

 LEADING STRATEGIES

# The Role of Organizational Change Management in Successful Strategic Enrollment Management Implementation

By Clayton Smith, Janet Hyde, Tina Falkner, and Christine Kerlin

During the 2019 American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Conference, there was much discussion about how important change management is for successful SEM implementation. While we have known for some time that SEM needs institution-wide collaboration and support to achieve its objectives (Black 2010, Dolence 1993, Henderson 2005, Kalsbeek 2007, and Smith 2000–2001), enrollment managers have varying degrees of success in achieving the change management necessary to fully implement SEM. This article provides an overview of change management in higher education, identifies some of the ways organizational change contributes to successful SEM implementation, and introduces some specific ways in which community colleges and four-year institutions are managing change at both the project and enterprise levels. Recommendations for professional practice and further areas of research are also presented.

## Defining Change Management

A good way to begin a discussion of change management related to SEM implementation is to establish a definition that fits the educational context. Greek philosopher Heraclitus said more than 2,000 years ago, “Change is the only constant” (Mark 2010), suggesting that everything is in a continuous state of flux. Today we live in a world where change is present in our every-

day life in changing technology, increasing globalization, continuing cost containment, increasing speed in market change, growing importance of knowledge capital, and increasing rate and magnitude of change (Rothwell, Prescott and Taylor 2008).

Change management is the process of helping a person, group, or organization change (Rothwell, *et al.*

2009). Anderson and Anderson (in Rothwell, *et al.* 2009) define change management as:

*...a set of principles, techniques, and prescriptions applied to the human aspects of executing major change initiatives in organizational settings. Its focus is not on “what” is driving change (technology, reorganization plans, mergers/acquisitions, globalization, etc.), but on “how” to orchestrate the human infrastructure that surrounds key projects so that people are better prepared to absorb the implications affecting them (Anderson and Anderson 2009, 270–71).*

In other words, organizations do not change; people do.

## Change Management Levels

It has been said that people change within organizations on three levels: individual, organization/initiative, and enterprise (Burke 2008, Martin 2006, Prosci, n.d.).

- **Individual Change Management.** Individual change is the first change management level. It is important to know how people experience change and what they can do to achieve change in their professional lives. This involves learning how people make successful transitions. Individual change management draws on disciplines like psychology and neuroscience to develop and apply ways of supporting individual change.
- **Organization/Initiative Change Management.** Organizational change management is all about managing change related to the project being implemented. It involves identifying the groups and people impacted by the project and in what ways they will need to change. It then involves creating a set of activities to ensure that project employees receive the support they need— including awareness, leadership, coaching, and training—to change successfully. Supporting successful individual transitions within the project scope should be the primary focus of organizational change management.
- **Enterprise Change Management Capability.** Enterprise change management is important and difficult. It involves embedding change management in an in-

stitution’s roles, structures, processes, projects, and leadership competencies. Where enterprise change management capability is present, individuals will embrace change more quickly and effectively, and organizations will be able to embrace strategic initiatives. In order to establish an enterprise change management capability, the institution will need to embed change management across the organization.

## Manifesting Change in Institutions

Institutions have identified various challenges associated with implementing SEM; collectively, these challenges can be described as the “blame game.” Some criticisms have focused on SEM taking too much time. For example, some say too much time is spent in meetings, processes are too complicated, or the amount of time required to accomplish a SEM activity is out of alignment with its value to the institution. Other criticisms focus on the costs associated with SEM, including those of data systems or of staff associated with SEM. Most often, others in the organization are blamed for SEM challenges or failures. Criticisms include the wrong academic programs, the wrong administrative processes, poor marketing, poor student recruitment, and poor or insufficient data (Hyde 2018).

External factors, which an institution is often powerless to change, impact the sense of hopelessness that leads to what Dolence (1993) refers to as the denial phase of SEM. The word on campus is that “it’s just demographics, competition, economics.” Gage and Sigler (2016) identify the following external factors: changing demographics, decreasing number of high school graduates in many jurisdictions, increased competition among institutions, decreased funding from government, reduction in demand for some academic programs and increased demand for other majors, public demand for accountability and institutional effectiveness, increased demand for comprehensive career services, and market vulnerability associated with continued significant increases in tuition and fees.

The blame game is understandable in the context of the pressure that SEM implementation can put on an organization. Pressures resulting from changing roles,

changing jobs, and changing processes can be experienced in administrative areas across the organization. In other areas of the organization, stresses may result from the pressure to change attitudes and thinking, academic programs, institutional brands, marketing, and recruitment processes as well as the uncertainty that accompanies any form of change.

