Building a SEM Organization: The Internal Consultant Approach

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Introduction

There is little doubt about it; colleges and universities are reluctant to change. They are large and diffuse organizations with few clear lines of control. Yet, the external environment in which colleges and universities operate is changing quickly. The U.S. higher education community is experiencing the most dramatic changes in student demographics since the post World War II era (WICHE, 2003). States and other organizations are conducting new external evaluations to justify lower amounts of public fiscal support. Public expectations are growing rapidly for a wide variety of high quality student services. These changes make it essential for institutions to implement at least some aspects of strategic enrollment management (SEM) so as to develop greater institution-wide understanding of how to best react to the emerging student trends, needs and markets. As a growing number of institutions encounter this reality, many find themselves grappling with a fundamental question: "What is an effective approach to implementing SEM that is sustainable and likely to be embraced by the entire campus?"

The complexity of the current environment, coupled with the organization of most administrative structures, has built the expectation that environmental scans, assessment of strategic needs, the development of marketing plans and other core planning activities are often best met by outside professionals and consultants. Over the past two decades, the professional SEM consulting field has become highly valued by many institutional leaders. Demand for help in addressing these changing markets and institutional expectations have driven a fast-growing support industry. A June 2007 compilation of higher education consultants listed approximately 200 consultants with focuses in 50 different categories (University Business, 2007). Over 130 firms were noted for their abilities to assist universities with implementing SEM in terms of change management, marketing, diversity, financial aid, distance education, student market research, strategy, planning and/or communications. Why must institutions continually look externally for assistance with these critical institutional needs?

This white paper presents a performance concept of the "in-house consultant" model (IHC) as a means to more clearly position the chief enrollment officer, and SEM units, as a campus wide support team focused on helping most offices achieve and sustain core institutional strategic initiatives. Fundamentally embracing the IHC conceptual metaphor would address the mind- and skill-sets required by enrollment management professionals to help their institutions operate in a more efficient and proactive manner.

Benefits of Consultants

The scope of an external consultant's stature has significantly expanded in our era of high-tech, enterprise planning work places. These temporary, expert employees are expected to provide a client with, "*objective advice and assistance relating to the strategy, structure, management and*

operations of an organization in pursuit of its long-term purposes and objectives. Such assistance may include the identification of options with recommendations; the provision of an additional resource and/or the implementation of solutions" (Institute of Management Consultancy, 2002, ¶5).

The ability to utilize the resources and knowledge of a field expert is often exhilarating for an organization. The frustration of losing that energy and competence after a consultant concludes his/her project is also a common complaint among staff and faculty. Many people are familiar with the scenario: a problem is identified, a consultant hired, a plan written, and then the institution is left to develop the structure to implement and sustain the new plan.

This is not to argue that external consultants are superfluous or ineffective at addressing detailed problems. There is a time and place for colleges and universities to seek outside help. In fact, external perspectives are sometimes needed to help institutions reorient or break through bureaucratic obstacles and bring valuable insights from a breadth of experiences. Many schools need a SEM "road map" that only an external agent can help construct. This is especially true for schools with no prior SEM orientation or institutions facing an emergency enrollment situation. The ability to benefit from a short-term contract with an experienced firm or individual can be invaluable.

When a campus does employ the services of an external SEM consultant, the question may be asked "where do we go from here?" This scenario provides a "jumping off point" that can be seized and embraced. By positioning a campus-based SEM professional as an in-house consultant, campus leaders can signal that they are serious about meeting the institution's enrollment goals and are willing to take the steps necessary to support a SEM-based organization.

Whether or not an institution starts with an external consultant, SEM professionals can be most effective if the campus community views them in a "consultant" or helping role, rather than just "another administrator" running a support unit.

The Role of SEM within the Organization: Standard Professional Expectations without a Standard Operational Model

> *"There is no one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach to enrollment management, with higher education's trademark of diversity of mission, purpose, size, and control." (Kurz and Scannel, 2006, pg. 35)*

The fundamentals of enrollment management focus on the use of research and cross-unit collaboration to drive student recruitment and retention activities. The best enrollment professionals use analytics and tactical skills to engage the entire campus community in knowledge and activities that spur student success and optimize institutional resources.

