

## CHAPTER 1

# Origins of Strategic Enrollment Management

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This chapter presents a brief historical overview of the factors that led to the rise of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM). This chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive history, but instead provides a context for the chapters that follow, which offer a comprehensive overview of the organizational structures, processes, types of research, and strategies that underpin the concept of SEM. This chapter examines the historical roots of SEM and discusses why demography, governmental trends toward the privatization of postsecondary education, the role of rankings, and institutional isomorphism (the tendency of organizations to mimic the structure of similar organizations) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) have created a context in which SEM will likely not only remain a fixture in postsecondary education, but will grow in its importance among colleges and universities.

Complete histories have been written on the rise of SEM (for example, Henderson, 2001; Hossler, 2011). Indeed, SEM has not only emerged as an important managerial function in the United States but also in other parts of the globe as well. The global trends toward the privatization of tertiary education, as well as globalization, international rankings of colleges and universities, and demographic trends in many industrialized nations are making SEM an increasingly common organizational concept in other nation states.

Before providing a historical overview of emergence of SEM, we offer a brief introduction to SEM to set the stage for this chapter. One important caveat is warranted in this introduction: Although some chapters in this handbook may refer to for-profit sector postsecondary institutions as part of the competitive forces that influence the enrollment strategies of non-profit colleges and universities, this volume does not provide an overview of SEM activities and strategies in the for-profit sector. To date, too little is known about the strategies, policies, and practices of the for-profit sector to be included in this book.

Strategic Enrollment Management is perhaps best described by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (1991), as a structural framework that can be simultaneously considered as an organizational structure, as a set of processes, and as organizational policies. In this context, SEM is simultaneously a set of processes and policies associated with the recruitment and admission of college students, as well as the retention, academic success, and graduation of students enrolled in postsecondary education. It is also a managerial paradigm for organizations associated with these processes. Typically, SEM organizations include the offices of admissions, financial aid, registration and records, and an enrollment-related institutional research office. In addition, offices such as orientation, academic advising, the bursar, and sometimes offices associated with student affairs and/or institutional marketing can also be included in SEM organizations.

Bob Bontrager and Christine Kerlin (2004) posited that SEM comprises the following components:

- Characteristics of the institution and the world around it
- Institutional mission and priorities
- Optimal enrollments (number, quality, diversity)
- Student recruitment
- Student fees and financial aid
- Retention
- Institutional marketing
- Career counseling and development
- Academic advising
- Curricular and program development
- Methods of program delivery
- Quality of campus life and facilities

This chapter considers several definitions of SEM, followed by a brief history of its origins—the adoption of for-profit business strategies, demographic trends, and shifts in public policy provide a short historical account. In addition,

theoretical frames that have been employed to explain the rise and use of SEM are examined. This chapter ends with a discussion of the future of SEM.

## DEFINING STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

A number of definitions for SEM have been advanced since the books and articles first started to appear on this organizational concept. Bontrager (2008) defined SEM as follows: “Strategic Enrollment Management is defined as a coordinated set of concepts and processes that enables fulfillment of institutional mission and students’ educational goals” (p. 18). Another leading scholar and practitioner in the field, David Kalsbeek (2013), defined SEM as “A comprehensive approach to integrating all of the University’s programs, practices, policies, and planning related to achieving the *optimal* recruitment, retention and graduation of students.”

Don Hossler and John Bean have proffered the following definition:

Enrollment management is both an organizational concept as well as a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert more influence over their student enrollments and total net tuition revenue derived from enrolled students. Organized by strategic planning and supported by institutional research, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. These processes are studied to guide institutional practices in the areas of new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development and other academic areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college (revised in 2001 from Hossler, Bean, & Associates, 1990, p. 5).

This discussion of components and definitions of SEM share a common focus on the systematic integration of the functions of admissions, the relationship between tuition and fees (pricing) and financial aid, and student retention, along with the use of research to inform institutional policies and practices. The importance of curriculum offerings and the quality of the student experience are also recurring themes that are emphasized for the role they play in attracting and retaining students.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

These definitions and the discussion of SEM emphasize the intentional role institutions can play in *shaping the class* and represent key elements of SEM. However, it bears noting that the issues that determine a student’s decision to enroll or persist in a college or university (at the undergraduate or graduate

level) are far too complex to manage; the real goals are to influence the student's decisions in an ethical manner (assuming that the institution was a good choice for the student in the first place).

