Strategic Enrollment Management Case Study:

Middlesex Community College

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Abstract

Due to recent economic conditions, many colleges and universities are reexamining what it means to recruit and retain students. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is an approach that focuses on integrating institutional departments such as Admissions and Financial Aid that concentrate on the recruitment, retention, graduation, and overall success of its students. SEM is rapidly gaining ground in institutions across the nation, and has huge potential to influence future trends in higher education. As a large public two-year college, Middlesex Community College (MCC) has worked diligently to evaluate and revise their current strategic enrollment practices in order to educate, engage, and empower their students in more sustainable and effective ways. Through MCC's Vision Plan and Strategic Enrollment Plan, the institution aims to increase enrollment, improve retention rates, and connect curricular programs to workforce needs to transform and sustain their institution.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the direction and demographics of higher education in the United States has changed quite drastically. Students are looking for more convenience, cheaper tuition costs, and career-based degree programs (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). As such, it will be crucial for institutions to strategize about how to meet these new needs in order to remain competitive. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is the "systematic integration of the functions of admissions, the relationship between tuition and fees (pricing) and financial aid, and student retention, along with the use of research to inform institutional policies and practices" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 5). "No department that stands alone will contribute the same positive impact upon students as a concerted and deliberate team approach" (Schultheis, 2015, p. 19). Campus-wide efforts are required by all to address these changes and make a lasting educational impact.

Middlesex Community College (MCC) is such an institution that must embrace the shifting requirements of students today to retain their advantage in an increasingly crowded educational market. By looking at their Vision and Strategic Enrollment Plans, MCC hopes to gain valuable insight as to which modifications are obligatory and which initiatives they can employ to meet the educational and economic needs of their student body.

Background

As a large public community college based in the Greater Boston area, Middlesex Community College (MCC) attracts a large number of students working toward any one of the possible 75 Associate degree and certificate programs (Middlesex Community College, 2015a). Their overall mission is to meet "the evolving educational, civic and workforce needs of our local and global communities" (Middlesex Community College, 2015b). They have two campus

locations, Bedford and Lowell, which helps accommodate all learners in Middlesex County in terms of distance. As of fall 2015, they reported 125 full-time faculty, 460 part-time faculty, and an average class size of just 21 students. In addition, as of 2013, their total enrollment was at 13,267, with 58% being female and 42% male, and their total number of 2013 graduates was at 1,325 students. MCC also believes strongly in community engagement, corporate training, and creating a lasting economic impact, making MCC a great choice for students wanting a career-based education and community involvement (Middlesex Community College, 2015a).

Like many schools across the nation, MCC is currently experiencing a significant overall decline in enrollment. To change this, their Vision Plan (analyzing 2010-2015 institutional data) and Strategic Plan (2020 projected plan) demonstrate their desire and steps to increase enrollment, improve retention rates, and further foster community engagement and collaboration.

Vision Plan

In June 2015, MCC published a Vision Project Dashboard that was intended to inform campus presidents and trustees about the institution's progress, citing areas of success and for improvement (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). Focusing on the report's key components of college participation, college completion, student learning, workforce alignment, and preparing citizens, MCC leadership was encouraged to analyze the results and set new priorities for future success and growth.

College participation

MCC enrolled 12,999 students in 2014 (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). While this number was the second-largest in the community college sector, the overall enrollment did not seem to change much in a five-year period. As such, increasing enrollment was a top priority for future initiatives.

In addition, providing access and equality through education was a major goal in 2014.

The ethnic diversity of the student body – 16% Latino and 8% African-American – exceeded the

regional demographic numbers, which demonstrated their commitment to diversity in education

(Middlesex Community College, 2015d). MCC still recommended increased minority enrollment

to stay ahead of current trends.

With 35% of its students receiving Pell Grants, MCC's proportion of low-income

students is 10 percentage points below the community college average (Middlesex Community

College, 2015d). This demonstrates an urgent need for increasing financial resources to low-

income students.

College completion

In terms of college graduation, "the ATD (Achieving the Dream) rate at Middlesex was

50% in 2013, the highest of the 15 community colleges" (Middlesex Community College, 2015d,

p. 4). This rate improved "at an average rate of 1.3% a year over the past five years, making it

one of just three community colleges that achieved the Board of Higher Education's goal of 1%

or more annual growth in student success rates for both last year and this year" (2015d, p. 4).

Finally, MCC boasted a 62% Fall 2014 retention rate, which is two points above the community

college average (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). The 2010-2015 period overall showed

steady improvement as well. These findings indicate that MCC's initiatives to nurture the student

body year-to-year is working.

