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ABSTRACT

A case study is presented which tests Hossler's 1984 assertion (that well conceptualized plans to manage enrollment can lead to a better institutional self-understanding and an enhanced institutional health and vitality) and critically examines one private, comprehensive university's effort to improve the quality and quantity of its environmental and market data. Investigation focused on (1) factors contributing to the design and implementation of a new enrollment management system and (2) tangible effects attributed to the system 5 years after its inception. Information is presented as follows: toward a collaborative solution; defining the strategic components (market research, institutional pricing and student aid, institutional competition, admissions yield, admissions selectivity, and student retention); and after 5 years, some encouraging results. It is concluded that information on enrollment is crucial to institutions of higher learning to prevent an untimely demise. While private, enrollment-dependent campuses are the most vulnerable to the threat of dwindling freshman classes, all colleges and universities can benefit from the strategic framework constructed by the university in the study. Tables are included. Contains 13 references. (SM)

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A MEETING OF THE MINDS: IMPLEMENTATION OF AN EFFECTIVE
ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY AT ONE PRIVATE COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITY

Marsha V. Krotseng
Association for the Study of Higher Education
Annual Meeting, November 1989

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Introduction: Information as Prelude to Planning

"Information is the lifeblood of an organization," asserts General Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "If you're not on top of the information system, you're not dealing with the lifeblood of the organization" (quoted in Wallechinsky, 1989, p. 5). As the organization's sustenance, information connotes considerably more than specific facts and details that are routinely recorded; rather it refers to data that has been retrieved and analyzed (Fincher, 1983). Like their counterparts in government, industry, and the military, effective college and university executives now seek such analysis as the basis for policy decisions and strategic plans (Keller, 1983). "Any institutional planning effort," observe Lasher and Firnberg (1983), "requires information on the institution's past, its present situation, its environment, and forecasts of its future condition" (p. 98).

Farsighted commentators pressed campuses for improved information during the mid-1970s. For instance, Torrence (1975) concluded, "The case, or cases, for our diverse systems of postsecondary education may flounder in a morass of unfocused and perhaps irrelevant data unless we are able to identify the significant policy issues at each level and the nature of the information needed for decision-making" (p. 4). With "increased demands for accountability and limitations of restricted resources . . . pressure to manage institutions more

effectively and efficiently" has heightened attention to strategic planning in the less hospitable environment of the 1980s (Fife and Barnett, 1986, p. 7). Indeed, strategic thinking has become de rigueur as insistent policy issues underscore the need for long range planning. Perhaps the most crucial of these issues is demographic change.

Over the next five to ten years demographic shifts in the college student population could substantially alter the character of many campuses and, in extreme cases, imperil institutional survival. A precipitous decline in the number of traditional college-aged students is anticipated for all states but California, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia through the mid-1990s (Verkuil, 1989). According to one projection, total college and university enrollment will drop nearly six and one-half percent in the decade spanning from 1985 through 1995 (Center for Education Statistics, 1987). Table 1 presents a detailed examination of the factors contributing to this overall figure. However, some of most salient statistics show a three percent greater decline in enrollment for private institutions than for public campuses, a six percent greater decline for four-year than for two-year institutions, a fourteen percent decrease in full-time enrollment compared with a four percent rise in part-time enrollment, and a twenty-two percent drop in enrollment of 20-21 year olds compared with a twenty-nine percent increase in enrollment for the group aged 35 and above. Such demographics inevitably will bring heightened competition

Insert Table 1 about here

for students, "requiring new campus modes of operation and new

surveillance procedures" (Keller, 1983, pp. 16-17). Clearly, less selective private, tuition and enrollment-driven institutions face the greatest threat. While effective planning will help guide all campuses safely through an uncertain period, strategic thinking is essential for those most at risk. As suggested above, timely and accurate information provides the necessary prelude to any academic strategy.

