Proposed Strategic Plan to Improve Student Retention and Enrollment at Universities: A Perspective Study

Hisham A. Maddah

King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia,   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8208-8629

Abstract: This article aims to study the impact of the institution's strategic plan and the given student benefits and/or provided services on the student retention/enrollment rates. Institutional sustainability and student performance/motivation can be maintained with proper guidelines and enrollment management practices aligned with the university mission. Here, we propose a guided institution's strategic plan for King Abdulaziz University (KAU) including discussions on the university mission/vision statements, admission standards and counselors, recruitment procedures, student engagement, student support services, finances, and academic advising. The introduced strategic plan is believed to improve student retention and enrollment via: (a) applying the IDEAL initiative to promote campus diversity, (b) providing first-year support and assigned full-time advisors for guidance and persistence, (c) understanding applicant profiles for effective recruitment, (d) training and engaging students in several workshops and activities, (e) offering welcoming-week orientation to familiarize new students with the university requirements and guidelines, and (f) giving space to students to encourage in-class discussions and make them feel comfortable to share their ideas, from applying the "Turn and Talk" strategy. Strategic plans have a direct impact on the delivery of high-quality and cost-effective services to meet students educational and financial needs, with realistic/quantifiable goals necessary for student recruitment/success.

Keywords: Strategic Plan, Retention, Enrollment, Recruitment, Student Engagement

Introduction

Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) describes the most significant aspects of the management plans to ensure student enrollment, retention, and graduation are met and are aligned with the institution's mission and goals. Planning is the first step that should be initiated by the management whereas brainstorming new ideas and thinking about maintaining the plan quality is much more important than the planning stage. The university needs to maintain student performance, keep them motivated, and share with them the proper guidelines necessary to follow to make students successful bodies in the community. Enrollment management practices should be more inclined towards the institutional sustainability where tuition for revenue is important but should become the second priority after ensuring good student education, retention, and enrollment are achieved. It is

also equally important to check for alignment of the strategic management plans with the university mission and vision in agreement with the approved strategic plan from higher administration.

The university needs to focus its attention on the student experiences during their study time. Students can gain a lot of experience from participating in the ongoing on-campus activities and other part-time jobs. This will help in the "Recruitment through Graduation" process where students will see their dream job and be even more motivated towards finishing their degree to work in the intended job. On the other hand, budget, campus plans, and student affairs are some of the other areas that need to be integrated into the planning of SEM as an effort to boost student education (The Society for College and University Planning, 2019). In this work, we propose a guided institution's strategic plan for King Abdulaziz University (KAU) including discussions on the university mission/vision statements, admission standards and counselors, recruitment procedures, student engagement, student support services, finances, and academic advising, where the introduced strategic plan is believed to improve student retention and enrollment at the university level in various aspects.

Mission and Vision Statements

According to University's Mission for King Abdulaziz University (KAU), the vision is very broad as in "Becoming a world-class university with sustainability and community engagement" – that is associated with improving both education and communication/engagement for a better learning experience (Maddah HA, 2018b). Some of the discussed objectives that pertain to this vision include developing assessment methods, ensuring high research output, and providing students with better university resources and capabilities (Maddah HA, 2019b). Those procedures will help in allowing our students to become more successful and increase the retention and enrollment percentages. However, the university must seek to apply some of the already applied mission statement tasks/goals from the top-ranked university (MIT and/or Stanford). For example, applying the IDEAL initiative would aid in promoting campus diversity and enhancing student success and admittance. There will be no more discrimination and the student will be treated equally with clear institutional guidelines and given procedures (Maddah HA, 2018a, 2019c). The university can build a trust relationship with its students and faculty members towards having a better education system. The mission of the university, for now, involves different aspects: "Community Responsibility, Knowledge Development, Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship" as mentioned in the university website (King Abdulaziz University, n.d., 2015). STEM academic programs and university mission should take care of current students to develop their creativity, critical thinking abilities, and study skills which will develop the student persistence, retention, and graduation. Connecting the discussed strategies along with the stimulation of the student intellectual skills will improve the education journey that goes just as what is already planned in the mission/vision statements. The university should also include its plans and/or goals towards ease the admission procedures and campus diversification, which is certainly going to make the students feel more comfortable to come to university and finish their degree and graduate on the intended study timeline.

