

Putting the SEM Endorsement to Work: Perspectives from the Enrollment Management Field

*By Nick Heisserer, Stacy Maestas, Jennifer McClure,
Steven McDowell, and Kristen Taylor*

AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program, or SEM-EP, is a well-defined, self-paced professional development program and career advancement track for in-service enrollment service professionals. Designed to promote industry competency and readiness, the program helps learners develop expertise in strategic enrollment management through an approved curriculum from leading enrollment professionals that leads to a formal endorsement from AACRAO.

SEM-EP was first discussed from 1997 until 1999, when AACRAO studied the idea of a credentialing program in enrollment management. However, the plan was subsequently postponed. In 2010, Joe Head reintroduced the idea to AACRAO and served as the program's initial director. Bob Bontrager served as consultant for one year as the program was launched in 2012. The program had its inaugural graduate in 2014.

Since the inception of SEM-EP, more than 100 learners have begun the program. To date, more than 30 have completed it. Select graduates offered to share how they have applied the knowledge and skill gained from the SEM-EP in their everyday work. These are their stories.

Stacy Maestas

Registrar, Laramie County Community College

My journey as a result of completing the SEM-EP is still evolving. I discovered the SEM-EP in 2014 while doing

research during my graduate program. I am fortunate to work for an institution that values professional development and “growing their own” and was excited when the president's cabinet approved my request for professional development funding for the SEM-EP.

My institution has experienced declining enrollment, similar to the national trend and of concern to the college and our board. Our board and president determined that we would start researching strategic enrollment management. At the same time, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) approved our application to be a Guided Pathways 2.0 school. The timing of both decisions—SEM and Guided Pathways—aligned when I started the SEM-EP. Not long after the planning started, it was determined that I would co-chair the SEM focus as part of our Guided Pathways work.

I share this timeline and history because while I had barely started the SEM-EP, I was already benefiting from it. Among the most valuable lessons I learned was the importance of transparent and cross-functional collaboration and of working closely with all areas of campus. Since completing the program in November 2018, I have presented about the SEM-EP at the AACRAO Annual Meeting in Los Angeles and participated in an AACRAO Readiness Assessment on our campus to help determine the best time to embark on our official SEM planning. I've also served as a peer reviewer.

Content shared during the program was immediately applicable to my current role and to efforts with Guided Pathways and other initiatives on campus. While I am far from being an expert, my comfort level and knowledge of SEM continues to grow. The SEM-EP overview is accurate: Completing the program has prepared me for new leadership opportunities that I may not have had prior to completing the program. It was a win-win for my institution and for me. I look forward to continuing to learn and contribute in the ever-changing world of strategic enrollment management.

Nick Heisserer

*Director of Admissions & Registration,
Central Lakes College (CLC)*

Prior to enrolling in the SEM-EP, I had completed a few AACRAO webinars and trainings when I first started my role in student services. While these trainings provided me with tools for navigating day-to-day operations in that role, I chose the SEM-EP to help prepare me to navigate my next role—whenever that opportunity might present itself.

Among the skills I gained from the SEM-EP was improving enrollment data analytics. SEM-EP has four required components: webinar, field visit, SEM Essentials course, and a capstone project. My SEM-EP capstone project was research based. I conducted a review of enrollment data at my institution and discovered a student population that was under-engaged in the enrollment pipeline: students who had applied but never registered for courses. Upon reviewing the data, we determined that for the previous fall semester, 855 students were never engaged to enroll after failing to enroll in their intended semester. As a result of the SEM-EP, I created a re-engagement plan with the following goals: (1) to better understand the barriers that caused students to not enroll in their intended semester, and (2) to encourage students to re-enroll in a future semester. During the spring 2019 semester and with support from administration, the college launched Project Reconnect, a plan to survey all 855 students. Survey questions included:

- Why did you initially apply to CLC?
- Why were you unable to complete the enrollment process?
- In what month did you become interested in applying?

- Would you like to restart the enrollment process?

