

 LEADING STRATEGIES

A University's Journey in Developing a SEM Plan

By Robert S. Hornberger

Missouri State University (MSU) began developing a strategic enrollment management (SEM) plan at the beginning of the fall 2019 semester and completed this initiative in December 2020. The impetus of the plan was a changing landscape in enrollment and recognition of the need to respond with intentionality. The university approached the plan by gaining buy-in with campus leadership, engaging the full campus community, involving faculty as a critical role in the process, and eventually extending the project timeline to allow for reassessing and modifying the plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Missouri State University (MSU) is a four-year public university with approximately 24,000 students. For more than 20 years, it enjoyed stable and moderate enrollment growth (*see* Figure 1, on page 12). During this time, the university's enrollment management goals and initiatives were vaguely listed in the university's long-range plan (LRP) and led by an executive enrollment management committee (EEMC) chaired by the associate vice president for enrollment management and services (AVPEM).

As the enrollment landscape began to change, particularly regarding issues such as demographics, competition, perceptions of higher education and the value of a degree, MSU projected enrollment declines, especially among first-time freshmen and new undergraduate transfer students, starting in 2019. In fact, some

of this decline had already begun in 2017. Additionally, the university observed a projection by the state that the number of high school graduates would decline over the next ten years, with a significant drop in 2025. Based on this expected shift and a change in the university's enrollment management leadership position, MSU decided to develop a SEM plan during the 2019–20 academic year. Initial work started in the summer of 2019, and more formal actions began at the commencement of the school year.

Theoretical Framework

When preparing for a campus-wide effort in developing a SEM plan, university leaders looked to several definitions as theoretical constructs for engaging the constituencies, defining the path forward, and setting the