When considered in the context of other complexities in the current postsecondary education environment and the increasing rate of change, SEM may seem like the last straw in an already overly stressful environment. Among the most common pressures are decreasing enrollments, decreasing funding, increasing costs, increasing diversity, changing expectations of learners, and changing expectations of employers. In short, today's postsecondary education environment is so complex that the added pressure of SEM implementation may feel like more than the organization can handle.

Nimble organizations are effective at managing organizational change. Conner (2010) states that nimble organizations are those with a sustained ability to quickly and effectively respond to change. Historically, postsecondary education organizations have not been nimble; yet if an institution can become more nimble, it may have an expanded capacity to navigate the changes it faces. To become nimble, institutions should focus on two areas:

- “Creation of the environment where nimbleness can flourish (reflected in the organization's leadership, culture, and approach to change roles; and
- Creation of the application structures and processes that drive successful execution (reflected in the organization's portfolio of initiatives and implementation architecture)” (Conner 2010, para. 1).

McKinsey and Company recently highlighted the ways in which the implementation of organizational change is evolving (Lindsay, Smit and Waugh 2018). They share survey results that indicate the three most significant success factors in achieving organizational change: planning at the outset for the long-term sustainability of the change, clear organization-wide ownership and commitment to change across all levels of

the organization, and clear accountability for specific actions.

While the above-noted authors identify multiple meaningful contributors to effective change, all of which are useful, a collaborative approach is critical for successful change associated with SEM implementation. Black (2010) speaks of the importance of collaboration in the evolution of an organization-wide SEM culture. He describes four steps, including initial information sharing across the organization followed by communication regarding the shared information and “collaboration between academic and enrollment leaders designed to implement identified action items” (23). Black (2010) writes, “The first three stages are often ad hoc in practice. It is not until the fourth developmental stage of a SEM culture, fusion, that joint efforts begin to become standard practice” (23).

Collaboration is indeed the key to supporting change in postsecondary education organizations. By implementing structured processes to encourage collaboration, we can enable earlier and more effective organizational change. Many will immediately assume that they are already collaborating, but collaboration in this sense is a structured process that goes beyond cooperation to embrace the constructive management of differences.

Gray and Purdy (2018) state, “Partnerships are born of diversity and require capitalizing on that diversity to achieve joint ends” (68). This describes the postsecondary education environment well. There are diverse perspectives among executive leadership, administration, and faculty; all are valuable, but often they are so diverse as to become adversarial. This can be particularly significant during a SEM implementation. Where initiatives such as SEM are concerned, Givens (2018) states, “You can throw all kinds of software and data at a problem, but if faculty aren't brought in early to the process in a collaborative way, effective change is unlikely to happen” (para. 3). Walmsley (2016) comments, “Some universities experience problems where the culture is one of ‘them and us’ where faculty are in one camp and administrators are in the other. The culture of collaboration does not exist in these types of circumstances” (para. 4).

One way to improve collaboration is to host team innovations where new ideas are shared. Another approach is strong leadership that assigns team members to develop ideas individually and bring them back to the larger group, as well as sharing individual stories in order to know one another better, managing tasks, encouraging open communication, and aligning team members' interests (Young Entrepreneur Council 2018). These techniques could be effective in building bridges between different constituencies within a postsecondary education organization and could lead to a more collaborative environment that supports effective change.

Gray and Purdy (2018) detail the following essential components of collaboration:

- “The actors are interdependent with respect to the problem of issue, and none of them can solve the problem on their own;
- It is an emergent process that uses shared rules, norms, and structures;
- It involves constructively wrestling with differences using formal and informal negotiations and consensus-building to find trade-offs that create value for all;
- Partners bring different competencies and need to respect and learn from each other's expertise; and
- Partners assume joint risks and responsibilities for the outcomes of their joint efforts” (8).

Collaboration in multiple situations that begins with early engagement among individuals in teams across organizational boundaries achieves outcomes that meet organizational needs as well as individual and team objectives. The following are keys to success for effective organizational change in postsecondary education environments:

- Take enough time: Take enough time to plan the initiative and broadly identify those who will be affected.
- Collaborate: Engage early and often with those affected, and involve them in collaborative planning for SEM implementation.

- Keep it simple: Avoid overly complex SEM implementation strategies that require too many people in too many meetings too often.

## Managing Organizational Change Associated With SEM Implementation

This section presents three case studies for SEM implementation—two at community colleges and the other at a four-year, public university. They reflect change management at both the project and enterprise levels. Of the community colleges, College A reflects the experience of one of the co-authors as the director of admissions and records at an institution in the Pacific Northwest. College B reflects the observations of one of the co-authors at a large community college east of the Mississippi. The four-year, public university case reflects the experiences of one of the co-authors as a member of the office of the registrar and as director of the office of student finance at an institution in the Upper Midwest.