The university should seek to promote the welfare and to educate others for exercising an influence in behalf of

humanity and civilization. Involving research and education goals in the mission can help the students to become more creative, knowledgeable, and critical thinkers. Services and other procedures in the mission must be considered for ensuring smooth admission to the incoming students with equal opportunities. In terms of politeness and communication, ethical values and other integrity (foundation) and diversity values should be also involved in the mission statement, which would result in having a more diversified campus and a better learning environment (from applying the IDEAL initiative). The mission statement of the university should focus on educating students in science, technology, and other areas so that students can serve the nation and humanities with the top gained knowledge. The university must provide students with rigorous academic study towards the discovery of new things that would enhance student success and stimulate the intellectual skills of students. Each member of the community is a priority to the university where the university must seek to develop each person's abilities for effective and creative achievements (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), n.d.).

The strategic plan must show that as the university mission is "to enrich society through cultural prominence, scientific acumen and pioneering research" with values directed toward integration of professionalism and excellence, leadership, innovation, diversity, and continuous academic research. The university aims to provide a positive and encouraging learning environment that would ensure student success and increase retention and persistence. Improving communication skills and self-development skills are some of the adopted methods to be acquired to empower the students and be motivated to come to the university. The university considers the students as "the center of attention at KAU, and all efforts will be made to keep the students abreast of all contemporary developments in their fields". Focusing on the students means that there will be developed assessment methods, knowledge, and skills that would enhance student retention and graduation rates (KAU, 2013). All scientific chairs at KAU are intended to enhance the recruitment, retention, and support of outstanding individuals; this would enhance the strategic plan leading to significant contributions to the academic and research community. Supported high-quality teaching and research programs by the university are some of the strategies that can increase student persistence and graduation rate with stable and continuous development in the pursuit of academic and educational excellence, as mentioned by the university former president (Tayeb, 2016).

The Five Goals and Their Objectives

Student enrollment, recruitment and marketing: The university should adopt various strategies and techniques which are suggested to improve student retention with clear actions to reach persistence and retention goals. For example, the Student Success and Retention Council (SSRC) develop continuous practices and action plan or assessment activities to guide, support, and ensure student success (Maddah HA, 2019b). They also consider the graduation time rates articulated in the following guiding principles: (1) provide student with required graduation information as soon as possible, (2) provide guidance and support for knowledge development; (3) consistently measure student performance towards success and give help and advice to improve both retention and graduation (University of Central Arkansas, 2017). This plan aims "to increase

degree completion rates by defining and implementing universal accountability measures". Both student retention and degree completion will be enhanced from this plan in the university. The integration of student accountability and the support/achievement of students in the plan is expected to enhance the student academic success goals. Several engagement strategies to increase first-year retention are outlined throughout this plan, which would also increase student's persistence to degree and career placement. Some of the highlighted goals are to increase the first-year retention rate by 72% and six-year graduation rate by 42% while developing a strategy to close student-preparation gaps. Support programs involved in the plan would help the students to navigate the road to their degree for successful completion of the intended program.

Assigned full-time faculty and/or advisors is an excellent strategy discussed to give guidance and improve retention and persistence. Diversity, inclusion, admission criteria, program requirements, and first-year support are some of the specific discussed areas with clear given strategies selected based upon best practices to improve student development and persistence (The University of Akron, 2014). These strategies are excellent, clear, and cover many aspects which are more likely going to make students remain in school and succeed as compared to the other discussed plans. Recruitment practices and techniques will be different for online education, and it should be based on hiring innovative faculty either as full time, local area adjunct, wide-area adjunct, or well-qualified professors from other universities nationwide. Faculty recruitment should be a very credible and selective process to only choose "Faculty members with high credibility that will enhance the image of the online education". Lastly, "successful online faculty … connects the benefits of online education with the background/mission of the institution" (Rahman, 2001).

Generating admissions processes in universities remains a critical step for developing university recruitment and enrollment of students. Higher education leaders should standardize the admission process and university objectives to be aligned with the university mission/vision, so that everyone in the university will benefit from such a change.