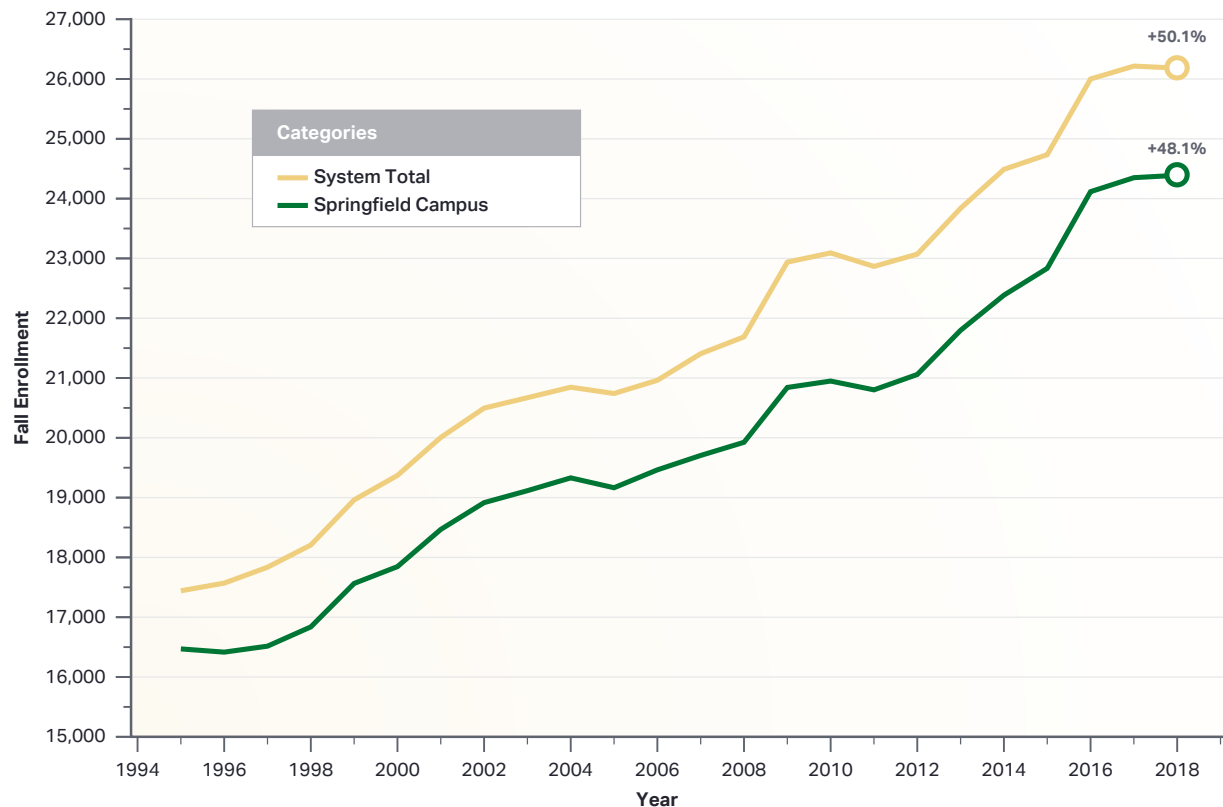


FIGURE 1 ► MSU Enrollment Trend

appropriate tone. During a summer 2019 administrative retreat, the AVPEM shared with key university leaders the following definition: “[Strategic] Enrollment management is a comprehensive and coordinated process that enables a college to identify enrollment goals that are allied with its mission, its strategic plan, its environment, and its resources, and to reach those goals through the effective integration of administrative processes, student services, curriculum planning, and market analysis” (Kerlin 2008). The emphasis of this definition at the retreat was that SEM is a) an organized and intentional process, b) partnered with the university’s mission and long-range strategic plan, and c) integrated with university policies, practices, curriculum, and external environmental research.

Later, in a campus wide kickoff event, the AVPEM shared this definition with participants: “Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is a key concept in the administration of higher education institutions today.

SEM provides a unique framework for improving student and institutional outcomes by jointly enabling student access to and success in higher education, best business practices, and comprehensive institutional planning” (Black 2004). After providing the premise to attendees that MSU faced a challenge to its many years of sustained enrollment growth, this definition served as a unified buy-in of the value SEM plays on a campus.

The AVPEM also provided a complementary definition by Ruffalo Noel Levitz to help affirm the alignment of being data driven with fiscal, academic, and student service priorities. “Strategic enrollment planning is more than a long-term recruitment or retention plan. It is a data-informed process that aligns an institution’s fiscal, academic, co-curricular, and enrollment resources with its changing environment to accomplish the institution’s mission and ensure the institution’s long-term enrollment success and fiscal health” (Ruffalo Noel Levitz n.d.).

Perhaps the most foundational framework establishment of SEM on the MSU campus was that a comprehensive view of SEM includes: a) recruitment (including outreach), b) retention, c) research, and d) structure (Schoenherr 2020). Recruitment is the focus on initiatives related to students starting at the university. A part of recruitment is outreach—the strategies involved in building relationships with high schools, community colleges, K–12 schools, community organizations, and access programs. Retention involves policies and practices related to helping students be successful by remaining at the university until completion of their academic credential. These efforts require a strong reliance on research, both internal institutional data and external resources. Lastly, a successful institution is thoughtful and intentional in its structure regarding enrollment management. For example, what components of enrollment management (recruitment, retention, research) exist within the enrollment management unit of the organization? And where in the university’s organizational structure does the enrollment management unit exist (academic affairs, student affairs, office of the president)? The answers to these two questions are essential to communicating and managing enrollment initiatives. These definitions served as theoretical frameworks for MSU’s engagement in a comprehensive, coordinated, and resource-committed process.

The Approach

Summer 2019 was a transitional period for the enrollment management unit and culture of MSU. The long-time AVPEM, who had provided strong leadership and helped ensure steady growth in enrollment for 42 years at the university, was retiring. His replacement was a promoted internal candidate who had served at MSU for 22 years as the registrar, enrollment services web and data coordinator, and assistant director of admissions. With the aforementioned changing enrollment landscape in mind, and recognition that a new spark needed to ensure a knowledgeable and engaged campus regarding enrollment, the new AVPEM began setting the stage and acquiring leadership buy-in to create a SEM plan.

Initially the AVPEM began working with the president, provost, VP for student affairs (the AVPEM’s supervisor), and the outgoing AVPEM. They began discussing the pending impact on enrollment and reviewing the university’s past approaches to enrollment planning. The university’s strategic LRP included goals regarding enrollment, but upon subsequent review, these goals were determined to be limited and vague. The group concluded that it was the appropriate time to create the university’s inaugural SEM plan.

This leadership group expressed several key factors for the initiative: First, MSU was one year away from the kickoff to begin planning a new LRP for the university. University leadership would need to be intentional in both the scope of the SEM plan and its timing of goals and strategies, so that it would be complementary to the LRP. Second, this would need to be a comprehensive and coordinated project, involving broad campus participation. Third, it would be essential to create faculty buy-in and ensure they were well represented and engaged throughout the entire process.

