



# ENROLLMENT

## Strategic Enrollment Management in the United States and Canada

Since the early 1990s, Canadian registrars, admissions officers and student affairs professionals have traveled to U.S.-based conferences in search of the holy grail of enrollment management, finding it at the AACRAO Annual Meeting, AACRAO Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Conference, and other meetings sponsored by Noel-Levitz, SEM Works, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, among others. The general idea was that Canadians needed to learn from Americans about enrollment management, and there was not a national set of practices within Canada to support the development of a growing set of enrollment management professionals. Building on their 2006 *SEM Source* article on the same topic, the authors reveal similarities and differences in the way SEM is practiced in Canada and the United States.

# NET OR *Enrolment*

Shaping enrollment through a focused approach to student recruitment and retention is now acknowledged by many Canadian educators as an essential part of the higher education landscape. Yet some see strategic enrollment management (SEM) as primarily an outcome of the American experience and thus not easily transposed into the Canadian context. It is our view that although SEM's emergence in Canada has been more recent, many of the issues facing Canadian colleges and universities are similar to those in American institutions. As our profession reaches maturity, there are clearly lessons we can learn from each other—pitfalls to be avoided and innovations to be adopted on both sides of the border.

The difference in approaches to SEM in the two countries is a result of the differing social, political, and eco-

nomical contexts in which it developed. Although Canada and the United States share some of the same heritage, the American break with England in the late 1700s changed forever its cultural focus from being linked to Europe to charting its own course. Canada, on the other hand, remains well connected to both the United Kingdom and other parts of the world, through membership in the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. Canada's national commitment to bilingualism, multiculturalism and universal health care are examples of a different social and value system than its neighbor to the south. This difference has affected the way both postsecondary educational systems operate in the 21st century.

With more than 3,500 colleges and universities, the U.S. postsecondary education system is heterogeneous in terms

of academic focus, degrees offered, size of enrollments and students served. It is oriented toward providing a holistic student experience where student life is an important part of the college experience. It also operates within the context of decreasing state support of public institutions, increased accountability, increasing tuition levels, significant differences in regional student demand and continuing growth in the not-for-profit institutional sector. This has led to SEM becoming a mainstay at most institutions.

Canada, on the other hand, has many fewer institutions (approximately 95 universities and 135 colleges) and a relatively small quality gap between top-ranked institutions and those ranked lower, which results in most institutions being considered of “good quality.” Until recently there has been less concern for student development and the broader campus experience in Canada than in the United States. Although participation in postsecondary education has continued to increase in Canada, there is an increasing reliance on tuition income and increased public accountability (in the form of key performance indicators and national newspaper and magazine rankings), which has resulted in increased competition among institutions. Although many enrollment practitioners have turned to American colleagues and consultants for “best practices” and ideas for new tactics and strategies, many Canadians remain uncomfortable with SEM’s market orientation.

This paper builds on the authors’ earlier *SEM Source* essay (Smith and Gottheil 2006), which introduced the topic to North American enrollment managers.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

We took a multi-faceted approach to studying comparative enrollment management practices in Canada and the United States. As practitioners of enrollment management on both sides of the border, we began our investigation by talking to some of the leading enrollment management professionals in both countries. Interviews were held with 20 senior SEM professionals. This resulted in a number of conference presentations at the Association of Registrars of Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) and American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) conferences in 2005–08. Topics included retention of special population students, recruitment of underserved student populations, financial aid, and a comparative look at SEM in the

United States and Canada. We also presented an AACRAO webinar in 2008.

From the interviews and subsequent conference presentations, we learned that a need existed to verify the qualitative findings of our interviews and subsequent discussions with enrollment management professionals. This led us to administer a quantitative survey of American and Canadian chief enrollment officers in January 2008.

Two surveys were prepared using identical questions. Language was altered to reflect different language use in the two countries. Response options were also varied to reflect certain differences in the focus of enrollment management. For example, in the United States, the focus of targeted recruitment initiatives is on particular underserved groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. When we posed the same questions to Canadians, we changed the question responses so that they provided options more appropriate for Canadian respondents (*e.g.*, Aboriginal Canadians, new immigrants, and visible minorities). The survey questionnaires were administered using the Web.

