Improving Retention and Graduation Rates

The Enrollment Management Disconnect

Enrollment Management has become an emphasis in most North American Institutions of Higher Education. While definitions of Enrollment Management are varied, a common thread is the focus on managing "cradle to grave" relationships with prospects, students, and alumni.

Many institutions have spent a great deal of time and money on enhancing the admissions process. As a result, most of those institutions have experienced measurable enrollment growth, especially in target populations that improve student diversity. Alumni relations is also a common strong point, due to a consistent focus of senior administration on fundraising and maintaining a dialogue with "friends" of its institution. Little, however, has been done to improve student outcomes in the middle of the Enrollment Management "client" life-cycle.

The irony, of course, of the focus on admissions and alumni relations is improved student outcomes should make everything stronger. How much easier would it be to sell an institution to prospects and their parents if it had a reputation for helping students succeed? Shouldn't improved access to required courses make for more alumni, and happier ones?

Why do institutions focus so intently on "access" to higher education, yet do little to maximize student access to the courses they need to graduate? The answer appears, in large part, to be based on two factors: the complexity of the problem and politics of making schedule changes to increase student access to courses.

Complexity
Predicting what all of your students need to take, conflict-free, in an upcoming academic term is just plain hard. Thousands of students with nearly unique academic history, goals, and interests make for a very complex problem.

Politics
Academic departments have always controlled the schedule building process. This decentralized process and the dearth of good data on students' course needs have limited changes to schedules to minor tweaks resulting from changing faculty composition or interests. A cross-departmental analysis is needed to implement student-centered change, yet this is difficult to accomplish within the scheduling building process so deeply ingrained in the culture of most institutions.

The Problem: Declining Retention and Graduation Rates

The Director of The Education Trust, Kati Haycock, summarized the problem in her testimony before the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education in May 10, 2004: "Though higher education as a whole has made important progress on access, it has made far less progress in translating access into success." Her organization conducted a recent study of first-time, full-time degree-seeking college freshmen. Their findings: only 63 percent graduate within six years, and only 37 percent obtain a B.A. in four years. A U.S. Dept. of Education study pegged the four-year graduation rate of private institutions of higher education (IHEs) at 48.6 percent, and the public IHEs at 26 percent. Haycock goes on to report that student mobility (transferring to another four-year institution) is not the primary culprit for low graduation rates. Eighty percent of students who start at a four-year institution and get a bachelor's degree earn that degree at the institution where they first enrolled.

Is this a problem for which there is no solution? We don't think so. Institutions can't do anything about students who change majors, take a reduced load to accommodate work, or party more than they study. They can, however, help their many focused, full-time students graduate on-time by making the courses that they need available.

The Solution: Improving Students' Access to Courses

Improving access relies on a much better understanding of students' course needs and a system for responding to those needs through high-impact schedule changes.

Understanding Students' Course Needs: Demand Analysis
Your Student Information System probably has the data needed to analyze student demand, such as historical schedules over the past several years, student academic history, degree audit information, and data about your active students. The hard part – which has been a focus of our firm for the past few years – is turning all of that raw data into usable information.

Here are the steps we take in this process:

1. Historical analysis – A study of what individual students have taken in the past. We have added demographic sub-population tendencies and trends to this methodology that has been used by many institutions for years. While historical analysis is a good start, it is inherently limited by past

schedule offerings - if you didn't offer it, there is no historical demand. Put more simply, this analysis tells us more about what students settled for than what they needed.

2. Program analysis – A study of individual, active students' degree progress so as to assess what should/might be taken next. This approach requires access to a degree audit system that defines the rules and requirements of your various programs. Program analysis is an excellent way to discern student needs, especially as a student approaches the end of their degree path.

3. Graduation Planner – An on-line survey of individual students as to their desired courses and availability for upcoming terms (this step is optional, but highly recommended). This tool levrages the program analysis, enabling students and advisors to plan academic careers while modeling the feasibility of various paths. For students that complete this process, there is a clear answer to the complex questions of what to take, in what order, and over how many terms. Institutions get demand data on both program requirements and desired electives.

A New Student Service: Roll-forward Schedule "Realignment"

Most IHEs roll academic schedules from the previous "like" term. The roll-forward schedule has its merits – it's easy to do and it minimizes change in a change-resistant culture. Like anything that rolls, however, an academic schedule periodically needs realignment.

The idea of a roll-forward realignment is relatively simple: periodically adjust your academic schedules to accommodate for resource shortages and changes in student needs. Adjustments should only be made when the impact of the change outweighs the political fallout of the change. What types of adjustments might fit this criterion?

• Adding a course offering so seniors can graduate on time

• Changing an offering time to correspond with the availability of the students who need it most

• Changing an offering time to reduce conflicts between other offerings that students need to take in a given term

High-impact course offering changes fall into two categories: under-supply and over-supply.

1. Under-supply is when the number of students needing the course can't be accommodated in the roll-forward schedule. Courses falling into this category must be prioritized by the following factors: How many students are impacted? Is the course a degree requirement for these students? Are these students near the end of the program? Is this course a prerequisite of other required courses?

2. Over-supply is when the number of students needing the course is lower than the number that can be accommodated in the roll-forward schedule. Courses falling into this category must be prioritized by such factors as: How many excess (unneeded) offerings are there? Is the instructor listed as TBA or part-time? How many empty seats will there be (in tentative rooms)? Do these offerings occur during primetime hours or in highly sought after rooms?

High impact time changes also fall into two categories: wrong time of week and student conflict.

1. Wrong time of week is scheduling offerings when the students who need them are not available. You might be offering the right number of sections of a course, but find that half of the students needing the course are night students and all of the offerings are scheduled during daytime hours. Prioritizing these disconnects involves the same factors as under supply, since the net effect is the same – students can't get courses that they need.

2. Student conflict is when groups of students want to take two or more sections that are offered at the same time. If those sections have always been in conflict in roll-forward schedules, this problem may remain undetected (unless students complain). Prioritizing these disconnects, like wrong time of week, involves the same factors as under supply.

The Implementation: Top-down Consensus Building

There will always be resistance to change, especially when dealing with a politically charged area like academic scheduling. Improving student access to courses – and resulting retention and graduation rates – can only be accomplished with support from senior administration. We have found that better information is another key to "selling" change. If you are only recommending high impact changes wherein you can create a compelling case for that change (as opposed to a complete overhaul), discussions can become more rational and objective.

We recommend the formation of a Student Success Committee comprised of personnel from scheduling, academic departments, institutional research, finance, information technology, and facilities. This group should seek to develop a consensus on how to adequately plan for the future. Specifically, we recommend that this group set specific goals involving retention and graduation rates and scheduling policies to support those goals. Finally, remember to publicly celebrate your achievements that further the mission of retaining and graduating students.

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