

SEM Endorsement Program: Ten Years of Growing Enrollment Management Competency

*By Joe Head, Christopher Tremblay,
Kimberley Buster-Williams, and Patrick Tanner*

This year marks the beginning of the tenth year of AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program (SEM-EP). As part of acknowledging this milestone, this article includes four perspectives from individuals associated with this unique credential: Joe Head, founder and first director of SEM-EP; Christopher Tremblay, current director of SEM-EP; Kimberley Buster-Williams, current assistant director of SEM-EP; and Patrick Tanner, SEM-EP's 50th graduate.

A Look Back

By Joe Head, SEM-EP's Founder and First Director

With the rise of enrollment management (EM) in the late 1970s and 1980s, a new breed of professionals stepped up to meet the challenges of recruitment, retention, progression, database management software, and graduation dynamics. As the field matured, so too did the demand for preparation and validation.

Enrollment management is thought to have first surfaced at Boston University (Maguire 1976) and was further shaped by Don Hossler and John Bean (Hossler, Bean, & Associates 1990). The old landscape of student life transformed to a culture of "student success" relationships and a need to abandon a one-size-fits-all enrollment model.

Target marketing and holistic student outreach systems were developed as a customized formula to fit institutional type, mission, and revenue impact. Cutting

edge administrators saw the need for a tightknit and comprehensive system of institutional services grouped under a division dedicated to manage enrollment outcomes. As a result, a call for national leadership and approved career preparation was sought.

As enrollment management spread within higher education, young professionals began to search for options that would prepare them to effectively lead in the field. The perceptive practitioner understood that training was needed to generate optimal enrollments that would sustain institutions and gain professional standing.

The young guns of higher education enrollment services began to note the evolution of consulting services such as Ingersoll and Associates, Noel Levitz, and some niche boutique seminars dedicated to EM concepts. However, the savvy interest in the rise of EM also begged the question of credentialing and where to find it.

AACRAO leaders soon introduced strategic enrollment management (SEM) and sponsored an annual conference dedicated to the best EM practices, trends, and innovations delivered by the most gifted minds in the field. Once again the question was posed about a uniform curriculum and pathway to gain formal recognition. These voices stirred responsible and talented enrollment personalities to ponder how a customized program could be offered within the boundaries of AACRAO.

The topic went on to be discussed in professional AACRAO circles for years but was met with the realities of logistics, costs, ownership, and management. Therefore, the AACRAO annual conference and SEM sessions

continued to be the response for enrollment management role preparations, but fell short of satisfying the credentialing question.

A SEM credential was first considered by AACRAO in the mid-1990s when a fact-finding effort was proposed to determine the interest and shape of what might be involved. Stanley E. Henderson, president of AACRAO at the time, authorized a two-year study in 1997 and charged a task force (chaired by myself, a retired associate vice president of enrollment services at Kennesaw State University in Georgia) to look into the possibilities. Meetings were held in various regions of the United States to gain feedback. The committee's report concluded that sufficient interest was apparent, but great difficulty prevented such a program to become operational in terms of delivery, access, cost, sponsorship, instruction, content, and staffing support. Additional discussion centered on whether the credential should be a certificate, license, registration, diploma, or endorsement. As a result, the idea was tabled until circumstances were more favorable.

As the internet became more prominent in subsequent years, the state of Georgia launched a registered enrollment professional program for its membership entitled Georgia Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers Institute for Strategic Enrollment Management, or GISEM. This was a field- and conference-based experience sponsored by GACRAO concluding with a registered enrollment professional certificate. The program was initiated in 2005 and attracted the attention of several other neighboring states that also attempted to launch similar programs.

By 2009, AACRAO became re-interested, and Jerry Sullivan, executive director at the time, asked me and Bob Bontrager to work together to establish the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM)–Endorsement Program (SEM-EP). The plan was modeled after the Georgia program but would be structured as field-based and with online curriculum delivery for in-service professionals and would involve webinars, field visits, and a capstone. Upon successful completion, the candidate would be listed and recognized on the AACRAO SEM-EP web registry page as an endorsed enrollment professional.

I was then named the first director and began enrolling candidates in 2012. In 2017, Christopher Tremblay assumed the directorship and continues to make outstanding contributions to the credentialing program.

As SEM-EP celebrates its tenth anniversary and boasts an elite registry of graduates, the endorsement stands as AACRAO's pathway to professional recognition in the industry.

