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A Message from the President
September 2011

THE PRINTING OF THIS Insights compendium represents the completion of our third year of regular publication of facts, feelings, and advice about the potentially painful consequences of a troubled economy for institutional leadership and enrollment management. Embedded in this year’s work – and a modest rebranding of Insights for a Challenging Economy to Insights for a Changing Economy – is our acceptance that “challenge” is now a permanent condition and our belief that wisdom and perspective are best found in using challenge to catalyze, build, and sustain positive organizational change.

Our substantial and loyal readership in the communities of higher and secondary education is a source of pride and inspiration for all of us at Maguire Associates. Insights is and will continue to be a representation of our collective point of view – the product of a team of practitioners, scholars, researchers, and data analysts informed by the ideas and experiences of our institutional colleagues around the country and across the world. That said, it is time to recognize and thank Jessica McWade (concept, launch, writing, publication schedule), Sarah Madey (design, compendium design, distribution), and Sarah Parrott (writing) for their particular contributions to this ongoing effort.

It is also time again to recognize Patrick Lencioni, his great book “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” and the relationship of this work to the “dysfunctions” series reflected in this compendium. Lencioni’s book has been used here at Maguire Associates to promote team building. We borrowed heavily from his framework to present best practice ideas in an unexpectedly provocative way to a group of highly accomplished chief enrollment officers who we thought deserved a fresh approach to spark discussion and dialogue. “The Five Dysfunctions of Enrollment Management” series contained here followed from that effort.
Are we suggesting that enrollment management practice today is dysfunctional? Hardly! In fact, we see most institutions at peak performance, functioning at highest levels even as they embrace a volume and a velocity of change that is unprecedented for most education institutions. The Maguire Associates team will continue to share thoughts, trends, data, and advice in *Insights* during the upcoming year. This third edition compendium is a summary resource as we prepare for the next cycle, which will include increasing opportunities for welcomed contribution and content from our readers.

Best Wishes,

Kathy Dawley
President

**Kathy Dawley, President & CEO**

Kathy joined the Maguire Associates team in 1989 and has served as president and CEO since 1996. Her insightful leadership has benefited Maguire Associates and the many colleges and universities where she has collaborated with boards, presidents, leadership councils, and departmental teams to plan and achieve their strategic and operational goals.
Maguire Associates launched Insights for a Challenging Economy two and one-half years ago at the dawn of the Great Recession. Through the recession's depths we shared with you – and you with us – both facts and feelings about a troubled economy and its painful consequences for institutional leadership and enrollment management. Together, we considered what was happening, why, what to do about it and, above all else, how to remain calm and focused amid such economic turbulence.

So now it’s time for a modest rebranding of Insights. We know that times are still challenging. For many, the recession is over in name only, especially in the employment and credit markets. These may be so-called “lagging indicators” for the economy overall, but we all know the essential role jobs and credit play in making higher education possible for students and their families.

Nonetheless, we accept that “challenge” is now a permanent condition – the “new normal” – and that wisdom and perspective are best found in using challenge to catalyze, build, and sustain positive organizational change. Thus, welcome to the new Insights for a Changing Economy and, with it, a review of some useful leadership principles to start the new year.

Four Leadership Perspectives

Here are four thoughts about leading and managing talent that you may want to incorporate into your New Year’s resolutions. Some of these echo advice we have previously offered, but they are all worth considering anew – especially at this time of year. Sure, these insights may seem like common sense, but common sense can be too easily compromised in tough, ever-changing times.

1. Recognize and Reward Great Performance: So who among your employees has performed exceptionally well over the past two or three years? Who rose to the occasion and, in turn, what have you done publicly and
privately to acknowledge their contributions? Budget cuts are no excuse when it comes to rewarding your best, most talented people. Indeed, not rewarding superstars these days is financially and strategically risky, since it may invite your best performers to seek employment elsewhere and, in the process, negate the investments you have already made in them. Remember that, unlike two or three years ago, your best people now have employment options. They have access to interesting positions that are opening up around the country as the economy slowly recovers.

Work with your leadership team, CFO, and Human Resources staff to undertake a true cost accounting of the financial risks associated with not keeping your best people. Or at least introduce the notion that one can be pennywise and pound foolish when it comes to losing top talent needlessly. If raises and bonuses have not been available, then reward your best people with other considerations such as a long weekend here and there, a restaurant or spa gift certificate, or even fewer meetings. Here’s a case where the thought truly does count. Oh, and remember to say “thank you,” too.

Above all else, keep getting better at recognizing excellent performance publicly and promptly. This is not cheerleading; it’s leadership. Signal to your superstars that you get it: that you understand the key roles they have played in your institution’s – and your own – performance.

2. **Improve Performance Planning:** Ask whether and how your performance planning system has improved as a result of the economic crisis. This question assumes, of course, that you already have a useful, robust performance planning system and that you adhere to its discipline. One clear way to reward and recognize talented contributors is to discuss with them the richness of long-term career opportunities for them at your institution. It may seem counterintuitive, but one of the best ways to retain great people is to help them build resumes that become increasingly
impressive to outside employers. If you don’t groom your superstars in this manner, you’re going to lose them anyway. Plus, working to advance your best people sends signals to other, perhaps younger employees that meaningful career tracks exist for them at your institution.

And besides, what better way to assess an employee’s strengths, weaknesses, operational barriers and dependencies, and the other elements of a performance plan, than through the exacting lens of performance during difficult times? As the saying goes, “Tough times are the truest test of character.” Not having this conversation with your best people may well be a wasted asset.

3. **Overcommunicate:** We cannot communicate enough the importance of communicating enough – and then some! Legendary Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach once suggested that, “It’s not what you say. It’s what they hear.” People read, view, and hear things through their own unique perceptual filters, sometimes interpreting messages in radically different ways than intended. Overcommunicating means finding many, varied opportunities to articulate your high-priority messages to your employees, using interesting examples to animate them and multiple media to distribute them.

As a leader of a college or university or one of its units, you own the responsibility for ensuring that employees understand your objectives and expectations. Of course, these should all be drawn from your institutional and enrollment management strategic plans and then factored into your own performance plan and those of your employees. One always vexing question here is whether or not the core messages from your strategic, enrollment management, and performance plans are aligned or, instead,
contradict one another. As a leader, you will need a firm foundation of congruence across strategic, enrollment, and performance plans for you and your team to make meaning out of the daily operational communications that we are emphasizing here. Without this clarity, a leader and an institution risk saying a whole lot of nothing.

4. **Take Personal Stock:** How did you perform during the economic crisis? Have you marked the areas in which you excelled and those in which you fell short? Perhaps the recent holidays provided some time for needed reflection and introspection. If they were anything like our holidays, however, perhaps not. Nonetheless, when will you find time for critical self-assessment? Have you asked your boss and your key employees for a constructively critical review? If not, you may be doomed to make the same mistakes again.

How do you feel about being a leader? We often hear people admit privately that they are so busy with the substance of their “day job” that they have precious little time to lead. It’s a realistic, understandable lament, but it also provides a diagnostic clue. Visibly leading your people has to be “job number one.” Doing so effectively, and empowering the right people to engage in increasingly strategic work, will ultimately give you more of the time you deserve and desperately need.

These are four thoughts for your consideration at the start of the year. We understand that these suggestions are easier to make than to implement, but they are true nonetheless. It’s been said that leaders “never let a serious crisis go to waste.” Well, what have you learned and applied from the
challenging economy of the last three years?