The survey sample included an “n” of 274, with an even number of Canadian and American institutions chosen as survey participants. The Canadian participants were selected from the membership of ARUCC and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, complemented with provincial lists of registrarial professionals. The American participants were selected on a random basis from the registration list for the SEM XXVII conference, incorporating even numbers of two- and four-year institutions. The link to the survey was e-mailed to prospective participants the first week of January 2008, with weekly reminders sent the following two weeks. The total response rate was 37 percent, with a 27 percent (41) response rate for the American institutions and a 47 percent (65) response rate for the Canadian institutions.

## About the Survey Respondents

Most of the survey participants coordinate one or more of the following areas of enrollment management: admissions, domestic student recruitment, international student recruitment, or marketing. Table 1 includes an area of responsibility profile for the survey participants.

Survey respondents view their knowledge of SEM to be either intermediate or advanced, with relatively few rat-

ing themselves at the beginner level. The perception of advanced knowledge differed between Canadian and U.S. respondents, with 37 percent of the Canadians seeing themselves as having advanced knowledge of SEM, while 46 percent of U.S. participants made the same claim. Figure 1, on page 32 shows the self-perception of SEM knowledge for the survey respondents.

Survey participants represent the major regions of both countries. The Canadian respondents underrepresent francophone institutions. The American respondents overrepresent the South and West regions. Table 2 displays the regions in which survey respondent institutions are located.

Most institutions are public, which under-represents private institutions in the U.S. sample. Most of the U.S. survey participants are employed at two-year undergraduate or 4+-year undergraduate institutions. The Canadian group is comprised of representatives from each of three institutional types (two-year undergraduate, four-year graduate and 4+-year undergraduate), with 55 percent of those responding coming from 4+-year undergraduate institutions. Figure 2, on page 32 provides a breakdown of survey respondents by type of institution.

Canadian respondents are evenly divided between three full-time headcount groupings (1,000–2,499; 2,500–4,999; 5,000–9,999; and 10,000–19,999). American survey participants group most heavily in the 2,500–4,999 FTE grouping, with slightly smaller numbers in 1,000–2,499 and 5,000–9,000 sizes. Most institutions in both groups had

Table 1.

*Areas of Enrollment Management Responsibility*

Area of Responsibility	Canadian Participants (%)	U.S. Participants (%)
Aboriginal Education & Service	2	–
Academic Advising	10	6
Academic Discipline	2	3
Academic Planning	2	–
Academic Support Services	–	–
Admissions	19	31
Alumni	5	–
Co-op & Career Services	2	–
Diversity Programs	–	3
Domestic Recruitment	67	69
Dual Enrollment	–	3
Financial Aid	10	6
First Year Programs	2	3
Grad Recruitment	2	–
Health & Counseling	5	3
Honors Program	–	3
Institutional Research	–	3
International Recruitment	19	25
Marketing	43	47
Off-campus Student Services	–	6
Pre-College Programs	–	3
Registrar	–	25
Residence Life	–	3
Student Accounts & Billing	–	3
Student Affairs	7	–
Student Retention	5	–
Testing	–	6
Transfer Articulation	–	3

Table 2.

*Institutional Geographic Location*

	Region	Canadian Participants (%)	U.S. Participants (%)
<b>Canadian</b>	Western	36	–
	Prairies	13	–
	Central	37	–
	Maritimes	14	–
<b>U.S.</b>	New England	–	12
	Mid-Atlantic	–	13
	South	–	32
	Mid-West	–	21
	West	–	22

**Table 3.**

*Under-served Student Groups of Greatest Interest*

Group	Canadian Participants (%)	U.S. Participants (%)
Asian	30	49
Black	17	80
Canadian Aboriginal, First Nations, Metis, Inuit/Native American	79	46
Dislocated Workers	4	15
Displaced Homemakers	—	10
Displaced Workers	—	—
Female	4	—
First Generation	19	37
Francophone	2	—
Hispanic/Latino	2	12
Home Schooled	4	—
LGBT	2	—
Low Income	6	56
Male	17	—
Northern Canadians	23	—
Recent Immigrants	36	20
Rural Students	23	20
Sole Support Mothers	2	15
Students with Disabilities	23	20
Urban	—	10

