

Interview with John (Jack) Maguire Chairman, Maguire Associates

- Dr. John (Jack) Maguire is the former Dean of Admissions and Dean of Enrollment Management at Boston College, where he pioneered the field of enrollment management in the 1970s. In 1981 he founded Maguire Associates, a market research and consulting company based in Bedford, MA that specializes in higher education. Along with his continuing work at Maguire Associates, Dr. Maguire is currently a trustee of New England College and Millikin University, and a member of the board of directors for Boston College Ireland in Dublin.

 Robin Matross Helms

What is your education and career background?

I graduated from Boston College High School in 1957 and Boston College in 1961, and then went on to get my doctorate in theoretical physics at Boston College in 1966. After that I did a post-doc at Rice University for a year and a half, and then came back as a senior research fellow at BC. I then got the first available tenure-track position as an assistant professor of physics, my background being mathematical physics.

Just to complicate things, I was also involved in politics at that time. I ran for the school board in Lexington, MA, and had, some would say, the misfortune to get elected. At the age of 29 I was elected to the board, and at the age of 30, I was the chair of it. One of the people who supported me in that endeavor was John Mahoney, Sr., who received an honorary degree from BC this year. Now, unbeknownst to most of us at the time, BC was going through a major financial crisis that involved, among other things, enrollment. John Mahoney went to the president of BC and said “there’s this guy in Lexington, he just got an assistant professorship in the physics department at BC, he’s chairman of the schools committee, he’s 30 years old, and he could be the next dean of admissions.”

So they conspired with the chairman of the physics department, and the three of them basically just told me “you are going to be the new dean of admissions.” I told them I didn’t have a clue as to what that would entail, but they said they would teach me. So I ended up, against my will and better judgment, as dean of admissions at the age of 31, back in the early 1970s when BC wasn’t doing so well.

When I started as dean of admissions, there were people in the office who had worked there for many years. I didn’t know anything and they knew everything. Fortunately, I was able to convince them that it was in everybody’s best interest to teach me what they knew. Of course they did so, and I used that knowledge, along with my quantitative skills, to

create a program we christened “enrollment management.” Frank Campanella, the executive vice president of BC at the time, was also involved in this—I would say that he is the founding godfather and I am the founding father of the discipline of enrollment management. This took place principally because Boston College was in deep trouble, and out of exigency, out of *necessity*, we started the enrollment management program around 1973 or 1974, just as Father Monan was coming on board as president.

Then around 1982, after eleven years as dean of admissions and dean of enrollment management at BC, I went to Father Monan and told him that I was going to leave to start my own company. He replied that if I would stay on for one more year and chair a soon-to-be-formed task force on new technologies, he would give me a year’s sabbatical. Not only would he pay me a year’s salary, but he would make BC my first client. So when I finally started my company, Enrollment Management Consultants, in 1983, I already had a big client.

We eventually made Enrollment Management Consultants a division of a bigger umbrella company, called Maguire Associates, and went from a management consulting firm, principally, to a company that did market research and strategic planning. But it was really at Boston College in the mid-70s that the whole notion of enrollment management began.

What effect did your work as dean of enrollment management have on Boston College?

Most of my work took place before Doug Flutie came on the scene, and we had already tripled undergraduate applications before anyone had even thought of him. When he applied in 1981, we’d already gone from a total of 7,000 applications, including freshman and transfers, to over 14,000. We had taken the acceptance rate from 90 percent down to about 35 percent. We had used financial aid strategically in big ways, and

had gone from a school that was essentially all commuters, to a school that was now principally resident. Instead of a handful of kids from California, for example, we now had hundreds. We had transformed the face of enrollment at Boston College.

The person who deserves the most credit for this is Father Monan, really, as well as Frank Campanella, and Charlie Donovan, S.J., who was my mentor and the academic vice president at the time. I'll take some credit as well, but there were a lot of individuals to share it. I think that Boston College, as a result of the good work that those people did, pulled back from the brink, was no longer discussed in hushed tones as the next campus of the University of Massachusetts, and began to take its place as a national institution. Thousands of dormitory beds were built, demand went way up, and new facilities were built. I think that enrollment management played a significant role in all of that.

How would you define enrollment management, and what are its goals?