The CLC Foundation awarded an institutional mini-grant to provide incentives (prizes) for students to respond to the survey. Students who wished to restart the enrollment process were contacted by CLC's admissions department. Survey data made it clear that students chose not to enroll for many academic and non-academic reasons, including:

- Student's personal schedule conflicted with the class schedule
- Undecided as to a program of study
- Unable to place into college-level courses
- Personal non-academic factors prevented them from enrolling

In addition, we learned that students are interested in restarting the enrollment process. For example, 24 students re-enrolled in fall 2019 courses as a result of this program. Without SEM-EP, these students would never have been identified. Their futures are now brighter and the college's enrollment is greater as a result of SEM-EP.

Steven McDowell

*Director of Financial Aid Services,
Connecticut State Colleges & Universities*

The Connecticut State Colleges & Universities system comprises twelve community colleges, four state universities, and one online college. These institutions, governed by the Board of Regents for Higher Education, provide affordable, innovative, and rigorous programs for more than 85,000 credit and non-credit students to achieve their personal and career goals and contribute to the economic growth of Connecticut.

Financial aid administrators tend to focus on the nuances of the profession, federal regulation, and a host of acronyms. The SEM-EP gave me an opportunity to step out of my comfort zone to learn more about how financial aid fits into the bigger picture at institutions of all shapes and sizes.

Once my training in SEM-EP was complete, I was recognized for having expanded subject knowledge of SEM-related activities, practices, and policies. One policy that leveraged my SEM-EP learning is our community college Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policy, which provides for greater emphasis on student success



Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program

AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program (SEM-EP) is designed to provide a well-defined professional development program and career advancement track for enrollment service professionals. For the individual, completion of the program is a valuable addition to a resume and a formal recognition by AACRAO regarding professional readiness to conquer current and future challenges in the field. For the institution, the program will offer a better way to evaluate the preparedness of prospective employees for SEM positions.

How long is the program?

The SEM-EP is tied to the most recent SEM material and trends in the field. The program is designed to be completed in 12 to 18 months.

What do I receive when I complete the program?

AACRAO will provide you with official documentation to verify your successful completion of the SEM-EP professional development curriculum. Graduates will be listed on the AACRAO SEM-EP national web registry.

Program Eligibility

- Five years experience in the field of SEM (Registrar, Admissions, Recruitment, Financial Aid or related fields as determined by the SEM-EP program committee).
- Individual must be employed (full or part time) by an "accredited" post-secondary institution.
- Provide a one page vita or resume reflecting career experience, professional accomplishments and education.
- Hold a minimum of an earned baccalaureate degree from an accredited institution.

Curriculum

The SEM-EP faculty are drawn from highly experienced professionals in the field of enrollment service.

1. SEM 101 Online Course

A four week course to develop a baseline understanding of SEM.

2. Webinars

Three pre-recorded webinars on topics focused on key components of SEM.

3. Field Visits

Visits to three approved institutions of distinct types followed by a written report guided by prescribed questions. In addition, **attendance at the AACRAO Annual Meeting or AACRAO SEM Conference will fulfill one of the field visit requirements.**

4. Capstone Research Experience

All SEM-EP candidates are expected to conduct a brief research capstone project during the course of the curriculum. The assignment focuses on tracking and analyzing a local population of students from the candidate's institution and concludes by reporting conversion outcomes or conducting an annotated literature research project.

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For more information on this and other professional development opportunities, visit: www.aacrao.org



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and early academic intervention in conjunction with financial aid. In the first semester of implementation, this policy accounted for an increase in headcount of 1,369 and FTE of 821, equivalent to \$1.8M in tuition and fee revenue. In addition, 71 percent of the students who sought advising during the first semester of implementation enrolled; 50 percent of those persisted into the next semester. Presentations on this policy, uniformly applied across all twelve of Connecticut's community colleges, have since been given at three national conferences.

I was also offered an opportunity to serve as a co-manager for the Recruitment Architecture group under our community colleges' Guided Pathways initiative. This endeavor is focused on designing policies and practices to streamline enrollment and strengthen connections to pre-K-12, transfer institutions, and employers by using all four Guided Pathways principles: developing coherent academic paths, creating meaningful learning experiences, helping students select an academic/career path, and helping students stay on their chosen academic/career path. To date, a major milestone achieved by this group has been elimination of the application fee for new community college students. This change provides for increased access and opportunity and breaks down a financial barrier for students throughout Connecticut.