In order to be primed and ready to go the fall semester, the incoming AVPEM began presenting the case for investing in the development of a SEM plan to various campus constituencies. He met with the faculty, staff, student government association, as well as leadership councils of the MSU president, provost, and VP for student affairs. These “roadshows” included the following topics: a) introduction to SEM, including definitions and applications to campus; b) trends and issues in enrollment management, including issues such as affordability, consumerism, competition, new markets, new learning modes, a changing student population, shifting demographics, risk management in terms of public relations, and questions about the value of a degree; and c) the steps in and approach to developing a SEM plan. Also included were the premises that: SEM plans are similar in design to a LRP; are best employed through the utilization of a committee structure; address recruitment, retention, research, and structure; involve both internal and external marketing and branding; and must have the engagement of a campus community. The summary and challenge left with university leaders was

that MSU has had strong leadership and a successful history, yet was entering a new environment regarding enrollment management.

The formal process of vetting the concept and generating buy-in was a crucial step in the journey. However, equally important was the relationship building that had taken place well before the presentations and was cultivated as a part of the process. Having served at the university for many years, the AVPEM had already established key relationships. The AVPEM was able to benefit from trust and advocacy resulting from those connections and foster new relationships that would set the groundwork for sustaining support going forward.

MSU made several practical and important tactical changes prior to the fall 2019 semester to help ensure a successful project. The president endorsed enrollment as one of the major themes for the university's governing body, the Board of Governors (BOG). The incoming AVPEM attended the BOG's annual leadership planning retreat in August 2019 and provided the BOG members the context and justification for the inception of a SEM plan. The president and BOG established a protocol for the AVPEM to give regular updates at standing board meetings throughout the year and developed a completion deadline of June 1, 2020.

The new SEM committee structure included a steering committee that replaced the former EEMC. The new AVPEM began meeting with the president's cabinet every week to provide updates and feedback and to receive new tasks related to the SEM plan development process and structure. The president also included the AVPEM in every one-on-one meeting with the VP for student affairs, who directly reports to the president and is the immediate supervisor for the AVPEM. In this meeting, the AVPEM gave bi-monthly updates and sought directives from his leadership.

All of these actions established effective organizational communication, both in horizontal and vertical directions. In addition, the AVPEM already had an established collaborative role by being a member of the provost's staff and academic leadership council meetings, while formally reporting to the VP for student affairs and serving on her leadership team. Thus, the AVPEM

position uniquely serves as a bridge between the academic affairs and student affairs divisions. This existing structure also supported effective communication and collaborative leadership.

The AVPEM, through consultation with the president's cabinet, created an organizational committee structure, developed charges, assigned chairs, determined membership, and established a set of guiding principles for the SEM process. The cabinet supported the AVPEM's request to have a campus-wide kickoff event. The president agreed to financially invest in a professional SEM plan writer. Lastly, university leadership decided to invest in the leaders of the SEM planning process by committing to send representatives to the AACRAO SEM Conference in Dallas, TX. Several of the chairs of the steering committee and councils attended. Even the president flew in for a day to attend the pre-conference workshop on building a SEM plan. This provided for positive team building, confirmation of top leadership support, and acquisition of practical information and tools for the project.

The Structure

The organizational structure (*see* Figure 2, on page 15) for the SEM plan development included: a senior leadership team of the president, VP for student affairs, and provost; a steering committee; four councils: a) recruitment, b) retention and completion, c) academic programs and deliveries, and d) marketing and communication; and a data support team. There were also multiple subcommittees, including one with community members and alumni.

While the former EEMC had operated with senior leadership as members, those individuals joined the senior leadership team of the SEM planning process, not the steering committee. This change intended to empower members of the steering committee and remove observed bias and unintended influence of the senior leaders. The senior leadership team provided overall management and served as a bridge to the BOG. The steering committee was responsible for developing the university's long-term enrollment goals, approving strategies, and communicating with leadership.

