



Expectations: The President / Chief Enrollment Officer Relationship

Enrollment Manager, Vol. 8, Issue 2, April 1, 2012

By Marylouise Fennell and Scott D. Miller

We've written before on the critical topic of transformational presidential leadership. This column is devoted to the relationship between the college president and the chief enrollment officer. Because enrollment is the single most important revenue "driver" at most colleges and universities, the strength of that relationship is critical to institutional success.

In dozens of consultancies at diverse institutions, we've found that all have at least one thing in common: a proactive president who demonstrates commitment to a culture of recruitment and retention.

Keeping Your Eye on the Prize

Urgency and continuity of focus are critical, observes Dr. Joe Pace, a nationally-known specialist in student retention and chairman of the board, PX2 Youth and Higher Education, who also serves as program director, facilitator and speaker for The Pacific Institute in Seattle, WA.

"What we almost always find when we are retained by institutions with slipping recruitment and retention is that the little things that make all the difference to students have slipped through the cracks," says Pace. He adds, "Just a small lapse in attention to student needs and expectations can result in a critical slippage in students."

The President

Dr. James L. Fisher, noted author and President-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, states, "A transformational leader can be likened to the captain of a ship; others may steer the ship, but the captain must first chart a clear vision."

With changing student and family demographics, eroding financial support from federal and state governments and competition becoming ever more intense, visible and entrepreneurial presidential leadership is essential.

The visible CEO challenges the status quo, setting priorities while engaging the community and openly linking enrollment to the financial health of the college. He or she leads the desired profile, establishes an organizational structure to facilitate productivity, frames issues and policy and pilots institutional strategies and approaches.

Moreover, the transformative president must demonstrate a keen understanding that buildings, grounds and technology are an integral component of strategic success. This is especially true of health, fitness and

athletic-related facilities and amenities: NCAA statistics point out that student participation in varsity and junior varsity teams nationally continues to rise at the rate of about 2 percent a year. As our colleague Dr. Walter M. Bortz III, former president of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, states, "Ensuring that the campus has curb appeal and is filled with first-class technology, faculty and facilities helps to guarantee the necessary enrollment to keep the enterprise operational and growing."

Championing Enrollment

The president must continually champion enrollment, engaging key leaders in the process while allocating the resources needed to get the job done. Although vision is vital, attention to detail is equally critical. Progress requires a business approach and demands weekly reports from the chief enrollment officer. These should include:

An overall report that includes, but is not limited to, contacts, inquiries, applications, completed applications, acceptances and confirmations;

Individual reports for counselors and call-center personnel that includes volume of contacts and conversions, and

Financial aid reports including, but not limited to, pre-awards, awards and acceptances. These three areas are the most crucial, and an effective enrollment president always has command of this information.

The Chief Enrollment Officer

The role of this key individual has become increasingly complex, states Bethany College vice president Sven de Jong, who has successfully implemented a model recommended by The Dysart Group in 2007. After years of "roller coaster" results at Bethany, the model has resulted in three of the College's largest classes in the past 30 years and the largest headcount in 35 years in 2011. This while also progressively improving the profile of each incoming class.

"Increased competition means that chief enrollment officers must be continuously scanning the enrollment landscape, seeking new approaches and proactively recommending strategic responses to new trends," he adds. "New trends are pointing to an approach in which enrollment resources must be simultaneously directed not only toward bringing in next year's class, but also focusing on high school

sophomores and juniors, increasing numbers of transfer students and connecting with them in ways and on platforms prospective students expect in today's highly technologically integrated society."

Depending on the complexity of the organization, this key campus leader might carry any one of a variety of titles; those of vice president, dean or executive director are among the most common. de Jong is Vice President for Institutional Advancement, with all external affairs (including enrollment and fund raising) falling under his supervision. A Director of Enrollment reports directly to him. "It is imperative that he or she be an active institutional spokesperson, a team builder and an accomplished motivator all while holding the staff accountable," de Jong noted.

Presidential expectations for this individual include the setting of realistic goals and energetic, ongoing participation in website and e-marketing (including social media), print media, direct mail and the college's first-year program. Further, he or she must understand the vital role of research in analyzing trends, the pivotal role of marketing, the volatile world of admissions and financial aid, the value of student orientation and the necessity of retention and advising. The enrollment manager must also demonstrate the "people" skills to train and motivate the enrollment counselors who work in the field and those who staff the call center.

Finally, the effective chief enrollment officer must operate from a bottom-line perspective, focusing on the objectives of each component reporting to this area. Combining these big-picture and detail-oriented factors leads to a successful outcome, with the result exceeding the sum of its parts.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is President of the College and M.M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he recently started his 22nd year as a college CEO.

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, PA, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and principal of Hyatt-Fennell, a Higher Education Search Firm.

They have collaborated on nine books, including "President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education" (2009) and "Presidential Perspectives: Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade" (2011). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.