Some of the earliest battles in the field actually had to do with the name of the field itself. I remember back when Frank Campanella and I went to the dean of the School of Management at BC and asked him, "How does the name 'enrollment management' sound to you?" And he said, "Wait a minute, 'management,' that's the name of my school! Don't start bandying about my name—why don't you call it enrollment planning?" But Frank Campanella said, "No, we're going to call it enrollment management." The name enrollment management has caught on, but frankly to me it's the worst title I can think of, except for all the others. But it's a really ugly title, and it doesn't at all get at what enrollment management really is—data-driven decision making and fact-based management, linking people and resources to get it done in the area of higher education marketing. It's not a euphemism for marketing, but some might think of it as that. We were coupling admissions, financial aid, retention, registrar, student flow, information systems and research, market research, and strategic pricing into a package that would allow interactive effects and generate an ideal outcome.

Now the buzz phrase is *strategic* enrollment management. I would actually argue that most of what we were doing back in the early days of enrollment management *was* in fact strategic, rather than tactical. It wasn't about putting the stamp on a little crooked so that it would look like it was personalized when it wasn't—that's the basest of tactical approaches. We were much more into the theoretical and strategic domain even then.

Enrollment management certainly gets into the domain of program development as well. You have to have a product, so that we're not just talking about "image," and we're not just talking about "branding"—another word that's come into the lexicon in the last few years to infuriate some of the old-timers. Over the years enrollment management has been described as evolving from just admissions, marketing, pricing, and financial aid to a systemic approach. But I argue that if it gets

too broad, it could in fact lose its significance. Yet some people think of it as more narrowly defined, as admissions and marketing, and it's not that either.

Overall, the history of the field is simply a history of trying to make schools understand what their challenges and opportunities are with regard to fundamental things like competition, positioning, and putting together an integrated package that includes pricing as well as an offer of admission, maybe an honors program, and other things that would make it more attractive for people to go to one school over other schools.

Would you say that there has been a lot of progress made towards reaching these goals in the 30 years that enrollment management has existed?

There's an article that I wrote in the mid-1970s called "To the Organized Go the Students," that really presents a blueprint for enrollment management. Ironically, most of it is still not being done. There is still a lot of "low-hanging fruit" in this business. It isn't as if the set of problems that we talked about in that paper have been solved. You would think that by now I'd be talking about evolution, progress—that all of those things are done and now we're working on a whole new set of problems. But in fact, 80 percent of what we were talking about is still an unfinished agenda as we move forward. There are new things too, obviously, related to the Web and technology, but many of the original challenges remain.

What are some of the enrollment management tools and techniques that are currently used in the field?

A lot of the tools and techniques go back to the 1970s—much of what could have been implemented and should have been implemented since then hasn't been implemented. However, one major development is technology—principally the Internet—which has allowed students to take virtual tours, apply to the institution, and even enroll via the Web.

One of my clients went from a situation where just last year, 2,000 of the admitted applicants were paper-based; this year, the number is down to 1,000. And the number of Web-based applications has gone from 500 to 2,500. There was a *huge* increase in the total number of admitted applications, but some questions lingered that we've only been able to answer recently. For example, are these Web-based applications "soft" or "hard"? This school didn't charge a fee for Web-based applications, so you'd think they would be soft. Well, we're beginning to prove that, in fact, the Web-based applications weren't soft, and there's already good evidence that the school is going to meet its net revenue and enrollment goals.

What we've begun to look at in recent years is a really sophisticated fact-based approach to managing enrollments, using market research at every step of the way, from geodemographic research that you can get from databases and warehouse data, to analytical and attitudinal-based market research, with a focus on using more sophisticated analytical techniques to do multi-variate analysis. One example of this involves using an enrollment management forecasting analy-

sis system, the whole basis of which is to look at how students behave on an individual basis, and then cumulate them in order to achieve institutional goals.

One thing that has caught on in the field that I think is a major improvement over how things were done in the past is the use of constituents in the admissions process. We did this when I was at Boston College, with great results—BC's admissions staff of 20 was augmented by an alumni cadre of about 3,000–4,000 at its peak. There were alumni all around the country, all around the world, who were used to help recruit and interview students. So we had a personalized, face-to-face approach anywhere, without having to deploy the admissions staff and spread them too thin. We built an alumni admissions program that did two things: first, it reduced the time and money expenditure of having primary staff travel, and second, it got potential students in touch with alumni, who have more credibility than paid admissions staff, for obvious reasons.

Introducing alumni also allowed us to get more and more admissions staff involved as managers rather than as road-runners. We had all kinds of program directors—program director of transfer admissions, program director of alumni admissions, program director of minority and international admissions, and many others, all of whom interfaced with the program director for freshman financial aid. This system gave staff an opportunity to get more involved at higher levels. My proudest achievement may be that from those original staffs of admissions people, something like fifteen of them eventually turned out themselves to be directors and deans of admissions at colleges and universities around the country, including BC. That's a statistic that would be hard to match.