### Community Colleges

Completed project change management. College A is an example of successful change management for a project directed at improving access and retention services. With an enrollment of approximately 8,000, College A, located in a suburban/rural area, did not have a strong budget given recent enrollment losses. This loss of fiscal and enrollment vitality, accompanied by the termination of some instructional programs, contributed to a growing sense of urgency to implement enrollment-strengthening strategies. Discussion of this situation and the development of a coalition of mid-management and executive leaders took some time to coalesce into some clear messages of urgency and options for addressing the problems.

Among several action plans, a project directed at reengineering the admissions and registration functions required dramatic changes affecting staff positions, facilities design, and service redesign. The goal was to merge the two separate offices into one, remodel the existing office space, increase office hours, and refine

and expand job functions and services in order to create a new one-stop enrollment services area that would increase access and improve retention processes.

The director of admissions and records outlined the basis for urgency, described how the team could help, and developed a vision for the new area, gaining the buy-in of the vice president for student services and the vice president for instruction. Administrative services set the budget and the mechanism for remodeling the old offices. The director attended meetings of other departments on campus and described the plan, gaining input on processes related to college units.

Several challenges loomed: (1) the logistics of moving during the remodel into alternate space, which was clearly sub-standard, (2) the lack of standard procedures in both offices, and (3) a union environment where staff position descriptions were fixed and some staff were prickly about perceived changes in assignments and workload. Critically, college leadership did not indicate a plan to reduce positions through the merger. A clear positive indicator was that most staff were committed to helping students; they saw the need to change and improve operations. Among a staff of fourteen, four natural leaders emerged, and a team spirit was established.

Prior to the move, the director led the staff through various office redesign plans, gaining input through discussions about new ways of serving students. At the same time, set-up of the alternate space was discussed with staff. Several visited other colleges to view their one-stop operations. This resulted in an agreed-upon layout for staff work stations and offices in the temporary as well as the new space.

The merger of the two offices required re-thinking services, a primary example being how to build processes and staff positions such that the admissions and registration/records functions were merged, expanded, and performed seamlessly. In fact, the sub-standard nature of the temporary quarters provided the almost-perfect environment for that, since all staff were now sitting cheek by jowl with one another. This naturally facilitated their learning what each did (and could do) by simply overhearing one another; humor was also involved. Building on this informal cross-training en-

vironment, regular staff meetings focused on adjusting procedures and policies. Staff themselves saw how they could streamline their work and their services. This made the effort to redefine work along the lines of the original vision much easier, though several positions had to be submitted for re-classification. Leadership's promises that lay-offs were not the intention of the merger contributed to a positive climate for negotiation.

After several months, the project was successfully completed. Keys to success included intensive efforts to include staff member review and input individually and through large group meetings and recognizing that their insight into their work was just as valuable—if not more so—than the idealistic vision of the director. In following years, the “new” enrollment services structure was subject to more changes and expansion. The original merged model proved to be a steady platform for such improvement.

Challenges at the enterprise level of change management. The experiences of two-year College B and its challenges and opportunities for change differ from those of College A. In this case, the change process is just that: “in process.” With an enrollment of more than 35,000 at multiple campuses in a sprawling suburban area, this institution faces two primary issues: decreasing enrollment and an expressed need to improve a wide range of student services and to expand instructional services. Naturally, other factors affect these primary issues: changing demographics, campuses with different missions, as well as a large and talented workforce, albeit with obvious gaps in their collaboration. Several efforts to bolster enrollment and improve student services at College B have been tried in the recent past, and some are in process.

As College B forges ahead in enrollment planning, leadership at various levels—executive, mid-management, etc.—needs to look at the change factors engendered by more comprehensive adjustments and initiatives than projects at the program level. Given the college's high complexity, institutional directions, policies, and procedures must be considered within the context of multiple campuses along with a wide web of missions as well as diverse programs and services. Tin-

kering here and there with programs and services will either not have much impact on institutional success or will fail due to the lack of integration. Change requires more comprehensive and substantive energy, buy-in, and involvement at many levels.