Student Learning

MCC examined licensure pass rates and their culture of assessment to measure student

learning. "Although Middlesex's 88% pass rate for the 2013 Registered Nurse licensure exam is

down from the prior year, this exam result exceeds the community college average by five points

and has been trending upward" (Middlesex Community College, 2015d, p. 5). In contrast, the

Radiology pass rate was only 71% in 2013, which was 13 points below the community college

average (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). Having such mixed results, MCC proposed

focusing on the overall culture of assessment to better understand how their students are faring

across the curriculum in key learning outcomes and what effective changes could be used to

increase pass rates (Middlesex Community College, 2015d).

Workforce alignment

From 2010 to 2014, the number of degrees and certificates conferred by MCC increased

19% compared to 22% across all community colleges (Middlesex Community College, 2015d).

These statistics suggest room for improvement. Additionally, approximately 34% of the degrees

and certificates conferred in 2014 were in the Healthcare and STEM fields, highlighting that

MCC's dedication to career-based education is succeeding, yet could further develop and grow.

Preparing Citizens

Civic learning and engagement has been named a top policy priority by the Board of

Higher Education in 2014. As such, MCC hopes to create their own civic learning metric by

which to measure the number of students participating in such courses and initiatives on campus

(Middlesex Community College, 2015d). Meanwhile, MCC has been recognized for their

community engagement and placed on the President's Higher Education Community Service

Honor Roll in 2014 (Middlesex Community College, 2015d).

Strategic Enrollment Plan

To increase enrollment and retention by 2020, MCC's Strategic Enrollment Plan charts

key institutional directions and ideas. Specifically, MCC says they are "committed to increasing

fall enrollment by 7%, to 10,000, by 2020" (Middlesex Community College, 2015c, p. 3). By

"using SEM as a tool to enhance communication, collaboration, and partnerships" (Gottheil, 2015, p. 250), MCC hopes to draw inspiration and buy-in from all departments in the campus-wide effort to achieve these goals. Through increased high school partnerships, offering more workforce connections to their curriculum, increasing applicant and enrolled student diversity, retaining students through proper assessment, advisement, and engagement, and finally systematically reviewing policies and procedures over time, MCC hopes to become a more robust and competitive institution by 2020.

Increasing High School Partnerships

Although the overall number of high school graduates is expected to grow nationally (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014), the population of Middlesex County high school graduates is expected to decline (Middlesex Community College, 2015c). Currently, MCC has over 13,000 undergraduates, with just 44% of them are working toward their degrees or certificates full-time (Middlesex Community College, 2015a). This would leave one to assume that the college caters toward the working adult student. MCC would be wise to consider targeting specific high schools that produce college-seeking graduates, such as Bedford High School and Nashoba Valley Technical High School (Middlesex Community College, 2015c). "As the numbers of high school students decline, MCC can increase enrollment by improving yield rates from selected high schools through dual enrollment and targeted outreach and recruitment activities" (Middlesex Community College, 2015c, p. 4). Dual enrollment programs can be especially effective, as they create a pathway that supports student transition from high school to college and encourages their campus involvement (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Furthermore, "stronger outreach to high-school guidance offices to be sure students are getting good, realistic information about what will be required of them academically and financially" (Van Der Werf &

Sabatier, 2009, p. 15) can produce strong enrollment returns. Targeted high school outreach and enrollment pathways can lead to direct increases in enrollment, retention, and degree completion for that specific student population.

Strong Career-Based Academic Programs

"Public anxiety over the cost of college is at its highest level ever. That worry is combined with the realization that higher education is increasingly a necessity in modern society, rather than a luxury" (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 25). Furthermore, "large percentages of college seniors continue to graduate without having received a job offer" (HERI, 2014), so it will be vital for institutions like MCC to assuage these concerns by offering more degree programs that produce a clear return on investment and are linked to economical workforce needs.

MCC already has a strong mission related to providing career-based degree programs (Middlesex Community College, 2015b). However, as the Vision Plan noted, the number of degrees conferred could stand to increase. One of the objectives of the Strategic Enrollment Plan includes a complete review of programs for workforce alignment, and using resources such as ACT Work Ready Communities and EMSI (Economic Modeling Specialists) to assist in these efforts (Middlesex Community College, 2015c). By connecting their mission of being a community-based, economy-linked institution with the current workforce trends, MCC stands to make huge enrollment and retention gains in this area.

Recruitment of Minority and Underrepresented Populations

Traditionally, college-bound students have been from wealthy, middle class families (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). It is projected that Hispanics will be the fastest growing college student population as "white, non-Hispanic high school graduates are expected to decline" (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, African American,

Asian American, Latino, and nontraditional college students (such as working adults and veterans) will continue to grow in numbers (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). As a result, schools will have to make significant adaptations to their strategic enrollment plans to survive.