So it was about developing talent and keeping it there?

Yes, and part of it was the notion that staff could get big responsibilities early on. And part of it was the notion that we were going to try to violate Gresham's Law. Gresham's Law says that too often, the bad drives out the good—not always, but too often—in an environment where things aren't working. The good people leave and the bad people stay, and the only people who come into an environment like that are people who aren't very good. And if they're like that when they come in, sometimes they sink. Violating Gresham's law to me means driving out the bad and sustaining the good. One way to drive out the bad is to cultivate the best in people—hire good people, and cultivate the best. So we were not always firing people, but were in fact improving the system.

Are there any particular case studies that stand out as institutions that really changed dramatically as a result of these types of techniques?

Of course Boston College stands out as the one that's changed the most—it had a great president and executive vice president, who gave us the freedom to do what needed to be done. Although we've worked with schools all over the country and the world, many of the institutions where we've

had the greatest impact are right in Boston. Boston University is probably our biggest client, and they've had a huge transformation in which I think we had a part.

Also Northeastern University was an institution that for a long time was hemorrhaging—there was more net revenue and enrollment revenue loss at Northeastern over a ten-year period than probably any other place in the country. And yet they're now thriving. They redefined themselves, reengineered, downsized, did a lot of market research, and better defined the meaning of cooperative education and how it integrates into their curriculum. They have built new dormitories and improved the campus, and have a great leader in Dr. Richard Freeland.

Actually, probably the institution we've had the most impact on is Emmanuel College. We were the ones who did the market research and gave them the advice to go co-ed. And I think that last year they had more freshmen than they had sophomores, juniors and seniors combined. Interestingly enough, when they went co-ed, they obviously had an increase in males, but they had a bigger increase in women than they had in men. The entering class was 100 one year, all women, and the next year the class was something like 150 men and 250 women.

Another small school example is Emerson College. They faced a major decision about whether to stay in downtown Boston or move out of the city. We had a profound impact there, helping them make that decision, and tripling their enrollment. We're having, I think, a major impact today on New England College, where I'm a trustee, so I see it from several perspectives. I've helped them with enrollment management and enrollment planning, and I think that they are going to be one of the success stories of this decade. There are many other examples, but those are a few.

How would you say that schools can go about creating a market niche for themselves?

Well, it starts with mission—who are you, and who do you really want to be? You have to look carefully through introspection, data analysis, and market research at what *truly* makes you special. It doesn't have to be unique, but it has to be distinctive. What is it about you that makes you special in a marketable sense? Something that not only feels good to you, but might also be inviting to others. You need to study that relentlessly, look carefully at how you quantify those distinctives, and understand that branding and marketing are not just fancy words. It's Gresham's law reversed—drive out the bad in favor of the good. It's kind of a virtuous circle. The virtuous circle violates the second law of thermodynamics, or it violates Gresham's law, and basically says that you can improve isolated systems, they don't just automatically wind down. And if you can do that, then you can create a situation like we've created at many colleges and universities, where things actually get better and the good *does* drive out the bad.

To me, any institution that wants to market itself as distinctive has to first find out how it converges with mission,

and then work hard to get anti-Gresham's law at work and let the good drive out the bad—you have to keep working at that; it isn't easy. Give people lots of responsibility and help to create an environment where when people leave for bigger jobs, they're good people, better because of the impact you've had on them. And make sure that they routinely will be replaced by even better people when the word gets out. That can happen whether it's an admissions enrollment management team, or an entire college or university. So I'd say do the research to find out what makes you special, see what's realistic in terms of your position among your competition, and then market wisely. If anything understate—don't overstate, and don't exaggerate. Throw your hat over a high wall, but not too high a wall.

What do you see as the future of enrollment management, and what are some new trends and developments that are likely to affect the field?

First, there's definitely going to be a big sea-change related to the Web. Schools are beginning to use integrated systems that feature the Web as the basis for moving people down the admissions funnel. It's not just allowing students to apply on the Web, but using it for virtual tours, communicating with constituencies, and creating an environment where it will be attractive to actually visit the place and see it in three dimensions.

Second, there is much more information available from sophisticated market research as the basis for distinctive positioning. I think more and more schools are going to rely on such research techniques in the future.

