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SEM in Canada: A Unique Approach

Shaping enrolment 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 enrolment management 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. Yet Canadian history and value systems have also shaped a distinctive approach to SEM that has resulted in different areas of focus as well as different strategies and tactics to influence student recruitment and retention. As our profession reaches maturity there are clearly lessons we can learn from each other, pitfalls to be avoided and innovations to be adopted and adapted 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 economic 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 1700's 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 has helped to shape a different social and value system than its neighbor to the south. This affects the way both postsecondary educational systems operate in the 21st century.

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Canadian students frequently attend their local institutions as *commuters*.

With more than 4,300 colleges and universities, the U.S. postsecondary education system is heterogeneous in terms of academic focus, degrees offered, size of enrolments 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 far fewer (225) post-secondary institutions. Despite a recent emphasis on rankings and consequent tiering, there is a relatively small quality gap between top-ranked institutions and those ranked lower, which results in most institutions being considered of “good quality.” Canadian students frequently attend their local institutions as commuters. 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 a looming decline in secondary school enrolment. Dramatic cuts in provincial grants, a heavier reliance on tuition income and increased public accountability (in the form of key performance indicators and national newspaper and magazine rankings) have resulted in increasing competition between institutions. Although many enrolment practitioners have turned to American colleagues and consultants for “best practices” and ideas for new tactics and strategies, many Canadians still remain uncomfortable with SEM’s market orientation.

Outlined on the subsequent pages are some of the areas where Canadian and American educational systems and SEM practices differ (Smith & Gottheil, 2006 and 2008).

SEVERAL AREAS WHERE THE US AND CANADA DIFFER

1. Canadian students frequently attend their local institutions as commuters.
2. Dramatic cuts have resulted in increasing competition between institutions
3. Many Canadians still remain uncomfortable with SEM’s market orientation.

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👉 ACCESSIBILITY 👈

In both countries, increasing access to postsecondary education is seen as key. Groups deemed to be underrepresented, and thus targeted for accessibility programs, differ due to historic immigration and colonization patterns. Both countries are interested in more access for first-generation and low-income postsecondary students. In the United States, there is also interest in more access for African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans. In Canada, access is seen as key for Aboriginal, Francophone and Northern Canadian students. SEM practices in each country reflect these differing priorities.

Canadian institutions have provided mostly merit-based scholarships.

👉 ACCOUNTABILITY 👈

There is much interest in public accountability of higher education in both countries, with increasing government interest in loan defaults, recruitment accessibility, retention, graduation, transfer rates and other key performance indicators. Both countries have seen the introduction on a limited basis of performance-based funding. In Ontario, the National Survey on Student Engagement is now being used as an accountability measure in the university sector.

👉 ADMISSION POLICIES 👈

The basis of admission in Canada is primarily high school marks, whereas U.S. institutions use Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)/American College Test (ACT)/Advanced Placement test scores, essays, interviews and a variety of non-cognitive factors. Most admission offers in Canada are made between March and June, with some earlier offers made to top candidates. In the United States, offers are made throughout the final year of high school using early action, early admission and rolling admission approaches. Whereas the United States has a May 1 reply date, there is no agreed-upon confirmation deadline in Canada, although many provinces use a late May or June date.

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Both Canada and the United States have seen cuts in *public funding*

FINANCIAL AID

Both Canada and the United States have seen cuts in public funding of post-secondary education 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 but have no acknowledged presence in the Canadian environment. Canadian institutions have provided mostly merit-based scholarships, although there has been some recognition over the past few years of the importance of need-based aid (Junor & Usher, 2007). Whereas most American financial aid offers are provided to students near the time of their admission offer, in Canada the complete financial aid offer is not known to students until after they make their enrolment decision. Athletic scholarships, while present in both countries, are considerably more developed in the United States. In summary, the financial aid program is seen primarily as a student support service in Canada while American institutions see enrolment management as the primary purpose of financial aid.

GEOGRAPHICAL DRAW

In the United States, a considerable number of students choose to live on campus and to go away to school. This is true for a much smaller number of Canadians, who tend to attend their local institutions. This results in little student mobility between provinces and small residence populations on most campuses. There are implications, in this regard, for student engagement, retention and student life programming in Canada. Transfer agreements with community or technical colleges, 4-year universities or both are relatively common in both countries.

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SEVERAL AREAS WHERE THE US AND CANADA DIFFER

1. Financial Aid
2. Geographical Draw
3. Enrolment Marketing
4. Organization
5. Planning

ENROLMENT MARKETING

U.S.-based institutions make considerable use of direct mail and target marketing. In Canada, advertising is mostly geared to enhancing the image of institutions rather than targeting student recruitment. Further, Canadian enrolment marketing is mainly focused toward high school students, whereas U.S. marketing is more broad-based and oriented toward other market segments. Canadian students do not take SAT- or ACT-type tests and thus Canadian institutions do not engage in name purchasing. In general, Canadians also have a more highly developed notion of privacy, which affects marketing approaches. One way of differentiating between approaches to enrolment 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.

ORGANIZATION

A large number of U.S. institutions have adopted a formal SEM organization structure. In Canada, SEM is still seen as largely a registrarial responsibility. Some institutions, however, have developed a matrix approach using SEM steering committees and related working groups, and have nominally assigned a senior administrator to coordinate SEM efforts.

PLANNING

Many institutions on both sides of the border equate the use of enrolment management strategies with having a SEM plan. An increasing number of U.S. institutions and a few Canadian institutions have developed comprehensive SEM plans, with a sizable number claiming they are in progress. A continuing challenge in Canada is that most enrolment data analysis occurs in planning offices by staff that do not always fully understand SEM and/or have the time to devote to reach and resources to SEM questions.

