

Enrollment Training and Development and the Impact on Higher Education Growth

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The higher education industry is competitive. Over the last decade, higher education institutions have experienced many challenges, including an 11% decrease in student enrollments nationwide (Nadworny, 2019). Further, COVID-19 exacerbated university enrollments and the delivery of academic content and lecture. National Fall 2020 enrollment numbers show a 30% reduction of adult students aged 24 years and older (St. Amour, 2020). Private, non-profit institutions like Indiana Wesleyan University's (IWU) National & Global division have experienced more significant enrollment declines. Over a 3-year period (FY2018–FY2021), IWU experienced a 17% enrollment decrease. Consequently, significant losses of tuition revenue occurred, causing the institution to reduce its workforce. During the same period, the confidence level in higher education institutions have dropped significantly. Research conducted by Strada Education (2020) indicated the confidence and satisfaction level of Americans dropped substantially. Consequently, tactics relative to new enrollment training and development have become more critical. As the level of interest in a college degree declines, institutions must find ways to become more effective with those who raise their hand and show interest.

The Problem

Higher education institutions are encountering a crisis. Based on the significant decrease in college enrollments, university administrators are making tough decisions relative to human capital. Since January 2020, the higher education workforce in America has decreased by 7%. The reduction equates to 337,000 fewer faculty and staff working in institutions nationwide (Bauman, 2020). Public institutions are reducing employees at a higher rate than private institutions. Through September 2020, private universities made a slight comeback, with a net employment loss of 137,000, increasing from a low point of 237,000 in April 2020. Public universities continued to progressively reduce staff during 2020 and recorded a net loss of 250,000 employees by year's end. Never in the history of record-keeping has the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded a more significant loss of employment within the higher education sector (Bauman, 2020).

The problem is a significant loss of post-secondary education enrollments. From a national and global perspective, businesses will not be able to meet the demands of employing an educated workforce. Therefore, leading-edge technology and business production may suffer. This study focused on the IWU National and Global enrollment department and identified techniques and solutions early in the enrollment counselors' tenure in working with prospects.

Driving Research Questions

- What are successful coaching strategies for a university's enrollment team's success?
 - What do prospective students consider when deciding on a university?
 - What are the higher education industry's metrics for enrollment counselor sales performance?
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Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach to gather information through open-ended questions and probing initial participant responses (Stuckey, 2013). Consequently, the researcher's biases were limited when gathering the participants' opinions and attitudes relative to IWU enrollment counselor training and development through the use of member checking. Primary research methods such as semi-structured interviews, problem-based learning, the Virtuous Business Model (VBM), IWU financial transparency, and IWU participant transparency contributed to the methods used in this ADP. The primary research occurred through Zoom recorded interviews which were then extrapolated into transcription and developed into the following four themes for thematic analyses:

- Effectiveness of Current Training
- Ineffectiveness of Current Training
- Training Materials and Processes
- Enrollment Systems

Research subjects included new IWU enrollment counselors with less than one year seniority and enrollment leadership. Member checking occurred post interviews and transcriptions were shared for correction as necessary.

Analysis

The research aimed to identify the IWU employee experience, views, and opinions of enrollment training and development. The results of the interviews were segmented and merged into the top 10 categories under the main heading of orientation. The 10 categories were then classified into the four themes listed above and identified the training's effectiveness as being systems-focused. Consequently, being systems-focused versus developing prospect relations was also a weakness. Participants felt that due to the primary focus of training being on systems rather than relationship-building or selling the benefits of IWU to prospects, a significant area of missed opportunity existed. A common theme showed that 100% of the participants felt the training's structure and flow were poor and needed improvement. This area is significant and a missed opportunity when enrolling students.

Another notable weakness under the ineffectiveness theme identified a lack of assessment for knowledge and understanding throughout the 40–60 hour new enrollment counselor training. As a result, knowledge retention from the lengthy training was lost. Further, satisfaction surveys did not happen either. Checking for understanding and knowledge gaps throughout a training system is desirable for content retention (Gurr, 2017).

Recommended Solution

After thorough analyses of gathered opinion and content, this study identified three options for the IWU enrollment department: (a) keep the training intact with no changes, (b) hire a consultant to reconstruct the entire training, and (c) keep the core training intact, address the deficiencies, and develop a functional training structure and process with learning modules and assessments. Of the three options, the third was selected. Training structure and effective content are critical factors in learning and retaining new knowledge. Further, using the *segmenting principle* allows training participants to learn more effectively and retain the information long-term (Stone, 2021). Segmenting requires the trainer to organize and classify content in short chunks or modules. The segmenting approach allows the learner to retain and understand the presented content. Further, incorporating a learning assessment after each module helps participants to quickly achieve the learning objectives.

Significant discovery established the rationale for keeping the core training intact and making substantial improvements. First, the solution can be measured and implemented quickly. Next, it is cost effective and should generate a return on investment. Finally, few costs are associated with implementation other than resourcing existing staff. Revising the current training's effectiveness should shorten the counselor's learning curve by half. If this estimate proves accurate, a new enrollment counselor may increase enrollments by 16–24 starts annually. It takes new counselors four to five months to hit their full stride of 8–10 enrollments per month (T. Moore, personal communication, February 2022). Improved training coupled with increased effectiveness is anticipated to shorten the counselor's learning curve by half the time, allowing them to contribute full stride after two months versus four or five. Doing so allows the counselor to contribute two to three months of enrollments sooner, equating to 16–24 additional starts. Based on a 60-member enrollment counselor team and a 30% annual counselor turnover rate, 18 new hires are possible annually. Implementing the new enrollment counselor training recommendations could generate 288–432 additional students per year because of earlier counselor contributions, helping answer the predicament of declining student enrollments. IWU could realize an additional \$387,936 to \$581,904 in tuition revenue by improving the effectiveness of the new enrollment counselor training. The new student should complete at least three credit hours during the two-month improvement period. With an additional 864 to 1,296 total hours completed during the two-month improvement span and an average per credit hour rate of \$449.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study included the number of participants, limited timeframe to collect data, and the role of the researcher. At the time, the researcher was employed by IWU and served as a leader in the enrollment department. The researcher had a high confidence level in the results of the primary research methodology.

Conclusion

Improving a sales training system or model is not an easy task. According to Clark (2016), 70% of training initiatives and new approaches miss their goal. Behar (2021) states all leadership within the organization should support new training systems and adjustments to reach the most effective outcomes. Further, sales managers must see the value in the changes or the implemented ideas will fall flat (Behar, 2021). Implementing the recommendations provided have substantial upside for enrollment counselor improvement. Therefore, all enrollment department and IWU administration employees must support the recommended solution. Training enrollment staff effectively is essential for counselors to enroll students earlier in the process and build confidence by experiencing early success. Planning effectively, developing a sound training system, and organizing a rhythm or flow are the foundations for a positive outcome of new employee training (Gurr, 2017). This will ultimately lead to higher enrollments while working with the same prospect base. Increasing the effectiveness of the IWU enrollment department is a must for future success.

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