

# **Defining Enrollment Management: The Political Frame**

Jim Black

Elements of Bolman and Deals' (1991) political frame are widely discussed and written about among enrollment managers. Whether it is under the guise of managing change, getting things done, understanding institutional politics, or soliciting campus-wide involvement, the issues are often thorny and leave many practitioners perplexed. Frequently, these issues involve leadership styles, decision-making criteria, organizational impediments, competition for scarce resources, power struggles, and the institutional culture.

“Politics is a natural way of getting things done in enrollment management because, by its nature, enrollment management relies on an interdependence of many departments, functions, and processes” (Kalsbeek, 1997, p. 157). It is this interdependence that makes politically savvy enrollment managers an institutional asset. Even if an enrollment manager is in a position to mandate what matters or has the ear of a president or another senior administrator who can issue directives, skills such as building relationships and motivating others to embrace an idea or a strategy are needed to integrate services, influence the academic product, shape institutional image, or on occasion, circumvent the bureaucratic maze.

Politically astute enrollment managers are always searching for leverage (Owens, 2001). For example, a decline in new student enrollments or continuing student retention can provide the leverage necessary to create an institutional sense of urgency. It is virtually impossible to effect substantial change without a sense of urgency (Belasco, 1991; Kotter, 1995; Black, 2001; Whiteside, 2001). After all, colleges and universities have been in existence longer than any

other organization in the world except the church. We have endured not because of our capacity to change but rather in spite of it.

As enrollment managers we have access to data that can transform or influence mindsets, business practices, strategic decisions, and institutional priorities. But the data are rendered useless if there is no analysis. According to Black (2001), the data also must be used to tell a story. The story should promote an understanding of the dynamics that impact enrollment. And it must be delivered in digestible sound bytes, over an extended period of time, with some repetition. It must answer the proverbial question, “What’s in it for me?” Lastly, the story must be compelling. Once the story has been ingrained in the psyche of the intended audience and they have shown signs of investment in the cause, it is time for what development officers call “the ask.”

Not only should circumstances and data be leveraged, but relationships should as well. Enrollment managers should invest considerable time in identifying power brokers and developing relationships that are mutually beneficial. A recently retired dean had a practice of sending a single long stem rose to departmental secretaries along with a brief personal note expressing appreciation for what they had done for his unit. He recognized that secretaries, particularly in the academic departments, play a major role in getting things done. Similarly, an admissions office at a public university in the South hosts a reception for physical plant and grounds staff once a year to show appreciation for what they do to keep the campus looking pristine. As a dean and now as an associate provost, I send personal notes to faculty and staff

thanking them for their contributions to our enrollment efforts. These simple gestures motivate others to invest in and when necessary, sacrifice for your cause.

The art of leveraging circumstances, data, and relationships is at the heart of the political frame. These leverage mediums are simply a means to an end, yet they are prerequisites to advancing the enrollment management and indeed, the institution's agenda. If enrollment managers fail to exert political skills and appropriate tension within the organization, they have failed their institution. In keeping with the laws of inertia, higher education organizations remain at rest unless propelled otherwise. Kalsbeek (1997, p. 169) said it best when he wrote,

In organizations like colleges and universities, nothing happens unless someone pushes. The challenge we all face in enrollment management is how to push forward, how to solve the many problems facing our institutions, how to exercise the influence required to make things happen—and then having the political will to do it...

Our job is to push. More importantly, our job is to push in the right places at the right times, which implies that our efforts must be informed and strategic. Whether we are comfortable with it or not, we must be political creatures to be effective in such a highly political environment.

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