**RESULTS**

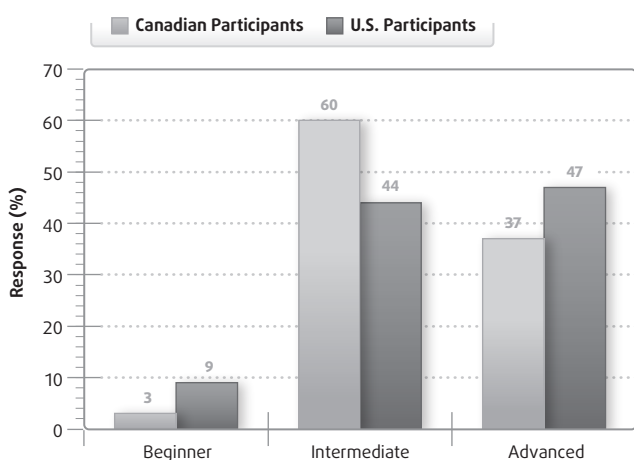
**Accessibility**

In both countries, increasing access to postsecondary education is seen as key. Groups deemed to be under-represented, and thus targeted for accessibility programs, differ due to historic immigration and colonization patterns. Both countries are interested in more access for first-generation postsecondary students. Most survey participants indicated that their institution has enrollment goals to achieve a rich representation of diversity in the student population (83% Canadian; 98% U.S.).

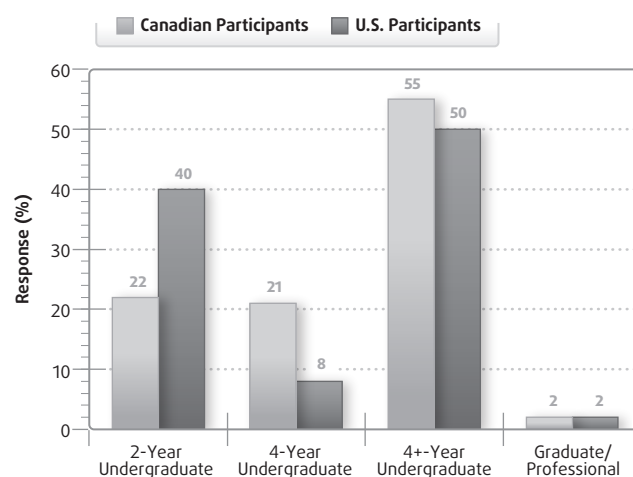
Underrepresented student populations of interest to each national group varied. The underserved student populations of greatest interest by Canadian institutions include Asian, Aboriginal, first generation, northern Canadian, recent immigrants, and students with disabilities.

The groups of interest by U.S. institutions include Asian, Black, first-generation, low-income and Native Americans. The groups of greatest interest are Aboriginals and Asian students for Canadian institutions, and Black and Asian students for Canadian institutions, and Black and

part-time headcount below 5,000. Figure 3, on page 33 describes survey respondents' institution enrollment by full-time and part-time headcount.



**FIGURE 1.** *Self-perception of SEM Knowledge*



**FIGURE 2.** *Type of Institution*

Asian students for U.S. institutions. Table 3, on page 32, identifies underserved student groups of greatest interest.

Two access strategies were identified. More than half of the respondents (55% of Canadian institutions, and 76% of U.S. institutions) work with community organizations to encourage students in grades 7–10 to consider attending post-secondary education after high school. Some institutions (42% of Canadian institutions and 50% of U.S. institutions) offer summer bridge programs for students needing developmental coursework or students who may be in need of additional transition support.

### Accountability

There is much interest in public accountability of higher education in both countries. The most common accountability measure is graduation rates (69% in Canada; 62% in the United States). Other accountability indicators include: loan defaults (40% in Canada; 64% in the United States), recruitment accessibility (44% in Canada; 38% in the United States), student retention (1% in Canada; 0% in the United States), enrollment targets (3% in Canada; 6% in the United States), transfer rates (0% in Canada; 5% in the United States) and athletic eligibility (0% in Canada; 3% in the United States). Moreover, a number of institutions reported receiving performance-based funding from government (42% in Canada; 24% in the United States).

### Admission Policies

Canadian institutions reported using primarily high school grades/marks (95%), interviews (38%) and essays (27%) as the basis for admission. Other factors in the admissions decisions include non-cognitive factors, auditions, portfolios, personal recommendations, in-house testing/assessments, and university marks for transfer students. American institutions reported using primarily high school grades/marks (63%) and test scores (53%) as the basis for admission; 35 percent used high school graduation as they are open admission institutions. Most American institutions (92%) used a composite of grades from Grades 9–12 to make their decision.