Ironically, "information about what exactly is going on within a college or university is still underdeveloped at numerous campuses" (Keller, 1983, p. 131). For instance, Keller describes information about students as at once both superb and surprisingly meager. "What is superb," he says, is our knowledge of "characteristics, abilities at entry, rates of dropout, financial help, and the like" (Keller, 1983, p. 132). Conversely, colleges and universities are less likely to conduct their own sophisticated market research and analysis of students. However, this key perspective demands increasing attention; administrators with a thorough understanding of their institution's distinct appeal to specific segments of the student population can position their campus to effectively confront the challenge of demographics. Moreover, they will be poised to pursue some as yet underexplored student markets. A strategic plan for enrollment management outlines the institution's strengths and scans its environment for potential threats which can be transformed into opportunities. Such strategy does not begin with slick, Madison Avenue advertising, glossy brochures, promotional floppy disks, or videotapes (Arundel, 1989). When considered collectively as part of a comprehensive information system, raw data on admissions yield,

enrollment, retention, attrition, effects of financial aid, and primary market become the "stuff " of strategic decisions. Without such data, Sherlock Holmes once advised an anxious Watson, "one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts" (Doyle, 1967, p. 11).

Purpose of the Study

Indeed, a well-defined enrollment management strategy unveils the facts rather than twisting them to fulfill the common wisdom. Looking beyond the admissions process alone, enrollment management entails monitoring patterns of the complete student life cycle -- from a prospective applicant's first inquiry through graduation. In short, enrollment management comprises "any institutional attempt to influence the number, mix, and quality of students through recruitment and retention strategies" (Glover, 1986, p. 16). Hossler's (1984) careful review of higher education's enrollment management literature concludes that

Well conceptualized plans to manage enrollment can lead to a better institutional self-understanding and an enhanced institutional health and vitality. With adequate information about the institutional environment and sufficient data about the actual and potential markets of a college or university, enrollment managers may indeed be able to influence college choice effectively. (p. 148)

This case study tested Hossler's assertion by critically examining one private, comprehensive university's efforts to improve the quality and quantity of its environmental and market data. Investigation centered around the questions, (1) What factors contributed to the design and implementation of a new enrollment

management system at this institution? and (2) What tangible effects can be attributed to the system five years after its inception? Specifically, the research (1) documents the unique collaborative process which yielded a new enrollment management strategy; (2) describes the components of that strategy; (3) analyzes the tangible results (e.g., student enrollment) five years after initiation of the strategy; and (4) suggests how other types of higher education institutions can successfully apply the findings.

Methodology

With its in-depth focus, case study methodology promised to lend keen insight into the above questions. Semi-structured interviews with the Associate Vice President for Academic Administration and the Directors of Admissions, Financial Aid, and Institutional Research were supplemented with individualized questions to probe for further detail. In addition, internal reports (including a recently revised strategic plan) and quantitative data from the university's Office of Planning and Institutional Research provided context and served as indicators of the degree of success the enrollment management strategy has achieved. Complementing this wealth of material were a number of refereed publications featuring the university's novel information systems.

The University Context

This research concentrates on enrollment management efforts in one private comprehensive university currently serving over 4700 full-time and 2700 part-time students. As a tuition, and therefore enrollment, dependent institution its major concerns are sustaining (and hopefully increasing) enrollment levels over the coming years while also maintaining student quality as measured by class rank and

SAT scores. Demographics suggest that satisfying these tandem goals will be a monumental accomplishment for all but the private and public ivies. The stakes are even higher for this university; once primarily a commuter institution, the campus now houses approximately 3500 students in recently constructed dormitories. Enrollment management will prove integral to achieving its aims. As recognized in the institution's 1988 strategic plan,

effective enrollment management is critical to success in establishing a reputation for academic excellence, for improving the quality of campus life, and for acquiring resources necessary for the University's future growth and development.

At the University...enrollment management is given a high priority to create opportunities to influence the size, mix, and quality of student enrollment through student recruitment and retention efforts and through improvement in the quality of academic programs and student services.

Enrollment management is a University-wide responsibility.

