

Reflections on Growing Enrollment at Shawnee State University

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When I began my employment at Shawnee State University in July 2000, not a day went by when someone, somewhere didn't ask "Well, how's enrollment look for this fall?" Not only did the President and his cabinet ask, but faculty, staff, students and community members asked the question on a regular basis.

In July 2006, I only recall two people asking the "question"! Dr. Field, my direct supervisor, and President Morris (who asked on a daily basis) were the only folks with whom I had that discussion.

So, after five years of continuous enrollment growth, did the campus community have total confidence in the enrollment management unit or had complacency set in? I am writing this paper to remind the campus community not to become complacent.

A "reality check" did occur with the release of the Fall 2006 enrollment figures. While total enrollment did grow modestly, the "new student" number actually fell by nearly 4%. A decrease in the number of transfer students and Post Secondary Students accounted for nearly all the drop. The number of new first time freshmen students remained relatively stable, dropping from 833 to 830. Fortunately, improved retention of our current student population counteracted the drop in the number of new students resulting in enrollment growth for the sixth consecutive year.

Will enrollment continue to grow for a seventh consecutive year and beyond? Restructuring the university and creating an enrollment management unit was a good first step to take. President Morris has convened two separate task forces; one on recruitment and the other on retention. These task forces will be charged to review our current practices and policies which impact recruitment and retention and make recommendations to help us improve both areas. Gone are the days when the admission office staff could visit all of the high schools within a 50 mile radius of campus and an adequate number of new students would enter the university in the ensuing fall.

Enrollment management staff must deal with a tremendous number of variables which impact students and families as they move through the college selection process. Many of these variables are beyond our control. Demographic data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that the number of public high school graduates in Ohio will peak at 119,970 in 2009 and then drop by nearly 7.5% to 109,000 in 2014. A similar demographic trend will be occurring in Kentucky as well. Enrollments in our local feeder schools in Scioto County appear to be following this same trend.

Other variables are related to state political and funding issues. Governor Taft's educational reform plan that would establish a rigorous core curriculum as the default standard for all of Ohio's high school students, beginning with the class of 2011 will have an effect on Shawnee State University's enrollment. While we will be exempt from the mandate that will move all remediation to lower cost community colleges, I am concerned that many of the prospective students of lesser academic ability from around the state who currently choose to enroll at SSU,

will be directed by their high school counselors to focus only on their local community college rather than explore the options we can offer.

Another variable impacting our enrollment will be the future of the Post Secondary Educational Options Program. Local high schools are very cognizant of the funding issues related to this program. Many high schools are becoming more aggressive in their curricular offerings for prospective PSEO students. A growing number of high schools actively discourage their students from participating in the PSEO program.

At the Federal level, a stagnant Pell Grant program will be forcing more low income students to enroll at lower cost community colleges. The new Academic Competitiveness Grant (ACG) and the national SMART Grant may have a positive effect for four-year universities. However, because so many of the students in our region who enroll at SSU are under-prepared, they will not meet the criteria to be considered for the ACG.

I am also very concerned about the lack of attention being given to the financial need of college students from “middle income” families. If a student from one of those families which is just above the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) for Pell eligibility chooses to enroll at Shawnee State University and lives in one of our housing units, their financial need may approach \$12,000. I find it on the verge of being unethical to counsel such a student to incur such a large loan obligation in order to attend our institution.

Considering all of these variables and the fact that today’s “millennial generation” student behaves very differently than students of past generations, the recruitment and retention of today’s college student is very challenging. The resources, both human and fiscal, required to attract and retain such students is increasing and certainly presents a challenge to the board and the senior leadership of the university.

Enrollment growth doesn’t “just happen”. Anecdotally, I can report to you that many of my colleagues at the other state assisted universities are very concerned about these issues. Many are already seeing virtually zero growth or a decline in the size of their incoming classes. After several years of missing their goal, a certain, prestigious school increased their rate of admission (they lowered their selectivity) to insure the size of their class that entered this fall. I am pleased that President Morris and her cabinet budgeted this year on zero growth.

President Morris has directed the university to plan to grow to 5300 students. It is more than the Enrollment Management unit working to recruit and retain students. This goal, if it is to come to fruition, must be a priority of the entire campus community. Everyone must be involved and understand how challenging it is to grow a university.