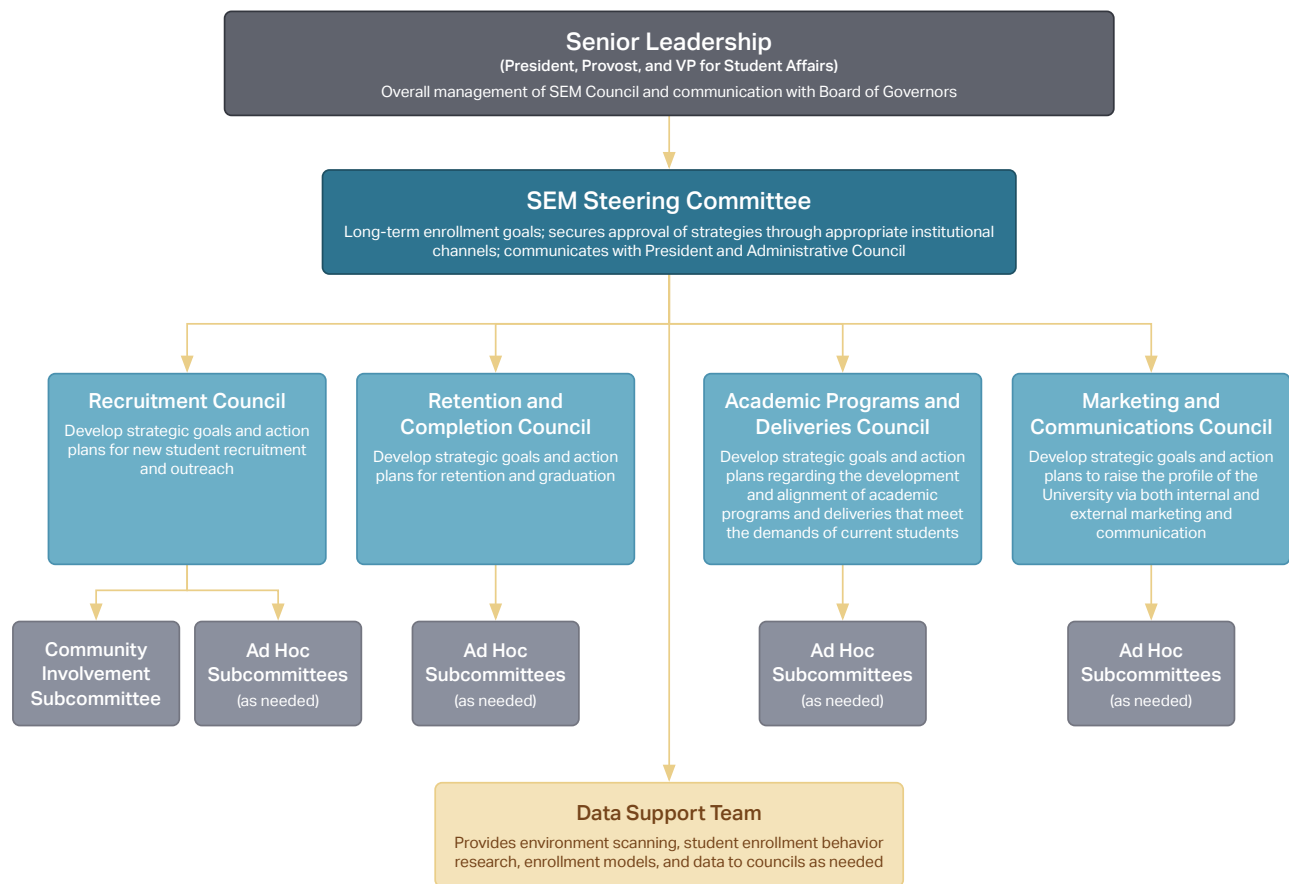


FIGURE 2 ► SEM Committee Structure

Out of the four power councils, the recruitment council and the retention and completion council fit the more traditional SEM model. They were responsible for developing strategies regarding outreach and recruitment, and persistence and graduation, respectively. The other two were unique to a SEM structure. The AVPEM, along with consultation from university leadership, established the academic programs and deliveries council to address the important connection between enrollment and academic quality at the institution. More specifically, they charged the council with creating strategies that aligned the university's programs and delivery modes with both student and market demand. The AVPEM also created the marketing and communication council to address strategies related to the university brand and both internal and external marketing and communication.

Each council had both existing and newly created subcommittees to establish deeper dives into strategy ideas and tactic development. Based on input from the BOG at its summer retreat, the AVPEM and university leadership also established the community involvement subcommittee to ensure a mechanism for input from alumni and the community. The data support team provided retroactive environmental scans, a review of institutional data, new mechanisms for requesting reports, research on enrollment projection models, and information to councils as needed.

The AVPEM was intentional in both the structure and makeup of the committees by designing the steering committee, four councils, data support team, and community involvement subcommittee with a co-chair model. Typically, one chair represented staff or administration while the other represented faculty or

academic affairs. For example, the AVPEM and dean of the college of natural and applied sciences co-chaired the steering committee.

