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ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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COLLABORATION AND PRIORITY IDEAS AT THE YES WE MUST COALITION CONFERENCE IN ROANOKE, VA

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The **Yes We Must Coalition** is a group of 39 private colleges and universities dedicated to providing access and ensuring success for low income/first-generation college students. Member institutions educate large numbers of needy students and more than half of their total enrollments are comprised of students eligible for the Federal Pell Grant.

The organization recently held a conference in Roanoke, Virginia that was attended by 139 administrators from 32 member institutions. The idea was to provide an opportunity for collaboration and discussion. The conference ended with the chance for attendees to sign up to collaborate on a number of future initiatives.

It is clear to me that the most pressing issue confronting Coalition members, and for that matter any institution serving large numbers of at-risk students, is student success. While providing initial access to college for such students is an important first step, it is less meaningful if the access does not include reasonable odds for retention and graduation. Research indicates that term-to-term retention rates and, ultimately, program completion rates are particularly challenging for students with limited levels of pre-enrollment academic preparation, high financial need and lack of family experience with higher education.

Many readers might believe that the issues confronted by Coalition members are limited to a small number of colleges and universities. This is simply not the case. Changing demographics and evolving college enrollment patterns make it clear that the population served by Coalition member institutions is growing. These “at-risk” students are what some are calling the *new majority*. The conference presentations and discussions, sharing of tactics and strategies and multiple opportunities for private brainstorming made the gathering valuable for anyone interested in serving these students.

I wanted to share a few of the priorities and ideas that I picked up by interacting with many of the attendees. The following represents my personal impressions and conversations and do not necessarily reflect those of the Coalition or its member institutions. As mentioned previously, I think the focus for many of these colleges and universities was on enhancing retention efforts but the tactics for addressing retention covered a broad range of educational services.

Many of the conversations centered around the belief that we can move past trying to determine and now start to specifically address the primary challenge. It is relatively easy to identify the most at-risk students prior to initial enrollment. Colleges and universities often have research and studies and surveys that enable

