

 LEADING STRATEGIES

A Project Management Tool for SEM

By Ginnifer Cié Gee

Using a case study approach, this paper recommends a SEM project management system for organizing and maintaining SEM implementations and maintenance. Through the practical application of SEM concepts to an active SEM implementation plan, the author applies a model of a project management methodology. First, an institutional profile along with an explanation of the SEM journey is discussed. Second, Scrum project management methodology—the inspiration for the proposed SEM project management tool—is introduced. Third, a suggested plan for future adaptation is provided. Results showed that a project management system can mitigate some of the chaos that accompanies an institutional shift in identity.

SEM-EP Capstone: A Project Management Tool for SEM

Institutions of higher education are changing. The historical model of students being college ready is shifting to a philosophy that requires institutions to be student ready. Student success initiatives, marketable skills/experiential learning integration, managing student debt, and the familiar goals of meeting enrollment goals are the focus. In order to survive, colleges and universities need students in seats from admission through graduation. Given decreased funding from state and other private sources as well as a national rhetoric of doubt concerning the value of a college education, institutions are forced to adopt agile, modern, and streamlined management methods. For enrollment management professionals, responsibility for the success of the next class

can be overwhelming. With greater responsibilities and new mandated collaborations comes an opportunity to evaluate how we work. The current case study highlights observations during an institution's implementation of a robust, fast-paced strategic enrollment management plan. A possible gap in SEM training and documentation is addressed with a proposal for a new SEM project management tool.

First, the author provides a profile of the institution and explains the journey through SEM implementation, including how a SEM project management tool was piloted. Second, Scrum project management methodology—the inspiration for the SEM project management tool (SEMPM)—is explained. Third, a model for future adaptation of SEMPM based on several literature- and research-based assumptions about SEM is provided.

An Enrollment Case Study

The university chosen for this case study is a Hispanic-serving institution in the south that enrolls 32,000 students, employs 1,322 faculty, and offers 157 degree programs. In its 50 years of existence, this institution has gone through an identity shift. Having begun as a commuter school serving students primarily in the local area, enrollment has doubled over the past two decades. Institutional identity has changed such that it is now one of the state's top research universities as well as a top choice of students. Yet this institution never had a formal, campus-wide SEM plan.

Developing the Plan

In terms of following a proper SEM analysis and implementing the plan, the institution followed the prescribed program. As Bontrager and Brown (2009) stated, enrollment planning has to be partnered with financial planning. The budget outcomes and the goals of the institution need to be aligned in order to make the best decisions about strategic planning. It can be inferred that this lack of alignment is why this institution had never developed a SEM plan. For many years, enrollment “just happened” as a result either of the institution's position in the region or of increases in high school graduation rates. However, as recruiters from competitor universities arrived, as local community colleges touted their affordability, and as new public universities established campuses nearby, the institution's status as the only large public institution in the area began to change. New university leadership realized that relying on luck was not the way to stay competitive or relevant in a rapidly changing and somewhat unpredictable higher education market. When the institution began to be viewed holistically rather than as independent siloes, and when its financial health was compared to enrollment health, it became evident that illness was on the horizon if change did not occur. A university-wide SEM plan was needed.

Anticipating that creating a SEM plan would be arduous, an outside consultant was hired in tandem with an outside consultant for budgeting and finance. These two processes worked together as the institution decided what a healthy enrollment number would be in

five, ten, and 20 years. An environmental scan of the student population revealed that time and resources were not being spent wisely.

Generally speaking, there are three basic categories of students: those who will never attend, those who will attend no matter how the institution recruits them, and those who might or might not enroll. Analysis identified efforts being directed to students who would never apply and failure to foster relationships with those who were uncertain about their enrollment. Some sub-populations of prospects were not even acknowledged. It was evident that the phase I focus had to be on prospects and inquiries. Processes were haphazard given the lack of a customer relationship management system (CRM).