As their Vision Plan demonstrated, MCC has a demonstrated commitment to providing college access to minority and underrepresented students, yet these students fall short in regards to college completion (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). To address this problem, MCC proposed an objective to develop college-wide recruitment and retention plans for adult students, veterans, young men, Asian, Hispanic, and African-American students for multiple departments (Middlesex Community College, 2015c). "Colleges will have to pay more attention to what factors will allow members of different student groups to succeed" (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009, p. 14). By using alternative marketing approaches, increasing financial aid resources, revising curriculum and advising strategies, and extending additional community partnerships, MCC would stand to make significant enrollment and retention gains. Drawing on the expertise and innovation of the entire campus community will help make a difference in MCC's strategic enrollment and retention initiatives (Gottheil, 2015; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

Navigation of Enrolled Students – Advising & Assessment

To strategically increase enrollment, an institution must think about the existing student body. Retention, therefore, is a large part of a college recruitment solution: "With greater competition, decreasing prospect pools, and diminishing resources, colleges are turning to improve retention as a method to increase enrollments" (Schultheis, 2015, p. 19). Retention initiatives should not only focus on student services and academic advising, but creating a more

comprehensive, collaborative educational setting that promotes the success of all students (Schultheis, 2015).

As mentioned in MCC's Vision Plan, reexamining their culture of assessment to deliver effective curriculum is one part of the retention puzzle in terms of increasing student learning and exam pass rates (Middlesex Community College, 2015d). In addition to assessment, MCC asks the admissions, faculty, academic affairs, and career center departments to help identify additional outreach activities and to help strengthen connections between departments (Middlesex Community College, 2015c). These cross-collaborative undertakings promote strategic enrollment management across the institution and have been shown to breed success (College Board, 2011; Gottheil, 2015; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Other tasks such as increasing internship availability, promoting prior learning credits, identifying at-risk students, and increasing community connections will be used by MCC to improve retention as well (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Middlesex Community College, 2015c; Schultheis, 2015).

By showcasing how enrolled students are successfully navigating through the educational process, it can draw new students to MCC. Retention success has impacts across strategic enrollment management and can "provide some relief to the pressure of replacing and growing an incoming class" (Schultheis, 2015, p. 19).

Systemic Review of Policies and Procedures

"Research is an important part of Strategic Enrollment Management" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 449). It is therefore important to review policies and procedures periodically in order for institutions to remain informed about current data and prepared for future trends.

Because MCC took the initiative to evaluate their practices in the Vision Plan (Middlesex Community College 2015d), they are already employing appropriate SEM methods to analyze

data to promote continued enrollment and student success. "When institutions devote time and resources to [SEM] efforts, they have a good chance of being successful" (College Board, 2011, p. 11). Within the Strategic Enrollment Plan, they vow to "conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment and commit to ongoing environmental scanning" (Middlesex Community College, 2015c, p. 8) to identify issues and propose changes. In addition, they also intend to "develop a return-on-investment methodology to review policies, procedures, and services for impact and cost" (p. 8). They are clearly committed to evaluating all data to encourage student and institutional success. "Using analytics identifies problematic issues, establishes benchmarks and key enrollment indicators, and underpins assessment efforts. Circulating data can also quickly propel change" (Gottheil, 2015, p. 253).

In a true effort to "educate, engage, and empower a diverse community of learners" (Middlesex Community College, 2015b), MCC must continue to reassess data and rely on the multitude of departments and experts on campus. In addition to helping their meet their strategic enrollment and retention goals, "creating partnerships and regularly presenting the results of the research will help build trust across campus" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 451). When everyone is involved in the data-gathering and data-sharing process, the students and the institution at large all stand to benefit.

Conclusion

Enrollment and retention efforts must be intentional, strategic, and linked to the institutional mission to truly make an impact (Gottheil, 2015; Schultheis, 2015). One must "involve the entire institution to target student graduation and goal achievement" (Vander Schee, 2013, p. 14). At Middlesex Community College, substantial efforts have been made to achieve increased enrollment and retention rates. Through their Vision Plan and Strategic Enrollment

Plan, it is obvious that MCC is aware of their potential challenges and also takes their

responsibility to successfully recruit and retain their students seriously, having made significant

strides to promote diversity and foster communication and engagement across campus.

That being said, MCC understands they have critical work to do. "(SEM) provides an

opportunity for us to reflect on who we are, where we have been, and where we want to go"

(Gottheil, 2015, p. 254). While MCC proposed some viable solutions to their enrollment

struggles, other recommendations could include the following: introducing more hybrid or

online-only courses for the working adult and minority population, as both value schedule

flexibility and affordable costs (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009), and increasing overall direct

faculty involvement with retention efforts (College Board, 2011; HERI, 2014; Hossler &

Bontrager, 2014; Schultheis, 2015; Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2009). By continuously examining

practices and regularly proposing creative, alternative solutions, institutions like MCC will be

able to strategically increase student enrollment, retention, and graduation, which will sustain

them for years to come.

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