Admission standards and university requirements: In an ideal scenario, university admission standards should be done after careful consideration of comprehensive data analysis, enrollment trends, goals reassessment, and applicants' profiles (Hilts, 2018). The university must take action towards changing the admission standards based on the collected data and information from previous years, semesters, and previously enrolled students. The admission standards of the university must satisfy students' needs and must ensure equity and equality between the incoming students. Qualification and requirements need to be predetermined by the university leaders after communicating with department heads and colleges deans to list the general university requirement and the specific program requirements for the admission of students. To smooth the enrollment and recruitment of students, the university can use earlier data to estimate the number of yearly enrolled students in the different available university programs. From that point, the university can then focus more on the high-demand programs and recruit some of the current/senior or alumni students to be the point of communication between incoming students and university leaders/advisors to address any possible concerns. Student recruitment is a very critical component in Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM). It changes according to

many factors found in research which include the complexity of the admission standards, student behavior, and collected data regarding the current students (Sigler, 2018).

Action steps towards better recruitment: A good strategic plan and/or action steps that would improve the admissions standards, enrollment objectives, and enhance student recruitment have been suggested earlier from the "Improve Access and Opportunity for Traditional and Non-traditional Students" Strategic Thrust (University of Illinois Springfield, 2018). Leaders need to identify their students' demographics and economics situations where the office of enrollment must give equal enrollment opportunities to all incoming students from recognizing any shifting in students' demographics. Suggested action steps include: (1) provide financial aid comparable to the other aids provided by other public universities; (2) ensure the education is affordable for all the students; (3) increase fund from private sources that would ensure low-income students have equal chances to be enrolled; (4) develop education curriculum and offer new education programs based on the student needs; (5) align targeted marketing efforts with enrollment trends to gain more students enrolled on-campus programs; (6) support continuing education opportunities; (7) create a mechanism for consultation about recruitment, admissions process, and retention; where organized events can be very helpful to increase student recruitment letting all involved parties gain the desired benefits (University of Illinois Springfield, 2018).

Admissions counselor: The role of the admissions counselor in the facilitation of the admission funnel involves the facilitation of the "marketing and recruitment strategies" to be more effective in addressing prospective student leads and inquiries. Having a good admission counselor can ease the way for many students who may keep in communication (about their application) with the university from being more familiar with the admission process. Typically, understanding trends in enrollment, goals of the prospect students, and applicant profiles would allow the counselor to effectively recruit a student from prospect/inquiry to matriculant. Other efforts can involve a plan to achieve better communication such as college fairs, school visits, campus tours, and other technological methods (e.g. webinars and online tours) that would familiarize the students with the admission process as well as the university system. Staff members have to work collaboratively to assist students in their admission relying on the adopted strategies in the student recruitment plan where "it is important to involve stakeholders from recruitment, admissions, and enrollment who all influence what prospects think of the school" (Hilts, 2018).

Relating admissions standards to student retention and enrollment: Enhancing student recruitment through some of the early reliable strategies and tactics can certainly enhance the admission standards and therefore student enrollment and retention. For example, a four-year public school can adopt strategies like having: (1) campus open house events; (2) visit days for high school students; (3) encouraging prospective students to apply on the admissions website; and (4) encouraging prospective students to schedule campus visits, which altogether have been considered as the top four tactics for boosting student recruitment and university marketing from the improved admission standards resulting in increasing retention/enrollment rates (Hanover Research, 2014).

Student Engagement

One example or strategy to encourage participation is "Turn and Talk" where it states that we need to give some space to students between discussions to share ideas with their peers for a few minutes, then come back again to the whole-class discussion. This method should be adopted to let students feel more comfortable and have plenty of time to work their minds and share their contributions (Kriegel, 2018). Being positive about other ideas, creates a positive environment as well. Friends feel comfortable in sharing ideas with others when they feel safe to talk to them. Instructors should not be judgemental about someone's ideas or thoughts, all ideas are valid, and the teammates or students must be treated equally without giving advantage to some people or parties over the others. The personality of the student will lead to an engaging or passive environment, usually dealing with introverts make it more difficult to continue discussions. However, this does not mean only extroverts can facilitate the discussion since the course of the discussions is controlled by the instructor as well as the asked questions and raised concerns.