Fifty percent of the committee and council members were faculty with diverse backgrounds and expertise from each of the seven MSU academic colleges. Also, each council had one co-chair who also served on the steering committee, allowing for direct communication and connections between the committees. In addition to faculty representation, the student voice was very important to the development of a comprehensive plan. Through coordination with the student government association, a student member joined each committee as well.

The co-chairs of the steering committee, under direction of the president's cabinet, developed descriptions and charges for each council, providing clarity and directions. The descriptions denoted the councils' placement in the SEM organizational structure and encapsulated their overall work. Each council had approximately ten charges, which served as an appropriate bridge between the higher-level guiding principles and more specific strategies and tactics of the SEM plan.

The Principles

While the AVPEM and president's cabinet were establishing the organizational structure and membership, they found themselves in a predicament. Was it better to establish the goals before the creation of the councils so their role was defined and unambiguous, and they could immediately begin working on strategies? Or was it better to wait on goal establishment and let the councils play a pivotal role in developing them? And if the latter, how could they give the councils clear and specific charges without the goals being defined? This led to a compromise between these two options, an approach that retrospectively served as a stronger and more applicable pathway than the initial two considered. These principles, which helped direct the tone and expectation, were later replaced with more specific and refined goals.

Those guiding principles were to:

- Stabilize enrollment short term

- Grow enrollment in targeted areas
- Improve retention
- Facilitate successful degree and credential completion
- Broaden access to underserved populations
- Identify new and emerging academic programming that meets student and workforce demands
- Equip students for successful career outcomes
- Employ actions and modify processes that eliminate barriers that impair student success
- Raise the profile of the university
- Develop a culture of enrollment growth among faculty, staff, and students

The Kickoff

In September 2019, the university hosted a campus-wide kickoff with more than 225 participants. The president spoke, sharing the premise that MSU was facing a changing landscape in enrollment and that the development of a SEM plan was warranted. A consultant provided a keynote address on the academic marketplace and the importance of involving the academic community in SEM, underlying the university's emphasis on the essential role faculty play in the development and implementation of a SEM plan. Next, the AVPEM discussed the framework and definitions of SEM, logistics of the SEM planning process, and SEM guiding principles to set the tone for the process. Lastly, the AVPEM announced membership of the councils, and each was given time in the end to have an initial meeting and discussion of their charges, as related to the overall project.

MSU developed a SEM website featuring: the premise for SEM, committee structure, membership, charges, and a repository for SEM related documents and presentations. The university also created a SEM blog as a vehicle for announcements to the campus community. The website also included a SEM involvement form, allowing members of campus to volunteer to be a part of the planning process. Only one day after the kickoff event, more than 70 faculty and staff expressed interest by completing the form, and the submissions grew over the subsequent weeks.



FIGURE 3 ► SEM Removeable Stickers

All attendees received a set of removeable SEM stickers to help brand the university-wide, collaborative effort (see Figure 3). The president concluded the kickoff presentation with the following quote: “Campus leaders cannot change the wind direction, but they can trim the institutional sails. For too long, the admissions dean or enrollment manager had the lone hand on the tuition-revenue tiller. Now, it’s all hands (campus leadership, faculty, staff, trustees, etc.) on deck, pulling the tactical lines in a coordinated, strategic fashion” (Conley 2019). After the kickoff, the councils began working through their charges and establishing subcommittees.

Initial Goal Development

With the kickoff established, the goal development stage of the SEM planning process began. The steering committee continued meeting monthly. With no time to spare, each council breezed through the forming,

storming, and norming stages of a group development (Robbins and Judge 2014) and quickly began performing. They addressed their charges and solidified or established relevant subcommittees. To give them more concise direction, MSU partnered with a consultant, and a representative was hired as a plan writer. The consultant visited campus and joined a mid-year leadership retreat in November 2019. This provided her a macro-level perspective of university initiatives and priorities.

The consultant also met with various constituencies during her visit, including the senior leadership team, steering committee, councils, and data support team. She led the councils through activities to help understand the hierarchy of goals, strategies, and tactics, and provided brainstorming and direction for how to proceed with goal development. She also partnered with the AVPEM to provide a presentation to the council members on existing institutional enrollment data and how it is used.

With the help of consultant training, the steering committee and councils used the initial guiding principles and council charges to create seven specific SEM goals. The focus of the goals were recruitment, student success/retention, student success for underserved populations, climate, graduation/completion, financial preparedness, and raising the profile of the university.