Having firmly deposited that large question on your doorstep, we wish you and yours a successful and enjoyable 2011. Seriously, you have undoubtedly found ways to grow professionally amid these recent difficulties, and you have likely overcome some rather formidable challenges. To that we say, congratulations. Let’s continue the dialogue as the challenge of these last three years gives way to more positive change.
Employee Spotlight:

David Wuinee

Been with Maguire since: August, 2005

Top TV Show: Big Brother

Guilty Pleasure: Potato Sticks

Favorite Collegiate Sports Team: University of Kentucky

Favorite Food: Macaroni & cheese

Favorite Book: The Lords of Discipline

Favorite Movie: The Shawshank Redemption

Where David Grew Up: Dalton, MA

Maguire Roles and Responsibilities: As a former Vice President for Enrollment Management, David brings senior level enrollment experience and expertise to client service, most often focusing in the arena of admissions, financial aid and enrollment strategy.

“David can relate to our real-life situations because of his own past experiences. This brings a higher level of knowledge to the table and it enriches our discussions and ability to navigate the SEM waters of today.” Amy M. Adams, Ph.D. Associate Vice President of Enrollment Services, Capital University

As Vice President and Deputy Director of Maguire Associates’ Knowledge-Works organization, David is also responsible for modeling team operations, inclusive of sales & marketing, budgeting, project team assignments, and staff mentorship & leadership.

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MAGUIRE ASSOCIATES WAS PLEASED to participate in a White House forum on education, business, and the budget recently, sponsored by the New England Council. At the session, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan warned that America “must get much better, much faster in education and get out of the ‘catch up’ business.”

Playing catch-up appears to be exactly what the United States is doing, however, when one considers the ambition of the Obama Administration’s “cradle to career” vision for education. Understandably, Duncan makes no apologies for the scope and sweep of the President’s agenda. “I’d love to just focus on one of these initiatives” – referring to the Administration’s three-part early childhood, K-12, and higher education agenda – “but we don’t have that luxury.” “We have no choice,” he later said.

Several times in our briefing with him, Duncan called for a “much greater sense of urgency” about education in this country. Although he did not say it, one sensed frustration with a collective failure to work systemically and in the long term on an issue that can only be addressed effectively in holistic, structural terms.

The Business Community Needs to Step Up!

The White House is on a charm offensive with the business community these days. This is precisely why our delegation also met with Bill Daley, the President’s chief of staff and a longtime banker and business leader, as well as regulations czar, Cass Sunstein. President Obama’s team is wooing business support in advance of the November 2012 election. Our delegation featured many top New England business leaders and some college and university presidents, too.

It was Duncan, however, who issued the most passionate call of the day for
both broader and deeper business engagement in education. He said there are “a couple of million high-skilled, high-wage jobs unfilled in this country because we don’t have enough knowledge workers.” Well, that certainly got everyone’s attention, as Duncan listed many other head-spinning data points about the state of U.S. education including a 25 percent national dropout rate. In underscoring data about U.S. college and university persistence and graduation rates, Duncan emphatically told us that, “We need to focus much more on attainment and not just access.”

Duncan said it was time for more business leaders to “step up” to the challenges of education. He wondered out loud, “How can business find its voice in education?” He seemed mystified that more business leaders were not engaged in – or even angrier about – this gap in knowledge workers. For a company like ours with analysts, econometricians, and statisticians together in a KnowledgeWorks unit, we wonder whether and how a “knowledge worker gap” could play in the 2012 presidential election amid so much discussion of jobs. Not well, we suspect, since unlike the “missile gap” of years ago, the “knowledge worker gap” may lack sufficient political resonance. Too bad, since it is more real than 1960 claims of a “missile gap” that most historians now believe were more fiction than fact.

Duncan used this “knowledge worker gap” to implore the business community to get tougher about educational expectations and outcomes. “The business community’s voice has not been tough enough; not demanding enough of government and educators.” It was a refreshingly candid appeal. And it also reminded several of us of the scene from the 1976 film Network in which Peter Finch opened a window and screamed, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore.” Secretary Duncan must find that emotion very satisfying.

Did you know?

26 is the average age of an undergraduate student.
The Cradle-to-Career Continuum

Duncan, who spoke without a prepared text and was the best speaker of the day, outlined the Administration’s agenda along the continuum from early childhood education to K-12 and ultimately to higher education. Three interesting take-aways included:

- **Dropout Factories**: He said there are over 100,000 K-12 schools in the United States, of which roughly 35,000 are public and private high schools. He noted that only 2,000 of these schools - what he called “dropout factories” - account for over half of all dropouts. He added that the Administration is actively tracking “1,000 schools in the U.S. in fundamental turnaround mode.” Let’s hope most of them come from these 2,000 dropout factories.

- **Community Colleges**: In stressing the “huge investments” the nation is making in community colleges, Duncan said that they are an “unpolished gem” for training “18, 30 and 50-year-olds” into the new economy. While he did not cite specifics, Duncan, Labor Secretary Solis, and their staffs have been busy lately developing and announcing the criteria for the first $500 million in stimulus grants under the $2 billion Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program.

- **FAFSA Simplification**: Duncan underscored that the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has been “dramatically simplified” recently, though he’d certainly get push back from those of you who think much more work is needed here.

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**Did you know?**

32% of students completed a net price calculator hosted by their enrollment school in during the 2011 enrollment cycle.¹
No Laughing Matter

This was a serious gathering on a rather sobering subject. Still, Duncan got a polite chuckle when he reminded this group of New Englanders that he had been cut by the Boston Celtics. The biggest laugh of the day came, however, when longtime Obama colleague Michael Strautmanis, Deputy Assistant to the President, told everyone that the White House recently hosted a reception for the National Governors Association. “Every Governor thinks about being President……so a lot of these folks were here measuring for drapes,” he said.

Higher education is central to the pursuit of higher office or, for that matter, most any professional calling. The Obama Administration’s ambitious “cradle-to-career” agenda seeks to overhaul the U.S. educational system, and there is no argument that it is sorely needed.

After listening to Duncan, it’s clear that the Administration is hardly doing too little. Far from it! The risk here is one of being overwhelmed – or overmatched – by trying to do so much. And yet there does seem to be little choice these days than to address the inadequacies of American education systemically and ferociously. The stakes are just too high to do otherwise.
Concern about student retention in higher education has grown dramatically in recent years, as evidenced by the ever-increasing numbers of blog postings, web sites, articles, journals, and books on the subject. While the very word “retention” seems to impute primary responsibility to the institution for maintaining the academic careers of its students, this can be misleading. What we call retention is, of course, a two-way relationship between student and institution. In order to fully understand that relationship we must be willing to examine all of the factors that may contribute not only to a school’s capacity to retain but also to a student’s propensity to persist.

Most college and university leaders recognize the complex, multifaceted nature of this student-school relationship. And yet many of the approaches recommended to improve retention, while often very useful, tend to emphasize only one or two aspects – and often the most tactical aspects. Less frequently considered are broader and longer-term strategies with ramifications for institutional positioning, messaging, enrollment practices, academic programming and standards, organizational structure and research capabilities.

Our purpose in writing this paper is to fill in some of the missing pieces by presenting a holistic approach to student retention that combines the strategic as well as the tactical, the long-term as well as the short-term, and notions of attrition mitigation as well as retention enhancement.

The Student Perspective
A Continuum of Reasons for Attrition

The literature suggests at least six broad (and, at times, overlapping) reasons why students might choose to drop out or transfer from an institution of higher education. They range from personal and family circumstances and preferences, to preparedness for college level work and adjustment to college life, to issues arising from the availability of desired offerings and positive or
negative experiences at the institution.

- **Circumstances:** Personal circumstances specific to a student and his/her family may cause that student to drop out or transfer. The reasons can include personal illness, family illness or obligations, financial problems, a need for full-time employment, logistical problems posed by distance from home.