Many recent SEM papers provide tremendous insight in terms of SEM operational definitions, organizational models, assessment tools, functions, and tactics required of effective SEM organizations (e.g., Kalsbeek, 2006; Bontrager, 2006, Henderson, 2004; Black. 2003 and Hossler, 2005). Because of the wide variety of colleges and universities and the environments in which they operate, these authors and many others have concluded **that no standard model for**

SEM can exist, but the standard expectations of SEM leaders do exist (Kurz and Scannel, 2006).

A content analysis of 200 of the most recent job advertisements for SEM professionals further illustrates institutions' desire to have enrollment management leaders with consultant-like characteristics (Tuchtenhagen, 2007). Within those advertisements, the most common recurring themes ask for people who possess "solid foundations in job experience and education", "high energy and passion for student success and higher education," "strong organizational and analytical skills", "the ability to collaborate with faculty and staff", "strong communication, budgeting and personnel development skills", and a "team-work philosophy." Most advertisements contain a request for an individual who will be "responsible for the development and implementation of integrated strategies to achieve diverse student enrollment goals" and who can "develop and implement the strategic enrollment management plan".

The IHC concept is not new, but seldom publicly embraced by executive leaders. This is in spite of the fact that similarities between consultants and SEM professionals are numerous. Michael Hovland's (2006) "Experts Close to Home: How to work Like a Consultant on Your Own Campus" presentation illustrated how many traditional consulting tactics can be systematically applied by SEM professionals. Jim Black's SEM framework paper (2003) and SEM business practices workshop (2002) promotes the use of traditional consulting practices such as using diagnostic tools, establishing staff technical competencies and training systems and using key performance indicators (KPIs) for cross-campus data sharing and outcomes assessment.

Moving a campus's perception of SEM professional from "administrator" to "in-house consultant" can be a natural transition. Most SEM professionals already possess the expert knowledge expected of practitioners and the characteristics and skills common among successful consultants. Institute of Management Consultancy's model for professional managerial consultants further defines this professional role by outlining the professional behaviors of effective consultants (2002). Similar to the chief EM officer advertisements, the Institute's standard emphasizes that consultants must be individuals who regularly manage complexity and responsibility, seek personal growth, use analytical and pro-active thinking, have strong interpersonal interactions, and have delivery effectiveness.

In fact, the number of professionals with the skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities to effectively create a SEM organization has grown, and many of these people now fill full-time positions within institutions. These professionals also bring with them extensive professional networks from which to draw upon to aid the institution. However, rather than looking to utilize existing SEM personnel, many colleges and universities continue to believe that answers to their SEM problems are best found outside of the institution. The task of supporting the external consultant is often left to the very individuals who had the training and capacity to write the plan; but were disregarded because of their internal position. Such a scenario can be changed.

Embracing Consulting Expectations

Noting the similarities between external consultants and current expectations of SEM professionals is only one step in understanding the IHC approach. Creating the role of an internal consultant is as much an understanding of needed knowledge and skills as it is an appreciation of

how educational systems operate and the role of SEM within those systems. This section seeks to reframe how colleges and universities operate by repositioning how campus constituencies view SEM and its leaders.

Over the past two decades, several preeminent SEM thinkers have elaborated on the role and structure of SEM organizations. Hossler (1986), Dolence (1993), Henderson (2004) and Kalsbeek (2006) have all discussed the appropriate administrative structures and the orientation of SEM. We readily accept that both structure and orientation are important aspects for understanding and leading SEM units. Where a unit is located in the overall structure can signify its importance and determine whose voice is heard in institutional decision making. Further, philosophical orientation (e.g., administrative, student focused, academic, or market-centered) can impact how the SEM units operate and interact with other units in the organization (see Kalsbeek, 2006). However, because of the manner in which universities actually work, neither structure nor orientation fully optimizes the SEM units' impact on the overall function of the university if the SEM processes and its leaders are not commonly appreciated and valued.

