

MANAGING the ENROLLMENT CRUNCH

By Stephen G. Pelletier

With students proving a little harder to find in many states, public universities need new strategies for enrollment management.



In the upper peninsula of Michigan, one university is starting the world's first cold weather body farm, part of a new forensic anthropology major. Separately, recognizing the rise of medical marijuana, that same institution has launched a unique undergraduate degree in medicinal plant chemistry. The program will train students for work in emerging industries related to medicinal plant production, analysis and distribution. In Oregon, which has legalized marijuana, another university is studying whether it ought to create a program in cultivating cannabis.

The advent of programs like these tells a couple of stories. Fundamentally, they embody forward-thinking from universities that have carefully analyzed emerging needs for academic programs—and moved quickly to serve those needs. The other story is that part of what's driving that creativity in program development is that a great many public universities serve geographic areas with a shrinking cohort of high school graduates. That in itself is a strong impetus for designing new programs that will attract new students. And that's one strategy for universities to use for working themselves through the current enrollment crunch.

Today's sometimes Sisyphean task of meeting enrollment targets has been a fact of life across higher education for several years now. In the context of public higher education, that raises a pertinent question: How are state universities addressing their enrollment challenges?

Familiar Numbers

Some of the data points behind today's demographic challenges are probably as familiar to college administrators as the names of their children. In 2016, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) framed the challenges in a report called *Knocking*

at the College Door. WICHE researchers projected that “after steady increases in the overall number of high school graduates over the last 15 years, the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation.” Using 2013 as a benchmark, the report projected that the U.S. would produce fewer high school graduates than it did that year in each of the years between 2014 and 2023. While gains in the number of high school graduates are expected in 2024, 2025 and 2026, WICHE projects that declining trends will resume between 2027 and 2032, when average high school graduation cohorts are again expected to be less than those in 2013.

Noting that about a third of all public high schools are in the South, WICHE further projected that schools in that region would see an increase in graduates, at least until 2025. Schools in the South are projected to produce some 45 percent of all high school graduates in the country. Production of high school graduates is also expected to remain robust in the West, which will produce about 30 percent of all graduates. But in the Midwest and Northeast, the outlook is rather different. WICHE expects the share of high school graduate production in the Midwest and Northeast to decline by 12 and 11 percent, respectively, between 2013 and 2030. The Midwest is projected to produce just 19 percent of the nation's college graduates in 2030, while the Northeast will produce just 16 percent. That's obviously not good news if you have responsibility for managing a university in those regions.

Looking in 2013 at federal government projections that higher education enrollments would increase just 15 percent between 2010 and 2021, Kevin Crockett of the enrollment management consulting firm Ruffalo Noel Levitz said that constituted a projected compounded annual growth rate of 1.25 percent, compared to 3.52 percent between 1996 and 2010. Indeed, the National Student Clearinghouse found that overall

postsecondary enrollments in fall 2016 were *down* 1.4 percent from the previous fall. Enrollments in four-year public institutions were essentially flat overall, but that belies the experience in universities in pockets of the country that have seen pronounced erosion in enrollment. In April 2017, for example, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that nine of the 14 institutions in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education had experienced “double-digit percentage drops” in fall enrollment since 2009.

One final set of data points suggests that, on average at least, public universities are managing to hold steady in enrollment. In May 2017, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that enrollments in four year public universities had risen a paltry 0.2 percent—essentially flat—continuing trends for the same semester in the prior two years, which saw increases of 1 percent and .0 percent. But national averages and flat growth may not be particularly comforting to institutions in geographic areas where the pool of potential students keeps shrinking.

“Step Back and Reevaluate”

Derek Hall, the assistant vice president for marketing and communications at Northern Michigan University (NMU), is one of the many administrators of public universities who is dealing with a squeeze on potential student markets. The region where his school is based, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, saw a 4.4 percent drop in population from 2000 to 2016. Moreover, he says, the percentage of high school students in the area who go to college is also declining.