- **Preferences:** The student may choose to leave because he/she preferred another school to begin with and only matriculated out of necessity or until improvement in grades permitted transfer. Other personal preferences regarding the student body, amenities, location, etc. might also figure into the decision.

- **Preparedness:** Inadequate academic preparation that results in poor grades or, conversely, inadequate academic challenge for students with a high level of preparation and expectation may result in a decision to leave the school.1

- **Adjustment:** The student may be emotionally unprepared to be on his/her own or unable to make the necessary social adjustments to college life. The student may be unhappy with roommates or stressed by other aspects of the social life at the school.

- **Offerings:** The student may be disappointed in the programmatic offerings of the school (academic and/or extracurricular, athletic, etc.) either because what had been promised was not, in fact, available or because the student had changed academic or other interests along the way.

- **Experience:** Desired program offerings and other features may be available but so poorly delivered that the student’s experience was negative enough to precipitate a decision to leave.

1 Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, 2009
As shown in Figure 1, these reasons for attrition can be viewed as progressing from those that are almost entirely personal with little or no potential for the school to affect the student’s decision to those that are the result of interactions between the student and school such that the institution can play a role in influencing the outcome.

**Figure 1: Continuum of Reasons for Attrition**

At one extreme, Circumstances and Preferences are reasons for attrition that tend to be the least susceptible to institutional influence on the student’s decision. As we move to the right on this continuum, Preparedness and Adjustment combine both personal and institutional factors in ways that may permit the school to take steps to successfully preempt a decision to drop out or transfer. And, as we approach the other extreme where the institution can be most influential, we see how Offerings and Experience more substantively speak to the school’s role in providing desired (or promised) programs and experiences, and in delivering them with a high degree of student satisfaction.

The remainder of this paper focuses on those things an institution can do in the middle to right-hand end of this continuum to actually reduce attrition and enhance retention.
THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE
A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PARADIGM OF RETENTION

We structure our approach to student retention around a multidimensional paradigm that speaks directly to how a college or university can improve those aspects of retention performance that are amenable to institutional action. As displayed in Figure 2, we have identified eight dimensions of retention positioned opposite one another to form four basic retention strategies.

Figure 2: Dimensions of Retention
Four Retention Strategies

These four strategies are:
- Improve capacity to address retention issues.
- Save at-risk students.
- Improve student satisfaction.
- Make attrition less problematic.

We contend that, while institutions will vary in their ability to pursue any particular strategy, all of these strategies working together are necessary for a school to be maximally effective in its retention efforts. Below, we discuss each strategy and its constituent dimensions.

- **Improve capacity to address retention issues.** Student retention – even more than most institutional responsibilities – requires that extra attention be paid to organizational capacity to act effectively. And that is because among all of the important functions in higher education it is the one that is least often “owned” by anyone.²

In part, this is because retention is not a one-time, single-cause event that can be easily assigned to a function or department. It's an ongoing responsibility of the institution as a whole. Everyone, in other words, is responsible. Which is typically a way of saying that *no one* is responsible. But there is another all-too-human reason. As the famous proverb goes: “Success has many fathers, while failure is an orphan.” When the student who drops out is viewed

² Hossler and Lucido, 2009; Ziskin, Hossler, and Kim, 2009
as a failure of the system, who would want to be the party designated as responsible for not preventing that dropout?

Establishing the most appropriate organizational mechanisms for addressing retention issues thus becomes a critical first step in any comprehensive approach. Such mechanisms can run the gamut from the designation of a specific individual serving as something akin to a Chief Retention Officer or a cross-functional committee or working group with sufficient authority (and budget) to make a meaningful difference. Getting folks across multiple functional areas on the same page – literally – by using a common, widely understood set of retention metrics arrayed in compelling “dashboard” reports can be another effective organization device to provide the necessary awareness, focus, and structural reinforcement.

So, organizing to address retention issues is a key dimension of institutional capacity. Just as important, though, is knowing why students stay or leave. To put it another way, a school’s capacity to address retention issues includes both the organizational mechanisms to act and the factual knowledge to act upon. Most schools know how many students enroll, submit deposits, register, and complete their courses of instruction. To varying degrees, most are aware of which students have failed to take the above actions (some in a more timely manner than others). But schools vary considerably in the clarity of their understanding about why students drop out or transfer to other institutions. Either they don’t ask or when they do it is not in a consistent manner or in a way that truly surfaces the more subtle, unstated reasons. After all, dropping out is a decision that might be guilt-laden or embarrassing, and the true reasons for such actions are seldom easy to elicit. Lack of such knowledge can really hamstring even the best organized effort to stem attrition.
Questions to ask about the Organize and Know dimensions:

Organize to address retention issues.
Are we well-organized to address our retention issues? Have we assigned appropriate decision-making responsibility? Do we have the necessary data and reporting systems? Do we employ these following best practices:

• We have established well-identified organizational mechanisms for coordinating all institutional efforts related to enhancing student retention.

• All departments in our institution recognize the importance of student retention and their roles in promoting and helping to assure retention.

• Our institution’s most recent retention data are readily available to those with a need to know them.

• We have at least one staff member whose sole responsibility is student retention.

• We have a dedicated person and/or system responsible for tracking, compiling, and reporting retention-related data and interventions.

Know why students leave.
Do we know the characteristics and opinions of students who stay and who leave? Do we understand the reasons why these types of students transfer or drop out? Do we employ these following best practices:

• We know how many students leave our institution on an up-to-date basis.

• We use research and analytical techniques to understand which factors best explain why particular types of students leave our institution.

• We understand the key factors that influence retention, persistence, dropout and transfer.

• We conduct an exit interview (either online or in person) with each student who leaves our institution to determine their reason(s) for leaving.
• We make an effort to determine where students who transfer out of our institution subsequently enroll.

- **Save At-Risk Students**

This strategy is perhaps the most often cited in the burgeoning retention literature. This is not surprising, as saving at-risk students is all about retaining existing “customers” – a goal of CRM systems in all sorts of industries – and its successful execution has the kind of immediate impact that gets people’s attention. Few would deny the benefits of this strategy, whether they accrue to the student in the form of a college career still on track for successful completion or to the institution in the form of mission fulfillment, enhanced reputation and standing, student/alum gratitude and support, or financial stability. One might say that no retention effort worth its salt does not have a robust mechanism for tracking at-risk students and intervening to prevent their premature departure.

**Questions to ask about the Track and Intervene dimensions:**

**Track at-risk students.**
How well do we identify students at risk for attrition? Do we have a robust tracking system that provides sufficient early warning of students who are attrition risks? Do we employ these following best practices:

• We have identified which types of students (defined by characteristics known at the time of enrollment) have the greatest potential for attrition.
Retention White Paper

• We routinely tag each incoming student in terms their attrition risk potential.

• We are able to track particular at-risk students so that we can spot the critical behaviors, performance indicators, and attitudinal shifts in time to take appropriate action.

Intervene to prevent attrition.
Do we have the student support services in place to prevent or minimize attrition? Are we able to quickly mobilize and coordinate the appropriate staff and services needed to intervene on behalf of at-risk students? Do we employ these following best practices:

• We have a required first-year program to orient, acclimate, and socialize students early in their life at our institution.

• We have an advisement program (that involves faculty, staff, peers, and/or graduate students) that attempts to align curriculum and student life choices with each student’s personal and career goals.

• We have in place the necessary academic, financial, emotional, and other support services and staff that can be mobilized on behalf of students who need them.

• We actively intervene with students whom we identify as at risk for dropping or transferring out.

• We have a rapid response capability that alerts particular individuals – e.g., staff, faculty, residential assistants – to intervene and coordinate their efforts in helping the at-risk student make the right decision.

