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Submitted by Angel B. Perez on August 12, 2019 - 3:00am

The role of the chief enrollment officer is undergoing seismic shifts.

As higher education grapples with extraordinary challenges, enrollment leaders are charged with creating solutions. Changes in student demographics, unsustainable financial models, anticollege movements, public distrust and divisive political rhetoric all land at our doorsteps. The turnover in the position is unprecedented, and few people aspire to the job. Those who do are often surprised by the expectations. The pace is intense, the politics fierce and the animosity relentless. As leaders explore solutions to extraordinary challenges, voices of disagreement and discontent have become stronger.

The role is not for the faint of heart, yet the new enrollment leader has the privilege of a front-row seat in securing the future of American higher education. The opportunities for making an impact on institutions and society are great, but those who choose the role must understand its current complexity and limitations.

I currently serve as vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., and I also teach in the educational studies department. Like many institutions, Trinity understands that in today's higher education landscape, it is no longer enough to admit a class. Enrollment leaders also must be invested in the success of their incoming classes, and many colleges have expanded the role of chief enrollment officer to serve the entire life cycle of the student. Many are now responsible for retention, marketing, student affairs or career services. The expansion of the role, coupled with the challenges facing higher education, requires a new pace and skill set.

Most people who inherit the role were trained as admissions officers, a job that rarely provides adequate preparation for the diverse responsibilities of today's enrollment manager. I am expected to serve as an institutional leader who attracts talented students from across the globe and helps them finance their education, all while using the latest research and high-impact practices to create models for student success and outcomes. I must achieve all of this while meeting the college's revenue and student demographic goals.

I work in partnership with a stellar group of leaders on the president's cabinet, and together we've grappled with budget deficits, social media crises, student cultural conflicts, strategic planning, the creation of data-driven cultures, curricular reform, the re-energizing of alumni, student protests and even, sadly, student deaths. I engage marketing and storytelling efforts, manage crises, and navigate the politics of higher education's shared governance model to help colleagues adjust to rapid change. I also lead a large team of individuals whose daily work brings our mission to life. While my job entails hiring, inspiring and providing tools for the team's success, my most important responsibility is providing clear vision and direction. A team without vision and direction is like a ship without a rudder.

The complexity of our work as leaders has evolved. It's no longer enough to do the job and meet institutional goals. It's important to be a masterful storyteller, astute politician, strategic fundraiser and authentic, visible presence for students while being on the cutting edge of best practices. Oh, and don't forget to tweet! You must be able to make rapid mental shifts on a daily basis, and you move so quickly, the ability to reflect can be challenging. One minute you are in a meeting with the CFO about revenue goals or econometric modeling, and the next you may be speaking with the media about an issue on campus. A few hours later, you may be giving a speech to alumni, meeting with the student government, getting advice from your legal counsel, counseling a student, responding to a disgruntled parent and then heading to the airport to catch an overnight flight to another country. Some days you will experience the joys of hiring, while others bring the sadness of firing. The job produces a whirlwind of emotions, none of which you can ever show in public. As a former college president told me, "These jobs teach you the art of smiling while feeling tortured."

Your constituencies are many, and their needs often are in direct conflict with one another, so honing skills to navigate campus politics is a critical. When creating new policies or addressing crises, the enrollment officer is not always the decision maker. This person leads the conversation and helps each constituency understand the trade-offs. Success means working collaboratively to build consensus. It also means including many voices, because that's how the best decisions are made. Change happens slowly on college campuses, yet today's challenges require expediency. You must learn to be nimble. If one strategy does not work, find other creative ways to succeed, knowing that to do so, you must bring your constituency along.

Higher education functions on a shared governance model; the only true "power" an institutional leader has is persuasion. The new enrollment leader also understands that in a controversial landscape where most people don't agree on how to solve problems, their decisions and outcomes won't always be valued. Anyone taking on the role must learn to be comfortable with this. One academic dean put it best when I asked her why the faculty didn't appreciate the outcomes of a policy decision: "If you came to academia looking for validation, you are barking up the wrong tree."

Despite the challenges, the rewards are grand. There is no greater joy than effecting institutional change and working with colleagues to actualize the mission of the college. There is no bigger boost than watching student lives transformed as they benefit from policies you helped shape. There is no greater pride than supporting members of your team as they take the skills they learned and move on to serve other institutions.

The role provides ample opportunity for impact, not only on campus but also around the country. As the nation grapples with enrollment challenges, more of us are being invited to a seat at the table to create solutions. My current role has afforded me an opportunity to impact the national conversation around issues I care most about. Appointed by the governor of Connecticut to the New England Board of Higher Education, I've worked with policy makers, academics and politicians to strategize around challenges in the region. I've also served on the Gates Foundation's Higher Education Committee of 50, a

group of higher education leaders making strategic policy recommendations to Congress.

As chair of diversity, equity and inclusion on the Berkshire School Board of Trustees, I helped develop the school's inaugural strategic plan for diversity initiatives. At the local level, I've been able to partner with college access organizations in the city of Hartford to create stronger pipelines for the most marginalized students in our community. Many of these programs will impact students, families and communities for years to come. The opportunities to serve have been endless, reflecting the growing need for enrollment leaders to enter the national discourse on shaping America's educational future.

Chief enrollment officers are at the forefront of an industry in need of innovation. Their leadership will determine the direction institutions take. Their policies will impact who goes to college, and their advocacy on the national stage can ensure that universities make a commitment to serve the public good. Higher education's future will rely on strong institutional leadership, creativity and courage. The new chief enrollment officer has an important platform. If used wisely, the role is rife with opportunities to make a significant difference in the world.

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