Upon completing the program, I was selected to be part of the SEM-EP evaluation team, serving in 2017-2018 as well as 2018-2019. This gave me an expanded opportunity to provide feedback on current learner assignments, support colleagues by providing an internal perspective for each assignment, and help further develop the enrollment management profession. I also co-presented a poster session on the program's benefits at the 2018 AACRAO SEM Conference.

By working through the SEM-EP, our community colleges have been able to take meaningful steps toward promoting student success initiatives that are contributing to enrollment efforts statewide.

Jennifer McClure, Ph.D.

*Managing Director Enrollment Services,
Elgin Community College*

Elgin Community College (ECC) is one of 48 comprehensive community colleges in Illinois serving 9,000 students in District 509. ECC is a Aspen Top 150 College, an Achieving the Dream Leader College, as well as a military-friendly institution providing 138 degree

and certificate programs, dozens of continuing-education classes, as well as high school equivalency and English language classes.

As a former registrar, I have sat at the crossroads between academic and student affairs. SEM-EP allowed me to learn more about how financial aid and other areas in the college can work together to build enrollment and champion student success.

With knowledge gained through the SEM-EP, I was able to help form our Strategic Enrollment Planning Committee, which brings together 20 faculty and administrators representing areas across the college to discuss goals related to outreach, recruitment, onboarding, classroom, and completion. We review enrollment data, discuss areas for improvement, and prioritize initiatives toward the specific areas that have been identified.

Currently, our efforts have focused on retention of our current students. Initiatives have included mandatory advising, continuing student registration, and near-completer campaigns. We worked with our president to create a message for our near-completers that encouraged them to complete their credentials. The e-mail included academic advisor information to facilitate students' scheduling of advising appointments. Partnering with Student Financial Services, we institutionalized calls to students in jeopardy of being dropped for non-payment. As a result, we continue to see the total number of students being dropped decrease semester over semester. Using the call-center knowledge from our new executive director of institutional advancement and the foundation, we created a pilot that focused on 1,100 students who had earned 60 credit hours but who had not yet earned a degree. In addition, we looked at our environmental survey, which showed the aging of our district residents, and implemented the AL360 from the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) to help identify areas in which we are doing well and those in which we can improve our service of adult students.

Overall, the SEM-EP provided ways for our college to have conversations about enrollment—to include all its aspects, not just the recruitment of new students.

Kristen Taylor

*Senior Director of Enrollment and Partner
Operations, Helix Education*

Our profession is interesting for many reasons. Many assume that enrollment professionals do not discuss

their institutions' strategies or challenges with one another. As a rising administrator at open-access institutions, I relied on professional associations, articles, books, and an occasional drive-by conversation with enrollment colleagues as means of learning more about the profession. I quickly understood enrollment management to be a novelty at open-access institutions and embraced the challenge to shepherd a coordinated and comprehensive approach to recruitment and retention at two community colleges and in regional systems of two universities in Ohio.

A mid-career administrator, I served as the Senior Regional Director of Enrollment Management for the regional open-access system of Miami University in Ohio, a highly regarded and nationally recognized public university. The university's main campus and two regional campuses are in the same county between Cincinnati and Dayton. Competition is fierce, and the local economy is strong. To meet these challenges, Miami University Regionals has transformed considerably since 2015 by creating a new academic division, doubling its number of bachelor's degree programs, and creating an

enrollment management unit. Because this was a pivotal time for the Regionals, I sought AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program to best position the Regionals to achieve sustainable success.