SEM task forces comprising faculty, staff, and students were formed. SWOT analysis and return on investment were calculated while much-needed systems (including a CRM and scholarship management software) were purchased. Clear timelines were developed, and enrollment projections were made: 38,477 by fall 2023 (33,066 undergraduates, 4,627 graduates, and 784 post-baccalaureates). As of fall 2017, enrollment was 31,000 students. Eight phase I SEM initiatives to begin in fall 2018 and thirteen phase II initiatives to begin in fall 2019 were identified. The process was the mirror image of what Bontrager and Brown (2009, 64–68) outlined and proved very effective.

Working the Plan to Make It Work

The process outlined in books, articles, and workshops for preparing a SEM plan for launch is excellent; it's a beautiful road map. However, when the consultants leave campus and it is time for the actual journey to begin, the ability of everyone to stay the course is critical to the project's success. This is where the current case study begins. First, a caveat before discussing the specifics of this institution's SEM planning: Discussion of a project management tool was not born from a place of inadequate quality or quantity of work. It was simply an observation of a need for a systematic process for organizing a large, multifaceted project. For this institution, the factor of change must be considered as it can have a dramatic impact. It is likely that as many colleges

and universities adapt to the changing higher education landscape, change management will be a frequent topic. Changes in university structure, job function, and job purpose are discussed below.

Change Management

How well institutions of higher education manage change—including the change a SEM plan can bring, such as organizational re-structure—is critical (Bontrager and Green 2014, Huddleston 2001): “SEM requires a wide range of functional changes from within institutions that suggest new planning processes and structures” (Bontrager and Green 2014, 532). There may be a need to reorganize departments as these structures should be designed to support the enrollment environment (Huddleston 2001). At this institution, a new Division of Strategic Enrollment was created; previously, enrollment services (admissions, registrar, and financial aid) were housed within student affairs. To be more strategically enrollment focused, it was necessary to create a new division solely responsible for all areas of enrollment, retention, and graduation.

Suddenly, staff not only had their day jobs to continue but also were in charge of facilitating a major SEM initiative, leading employees down new and somewhat unfamiliar paths, and adapting to organizational changes both theoretical and physical. The Satir change model (Smith 2015) shows the progression of emotional response that people experience when faced with an altered status quo: First, there is resistance resulting from the break of the comfortable way of doing things to this new and unknown process. Second, they are thrown into disarray as they work to reduce uncertainty, learn new skills, and adapt to the change. The rate at which people become integrated into the change depends on many factors, such as effective leadership, communication, and acceptance that “this is the new status quo.” Over time, this change becomes the new normal, and a level of comfort returns. This is one reason that a clear SEMPM tool is needed to help maintain progress in the midst of upheaval. The following highlights the SEMPM pilot and Scrum methodology used as the inspiration for the SEMPM. This is the methodology for implementing the plan.

SEMPM Pilot

The need for a more streamlined project management system was identified in the middle of the institution’s implementation of phase I initiatives. The eight large initiatives had sub-initiatives, each with its own tasks and projects. In the midst of the chaos of change, maintaining day jobs, employee turnover, stretched resources, and project management, some tasks were being missed while some efforts were being duplicated. The lack of acceptance criteria for some of the initiatives prompted the first realization that progress was slowing. How would we know when an initiative was complete? How should we measure it? Relatable generic statements such as “increase first-gen” or “enhance summer programs” may create excitement across campus at the outset, but unless these goals are well-defined, it is difficult to measure and demonstrate progress. Teams were able to agree on some pass/fail criteria. It should be noted that not all initially agreed on what constituted acceptable completion of a project; this constituted further evidence of the need to define this at the beginning stages.

Ownership also proved problematic. Several initiatives were owned by the same person, and the demands proved too great. Time to completion, resources, and available skilled staff should have been discussed initially so more delegation could occur in order to accomplish the full scope of what was proposed. In response, the team realistically time-boxed several initiatives and delegated more tasks. Those tasks that were divided into timed deliverables with clear owners were accomplished much more quickly.