Such was not always the case. At the beginning of this decade the institution enjoyed the lingering effects of a long period of growth, and the academic community remained unconvinced that decline was imminent. A graph of the region's rapidly dwindling population of eighteen year olds finally conveyed the urgent message. Suddenly "a lot of folks became sensitive to enrollment management and retention" acknowledged the Associate Vice President for Academic Administration. "People then recognized enrollment as job number one" and geared activity toward that end. They clearly perceived the relationship of enrollment management to institutional health -- both academic and

financial.

Unfortunately the university's information systems were "abysmal" in the early 1980s; according to the Associate Vice President they were "systems" only in the broadest sense of the word. The campus obviously was suffering from information underload. Consequently, the institution invested in a national vendor's student information system for the mainframe computer, a system that ultimately proved better suited for easy on-line use by administrative offices than for effective reporting and analysis. To resolve this dilemma the Associate Vice President and recently-hired Director of Institutional Research arrived at a compromise: All student data would be stored and maintained on the mainframe for operational use while enrollment analyses and research would be performed by downloading this data to microcomputers in the Office of Planning and Institutional Research. The specifics of this microcomputer-based information system were left to the Directors of Institutional Research and Admissions.

Toward a Collaborative Solution

As a former Director of Admissions himself, the Director of Institutional Research held a solid intellectual grasp of critical issues. "He knows as much or more about admissions than I do -- formally and informally" relates another Admissions Director. Viewing himself as a "change agent," the Director of Institutional Research conducted a comprehensive literature review and then consulted with the admissions office concerning objectives of enrollment management, reports, and what specifics might be incorporated in market analyses. This meeting of the minds illumined the goals of enrollment management as cited in the university's strategic plan:

1. To seek ways of increasing the University's market share of prospective applicants;
2. To insure that institutional pricing and student aid policies are competitive with those of comparable institutions and to assure the diversity of the student body;
3. To seek ways of increasing admissions yield from the number of accepted applicants to provide the number and quality of entering students the University requires across its eight schools and colleges;
4. To increase admissions selectivity and provide an enrollment mix that is consistent with the University's mission as a private, comprehensive university serving full- and part-time students at the undergraduate and graduate level;
5. To increase the accuracy of enrollment and income forecasts for budgeting purposes;
6. To offer, within the limits of available resources, high quality academic programs that are responsive to the needs and preferences of entering students;
7. To offer, within the limits of available resources, high quality campus experiences that are responsive to the needs and preferences of students;
8. To find effective ways of analyzing, predicting, and improving student retention;
9. To balance instructional staffing and income and expense at realistic levels considering both academic values and enrollment demand; and
10. To enhance the University's image and reputation for academic excellence and the quality of campus life through visible achievements of students, faculty, alumni, and staff.

The above goals outline various components of the enrollment management system which evolved through a partnership linking the

Offices of Admissions and Planning and Institutional Research. In creating the research-based system to achieve these aims, the partners first identified key data from elements residing on the mainframe and arranged to download that internal data for extensive analysis at the microcomputer level. Objectives for the system itself were

- (1) to integrate external environmental trends and internal enrollment data across years and
- (2) to track student cohorts longitudinally from prospective applicants through application, enrollment, retention, and alumni follow-up.
(Glover, 1986, p. 22)

At that point, the Office of Planning and Institutional Research studied the overall database on an IBM-PC AT to design the most efficient data file structures given anticipated requirements. Considering student subpopulations, reporting needs, and the enrollment management and research literature base, six fundamental database structures emerged: "(1) applicants for admission; (2) prospective applicants for admission; (3) financial aid applicants; (4) characteristics of entering students; (5) summary academic history for enrolled students; and (6) course enrollment demand" (Glover, 1986, p. 19). Data from such external sources as the The College Board Handbook, The College Cost Book, and John Minter's National Data Service were incorporated for use in informative interinstitutional comparisons and market analyses.