Evolving Based on the Times

By Christopher W. Tremblay, Ed.D., Director of SEM-EP

My doctoral dissertation on graduate certificates in college admissions counseling led me to research and catalog the emerging enrollment management credentials. That research prompted Janie Barnett at AACRAO's national office to ask me to join the SEM-EP team to work with Joe Head in 2016. For six months, I served as assistant director as I learned how to manage the program under the leadership of Head. In January 2017, when I became the second director of SEM-EP, Kimberley Buster-Williams of the University of Mary Washington at the time, joined the SEM-EP team as assistant director. Together, Kimberley and I have advanced the program. In these last five years, our goal has been to provide an enriching, educational experience for professionals interested in growing their SEM skillset and toolkit.

In the beginning, we drafted and published learning outcomes as a way to validate the curriculum. We quantified the time commitment by estimating the expectations of each assignment. When we calculated the total and it showed about a 90-hour investment, I remember Tom Green, AACRAO's former associate executive director of consulting and SEM, saying, "Wow, that's the expectation of graduate credit-bearing course."

In 2017, we invited AACRAO members and SEM-EP graduates to give back to their association by joining as evaluators. In this role, enrollment management leaders review submitted assignments and offer feedback. To date, fourteen individuals have served SEM-EP in this capacity.

When we began hearing from prospective students that their institutions did not have professional development funds to support them, we launched the partial SEM-EP scholarships. These \$500 scholarships are awarded quarterly to applicants based on the strength of a submitted essay; a letter of support; diversity as defined by geographic region, institutional size and type, gender, race, and ethnicity; and demonstrated leadership characteristics.

(ORIGINAL ADVERTISEMENT REMOVED)

SEM-EP TENTH



ANNIVERSARY



Representing **25** U.S. States & Canadian Provinces

LIFETIME

134 Enrollees

50 Graduates



AVERAGE/YEAR

15 Enrollees

6 Graduates



Current Enrollees*

38



Evaluators

14



Assignments Reviewed

292

*As of November 1, 2021

February 2019 brought the first university agreement connected to SEM-EP. Under this agreement, professionals who have earned the SEM endorsement receive three credits toward the completion of the Doctor of Education: Leadership in Higher Education degree at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Upon successful completion of the SEM endorsement, Bethel University will waive the course, EDUC 885: Individual Projects in Higher Education. “We are thrilled that a four-year university like Bethel University is recognizing the educational value of our training and endorsement,” said Mike Reilly, AACRAO’s former executive director. Likewise, students at Bethel University can elect to enroll in AACRAO’s SEM-EP as part of their pursuit of the Doctor of Education degree. This arrangement encourages enrollment management professionals to continue their education and pursue a doctoral-level credential.

Through the capstone requirement of the credential, our graduates have studied and produced reports that have addressed some important topics in our field: shifting institutional scholarship budgets, the future of enrollment leadership, SEM project management, evaluating the impact of timely outreach on re-registration, public-private partnerships, as well as SEM in law school and medical school settings.

Just like every other education-based organization, AACRAO had to pivot its professional development offerings during the COVID-19 pandemic. So we took our required field visits and launched them virtually. This afforded all enrolled learners the opportunity to participate in these organized events to learn about SEM in practice at institutions across the country. In our ninth year, our students learned from Brigham Young University-Idaho, Arapahoe Community College, University of Michigan, University of Florida, Indiana University, and the University of Toronto-Mississauga. We are grateful to those institutions for hosting us.

In 2021, working with AACRAO leadership, we were among the first of the digital badges to formalize the endorsement in a more meaningful way. Our badge, offered through Credly, offers our graduates a way to display their educational experience.

Enrollment in SEM-EP peaked with 46 current learners in April 2020. Over the years, the program has averaged 35 learners at any given time. The year 2021 marked a milestone by graduating our 50th individual, Patrick Tanner of the College of Western Idaho, who

is featured in this article. On September 10, 2021, we saw the very first job posting to specifically reference the AACRAO SEM endorsement as a preferred requirement for the position of Senior Director of Enrollment Services at Wor-Wic Community College in Salisbury, Maryland.

What do our graduates say about their experience? Since feedback is sought from every completer, we receive many accolades:

“This is a great program! I have benefited greatly from this professional development experience. I would like to thank all of the AACRAO faculty who work so diligently to share their knowledge and experiences with those of us growing in the profession.”