Third, I think the use of constituencies will continue to become more prevalent. Even with all the high tech that we've got, high touch is still going to be important. And as credible as good admissions staff are, they should be managers, and should organize other constituencies, like students and parents, and particularly alumni.

Fourth, there will be all kinds of information in terms of strategy, like enrollment management forecast models that allow you to predict whether or not a particular applicant will enroll. This information is then coupled with other variables to actually determine optimal configurations of students in the aggregate to balance net revenue, quality, and other variables. These things have been talked and written about for a while, but they are still an ongoing agenda for most schools.

Also, an idea that I threw out there a while ago is that higher education could take a more integrated approach to managing endowments, and I'm actually working on this for a couple of schools now. For example, is it really the best use of Princeton's endowment to subsidize students so that they don't have to accept self-help? Princeton creates a competitive environment where Harvard, Yale, and Stanford may think they have to do the same. Or, might it make more sense for an institution like Princeton to partner with an institution like, say, New England College? Princeton could go to New England College and say "We've got \$10 billion in endowment, so we've got a stray \$100 million floating around.

That's 1 percent of our endowment, and we'd like to give it to you with lots of strings attached." If we'd like to see education not just for people in the top academic tier, but for people who might be struggling—who might end up after four years with more value-added than those who attend top schools—then this is a possible option. I think a key question would be: Can we invest our endowment in more effectively educating the students of America if we do something like that than we could if we make sure students at top schools don't have to take out a loan? Interesting question, fraught with controversy, as well as issues related to legislation.

Another big trend is the growth of the for-profit higher education sector, and the fact that companies like Sylvan, for example, are actually deserting their original missions in favor of higher education because they see higher education as a boom area. The development of the next generation of elementary, secondary, and early-childhood education teachers may well be through a system that involves a combination of for-profit and not-for-profit education. That's all coming down and would relate directly to enrollment management, for sure.

How do you think some of the key issues in higher education right now, such as early action, merit aid, and the upcoming ruling on affirmative action, are likely to affect the field of enrollment management?

First of all, as I see it, schools are using early decision and early action strategically to firm up their classes. In my opinion, students aren't at all prepared, most of the time, to make their decisions so early, yet they feel that if they don't apply early action or early decision to their top choice schools, they might not get in. I became a complete convert when my son Matt, got out of high school and decided to take a year off. He toured the world for a couple of months, then went to work for a temp agency, and learned a lot. It's made all the difference in his life—he's a much better student at Amherst College now than he would have been had he started there a year earlier.

Many schools use these early action plans to jack up their statistics for *U.S. News & World Report*. This is creating all kinds of problems in terms of competition because everybody is saying, "If they've got that edge by doing that, then we've got to do it to maintain the balance, or else we might be thought of as weaker." So it starts, I think, a vicious circle rather than a virtuous circle.

On merit aid, there's no question in my mind that at the institutions that have excess capacity and can't fill their classes, you can have your cake and eat it too. You can increase your discount rate and increase your net revenue. This is not true of a place like BC or Harvard or Princeton. If you're at full capacity, the minute you increase your discount rate, you decrease your net revenue—you have to. However, for those schools with excess capacity, merit aid says that you can build a better class and get more net revenue, higher quality, and more diversity.

The most selective colleges and universities often cry foul when they hear about institutions using merit aid, saying that merit aid is unethical, and that schools should only give need-based aid. However they have been able to fight off the “pecking order” by doing things that have been in their estimation quite ethical, such as having an early decision program and no loans, and discounting their tuition dramatically. For example, the tuition should be \$60,000, and yet they only charge \$30,000, because they can subsidize the rest of it from endowment. So a lot of the schools that cry foul against places with excess capacity using merit aid really in a way use merit aid from generations ago through the endowment.

So I believe that merit aid is a good equalizer, and ironically, at those schools that have excess capacity, it doesn't have to be either/or. We don't have to take money away from economically disadvantaged students in order to give it to students who don't have any need—you can do both. At a place like Princeton, you've got to make choices. If you decide that you want to give more money to minorities, too often you've got to give less money to needy White kids. So there are all these trade-offs that get people fighting. However they don't fight so much at the schools with excess capacity because they can keep all those issues in balance.

In the final analysis what matters much more than clever planning models, “smoke and mirrors,” and some of the other things that schools do to get themselves boosted up in *U.S. News*, is building good programs. So to the extent that you can create a virtuous circle that generates more revenue at a place like New England College, you can use that money to give faculty better salaries, which means better faculty, and you can subsidize better facilities and better programs, which means that students are served better. And ultimately you want to serve students better. If the methods used to boost the rankings are counter-productive to that, they shouldn't be used, but if they reinforce that, they should be. I maintain that there are many times when they can definitely be used to improve the lives of students, which is the most important thing, which sometimes we overlook.

