sets. While on average a college education produces high returns, the individual student with whom one meets may or may not realize such returns. For example, a thirty-five-year-old career changer who must take out large student loans will have a much lower rate of return on his education investment than an eighteen-year-old on full scholarship. The optimal amount that each student ought to invest in education will vary substantially. Thus, judicious application of McMahon's findings requires that we not lose sight of our students' individual needs. In the long run, better information on the range of benefits our industry provides will help us serve students and society to greatest effect.

About the Author

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