Increase Student Satisfaction
Whereas saving at-risk students promises an immediate payoff for all parties, increasing student satisfaction is more often a case of delayed gratification. It can, of course, produce near-term, tactical results (by improving food service or access to parking, for example), but in most cases this
strategy requires a longer lead time to assure that promises made during the recruitment/enrollment stage are aligned with experiences actually delivered post-enrollment.

In the same way that improving organizational capacity to tackle retention issues (the first strategy noted above) lays the groundwork for overall institutional responsiveness, increasing student satisfaction lays the groundwork for responding to the concerns of those students whose possible decision to leave is driven by negative experience at the school. An impending decision driven by negative experience cannot always be reversed through direct intervention with the particular student. By then, it may be too late to do anything. Enhancing student satisfaction by promising only what the school can deliver and delivering well on those promises may only be possible over a longer timeframe on behalf of students in the aggregate.

Another reason to pursue a satisfaction enhancement strategy is that it helps assure that even those students who were never at risk for attrition but who might nevertheless have been dissatisfied with their experience will graduate satisfied enough to become satisfied alumni who are likely to support the school for years to come, not only as donors but as volunteers, sources of referral, and advisors or trustees. Retention for its own sake, in other words, is less important than satisfied retention.

**Questions to ask about the Promise and Deliver dimensions:**

**Promise only what we can deliver.**
Are we raising appropriate expectations in the promises we make in mar-
keting to prospective students? Do we promise more than we can deliver? Are any of our messages misleading? Do we employ these following best practices:

- Our recruitment publications accurately portray our institution to prospective students.
- We carefully craft our messages (including visual imagery, taglines, etc.) to assure that our promises are consistent with our actual offerings and proven performance.
- We gather feedback (using surveys and other market research tools) to determine how those who receive our messages are interpreting them.
- We gather feedback to determine whether the expectations of those who receive our messages are consistent with the promises made.
- We have an evaluative process in place that helps assure we offer academic and other programs, services, and student experiences of interest to and demanded by the kinds of students we hope to attract.

**Deliver desired experiences.**

Are we delivering the academic offerings and other experiences that we promise and that fulfill student desires and expectations? Do we employ these following best practices:

- We have an ongoing process of student feedback that surfaces student opinion both as to the availability of desired courses, programs, and experiences and the quality of their delivery.
- We are responsive to student feedback and act promptly to make needed improvements to programs, services, and experiences.
- Courses routinely include frequent faculty feedback, in-depth writing assignments, multiple modes of assessment, cooperative learning, and capstone experiences.
• We provide programs (such as internships, service-based learning, and peer tutoring) that help simultaneously connect students to course content, faculty, and one another.³

• We seek “course redesign” opportunities for incorporating technology that tailors content delivery to individual student learning styles and deepens their commitment to persist.

- **Make Attrition Less Problematic**

To this point, we’ve been discussing strategies and tactics aimed at improving a perceived retention (or attrition) “problem.” What about ways of making attrition less of a problem in the first place? If the institution were to enroll only students with a high probability of persisting through graduation, that would certainly render moot much concern about retention. Mining the school’s historical data to better identify and recruit those students who display characteristics associated with satisfaction and persistence and adopting financial aid and other enrollment practices to enhance the likelihood of their matriculation could go a long way toward improving student fit with the school – and, as a byproduct, retention. Of course, many institutions would resist such adjustments in enrollment policy and practice – and rightly so – especially if doing so were to conflict with key mission-driven goals of promoting access and diversity. But even commitment to laud

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³ Kuh, 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates, 2005
able super-ordinate goals should be a conscious choice made after due consideration of how front-end enrollment policies affect subsequent retention experience.

Another way to make the whole issue of student attrition less problematic is to reframe the perceived problem by reassessing its strategic signifi-
cance and/or mitigating its institutional impact. When viewed in light of the school’s own history or ambitions, current levels of retention/at-
trition may turn out to be more or less significant. And the same might apply, if the school’s retention were to be viewed in light of competitor or peer institution performance. Perhaps the current level is already close to the best level achievable, given the fact that, as the continuum in Figure 1 suggests, there are Circumstance and Preference reasons for attrition that may be beyond the power of the school to affect. What if improving retention came at the cost of lowering academic standards – would doing so be desirable? In this light, a certain amount of attrition might be seen as a good thing. For that matter, is it really a good thing to retain and graduate dissatisfied students who go on to become disgruntled, non-
supporting alumni?

Even if a certain amount of attrition is deemed acceptable, there are several mitigation strategies available to offset the negative (largely financial) effects of attrition – from an efficient inbound transfer program that seeks to replenish the ranks of departing students to a proactive dropout contact program that seeks to turn those departing into stop-outs, eventual degree completers, or adult learners down the road. Students who never graduate might nevertheless become ardent institutional supporters if

4 Park, Boman, Care, Edwards, and Perry, 2008-9
5 Very informative here is Horn (2007). A Maguire Associates analysis of these comprehensive NCES data found that 53% of the variance in school graduation rates can be explained by a combination of just three factors: selectivity, percentage of students that are low-income, and highest type of degree offered by the institution.
they are maintained as valued members of the school’s employment and advisory network.

**Questions to ask about the Enroll and Reframe dimensions:**

**Enroll students likely to persist.**
Do we make necessary adjustments in student recruiting and enrollment that will assure the best fit between student and school, such that the greatest number of students will persist through graduation? Do we employ these following best practices:

- We enhance the prospects for enrolled student retention by pursuing an “upstream” (pre-enrollment) college preparation or remediation strategy.
- We adjust our student recruitment and enrollment practices to enhance the likelihood of attracting students with characteristics associated with satisfaction and persistence.
- We have a multi-year enrollment strategy with special marketing / messaging campaigns to enhance the prospects for re-enrollment into the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years.
- Our financial aid and awarding practices are sensitive to the needs of prospective and current students for whom affordability is a key determinant of whether they enroll and persist.
- We offer increased financial aid in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years to compensate for increases in cost of attendance.

**Reframe the significance of attrition.**
How significant is our retention “problem” in terms of financial cost, competitive standing, and institutional ambitions? Are there certain programs or student subgroups for which our current attrition level is tolerable, or even desirable? What are our broader institutional strategies for mitigating the effects of attrition? Do we employ these following best practices:
Retention White Paper

• To gauge the significance of our retention performance, we know what our attrition experience costs in foregone revenues.

• To gauge the significance of our retention performance, we compare our retention rates with our aspirations, our recent history and those of similar or competing institutions.

• To gauge the significance of our retention performance, we assess whether those who persist through graduation are satisfied and support the institution as alumni.

• To mitigate the impact of student attrition, we have a proactive transfer replacement strategy.

• To mitigate the impact of student attrition, we maintain contact with those who leave with the intent of encouraging their future re-enrollment or some other form of continued institutional support.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Strategies

Institutions that adopt the kind of multidimensional framework we propose will quickly see that two strategies – Improve Institutional Capacity and Save At-Risk Students – are relatively short-term in their execution and anticipated impact. We might refer to these as focused on reducing current student attrition. The other two strategies – Increase Student Satisfaction and Make Attrition Less Problematic – are inherently longer-term in their orientation. Here we can say the objective is enhancing future student retention.

For example, expanding course offerings and boosting faculty effectiveness as part of an effort to improve student
satisfaction are likely to take longer to implement and influence outcomes than, say, launching a student satisfaction survey or increasing advising staff to more effectively intervene with at-risk students. Similarly, refocusing enrollment efforts so as to enroll students who are more likely to persist will tend to produce retention benefits over a longer time frame than will upgrading the student tracking and intervention system.

