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# Lessons from the NFL for Managing College Enrollment

Jerome A. Lucido    January 2013

# Introduction and summary

The process of college admissions does not suffer from lack of attention. Students and families often obsess over it, media coverage is plentiful, and commercial enterprises that offer test preparation, private counseling, rankings, and guidebooks capitalize on it. Yet admission is but one aspect of how colleges and universities manage their enrollments and impact educational attainment in the United States. How colleges determine who is recruited, who merits admission, who receives student aid and of what variety, which classes are offered and when, and what kind of assistance is provided to students all comprise a complex system and an emerging field known as enrollment management. Outside of the world of higher education administration, however, the term enrollment management has little meaning. But as the United States looks to increase the percentage its population entering and graduating from college, this larger process must be more fully understood.

That colleges manage their enrollments only makes sense. After all, enrollments make up the bulk of institutional revenue at universities and colleges and students bring the energy, diversity, and talent that comprise the potential for learning and academic success. So it is to be expected that colleges and universities will manage enrollments to meet their particular missions, needs, and interests. What can be said, however, about the way college enrollments are managed on behalf of the public and national interest? This paper addresses this question by examining institutional enrollment goals and the enrollment decisions and strategies that are used in service to them. Further, the paper addresses how institutional goals may be directed in greater measure toward the public interest. In doing so, a framework is provided for better public information and more informed public policy with respect to college enrollment in the United States.

Specifically, this paper begins with a focus on the imbalance in higher education results in relation to the educational-attainment needs of the country. Next it identifies fundamental conditions to which institutions respond when establishing enrollment goals and highlights the strategies that enrollment managers employ in balancing the competing demands of equality of opportunity with institutional ambitions and revenue requirements.

The paper establishes that enrollment strategies favor economically advantaged students and identifies public disinvestment, poor economic conditions, and the highly competitive positional marketplace of higher education as factors that drive enrollment strategies and lead to lopsided educational results for the nation. It then takes a novel turn by adapting the unlikely example of the National Football League as a promising model to moderate harmful competition, regain public trust, and focus on educational results as measures of quality, as opposed to the present rankings-centered emphasis on characteristics of the incoming student body.

It's common knowledge that the NFL establishes rules that temper competitive practices that could harm the game of football and its member franchises. These rules include the banning of illegal performance-enhancing substances that could result in a competitive advantage, establishing the roster size and payroll limits of teams, and putting in place revenue sharing by all franchises. The intent of these rules is to focus competition on the field of play, contain costs, and permit small-market teams to compete with those teams with greater resources. Drawing on this example, this paper develops the concept of a “league” of member institutions to establish mechanisms of public information, public policy, and institutional goal setting in order to focus attention on educational results and broaden the service of higher education to the nation. It also calls on education policymakers and others to provide favorable conditions to allow such cooperation to occur.

Specifically, this paper suggests that American higher education would be more inclusive and results driven if colleges and universities formed a league to establish rules of competition and progress in the public interest. The goals of this “Higher Education League” would be broader participation, increased rates of success, and reduced costs. League rules would ensure better and more relevant public information about college characteristics and college choice, clear and consistent recruitment and application guidelines, full disclosure and uniform methods in the determination and delivery of student financial assistance, educational quality measured by student learning and student readiness to realize personal and societal goals, and the nurturance of the talent in the K-12 pipeline.

This paper concludes by suggesting that higher education leaders, public policymakers, philanthropic foundations, corporate entities, and others engage in and support the exploration, formation, and start up of the league.

In sum, this paper examines the conflicts and tradeoffs in college-enrollment management and presents a case for how the goals and strategies pursued can be recalibrated to address the national priorities of educational access and completion.

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