Strategic Enrollment Planning in an Era of Diminishing Resources

Jason L. Meriwether, PhD

Enrollment leaders are navigating historic budget constraints, compounded by shifts in federal funding, increased scrutiny of student loan programs, and a steady drumbeat of concern from experts about the long-term erosion of resources in higher education.

Unfunded mandates to grow without resources create natural conflicts for enrollment leaders who face pressure to achieve strategic goals with an unrealistic expectation to do so. Even more disconcerting, there is often an expectation to grow even while staffing reductions and cuts to operational budgets concurrently undermine enrollment planning. When budget reductions are applied as blanket percentage cuts or dollar targets, rather than informed by strategic priorities, institutions risk expecting meaningful outcomes from functions that no longer have the resources to deliver them.

In the face of these demands, enrollment leaders face a few important considerations when balancing how to reinvest, reallocate, reduce, or request funds to support a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan. Here are 6 areas to focus on as you shape your planning.

Context Matters

The most effective approach to create context for enrollment management funding is to leverage data. Particularly, it requires the right mix of historical analysis and current trend data, an effective way to counter the anecdotal information that often drives the narrative.

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Importantly, gathering and analyzing this data should not be a rare occurrence. Establish ongoing, timely, automated systems for reviewing and sharing trend data for the best results. These systems should be accessible to all stakeholders and consistently discussed and reviewed.

Look for ways to connect such data with budget history and projections. Even in the face of sunsetting or eliminating academic programs or ending unsuccessful initiatives or services, timely data review and assessment can create opportunities to fund new initiatives without seeking more dollars. Using that data can help make the case for investing in more efficient strategy levers or additional capacity to complement a SEM plan.

Consider Student Behavior

When making decisions about new investments, requesting new funding, or defunding strategic initiatives, one of the most critical factors is understanding how our students behave. Student interest can be demonstrated in various ways: applications, yield, transferring in or out of a program, retention and completion trends, survey data, or academic performance.

Whether your institution uses credit hours or headcount to measure budget impact, student subscription and interest are essential to demonstrating the value of curricular and co-curricular programs, student services, and enrollment strategy levers. No matter how committed university leaders or faculty may be to a program or initiative, student demand always reveals whether to sustain, suspend, or sunset an initiative.

Collaborate with Faculty to Set Priorities

I recently edited and co-authored a chapter in the book *Prioritizing Enrollment Management: Effective Practices and Strategies for Student Success and Completion*. In my chapter, I emphasize the critical role of academic collaboration in building and sustaining a successful enrollment management enterprise. A central takeaway: enrollment leaders achieve far greater impact when they engage institutional stakeholders as partners rather than obstacles. **Collaboration isn't optional. It's essential.**

This is where enrollment data becomes especially powerful. When shared effectively, it can inform academic decision-making, supporting the development of new programs to generate revenue, building the case for new funding, or guiding the reallocation of existing resources. Data, when contextualized, becomes more than numbers; it becomes strategy.

It fuels marketing, messaging, recruitment, and ultimately supports academic innovation.

Regular, proactive collaboration with faculty allows us to set shared goals and anticipate program needs. Goals don't always have to focus on growth but should align with broader strategic enrollment plans. By providing insights into which courses are likely to thrive—or struggle—we help faculty avoid last-minute disruptions that can impact students' ability to stay on track.

When managed thoughtfully, these partnerships enhance student satisfaction, persistence, and most importantly, degree completion.