Different schools will judge their needs differently as between short- and long-term strategies and, more specifically, between any one of the eight dimensions and the others. What we hope is clear from the foregoing discussion, however, is that every school should assess its needs along all eight dimensions in order to make the most informed judgment about how best to resolve its own particular retention concerns.

**Conclusion**

It is tempting to think of student retention as just another function like enrollment management or institutional advancement. In fact, retention is a simple term describing often bewilderingly complex relationships between student and school.

From the student perspective, reasons for attrition can range from personal circumstances and preferences to issues of preparedness and adjustment to opinions formed about the school and its offerings as a result of direct experience – all to differing degrees and in varying combinations. From the institution’s perspective, there is a similarly diverse array of considerations to be taken into account in striving to address those particular reasons for attrition.
that fall within the institution's power to influence.

Only a retention model that encourages a school to assess its options along multiple dimensions will be sufficiently comprehensive, nuanced, and resilient to work across such a complex landscape of possibilities. The 8-dimension paradigm we propose is such a model. It speaks to a) issues of institutional capacity to understand the attrition drivers within its student body and to counteract them in a coordinated way, b) systems for tracking at-risk students and intervening on their behalf, c) student satisfaction as affected by the alignment between promises made and experiences delivered, and d) the strategic significance of attrition as a problem to be solved or a condition to be accepted and mitigated.

All of these dimensions need to be explored before any school can say it has truly tackled this nebulous yet critically important phenomenon we call retention.

References


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WE ARE OFTEN ASKED, “What are the most pressing problems in the practice of enrollment management today?” The question is only natural since we’ve worked so closely with hundreds of colleges and universities for nearly 30 years now.

This subject has been recently considered by Maguire Associates President & CEO, Kathy Dawley, in a framework of “five dysfunctions of enrollment management” that offers a clear and intentionally provocative critique of current practices. In this issue, we present an overview of the five dysfunctions. Subsequent issues of Insights will explore each dysfunction in greater detail and ask for your candid feedback.

Kathy says, “As enrollment practitioners we have—with good reason—abandoned the limited notion of “admissions” in favor of a much more sophisticated, multi-faceted conception of enrollment management. In doing so, however, we and our institutions may have unwittingly adopted a set of dysfunctional habits of mind that have blinded us to opportunities to leverage our effectiveness.” In other words, we are working harder than ever, but not necessarily working smarter.

What are our biggest gripes?

1. **The absence of sustainable, cross-functional partnerships.** This concept involves leveraging the contributions of communities that support our campuses and educational missions—alumni, faculty, parents, students, and staff. All of these groups impact the full lifecycle of enrollment management, from prospective students through lifelong alumni and supporters. There is a compelling need to encourage and create more acts of collaboration within our institutions, with less concern for protecting silos. While there are many brilliant examples of cross-functional partnerships...
in higher education today, we need more and we need them to work better and be more sustainable over time.

2. Fear of letting go. Not all recruitment strategies or tactics work indefinitely. We see far too many admission offices running at a frenetic and unsustainable pace because they keep adding initiatives and activities without letting others go. Careful analysis of return on investment is critical in determining what recruitment strategies work and what strategies can be abandoned. We need to build courage and confidence, take more risks, and be far more efficient with precious institutional resources.

3. The lack of commitment to proof. No one college or university can be all things to all students and families. Institutions need and want to be true to their unique character and missions and seek out those who most want what their institution offers—what it really is. One only needs to evaluate the plethora of generic search mailings that pile up in prospective student mailboxes each spring to know that institutions do not take a particularly brave or gutsy posture about offering proof about what they are—and what they do and do not do well. Across higher education, we seem stuck on the lure of consensus and certainty, saying too little in favor of waiting for perfect information.

4. Avoidance of accountability for student retention. At the core of enrollment management is the notion that enrollment is a continuing process. Institutions must proactively “re-enroll” students year to year, and also after they graduate. This is best accomplished by being relevant at each and every stage of the educational process. In other words, institutions

Did you know?

37% of students are not attending their first choice school.¹

Among these, 31% did so because they could not afford it.¹
should strive to admit inadequacies, not over-promise at the beginning of the relationship, and proactively address problems as they arise.

5. **Inattention to the consequences of tradeoffs in stewarding net revenue.** This, we believe, is the most serious dysfunction. Most institutions have the tools and talents to manage and maximize net revenue, even in difficult times. But what stands in the way of progress is the short-term mindset of “What’s in it for me?” that permeates the thinking of individual institutional leaders. The chief academic officer wants a higher SAT/ACT profile. The chief financial officer wants to balance the budget. The chief enrollment management officer wants to hit a target headcount. The head of student life doesn’t want to cram residence halls. The president feels pressure from legacy donors. And the board of trustees is intent on lowering the discount rate. We know this sounds familiar to many readers, and we are often left with a “mission impossible” scenario that says, “Do it all!”

Please stay tuned to our *Insights* series this spring as we tackle each of these dysfunctions, starting with the first one, “The absence of sustainable, cross-functional partnerships,” in our next issue.
**Employee Spotlight:**

**Linda Heineman**

**Been with Maguire Since:** October, 2008

**Top TV Show:** Desperate Housewives

**Guilty Pleasure:** Chocolate

**Hidden Talent:** Baking the world’s best chocolate chip cookie bars

**Favorite Food:** Said chocolate chip cookie bars

**Favorite Book:** The Harry Potter series (with the exception of book #5)

**Favorite Movie:** The Devil Wears Prada

**Where Linda Grew Up:** Pittsfield, MA

**Maguire Roles and Responsibilities:** Linda joined the Maguire Associates research team in 2008, bringing a wide variety of skills and experience in survey research and statistical analysis. As Associate Vice President for Research Operations, Linda oversees research operations including survey design and programming, data collection, analyses and presentation of results, as well as quality control of processes. Linda also manages client relationships and day to day operations on a portfolio of research projects. Linda has worked as a research and data analysis professional in the private sector and for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. She has a bachelor’s degree from the University of Rochester and a MBA in Marketing from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

**How to reach Linda:** lheineman@maguireassoc.com
HOW MANY READERS face institutional mandates from the top to “fix retention” or “enroll more out-of-state students?” We know this may sound familiar to you because we are often asked to help colleges and universities with these issues. We have found – almost without fail – that the primary reason these mandates result in so much confusion and frustration is that they require effective cross-functional partnerships on college campuses. In other words, people have to play well together.

Still, we find that smart, competent people in higher education routinely resist collaborating to solve common institutional problems. Why?

We hear many excuses. Too many “silos” exist across campus. Functional areas that should be working together (admissions and financial aid, for example) report through different channels. Leaders don’t support or reward a team approach to solving problems. People are overworked and underpaid. The list of excuses goes on and on.

Bottom line: Higher education institutions don’t leverage the contributions of their internal colleagues very well at all. That’s why there is such a compelling need to encourage and reward greater collaboration within institutions, with less concern for protecting individual fiefdoms.

Take retention, for example. We can all agree that retaining and graduating students delivers many benefits for the students, our institutions, and the larger society. When it comes to working together to improve retention on college campuses, however, we see many efforts fail. We believe this occurs because retaining students involves so many seemingly disparate functions;
from admissions on the front end through student affairs/services and curricular planning, advising and faculty staffing, just to name a handful. These functions have different reporting structures and are evaluated on vastly different criteria – few of which involve retaining or graduating students.

Another good example is recruitment and enrollment of students, particularly new or different student populations. We work with a number of large, public universities that are under significant pressure to increase more lucrative out-of-state student populations to make up for shortfalls in state support. While many still believe recruiting new student populations is the sole responsibility of “admissions,” the reality is that – to be successful – many different functions across campus have to be involved and integrated:

**Financial Aid.** Attracting out-of-state populations is much easier when the correct pricing and discounting through scholarships and grants is offered. Many public universities are starting to think like their private counterparts in this regard.