The majority of Canadian institutions have not used test scores in admissions decisions making (59%), and an additional 25 percent have de-emphasized the use of test scores. For U.S. institutions, 17 percent have de-emphasized use of test scores, and 43 percent have never used test scores to make admissions decisions. An additional 39 percent of U.S. institutions have not de-emphasized the use of tests.

Fall admission decisions are generally made on a rolling basis throughout the year (86% in Canada; 85% in the United States). Canadian institutions that do not operate on a rolling basis tend to make their decisions during the March to April period, while American institutions do so

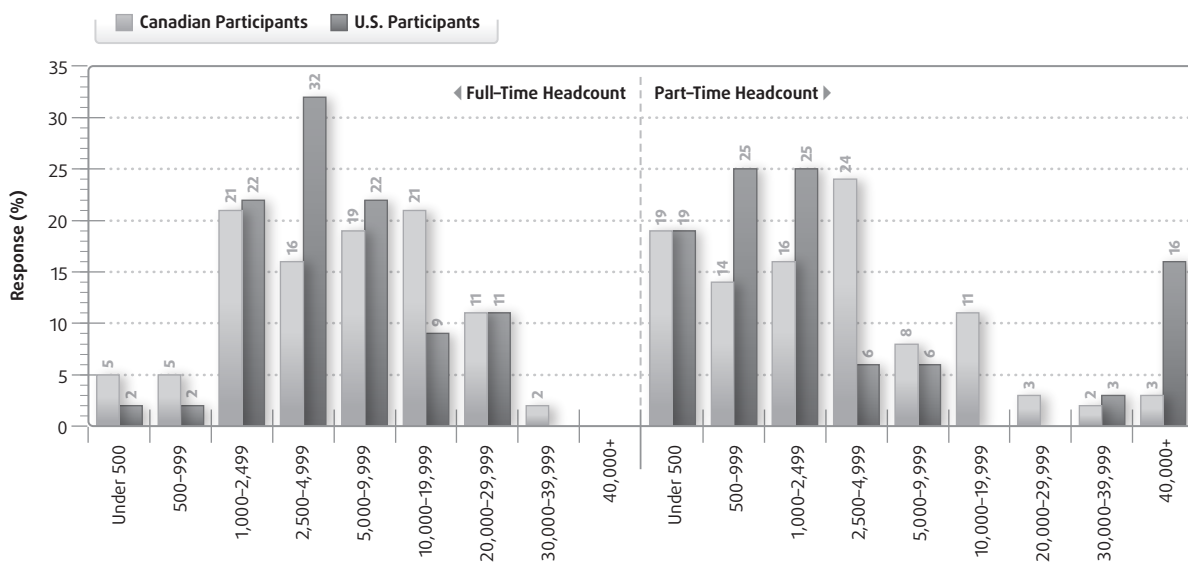


FIGURE 3. Institutional Enrollment Headcount

in January to February. Institutions from both countries make earlier offers to top applicants (57% in Canada; 21% in the United States).

The required confirmation date for Canadian institutions is after May 1 (70%), while American institutions primarily use a May 1 priority deadline (55%).

### Financial Aid

Both Canada and the United States have seen cuts in public funding coupled with large tuition increases and some tuition freezes. There is a growing perception by low-income students that they cannot afford to continue their education after high school. This has led to the adoption of differing approaches to financial aid. Leveraging and discounting are used extensively in the United States (38%) but have little presence in the Canadian environment (1%). Canadian institutions provide mostly merit-based scholarship (82% in Canada; 67% in the United States). Nearly all American and most Canadian institutions have a tuition payment plan (56% in Canada; 92% in the United States).

A key difference between the two countries is the role of financial aid. The financial aid program is seen primarily as a student support service in Canada (72% in Canada; 52% in the United States). Many more American institutions see enrollment management as the primary purpose of financial aid (28% in Canada; 48% in the United States). As a result, need based institutional grants/bursaries are awarded more so by Canadian financial aid offices (63% in Canada; 44% in the United States). Still, a relatively small number of institutions are able to meet full need for low-income students (10% in Canada; 18% in the United States). Interestingly, a similar number of institutions in Canada and the United States report awarding a majority of institutional aid to students with financial need (65% in Canada; 68% in the United States).