Leadership needs to anticipate institution-wide challenges to change and to identify ways to overcome them as part of its planning to transform student services and instructional programs. For example,

- The College B workforce has seen change efforts come and go. The effect of this on employee culture needs to be acknowledged. Structuring a plan distinguished by short-term and frequent feedback and review of progress may increase staff members' investment.
- Executives and managers at College B are not always in agreement regarding day-to-day matters, much less larger initiatives. Teams should be created that are committed to collaboration and equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources to do the work that is required.
- The executive leadership of College B is subject to many distractions given the current social, political, economic, and legal environments. It is one thing to start one or more change initiatives and another to stay on point, particularly at a complex organization. The college's leaders need to commit to reach consensus, stay on message, promote the message, and collaborate to manage and monitor initiatives and programs despite their diverse portfolios and inevitable emergencies.
- College B, like many other colleges, operates in a unionized environment. Conflicts can arise when employees' routines, assignments, and work environments change. Employees are focused on their current work. Asking them to allocate time to meetings and training and to change their work can incite resentment and non-compliance. At the outset, leaders should evaluate the potential impact on employees and work levels affected by change.

By considering how to address an environment of change at the enterprise level, leaders at College B will improve the likelihood of more lasting and effective success for institution-wide initiatives as well as more focused program and/or service changes.

## Four-Year Institution

This four-year, public, research I institution is situated in an urban setting and has an undergraduate degree-seeking enrollment of 31,500. During the 1980s and early 1990s this institution boasted the largest student enrollment in the country—just over 60,000. While this enrollment was impressive and indicated the significant support the institution provided to its state's populace, it also meant that the institution was trying to be all things to all people and in so doing was not supporting many of its students well. The institution's four-year graduation rate was less than 20 percent at the time, and the campus community was unconcerned; the general sense on campus was that students should be allowed to take as long as they needed to complete their degrees. Stopping out was not discouraged, and retention was never part of the discussion. A 1995 student satisfaction survey revealed that students were very dissatisfied with the service they were receiving from the institution and that staff didn't care about them or their success.

These two factors were the primary drivers for changing the way the institution's leadership viewed its students and its role in defining and supporting student success and shifting the campus culture toward service. This concept—to foster student success in all its forms—was reiterated during the next 20 years whenever the question arose as to why changes were implemented.

In fall 1999, the institution shifted its academic calendar from quarters to semesters and implemented an enterprise student system. In the years preceding these transitions, the campus re-examined academic policies and procedures; the desired academic profile of incoming first-year students; the role of academic advising in student success; the role and location of student services; campus cultural expectations regarding student enrollment behavior; the increasing debt of undergrad-

uate students as tuition increased and state investment in higher education decreased; and the concept of student success. Some of these changes involved physical spaces and service provision while others involved long-held beliefs about higher education delivery. Both proved equally difficult for the campus community.

Throughout the changes, key campus leaders reminded the campus community of “the why” for the changes. “The why” was never specifically attributed to implementing a SEM strategy but rather as a necessary shift in service delivery to align institutional resources, language, action, and mindset to be student centered.

One of the physical changes was to combine student-facing components of financial aid, billing, and registrar functions in one unit—a one stop—one of the first in the country. Prior to this, students would stand in three separate lines in the same room to conduct their business; each separate department would address its specific issues and not know or care if the changes would have any impact on billing, records, or financial aid. Each department used a separate stand-alone information system.

The pace of change within higher education is often referred to as glacial. Twenty years is hardly glacial, but time was a defining factor in this institution’s adoption of SEM principles. Each change required time for the campus community to voice concern, identify potential unintended outcomes, and adjust processes and procedures. Over the past twenty years, an increasing number of areas have embraced the concept of coordinated and intentional student service delivery throughout the student lifecycle. Yet skeptics and naysayers remain. Nevertheless, the institution has continued to examine and change in support of student success. As noted previously, it is essential to allow appropriate time for culture to change. Be prepared to accept that not everyone on campus will embrace change.

The transition to a new student information system and a semester schedule afforded this institution a natural opportunity to scrutinize and revise education policies that affected students. One of the most sweeping changes was to centralize education policies rather than allow each of the institution’s eleven undergradu-

ate colleges to have its own. Previously, students could be held to different standards for probation, suspension, and readmission, to name a few, if they transferred to a different college within the institution. In addition, the institution codified in education policy the standard length of a baccalaureate degree and instituted a policy defining timely graduation for undergraduate students. New degree requirements, new degree programs, and curricular changes all had to fit within the policy parameters and support student success.