**Institutional Research.** Good quality market research is needed to determine where student populations exist in sufficient numbers and quality to support an out-of-state recruitment effort. Competitor research is also needed to investigate the prices and offerings of an institution's primary competition for these students in the new market.

**Marketing and Communications.** The recruitment materials and messages that work for in-state students and families might not be successful in new, out-of-state markets. We have found that “cookie-cutter” marketing campaigns to new populations that are not backed by market research often fail, and fail expensively.

**Registration and Curriculum.** Are the institution’s course selection processes set up to help out-of-state students register for the courses they need? Many public institutions still require on-campus registration that would
put out-of-state students at a distinct disadvantage, result in dissatisfaction, and, ultimately, attrition. Why spend the money to attract and enroll new student populations if the institution is not set up to serve them well from the very beginning?

**Housing and Student Life.** Does capacity exist to house more resident students? Also (and this is important), is the institution set up to facilitate campus events and activities on weekends when a significantly larger proportion of students stay on campus?

**Alumni.** One of the most valuable, and yet often overlooked, assets to any recruitment campaign is an institution’s alumni. This is especially true for recruitment activities that are outside an institution’s primary market. Alumni can be asked to gather market intelligence in a new area, meet students and families, and facilitate events to generate interest.

It is clear that this list can easily be expanded to include other campus functions and external communities that could support, and benefit from, revenue resulting from enrolling new populations and retaining students through graduation. The question is whether people can look beyond their own functional silos to create the best fit between the school and the student for the long-term benefit of each. Where to begin? Well, the lyrics from a famous hit single in 1987 offer some guidance here:

“If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.”

We know of many individuals and institutions making the change and becoming more collaborative these days, almost of necessity. With this development comes brilliant examples of cross-functional partnerships at colleges and universities everywhere. That’s good news because higher education needs to embrace internal collaboration, cooperation, and communication as powerful competitive assets in today’s increasingly complex, fast-changing market.
Employee Spotlight:

Leslie Horst

Been with Maguire Since: January, 2005

Favorite Movie: Fantasia

Guilty Pleasure: Bittersweet dark chocolate

Favorite Collegiate Sports Team: Harvard Tennis & the University of Michigan Football

Hidden Talent: An infamous seagull imitation

Favorite Food: Thai fresh shrimp rolls

Favorite Book: No favorites here - whatever good one she’s reading at the moment.

Top TV Shows: Red Sox baseball; any cool science/nature documentary; Project Runway

Where Leslie Grew Up: Boston, MA

Maguire Roles and Responsibilities: Leslie works on research, consulting, and strategic planning projects for a wide range of clients, with a particular emphasis on qualitative methods and secondary data analysis. She coordinated three out of our four survey projects for The Chronicle of Higher Education (college/university presidents, college professors/high school teachers, college/university trustees) and wrote reports that became the basis of the Chronicle’s widely read summaries of all of these projects. She has conducted in-depth interviews with audiences as diverse as construction industry leaders, college faculty members, and Episcopal Church bishops.

How to reach Leslie: lhorst@maguireassoc.com
WHEN WE SPEAK with enrollment professionals about how their jobs have changed over the past ten years, we hear the same answers, regardless of institutional profile, geography, size, or location:

“We are doing so much more with so much less.”
“The demands are so much greater and the expectations so much higher.”
“It’s hard to keep up with everything – we feel like we are always behind.”
“I’m just plain tired.”

It would seem that most enrollment professionals can readily identify with these lyrics from Jackson Browne (1978):

Running on-running on empty;
Running on-running blind;
Running on-running into the sun
But I’m running behind.

After partnering with literally hundreds of admission and financial aid practitioners over the past 28 years, we note a common thread: Enrollment operations are loath to relinquish any strategies, processes, and tactics that have been used in the past – even as newer techniques become available. Instead, we just see new initiatives and recruitment activities added every year. Inquiry and application pools have ballooned. Over time, this additive process has left many enrollment leaders and their staffs overwhelmed and “running on empty.”
Not all recruitment strategies work indefinitely – even the best ones become outdated over time. To stop running on empty, we need to be more willing to let some initiatives go in favor of others. Here are four observations about how this situation has come about and what to do about it.

1. **Adding to the portfolio of recruitment initiatives without “retiring” programs of the past.** Paper/postal or electronic/digital outreach? Personal calls to land lines or text messages? High school visits and college fairs or virtual events/social network communities? Financial aid nights or outsourced call centers to support families as they fill out financial aid forms? Over the past decade, older modes of delivery of information have yielded to newer methods offering promise. Much experimentation has occurred, but most often the old and the new continue, retiring little and adding lots.

2. **Avoiding decisions involving the reallocation of resources (time and money).** For instance, the subject of social media is evoking at least two contradictory impulses with enrollment practitioners. On the one hand, there are those who feel inadequate and behind the times for failing to jump fully onto the social media bandwagon. Where to find the resources to do this well and keep everything else going? Yet there are others who are more comfortable with social media, but question the time spent on it and worry that the whole of its promise will never exceed the sum of its disparate parts.

The fact is that students are now heavily using social media to investigate college options – and at all stages of the process. Using as blueprints your institution’s strategic plan, enrollment management plan, and marketing plan, intentional, intelligent initiatives in social media are now imperative. Deciding what to do, who will coordinate it, why you are doing it, and how it will be measured require a major reallocation of resources to ensure a minimum of fresh, quality content and interactivity as well as the
data analytics required to assure and measure success.

3. **Not trusting market research to guide the way.** We continue to be amazed at the lack of market research in higher education. Decisions that can cost an institution millions of dollars in lost revenue are being made on the basis of anecdotes. In the world of higher education, it’s easy to believe that we already know all the answers and don’t need to question prospective students and families about what they consider our institutions value to be. This very human conceit is, well, dangerous. In some cases, institutions are reluctant to hear what prospective students and families think about them because it might be painful. So market research is relegated to the “to do” list each year. Admissions offices need to use market research just as travelers need to use maps. In both cases, the information will keep the user from straying off course and guide the way to the intended destination.

4. **Believing in the “silver bullet.”** We all like to believe there’s a silver bullet out there; just one change in our tactics or new initiative that will ensure that we meet our enrollment goals. Marketers and vendors want us to believe this too. They also want us to believe that we cannot let go of past practice, either, just in case the silver bullet turns out to be a dud. So we invest in new marketing materials, change the color, content, or size of the materials we already have, search for new pools of prospective students in far-flung states, develop a new logo, create a new website, write more communication streams, buy more gadgets, hire a bunch of consultants, set up committees, establish a Facebook presence, tweet, and create blogs. This all comes in addition to our regular recruitment activities. The question is, really, to what degree do any of these tactics succeed in generating applications and enrollment and, if any do, how would you know which ones? How can you build courage and confidence, take more risks, and be more efficient with precious institutional resources?
**Employee Spotlight:**

**Sarah Parrott**

**Been with Maguire since:** 2006

**Top TV Show:** True Blood

**Favorite Book:** *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

**Favorite Food:** Anything I don’t have to cook myself.

**Guilty Pleasure:** Eating two lunches

**Hidden Talent:** She takes boxing classes and works with a trainer. People don’t know that she has a great left jab and a mean right uppercut.

**Where Sarah Grew Up:** Fresno, CA

**Maguire Roles and Responsibilities:** Sarah is an expert in predictive modeling and enrollment management research. Prior to joining Maguire Associates in 2006, Sarah held the positions of Director of Research & Planning and Director of Enrollment Services at Brandeis University. She worked closely with Alexander (Sandy) Astin at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute to plan for and analyze data from the CIRP Freshman Survey. Sarah holds two bachelor’s degrees (violin performance and psychology) and a master’s degree in experimental psychology from California State University, Northridge; a master’s degree in education from UCLA; and a Ph.D. in Higher Education & Organizational Change from UCLA. Sarah is also a frequent author and presenter on a number of enrollment management related topics.

