Enrollment Management

Background

Strategic enrollment management, or SEM, can be defined as a comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain optimum recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of students, where “optimum” is defined in the academic context of the institution (Dolence, 1993). As the following examples showcase, over the past five years, enrollment management has seen varied levels of human and fiscal investment and varied levels of positive outcomes at SDSU.

First-time full-time enrollment has remained relatively stable over the past five years. The Impact 2018 enrollment goals of 11,000 students on the Brookings main campus and the overall enrollment goal of 14,000 have not been realized to date. In fall 2016, enrollment was 12,613 and on-campus enrollment was 9,836. SDSU has seen significant growth in underrepresented students, STEM graduates and international students since the start of Impact 2018. Although enrollment management initiatives were included within the Student Success Model, a comprehensive SEM plan for the institution was not developed to achieve this goal. In the spring of 2017 an Enrollment Management Council was created and the university’s comprehensive SEM plan will be finalized in the spring of 2018.

The SDSU Student Success Model was developed and implemented collaboratively by the Academic and Student Affairs divisions in 2010. It focused on institutionalizing high impact practices from George Kuh’s Student Success in College (2005). A detailed university report can be found here: https://www.sdstate.edu/sites/default/files/academic/upload/Student-Success-Taskforce-Report.pdf. This strategic increase in investment has correlated with an increase in first-to-second year retention of first-time full-time freshmen – nearly reaching our institutional goal from Impact 2018 of 80%.

Another influence on engagement in enrollment management was the move to decentralized budgeting. University faculty members and administrators are acutely aware of the importance of enrollment and many units are engaging and investing in recruiting and retention efforts but in isolated ways. This influence brought about by DBM brings individual engagement by departments and units, but until a SEM plan is implemented there will continue to be unequal and uncoordinated efforts by individual units.

Student recruitment in a competitive marketplace is certainly influenced by cost. As student costs (tuition, fees, room, and board) have risen by 120% between 2001 ($7,073) and 2017 ($15,111) at the undergraduate level, the SDSU Jackrabbit Guarantee scholarship has not increased, and the Pell Grant and other federal aid programs have seen limited growth. The lack of institutional funding for scholarships creates a disadvantage competitively for SDSU to maintain or
even increase enrollment, particularly for undergraduate students.

**Lessons learned**

SDSU can capitalize from many lessons learned through efforts to increase enrollment in previous years. Among these lessons are:

- **Develop a clear, shared vision for enrollment management.** It is important for SDSU to develop a shared definition of enrollment management and a SEM plan that focuses on recruitment, retention, and graduation. This definition and plan should be communicated broadly through an internal marketing campaign to ensure that SEM priorities are embedded into all areas of SDSU, with all employees taking responsibility for enrollment management. Perhaps the most powerful impact of this shared vision is the opportunity for collaboration across divisions, colleges, departments, and programs.

- **Use data to optimize impact.** SDSU must be prepared to meet the needs of a growing and changing student population through targeted academic and co-curricular resources. By using better predictive models and assessment plans, SDSU can determine student needs and calculate return on investment in an effort to reallocate resources to higher impact initiatives that will support the growing student population and shifting demographics.

- **Capitalize on previous successes.** Many academic departments and co-curricular programs at SDSU have implemented strategies to increase enrollment. Attempts in academic units have focused on credit-hour generation by repackaging academic offerings or marketing the value of SDSU courses. Undergraduate admissions-based programs have implemented direct-admit programs that could be applied more broadly with other undergraduate admissions-based programs and with the graduate school. Dual credit and online enrollments continue to increase as they offer enhanced access to a college education. This accessibility could be further enhanced through more eight-week courses, courses taught between the fall and spring semesters, and evening and weekend courses, with expanded services to support the extended time frame.

- **Commit to educational access and success.** SDSU must reconsider how to achieve institutional goals for retention and degree attainment as we strive to increase access to higher education and to recruit from a traditionally higher risk population. Nationally, support for student services has increased by 11%, but graduation rates have remained flat. This is a success, considering the large number of students from high-risk populations who are pursuing a college degree, but we need to make a
stronger commitment of support to increase the graduation rate in the future (EAB, 2017). Similarly, SDSU can identify ways to promote a healthy campus climate which will positively impact enrollment.

