Field Observation: Strategic Enrollment Planning at the New U

Lynsey Newhouse

Georgia Southern University

Abstract

Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University will soon be consolidated into one large institution. Recruiting for this new institution will be challenging. In anticipation for this new obstacle, representatives from both universities are participating in Strategic Enrollment Planning. On Wednesday, June 18, 2014 the Steering/Action team of the Strategic Enrollment Planning Committee met to break down a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. During an extensive discussion, the team divided each category into five sub-sections on which to focus their recruitment and retention efforts. They concluded the meeting with requests of data to support each point. The efforts put forth during this planning will benefit enrollment in the upcoming years after the consolidation.

Field Observation: Strategic Enrollment Planning at the New U

In January of 2015, the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents will vote to give final approval to the consolidation of two universities: Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University (Kennesaw State University/Southern Polytechnic State University Consolidation, 2014). Both schools are well-staffed and fully functioning universities, so the consolidation process is slow. The consolidation committee, when discussing plans of the consolidated Kennesaw State University, has internally named this new institution the *New U*.

This consolidation will cause countless changes, and a strategic plan is the best response to the swift changes in higher education (Yeager, El-Ghali, & Kumar, 2013). Both institutions are partaking in creating new strategic plans for all facets of the New U. On Wednesday, June 18, 2014, representatives from Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University came together for a Strategic Enrollment Planning meeting. This meeting was a follow-up from a prior meeting and the goal was to categorize and prioritize the previously listed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the New U. Representatives from both Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University, known as the Action/Steering team, were present at the meeting. These included the Associate Vice Presidents of Enrollment Services, their administrative assistants, the Associate Deans of Enrollment Services, several Academic Deans, chief data officers, facilities managers, and other representatives from both institutions. The purpose of this meeting was to continue the efforts of building and defining recruitment, enrollment, and retention of the New U.

A representative of Noel-Levitz, a consulting firm specializing in higher education, conducted the meeting. According to their website,

> Strategic enrollment planning is more than a long-term recruitment or retention plan. It is a data-informed process that aligns an institution's fiscal, academic, co-curricular, and enrollment resources with its changing environment to accomplish the institution's mission and ensure the institution's long-term enrollment success and fiscal health. (Noel-Levitz, 2014, What is Strategic Enrollment Planning section)

The importance of a Strategic Enrollment Plan for the New U is clear. As Yeager et al. stated, "No longer is it possible for an institution to simply react to whatever happens; rather, it must understand how new circumstances will affect its operations, and respond proactively" (2013, p. 127). The participants of this team are actively responding to new challenges, which is very important in higher education today.

In the preceding meeting, the Action/Steering team worked with seven working groups comprised of representatives from all levels of management between both institutions to create a large list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A list of strengths and weaknesses is an inventory of the internal influences on the New U, while the opportunities and threats are comprised of external influences on the New U (Yeager et al., 2013). In the June 18 meeting, the Action/Steering team reviewed the lists produced by each working group. They created categories within each group of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This is called situational analysis, and produces a list of priority issues for the specific enrollment plan for the New U (Yeager et al., 2013).

Internal Review

A large part of developing a strategic plan is taking an account of all internal influences and attributes within the university. Then, the strategic planning committee discusses and applies how an institution can use these internal forces to help attain their new institutional goals. These strengths and weaknesses are known as micro-trends (Yeager et al., 2013). This internal scan is more complicated than most, because it involves two completely separate institutions. For instance, a strength at Southern Polytechnic State University could compensate for a weakness at Kennesaw State University. An example of this is the coveted engineering program offered at Southern Polytechnic State University that will carry over the New U. In the same regard, a strength of one university could dissipate in the consolidation. An example of this would be the small size of Southern Polytechnic State University. After the merger, the New U will grow to over 30,000 students.

Strengths

The working groups created a list of strengths that contained over 75 positive attributes of the New U. One of these was Kennesaw State University's nationally ranked first-year experience program. According to Kennesaw State University's press release, Kennesaw State University was among only 16 institutions praised for their innovative and inclusive first-year experience program (Kennesaw State University, 2013). Additionally, Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University are leading the way in online learning. Between the two Universities, they offer 49 online graduate programs and 18 online undergraduate programs (Kennesaw State University, 2014; Southern Polytechnic State University, 2014).

Using the inventory of strengths, the Action/Steering team grouped the strengths into five categories: comprehensive institutional, innovation, facilities, culture, and financial. As outlined in *The Development of an Institutional Strategic Plan,* they Action/Steering team listed all institutional assets and discussed their contribution to the improvement of recruitment and enrollment of the New U (Yeager et al., 2013).

Weaknesses

In the same way, the Steering/Action team reviewed the list of over 100 weaknesses. It was vital that the Working Groups were honest in creating this list of weaknesses in order to understand the enrollment landscape of the New U (Yeager et al., 2013). While many of the strengths listed were broad and based upon the institutions as a whole, the weaknesses were very recruitment based. A few examples of these weaknesses were a reputation for not being first choice, limited advertising budget so marketing and branding is difficult, and the lack of any internal scholarship fund.

