

## A Community College Roadmap for the Strategic Enrollment Management Journey

AUTHOR

**Christine Kerlin**  
*AACRAO Senior Consultant*

As the twenty-first century continues to unveil new challenges for higher education, enrollment planning and management strategies offer a pathway for community and technical colleges (CTC's) to sharpen their focus, optimize their resources, and achieve enrollment goals that support the health and viability of their enterprises. While there is no single formula for strategic enrollment management, several of the steps suggested in this article may help college leaders get started on their own unique journey.

Community and technical colleges face a number of unique enrollment challenges. First, as open door institutions, community and technical colleges address the question of "controlling" their enrollment quite differently than baccalaureate institutions, which may utilize various selectivity tactics to increase or decrease

their enrollments, and to match those they admit to their offerings. By and large, CTCs are enrolling most of the students who walk through the door, and are meeting wildly varying levels of needs, interests and preparedness for college work. To manage enrollment and/or to focus on different populations that are matched with special programs, CTCs may find it helpful to develop segmented marketing and recruitment plans, and may rely on faculty and staff from different segments to utilize their community connections to assure healthy programs and enrollments.

Second, though CTCs are open door, many of them do provide programs that have restricted entry; this is often seen in health science programs. In those cases, it can be very helpful to observe the practices of the baccalaureate institutions to

*continued on next page*

find successful models of strategic enrollment management. Practices such as focused marketing, application processes, analysis of access to pre-requisites, and waiting list management should be examined.

Third, increasingly, CTCs are finding their “niche” being nibbled away by other institutions and learning organizations. This calls for a serious review of the institution’s market position, a review of the viability of current programs, and an entrepreneurial approach to new program development. The challenge is not only in the area of certificate and degree programs. The ability of some competitors to offer 24/7 service, non-traditional delivery modes, and other benefits may exceed the available resources of a typical CTC. However, a number of CTCs are developing model programs of re-organized student

services, as well as aggressive partnerships with business and industry to expand their program relevance.

Fourth, community and technical colleges, which historically have flourished because of their focus on their local community, are challenged to expand their vision to global concerns: the ability of their graduates to function in international work environments, the ability of their faculty to infuse global issues into their materials, and the ability to occupy a positive position worldwide as an effective education provider. This goes beyond the notion of managing (growing) enrollments by attracting more international students. Opportunity beckons the CTCs to assure their local residents that they can “think globally and serve locally”.

## Building an Effective Strategic Enrollment Management Plan

- 1 | Establish relevance
- 2 | Conduct an environmental scan
- 3 | Identify and explain the issues
- 4 | Select the most critical issues and identify key strategies that respond to those issues
- 5 | Set goals, using measurable elements wherever possible
- 6 | Identify tactics
- 7 | Create an assessment, feedback and revision schedule
- 8 | Communicate

**THERE IS NO STRICT RECIPE FOR DEVELOPING A SEM PLAN.**



Though the list of challenges could become quite long, only one more will be identified here: inadequate funding. Typically funded at a lesser rate than their sister public four-year institutions, many CTCs are

trapped in an environment of needing to enroll more students in order to gain more tuition income and/or state and local funding, yet never having enough income to catch-up to the expenses of that enrollment. This challenge goes to the heart of strategic enrollment management, which is the ability to identify strategies and practices that match resources with wants and needs. In other words, CTCs should carefully identify their different funding streams and expenses, and match the emergent needs with their prioritized missions. Analyses of program mix, of class scheduling routines, and of budgeting methodologies, for example, are central to optimizing, and growing resources.

## Building an Effective Strategic Enrollment Management Plan

Notwithstanding the goal of imbuing every member of the college with a sense of responsibility for enrollment management and success, an enrollment management plan, usually developed within some sort of collaborative group, helps the college focus on key initiatives that intentionally move the college toward its goals. There is no strict recipe for developing a SEM plan; a college's unique culture, opportunities and challenges should drive its formulation. However, the following steps are offered as a suggestion for both method and format.



- ▶ **Establish relevance.** Identify the portions of the college's strategic plan that are relevant to the enrollment position of the college. The SEM plan should support the strategic plan.

*continued on next page*

- ▶ **Conduct an environmental scan.** Analyze internal and external enrollment-related data that expand understanding of the issues raised by the strategic plan, as well as related strategic enrollment issues. SEM findings can also be used in a feedback loop to overall strategic planning.
- ▶ **Identify and explain the issues.**
- ▶ **Select the most critical issues and identify key strategies that respond to those issues.** Focusing on a limited number will enable the college to concentrate its attention and resources toward achieving the biggest impacts.
- ▶ **Set goals, using measurable elements wherever possible.**
- ▶ **Identify tactics.** Brainstorm, use data, assess resources, and be selective about the tactics that will have the most positive response to the issues. Identify the commitments and the accountabilities for those tactics.
- ▶ **Create an assessment, feedback and revision schedule.**
- ▶ **Communicate.** Periodic meetings, a campus feedback mechanism, and sharing of the plan help assure collaboration and follow-up.



Strong executive leadership and broad participation are the key elements in the success of the development and execution of a strategic enrollment management plan. Re-visiting the college's strategic plan, analyzing data, and identifying issues that affect enrollment are the foundations of a strategic enrollment management plan and are well-suited to the role of college leaders in starting their institution on the road to enrollment health and viability.

MORE INFO

For more information, visit the AACRAO Consulting website at <http://consulting.aacrao.org/> or contact us at [consulting@aacrao.org](mailto:consulting@aacrao.org) or 202-355-1056.