To facilitate the student engagement some strategies are proposed (Weimer, 2012) including: (1) enhance students' self-belief, (2) create learning that is active, collaborative, and fosters learning relationships, (3) ensure that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds, and (4) recognize that teaching and teachers are central to engagement. The student needs to feel confident and this confidence level can be improved by training and engaging students in several workshops and activities held on-campus. Active learning is very critical to have students who are motivated; thus, the university must enforce active learning in some of the classes for better success rates. Institutional culture must be diverse where the admission policies should be very clear about diversification to accept any student from any background in the university, this would develop student engagement prominently. Some of the challenges may arise from the fact that the whole engagement process is linked to the professor, and it is only the professor's responsibility within the class boundaries (during class) to motivate students to become part of the discussion!

Different examples and/or strategies can be adopted by universities to help academic departments ensure that students succeed regardless of their motivation and/or interest in the course materials. Strikwerda (2019) summarized the following techniques to improve student retention and enrollment in higher education institutions: (1) individual instructors – especially in the first semester and first year – make a huge difference: professors and instructors should be accessible to their students and must clarify any doubts to the students and effectively teach the required skills to survive college study; (2) introductory courses are crucial make-or-break arenas: administrators and/or faculty should cooperate and work hand-by-hand together towards developing course materials and creating opportunities in these courses for tutoring, office hours, and study-skills sessions enhancing student sense of belonging; (3) at-risk students perform better and stay focused: students will be studying harder when they feel the course materials are difficult to understand, and this will improve their performance as well as ensure their timely graduation and success; while [adding ways to make sure they will catch-up with the course pace] is important; (4) share relevant information widely: the role of instructors and

administrators or department chairs in the student retention would not be clear without sharing current progress and work done by others, all faculty need to work together with a clear plan in mind towards improving retention using the available students data to have the best practices shared with others for increased retention and graduation; (5) collaborative efforts payoff: blending available cultures in the campus together will foster retention from collaboration, students will feel more safe, comfortable, and will likely come regularly to classes when diversity and collaboration values are promoted via clear strategic plans (Maddah HA, 2019a; Strikwerda, 2019).

Student Support Services

First-year experience students need to feel they are welcomed in the university and they need to know more about the new homes that they will be in for the next 4 to 5 years. Many first-year experience areas could be researched to work on them for welcoming the incoming students. However, the author believes that the most important point is the "Welcome Week Activities" that would familiarize the new students with the university requirements, guidelines, and recurring campus activities as well as their way to survive and be successful during the undergrad study. Two universities have been researched for their welcome-week activities and provided programs as discussed in the following sections.

It is very important to offer new students a welcoming week (e.g. Fall 2019) with "New Student Orientation" and four days of opportunities to connect with other new students and know the university community. The given program is estimated to significantly increase student interactions with other new students, make friends, and allow faculty-student interactions for the first time. Student engagement and involvement in the activities will ensure student success during the first week and beyond. The activities or opportunities include giving guidance to students for their resident move-in and commuting check-in for a smooth transition. Many meetings are arranged to improve the student's interactions and familiarize them with the provided academic programs and what is expected to be delivered to be a successful student. College welcome and academic programs on the second day plus a welcoming picnic will make the students more aware of the academic program and improve both student-to-student interactions and faculty-to-student communications making students feel more comfortable during their next weeks. "Walking Tour" is very critical to let students know their campus well and at the end be able to identify their classes from the "Where Are My Classes Campus Tour?" (Thomas Jefferson University, n.d.).

A decent welcoming-week program, which contains lots of activities, is meant to make students feel safe, comfortable, know each other, have fun together, and know their campus, their classes, and be part of the community to focus on their future study requirements. Campus constituents involved in the planning and implementation of the program include both faculty and administrators plus some senior students who can walk the incoming students and welcome them on-campus for achieving engagement and familiarizing the students with their new place. Group meetings will improve communication, playfair can lead to making friendships, new students welcome will make students feel comfortable to share their ideas, evening activities are meant to

be unprofessional for little more fun, and lastly, the residence hall meeting is very important for students who stay on-campus. Other program activities with other plans or workshops are critical for improving students' relationships, enhancing diversity awareness, and educating students more about their academic programs to be successful in their coming years!

