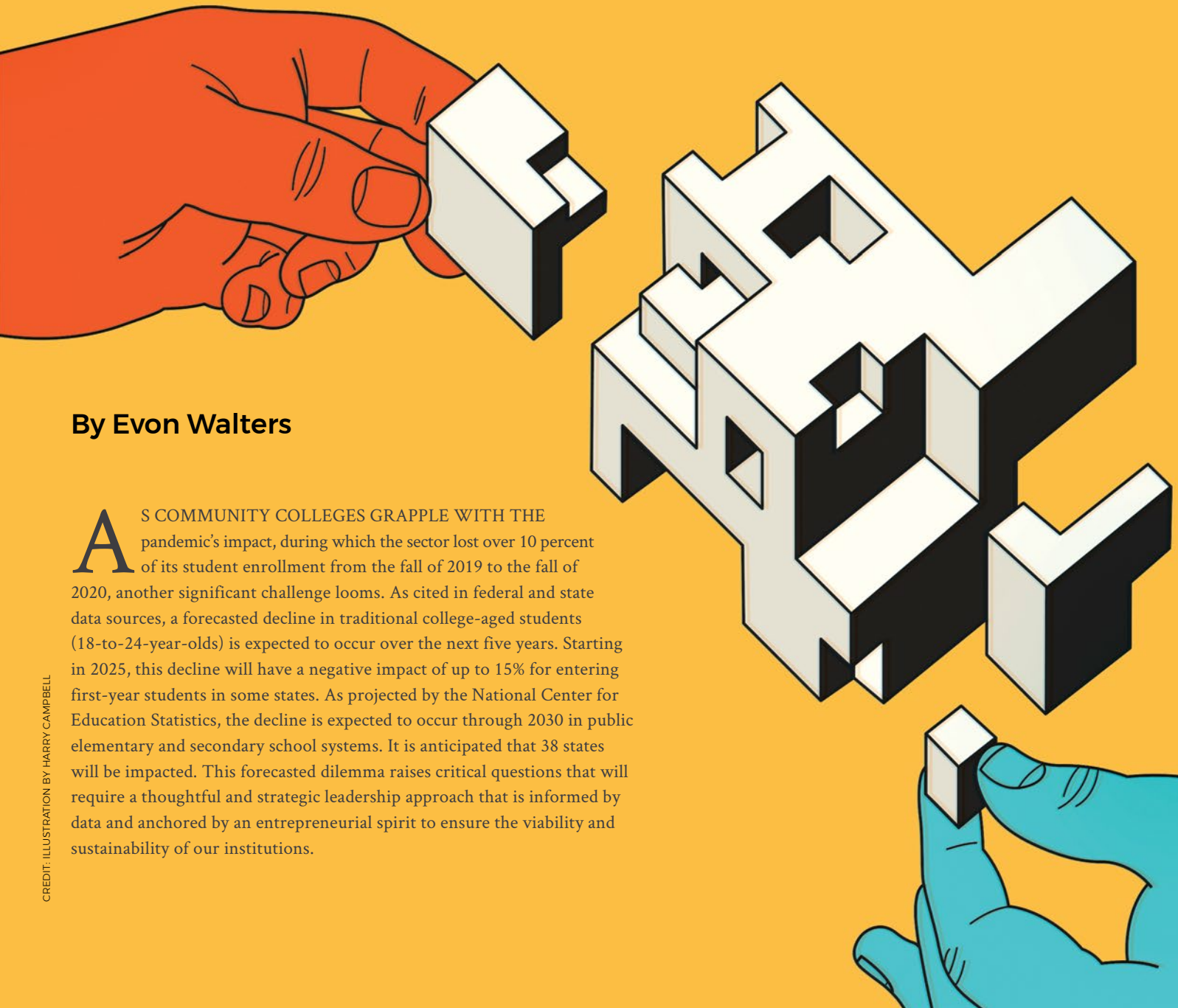


Strategic Enrollment Management

Addressing immediate challenges with
an eye toward the future.