**How to reach Sarah:** sparrott@maguireassoc.com
THERE HAVE BEEN MANY stories in the media recently that ask whether college education is really worth the price. With jobless rates and college sticker prices both riding so high, it is not surprising that journalists, columnists, and pundits are banging the “college outcomes” drum. Families are subject to loud (and sometimes misinformed) voices on both sides of the issue, but one voice seems to be missing – that of the colleges themselves.

At least two things are very clear. This debate is not subsiding anytime soon, and the answer to the question above should be based on facts rather than conjecture and anecdotes. It is time for colleges and universities to stand up and make a case for their value, and to do that they must offer clear, understandable proof points to families and the media about exactly why higher education, and education at their particular institutions, is worth the price. If we, as college professionals and stewards, don’t provide evidence-based facts to inform this national debate, who will?

In our work as consultants to hundreds of colleges and universities, we are concerned that so many – both public and private – seem unwilling or unable to offer proof points about their institutions. In other words, institutions have not clearly articulated to families (and the media) exactly why the education at their particular institution is worth the price. Instead, families are asked to invest their money in a specific institution or program based on faith.

We say, not good enough.

Most institutions already have the information they need to make a compelling argument for their value. Let’s start with national research. Students and
parents have already told us how they determine the “quality” of colleges and universities, and the rocky economy of the past few years did not change their opinions. The results from Maguire Associates/FastWeb College Decision Impact Decision Survey tell us what families consider to be important in their decision to invest in higher education, regardless of whether a particular institution is public or private:

- Variety and depth of courses in their field of interest
- Percent of students employed after graduation
- Academic facilities
- Student/faculty ratio
- Graduation rate

How many of our institutions can respond to these with specific proof points by program? Not many, in our experience. Here we offer three primary reasons we believe this is so:

**Fear of commitment.** Let’s admit that our institutions are not all things to all students and families. We get that. We need and want to be true to what we are, seeking out those who most want what our institution offers – what it really is. Many institutional leaders do not take a particularly brave or gutsy posture about offering proof of what their institutions or specific programs are – what they do and do not do well. Publications look the same. Messaging is the same. Campus tours are the same. When institutional direction is unclear and the directive (spoken or unspoken) to enrollment managers is to “bring in more!”, it’s no wonder we continue to drive ourselves crazy.

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*Did you know?*

17,082,000 is the number of high school students in the U.S.
There are myriad reasons why institutional leaders might be reluctant to offer a clear position based on proof points about their institution. Among them, the fear of getting it wrong and losing enrollment and market share. Also, there is a very real concern about upsetting alumni and donors who want their alma mater to be what they thought it was when they were students a very long time ago.

**Waiting for consensus and certainty before taking action.** Judging by the number of committees at colleges and universities, it is clear that consensus is sought out and valued. Consensus is also difficult to achieve and its lack can be used as a reason for not committing to proof points. We all desire a modicum of certainty before making changes or implementing new ideas, especially where it pertains to recruitment and enrollment. We tend to forget, however, that consensus does not imply certainty – history has shown time and again that a committee can get it completely wrong. If we wait to convert all the naysayers before taking reasonable action we risk losing out on some wonderful opportunities.

**Waiting for “perfect” information about outcomes.** Higher education is replete with statisticians and market researchers who are very quick to point out imperfections in any study, including studies about what graduates are doing after they leave an institution. It’s just the nature of the business. In some cases, we have witnessed this “quest for perfection” used as an excuse to torpedo the best research and delay progress in functional areas. The messengers of information on the receiving end of the criticisms – typically institutional researchers – become reluctant to share information for fear that arguments about methodology will overshadow results. We have to become comfortable with the fact that there will never be perfect information. The trick is being able to determine when information is “good enough.”

So, can you prove that an education at your institution is worth the price? Can you clearly articulate your institution’s value to parents, students (and reporters) who are asking good questions? We certainly hope so, because our collective futures depend on it.
**Employee Spotlight:**

**Patricia (Patty) Blanchette**

**Been with Maguire since:** August, 2011

**Favorite College Team:** BC Eagles

**Favorite Book:** *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley

**Favorite Food:** Dolma (Armenian stuffed grapeleaves)

**Guilty Pleasure:** Audiobooks and nerd TV (i.e., anything on the Science Channel)

**Favorite Movie:** Star Wars

**Hidden Talent:** She can solve a Rubik’s cube in about 2 minutes

**Where Patty Grew Up:** Methuen, MA

**Maguire Roles and Responsibilities:** Patty serves as a consultant and project leader in the enrollment management area. Patty joins us from The College Board where she served as Senior Director for K–16 Initiatives in the New England Regional Office. Prior to joining The College Board, Patty worked in a variety of teaching, research, residential life, and enrollment management positions in higher education and secondary schools, including: the University of California, Santa Cruz and Berkeley, Stanford University, F. W. Olin College of Engineering, and Phillips Exeter Academy. Her experience in these positions has honed her skills in helping institutional leaders to effectively align academic and administrative priorities. Patty holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of California, Santa Cruz, an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School, an M.A. from the University of Chicago, and a B.A. from Boston College.

**How to reach Patty:** pblanchette@maguireassoc.com
ANOTHER FALL SEMESTER is soon upon us. For many, that means a renewed focus on how to improve retention and graduation rates. There’s nothing like another meeting about retention to suck all the air from the room. Over and again, we hear from our Presidents and Trustees that retention is a priority. Yet it seems that meetings about retention invariably involve more talk than action and are peppered with a fair amount of finger-pointing and passing of the hot potatoes of responsibility.

We all recognize the critical importance of good retention and graduation rates, but it is so difficult to get our administrative arms around the issue. A big part of the reason is because no one office or person can truly be “in charge” of keeping students satisfied and making progress toward a degree. Retention has to be managed from the top of our organizations, and the people involved must be empowered to make decisions that have an impact on their colleagues in other functional areas. To be successful, there must be a level of trust among those involved to question long-held assumptions and perhaps even put some sacred cows out to pasture.

We strongly suggest you consider changing the “annual retention meeting” format this year. Instead, use the time to discuss ways in which you might answer the following questions:

Are we organized to address retention issues, structurally and operationally ready to do so?
• Have we assigned appropriate decision-making responsibility and authority?

• Do we have the necessary data and reporting systems to supply the information we need, on a timely basis?

Do we know the characteristics and opinions of students to stay and leave?

• What can we learn from more sophisticated data analyses about underlying causes and less obvious but important patterns of attrition?

• Does our Institutional Research office have information that we can use to begin to answer the question of why students decide to stay or leave?

How well do we identify students at risk for attrition?

• Do we have a robust tracking system that provides sufficient early warning for students who are attrition risks?

• Can we receive hands-on assistance in putting in place effective student identification, tracking, and tagging systems?

Do we have student support services in place to prevent or minimize attrition?

• Are we able to quickly mobilize and coordinate the appropriate staff and services needed to intervene on behalf of at-risk students, doing so on a timely basis?

Are we raising appropriate expectations in the promises we make marketing to prospective students and families?

• Do we deliver on what we promise?

• Are our messages accurate?

• What does even a cursory review of our marketing materials and student reactions to those materials tell us about the alignment of our promises with their expectations?
Are we delivering the academic offerings and other experiences that we promised and that fulfill student desires and expectations?

