

Presidential Playbook:

The Contemporary Transformational Model for Liberal Arts Colleges

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In our last Enrollment Manager column, we outlined the key ingredients for enrollment success at private liberal arts colleges. Our premise, based on over 30 years of leadership experience at Council of Independent Colleges institutions, suggests that private colleges with an endowment of under \$100 million should have a full-time enrollment of at least 1,100. This number provides “critical mass” for campus climate, student life, and budgetary operations without compromising the small college atmosphere.

Highly successful models also focus attention on graduate, special session (mini-term), early enrollment (precollegiate), and online (non-traditional), reflecting service to diverse student markets.

The model we suggest was featured by Dwyer Education Strategies (<http://www.dwyereducationstrategies.com/the-commonwealth-is-witnessing-a-transformation-atvirginia-wesleyan-university-in-virginia-beach/>) and titled “The Commonwealth is Witnessing a Transformation at Virginia Wesleyan University in Virginia Beach.” Consultants noted the positive results of academic expansion, investment in infrastructure, and a “systematic and comprehensive communication plan” for student recruitment.

The model is based on 30 years of experience leading liberal arts colleges and research we conducted with over 100 college and university presidents—information we have shared during the past 13 years through two popular thought series for higher-education presidents nationwide. “Presidential Perspectives” (www.presidentialperspectives.org) and “President to President” (www.president2president.com) are higher education leadership series written by college presidents for college presidents. The “President to President” series is sponsored by Sodexo, which exerts no editorial control over content.

Chapters are authored by notable presidents whose institutions are in the forefront of innovative practices in these areas. One chapter will be released each month, distributed electronically, and posted on this website. At the end of the series, the foreword and chapters will be bound into a keepsake book. We encourage you to explore the archive of this “think tank” and subscribe free of charge. This year’s series, “How Disruptive Innovation is Shaping the Next-Gen Campus and Enabling Student Success,” will focus on how institutions are innovating

in order to secure the future and ensure positive business outcomes, all while enhancing the student experience on campus.

In this issue of Enrollment Manager, we focus on the role of the president in the enrollment equation, and how sustainable, quality growth continues on many campuses resulting from sound enrollment practices led by a fully engaged president.

A winning enrollment strategy starts at the top with a president fully committed to a comprehensive enrollment plan based on an overarching vision for the institution. The Board must understand and visibly support the setting of large but realistic goals and sustainable viability to be achieved by the president—the primary spokesperson and advocate of the strategy—and his or her team.

In successful strategic planning, objectives should be realistic enough to inspire consensus and commitment to results. To achieve this, we recommend the following:

- Commission an independent Institutional Review to evaluate current conditions and assess opportunities. This will provide the basis for a four-part comprehensive planning model including space-utilization study, condition assessment, 10-year master plan, and strategic plan.
- Utilize experienced counsel to develop an enrollment matrix that will control the discount rate, produce a significant return on investment, and evaluate staff effectiveness. Staff evaluations should be based on specific objectives and outcomes.
- Dedicate gift dollars and, if necessary, some leveraged borrowing to build or renovate high-impact facilities. “Tired” classrooms, grounds, and facilities—not to mention inadequate technology—create a drag on the entire enrollment process. Transformational presidents recognize the importance of attractive facilities and look for creative ways to fund improvements. Athletic facilities—artificial turf, lights, all-weather tracks, and improved locker, training, and weight facilities—are a useful starting point. (The revitalized facilities can enable the college to Transformational Model for Liberal Arts attract a new brand of coach, responsible for recruiting scholar-athletes who will be successful on and off the field or court.)

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- Add extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that will utilize these facilities and boost enrollment. A marching band will also support the music program, for example.

We also suggest:

- Reconsider the use of part-time faculty and staff in key positions. Part-time employees generally do not produce positive results in recruitment or retention.
- Create cost-effective, synergistic partnerships to support the library, learning resources, and technology—all important to ensuring student success.
- Supplement traditional program growth with a modest but student-centered, non-traditional adult program. Online offerings can succeed here.
- Utilize branding and marketing dollars wisely. Although most successful brands are not created overnight, judicious use of resources can result in a highly effective, long-term strategy.
- Develop a comprehensive internal communications plan that will help to drive the external one. Briefing faculty, staff, students, and volunteers on goals and successes—and keeping them on message—will pay dividends in public opinion and fundraising, and, even more important, in enrollment and retention.
- Periodically utilize external counsel to evaluate results objectively and recommend areas for improvement from an informed, outside perspective.
- Ensure that the president is visible at all admissions open houses as well as parents and family weekends. Remember that he or she is not only the chief spokesperson for the institution but also its best sales executive. In the highly competitive, supercharged enrollment landscape of today, no institution can afford to be complacent or to rely on strategies of the past. That means that progress and sustainability in enrollment depend on a forward-looking, innovative, and integrated recruitment strategy. It begins with the president, is sustained by bold but realistic thinking and planning, benefits from investment in infrastructure, and relies on motivated, regularly evaluated staff.

Have no doubt: enrollment will remain challenging, but only by meeting those challenges can enrollment succeed.

About the Authors

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