By combining popular relational database software (e.g., dBase or FoxBase) with the statistical capabilities of SPSS-PC, the Director of Institutional Research and his staff produced a powerful yet flexible research and analysis system in less than six months. Standard tables

and report forms filled the institution's information gap and were easily modified to satisfy additional needs of the Admissions Office. Whereas mainframe reports could be altered only after a time- and budget-consuming COBOL reprogramming effort, the new enrollment management system could readily respond to user queries or ad hoc requests. For instance, "the admissions officer can model admissions yield and academic quality directly from the downloaded database, changing his or her selection criteria . . . or ranges of values to assess the number and quality of students whom a college gets from any defined market segment" (Glover, 1986, p. 25). More specifically, a simple screen entry enables the Admissions Director to view the number, names, and academic characteristics of students from suburban St. Louis or of students who scored over 500 on the mathematics portion of the SAT.

Defining the Strategic Components

The following distinct, albeit interrelated, components of the system address the principal goals articulated for enrollment management.

Market Research: As Keller (1983) describes it, higher education marketing is a scholarly effort "of systematically understanding who it is your university is serving, why they come, why they don't come, and how you might serve your students better and position yourself more self-consciously in the complex network of 3,100 colleges and universities" (p. 159). This enrollment management system aids Admissions and other administrative offices in understanding the population(s) served by the university as a whole and by each of its eight diverse colleges. Existing as well as special request reports

examine applicant and enrolled student origin by zip code, indicating which market areas promise the highest potential yield and whether percentages have shifted over time. A recent addition to the original system is geographic mapping software which can plot current and potential markets from demographic data on applicants. Complementing the above techniques, the Admissions Office now carefully reviews the list of students with high National Merit test scores.

A new Admissions Director appointed two years ago characterizes the university as already "well ahead" of most others in strategic marketing. Applauding the strong support from Institutional Research, he acknowledges, "Recruitment doesn't take care of itself. . . Institutional Research is the vital link in a lot of areas in providing trends. If we are looking for a new market, we turn to Institutional Research and ask." Given the Institutional Research Director's unique admissions background, the Director of Admissions frequently seeks his counsel on short-term techniques and long-range strategy to find "that special hole or market niche" occupied by each college within the university (Keller, 1983, p. 159).

Institutional Pricing and Student Aid: With enrollment as "Job One," implementing the admissions portion of the system inevitably took priority over the financial aid component. However, once admissions was under control the Financial Aid Director was eager to achieve similar results for his area. Development of this segment began as a "mutual meeting." The Director of Financial Aid concedes, "I don't know if he [the Director of Institutional Research] came to me or I went to him, but if they want admissions, the next thing is financial aid. So if I approached him, he probably already had it in mind anyway."

The component which evolved from this encounter not only provides for routine student aid reporting but, more important, helps ensure that "financial aid is getting to the right people" -- in other words, those who need it most. Various analyses allow the Financial Aid Director to trace fund distribution across colleges and across student sub-populations as defined by SAT scores, residence, retention rate, grade point average, or athletic participation. Ad hoc requests for information (e.g. a top administrator's query as to the characteristics of students receiving a particular scholarship) are quickly addressed, often using SPSS-generated tables or crosstabulations. As a result the Financial Aid Director affirms, "I can make decisions now that I couldn't before."

In conjunction with budget advisory meetings, the Office of Planning and Institutional Research also monitors tuition and fees, room and board, and total student costs over a five-year span for comparable institutions in a listing which indicates the university's relative rank.

Institutional Competition: "Central to the formulation of an academic strategy," stresses George Keller (1983), "is a knowledge of where you stand in the competition and a decision about exactly what competitive position you will strive to establish" (p. 162). To determine the university's situation vis a vis its competitors, the Office of Planning and Institutional Research has cluster analyzed an appropriate group of 221 private campuses, using financial indicators as well as applied-to-accepted and accepted-to-enrolled ratios (Glover and Mills, 1989) Based on resultant classifications, the institution's enrollment, yield, SAT scores, tuition and fees, faculty

salaries, and other characteristics can be viewed in light of the mean or median values for its peer group.