A key difference is when the financial aid offer is made. In the United States, awards are normally made before the required admission reply/confirmation deadline (49% in Canada; 73% in the United States); while in Canada it is common for students to receive a scholarship package after the

deadline. This supports the notion that financial aid policies in Canada presume local student enrolment.

While participation in athletic financial awards/scholarship is relatively new in Canada, more than half of the institutions offer athletic awards to qualified first-year student athletes (50% in Canada; 65% in the United States). The maximum size of awards is generally smaller in Canada (26% below \$3,000; 19% \$3,000–3,900; 23% \$4,000 or more) than it is in the United States (23% below \$3,000; 1% \$3,000–3,900; 35% \$4,000 or more).

### Geographic Draw

A majority of students in both countries are from the local catchment area or within 60 miles/100 km. The rest of student enrollment is drawn predominantly from outside the local area but within the institution's state or province. A relatively small number of students enroll from other states or provinces. Figure 4 provides a student enrollment geographic profile for respondent institutions.

Transfer agreements with community or technical colleges (47% in Canada; 49% in the United States), 4-year universities (45% in Canada; 44% in the United States), or both (10% in Canada; 8% in the United States) are common in both countries.

### Enrollment Marketing

The primary focus of most institutional marketing (95% in Canada and in the United States) is high school recruit-

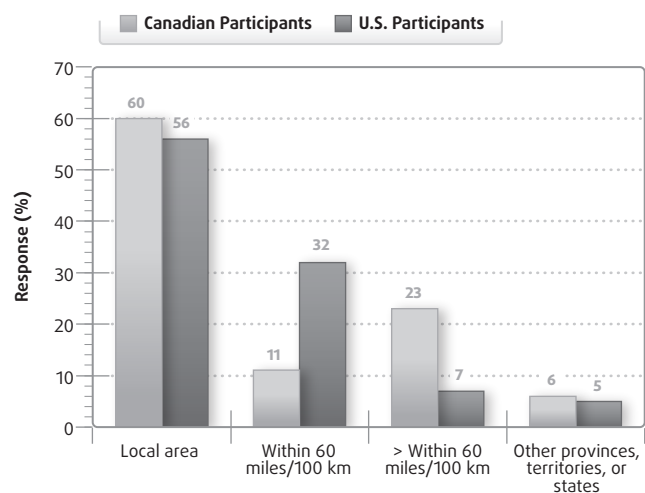


FIGURE 4. Geographic Origin of Majority of Students

Table 4.

Type of Recruiting Publications (Print or Web)

Type of Publication	Canadian Participants (%)	U.S. Participants (%)
Academic department/Faculty brochure	49	80
Admissions newsletter/tabloid	17	1
Adult/non-traditional student brochure	1	—
Athletic department brochure	20	17
Calendar/Catalog	23	19
Campus visit brochure	51	68
Direct mail/search brochure	65	78
Fact sheet	1	—
Financial aid/financing brochure	17	32
International student brochure	1	—
Parents' brochure	22	24
Recruiting poster	5	1
Recruiting video/DVD	—	1
Student life brochure	1	1
Successful graduates/alumni brochure	1	—
Under-represented student brochure	1	—
Viewbook for Grade 10 students	1	—
Viewbook for Grade 11 students	77	70

ment. Institutions also focus on students attending other postsecondary institutions (33% in Canada; 15% in the United States), adults (27% in Canada; 34% in the United States) and international students (17% in Canada; 1% in the United States).

A major difference in the way institutions conduct enrollment marketing is in the area of direct mail. Most U.S. institutions purchase student names for the purpose of generating institutional interest (60%), while Canadian institutions do not make use of this approach due to more restrictive privacy laws in Canada.

As a way of increasing student diversity on campus, American institutions make greater use of advertisements in underrepresented student-oriented publications (32% in Canada; 50% in the United States).

The perception of the effectiveness of recruitment communications varies. Canadian respondents view their recruiting publications more favorably than U.S. participants. American institutions tend to see their e-mail communications as more effective. U.S. respondents view their Web pages as slightly more effective than Canadian participants. Figure 5 displays recruitment effectiveness by communication type.