Using this extensive list of weaknesses, the Steering/Action team created another five categories specifically for the weaknesses of the New U. The first category was market awareness. The second category was system size and complexity and this included both organization and integration. The third and largest category was financial, and this included, lake of scholarship funding, costs, fees and financial requirements. The fourth category was student pathways and the last category was geography.

The weaknesses were easier to list but must more difficult to categorize. Again, this process is much more difficult because of the complexity of merging two institutions on two different campuses. This complication was most apparent in the list of weaknesses.

External Review

An important part of Developing a strategic enrollment plan is taking and inventory of

what Yeager et al. labeled "principal external macro-trends" (2013, p. 135). The Working

Groups identified many components of external influence on the New U. These trends divide

into one of two classifications: opportunities and threats (Yeager et al., 2013). This is the second

half of the situational analysis and produced an extensive list of positive opportunities of the

New U as well as threats to the upcoming consolidated university. This meeting only determined

the primary parts of the external scan. However, in further meetings, these parts will make way

for determining the trends in higher education as a field. Additionally, identifying these

categories of external assessments will help the strategic enrollment planning committee

determine how these individual and grouped opportunities and threats will affect the New U.

Opportunities

As quoted in Yeager et al. (2013), Servier states, "Responding to opportunities can propel

the institution forward" (p. 137). Identifying where an institution has potential for growth and

improvement, through an external environment can be invaluable. It would be foolish not to list,

and then take advantage of opportunities afforded to the New U.

The working groups established, in their previous meeting, over 60 different

opportunities for the New U. Among these opportunities, is the new athletic programs coming to

the New U, including football and marching band in 2015. From a recruitment and enrollment

standpoint, these new programs could create positive brand recognition and alumni support.

Another opportunity listed is the extension of collaborative programs with local community

colleges, specifically for transfer students.

The Steering/Action team divided the many opportunities into five focused categories. The first of which is integration. The second category is flexibility, both in programs offered and the means of delivery, such as on-campus or online. The third category is student experience. This category focuses on the newly developing athletics programs as well as the geographic areas in which the New U is located. The fourth opportunity is tuition and fees. This includes the potential, as the New U, to generate more external funding and the ability to relieve the students of a portion of the cost of attendance. Lastly, the fifth category of opportunities for the New U is branding and marketing.

Threats

While the list of threats was the shortest of the four with less than 40, it was certainly the most daunting. As quoted in Yeager et al. (2013), Servier states that threats "represent unfavorable trends or specific events that could lead to stagnation, decline or demise of the institution" (p. 137).

Among the list of threats were the high competition for students within the Atlanta market, reductions in HOPE driving students out-of-state, and the challenges of a suburban setting, such as growth constraints and the lack of a college town experience. The Steering/Action team grouped the threats into five categories. The first of which is the shifting nature of higher education, including the rapidly changing college student. The second category is the willingness and ability for students to pay for a college education. The third category of threats is governance, including the University System of Georgia and the Board of Regents. The fourth category is public perception, including the long-standing view of Southern

Polytechnic State University as a trade school. The last category of threat is funding, or rather, the lack of funding.

Emerging Needs

During the conclusion of the meeting, the Steering/Action team discussed what is needed to continue with the strategic enrollment planning. The progress made in this meeting was abundant; however, it needed to be taken further to achieve results. The next step in this process is to gather data based upon the categorization of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The chief data officers for both Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University were present in the meeting, and they recorded all data requests. Among these requests were data about peer and aspirant institutions, including enrollment numbers and program offerings, and data regarding top feeder schools. Others requested data was the market demand of certain programs, profiles of students that were not retained and transfer student retention. Much more data was requested and all of this data related to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats categorized in the meeting. In closing, the Steering/Action team selected the date for the next Strategic Enrollment Planning meeting. Mr. Kim West, the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Services, in a personal interview, stated the timeline for the strategic enrollment plan is 16 months and it had just begun (K. West, personal communication, June 18, 2014).

Conclusion

Strategic enrollment planning is vital to any institution, but more so to the New U because of the unique circumstances. Kennesaw State University and Southern Polytechnic State University are both different institutions, with different campuses, programs, missions and

student populations. Recruiting for this New U will provide enrollment services with a challenge most have never faced before. Establishing an enrollment plan provides the solid footing for admissions and recruiting at the New U. The portion of strategic planning covered in this meeting was situational analysis. According to Yeager et al. (2013) "It is imperative that the situational analysis explore both micro and macro environments in examining the institution's individual circumstances and the local milieu" (p. 136). The Steering/Action team successfully listed and discussed the environments surrounding and affecting the New U. This prepares them to utilize each concern as a positive aspect of the New U, allowing them to recruit and enroll students more effectively.

References

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