Admissions Yield: According to the university's new Admissions Director, information generated by the enrollment management system "describes a class completely and in any way you want." Among its many functions, one component monitors "year-to-year changes in the number of applications, acceptances, rejections, referrals, withdrawals, and tuition deposits received in each college" (Glover, 1986, p. 26). Using these statistics administrators can scrutinize shifts in application rates or yield ratios for particular groups of students and respond accordingly.

Admissions Selectivity: The quality of entering students is assessed by examining SAT scores and high school class rank for each college and for the University as a whole. A standard multiple regression equation also employs these indicators in predicting a student's likely grade point average. Profiles of returning students (aggregated by college or some other distinct group) are constructed by combining these variables with actual freshman GPA, cumulative GPA, and selected demographic characteristics.

Student Retention: Beginning with the 1984 entering cohort, retention rates for freshmen and transfer students have been monitored each semester. Results are presented in the form of raw numbers and percentages of students who (1) are still in attendance; (2) have earned two-year degrees (and are not continuing); (3) have earned four-year degrees; and (4) have left the institution. These rates are particularly instructive for the separate colleges. Additional reports detail the number and percentage of students still enrolled in their original college of application together with statistics on

those who have transferred between colleges (for example, from arts and sciences to education).

After Five Years: Some Encouraging Results

Inaugurating the 1989-90 academic year with a speech to all faculty and staff, the university's president noted with obvious pleasure several salient trends. Counter to current higher education wisdom, applications for Fall 1989 had risen by six percent; even more remarkable was the accompanying increase of several points in these students' average SAT scores. The president's statements suggest that the two primary goals of enrollment management -- increasing the number and quality of the applicant pool -- are, indeed, being met. Tables 2 and 3 offer further confirmation. Despite a six percent drop in the number of high school graduates in the university's five primary market states, full-time undergraduate enrollment rose from 3907 in 1987 to 4156 in 1988 (6.37%) and 4221 (1.56%) in 1989. Total full-time enrollment grew 8.04% to 4610 in 1988 and another 2.32% to

Insert Table 2 about here

to 4717 in 1989. Between 1986 and 1987 this number had risen by a much lesser 1.19%. Although the specific figure proved unavailable for 1989, enrollment of first-time, full-time freshmen rose from 1100 in 1986 to 1224 (11.27%) in 1987 and 1320 (7.84%) in 1988. The total number of new full-time undergraduates (e.g., freshmen and transfers) increased from 1431 in 1986 to 1535 (7.27%) in 1987 and 1593 (3.78%)

Insert Table 3 about here

in 1988. On the other hand, first-time freshmen and transfer enrollment had grown just 1.13% between Fall 1985 and Fall 1986. The percentage increases in first-time, full-time freshmen for 1987 and 1988 also far exceed the slight growth in the number of students taking the SAT for those same years (4.33% and 3.78% respectively). Moreover, the number of returning undergraduates rose by a dramatic 8.05% in the Fall 1988 semester, implying that higher freshmen enrollments have been accompanied by greater retention.

The Director of Admissions attributes increased applications and enrollment since 1987 largely to information and assistance provided by the Office of Planning and Institutional Research. In particular, he credits the enrollment management system for providing greater awareness of current and potential markets as well as of student characteristics. This more sophisticated identification of markets enables him to more effectively serve the university. The Financial Aid Director agrees that better marketing has played a significant role. In addition, the continuing impact of financial aid awards on various market segments and student subpopulations can be readily assessed.

Cooperation throughout the academic community and especially among several influential administrators has proven the key to this university's success with enrollment management. A revealing statement by the Director of Financial Aid most graphically characterizes this collaborative venture, "I will open up my books to [the Director of Institutional Research] any time, even though there may be skeletons there I don't even know exist. In fact, especially because of any skeletons; I know it will help me." Several unique

qualities of the Director of Institutional Research contributed to this relationship: (1) His encompassing vision of a whole system with admissions, financial aid, and retention as interwoven concerns rather than discrete entities; (2) His background as a former Director of Admissions; and (3) His interest in and willingness to work with the Admissions and Financial Aid Offices on a continuing basis.