- **Recruitment:** By 2026, increase overall headcount enrollment by 5 percent and increase FTE enrollment by 3 percent.
- **Student Success/Retention:** By 2026, increase the first to second year undergraduate student retention rate by 5 percent and improve persistence at other critical transition points across both the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- **Student Success/Underserved Populations:** By 2026, increase the number of African American, Hispanic/Latino/Latinx, first-generation, and Pell-eligible students enrolled by 3 percent and improve the persistence rate of underrepresented students by 5 percent.
- **Climate Goal:** By 2026, increase equity, and improve institutional support, experience, and overall climate for historically underrepresented, underserved, and under-resourced students, faculty, and staff.
- **Graduation/Completions:** By 2026, increase the number of credentials (*e.g.*, degrees and certificates) awarded to 5,800 per year.
- **Financial Preparedness:** By 2026, decrease the average loan debt of undergraduate students by 5 percent after inflation.
- **Raise the Profile:** Raise the profile of the university's academic quality through the pursuit of new and emerging academic programs and delivery modes, enrichment of existing curriculum and research, and equipping of students for successful career outcomes that meet workforce demands.

These goals were broad, touching on both the traditional themes of enrollment management (*i.e.*, enrollment, retention, and graduation), while also high-

lighting specificity toward underrepresented students, campus climate, lowering the average loan debt, and the correlation of the university profile, academic programs, career readiness, and workforce demand. The BOG approved the goals in December 2019.

Following the approval of the goals, MSU hosted a campus-wide SEM town hall meeting, which helped provide diverse feedback and strengthen the SEM plan development process. This meeting took place in January 2020 in the campus theater and included: presidential remarks to reemphasize support from university leadership; a steering committee presentation of the goals; council updates regarding initial ideas for strategies; and feedback from the attendees. The councils used the input to guide them in the next phase: strategy development.

Along with the feedback from the town hall meeting, the councils sought input from the areas they represented and brainstormed lists of strategy ideas. Each worked together to pare down the list and submit the ideas to the steering committee. The next responsibility of the councils was to help review the final version of the strategies and begin working on tactic development, although the tactics would not exist within the final SEM plan. They would, instead, be action items and exist in the form of recruitment plans, office operating manuals, and student success initiatives. Upon completion of the plan, a more streamlined version of the SEM organizational structure would continue.

At this point, the objective of the steering committee was to synthesize the strategy suggestions so that each goal included three to five strategies. The committee had established a first draft and were preparing to submit it to senior leadership for further consultation when the campus closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemic Pause

In late March 2020 when community shelter-in-place orders were established, the campus closed. All classes moved to online format; students in residence halls moved out; and employees transitioned their offices to their home environment. In addition to the physical changes, pragmatically the university transitioned into

TABLE 1 ► Change in SEM Goal Themes

Prior to Pandemic	Post-Pandemic/Long-Range Plan
① Recruitment	① Outreach and Recruitment
② Student Success: Retention	② Retention and Student Success
③ Student Success: Underserved Populations	③ Successful Graduation or Completion
④ Climate	④ Financial Preparedness
⑤ Graduation/Completion	
⑥ Financial Preparedness	
⑦ Raising the Profile of the University ¹	

¹ Quality academic programs through new and emerging programs and delivery modes; career outcomes aligned with workforce demands.

a crisis mode. As a result, the university put the SEM plan on hold. The established steering committee and councils began short-term emergency planning. The university revisited the SEM plan in summer 2020. Simultaneously, the university leadership began to meet about the upcoming LRP development, which was planned for a fall 2020 start.

The leaders of these two important projects began to meet with the senior leadership team and other key members of the president's cabinet. They deliberated on the question: With a global pandemic, significant civil unrest that had led to some campus uprisings, and major budget challenges, was it appropriate for them to be investing their time in these two long-term plans? Were their immediate needs more important and too demanding? Initially, the group was reluctant to commit to engaging in the two planning processes. However, they determined that while the immediate needs were of the most importance, MSU still needed to be planning strategically and proactively. The team decided to go forward as planned with the development of the LRP and simultaneously restart the SEM planning process.

These leaders had a mini retreat in the late summer of 2020 and met with a consultant to help formalize the steps going forward. The university hired this consultant to assist the leaders of the LRP process. They decided to work on both plans in a complementary fashion during the fall 2020 semester, complete the SEM plan in December 2020, and finish the LRP at the end of the 2020–21 academic year.