Universities are complex systems filled with multiple organizations and subsystems. To consider them a single organization that moves with cohesion, grace, and unified vision would be inaccurate. In reality, within this complex system, departments and other units operate as loosely-coupled units; meaning that, even though departments are interdependent, they retain a high level of independence due to their specialization of work (Weick, 1976). When we recognize the true nature of how universities operate as large systems comprised of multiple organizations, the concept of an "internal" consultant who helps bind the organization together begins to make more sense.

In fact, whether a consultant is viewed as "internal" or "external" is a matter of perspective. If we view the university as a collection of organizations and subsystems, rather than a singular organization, it becomes apparent that the SEM professional can bring an "external" perspective to other units within the institution. Certainly, each of the interdependent units possesses expertise that can be shared among the units. However, such sharing can be difficult as one purpose of loosely coupled systems is to protect the core units (such as academic departments in the case of universities) and buffer them from the influence of the environment and actions of other units. For example, changes in the math department usually have little impact on the biology department. Similarly, adding student activities does not alter the operations in the financial aid office. Quite simply, the ability of one unit to influence the rest is structurally limited without collaboration (Birnbaum, 1988). Management of student enrollments is one of the few functions that cut across units at any college or university.

As many who have worked in colleges and universities knows, the academy has been very effective in creating buffers to protect academic units from environmental forces. The problem this isolation creates is that many units continue to operate on out-dated assumptions of past environmental conditions and have not kept pace with current realities – such as how to recruit and retain undergraduate students (Birnbaum, 1988). As such, different ways of working within the existing structure can keep departments updated about changing student trends and help them adjust their internal plans to those changes as needed.

Can Internal Consultants be Effective?

Though it is commonly assumed that external consultants are more effective than internal personnel in fostering change, previous research into organizational operations suggests that this is not necessarily the case. Scannel and Kurz's reflection on SEM's third decade of existence in higher education illustrates the need for successful SEM professionals to act as internal consultants (2006). They outline three primary contemporary SEM functions:

1) *Setting and establishing linkages, shared goals, improved communication, and synergy across all institutional units.* Unit objectives need to be tied directly to enterprise-wide goals, rather than functioning as stand-alone systems.
2) *Using an analytical, empirical, data-driven approach to problem solving and decision-making*. Intuition is important but not sufficient. The "culture of evidence" is a cornerstone of effective enrollment management.
3) *Providing critical leadership*. Enrollment management almost always means changes in structure, reporting lines, communication, goals, etc. The challenges and risks of change should never be underestimated. Effective enrollment leaders are willing to accept the risks where they see the need for change.

Interestingly, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), who have produced several seminal works in the field of organizational theory, discussed similar success traits in their discovery that internal consultants (or "interdepartmental" liaisons) were the most effective mechanisms for coordinating departments and resolving conflict in the business arena. The most successful of these individuals possessed four primary characteristics:

1) *Ability to bridge goals and build trust between different departments*. SEM professionals need to understand and actively work to bridge the relationship between administrative offices, academic units, student affairs departments and so forth. Those associated with either area recognize that these are different cultures. An effective internal consultant needs to be able to bridge both worlds to bring the key stakeholders together.
2) *Respect earned through demonstration of an expert knowledge base.* One of the primary arguments for having SEM professionals serve as internal consultants is that they possess a technical competence that needs to be communicated throughout the system, but especially supported at the executive level.
3) *Understanding and communicating institutional vision*. Enrollments undergird the functions of the university. Without them, these institutions would not exist. Those who work in SEM units are more attuned to campus-wide functions than those in other units and can more easily communicate the need for maximizing the university's overall performance.
4) *A high profile throughout the organization.* This point does not argue that an internal consultant deserves a high profile; rather, someone with a high profile is more prone than someone without such a profile to helping an organization foster change. The execution of this concept is more in the hands of the president than in the SEM professional, but it does emphasize the importance of having strong support from the central administration.