Conclusion

If information is the lifeblood of an organization, for institutions of higher learning information on enrollment constitutes the white blood cells necessary to prevent an untimely demise. While private, enrollment-dependent campuses are those most vulnerable to the threat of dwindling freshman classes, all colleges and universities can profit from the strategic framework constructed by the university in this study. As the Associate Vice President insists, a multifaceted approach of "careful planning and manipulation of strategies in financial aid, admissions, and student life can affect the outcome of new students flowing in, retention, and graduation." The mutual benefits of inter-office respect and collaboration -- two powerful forces leading toward long-term institutional health and vitality -- also are evident. However, such strategic decisions are not for the feint-hearted; nor do they produce instant success. As in this case, the institution's administration must be willing to take a risk -- and to wait -- in order to reap the benefits. With a clear strategy in place, a college or university can "take more calculated risks, more risks with a purpose, and proper, necessary risks that enhance the long-term viability and quality of [the] campus." (Keller, 1983, p. 142).

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TABLE 1
HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT STATISTICS
1985-86 (ACTUAL) AND 1995-96 (PROJECTED)

	<u>1985-86</u>	<u>1995-96</u>	<u>% Change</u>
FTE Equivalent	8,943,000	8,027,000	-10.0
Total Enrollment	12,247,000	11,454,000	-6.0
Control: Public	9,479,000	8,925,000	-6.0
Private	2,768,000	2,529,000	-9.0
Type: Four-Year	7,716,000	7,051,000	-9.0
Two-Year	4,531,000	4,403,000	-3.0
Sex: Male	5,818,000	5,388,000	-7.0
Female	6,429,000	6,066,000	-6.0
Age: 19 & Under	2,834,000	2,421,000	-15.0
20-21	2,383,000	1,848,000	-22.0
22-24	1,933,000	1,628,000	-16.0
25-29	1,953,000	1,732,000	-11.0
30-34	1,261,000	1,394,000	+11.0
35 & Over	1,885,000	2,430,000	+29.0
Status: Full-Time	7,075,000	6,090,000	-14.0
Part-Time	5,172,000	5,364,000	+4.0
Level: Undergrad	10,597,000	9,756,000	-8.0
Graduate	1,376,000	1,422,000	+3.0
First Prof	274,000	276,000	+1.0

Source: Center for Education Statistics. (1987). Trends in Education, 1975-76 to 1995-96. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

TABLE 2
 HEADCOUNT ENROLLMENTS
 ALL FULL-TIME STUDENTS

	<u>Full-Time Undergraduate</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>	<u>Full-Time Graduate</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>	<u>Total Full-Time</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>
1981	4265		379		4644	
1982	4014	-5.89	388	+2.37	4402	-5.21
1983	3944	-1.74	350	-9.79	4294	-2.45
1984	3842	-2.59	258	-26.29	4100	-4.52
1985	3911	+1.80	336	+30.23	4247	+3.59
1986	3825	-2.20	392	+16.67	4217	-0.71
1987	3907	+2.14	360	-8.16	4267	+1.19
1988	4156	+6.37	454	+26.11	4610	+8.04
1989	4221	+1.56	496	+9.25	4717	+2.32

Sources: Strategic Plan, Office of Planning and Institutional Research.
Student and Credit Hour Enrollments, Office of the Registrar.

TABLE 3
 HEADCOUNT ENROLLMENTS
 FIRST TIME FRESHMEN AND TRANSFER STUDENTS

	<u>First Time Freshmen</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>	<u>Transfer Students</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>	<u>Total First Time</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>
1981	1258		333		1591	
1982	1108	-11.92	325	-2.40	1433	-9.93
1983	1088	-1.81	342	+5.23	1430	-0.21
1984	1004	-7.72	399	+16.67	1403	-1.89
1985	1099	+9.46	316	-20.80	1415	+0.86
1986	1100	+0.09	331	+4.75	1431	+1.13
1987	1224	+11.27	311	-6.04	1535	+7.27
1988	1320	+7.84	273	-12.22	1593	+3.78

Source: Strategic Plan, Office of Planning and Institutional Research.