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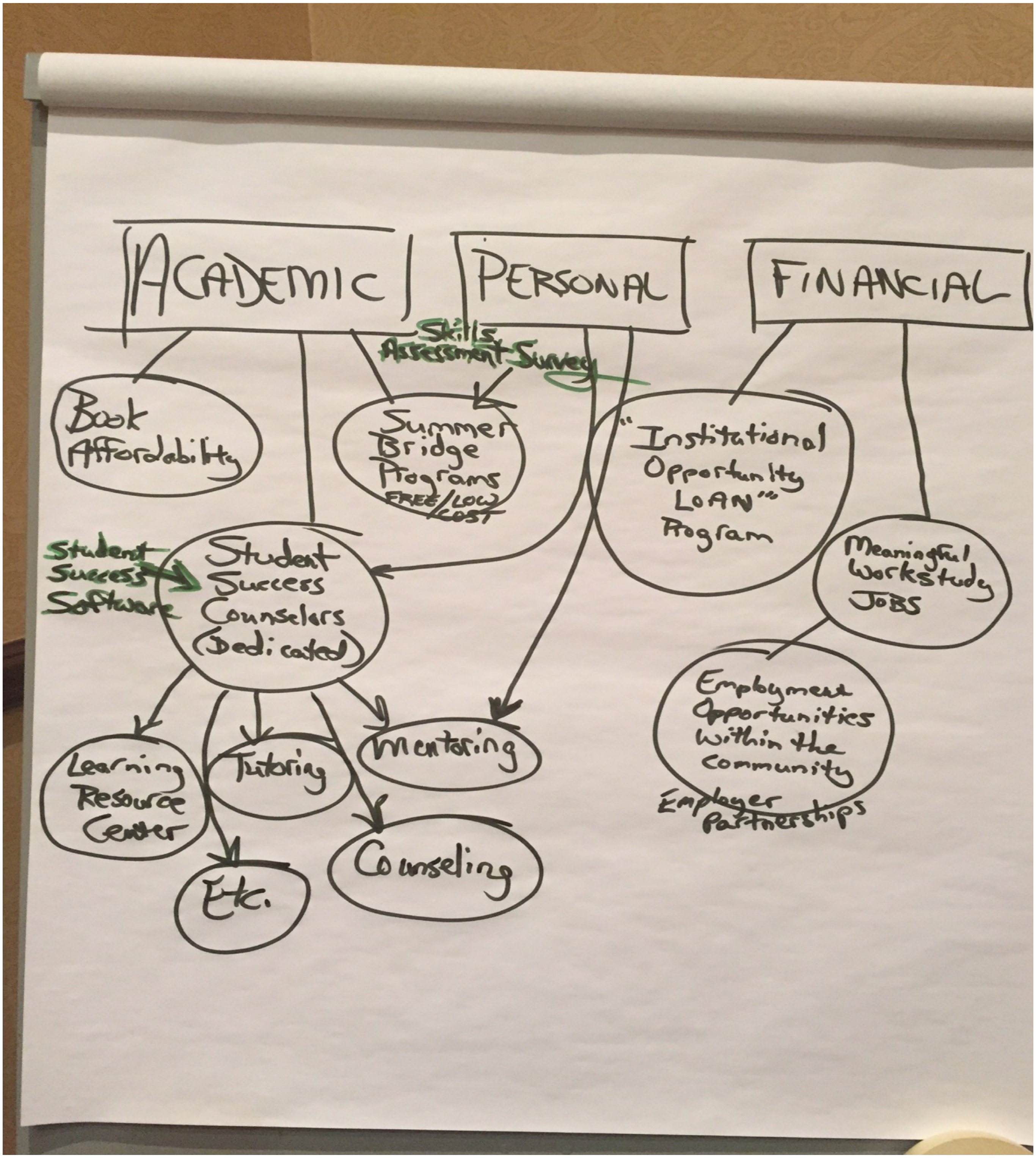

Christopher Burnley, Vice President for Finance at Ferrum College, synthesized a retention plan into a single page of a flip chart during the *Yes We Must Coalition* Conference.

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them to identify student populations most likely to be at-risk. Pre-enrollment characteristics such as low high school grade point averages, low standardized test scores even when adjusted for racial inequalities in testing outcomes, high financial need and lack of familial experience with higher education are agreed upon characteristics.

Many schools have also identified some basic tactics and strategies that research indicates can be effective and internal institutional studies confirm. The essential tactics I heard most often were high quality academic advising, active intervention, constituent appropriate financial aid packaging, books and collection policies.

High Quality Academic Advising

Academic advising, especially for first and second year students is critical. Quality advising for at-risk students is not a simple task.

- Academic advisors must clearly understand the academic offerings at the institution.
- They must be able to educate and actively enforce the importance of each course for the individual major and the overall degree.
- Such advising requires a detailed understanding of all institutional course offerings and majors. One must be able to explain proactively to students how the English 101 course is important for biology majors.
- Advising requires a broad knowledge of the job marketplace as work in the classroom must be shown to be of value in the workplace.
- A qualified advisor must understand, in a detailed fashion, the financial and financial aid satisfactory progress implications inherent in course selection.
- It seems more colleges and universities are moving to hire professional advisors rather than rely solely on faculty for first-year advising.

New Emphasis on Federal Work-Study and Campus Employment

Over the years, less attention has been paid to Work-Study and campus employment. The creation of jobs and placement has been left to the Financial Aid Office or Career Services. For most colleges and universities, student work is focused primarily on meeting institutional labor needs. Some schools, however, are setting aside at least some positions for at-risk students.

- These positions often are assignments working for individual faculty members offering purposeful opportunities for mentoring.
- Other jobs are set aside to be specifically focused on individual majors.
- A few jobs can even offer opportunities for reading and studying during working hours. Front desk jobs during the evenings at resident halls are an example.
- Job openings with individual lead administrators

Collaboration and Priority Ideas Continued:

can also be valuable. I met a couple of Presidents who use positions in their offices for production, yes, but also for relationship building and mentoring.