Restart

As a silver lining to the circumstances that delayed the SEM plan, this new pathway provided an opportunity for it to be restarted and completed in correlation with the development of the university's new LRP. The pause and restart also provided an opportunity to reassess the goals and strategies due to a new environment. The steering committee determined a) the circumstances used to project enrollment prior to the pandemic had changed; b) the SEM plan's goals and strategies had to be built with fluidity in mind, and c) they needed to establish a baseline or measuring progress on the goals.

As a result of the change in circumstances due to the pandemic, and the newly-coordinated timing for development of the LRP, MSU made several adjustments to the SEM process. First, the SEM steering committee co-chairs, through consultation with MSU leadership, narrowed the scope (*see* Table 1) and transferred two of the seven goals to the LRP, where they could be more globally addressed. Those two goals were #4 climate, as diversity and inclusion would be a major emphasis of the new LRP, and #7 raising the profile, which would tie into both the academic and marketing sections of the new LRP. Also, they collapsed one goal into two existing goals; #3 student success for underserved students was included in goals #1 and #2 on recruitment and student success, respectively.

The revised goals were:

- *Outreach and Recruitment*: By 2026, with particular focus on targeted student populations, increase

overall headcount enrollment by 5 percent and increase FTE enrollment by 3 percent.

- *Retention and Student Success:* By 2026, increase the first to second year undergraduate student retention rate by 3 percent, with a focus on improving retention by 5 percent for each of these sub-groups: African American, Hispanic/Latino/Latinx, first-generation and Pell eligible students; and improve persistence at other critical transition points.
- *Successful Graduation or Completion:* By 2026, increase the number of credentials (*e.g.*, degrees and certificates) awarded to 5,800 per year.
- *Financial Preparedness:* By 2026, decrease the average loan debt of undergraduate degree recipients by 5 percent after inflation.

In addition, a new introductory paragraph addressed the baseline and fluidity challenges to the goals:

The baseline for these goals will be fall 2020 for goals one and two, FY20 for goal three, and the 2019–20 academic year for goal four. While 2026 exists as the target date, because of varying internal and external circumstances (e.g., demographic shifts, the economy, university funding, challenges related to the pandemic, significant hindrances regarding international students), the SEM steering committee will annually review goals and adjust accordingly with approval from the senior leadership team. In addition to recent factors, a historical enrollment perspective will be considered as well.

Second, the co-chairs adjusted the steering committee membership to account for several changes in personnel and a streamlined approach to completing the plan. The co-chairs of the data support team became permanent members to the new steering committee, while the utilization of the data support team shifted to subgroups of employees ready to address ad hoc projects as needed in the process.

Third, the co-chairs downsized the organizational structure of SEM from four to two councils by keeping the two traditional councils, while disbanding the academic programs and deliveries council and market-

ing and communication council. The new LRP would address the strategies and tactics established by those councils.

Lastly, the SEM steering committee co-chairs reviewed the “new realities” and how they affected the development of the SEM plan. How would the pandemic affect the first-time freshmen class, transfer students, online education, and other instructional delivery modalities as well as the demand for various academic programs, the nature of technology in higher education, the ability for and interest from international students to attend, a changing economy, and funding from the state and private donors? And what were the currently unknown issues that could end up being a significant factor in enrollment?

The revised SEM plan was completed and approved at the December 2020 BOG meeting. Actions related to plan implementation include: the establishment of a new, streamlined committee structure (*see* Figure 4, on page 21); the creation of performance measures needed for plan assessment; development of tactics that are tied to the three to five strategies associated with each goal; and implementation of continuity with and maintenance of the plan.

The university will address a coordinated implementation of both the LRP and SEM plan by establishing specific initiatives of each plan for the 2021–22 academic year through the development of a new action plan during summer 2021. MSU creates an annual action plan each year, which services as a list of initiatives from the LRP that the university will address during the upcoming year. The SEM Plan will be a new contribution to this process, which will affirm the complementary nature of these two plans. The president’s chief of staff and contributors the president’s cabinet determined measurements of these action items so progress can be assessed both at established benchmarks throughout, and at the end of, the year.