“I enjoyed the sense of community between the current participants and past participants. I also liked learning about SEM practices at other universities and having the opportunity to reflect on what I was learning through the assignments.”

“Thank you for this experience. It was eye opening, and I hope other professionals consider this program. It just solidified my love for the profession and for enrollment management.”

“I enjoyed [that] the variety of learning methods allowed you to look at SEM from a lot of different angles.”

These comments reflect the quality of the endorsement and the role it is playing in developing and strengthening our enrollment management leaders.

We are grateful to AACRAO leadership for launching and supporting the SEM Endorsement, which is the *only* endorsement in the field of enrollment management. Special thanks to AACRAO staff member Michael Sisson, who has been the technological support, the problem solver, and the go-to person for SEM-EP.

Reflections from Kimberley Buster-Williams, SEM-EP’s Assistant Director

I have truly enjoyed working with SEM-EP learners and contributing to the profession. In doing research for my recent book, *History of American Higher Education from A-Z: A Primer for Enrollment Managers*, I discovered that interest in a diploma or certification goes back to the 1830s. In the mid-19th century, an academic degree was not required for professional practice in medicine or law. It is no surprise then that medical diplomas were in high demand and could be purchased for \$10 to \$25

in a scheme hatched by John Bennett. At the time, two interesting educational policy questions were raised. First, should a degree be based on classes attended and examinations passed at a set physical place? Second, or should a demonstration of proficiency and merit be the criterion (Thelin 2011)?

As shared in *A History of American Higher Education, 2nd edition*, “Bennett’s major reform to medical education was to assure that experience, not mere completion of a prescribed course of formal instruction, was the ultimate standard for assessing professional merit” (Thelin 2011, 57). A 1910 Carnegie Foundation report on medical education (Flexner 1910) recommended additional standards for medical degrees.

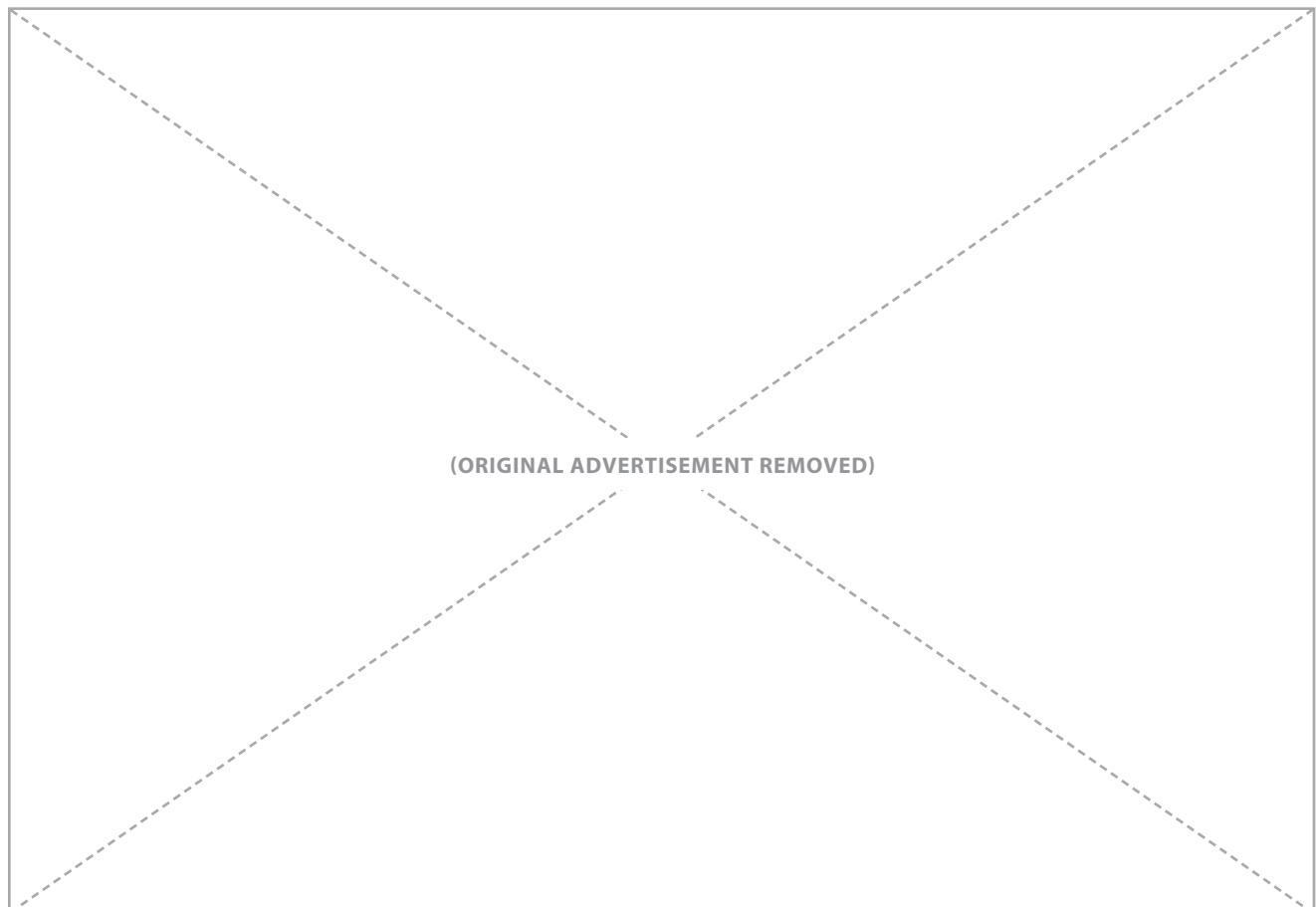
Like a medical degree today, AACRAO’s endorsement of enrollment professionals via SEM-EP is a highly respected standard in the profession. Those who earn the endorsement have both experience and an academic degree (per the admissions requirements). In addition, they have participated in a “preceptorship type model” of learning with preceptor-student contact time. In this model, concepts such as cognitive apprentice-