This research suggests that individuals who are familiar to the organization, have an intimate knowledge of the organization, and are trusted by the organization and its members possess great capacity for initiating and sustaining change.

Long-Term Benefits

Fundamentally, the expectations and stronger working relationships that can result from the IHC model can embolden institutions with a number of long-term opportunities to optimize resources and focus on successful and repeatable business practices. These include:

Cost savings by embracing institutional competencies. External consultants can be expensive. Although the pricing is determined by the consultant's unique skills and the complexity of a project, external consultants commonly charge $800 to $3,000 per day, not including travel expenses. Even the most compact projects can easily exceed $50,000 in consulting costs.

Greater organizational unity and engagement on core business practices. In order to succeed with SEM, a focus on fundamentals – the core business functions are essential (Black, 2002). The organizational complexity and thin developmental budget margins create an opportunity for SEM to link campus-wide functions and bridge student service gaps. If accepted, the SEM process and consultant-like activities help to bond the various leaders and units around a more centralized vision and business activities. The stronger linkages and working relationships can help the highly specialized departments identify the significance of their role in the institution's progress and financial standing.

Increased likelihood for sustainable change. External consultants have been criticized for a lack of understanding of the culture of the unique political and structural challenges that exist on any campus. Additionally, the more differentiated departments are, the more likely disagreements and conflicts are to develop, and the more difficult it is to coordinate and integrate their work. The IHC model positions SEM professionals to use their institutional knowledge to better establish the linkages and trust needed to create a stronger and more coordinated strategic plan through regular communication and requests for unit input. In other words, the in-house consultant is expected to regularly "take the plan off the shelf" and put it into action.

Implementing the IHC Model

The IHC approach must be more than a rhetorical strategy for heightening the SEM organizational culture; it should be a values-based training philosophy, an institutional expectation for collaboration, and a push for a heightened sense of professionalism.

Typically, a professional consultant will engage in providing change management solutions to a client. The following five step platform can help an institution develop the IHC paradigm while implementing SEM principles for planning, training and reporting activities.

Step 1: Establish a Vision

The first step in developing the IHC model is to define the conceptual role of SEM within the organization. By this, we are referring to the *core concepts* of SEM, not the office or unit

(Bontrager, 2004). SEM needs to be viewed as a system of responsibilities that are embraced as *institutional* responsibilities and transcend divisional boundaries, or other administrative silos. In fact, it is recommended that institutions adopt a SEM-oriented, thematic goal, which is "a single, qualitative focus that is shared by the entire leadership team—and ultimately, by the entire organization—and that applies for only a specified time period" (Lencioni, 2006, p. 178).[1] The thematic goal can help reorient the institution and help other units better understand the importance of the SEM unit. Typically this goal is part of the strategic plan (i.e. increasing, stabilizing, or diversifying the student enrollment). Ideally it would reflect meeting the school's capacity to serve and a descriptive vision of the type of students it desires to educate. Whatever the role and however it is expressed, the president and the executive board should ensure that everyone within their divisions understand the concepts of SEM and its importance to the institution in achieving the initiative.

Step 2: Align Systems

A critical component of the IHC model is to reorient the ways in which SEM is integrated into the organizational structure of an institution. First, for SEM to work, a clear organizational structure with a champion for all core SEM functions (i.e., research, recruitment and retention) must be designated. The existence of a clear and comprehensive enrollment management structure or administrative designation continues to be a problem on many campuses. While almost all US institutions have appointed a recruitment officer (Noel Levitz, 2007), as of 2004 over 45 percent of four-year U.S. colleges and universities had not designated a formal retention officer (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). There simply needs to be a formal clustering of the units that link the research, recruitment and retention functions of the institution. Once this is achieved, the chief enrollment officer and the EM support units can offer support through market based knowledge and technical resources to assist all campus units setting and achieving their enrollment-related objectives.