Finances

Fostering educational excellence requires understanding the student needs as well as providing affordable and quality higher education opportunities. There should be a balance between taken/given money (tuition/grants) with the possibility of providing debt-free degree options. America's higher education system must consider building an accountable and incentive structure focused more on giving educational opportunities rather than only collecting enrollment/tuition fees from students. Due to a lack of funds and high education costs, it has been reported (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) that more than 40% of first-time full-time bachelor's degree students don't graduate within 6 years; indicating the poor performance which may be attributed to the demanded tuition. Also, college students who take loans are three times more likely to withdraw from school with incomplete graduation. The educational mission cannot be achieved as desired without providing care, fund, and assistance to students for equal access. Two-thirds of the job openings in 2020 will require postsecondary education or training indicating the importance of fostering higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The 'Iron Triangle' can surely impact the mission implementation since, as quoted: "the relationship among cost, quality, and access is unbreakable". We can reduce the cost to increase access, but this will inevitably decrease education quality. Thus, the university should find alternatives that would somehow satisfy all the Triangle parameters while keeping in mind the intended mission irrespective of the country's economic status (Keats, 2015).

Academic Advising

Academic advising is a crucial step in education and the role of academic advisor at a university is very important to ensure student success. The advising role involves responsibilities, including course identification, career counseling, personal counseling/referral, and professional reference (Petress, 1996). Some of the major researched duties of an academic advisor involve "guiding students on the correct academic path which is at the forefront of all levels" (Bruens, 2012). This is the general theme or the university goal from hiring professional advisors or even assigning some of the faculty members as student advisors. There should be regular individual meetings between the student and the advisor to assess the student interests, skills, and potential careers, and therefore selecting classes and/or choosing the best program that fits the student needs and ensure high student retention and success rates. Advisors can offer networking and mentoring support to foster academic goals where discussions and academic questions can be answered to help the student find their ideal study path. Also, specific program requirements and other related questions to the taken courses can be clarified by an advisor with pre-planning and coordination with students. Advisors can decide whether a student would become a

successful student in his area or not by looking at his standardized test scores, transcripts, and course prerequisites. Program eligibility is a very important point where only students with a minimum level of certain scores can be admitted in the program which would increase the student retention rates. This is clear because dropping-out rates will become much less since most of the admitted students, who passed many screening exams, would successfully finish their program and graduate. The role of an academic advisor also includes frequent communication with the student regarding important dates and deadlines, registration, course changes, costs of tuition, facilities maintenance, and transfer requirements. Moreover, academic advisors may transfer students to "specialized staff for such issues as psychological/emotional counseling, financial assistance, and study-abroad programs" (Bruens, 2012).

The most effective approach to academic advising is the conjunction between professional advisors and faculty advisors since faculty focus on research, teaching, academic success, and curriculum commitments, while professional advisors try to ensure high student retention, outreach, and satisfaction, from the advising of students during their undergraduate study. Lastly, we should advise students by both professional/faculty staff where it has been suggested that such collaboration in the development of an advising syllabus and identifying the student potential goals and career options are promising strategies to increase student retention (Fessehatsion & Peng, 2021; Krush & Winn, 2010; Yilmaz & Korur, 2021).

Conclusion

We have demonstrated the importance of the institution's strategic plan and its impact on the student's enrollment and retention, based on the given benefits and/or services provided to the students. The university needs to aid students from the first day of classes till their graduation. For example, some of the benefits that would make a huge impact on student enrollment is supporting students financially to ease the financial burden on the incoming students. There should be a balance between taken/given money (tuition/grants) with the possibility of providing debt-free degree options. Hence, university leaders need to identify their students' demographics and economics situations to offer equal enrollment/grant opportunities. Prospective students should be familiar with the university requirements, guidelines, and recurring campus activities for successful education journeys. Universities must advise their students by both professional/faculty staff where it has been suggested that such collaboration in the development of an advising syllabus and identifying the student potential goals and career options are promising. Strategic enrollment planning and strategic plans can also help in providing realistic and quantifiable goals for student recruitment and student success. Choosing the best program that fits the student needs ensures high student retention and success rates. Strategic planning is critical since it will ensure the delivery of high quality and cost-effective university services and/or support to students. This approach is going to result in meeting the educational, financial, and material needs of the students and the institution.

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