ship, scaffolding, and learning in communities of practice are used to help learners understand the nuances of SEM. In closing, the trailblazers who had the vision to create such a program were way ahead of their time. They rebuffed “flat-world” thinking and our SEM-EP graduates, and graduates to come, are the beneficiaries.

Reflections from SEM-EP’s 50th Graduate, Patrick Tanner, College of Western Idaho

To say that the AACRAO SEM-EP experience has been helpful could not be more of an understatement. When enrolling in such a robust professional development opportunity, one wonders about the learning outcomes, the time commitment, and what knowledge will be gained due to participation in the program. Indeed, the engagement around salient enrollment concepts was valuable at each turn, but it is the sum of the SEM-EP enterprise that delivers outsized value.

All participants are employed in the field, and most have additional engagements such as consulting,



continuing their graduate studies, or some other opportunity that vies for the limited open space on their calendar. This reality complicates full participation from the outset, especially considering the “Essentials of SEM” online course that commences soon after enrolling for most; this is the equivalent of a compressed summer course.

Each individual has surely taken on this commitment knowingly, but the notion of drinking from a firehose is apropos relative to the immense amount of foundational information that is shared by enrollment experts. This learning sets the stage for what enrollees gain throughout the endorsement program.

After one recovers from that course and regroups, the path forward is simple, if not wonderfully exciting. Even though they were virtual, the field visits were the highlight for me. Again, there is much to be gained from online videos and diving into relevant literature from the past and the present, but I found that my greatest insights came from exploring topics du jour with colleagues across our great nation. The logistics of these virtual visits were pleasant for participants, though we know that the behind-the-scenes work to get them off the ground was tremendous for those who made the arrangements. Because of the approach of so many enrollment professionals who were eager to share their processes and procedures, all involved were able to end their day with more than a few great ideas to positively impact their students. This level of shared destiny is uncommon in these days of declining market shares.

Finally, each endorsement program participant must determine which style of capstone project they would like to embark on. Some grab datasets as they dream new dreams for enrollment on their individual campuses; others dive in deeply on a research project. I chose to conduct a limited literature review based on a recent book about community colleges and the need for a data-informed perspective. Capstone projects also incorporate a peer review aspect, further encouraging the building of strong networks for participants. While I readily admit that writing papers is not my favorite pastime, I found it beyond rewarding to synthesize foundational issues from the course, webinars, and field visits with the publications I used for the literature review.