At the same time, the institution changed from a quarterly to a semesterly curriculum. As a result, every course in the catalog was reviewed and revised to reflect the new number of weeks of instruction, and credit values were examined to ensure that accreditation requirements for semester courses were satisfied. The institution simultaneously established a financial incentive for degree-seeking undergraduates to encourage degree progress, with an overall aim of graduating in four years. This change required degree-seeking undergraduate students to pay for thirteen credits per semester (any more incur no additional cost) even if they enrolled in fewer than thirteen. (There is an exemption process for students with extenuating circumstances.) Many academic advisors were concerned that the mandatory credit load would be too great, and students would be less successful academically. Yet data did not bear that out. Nearly 20 years later, the average credit load for undergraduate degree-seeking students exceeds 14.5 per semester, putting them well on track to graduate in four years. Faculty senate support was needed to establish a per semester credit requirement; the discussion took more than a year, but it provided an opportunity to educate and engage faculty in the reason for the change: the support of student success.

Several years later, the institution continued to drive culture change in support of student success. Despite the institution being an early adopter of an electronic degree audit, data showed that students still registered for courses that did not count toward degree completion. Through a collaborative effort with academic advisors, the institution implemented a delivered version of the degree audit that clearly displayed when courses

for which they registered did not meet any degree requirements. Once this was in place, the institution was able to visually display whether students were on track to graduate in four years.

Along with policy and curricular changes, academic advising was identified as a key component in increasing student success, especially in terms of retention and graduation. At this institution, the standard ratio of students to advisors was well over 350:1. This made it challenging for advisors to provide appropriate and timely intervention. A near real-time advisor tool was designed for advisors by advisors to alert them when a student was engaging in behavior that was not as expected (*e.g.*, not enrolled during their assigned enrollment time, dropping all their classes, earning less than a C- in a course in the major, had not come to an advising appointment in more than a year, and other indicators of disengagement or behavior that does not demonstrate persistence or success). When initially introduced to advisors nearly ten years ago, it was met with skepticism and resistance. Advisors were used to engaging with students when students sought them out but not to reaching out to students proactively regarding their behavior. The tool is also used to indicate students who are a retention risk; the campus has established a cross-functional team to communicate with students about the issue that makes them a retention risk. Advisors can also make referrals within the tool to other offices on campus; those offices connect directly with the student rather than waiting for the student to schedule an appointment.

The results of these twenty years of persistent and intentional change have been nothing short of remarkable: The current four-year graduation rate is just over 71 percent, and the current retention rate is 93 percent. Because students are graduating in four years (some in fewer), the average debt burden has been decreasing steadily and is now well below the national average. The provost was instrumental in identifying the need for change; proposed changes were always nested within the central premise of supporting student success.

## Conclusion

We began our discussion by indicating that enrollment managers have varying degrees of success in achieving the change necessary to fully implement SEM. This may be because change within organizations occurs at the individual, organization/initiative, and enterprise levels (Burke 2008, Martin 2006, Prosci n.d.), and SEM is often implemented at only one or perhaps two of these levels. Implementation of organizational change is also evolving (Lindsay, Smit and Waugh 2018). The most significant success factors for achieving organizational change are planning at the outset for the long-term sustainability of the change, clear organization-wide ownership and commitment to change at all levels, and clear accountability for specific actions.

Institutions chose to engage in a “blame game” in which they alleged that enrollment challenges were associated with internal factors, such as having the wrong academic program(s), administrative processes, marketing, or recruitment. Others claimed that external factors such as demographics, competition, funding, and market vulnerability made the institution powerless to change. All of this leads to what Dolence (1993) refers to as the denial phase of SEM.

The key takeaway is that any tendency to engage in the “blame game” should be suppressed; energy should be directed instead toward adopting a collaborative approach, which many identify as the most critical dimension for successful change associated with SEM implementation. By implementing structured processes to encourage collaboration, we can enable earlier and more effective organizational change. Many will immediately assume that they are already collaborating, but collaboration in this sense is a structured process that extends beyond cooperation to embrace the constructive management of differences.

## Implications for Professional Practice

This article reveals several implications for professional practice. The following would enhance institutional



performance related to change management regarding SEM implementation:

- Develop a change management strategy that focuses on change at the individual, project, and enterprise levels.
- Review your institution for its nimbleness. Focus on your institution's environment (*e.g.*, leadership, culture, approach to change roles) and application structures and processes.
- Develop an organizational change plan at the outset to support long-term sustainability.
- Adopt clear organization-wide ownership and commitment to change.
- Establish clear accountability for specific actions.
- Establish a collaborative approach to evolve an organization-wide SEM culture that includes

information sharing across the institution, communication regarding shared information, collaboration among academic and enrollment leaders, and development of a SEM culture.

In conclusion, ensure that you take enough time, collaborate widely, and keep it simple.

## Further Research

Little research has been done on applying the scholarship of change management to the implementation of SEM at postsecondary education institutions. Given more than thirty years of experience implementing SEM at different institutional types and in a range of countries, it is time to conduct research—qualitative and quantitative—on this important topic.

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