By Evon Walters

AS COMMUNITY COLLEGES GRAPPLE WITH THE pandemic's impact, during which the sector lost over 10 percent of its student enrollment from the fall of 2019 to the fall of 2020, another significant challenge looms. As cited in federal and state data sources, a forecasted decline in traditional college-aged students (18-to-24-year-olds) is expected to occur over the next five years. Starting in 2025, this decline will have a negative impact of up to 15% for entering first-year students in some states. As projected by the National Center for Education Statistics, the decline is expected to occur through 2030 in public elementary and secondary school systems. It is anticipated that 38 states will be impacted. This forecasted dilemma raises critical questions that will require a thoughtful and strategic leadership approach that is informed by data and anchored by an entrepreneurial spirit to ensure the viability and sustainability of our institutions.



Community College of Allegheny County leaders developed and presented the strategic enrollment plan to stakeholders. At left: Dr. Vladimir St. Surin, Dan Duffy, Dr. Charlene Newkirk, Dr. Evon W. Walters, Dr. Tiffany Evans, and Dr. Mary Lou Kennedy.

As opposed to the 2008 Great Recession when enrollment grew, community colleges experienced the reverse during the pandemic. Enrollment declines were accompanied by an increase in competition for students, as well as a post-pandemic shift in student expectations of greater flexibility and accessibility to 24/7 digital enrollment transactions. Despite these challenges, our sector is uniquely positioned to boldly demonstrate its value and evolve its offerings in ways that meet the needs of our students. Institutionally, we will need to adapt by reimagining new and thoughtful measures aimed at broadening, diversifying, and modernizing recruitment and enrollment strategies and tactics. Such measures should be born from a strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan.

What is a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) plan?

A strategic enrollment management plan is an institution’s organized planning and execution effort that engages and solicits the input of multiple constituency groups, such as the governance structure, faculty/administrators/staff, cabinet leadership, and students. It includes such departments/divisions as admissions, financial aid, registration, academic affairs, marketing, and institutional research. Aligned with the institution’s strategic priorities, the plan is a blueprint that is informed by internal and external data. The core elements include measurable enrollment goals and targets, with accompanying tactics that are continually assessed. Ultimately, a SEM plan aims to optimize recruitment and retention efforts, with an eye toward developing a more targeted approach to increasing enrollment. Given the realities of the ongoing and forecasted demographic shifts, an effective SEM plan must be an integrated one, considering the college’s strategic plan, academic master plan, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan.

Faced with the challenge of dealing with a three-year enrollment decline among new students and a need to prepare for the pending 2025 demographic cliff, the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, embarked upon a two-pronged

approach. Its strategy dealt with immediate needs while preparing for forecasted long-term enrollment challenges. For the immediate, in fall 2022 the college launched a multifaceted re-engagement and recruitment campaign that targeted prospective, continuing, and “stop-out” students. Embedded within this campaign was a well thought out and chronologically deployed set of engagement tactics that included a diverse mix of social media, text messaging, phone, email, and in-person engagement activities that were continuously monitored and assessed. Simultaneously, in preparation for the forecasted enrollment cliff, the college canvassed a diverse body of college stakeholders in conceptualizing, developing, and launching a comprehensive strategic enrollment management plan. As a result, CCAC realized two significant outcomes:

1. For the immediate term, CCAC reversed a three-year 22% decline in new student enrollment with an increase in new and overall enrollment for the spring and summer semesters of 2023. Most significantly, within five days of the start of the fall 2023 semester, new student headcount enrollment was up 18%, returning students up 3%, and the overall student enrollment up 6.45%.
2. Completion of a SEM plan that provides a blueprint and focuses on four identified areas.

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles represent key elements that aided CCAC in the development of its SEM plan, as well as the launch of its re-engagement/recruitment campaign. These principles acknowledge upfront the importance of developing a plan that is shaped by an institution’s culture, its surrounding environment, and the identified challenges/opportunities. The principles are:

Principle I - Make Data Your Anchor:

In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* research brief on becoming a data-driven institution, the recommendation “Using Data, Not Anecdotes to Drive Decisions” accentuates the critical role of data as an integral

part of enrollment planning, execution, and assessment. Data shapes and drives institutional performance towards meeting goals, while enhancing individual/departmental accountability via establishing targets, monitoring, and assessing performance.