The types of recruiting publications vary. In Canada, the most widely used publications for recruitment include: viewbooks, direct mail/search brochures, campus visit brochures, academic brochures, parents' brochures, and fi-

ancial aid brochures. Popular recruiting publications for U.S. institutions include academic brochures, direct mail/search brochures, viewbooks, campus visit brochures, financial aid brochures and parents' brochures. Some of the

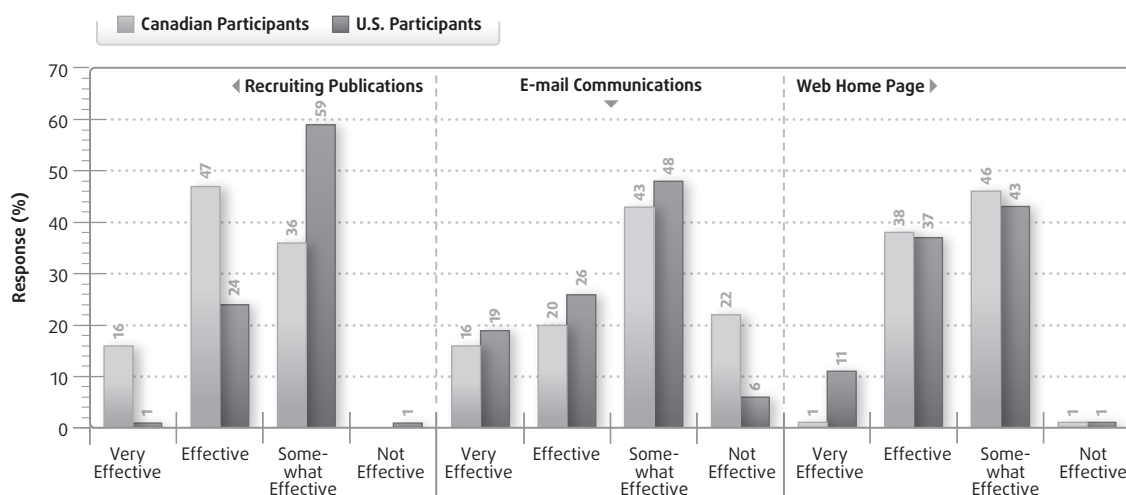


FIGURE 5. Perception of Recruiting Effectiveness—Publications, E-mail Communications and Web Home Page

institutions' recruitment materials are printed in languages other than English (56% in Canada; 34% in the United States). Table 4 provides a listing of the type of publications in use by institutions to recruit students.

One way of differentiating between approaches to enrollment management is to examine the number of communications sent prior to application and post-admission. American institutions communicate slightly more in the pre-application phase and about the same as Canadians in the post-admission phase. Figure 6 displays different forms and amounts of communications.

### Organization

A large number of institutions (62% in Canada; 51% in the United States) have adopted a formal SEM organization structure. A relatively high number of U.S. institutions (42%) are progressing in the development of a SEM organizational structure.

The type of SEM organization varies considerably between Canada and the United States. Most Canadian institutions use the committee form, while U.S. institutions use either the committee or division forms. This suggests more developed enrollment management programs in the United States than in Canada. Figure 7, on page 37 displays SEM organization types.

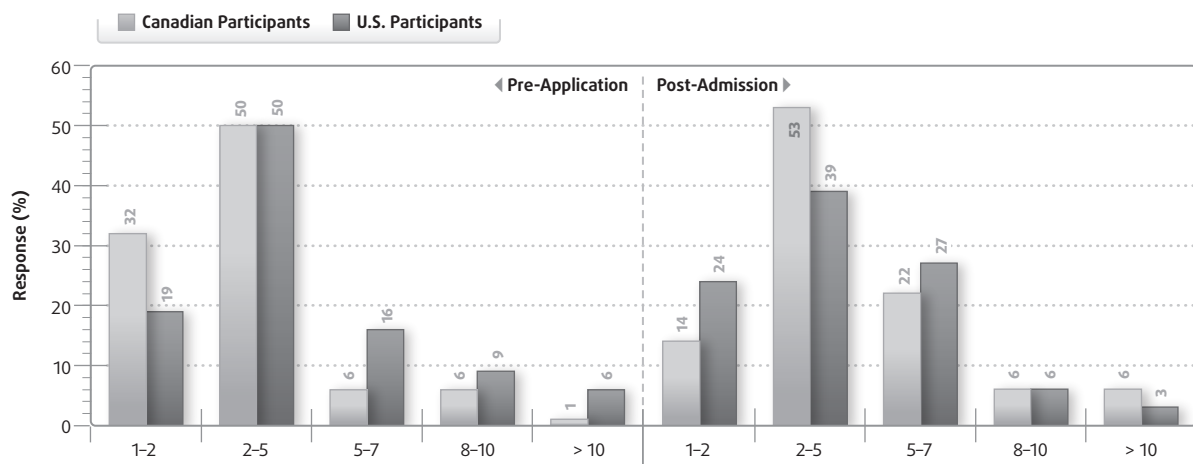
### Planning

Many institutions equate the use of enrollment management strategies with having a SEM plan. An increasing

