

Planning Beyond Recruitment: A Wake Up Call for Strategic International Enrollment Management

AS MANY CAMPUS LEADERS cope with the new reality of declining international enrollments, senior administrators will want to ensure their institution has a plan for international enrollment management (IEM) as opposed to simply having a plan for international recruitment. This shift in strategic thinking is long overdue.

A strategic plan for IEM should not be a separate document of which only the international enrollment staff are aware, but rather a component of the institution's overall strategic plan. As such, the institution's mission, vision, values, and goals should all clearly drive IEM objectives while colleagues across campus clearly understand how their positions fit within IEM.

Many colleges and universities are dependent on international enrollment and this dependency will increase with greater urgency as certain regions in the United States experience flattening high school graduation rates. There is a clear need to go farther afield to attract students at a time when the recruitment landscape is much more complex.

These two factors, urgency and complexity, may lead to a renaissance in terms of strategic thinking about IEM. As senior administrators come to realize that strategic IEM requires consideration of numerous variables and the application of specialized knowledge and skills, there will be greater intentionality in how they fund, staff, and organize IEM.

I propose five tools and concepts for helping campus leaders to best position their institution to compete for global talent in the years ahead.

Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis, developed by Kurt Lewin, is a technique for understanding the forces that either promote or hinder achievement of a particular goal. In the context of IEM, it informs strategies for improving yield cultivation and increasing student retention. However, it has another useful application in terms of understanding internal support for and resistance to change through examination of incentives created through campus budgetary models.

Traditional financial management through incremental budgeting is a good way to feed complacency while starving innovation. For instance, there is little incentive for staff in a centralized office of international education, where international student recruitment and services both reside, to grow enrollment if they are unlikely to receive support for managing an increased caseload of advisees. Similarly, faculty may undermine an opportunity to receive large numbers of sponsored students if they are not guaranteed additional faculty lines to accommodate the new course sections that will be necessary to accommodate the new enrollments. Incremental budgeting is an antiquated model reminiscent of an era when state subsidies covered most of an institution's costs. It does not encourage the entrepreneurial spirit necessary to succeed in a dynamic, globally competitive environment.

Today's administrators must be entrepreneurial if they and their institutions are to remain relevant. Two alternatives to incremental budgeting are performance-based budgeting, which incentivizes success as defined by strategic priorities, and responsibility center management, which delegates to selected units a portion of the revenue they raise in exchange for greater financial responsibility. Such models ensure that units supporting international enrollment management continue to receive the resources necessary for future success by allocating a portion of the revenue back to the units.

Prescriptive Analytics

Five years ago, it was easy to analyze descriptive statistics compiled over a multiyear period to predict within a few percentage points future international enrollment by academic program, degree level, and nationality. Today, the world seems much more complicated and the stakes for international enrollment managers are higher.



The simple formula that relied upon historical data to predict a fairly certain future must now constantly be reworked to include economic and political forces each weighted differently across markets. Moreover, increased uncertainty related to immigration policies, international affairs, and world markets necessitates running a wide range of scenarios with no clear alternative rising to the top. This new reality requires a level of sophistication that often exceeds available knowledge, skills, and time, particularly within inadequately resourced offices. IEM professionals should work with colleagues in institutional research to develop new analytical models that take into account the competing forces influencing international enrollment and possible actions for maximizing or minimizing their effect. Done correctly, the outcome will not only lead to solid predictions for the future, but also to shortcuts to the most impactful decisions and actions.

Pragmatism

A sound strategy should shape organizational structure. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that strategy is forced to fit within predefined frameworks of administrative systems, human resources, and workflow. If not addressed, campus politics will inevitably discourage pragmatism. Such an environment inhibits both effectiveness and innovation. In effect, it is why so many strategies fail.

In the end, a successful strategy is one that works. A pragmatic approach to IEM requires knowledge of the various tactics and tools available for achieving strategic goals and objectives. It also requires careful and objective assessment of individual and institutional biases. Failure to adapt to changing conditions is the quickest path to irrelevance.

Value-Stream Mapping

One of the most cost-effective ways to grow international enrollment is to eliminate waste by streamlining admissions processes. Value-stream mapping is a simple technique for accomplishing this goal. It requires processors and decisionmakers to map out the steps, decisions, and delays present within the admissions

process. Participants next code each step, decision, and delay according to the value it adds to the process. If an element lacks value and there is no substantive reason for it to remain a part of the process, then it is eliminated.

After participants brainstorm improvements to the current process, they incorporate these into a map of an ideal process and work toward implementation. Coupled with force field analysis and conducted within the spirit of pragmatism, the result is often a double-digit percentage decrease in overall processing time. Such an increase in efficiency positions the institution to compete more effectively for international students while at the same time freeing staff to work on other high-impact projects.

Systems Thinking

The scope of international enrollment management ranges from prospects to alumni and everything in between. Unfortunately, international recruitment, retention, and alumni engagement are often disconnected. Systems thinking is a technique advanced by Peter Senge, among others, for seeing interdependencies as opposed to distinct parts. When applied to IEM, systems thinking allows us to think about the whole student across all stages of the enrollment lifecycle. It is a means for seeing beyond administrative silos and ensuring IEM strategy is comprehensive.

In summary, strategic IEM is not simply growth, but rather it is a means for advancing mission-driven and vision-inspired strategic goals and priorities through the enrollment of international students. While recruitment is a strategy, it cannot be the only strategy. ■

DAVID L. DI MARIA is associate vice provost for international education at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County.

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