This section sets the stage for a brief historical overview of the demographic, societal, institutional, and public policy factors that shaped the emergence of SEM. In successive chapters, the processes, policies, and organizational structures that have been outlined in this introduction will be examined in more detail.

### The Impact of Demographic Trends

In the United States, the emergence of SEM can trace its origins to the mid-1970s. At that time a confluence of societal, demographic, and institutional factors created the context for the development of what has arguably become one of the most important administrative functions to emerge at senior levels of college and university administration since the rise of the senior development officer, which emerged in the 1950s (Lasher & Cook, 1996). Collectively, these trends created an institutional environment in which college and university administrators felt the necessity to be more intentional about attracting and retaining students. In addition to their consideration of the demographic and societal trends, campus-based administrators had reason to believe that they had the tools to be more effective in exerting more influence upon their enrollments and their ability to *shape the class*.

To set the stage for the convergence of these trends, it is important to remember that even in the 1950s when the GI Bill had resulted in a dramatic increase in postsecondary participation rates, the foundation for a more competitive admission recruitment environment among postsecondary institutions was being built. The growth of community colleges during the 1950s and 1960s, along with the growth in enrollment at four-year public institutions—especially what we now call *regional public institutions*—had started to place competitive pressures on private colleges that were small, less selective, and less visible—what Alexander Astin and Calvin Lee (1972) called “the invisible colleges.” It is important that we not underestimate the impact of the expansion of the postsecondary education system during this time period in the United States (a period that many educational scholars and observers describe as the *Golden Age of Higher Education*), as the number of traditional age high school students declined. Even in 1966, Alden Thresher, in his influential book, *College Admissions and the Public Interest*, reported that many private colleges and universities had found themselves needing to market the institution and recruit students actively in order to maintain enrollment—and the pressures on institutions to maintain their enrollments only intensified. In addition to increasing competition because of the growing number of postsecondary institutions, by the mid-1970s, colleges and universities had additional reasons to focus on

competing with each other: They were preparing for a predicted decrease of traditional age college students estimated to be as high as 42 percent (Hossler, 1986). Not surprisingly, increasing competition for a declining pool of traditional age students resulted in campus policy makers placing more emphasis upon the recruitment and retention of students.

The competitive environment that colleges confronted in the 1970s and 1980s were not the only factors that provided the impetus for the emergence of enrollment management. The attitudes of public policy makers toward postsecondary education were also shifting, not just in the United States but around the globe. Historically, the United States has been an outlier; in many countries, postsecondary education had been viewed primarily as a public good and thus it was free, entirely funded by national, state, and/or regional governments. Unlike much of the rest of the world, the United States had a mixed funding model, whereby students and their families paid tuition, even at most public institutions. However, among public sector institutions the *public good* argument had been the rationale for relatively high levels of state subsidies to most public two- and four-year institutions. The fact that college graduates made more money, which enabled them to pay higher taxes; that they were more likely to create new businesses and jobs, to vote, to be involved in community service organizations; and that they were less likely to be unemployed or incarcerated (Bowen, 1980) had resulted in a public policy perspectives that emphasized the societal benefits of expanded postsecondary education opportunities. This was the underlying premise of relatively high levels of support in most states for their public colleges and universities, which helped to keep tuition rates low.

### **The Emergence of Enrollment/Strategic Enrollment Management**

In the United States, the term, and perhaps the concept, of a comprehensive enrollment management system first emerged when Jack Maguire (1976) used the term “enrollment management” to describe his efforts to attract and retain students at Boston College. One of the first times the term formally appeared in public domain literature was in a 1981 *College Board Review* article by Leonard Kreutner and Eric Godfrey (1981) that describes a matrix approach to managing enrollments developed at California State University at Long Beach. Since these early publications, a spate of books, book chapters, monographs, and articles have been published on the topic of enrollment management. However, as a process and set of strategies, SEM, as we have suggested in the first section of this chapter, had been developing for many years. What made the enrollment management concept new when it first appeared was not demographic trends, public policy shifts, the development of new marketing techniques, or new retention strategies; rather, it was the organizational integration of functions such as academic advising, admissions, financial aid, and orientation into a

comprehensive institutional approach designed to enable college and university administrators to exert greater influence over the factors that shape their enrollments.

Subsequent to Maguire's coining of the term "enrollment management," professional meetings and additional books and monographs on enrollment management began to appear. Hossler, in a relatively short period of time, authored or co-authored three books on enrollment management including *Enrollment Management: An Integrated Approach* (1984), *Creating Effective Enrollment Management Systems* (1986), and *Managing College Enrollments* (1990). In addition, Frank Kemerer, Victor Baldridge, and Kenneth Green (1982) authored *Strategies for Effective Enrollment Management*. In 1984, Ray Muston published a monograph entitled *Marketing and Enrollment Management in State Universities*. Somewhat later, Michael Dolence (1991, 1996, 1998) also published some influential books and book chapters on SEM.

In addition to these early works, in the 1980s the College Board and Loyola University of Chicago sponsored the first national conferences on enrollment management. Attendance at these conferences was not robust, as the concept was still embryonic. Even so, several core principles were crystallizing that remain key underpinnings of SEM. These include a marketing orientation toward admissions recruitment, an understanding that student retention is as important a part of enrollment efforts as student recruitment, a realization that campus-based financial aid could be used in a systematic fashion to achieve multiple enrollment goals and that SEM depends heavily upon empirical research and data analysis to guide its efforts, and finally an understanding that SEM is a process that has organizational implications and often requires structural change in how various university functions are integrated and organized around efforts to enroll and retain a student body with a desired set of characteristics.

In 1991, the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) held the first annual Strategic Enrollment Management Conference, and by 2012, this annual conference drew 727 registrants from 300 institutions in nine countries, including Canada, Korea, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. Although attendees at the early conferences were mostly from tuition-dependent, private, not-for-profit colleges and universities, the attendance now includes flagship and regional public universities, two-year institutions, and a growing international representation. Senior university officers with enrollment management titles and responsibilities are now commonplace. Quickly, the term "enrollment management" became replaced by *Strategic Enrollment Management*. Terms like these are now common throughout both scholarly and professional publications in the field of higher education. Graduate courses and degrees in enrollment management are included in higher education curricula.

## Changing Public Policy Priorities

A confluence of factors, including a recession in the United States but also in other developed regions of the world, as well as the growing costs of healthcare services, K–12 education, pension benefits, and other government-funded programs, resulted in declining support for public tertiary education. In the United States, reductions in state and local governments funding between 1987 and 2012 resulted in a reduction of \$2,600 of state support per student enrolled after adjusting for inflation (Landy, 2013). In addition, in other nation states such as the United Kingdom or China, there was a push toward *massification*, the expansion of tertiary education, and public policy makers around the globe found that they could no longer afford to provide tertiary education at no cost to the students or their families. Countries ranging from the United Kingdom, to Russia, to China started charging tuition as they moved toward a cost-sharing model for funding postsecondary education (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010). Public policy makers across the continents started looking for a politically acceptable rationale for declining state support (and rising tuition at public institutions) and emphasized the private benefits of postsecondary education (higher wages, better jobs, more job security, and so on). In addition, neo-liberalism was taking hold in the United States and in many other countries. As a result, public policy makers began to extol the virtues of the market and competition as a way to create better and more efficient publically funded enterprises. Public institutions of higher education were not immune to these trends. Public institutions were expected to compete for faculty, for research dollars, and for students. Thus, colleges and universities, including public institutions, began to recruit students—and their tuition dollars—more actively as a way of recovering revenue lost from government appropriations. Though many state policy makers have decried the rise in college tuition prices, in most instances these increases can be tracked back to declines in state funding (Fethke, 2012).

## Theoretical Perspectives on Enrollment Management

Finally, the emergence of enrollment management can be viewed from the lens of three theoretical perspectives drawn from the fields of sociology and public management. We touch briefly on these theoretical perspectives.