number of institutions have developed comprehensive SEM plans (28% in Canada; 37% in the United States); more than half (51%) of U.S. institutions claimed that their plan was in progress. Most plans have clearly stated enrollment goals (94% in Canada; 93% in the United States). Specifically, they contain student recruitment goals (94% in Canada; 100% in the United States), student retention goals (67% in Canada; 100% in the United States) and an evaluation methodology for assessing and monitoring performance (71% in Canada; 87% in the United States).

An on-going enrollment research capability is critical to implementing SEM. Most institutions (57% in Canada; 66% in the United States) reported having a data-rich environment to inform decisions and evaluate strategies. Enrollment data analysis is generally provided by the institutional research/analysis office (75% in Canada; 100% in the United States), registrar's office (52% in Canada; 2% in the United States) or admissions office (7% in Canada; 2% in the United States). The person responsible for enrollment data analysis has knowledge of strategic enrollment management (93% in Canada; 92% in the United States). In addition to ongoing research on recruitment, most institutions also report conducting student retention research (70% in Canada; 83% in the United States).

The frequency of when research to support enrollment communication planning/implementation is performed varies, with more U.S. institutions conducting research several times/year (45% in Canada; 64% in the United States), a similar number conducting research once/year



**FIGURE 6.** Pre-application and Post-admission Communications

(25% in Canada; 22% in the United States), and more Canadian institutions conducting research every two to five years (17% in Canada; 5% in the United States) or not the past five years (13% in Canada; 8% in the United States).

Most respondents reported strong and effective working relations throughout campus in support of enrollment management (53% in Canada; 67% in the United States).

### Recruitment

There are considerable differences between U.S. and Canadian approaches to student recruitment, although the differences have narrowed in recent years. Whereas American higher education no longer fears the “recruitment” word, Canada is still transitioning from a liaison outreach effort to one that includes more strategic recruitment. Historic collegial approaches to recruitment in Canada continue side by side with increasing use of targeted print materials, 1:1 marketing, and e-recruiting.

Nearly all respondents (97% in Canada; 95% in the United States) reported competition for postsecondary students to have increased in recent years. Most respondents noted that competition has increased significantly (73% in Canada; 66% in the United States). Others said that it increased either somewhat (24% in Canada; 24% in the United States) or a little (3% in Canada; 10% in the United States). High school liaison is the primary form of student recruitment (75% in Canada; 56% in the United States) in both countries.

Use of new approaches to student recruitment is relatively similar in both countries. More Canadian institutions are employing 1:1 student marketing techniques, and more U.S. institutions are using e-recruiting. Figure 8 shows which new recruitment practices are being used in each country.

Student life is reported to be important to student recruitment (79% in Canada; 75% in the United States).

### Retention

Most institutions consider retention and student success to be important issues (89% in Canada; 86% in the United States). However, the way in which institutions focus on retention varies. As an example, retention committees are much more common in the United States (38% in Canada; 62% in the United States), as are the formulation of clear retention goals (39% in Canada; 62% in the United States), and the placement of a single person in charge of student retention (18% in Canada; 31% in the United States). On the other hand, there is considerable buy-in with regard to customer service on campus (90% in Canada; 93% in the United States) in both countries.

