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PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES: THE ENROLLMENT-DRIVEN BUSINESS MODEL AND CULTURE

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Reports abound of colleges and universities grappling with the realities of changing demographics, resulting in steep enrollment declines. Nationwide, college enrollment fell about 2 percent in 2012-2013; the number of new high school graduates peaked in 2011 and is not projected to reach a new high until 2024, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Successful presidents are fully engaged in the student enrollment process, driving a business paradigm and culture focusing on recruitment and retention while recognizing that students spend the bulk of their time doing things other than studying. Therefore, effective institutions aren't just focused on what happens during the 18 (or so) hours a student is in the classroom, but rather, on the overall learning experience.

Our long-time colleague, E. Gordon Gee, back for his second tenure as president of West Virginia University, and a veteran CEO of both private and public universities, often speaks of the importance of a "168-hour partnership" (the number of hours in a week) between institutions and students. Gee has a long history of inspiring the model we suggest.

Further, we recommend the following:

Leading the Discussion: The president should make student recruitment and retention a visible priority at all levels of the institution. Even with a clear, focused vision presidents cannot hope to effectively implement their partnership philosophy without ownership from key stakeholders.

Executing Seamless Processes: The president must be involved in defining the process and approving goals for the recruitment staff, as well as committing resources to support the program. Processes must address efficiency, communications, personal contact and attention. Further, the president is often instrumental in breaking down barriers among the admissions, financial aid and business/finance offices.

Involvement in Staffing: Most successful presidents prefer to play an instrumental role in hiring all enrollment management personnel, insisting on a staff with a bottom-line, results orientation and sales philosophy. In addition, CEO's must ensure that all key stakeholders are on board with consistent core messages and talking points.

Maintaining High Visibility: The president must remain active and highly visible in the enrollment management office and elsewhere. S/he is the face of the institution to key stakeholders. Effective presidents display a frequent and personal presence, not only at the enrollment office itself, but also by hosting informal recruiting visits in the president's office, cafeteria and other locations.

Speak Persuasively and Often: By doing so, the president can provide inspirational leadership to enhance the campus experience. Some colleagues take it a step further, personally calling top recruitment candidates. One veteran president of an NCAA Division III college coordinates campus visits with athletic recruiters so that top prospects benefit from a well-orchestrated visit with the president's office. Another takes a list of top prospective students and personally cultivates them. Finally, presidents should actively use social media to communicate with students.

Use Objective External Consultants: We recommend the use of external consultants to recruit key staff, to effect transformational change and to periodically evaluate progress. One experienced president tells us that he brings in The Dysart Group once a quarter to assess progress; after the conclusion of the recruitment cycle, bottom-line results from the previous year are evaluated.

No one ever said it would be easy; however, a few sustained hours of the president's time focused upon enrollment and retention each week can, over time, produce a significant impact. Presidential priority in this key area can energize faculty and staff to do the same.

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They have collaborated on 11 books, including "President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education" (Volumes I-III) and "Presidential Perspectives" (Volumes I-VIII). They also edit the popular higher education thought series "Presidential Perspectives" (Aramark), now in its eighth year (www.presidentialperspectives.org).