Talking about NMU's enrollment management efforts, Hall says, “We have had to step back and reevaluate where we best spend our time and efforts.” The school rebranded its marketing messaging and instituted customer relations management software that helps

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it personalize its marketing outreach. Like many other public universities, NMU has also broadened its geographic scope for student recruitment, including more aggressive recruiting not just in the UP and across Michigan, but in neighboring Illinois.

To compete effectively for students, Northern Michigan knows that it also has to find ways to stand out from the crowd. One way to do that is with unique academic programs. The school has taken two giant steps in that regard. NMU is creating the world's first cold weather body farm, part of a new forensic anthropology program, which will help law enforcement agencies, the military and scientists—not to mention CSI enthusiasts—improve their understanding of human remains. Another “first” is the school's new undergraduate degree in medicinal plant chemistry, the only program of its kind, which is designed to meet the need for skilled technicians and entrepreneurs in the cannabis, herbal extract, and natural product industries. While distinctive in academia, both programs fit naturally as strategic extensions of NMU's curriculum, which has a strong tradition in the health sciences.

Efforts like these are bearing fruit. After two consecutive years of enrollment declines of about 5 percent, NMU's student applications for the fall of 2017 were running 15 percent ahead of the previous year, and admissions were up 13 percent. A public/private partnership to renovate housing for some 1,200 students helped kick applications for campus housing up 16 percent.

Exporting Students

Shrinking pools of students are also a problem in New England. As associate vice president for enrollment management at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU), for example, Terricita E. Sass must navigate a landscape in a state that has been losing population and, to boot, is one of the highest exporters of college students to other states. That's on top of a general decline in high school graduates.

“One of the challenges that I think a lot of us in public education face is that many of us offer much the same menu of

options for students,” Sass notes. She says that raises a critical question: “What is distinctively different about one institution versus another institution?” To meet today's challenges, Sass says, enrollment managers have to identify “what are the niche programs that we are particularly good at?” A related challenge, she says, is to determine how best to define and communicate the inherent value and distinctiveness of a school's programs.

All those factors drive Sass to identify and act on many different tacks in the pursuit of students. SCSU is avidly recruiting more adult students, including those with transfer credit who want to complete baccalaureate degrees or advance certifications, and graduate students. Adding new academic programs is also part of SCSU's enrollment strategy. The school will launch a bachelor's degree program in environmental systems and sustainability studies this fall. Sass says some new graduate programs are also in the works, but haven't yet been announced. “We are also looking at some program niches and doing some restructuring on how we can highlight some of our signature and very strong programs,” she says. “We have not done that in several years.”

Another change in strategy may seem anathema in an industry where annual targets for growth are a given part of planning, but Southern Connecticut is looking at its prospects for enrollment through a pragmatic lens. Recognizing the innate constraints that constricted pools of potential students create, Sass says, “We talk about enrollment as more stabilization than actual growth. Growth is a great thing to say, but we are trying to make sure that we are planning according to what our demography says.”

Leaders Watch the Numbers

While not working down in the trenches of the enrollment management struggle, university leaders nonetheless have their eyes on the enrollment numbers—and are focused on institutional strategies that can help their institution address today's demographic challenges. In that regard, Linda Schott, president of Southern Oregon University (SOU), sees a landscape with many

different kinds of challenges.

Schott says many of the traditional age potential students in the region it serves around Ashland, Ore., could benefit from going to college, but that many simply can't afford to. Schott says SOU serves more first generation, low-income students and Latino students, and that baccalaureate degree attainment in the region has been traditionally low. In a quirky sign of the times, Schott says SOU speculates it loses potential students, particularly men, to jobs in the state's booming and lucrative marijuana cultivation industry. Overall, the school's enrollment has been relatively flat.

To meet those challenges, Schott and her colleagues are exploring many options. A more robust presence in online learning is one potential strategy. Southern Oregon is also looking at ways it might better serve the transfer student and adult student markets. The school is fine-tuning its retention efforts. Schott also has some innovative ideas for working more closely with regional businesses to help train their employees, perhaps based around short courses and badges or certificates.