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Historic collegial approaches to *recruitment* in Canada continue...

RECRUITMENT

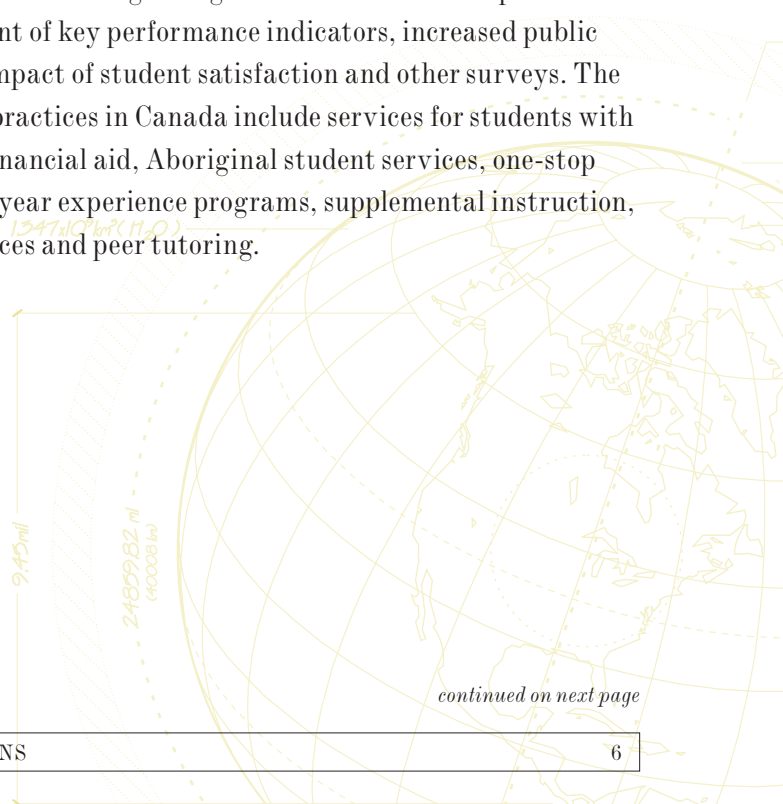
There are considerable differences between U.S. and Canadian approaches to student recruitment, although the differences have narrowed in recent years. Whereas American higher education no longer fears the “recruitment” word, Canada is still transitioning from a liaison outreach effort to one that includes 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. The United States makes much more extensive use of current student and alumni ambassadors, telecounseling and predictive modeling to attract students.

RETENTION

There is a great deal of similarity between Canadian and American approaches to retention. First-year-experience programs, integration of academic support services, student services consolidations and intrusive academic advising are present in both countries. Many U.S. institutions have formulated retention goals and action plans because retention is an accountability measure in many states. Canadian institutions are beginning to formalize retention plans as a result of the development of key performance indicators, increased public accountability and the impact of student satisfaction and other surveys. The most common retention practices in Canada include services for students with disabilities, emergency financial aid, Aboriginal student services, one-stop enrolment services, first-year experience programs, supplemental instruction, gender programs or services and peer tutoring.

EMERGING TRENDS IN CANADA

1. Changes in educational systems
2. Fiscal pressures
3. Enrolment planning
4. On-line learning
5. Use of Data
6. Recruitment
7. Impact of E-Recruitment
8. Admissions
9. Financial Aid
10. Student Services



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EMERGING TRENDS IN CANADA

We see a number of emerging SEM issues developing in Canada. These include:

- *Changes in educational systems*—blending/overlap of college and university missions; pressure for more seamless pathways and collaborative programs; increased institutional differentiation; expanding capacity in selected provinces; and development of private institutions.
- *Fiscal pressures*—decreased government funding; targeted funding with more strings attached; heavier reliance on student fees; and increasing operational costs.
- *Enrolment planning*—the demographic bubble is about to burst as the economic recession impacts post-secondary enrolment.
- *On-line learning*—explosive growth in recent years; distinctions between on-line and in-person instruction blurring; moving from the fringe to a central part of institutional operations.
- *Use of Data*—increasing use of KPI's and concern over a lack of a common data set.
- *Recruitment*—escalating competition has led to the need to find new markets; concern with access for First Generation and Aboriginal students; and increased focus on parental expectations.
- *Impact of E-Recruitment*—development of the “stealth” market place; CRM systems, Web portals and enhanced Web sites; expectation of 24/7 service; social networking; and on-line recruitment fairs.
- *Admissions*—change of philosophy from gatekeeper to facilitator of enrolment; centralized application centers; holistic admissions assessment; and reserving space for under-represented populations.
- *Financial Aid*—use of financial aid as a SEM strategy; growing use of merit aid and athletic awards; rising fees and higher student debt levels; and inability to close the gap for at-risk low-income youth.
- *Student Services*—recognition of the link between recruitment and retention and increased focus on the first-year experience and student engagement.

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CONCLUSION

Canada is well on its way to development of its own brand of enrolment management. Although much remains to be learned from the American experience, Canada has developed a wide array of its own SEM practices. These are now chronicled in the new Canadian SEM resource library, which can be accessed by going to www.uwindsor.ca/sem. Those interested in Canadian SEM are encouraged to visit the resource library, submit published work, technical papers and conference presentations, participate in the online forum and consider attending our annual Canadian SEM Summit. 🌐

*Canada is well on its way to
development of its own brand of
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