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THE CRUELEST MONTH IN COLLEGE ADMISSION

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To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, May is often the cruelest month for college admissions offices. That's when shortfalls in projected enrollment become evident. On small campuses, even a slight decrease in yield can translate into layoffs and cutbacks.

For many years, we have written on the vital role of boards of trustees in hiring transformational, exceptional leaders for college presidencies; it is those individuals who set the leadership tone for the institution. Extraordinary times require extraordinary leaders, and this is such a time in higher education.

In addition, it is critical that college CEOs closely monitor and encourage excellence in recruiting and retaining the student body. Because enrollment is one of two important revenue producers for any college or university (fund-raising being the other), presidents cannot afford to take their eyes off the ball for even a short time. Such continuous, focused attention on the admissions process is essential, especially as presidents seek to hire in the all-important area of enrollment management.

Here are some pointers:

Hire the best and brightest.

Most successful leaders subscribe to the theory of hiring superior individuals, and nowhere is this more critical than in the appointments of the chief enrollment officer and director of financial aid. Our research and historical perspective suggest that effective presidents surround themselves with the best, brightest and most productive people in key leadership roles—especially in the vital area of student recruitment and retention.

Competition for enrollment during the last 10 years has required a new level of sophistication; simultaneously,

marketing trends have changed almost daily, and financial aid challenges have become increasingly complex. Moreover, experienced enrollment practitioners point to rapidly accelerating change due to advances in technology, particularly the widespread use of social media to recruit well-qualified students. Thus, what worked yesterday may not work tomorrow, dictating that seasoned professionals from a decade ago need to continuously invest in staff development to refresh their knowledge base and ensure best practice.

Seek focus in challenging times.

As we've noted, a sustained effort is vital in the enrollment and student financial aid areas. The late W. Edwards Deming, world-renowned quality expert, admonished us to create "constancy of purpose" or "aim" as part of any individual or organizational pursuit of continual improvement. "We cannot program our GPS to a destination that does not exist," writes J. Gerald Suarez, a fellow at the University of Maryland's Center for Leadership, Innovation and Change. Focus and what Suarez terms "the ability to rise above the turbulence" are critical characteristics of successful enrollment managers and student financial aid officers as they continually adapt to volatility in the marketplace.

Hire an executive search firm.

Because the staff search process has become increasingly sophisticated, and the stakes for success ever higher, we are strong advocates for the retention of executive search firms for top enrollment management posts. No longer can colleges place an advertisement and hope to land a sufficiently deep talent pool. Seasoned recruiters will not only be cost-effective, saving the institution time and money, but also they will enlarge the candidate pool, identifying those who might not otherwise apply. Moreover, executive search firms can best perform "due diligence," checking off-resume references and thoroughly vetting both candidate and institutional history—preventing costly turnover resulting from mistakes in hiring.

Seek outside counsel.

Equally important is the perspective of outside counsel experienced in working with enrollment management professionals. Objective, outside counsel evaluates talent

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while identifying areas for further program and personnel development. After you've hired wisely, such consultation on a regular basis will enable you to build on your success by devoting appropriate resources to your enrollment program and fostering staff development.

This spring, it was widely reported, more than 83 percent of colleges and universities with enrollments under 4,000 will experience an enrollment shortfall in their incoming classes. By following these guidelines, your campus can minimize its chances of being among them.

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They have collaborated on nine books, including "President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education (2008)" and "Presidential Perspectives: Strategies to Address the Rising Cost of Higher Education" (2012). They are regular columnists for "College Planning and Management" and "Enrollment Manager." Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.