While I had years of administrative experience, I entered this program joyfully pursuing knowledge from colleagues—newer and more experienced. I was glad not only to learn from the best in the industry but also to have the opportunity to exchange experiences, lessons, and strategies with colleagues. I was most appreciative of the site visit requirement as this enabled me to meet with enrollment managers and their teams at various institutions. I was intentional in my selections: a public four-year, a two-year, and a private online institution. I was humbled by and appreciative of my site visit coordinators' welcome and willingness to arrange a full day of meetings and share their institutions' strengths, weaknesses (areas for improvement), opportunities, and threats. While reflecting and writing, I learned many lessons from these meaningful conversations and realized more fully that we are a community willing and wanting to support one another.

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From 2015 until 2017, I led the Miami University Regionals in creating their first Strategic Enrollment Management Council and SEM Plan. While I had created SEM structures and plans at previous institutions, this process was enriched by my SEM-EP engagement. Through the program, I learned and embraced the need to center SEM on the institution's academic context. Stan Henderson's wisdom, communicated through multiple reading assignments, focused on building community and a SEM ethos through the academic mission of the institution and was transformative. As a result of greater understanding of our craft, I was able to successfully connect with academic leadership and faculty and incorporate their participation and planning within our SEM structure. Although the challenge of integrating faculty and academic planning within SEM was not easily overcome, it was possible for the first time in my career. Articles by Henderson, Bontrager, Dolence, Green, and Ingersoll were useful in establishing credibility and research-based recommendations throughout this academic-enrollment collaborative project. This process and capstone project culminated in a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan integrating our academic, recruitment/marketing, and retention/success plans.

Since 2017, the Miami University Regionals have continued to improve our SEM ethos. This academic year, we are launching a faculty learning community

for recruitment and retention. Several articles and resources obtained through SEM-EP serve as foundational texts for this learning community. SEM is a continuous improvement industry. Welcoming our academic partners (a community often perceived as change-averse) is critical to positioning our institutions for sustainable academic and fiscal health. As enrollment managers, regardless of our years in the industry, we have a responsibility to improve ourselves, our institutions, and, most important, opportunities for the students and communities we serve.

Concluding thoughts by SEM-EP Program Director, Dr. Christopher W. Tremblay

These five enrollment management professionals are but a select few of the current learners and graduates in AACRAO's Strategic Enrollment Management Endorsement Program. Their stories offer insight about their experiences in the program, their institutional and professional contexts, and what they gained from their participation. These individuals are examples of how this professional development "endorsement" can help you upskill for your own future roles.

For more information about AACRAO's SEM-EP, contact Christopher Tremblay at sem-ep@aacrao.org or visit aacrao.org/semep.

About the Authors

Nick Heisserer is currently serving as a Business and Computer Technology faculty member for Central Lakes College in Minnesota. Prior to his current position, he served as the director of enrollment services at Central Lakes College overseeing the day-to-day operations of student services and enrollment management.

Stacy Maestas is the Registrar at Laramie County Community College (LCCC) in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She oversees day-to-day operations within the Office of the Registrar, serves on multiple cross-functional committees on campus and within the state, and is integrally involved in curriculum and program development, technology implementations, and process improvement initiatives. In addition to serving as the Registrar, she is also an adjunct instructor at LCCC.

Jennifer McClure, Ph.D., is the Managing Director of Enrollment Services at Elgin Community College (ECC) in Elgin, Illinois. She provides leadership and strategic vision in the planning, development, and implementation of all recruitment, admissions, testing, registration, and records services. She also chairs the Strategic Enrollment Management Committee.

Kristen Taylor is the Senior Director of Enrollment and Partner Operations for Helix Education, overseeing enrollment management and partner engagement for select partner institutions. At the time of co-authoring this article, she served as the senior regional director of enrollment management for Miami University in Ohio, providing leadership and strategic direction for admissions, enrollment marketing and communication, transfer pathways and partnerships, financial aid, one stop services, data analysis, and veteran services.

Steven McDowell is the Director of Financial Aid Services for the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities system. He serves as the chief system designee for student financial aid, providing leadership and direction in all areas of financial aid administration including policy analysis and development, research, legislative and regulatory analysis, program management, and information systems. He additionally serves as a member of the community college team within the CSCU Student Success Center, supporting the Guided Pathways initiative. McDowell is also the recipient of the 2020 AACRAO Emerging Leader Award.