Conclusion

There are two areas of “crisis” that served as major influences in the development of MSU’s SEM plan. First, MSU had experienced 20 years of strong enroll-

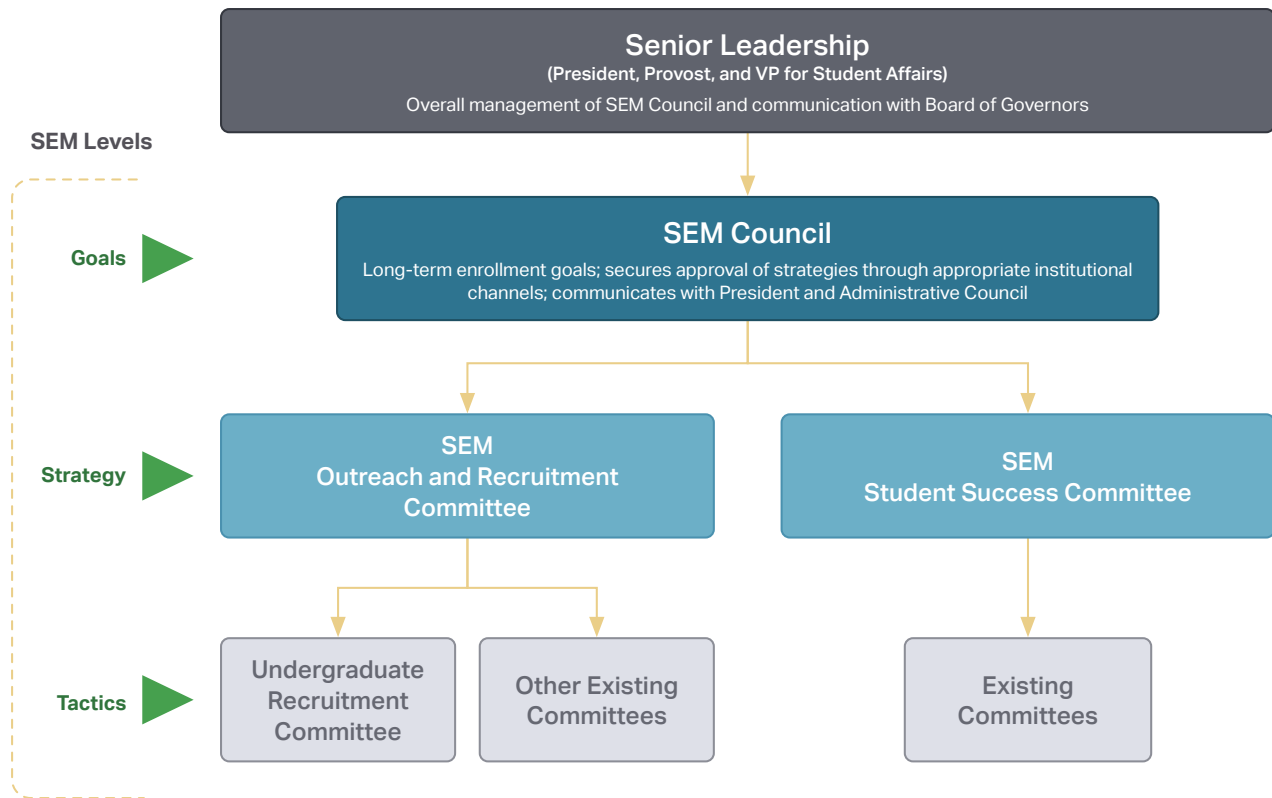


FIGURE 4 ► SEM Plan Implementation Committee Structure

ment growth. However, campus leadership recognized a new era in enrollment approaching because of the changing landscape in higher education and shifts in demographics. Although the university's LRPs had not focused strongly on enrollment in the past, MSU realized they needed to be intentional and strategic in a campus-wide approach to enrollment planning. Thus, the crisis of a changing higher education landscape and declining enrollment served as an impetus for SEM development.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic hit at a time when university leaders had already accomplished a significant amount of work on the SEM plan but before it was complete. The university needed to move into a crisis mode, and put the SEM plan on hold until the following

summer. At the restart of the plan, the university found itself in new circumstances and needed to reassess its goals and strategies. Furthermore, MSU was beginning a new LRP development process. As a result, the university adjusted the SEM process so that it could complement the new LRP.

MSU learned many essential lessons in the process, including the importance of: first establishing support and endorsement from senior leadership; developing buy-in from various campus constituents; involving a broad representation of faculty in the full SEM plan development process; the intangible benefits of relationship building; and a new level of understanding regarding the need to build flexibility and fluidity within the development and implementation of the plan.

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Dr. Hornberger earned a Doctor of Education in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Missouri, a master's in computer information systems from MSU, and a bachelor's in communication—socio-political from MSU. His research interests have primarily focused on predictors of academic success for conditionally admitted students, strategic enrollment management, and retention and persistence of various student populations.