**National trends and external picture**

As we strategize about enrollment management at SDSU, it is important to look at national trends and external factors that are having a direct impact on our ability to recruit, retain, and graduate students.

In the area of recruitment, tuition continues to be on the rise as public colleges face “steep state budget cuts.” (EAB, 2016). This decrease, or flat financial support for state-sponsored universities, has caused more universities to look to other markets including out-of-state students and international students to offset lost revenue through out-of-state tuition. In some regions of the U.S., demographics have also been on the decline, pushing public universities to look elsewhere to maintain enrollment. There has been potential to increase enrollment through focusing on international markets; however, this potential may be waning due to perceptions by the international community that foreigners are not welcome in the U.S. Another external factor that has an effect on international matriculation rates is whether a student’s visa is granted. So, while there continues to be potential on the international front, factors outside of institutional control may affect the sustainability of international enrollment.

According to Dana Strait, senior consultant at the EAB (2015), rising tuition has also been a factor in deterring middle-income students from attending universities. At the national level, in-state families are beginning to ask why state universities are more expensive than they used to be. Politicians have also “put colleges on notice” that there is a crisis in terms of college affordability and student debt. This external accountability is beginning to push universities toward creative solutions in regard to providing programs to students who are struggling to pay their bills. One example of this is Georgia State’s retention grants initiative that provided the university with a 300% return on investment with lasting effects of 90%. Price transparency is also an issue. National research indicates families do not understand how much college will really cost. This could be a complication for SDSU as there are many discipline fees that are added on to tuition that can cause students to be surprised when they begin to pay their bills. If students and their parents do not feel the university was transparent during the recruitment process, this can have a negative effect on retention.

In April of 2017, Jeffery Selingo of The Atlantic in his article “5 Trends Shaping the Future of College Recruiting,” discusses trends that colleges must understand if they are going to continue to be successful. The Common Application has caused a spike in applications for universities. The current trend is that students are applying to seven or more colleges which is
making it difficult for college admission offices to predict yield. He also mentions that there needs to be an emphasis on recruiting and retaining underrepresented populations indicating that “prospective students in America will begin to look very different in the next few years... Research [shows] that graduates are becoming more racially diverse and the numbers are expected to include more low-income and first generation students.” In February of 2017, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported on the future of enrollment. In this report, they indicated that “the downturn of high school graduates nationwide is almost exclusively the result of a decline among white students and are expected to decrease by 14% by 2030. Conversely, during this same period of time, the U.S. will see an increase of 12% in minority students.” How universities meet the needs of these students, not only from a financial standpoint, but a student services standpoint, will determine the institutions’ effectiveness in recruiting, retaining, and graduating these underrepresented students.

Nationally, there are an increasing number of programs and policies affecting how many credits are taken at the university granting the degree to a student. This is impacting revenue. Examples include:

- An increase in Dual Credit, Advanced Placement, College in the Classrooms, CLEP, and other college credit producing programs available.
- External pressures to reduce the number of credits required to complete an undergraduate degree.
- The growth of “al a carte” transcripts where online course or other offerings reduce the number of credits granted by the university issuing the degree.

According to a Huffington Post article called “U.S. Colleges Are Facing a Demographic and Existential Crisis,” “more than two thirds of private colleges and over 50% of public colleges failed to meet their enrollment or net tuition revenue targets in 2016.” Declining high school graduation rates and policies (such as the ones listed above) are having a negative impact on universities’ ability to meet their enrollment and fiscal goals.

**Strategic themes**

There are many components of Enrollment Management and many factors impacting its success at SDSU. Three themes identified through the strategic planning process are highlighted here:

**Enrollment management engagement.** All campus citizens, as well as community members, must be engaged in and accountable to enrollment management goals. Campus citizens should be aware of the relationship between enrollment and institutional financial health.

