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How Are We Doing? Gauging Enrollment Performance

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Even the most casual observer of American higher education has noted the continued turbulent environment. In the short-term, the uncertain economy has contributed mightily to operating deficits, forcing many schools to respond with personnel reductions and sizable increases in tuition and fees.

Unfortunately, simply responding with short-term crisis management until the economy strengthens presents its own set of risks. Longer-term trends of changing demographics, increased competition for students, student retention challenges, and shifting student financial aid, among others, indicate that any return to "business as usual" is more like "the impossible dream". Forward-thinking leadership must continually be asking the "How-are-we-doing" question about enrollment management and be judging the answers received. The rise of performance evaluation, institutional research and the like attests to the question's immediacy. The weapons in this arsenal now range from market

research to organizational reviews to satisfaction surveys to measuring outcomes.

But has this activity produced substantive performance improvement? Too frequently, the answer is no or not enough. Failing to produce significant change can be traced to the absence of one or more vital elements: comprehensive performance measures, meaningful performance standards, well-defined and communicated strategic imperatives, and a comprehensive game plan for change.

Comprehensive Enrollment Performance Measures: What Are the Critical Issues?

For enrollment-related performance assessment to have meaning, it must first be looking at the "right things". Data on several valid and common

measures of performance are typically available on most campuses; enrollment numbers, standardized test scores, recruitment yields, retention numbers, various financial outcomes, and placement success are among the more obvious.

These measures, however, don't reveal the full picture and typically miss the underlying factors over which the institution has real control. For example, what information is available to evaluate items such as administrative and academic processes, the cost of operating these processes, stakeholder satisfaction, employee training effectiveness, morale, organizational communication, utilization of technology, teamwork, or the impact of reward systems? These issues all affect the ability of the college or university to perform well or create change.

One of the right things any organization should continually gauge is how well it recognizes and reacts meaningfully to the environment and competition. At best, the high performer establishes an atmosphere that fosters leading-edge innovation and creativity to which others must respond.

Meaningful Enrollment Performance Standards: How Good Is Good?

Measuring the right things only partially addresses the task at hand. Suppose a school's financial aid unit has a student satisfaction index of 70 on a scale of 100, with the index based on knowledgeable and friendly staff, convenient location, understandable processes, and similar metrics. Is 70 a good score? Perhaps—if avoiding mass revolt is the only goal and mass revolt is unlikely at an index higher than 50. But a different conclusion might be reached if one or more competitors are at 90.

Such goals cannot be established in isolation. Setting meaningful goals that call for the institution to stretch requires an external viewpoint—for example, comparison with other colleges and universities. Organizations outside of higher education can also be excellent sources for goals as well as best practices.

The external view is also valuable when countering a reaction of skepticism or disbelief to challenging

Financial Aid Leveraging Seeks to Achieve Three Goals:

1 | What are the critical issues?

2 | How good is good?

3 | Where do we want to be?

4 | How do we create effective change?

performance goals. Selling new goals (and hence change to different practices) is easier if one can quickly point to another organization already performing at that "unattainable" level.

> ## THE KEY TO MEANINGFUL RESULTS, THEN, IS A PROPER BALANCE OF WHAT AND HOW.

Strategic Enrollment Imperatives: Where Do We Want to Be?

Lack of comprehensive measures and meaningful standards often reflects a more fundamental problem: absence of a clearly defined and communicated mission and objectives. Without this roadmap of strategic imperatives, the enrollment evaluation process has no sound footing.

Even if a statement of institutional mission exists, often it isn't adequately translated into actionable terms for those responsible for implementation. Individual functions are thus left to follow their own agendas, with little reflection of broader issues and strategies. This lack of alignment among functional, departmental and institutional purposes can render the most well-intentioned improvement efforts ineffective.

A Game Plan for Change: How Do We Create Effective Change?

Even if performance measures and standards are appropriately defined, clear answers to "How are we doing?" will be of little value unless strategies responsive to the current situation and future objectives are produced. For example, a recent university self-study concluded that "there is no systematic, university-wide mechanism for ensuring that implementation of [assessment] results is taking place, or for documenting changes made as a result of assessment information".

Implementation strategies must mirror the typical inter-disciplinary nature and complexity of many opportunities. Such initiatives may include a series of steps such as revising the marketing plan, restructuring the organization, offering training, providing ongoing intensive communications, redesigning processes, building faculty and staff involvement, and/or creating new systems.

Orchestrating these efforts is no simple task, and it calls for finely honed skills in answering questions like:
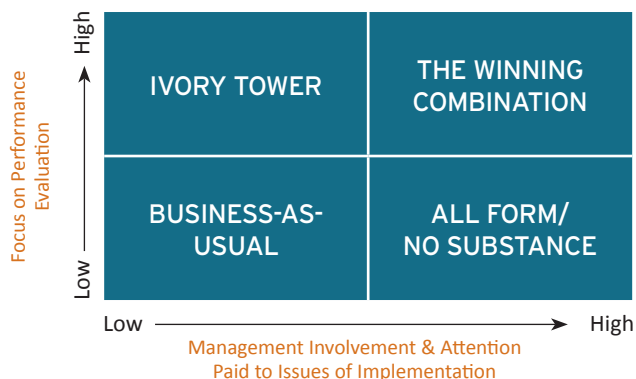
▸ What overall timetable is appropriate? What should be done first?

- What resources are needed, and how are they best marshaled?
- What is the linkage among the tasks?
- How will we know when we get there?

Putting It All Together

As shown in the diagram below, "The Winning Enrollment Combination" requires equal attention to performance ("Where do we want to be?" "What are the critical issues?" "How good is good?") and the implementation of effective change.

	Low ⟵ Management Involvement & Attention Paid to Issues of Implementation ⟶ High
High — Focus on Performance Evaluation — **Low**	IVORY TOWER | THE WINNING COMBINATION
	BUSINESS-AS-USUAL | ALL FORM/ NO SUBSTANCE

Shortchanging either dimension will yield suboptimal results. Focusing on implementation issues to the exclusion of strategy or performance issues produces "all form and no substance": perhaps the institution has intensively implemented the wrong things or focused on issues no longer of primary relevance. This errant focus can be likened to fine-tuning a buggy whip: like the buggy whip, the strategy is out of touch with the times.

Conversely, the ivory tower approach produces lots of studies and analyses but no results. Change is a difficult, time-consuming process that requires more than good insights on new directions to pursue.

The key to meaningful results, then, is a proper balance of *what* and *how*. Attaining meaningful results not only means knowing where you want to go—through strategic imperatives, performance standards and comprehensive performance measures—but also requires a comprehensive game plan for change that gives equal time to performance issues and methods of implementation.

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