The most widely-used retention practices in Canada include: services for students with disabilities, emergency financial aid, student services consolidation, Aboriginal student services, one-stop enrollment services, first-year experience programs, supplemental instruction, gender programs or services, and peer tutoring. In the United States, the most commonly cited retention practices are: services for students

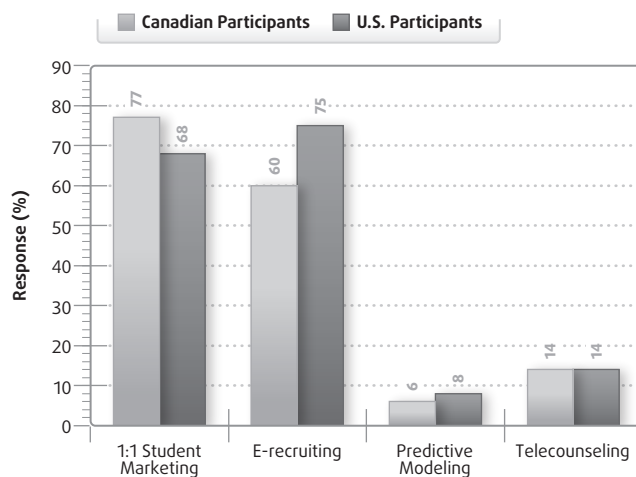
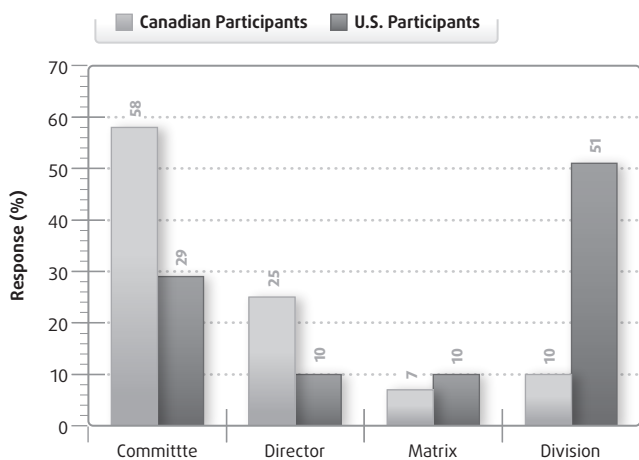


FIGURE 7. SEM Organization Type

FIGURE 8. Use of New Recruitment Practices

## Table 5.

### Reported Student Retention Practices

Retention Practice	Canadian Participants (%)	U.S. Participants (%)
Aboriginal/Native American student services	55	8
Academic advising	16	13
Career counseling	—	—
Early alert system	22	24
Emergency financial aid	89	55
Employment services	5	13
First year experience program	41	72
Gender programs, services or centers	25	34
International student services	5	11
Learning communities	17	24
Long-term success workshops	13	3
Mature adult student services	10	21
New immigrant services	—	—
New student orientation	16	13
Off-campus housing	6	3
Ombudsperson	8	—
One-stop enrollment services	44	42
Peer mentoring	8	3
Peer tutoring	24	13
Residence life programs	16	32
Service learning	11	29
Services for students with disabilities	94	95
Short-term success workshops	2	—
Student services consolidation	59	45
Supplemental instruction	30	34
Visible minority student services	—	5
Work-study programs	2	8

with disabilities, first-year experience programs, emergency financial aid, student services consolidation, one-stop enrollment services, gender programs and services, supplemental instruction, residence life programs, service learning, early alert systems, and learning communities. Table 5 provides a list of reported student retention practices.

In Canada, academic advising is primarily provided by professional advisors (60% in Canada; 38% in the United States). In the United States, faculty members deliver most

of the academic advising to students (40% in Canada; 62% in the United States).

### LIMITATION

Our examination of enrollment management is descriptive. We did not study the relative effectiveness of enrollment management approaches undertaken in the United States and Canada.

### CONCLUSION

SEM has evolved in both Canada and the United States over the past few decades. Practitioners are now adapting to changes in demographics and immigration patterns; educational systems and the academic preparedness of students; and evolving competitive markets. There is much that enrollment managers in the United States and Canada can learn from each other. Certainly SEM works in different cultural contexts, and the application of SEM must account for these differences. Some strategies work well in both cultures, whereas others do not.

This paper reveals that Canada is well on its way to development of its own brand of enrollment management. Although much remains to be learned from the American experience, Canada has developed a wide array of its own SEM practices, which American enrollment managers could benefit from examining.

### REFERENCES

Smith, C., and S. Gottheil. 2006. Enrollment or enrolment: The emergence of SEM in Canada. *SEM Source*. Available at: <[www.aacrao.org/sem/index.cfm?fa=view&cid=3270](http://www.aacrao.org/sem/index.cfm?fa=view&cid=3270)>.

### About the Authors

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