- Dedicating several jobs for off-campus employment in the community can also help.

Active Intervention

Active intervention is certainly not a new concept, but it is, perhaps, the most powerful tool available for colleges and universities serving at-risk populations. Tracking at-risk students along with their level of engagement, academic performance and finances, and coupled with an effective early warning system can make a real difference.

- Colleagues at the conference pointed out that appropriate technology is extremely important. While I am sure there are other vendors, I heard mentioned companies such as *Pharos* and *Starfish*.

- The greatest challenge, even with appropriate software, is dedicating sufficient personnel resources to the task. Timely and meaningful intervention is unlikely to be accomplished with one or two individuals who might also have other jobs. Appropriate intervention cannot be done by faculty and other administrators who already have full-time jobs. To really work, colleges and universities need to fund several full-time professionals to work only on intervention and advocate activities forty hours a week throughout the enrollment cycle.

Financial Aid Policy and Process

Institutions that serve large numbers of students demonstrating high financial need cannot conduct financial aid operations in a traditional manner.

- New award policies must be considered that reflect the financial realities of the population being served.

- Awards must be made early in the cycle and Financial Aid Offices must work pro-actively to ensure that students apply for financial aid early.

- Boards and administrators must understand that such schools are not likely to have low discount rates.

Books

Books. Such a simple thing. You might be surprised how many of your students do not have books for some of their classes and even shocked at how many students never purchase books at all. The cost of books at most colleges and university is extraordinarily high. For schools enrolling high need students, the cost of books is a huge issue. We should not be surprised that students struggle with academic success when they do not have textbooks.

- Innovative institutions are finding ways to include the costs of books in the comprehensive tuition fee. While difficult, it ensures that every student has books for their classes.

- Other institutions are seeking outside funding to cover the costs of books.

- It may be time for Presidents to insist that faculty consider electronic or other cheaper alternatives for textbooks.

Collection Policies and Innovation

Collections are often a big issue for colleges enrolling high-need students and outstanding receivables are often the reason why students are unable to complete their degrees.

- Business officers, in conjunction with financial aid officers, can probably be doing more to identify students with payment issues and proactively work with them to seek solutions, even if such solutions mean providing more institutional grants.

- Consider innovative institutional loans with low or no interest. I worked with an institutional loan program where such loans were completely forgiven if the student graduated.

- If nothing else, maybe we need to cease sending these students and families to collection agencies and cease the practice of withholding academic transcripts when such a practice can deny

Collaboration and Priority Ideas Continued:

unsuccessful students access to higher education forever.

Let's hope for even more conferences providing chances for collaborations and discussion on how we can all better serve these students in the future.

Communications Strategies for Enrollment Staff

Marylouise Fennell
Principal
Hyatt-Fennell

Scott D. Miller
President
Virginia Wesleyan College

Competition for prospective students' attention has never been fiercer. The congested higher education marketplace means that every communication between colleges and prospective students must further institutional branding and messaging. With the regular development of new technologies, a sound communication strategy has become paramount as we establish a public "face" for the institution to new audiences.

In this issue of "Enrollment Manager" we will address staff communications priorities, operational strategies and accountability. We will offer some suggestions from our experience that will help you make every communication count while enabling your messaging to stand out among others.

The use of an independent outside firm to establish this process and periodically evaluate effectiveness is recommended. Many of our colleagues have utilized The Dysart Group of Charlotte, NC to support this process.

Phone and Follow Up

Solid persuasive telephone skills are necessary in the overall enrollment operation. Follow-up correspondence is a must. Some of our colleagues have borrowed professionals from the business world—namely call center trainers—to work with staff on this area.

Communicate Across Platforms

Use of social media such as e-letters, blogs, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, and Facebook increase frequency of communication to key current and future constituencies, including prospective students, families, and donors, at little or no cost.

