



## Enrollment Management Leadership Starts at the Top College Presidents Must be Visible and Set the Tone

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - Enrollment Manager, Vol. 7, Issue 2, April 1, 2011

News on the enrollment front is mixed, adding to the challenge facing college Presidents already beleaguered by financial sustainability issues. The “Millennials,” the mini-boom generation now in and just out of college, is being replaced with a much smaller demographic. The good news is that there is still time to plan, because the percentage of high school graduates entering college is projected to increase through 2014. However, it’s estimated that in the next decades the number of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities will drop as secondary enrollment declines. How can our campuses respond?

The conventional wisdom is that admissions offices will have to work overtime to attract more students. We submit, however, that solutions need to go far beyond enrollment management and a plethora of student friendly-communications techniques to comprehensive strategic planning strategies. Following are some key recommendations:

***The President must be the driving force in making recruitment and retention a top priority on the campus.***

In these times, it’s too easy for enrollment issues to be placed on the back burner as fund-raising consumes Presidential time and energy. It is essential, however, that the President remains equally hands-on in both areas. We know of Presidents who have awakened too late to “red flags” which should have indicated negative enrollment trends.

No other area is more vital to an institution’s ongoing health and viability than recruitment and retention. It is critical, therefore, that enrollment report directly to the President with an open line of communication and access. In this critical area, Presidents simply cannot afford to take their eye off the ball for even a short period.

***The President must create a corporate culture that supports the enrollment operation.***

This includes a President who is highly visible in recruitment events, while taking the lead in the institutional philosophy portrayed in enrollment publications and online. This initiative also includes leveraging facilities to create value. “Tired” classrooms, grounds and facilities create a drag on the entire enrollment management process: enhanced residences, recreation-fitness facilities and dining services serve as an integral part of the student experience and play a vital role in attracting and retaining students.

As our 2010 book “President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education” (Council of Independent Colleges/SunGard publications) co-edited with our friend and colleague Jacqueline Powers Dowd emphasizes, institutions must also leverage technology to create a competitive advantage. While expensive, investing in technology also levels the playing field for small and midsized institutions.

***The President must maintain a balance on enrolling student-athletes.***

Most liberal arts colleges are members of the NCAA Division III, which emphasizes student-athletes who fit academically with the colleges in which they enroll. It is important that the President underscore the importance of athletics while at the same time holding the enrollment office to a standard of recruiting student-athletes who mirror the campus population. Student-athletes need to be just that. Recruiting those who do not reflect the institutional profile will inevitably lead to retention problems later, serving neither the athlete nor the institution.

***The President must exercise leadership in setting financial aid priorities.***

We hear many stories of Presidents getting into trouble over runaway financial aid budgets that are out of control. “Buying” students with steep discounts is a recipe for long-term financial ruin. Contrary to popular opinion, it is possible to attract and retain students, while also improving selectivity, access and affordability. It’s all in the planning.

Indeed, thoughtful, strategic planning, which includes but is not limited to, creating strategic partnerships, altering the product-delivery mix, enhancing student-friendly facilities and amenities and leveraging facilities to attract students who are a good fit with the institution is the bedrock upon which all future growth must be based. As an astute admissions dean once remarked, “The ability to respond to the market is a better benchmark of the health of an institution than any short-term tactics.”

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