

Mastering the Art of Balance: An Analysis of How Private Master's Institutions Pursue Institutional Quality, Access, and Financial Stability Through Their Enrollment Practices

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Abstract

This mixed methods study examines the enrollment priorities and recruitment strategies of two private master's institutions to reveal how these institutions are prioritizing their commitments to institutional quality, access, and financial stability. It further analyzes the types of recruitment strategies these institutions are utilizing to uphold their commitments, including the strategic use of financial aid. Lastly, this study evaluates the quantitative impact of these recruitment strategies, particularly upon issues of access.

Whether strategic approaches to enrollment management have transformed higher education for better or worse is open to considerable debate. Enrollment management is typically understood as the recruitment, admission, retention, and graduation of students (Hossler, 2004; Hossler, Bean et al., 1990; Huddleston, Jr., 2000). Thus, enrollment management includes institutional marketing, pricing, financial aid, student selection, retention, and graduation efforts. Some might argue that enrollment management has facilitated institutional responsiveness to student needs and focused attention on student outcomes and institutional goals (Ehrenberg, 2000; Hossler, Bean et al., 1990; Whiteside, 2001). Others would highlight the emerging view of higher education as a market-oriented commodity and see enrollment management as an organizational manifestation of entrepreneurial orientations that has promoted enrollment strategies potentially detrimental to equity and access (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; McPherson & Shapiro, 1998). Regardless, enrollment management has become a fixture within numerous institutions across the United States in the last 30

years, a development that will likely continue as higher education institutions, both public and private, become increasingly reliant upon tuition dollars in a competitive environment defined by prestige and resource maximization. This being the case, greater understanding of institutional enrollment policies and practices is warranted.

Institutional quality, access, and financial stability have surfaced as fundamental enrollment management objectives that may be appropriately deemed pillars of the profession. Over the years, scholars have examined how student quality influences institutional quality (McPherson & Shapiro, 1998; Winston, 1999), why access should be a vital institutional priority (Bowen & Breneman, 1992; Claar & Scott, 2003; Geske & Cohn, 1998), and why financial stability is essential for institutional stability in a competitive environment (Allan, 1999; Winston, 1999). Trends concerning enrollment management's pillars have become increasingly apparent. There is evidence that institutions are encouraged to become more selective in an increasingly stratified educational hierarchy defined by prestige (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Ehrenberg, 2002; Hossler & Anderson, 2004), that institutions are persuaded to admit a more socioeconomically homogeneous class of students in pursuit of prestige and resources (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Avery, Fairbanks, & Zeckhauser, 2003), and that a desire for resource maximization is facilitating the privatization of higher education (Claar & Scott, 2003; Eckel & King, 2004; Ehrenberg, 2003; McPherson & Shapiro, 1998; Selingo, 2003). Each of these market-oriented trends has direct implications on institutional quality, access, and financial stability within the higher education system; thus research concerning institutional enrollment practices and their effects is ongoing.

However, most, if not all, of the research regarding the pillars of enrollment management and recent enrollment trends appears to be primarily based on studies of research institutions. This study reveals the enrollment priorities and enrollment trends of two private master's institutions, in particular, to provide a more complete picture of the higher education landscape as it pertains to institutional enrollment policies and practices. Whereas research institutions are committed to providing education through the doctorate degree, master's institutions are colleges and universities that generally offer educational