Using such technologies, staff can foster and cultivate new relationships, expand existing networks, and raise the entire institutional profile. Further, a great deal of mileage can be gained from the repurposing of various institutional communications—in fact, often more than from the initial exposure.

Raise Your Visibility

Because the enrollment staff is the public face of an institution throughout the recruiting process, it is important that the image they project is both reflective of the institution's mission and values and in sync with its core messaging and overall branding strategy. Perception is reality when it comes to such marketing communications.

Communicate Early and Often

In his 2007 bestseller *Millennials Go to College*, Neil Howe observes that if prospective students don't know your brand by the age of 13, it is unlikely that they will consider applying when they are high school juniors. Thus, it is critical that you get your institutional brand out early and often.

Just as the successful realtor's mantra is "Location, location, location," the effective communicator relies on "repetition, repetition, repetition." Enrollment staff need to be able to relate what's been called the "30-second elevator message" about their institutions in a concise, compelling way.

Consistency is Key

Many communications experts have noted that when evaluating the efficacy of messaging, they find that consistency and continuity often trump content. In an August 2012 interview with the McKinsey Quarterly's Allen Webb, Olympic decathlon champion Dan O'Brien observes, "In the long run, consistency always wins out." O'Brien won a gold medal in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, following three consecutive world titles in

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES CONTINUED:

decathlon.

"Although Dan's commentary focuses on athletics, not business, executives may find parallels between the competitive challenges he describes and those facing their companies," Webb notes. Simply put, it's almost impossible to repeat a message too often for today's multitaskers.

Cultivate Compelling Messages

A vast body of research demonstrates time and again that people act on emotion undergirded by fact much more responsively than they do on the basis of facts alone. Emotions and effective storytelling trump facts, data, and statistics every time. Personalizing, localizing, and using emotion to connect with audiences are the hallmarks of persuasive communications that cause people to change their behaviors in ways favorable to the college or university.

We like the "SUCCES" formula for "sticky messages" advanced by authors Chip and Dan Heath: compelling and memorable messages must be simple, unexpected, concrete, concise, use emotions, and tell stories.

Finally, here are a few other specific recommendations to improve the effectiveness, process, and performance of your enrollment team:

- Extensive training in communication techniques including telephone, traditional written materials, text messaging, email and social media
- Weekly summary reports on communication between enrollment staff and prospects including volume completion
- Performance review checklists
- Periodic external performance appraisal
- Setting, implementing and annually reviewing departmental goals and progress toward those goals

In conclusion, tell your story as often and in as many ways as possible while utilizing a common sense "plan, do, check, act" managerial strategy to measure your efforts and make continual improvements.

Schedule a time to meet with John Dysart, President of **THE DYSART GROUP** to discuss your enrollment and revenue needs at these upcoming conferences:

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

2016 Presidents Conference
January 27-29, 2016
Capital Hilton
Washington, DC

Association of Business Administrators of Christian Colleges

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February 16-20, 2016
Renaissance World Golf Village Resort
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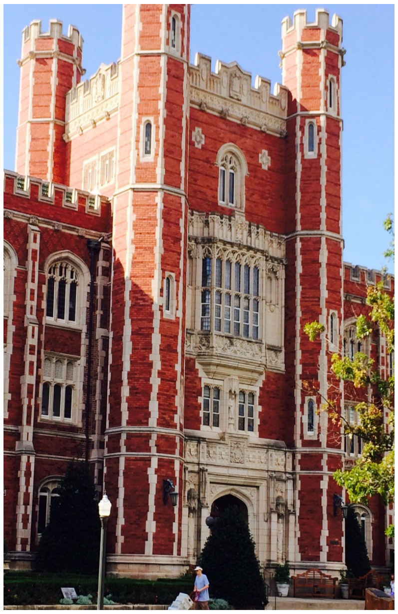

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We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment, enhance academic quality, reduce attrition and increase net revenue.

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