When beginning the SEM-EP journey, instructors state multiple times that we “only get out of it what we put into it.” Along with my fellow graduates, I have come away with a broadened perspective on what en-

rollment management is and what it could be. I find myself listening for different parts of conversations on campus. I’m utilizing renewed energy to collaborate across divisions to advance on completion metrics. My colleagues and I are addressing individual-level enrollment issues, curricular needs, government regulations, persistence data, and the science of leading and lagging indicators at all points of the student lifecycle with new eyes as we seek to support institutional success, one student at a time.

That’s the quirky nature of this body of work; it isn’t just about admissions. SEM must account for idiosyncrasies across space and time that outline extremely specific returns for every individual student, on a scale of tens of thousands. Yet, at the end of the day, it boils down to, “Will I make my class?” It always has, and it always will. Hopefully the answer to that question is confidently positive—but this is based on environmental scans, relationships with business and industry leaders, connections with high school students and counselors, support from local HR departments, and governmental and non-profit leaders, among others; the list is endless. Additionally, enrollment practitioners rely on an entire campus of professionals in every area to perform their responsibilities at a consistently high level, and they also personally put in blood, sweat, and tears. And when it comes to the first day of classes and students are counted, the careers and livelihoods of so many are left in the balance relative to the decisions that teenagers (and their parents and guardians), emerging adults, and mid-career professionals have made about how they should proceed with their own lives.

That is precisely why this endorsement program is so necessary. It isn’t about getting a leg up on the competition as much as it is understanding your institution’s systems, infrastructure, and data so that you can make course corrections that deliver for students. I once worked at an institution that painstakingly put many hours into the creation of a report until one day someone asked about it. It turned out that no one had read the report in years. Another institution couldn’t determine a particularly troubling aspect of a retention issue until the stars aligned and they created a specific report that shed light on the real issue—it was academically successful athletes who were leaving the school in droves before their junior year.

The problems facing higher education leaders are plentiful; the answers to those problems are in short

supply. We need to continue raising funds, developing physical plants, adjusting academic offerings, and updating advising and career counseling models. But these are all exercises in futility if they lack guidance from a well-developed enrollment plan that is founded on a well-understood student lifecycle. AACRAO's SEM-EP has helped me to understand that all enrollment managers are higher education leaders, but not all higher education leaders are enrollment managers. If we are to serve our students well, one at a time, we need to immediately address this truth.

Concluding Thoughts

For nearly ten years, the AACRAO SEM Endorsement has provided content knowledge, validated learning and developed a professional skillset for members and beyond. While we have looked back as we enter our tenth year, we also look forward, especially to our next milestone of our 100th graduate. As the field of SEM evolves, so too will this endorsement program. With digital badges in hand, our graduates go forth to implement SEM strategies on campuses all over the world.

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About the Authors

Joe Head was the inaugural director of the AACRAO Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program and served in that role until 2016. He is the former vice president of enrollment for Kennesaw State University. In 2004, Head was the recipient of AACRAO's APEX Award for Student Success.

Christopher Tremblay, Ed.D., is Editor-in-Chief of *College and University* as well as Executive Director of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan and Director of AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Endorsement Program. Tremblay has nearly 30 years of experience in college admissions and enrollment management, having served as vice chancellor for enrollment management at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, associate provost for enrollment management at Western Michigan University, and assistant vice chancellor for enrollment management at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, among other positions. Tremblay earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Michigan University. He has a post-master's certificate in enrollment management from Capella University, and doctorate of education in educational leadership from the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Kimberley Buster-Williams, Ed.S., serves as Vice President for Enrollment Management at Northeastern Illinois University. She has been a member of AACRAO since 1996. Buster-Williams earned an Ed.S. degree in higher education administration, a master's degree in education administration, and a bachelor's degree in English, all from Old Dominion University. She also has a postmaster's certificate in leadership from the University of Michigan's Center for the Education of Women. Buster-Williams' background includes extensive work in strategic planning, enrollment management in the academic context, access and diversity, branding/marketing, and assessment. She has published more than 20 articles in several academic journals and has presented both nationally and internationally.

Patrick Tanner serves as the Assistant Vice President of Enrollment and Student Services at the College of Western Idaho. Patrick began his work in residence life and housing at the University of Denver and then at Roger Williams University. Tanner also served in an administrative role at Penn State's York campus before moving to Idaho to continue his service at a community college (College of Western Idaho), and his learning at Idaho State University. In 2021, Tanner earned the Strategic Enrollment Management endorsement from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO).