A

h, for the good old days of public college admissions. Institutions could dip into an abundant pool of prospective students, maybe cherry-pick those with the highest high school GPAs or SAT scores, and rest easy knowing that there were enough students out there to fill the available spaces.

Unfortunately, those halcyon days are gone. Today, the squeeze is on. Competition is intense for pools of traditional students that are shrinking. To bridge enrollment gaps, institutions avidly recruit adults, transfer students, and other previously underserved populations. Further complicating things, the scramble for students comes at a time when universities need more tuition revenue—with state appropriations down, the State Higher Education Executive Officers tells us, public institutions now rely on tuition to provide an average 42.7 percent of their budgets, up from 32 percent just 10 years ago. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that in 2014, 53 percent of public universities did not meet one or both of their goals for enrollment and revenue.

So what’s a college leader to do? Pining for the good old days won’t fill classrooms. Neither will enrollment plans developed when students were aplenty. Rather, solving the interrelated conundrums of recruitment, admissions, retention, and revenue calls for leaders with the vision and drive to shape bold new strategies.

The environment for enrollment management “is only going to get more competitive going forward,” says Peter Farrell, a senior enrollment management consultant with the higher education consulting firm Royall & Company. “I think that the institutions that are most competitive for students—the institutions that are having the greatest success—are ones that seek to really control their own enrollment destiny and not wait for the market to define their enrollment for them.”
In Practice

In practice, public universities have started to become more sophisticated in the ways they manage enrollment. Institutions are using technology to personalize the way they woo prospective students—and to track results so recruitment plans can be fine-tuned. Social media for recruiting has proliferated and become more targeted. Universities are redoubling efforts to recruit out-of-state and international students—and the extra revenue they can bring. Institutions are becoming more strategic about financial aid. Program descriptions are being refined to make sure they go beyond mere narrative to “sell the sizzle.” Looking beyond academic records, universities are taking a holistic look at a student’s background and considering noncognitive variables like the ability to persist toward goals. And more institutions are using early-warning systems to help struggling students get back on track—and stay enrolled.

One representative institution is Washington State University Vancouver, which faces increased competition for students and is drawing more admits from lower income, first-generation, and minority populations. WSU Vancouver’s vice chancellor for student affairs, Nancy T. Youlden, says those changes have many ramifications. For example, she says, recruiting adult students not only requires different recruitment strategies than those for high school students, but it also means the university has to think about what pedagogical changes it needs to make to best serve adult learners.

Like many of her colleagues, Youlden knows that student retention is as essential as their initial recruitment. That reality raises the stakes for the level of student support the university offers. To help first generation students stay in college, for example, WSU has learned that it has to be specific and directive in helping that student cohort understand basic information, like how to visit a professor during office hours. WSU is also asking how it can improve practices to help its transfer students complete their four-year degrees.

Both WSU and Arkansas State University (ASU) have reorganized the administrative bodies that guide enrollment management, drawing a wider swath of expertise from across campus functions. “If you look comprehensively at enrollment management, it really involves your entire campus,” Youlden says. “That doesn’t mean that everyone’s going out to the high schools, but rather that everyone understands how their campus role impacts either recruiting or retaining students.” At ASU, for example, the enrollment management group, which meets every three weeks, includes a representative from finance—that’s because budgeting is directly tied to enrollment, says William Stripling, vice chancellor for student affairs. Deans in the group help circulate information about enrollment trends across campus.

While ASU offers online degrees, it recognizes that many of the students it targets specifically want a quality bricks-and-mortar college experience. To enhance the campus experience for residential students—a key factor in recruitment and retention, Stripling says—ASU has been building new dormitories and developing living/learning communities in residence halls. A related strategy, building new sorority houses, has helped the university attract new students and also piqued the interest of a number of other universities that are considering a similar tack. ASU has consciously leveraged club sports as a recruiting tool. Its rugby program, for example, attracts students from as far away as New Zealand and South Africa.

Deborah L. Ford, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, approaches enrollment management from a number of perspectives. She notes, for example, that being able to document and share stories of graduates’ success is a critical

“Enrollment management involves your entire campus. Everyone should understand how their campus role impacts either recruiting or retaining students.”

— Nancy T. Youlden
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A cog in student recruitment. Ford says that UWP’s array of academic programs is also critical. “If you don’t have strong academic programs that meet the needs of the region that you are serving, particularly for a regional comprehensive like us, then you’re not going to be able to attract students to those programs,” she says. UWP works closely with regional business to understand how the university can best align its curriculum to develop the employee talents that businesses need. To help ensure a robust pipeline of potential students, the university avidly pursues articulation agreements with regional community colleges.

Another example of broad thinking about enrollment management can be found at Portland State University, which has become deliberately intentional in linking enrollment management directly with performance-based budgeting. “We don’t talk about our budgeting model anymore without also talking about enrollment management planning,” says Sona Karentz Andrews, provost and vice president for academic affairs at PSU. “In fact, our budgeting planning process starts with strategic enrollment management planning at the school/college level.”

PSU asks its schools and colleges to determine where they think they can grow, based on market data and data-analysis processes that the university developed. Campus units also weigh which programs may need further development to get to capacity. They then develop strategies to meet their goals—perhaps by improving retention or by starting a new program targeted to a specific student audience. Campus administrators meet with the units to test their assumptions and refine their plans.

“In the past, we never really funded growth systematically and we never knew how much growth cost,” Andrews says. “Now we have a really good understanding of that, based on the tools that we have developed.”

Expert Advice

Experts in the private sector who advise universities offer numerous tips for schools that want to up their game in enrollment management.

Royall’s Farrell, for example, says that it is important for universities to engage with prospective students as early as possible. But there’s the rub. Farrell says students differ greatly in when they are open to hearing from recruiters. Through research, Royall has found that perhaps half of high school students are ready to think about college in their freshman or sophomore years, but 30 percent are not ready until their junior year. “Students control when they make themselves available to be recruited,” Farrell says. “The key is to be there with those students the very moment they raise their hand and say they’re ready to start thinking about college.”

Noting the close relationship today between prospective students and their parents, Farrell says that “parents need to be welcomed into the college choice process in ways that they’ve never been welcomed before. That’s really critical.”

Students complain that universities tend to sound alike in their marketing messages, Farrell says, “but very few universities do a good job of breaking through and creating an exchange of value that is something other than ‘let me tell you about my college.’” He suggests that a university’s marketing messages focus less on institutional features and more on the value that the institution produces, as demonstrated by student learning and employment outcomes. Farrell also urges colleges to help students make good choices about their college search. “Whether or not they end up choosing your college, that creates a differential relationship with that student that is authentic and valued,” he says.

In general, Farrell suggests, public universities can crib some ideas about enrollment management from private colleges, which have long been dependent on revenue from tuition. He predicts, for example, that more publics are going to adopt private-college approaches to financial aid optimization and tuition discounting.
“Students control when they make themselves available to be recruited. The key is to be there with those students the very moment they raise their hand and say they’re ready to start thinking about college.”

– Peter Farrell

**Institutional Pain**

Jim Black, president and CEO of the enrollment management consulting firm SEM Works, sees a landscape in public higher education that he candidly says is notable because “there’s a lot of institutional pain out there.” Public universities have become more tuition-dependent in an era when tuition-paying students are harder to find, Black says. He also notes that in the process of building residence halls and classroom buildings to attract students, some institutions have taken on added debt, adding to their need for revenue.

Black notes that while many institutions are ramping up their enrollment management capacities, some are just doing more of what they have been doing, which he says “is not necessarily the right thing.” Some institutions, for example, expand their markets, geographically as well as programmatically, without thinking about such changes strategically in the context of all the institution’s programmatic offerings and without committing the institutional resources needed to help such new ventures succeed. When many of those new programs fail, he says, institutions often tend to think the problem is marketing. But, he says, “they don’t have a product promotion problem—they have a product problem. And they are addressing the wrong side of that equation.”

“The key is not necessarily to work harder, but to work smarter,” Black says. Expanding into a new city or state may be an appropriate strategy, he says, but only if an institution “has the resources and the patience for that, and the underlying research to see that a market actually has potential for them.” Building a successful new market requires an institution to have a sustained presence there, Black says, such as a recruiter who can cultivate relationships, build networks and partnerships, work with alumni in that area, and maybe do some marketing. It often takes years for such efforts to bear fruit. “Honestly, most institutions don’t have the appetite for that,” he says. “They want a solution tomorrow. If it doesn’t pay off in the first year, they stop. And that’s not the right way to do it.”

Black says, “Most institutions are going to have to recalibrate their enrollment strategies. They really need to look at what they need to let go of that’s not producing results.” Making those determinations hinges on a robust ability to analyze data—but that’s also problematic.

“Institutions need to leverage data more to make informed decisions,” Black says. “Many of them are trying to do that, but I don’t think many have come to grips with what that is going to take in terms of building internal infrastructure” to use data well. What’s often missing, he says, is the analytical capacity to connect data to strategy in ways that are actionable. “Institutions often have people who can produce reports and get information to the right decision-makers,” he says, “but the analysis of that data and the implications of the data—that’s the gap.”

To prioritize goals, Black says universities should first take a hard look at internal practices and external environmental factors that affect enrollment success. But merely identifying trends is not enough— institutions have to figure out how to capitalize on key environmental realities.

Black stresses that successful enrollment plans should focus on data
“If you don’t have strong academic programs that meet the needs of the region that you are serving, particularly for a regional comprehensive like us, then you’re not going to be able to attract students to those programs.”

—Deborah L. Ford

rather than aspirational goals and should detail specific operational steps. For example, Black says, “If you want to increase the number of freshmen, you need to start backing that into, ‘Okay, how many admits does that mean, how many applicants, and how many inquiries do we need to achieve that goal?’ Then break that down by recruiter, so that they understand the targets that they need to hit, in order. Without that, goals can be useless.”

Finally, Black says, “You need to build in some accountabilities. Where are the milestones, and who is reporting back on achievement of those milestones and the timely delivery of the deliverables associated with it? Evaluation is critical for continuous improvement.”

President’s Role

How can university leaders best shape enrollment management at their institutions? Farrell says that, for one thing, presidents can help ensure that enrollment managers have the clout they need on campus. Presidents, Farrell says, “can help colleagues understand that this is the person who can determine whether we can offer raises to the staff, or be able to fund some of the projects in your department that you have put forward. Some of the more business-minded presidents are helping the academic side of the house understand this very clearly.”

“One of the things that I think is missing at a lot of institutions that should come from the presidential level is an enrollment vision,” notes Black. It’s up to the president, he says, to define enrollment goals broadly, in the context of what it is that the university seeks to become. “Some presidents will do that through a message that revolves around a sense of urgency—the sky is falling and if we don’t have these enrollments were going to have to eliminate programs and positions,” Black says. “It’s okay to have some of that, but it needs to be tightly coupled with a sense of hope. Presidents are really critical to setting the right tone.”

Based in Rockville, Maryland, Stephen G. Pelletier writes regularly about higher education.

This piece is the second in a series of articles Public Purpose published this year on enrollment management. In our previous issue, we explored the historical context of enrollment management; this can be accessed in our archives at http://www.aascu.org/IMAP/PublicPurpose/2015/Spring/.