Second, the IHC model argues for frequent, regular meetings of the service directors and unit leaders who have the most regular interaction with students. Just like the cross-unit "sharing meetings" that are called when an external consultant is hired; these regular meetings should include the managers of units responsible for admissions, advising, financial aid, student billing and collections, registration, student housing, food services, student activities, orientation, camps and pre-college programs, alumni and career services. Appropriate faculty and student representatives must be involved. The SEM team should be encouraged to share unit issues and events, but more importantly, discuss campus initiatives that potentially impact students and their ability to stay and succeed at the institution. The team's concerns and suggestions should be documented and share with the president and executive leaders.

Step 3: Create & Execute Plans

It is important to create enrollment management plans centrally and at the unit level. Objectives should focus on core SEM measurements such as establishing the institution's student service volume, and the subsequent admissions, student profile and retention benchmarks. While academic departments will likely know their enrollments and credit-hour generation, it is unlikely that they have an understanding of how their enrollments evolve over students' tenure in

[1] In this context a thematic goal could include, "improving the reputation of the institution" or "becoming the college of choice for students in the region or state."

their programs. Such information can be important at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for optimizing course offerings and advising workloads. Using unit audits, the in-house consultant should work with the academic and student service departments to generate benchmarks and determine how best to track unit progress. Start with determining a department's capacity to serve students by using measures such as teaching loads and class size, service needs and, as appropriate, create a profile of students the department wants to attract and retain and serve. Then, work with the department to create benchmarks and desired, measurable outcomes. The same types of research and planning exercises can be performed with most campus support units such as food service, billing and cashiers, counseling, career services and student activity offices.

Step 4: Integrate the Vision

Successful implementation of the IHC model depends on the ability and training of the people employed to execute it. It is important that new hires have a solid understanding of SEM, can move easily among and relate to different types of departmental cultures, and can understand and communicate institutional goals. The objectives, deliverables and reporting activities need to be emphasized in all job descriptions and performance goals. Annual training plans should ensure regular exposure to happenings in their specific fields through the sharing of articles and journal readings, plus ensuring the ability to attend relevant professional conferences. General training should be developed based on the consulting competency topics such as effective student learning, analytical and budget skills, market analysis, strategic goal setting, systems management and plan development and execution methods.

Step 5: Review the Process

In addition to the creation of the objectives and performance indicators for instituting the SEM vision, it is important to create a mechanism through which the SEM professional can report back to the broader collegiate community about the implementation of SEM initiatives and the market changes that may impact it.

A key deliverable for any consultant is a report and assessment of key performance indicators. (A thorough explanation and definition of SEM KPIs is provided in Dolence, Rowley and Lujan, 1997). Growth by program, student profile and diversity, student retention and graduation rates, and preferred discount rates are the fundamentals. Whatever the objectives are, they need to be determined by and embraced the institution's executive team. Once established, performance on each objective must be communicated through dashboard indicator reports that are distributed widely across campus. Data and data interpretation must be widely shared if the information is going to be used in cross-campus decision making.

The IHC model encourages that annual reports include updated environmental scans, comparisons of enrollment performance with strategic plan goals and competitors' performance levels, and student market assessments. Regularly scheduled events that include all internal stake-holders, such as a state of the university address or a mid-year luncheon, are logical times to review data and discuss the strategies for continual SEM improvement.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of an in-house consulting model is one of establishing an ideal performance model for SEM professionals, not an argument against using external consultants and gaining from their valuable input. The IHC model promotes the idea of letting internal, experienced SEM practioners develop institution-wide partnerships and plans to better ensure the university lives up to its promises to students, families, faculty, and alumni. The IHC model, if fully embraced, can play a uniting role for the typically isolated, silo-focused units of most campuses. The model is an ideal for strategic levels of performance and professionalism. It can be used to build an organizational culture that better motivates staff and faculty collaboration, demonstrates a dedication to intelligent planning and strategy execution, promotes a stronger passion for academic and student success through shared governance, and embraces the regular use of solid analytical and data-driven skill-sets to move an institution in its desired direction.

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