Resource Dependency Theory, which was first advanced by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald Salancik (1978), is often used to explain the emergence of SEM (see, for example, Hossler & Hozee, 2001; Schulz & Lucido, 2011). Resource Dependency Theory posits that organizations respond to changes in the external environment by shifting time, energy, and resources to protect or acquire scarce resources that are central to the health and vitality of the organization. Scott Schulz and Jerome Lucido (2011) drew heavily on the work of Shelia Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1997) and their work on academic capitalism to demonstrate how Resource Dependency Theory has been widely used to

explain the shift to the adoption of a market orientation among colleges and universities and the rise of SEM organizations in postsecondary education. Hossler and Hozee (2001) suggest that during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when there was a precipitous decline in the number of traditional age high school graduates, colleges and universities started to adopt more intentional business-oriented strategies and organizational structures to recruit and enroll students. Subsequently, the rise of the college rankings industry and the growing importance of persistence and graduation rates also resulted in more focus on student success and organizational changes to support these efforts. It is worth noting that these pressures are not unique to North American tertiary institutions. Demographic pressures in parts of Europe and Japan, for example, are causing postsecondary institutions to focus more attention on managing their enrollments, and an increasing number of regional and global rankings have become a global phenomenon that are also fueling the rise of SEM in countries other than the United States.

Institutional theory can also be used to help explain the increasing number of SEM organizations in postsecondary educational institutions, both in North America and in other parts of the world. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983) posit that as institutions, and organizations within institutions, seek legitimacy, they often mimic (*mimetic processes*) the organizational patterns and structures of other institutions and organizations deemed to be successful. This can result in a homogenization of organizational structures and patterns within other institutions and organizations that face similar challenges from the external environment. In essence, institutional theory can be thought of as an adaptive strategy whereby institutions mimic the organizational structures of similar organizations that are deemed to be successful. We submit that these processes help to explain the emergence of SEM as a normative organizational structure in many colleges and universities. As deans and provosts move on to become provosts and presidents at other institutions, if their previous college or university had a successful enrollment organization, they assume that it is only natural for them to have similar success at their new institution.

Finally, SEM can be viewed as a manifestation of what scholars of organizational studies in the field of public management scholars have called *new managerialism* (Deem, 1998; Exworthy & Halford, 1998). The term “new managerialism” has been widely used in the study of public sector organizations, and it refers to the adoption of organizational structures, technologies, management practices, and values that are more commonly associated with the private, for-profit business sector. Colleges and universities, many of them public organizations, were not immune from these trends, and the same is true of non-profit private institutions. In the case of SEM, we posit that the adoption of the following techniques are examples of new managerialism: the shift to viewing tertiary education more as a private benefit; the use of business



marketing strategies and data analytics to inform strategic enrollment strategies in the areas of admissions recruitment; the use of campus-based financial aid and empirically guided strategies to improve student persistence, success, and college completion; and the growing use of technology such as consumer resource management tools (CRMs), large database student information systems, and so on.

Drawing upon this introduction, we consider in more detail the rise of SEM in the next section.

## **STRATEGIC ENROLMENT MANAGEMENT: A STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK**

Although all of the factors discussed in the introduction to this chapter played a role in the emergence of SEM in the United States, the single largest factor was the declining number of high school graduates in the 1970s, which accentuated an already competitive environment for the recruitment of traditional age college students. Institutions in other parts of the world, such as China, the United Kingdom, and Russia, began the shift to cost sharing in the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s. This precipitated more focus on student enrollments in many countries where cost sharing became commonplace. As examples of new managerialism, colleges and universities in the United States started devoting more attention to business approaches to strategic planning, admissions marketing, and student retention efforts. For example, in the 1970s, offices of admissions began to use marketing techniques such as improved publication materials, targeted mailing strategies, and telemarketing techniques to attract larger numbers of students. At the same time, senior-level administrators began to utilize strategic planning techniques, also borrowed from business. These new approaches to strategic planning incorporated market research so that organizations could better understand their clients and the institution's position relative to competitors.

The adoption of these new marketing techniques also resulted in admissions officers using tools that enabled them to do a better job of tracking and communicating with prospective students through the use of applied social science analytical techniques and the use of computer and information science-assisted technology. The use of applied social science research methods also resulted in more careful analyses of tuition pricing decisions and the strategic use of campus-based financial aid dollars. Indeed, pricing and the use of campus-based student financial aid have arguably become the most important, as well as one of the most controversial, topics in SEM and are more fully examined in subsequent chapters.

In addition to the increasing use of for-profit business techniques in the areas of admissions and financial aid, student attrition became a widely researched topic in the field of higher education starting in the late 1970s and continuing into the twenty-first century (see, for example, Bean, 1980; Braxton, 2000; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; College Board, 2011; Tinto, 1993, 2012). This line of inquiry has led to the development of a wide-ranging set of campus-based initiatives to improve student success and college completion. They range from remedial education, intrusive student advising efforts to enhance student engagement and improve student motivation and goal orientation, to the use of campus-based financial aid and CRM tools. Indeed, an entire consulting industry has developed around the area of student retention.