- How will a more intensive review of student and staff feedback help us improve our offerings and our student experiences?
- Do we make necessary adjustments in student recruiting and enrollment that will assure a better fit between student and school such that fewer students become dissatisfied and/or leave?

How significant is our “problem” in terms of financial cost, competitive standing, and institutional ambitions?

- What are our broader institutional strategies for mitigating the effects of attrition?
- Are our pre-enrollment remediation and transfer replacement strategies sufficient?
- Are those who persist also supportive when they become alumni?
- Do non-persisters continue to support our institution?

The answers to these questions take some time to assemble, and usually involve a significant amount of data – data that already exist at the institution and data that need to be gathered through survey research, focus groups, and other feedback mechanisms. A retention effort that does not rely on data is like flying a plane without using the navigation system. In our experience, the most successful retention efforts have resulted from a long-term, disciplined approach that relies heavily on good quality data, analysis, and tracking. There is a solid beginning, but no end as institutions iterate toward improved retention, persistence and graduation of students.

So let’s agree to make this year’s retention meetings more productive and interesting. The results will be well worth the effort!
Employee Spotlight:

Joel Seligman

Been with Maguire since: July, 2011
Top TV Show: Law and Order UK
Favorite Book: Information Anxiety
Favorite Food: Roast leg of lamb
Guilty Pleasure: Lobster mac-n-cheese
Favorite Movie: The Mission (1986)
Hidden Talent: Cooking, singing, rowing

Where Joel Grew Up: Prattsburgh, NY (population 1600)

Maguire Roles and Responsibilities: Joel Seligman is a higher education communications leader with more than 20 years experience as a senior manager and consultant. He has held senior communications positions at Cornell University, Boston University, and the University of Chicago leading complex projects and teams in branding, alumni engagement, and related advancement functions. Joel holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Cornell, where he studied communication planning and strategy. Under the supervision of Robert Zemsky, he earned a doctorate in education at the University of Pennsylvania meriting distinction for his dissertation, entitled “Institutional Strategy and Communications as Catalysts for Philanthropic Support of Private Research Universities in the United States” (2009). Joel’s research interests center on the role of formalized and disciplined strategic planning and communications as they relate to advancing higher education.

How to reach Joel: jseligman@maguireassoc.com
We save the most egregious dysfunction for last. It’s also the most interesting! In our work as advisors to college and university leaders, one of the most frustrating situations we find is when rushed or ill-informed decisions are made that jeopardize much-needed revenue.

Sometimes, institutional leaders are not fully aware of the complex, reciprocal relationships among enrollment, financial aid, class profile, net total revenue and discount rate. That’s understandable, but that’s also when leaders risk making short-term adjustments to one of these variables without anticipating the implications of those changes on other variables, especially revenue. Sometimes, institutional leaders are simply protecting their own positions in choosing to focus on a particular short-term performance metric rather than considering all the variables in the context of what is best for the entire institution.

Here are a few of the situations we regularly encounter:

- **Discount rate before revenue.** We fully understand that a low discount rate is used by rating agencies and others as an indicator of financial health. However, we encounter too many situations where institutions needlessly force a low discount rate and, as a result, forfeit millions of dollars in net revenue that could have otherwise been put to good use. These institutions, are, in effect, suffocating themselves financially by remaining too loyal to useful but hardly canonical metrics such as the discount rate.

We encounter this all the time. Most colleges and universities have the data they need to envision different scenarios that reliably explore the relationships and decision-making outcomes among enrollment, net total revenue, and discount rate. They simply choose not to explore these various options and scenarios. We often demonstrate that a one- or two-point increase in an artificially low discount rate can result in millions of dollars in extra revenue for an institution within one year, and tens of millions of dollars within four years. This extra cash allows the institution to stabilize
itself until such time that it has gained market share and position needed to explore decreasing the discount rate without jeopardizing enrollment or revenue. This approach enables them to make this choice, however, from a position of relative strength.

Sometimes, even when institutional leaders are shown the revenue their institution could realize given a small uptick in discount rate, they choose discount rate over revenue. Until such time that discount rates actually fund improvements in services and facilities for students or generous need-based scholarship programs, we believe institutions should first consider their class profile and net revenue before the discount rate.

- **The quest for “quality.”** We have often heard, “If we could just improve the quality of our students then so many of our problems – such as retention – could be solved.” Again, this is a simple solution to a complicated issue. Put bluntly, attracting and enrolling students who score higher than an institution’s average (ACT, SAT, GPA) is an expensive proposition. Unless a college or university is significantly underperforming, discount rates will likely rise and revenue fall as a result of offering generous scholarships and discounts to high-scoring students who have many other college options.

We have found that changing the profile of an institution’s incoming class has to be done carefully, methodically, and always keeping net revenue at the forefront of the discussion. Increasing quality should only be considered if an institution is on solid financial ground, has a robust application pool, and can withstand a decrease in yield, increase in discount rate, and possibly stagnant growth in net total revenue. It may well be the right strategy, but it must be undertaken at the right time and under the right circumstances.

- **Just do it all!** Leadership teams often argue over institutional priorities largely to defend their own turf. The old saying, “Where I stand depends upon where I sit” rings very true in these situations. The chief academic officer wants to increase the SAT or ACT profile. The chief financial of-
The chief advancement officer wants to decrease the discount rate. The chief advancement officer is interested in enrolling legacy donor families. The chief admissions officer is terrified of not making this year’s headcount. The college deans want to fill their new programs. You have all been there and are often left with a “mission impossible” strategy that says just do it all!

Unfortunately, doing it all is rarely an option. The key is for everyone around the President’s table to understand the give-and-take that must be part of complex decision-making. If one metric eclipses the others (discount rate, for example) then net revenue might become a casualty and everyone around the table will feel the effect. We often find that if the key decision makers can see the results of changing one metric on all the others, then the planning and negotiation process becomes more palatable – and more evidence based.

For example, what will happen to net revenue and discount rate if the SAT or ACT average of the incoming class increases by 20 points or 1 point respectively? What will happen to enrollment and net revenue if the discount rate is decreased by two percentage points? How much will it cost to enroll students in new programs? What would the incoming class look like if net revenue were the only consideration?

The bottom line is that critical decisions about your institution’s enrollment, financial aid, class profile, net revenue and discount rate cannot be made in a vacuum. Making a decision in one of these areas likely means you’re making a decision in all these areas, whether intended or not. In building the strongest possible executive team, therefore, college and university presidents should understand the multivariate nature of these performance metrics, how they affect the positions and performance of each of their leadership team members and, ultimately, how, why and when they drive institutional revenue.
**Employee Spotlight:**

**Larry Butler**

**Been with Maguire since:** 2004

**Top TV Shows:** The Sopranos

**Favorite Book:** Anything by John LeCarre and, of course, EM=C2

**Favorite Food:** Lobster

**Guilty Pleasure:** Outrageous puns and inane palindromes

**Hidden Talent:** Drawing editorial cartoons and caricatures

**Favorite Movies:** Favorite Movie: Raging Bull, The Shawshank Redemption, The Missouri Breaks

**Where Larry Grew Up:** Chelsea, MA

**Maguire Roles and Responsibilities:** Larry leads the firm’s strategic planning practice and serves as a conceptual utility infielder. He began his 35-year consulting career with The Boston Consulting Group, where he was responsible for a broad array of strategy assignments. He subsequently established a consulting firm specializing in strategic planning for non-profit institutions. More recently, he served as S.V.P. of The Ross Group. He has written extensively on improving the information resources of governing boards and senior management teams. Larry co-authored with his Maguire Associates colleague, Jack Maguire, a book on a “systems” approach to enrollment management entitled EM=C2: A New Formula for Enrollment Management. He has a M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and a bachelor’s degree from Harvard College.

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References


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