Internal to the institution, this may be reflected in the use of current, past, and trend data in the institutional areas of new student enrollment, persistence, and retention rates. Externally, this includes integrating current and forecasted high school graduation rates, census, and labor-market data.

One example of how CCAC leveraged data in preparation for the forecasted enrollment challenges was in its dynamic capital campaign, coined "Pioneering Pittsburgh's New Workforce." Anchored by a comprehensive labor market study, informed by the state's high-demand occupation data, and supplemented by benchmarking research, the college exceeded its initial \$65 million fundraising goal that was inspired by individual, private, corporate, and government financial support. The most visible outcome was the construction of a state-of-the-art workforce development center that will open for classes in spring 2024. This facility will expand access to several of the region's high-demand and emerging occupational programs. Connected to the facility has been an advisory council comprised of K-12, workforce, and business/industry sector partners. This council works directly with our faculty in ensuring program awareness and relevance, as well as exploring and identifying partnership opportunities.

Principle II – Diversification Mindset:

In introducing this principle, three categories highlight how to best integrate diversification as a core institutional mindset in every aspect of enrollment planning and execution. The categories are:

1. Student targets: A shrinking K-12 population and increased competition for students will require a more strategic, broadened, and modernized approach to engaging different population segments — including but not limited to adult and historically underrepresented populations. To accomplish this, conducting an assessment and possible reprioritization of past and existing student feeder systems will be necessary. This assessment should lead to a deeper exploration of pursuing new alliances that may not be viewed as traditional in expanding student enrollment pipelines. Independent of its recently completed SEM plan, CCAC over the past three years has intentionally grown its partnerships with local community-based organizations, the business/industry sector, workforce/economic agencies, and the philanthropic sector. Most significantly, these partnerships have led to alternative funding opportunities in creating new enrollment pipelines.

2. Communication: Central to effective communication is the awareness of the demographic realities of the students you seek to engage, recruit, and support. As you know, community colleges represent the most diverse mix of postsecondary students in age, race, ethnicity, and economic status. Thus, success in engaging these students will rest upon the diversity in thought, approach, and, most

notably, the development and deployment of a diverse array of communication tactics.

In the fall of 2022, CCAC launched such a campaign with a comprehensive mix of text messaging, social media, and phone call campaigns in its attempt to connect and service prospective, new, stop-out, and current students for the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 2023. Strategically and chronologically deployed over a nine-month period, this campaign created an aggressive and personalized approach to guiding students through the admissions and registration process. As a result, the college realized increases in its new and continuing student enrollment for the spring and summer semesters, with a significant increase expected for the upcoming fall 2023 semester.

Principle III: Commitment to Continuous Improvement:

Enrollment challenges reflect not only the external demographic and labor-market realities, but also the internal issues associated with assessing one's capacity, systems, and quality of services. Anchored by a "student-centered" lens, a commitment to continuous improvement centers on improving processes and overall service levels via the consistent reevaluation of business operations, program offerings, and course scheduling.

Success can become tricky and potentially contentious, given the aspiration of wanting to improve service levels with the same or fewer resources. From a leadership perspective, it requires close attention to managing and assessing institutional culture and its readiness for change, while acknowledging the important roles of ongoing training and technology as tools to support any change initiative. As with our experience at CCAC, whether it's departmental or individual accountability, proactive, ongoing, and transparent communication will be central to any success that is to be realized in this critical principle.

Preparing for the future and its accompanying enrollment declines has never been more important for community colleges. This comes at a time of increased competition and the need to demonstrate a compelling value proposition for why your institution is the best postsecondary option. What is clear is the critical role that a SEM plan can play in ensuring that the strategy, systems, and programs are in place to attract, enroll, and help students persist and succeed in meeting their academic and career goals. The development of such a plan cannot be static, but must be continuously fluid, innovative, and diverse in its evolution in responding to its surrounding market.



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