On affirmative action, I'm definitely of a mindset that says that diversity is critical. First of all, I have to express my bias, which is that affirmative action for the rich is the alumni/legacy program, and that certainly involves people like present and former presidents. Therefore it's in some ways ironic that President Bush should be leading the charge against affirmative action when he's a product, at both Harvard and Yale, of affirmative action.

Having gotten that off my chest, the fact is that affirmative action improves education. As I mentioned, my son is at Amherst, which is one of the most diverse schools in the world. So the fact that Amherst attracts a diverse student body was a plus for him, and created a better educational environment. This is opposed to the argument that says, well, what if Matt were the last guy on the margin, and he got bumped out by one of these “lesser-deserving” students who happened to be of a different racial or ethnic background.

Matt's attitude is he wouldn't want to go to a school that didn't create an environment that might lose some kids like him in order to make it a more diverse place.

The other part of affirmative action is the assumption that we have developed sufficiently sophisticated measures, like the SAT, that would allow us to differentiate so finely among students that we can tell who's deserving and who's not deserving. Well, it's just nonsense to think that because somebody has a lower SAT than somebody else, he's disqualified relative to that other person, assuming their grades are equal. So the grades are equal and this White kid has high SATs, and this Black kid has lower SATs. Therefore, the anti-affirmative action argument says the White kid has a call on a spot in the class, and if we give the Black kid a spot in the class, we've somehow injured the White kid and done something that's unethical or unfair. That assumes the SATs mean a hill of beans in determining what constitutes admissibility—they don't.

One of the things I'm proudest of from my time as dean of admissions at Boston College was a battle that took place in the admissions office between a prestigious private school and an inner-city Boston public school, where kids were really struggling. The valedictorian at the public school might have double 470s on the SAT, and the top 10 percent of the class might average 900. On the other hand, the bottom 10 percent at the private school might average 1300 on the boards. We sent instructions out to the staff that they were to reject the bottom quarter at the private school, and were to admit the top quarter at the public school. Of course that lowered our average SAT scores, but it improved *wonderfully* the environment at Boston College. It really made a positive difference educationally.

And you know, from a tactical point of view it also had advantages that we hadn't anticipated. It got us more valedictorians and salutatorians from inner-city public schools who said, “Gee, I've only got 950 on the boards but I'm valedictorian here at my school, and I'm going to apply to BC.” We said, “Come on in, we'll take you and give you money! The kid from the prestigious private school who's at the bottom of his class is not going to get in—you're going to take his place.” If these students were minorities, so much the better, but I'm talking about not only ethnic, but also *economic* diversity. And you know, the other unanticipated consequence was that the prestigious private schools started sending us better applicants as well. So it had a two-pronged positive effect.

I think that with the court case, the most likely outcome is going to be a five-to-four vote, and the ruling will be to keep affirmative action. I hope that's what's going to happen. I hope that Thomas and Rehnquist, and particularly Scalia, don't hold sway and make it less likely that the kid from the inner city would get in over the kid from the rich private school, when the kid from the private school had everything going for him and the kid from the inner city had nothing. When people say, “Well, the private school is a better school,” I say, “Are you saying that the kid from the inner city chose the

public school over the private school?” He didn’t have a choice. So he played the hand he was dealt and did a good job, and he should be rewarded for that, not penalized. As long as SATs correlate so well with geography and family economic status, we shouldn’t use those as a basis for denying diversity.

I wish my son had a chance to testify—I think he’d convince those folks that affirmative action is a very good thing. You’d probably need to change its name because the phrase has such a dark cloud hanging over it. But still, the point is that creating diversity is important, not only for the people who get an advantage that they wouldn’t otherwise get, but for the Matt Maguires of this world. They may not realize fully what an advantage they’re getting by becoming part of a melting pot, but doing so is becoming more and more necessary now that the world is getting smaller and the lunatics

out there are trying to create separation. My goal would be to have a society, and ultimately a tiny little planet, where we’re not separated based on race, religion, socio-economic status, or ethnicity. It’s the opposite of what the Taliban and Ku Klux Klan are supporting as the best way to solve the problems of this world. And that’s not going to happen unless we keep bringing people together, which is my ultimate argument for affirmative action.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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