Southern Oregon is also leveraging new programs to help attract new students. Given that one of the fastest growing parts of the economy in the Ashland area is healthcare, the university developed a bachelor's degree in healthcare administration. A new M.B.A. degree in arts administration just launched. Building on a successful B.A. program, SOU started a master's degree in outdoor adventure & expedition leadership, one of only two such programs west of the Mississippi. Meeting the needs of regional horticultural interests, SOU created an online certificate in wine business management and is toying with the idea of a program in cultivating cannabis.

Missed Opportunities

Consulting with many colleges and universities, enrollment management expert Jim Black, the president and CEO of SEM Works, Inc., sees a lot that colleges and members could and should be doing to meet their enrollment goals. One common shortcoming that Black notices is that while many institutions say they want to recruit students other than traditional-aged first-years, they do not match that talk with robust, comprehensive marketing plans targeted specifically to markets like transfer students, adult learners and continuing education students. Similarly, Black believes universities miss opportunities to woo graduate students by underserving that group of students. "Graduate students are kind of marginalized on a lot of regional campuses and don't get a lot of resources," he says.

Perhaps acting out of panic rather than careful reasoning, some institutions promulgate new programs with a "spaghetti" strategy, essentially throwing up a new program and seeing if it sticks. Black says university presidents need to push their academic leaders to make sure program development and marketing aligns with

the institution's core mission—and has a sound business plan. "I recently heard a provost make what I thought was a pretty profound statement. Talking about how he prioritizes his investment in academic programs, he said, 'No markets, no margin, no mission,'" Black recalled. "In other words, he was saying that while every academic program feels they are likely critical to the mission, leaders have to focus on the ones that have a market" and the potential to turn a profit.

Black finds that many institutions need to do more robust market research. For example, he says, too many institutions focus on industry demand when they are reviewing their program mix when they also ought to be weighing factors like student demand, program capacity, and the relative strengths of their institution's other programs. It's also essential, he says, to carefully analyze the size and depth of the market for a given program, the extent to which it is saturated with other similar offerings from competitors, and whether relative market considerations leave room for success for a given program over time. Black advocates that institutions conduct a cost-benefit analysis to discern what a program's total costs are and whether any potential return to the university would outweigh those costs.

"Regional universities are not really doing a good job with differentiating themselves. For the most part, they look a lot like each other," Black says. One antidote to homogeneity, he suggests, is that institutions should focus, from a branding standpoint, on how they are different or how they can be different. "It can't just be promotion," Black says, "It has to be real. They have to find some things on the academic experience side and the student experience side that make them stand out and make them



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a compelling choice over some of their peers. I don't see that very often."

Black says that presidents should cultivate better relationships with their enrollment managers. "Presidents tend to have closer relationships with their development officers and tend to be focused more on fundraising, but the truth is that most of their revenue comes from enrollment, not from fundraising," he says. Black argues that it is up to presidents to make sure that enrollment managers "are placed strategically within the organization" and given the opportunity to "influence the strategic direction of the institution." For their part, enrollment

managers may need to learn how to speak truth to power. Blacks says, "A president's aspirations may or may not be realistic. The enrollment manager can provide research to make sure those goals are realistic."

The plain truth about enrollment management today is that old assumptions don't apply, and many of the basic rules of the game have changed. To meet today's challenges, universities need to adopt new thinking. "There is a market opportunity there," Schott says. "We have to figure out exactly where it is. We have to keep scanning to see what we need to do to be positioned for the future."

Talking about seeking state funding, Schott could also have been talking about enrollment when she said, "We have to quit wishing it were different and quit hoping that it comes back. We have to maintain our core commitments, but find new answers and new ways" of delivering on our mission. In short, she says, every institution needs to "be brave and keep thinking up new ideas." **P**

Based near Washington, D.C., writer and editor Stephen G. Pelletier specializes in higher education.