## THE FUTURE OF STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Collectively, the set of converging demographic, public policy, and institutional trends that have been discussed in this chapter provide much of the underlying foundation for the emergence of SEM. However, we have yet to look more carefully at enrollment management and Strategic Enrollment Management, and the organizational structures that have become increasingly commonplace among postsecondary institutions that have implemented some form of SEM.

The rapid expansion and evolution of SEM is well documented elsewhere (Henderson, 2001; Hossler, 2011). At the moment, there seems little doubt that SEM is now, and will continue to be, a fixture and a key function within higher education administration in the United States, and it is likely to become increasingly important in many other countries. The United States has entered a period of another demographic downturn among high school graduates—many of these graduates will come from the families of first-generation recent immigrants who will be less likely to attend college, especially four-year colleges (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2012). Public institutions continue to see their state funding decline, which makes them increasingly dependent upon student tuition, and thus student enrollment. In addition, in recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of two- and four-year, for-profit institutions. Despite the criticisms of college rankings such as those of *US News & World Report*, the visibility and importance of rankings continues to grow, and many of the metrics associated with rankings are focused on factors such as admissions yield rates, average SAT/ACT scores, and first-year student retention rates. In addition, the accountability movement in higher education has focused heavily on student persistence and graduation rates as indicators of institutional quality. All of these trends and concerns are typically the domain of enrollment management units. Finally,

as already noted, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have described mimetic isomorphism as the tendency of organizations to imitate another organization's structure because senior managers within the organization come to believe that the structure of peer organization is more effective. As a result, more and more institutions are adopting SEM structures because they have become so common that presidents and provosts believe that this is the best organizational structure for functions such as admissions, financial aid, student retention, and the office of the registrar.

Despite these trends and the rapid adoption of SEM structures across the United States as well as in other countries, SEM is not without its critics. Critics of SEM and college admissions and recruitment practices often infer or suggest that there was a "golden era" when colleges and universities did not compete and when most students attended college for the pursuit of knowledge (Quirk, 2005; Thacker, 2005). Critics argue that SEM is a negative example of the winner-takes-all society that has evolved in the United States, with too little thought to the pernicious effects it has on postsecondary educational institutions and the students that attend them (Frank, 1999). Although these critiques merit consideration, it is not accurate to suggest that there was ever a "golden era," at least in the United States, when most students attended college because of their love of learning and when colleges and universities did not compete. Historians of postsecondary education in the United States, however, reveal that this was seldom, indeed perhaps never, the case and that the history of postsecondary education is replete with examples of competitive practices and the use of financial aid to provide need-based aid for deserving low-income students and to attract high-performing students from more affluent families (Karabel, 2006; Thelin, 1982; Wilkinson, 2005).

Collectively, these demographic, societal, and political trends suggest that SEM is likely here to stay. Manifestations of SEM may vary according to the institutional mission of a campus, the unique academic programs universities may offer, and the geographical location of a college. However, institutional efforts to exert more influence upon their student enrollments (both matriculation and graduation) are unlikely to change. Indeed, in this current competitive environment, the importance of SEM is more likely to intensify than abate. From this perspective, it is fitting to close this brief history of SEM with a quote from Hossler and Kalsbeek (2008):

But in the spirit of *playfulness*, we would ask this: If enrollment management as it has been defined by its critics has such a negative impact on students and institutions and the social good, what is the alternative? Should institutions not attempt to plan for and manage their enrollments? Should colleges and universities just let their enrollments "happen"? Many of the critics of enrollment management hint at bygone days where institutional enrollment practices exhibited greater integrity and reflected some higher order values. Scholars

who have examined the history of American higher education demonstrate, however, that there is scant evidence to suggest that there was ever a time in the history of American colleges and universities where institutions' leaders were not attempting to exert influence on the numbers and types and mix of students enrolled in order to achieve the institution's mission and goals (pp. 2–9).

In the next two chapters of Part I of this handbook, we more closely examine how the complex interaction of being a public or a non-profit private institution, institutional mission, geographic location, institutional wealth, and state and public policies can influence the SEM strategies and activities on individual campuses. Chapter 2 considers the various organizational structures, range offices, and the uses of technology that have become important elements of SEM organizations.

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