Capture Relevant Market Factors

When budget planning, enrollment leaders should also consider market factors. Are there local, regional, state, or federal job protections in play? Which markets produce more (or fewer) high school graduates, transfer students, non-traditional students, online students, or international students? Understanding these factors is important for enrollment leaders as they decide about funding
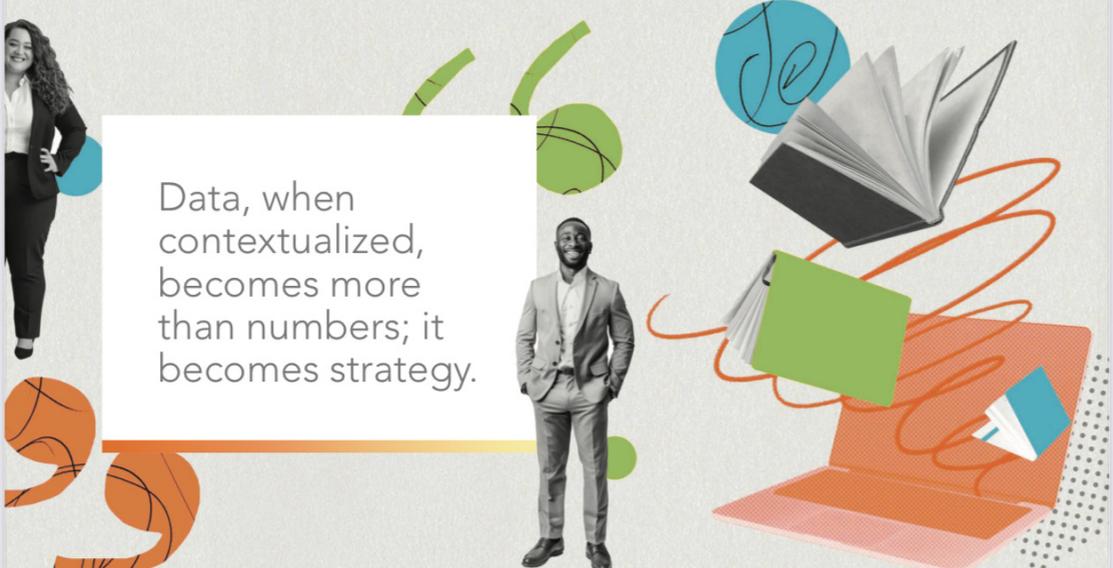
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recruitment, retention, persistence initiatives, and market saturation strategies, including digital targeting.

Enrollment leaders also possess the unique ability to share their data and outcomes as market influencers in messaging about recruitment, retention, or re-recruitment of students for graduate programs. Leveraging this market data also creates unique opportunities to partner with vice presidents for advancement or development to seek critical scholarship funds to bolster student perpetuity in these key areas.

Competitor Data Matters

Understanding competitor resources and data can help persuade or dissuade actions in marketing, recruitment, or messaging. While leveraging benchmark data is often necessary when it's time to propose or set tuition or housing rates, there is far greater opportunity to capitalize on this information. Consistent attention over time to degree production data, enrollment data, demographic data, and available budget and resource data is a helpful mainstay in enrollment management planning.

Keeping track of institutional program closures or declines can create opportunities to forecast changes in our market or compel adaptation before the negative trend reaches us. In other words, it helps us stay relevant and ahead of the curve. Supporting faculty leaders by providing competitor data allows enrollment leaders to serve as a needed resource and ensure program development is bolstered with pertinent data.

Commit to Retention and Persistence as Budget Priorities

Over the years, many of us enrollment leaders have experienced the frustrating situation when enrollment management is only perceived as recruitment in the eyes of some of our colleagues. Using context and data on retention and persistence investments amid budget cuts allows enrollment leaders to demonstrate their broader value. This also affords an opportunity to collaborate with student affairs leaders to impact student success, allowing us to demonstrate the importance of such partnerships.

A recent Institute for Higher Education Policy study encourages university leaders to prioritize 3 core elements: *retention, belonging, and persistence.*[1] It's a good reminder that investment in retention is also an investment in enrollment management, which can improve commitment to allocating funds to support our SEM plans.

Setting targets to grow persistence in key areas, sustain it in others, or expand successful initiatives to maximize retention for more students is vital to reshape that narrative

and demonstrate the economic impact of student success and perpetuity as functions of enrollment management.

Some of the best advice my parents ever gave me was to remember that if I don't provide the right information to get myself to the table, I will always be on the menu. My parents' wisdom is relevant for enrollment leaders, too.

We can reshape the resource allocation conversation and results on our campuses by expressing our work in outcomes, clearly defining ourselves as tools of persistence and retention, as well as recruitment, and harnessing our experience and talents to be the best collaborators in our campus communities. Enrollment leaders are well-prepared to drive conversations and ensure that budgeting and resource allocation are done *with* us instead of done *to* us.

Jason L. Meriwether, PhD, is an experienced higher education leader who has led Enrollment Management, Student Affairs, TRIO Programs, and NCAA & NAIA Athletics at public and private institutions. Jason has led collaborative and team-driven initiatives that have improved recruitment, retention, persistence, and graduation trends. He is the editor of Prioritizing Enrollment Management: Effective Practices and Strategies for Student Success and Completion, *published by Routledge in 2024. A native of Guthrie, Kentucky, Jason earned his PhD in Educational Administration with a specialization in Higher Education Leadership at Indiana State University. Jason currently serves as Vice President of Enrollment Management at Sam Houston State University.*

1 "How Student Experience and Belonging Interventions Can Support Strong Postsecondary Outcomes." Institute for Higher Education Policy. 2024. https://www.ihep.org/publication/student-experience-and-belonging-strong-outcomes/.