Admission and Enrollment Management: Spheres of Influence

As the Admission Director or Marketing Communications Director, you know that your school’s primary and frequently only source of hard income revenue comes from enrollment. This is rightly the focus of many, if not most, private-independent school strategic plans. To ensure strength in your enrollment position—whether your goal is growth, stasis, or “right sizing” your school to ensure mission excellence—there are three spheres of influence within which almost every other possible factor impacting your enrollment outcomes reside:

1. market position;²
2. school culture;³ and
3. constituent relationships.⁴

Perhaps new student enrollment demand is static or declining, or you have an enrollment retention issue, even as you continue to experience recruitment success. If so, persistently focus on each of the three spheres to sustain excellence and identify and improve on aspects of your operation that challenge your desired enrollment outcomes.

This ongoing process is the work of your Enrollment Management Team. This group consists of members of the academic, operational, and advancement leadership teams, as well as representatives from the faculty and student support services departments. The Enrollment Management Team’s primary purpose is the collection and analysis of data—and the creation and implementation of an enrollment management plan aligned with the school’s strategic financial plan and designed to help you achieve your strategic enrollment goals.

The accompanying graphic offers a means of aligning your analysis and your enrollment management plan goals and strategies—and monitoring and measuring the plan’s outcomes.

For schools to thrive in an innovation era, it is not enough to consistently deliver excellence; have a clear sense of who you are, and share that marketplace focus and your key difference-makers in both your internal and external messages. You must also position yourself as an influencer in the marketplace—made possible when you leverage your professional faculty and administrative teams as arbiters of what it truly means to be educated in the information age. Your school is unlikely to accomplish this by purporting to have all the answers in an era where change is the only real constant. You achieve it by committing as a professional staff to persistently ask the right questions; seeking research-based strategies to solve complex learning design challenges; and positioning yourself in the school-to-family partnership in a way that suggests what questions parents should ask of prospective private-independent schools.

Note the placement of students at the center of the diagram, serving as a reminder that students and their experiences of your school constitute both your mission and core focus. There exists a tendency for schools to become more and more adult-centric over time—because students enroll, graduate, and move on, and because adults, who are there for the long term, have a tendency to create processes, structures, and protocols meant to make the educational operation more manageable from their perspective. Evaluating all decisions through the lens of students and their experiences will help you manage that tendency toward adult-centricity. The goal is that all faculty, staff, and administrators ask themselves prior to any action: what is the benefit to students of the decision(s) we are about to make, the actions we are about to take, and/or the words we are about to speak or write. When you commit to an audacious culture of student-centricity, consider that commitment a Characteristics of Professional Excellence,⁵ and likewise consider it a primary hiring and retention criteria, you will have already strengthened your school’s enrollment position.

When parents experience the full measure of your commitment to nurturing, educating, and caring for children in a manner that:
1. is audaciously student-centered;
2. honors the importance of family—truly valuing parents as partners; and
3. provides them a steady supply of substantive feedback about their children’s progress. You will, with discipline and patience over time, inspire the long-term enrollment commitments you seek.

Challenges in any one of the spheres of influence—or in your ability to hold students at the center of all decision-making—may have a ripple effect in any or all the other spheres, making the persistent monitoring and refinement of the school’s enrollment management plan, operation, and outcomes mission-critical to meeting the school’s strategic enrollment goals.

1 See “Managing the Fiscal Realities of Enrollment Changes,” Ideas & Perspectives, 37-9-37.
4 See “Marketing Communications and the Parent,” Ideas & Perspectives, 40-9-35.