**Prospective and current student experiences.** SDSU needs to identify the primary factors that influence which university the student
chooses to attend and implement those factors into best practices for recruitment. In addition, being aware that high school students may not be using objective methods to select their university or their academic major is important when developing recruitment strategy. We will also need to address the customer service culture in higher education and match expectations of students and families to SDSU’s delivery of services.

**Political climate implications.** The Board of Regents set a goal of 65% of South Dakotans with a post-secondary degree. The traditional student population will not be enough to reach the Impact 2018 target enrollment of 14,000 students attending SDSU, nor the BOR goal noted above. To achieve these goals, SDSU must be a leader in adult education and transfer student success while offering educational options to students who are place-bound.

**Effects of changing demographics.** The ability to recruit and retain beyond the traditional student population will be critical, with much of future enrollment growth coming from adult degree completers (23%), international students (24%), community college transfers (10%), and minority, low-income, and academically underprepared students (EAB, 2017).

**Options**

As South Dakota State University entered the 21st Century, new recruiting initiatives were implemented. These efforts, along with the Jackrabbit Guarantee program, led to unprecedented growth in undergraduate enrollment. In subsequent years, as competition intensified for the decreasing number of regional high school graduates and competing institutions intensified their recruitment efforts and scholarships, continued enrollment growth proved to be unsustainable. In 2009 a student success task force was formed and in the following years numerous retention activities were implemented to offset losses in new student enrollment. Since that time, retention, recruiting, and scholarship programs have remained relatively unchanged.

With regard to scholarships, there are three options that may be considered. Historical emphasis at SDSU has been to provide the bulk of funds to the academically elite students, leaving reduced funding for the remaining qualified students. One option would be to evaluate the scholarship award practice to determine what award amounts yield the greatest enrollment benefit and fund scholarships in a manner consistent with this data. To increase access, this may include scholarships to address the gap between cost of attendance and financial aid awarded. A second option would be to develop a scholarship program for international undergraduate students where relatively small scholarship amounts may have a significant impact on yield. Finally, the Jackrabbit Guarantee program, which has remained unchanged since its
inception in 2001, could be evaluated to determine the increase in funding necessary to be competitive in today’s market due to almost 15 years of inflation and no growth in funding for the program.

Since 2000, the framework of our centralized recruiting model has remained relatively unchanged. However, some colleges and programs within the institution have initiated their own decentralized recruiting efforts that may not be associated with the campus recruiting programs. An option to coordinate all campus recruiting efforts may need to be considered. A second option would be to evaluate whether increased support of recruiting programs is necessary. The third option to consider would be to place more emphasis on recruiting high school sophomores to build a larger pool of potential applicants.

As a strategic investment in retention activities has been seen at SDSU over the past few years, the return on investment of those activities should be assessed to determine impact and reduce or eliminate the least impactful programs. Resources could be redirected to higher impact enrollment management practices.

Academic and co-curricular programs could be assessed through a program review process to determine the programs with the greatest potential to support and maintain enrollment and which, if any, may need to have their assets redirected to high demand and sustainable programs.

**Short-term plans**

In the short term, the following tasks are recommended related to enrollment management:

- Implement an inclusive SEM leadership structure to develop, implement, and assess SEM planning efforts.
- Develop a SEM plan focused on optimal enrollment and fiscal health, being mindful of changing demographics.
- Conduct a thorough analysis of scholarship programs at SDSU to determine ROI and future investments and strategy to enhance competitive advantage.
- Conduct program review of both academic and co-curricular programs to determine ROI and overall impact on achieving enrollment goals at SDSU.

**Long-term plans**

In the long term, the following are recommended related to enrollment management:

- Move from SDSU’s current **structural enrollment management model** where enrollment is flat to variable and we have started some restructuring around SEM while focusing on short-term strategies to a
**strategic enrollment management model** where we are achieving optimum enrollment, control our enrollment outcomes, have a stable SEM structure and funding, top-level EM support, and consistent planning and assessment of SEM at SDSU.

- Develop assessment tools to measure impact of SEM practices and use assessment data to tweak practices focused on continuously improving outcomes to meet our enrollment goals.
- Realign SDSU resources to support high impact SEM practices.

**Reference List**