There was no easily accessible visualization of processes. A visual SEM board was created on an office wall to serve as the hub of the project management process. At first, people were hesitant about the usefulness of this method, but once tasks started progressing along the board, understanding of its value increased. (See Figure 1, on page 28.) For example, competing priorities and limited time and resources resulted in one large initiative being static for months. The visual board clarified this. Resources were found to work on a portion of the initiative and thereby to produce some movement. If the display had not been visual, there



FIGURE 1 ► Sample SEMPM Visualization Board

might have been gaps in progress—or some progress may have been realized much later.

The team’s meetings were intermittent at first and not focused on actionable items needed to advance the plan. Consistent progress report meetings were identified as critical to collaboration and were implemented by the vice president of the division. One lesson learned was that the purpose of the meeting must be completely clear and include action items. Conversation was not to veer from the main topics of the SEM plan on which people were working. Four months after the project management pilot, four initiatives were complete, three were still in progress, and one was moved to phase II as a result of insufficient time and resources. Use of a project management tool greatly improved the identification of obstacles and barriers and served as an accountability tool.

A Project Management Tool for SEM

On the basis of information from the pilot project, the following SEM-tailored project management tool is proposed. “Scrum” is a management framework that originated in the disciplines of engineering, math, and computer science. (Scrum is heavily used in IT project

management. This discussion of Scrum may deviate from its use in IT processes given its focus on enrollment management.) Scrum does not stand for anything; rather, the term originates in the game of rugby and refers to the team coming together to get the ball from one end of the field to the other. In short, Scrum methodology allows teams to manage projects more effectively; allows for real-time process review and adaptive decisions, if needed; and allows for flexibility in changing environments. Ideally, a Scrum master facilitates a small team, identifying obstacles and working to clear them so work can be accomplished.

Scrum teams are interactive and cross-functional. The chaos that can result from too many projects at once has to be controlled if progress is to be realized. Risk is minimized by focusing on short iterations of clearly defined deliverables. According to James and Walter (2010), “The greatest potential benefit of Scrum is for it to be used in complex work involving knowledge design and collaboration, such as new product development” (1). It can be argued that there are many new products in a SEM plan, whether a new tool such as a CRM, a new recruitment plan, or a financial aid awarding philosophy.

Now that Scrum has been briefly defined, the discussion continues with further explanation of its use in SEM. Several assumptions about SEM are true and therefore are used to build the case for the SEM project management tool (Bontrager and Green 2014, Sigler 2017):

- SEM is a long-range project. Because SEM is not a short race, focus and direction can be lost; a tool to keep everyone on course therefore is helpful.
- SEM is a continuous process. Most institutions have five- or ten-year plans, but those plans should be dynamic. Being interactive and reflective with the SEM plan allows for changes in course when needed.
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) drive SEM. Without constant attention and evaluation, initiatives can morph into something no longer relevant. KPIs should be central to conversations; a tool that allows these to be reviewed routinely will accomplish this task.
- SEM should be flexible enough to adjust to realignment (if needed) with the institution's mission, vision, and values. It is not a report on a shelf.
- SEM is a campus-wide effort. As stated earlier, a project management tool allows for management of large projects by breaking them down into identifiable deliverables. Identification of achievement and moving the process forward are critical for campus-wide buy-in and participation. This can also assist in addressing the chaos of change.

Following is an outline of a structure for the SEMPM tool.

Cervone (2011) describes four core principles of Scrum that transfer well into SEM planning: First, individuals and interactions take precedence over processes and tools. How many times has an institution implemented a new tool or software program only to scrap it within a year? If the interactions of the people using the tools aren't solid, the tools become obstacles. Second, working processes are more important than comprehensive documentation. Yes, a clear SEM plan should be written; however, the real time and energy

are not dedicated to perfecting a static document but to working the tactics and strategies outlined in the document. Third, customer collaboration (*i.e.* the student) should take priority. The SEM plan should always be student focused. Once an institution loses focus on the student, it has lost sight of the goal. Last, responding to change is more important than following a plan. With diligent assessment as the plan progresses, an institution should be able to identify when a shift in course is needed. If an obstacle proves insurmountable, another way around must be found. Sadly, lack of assessment and periodic evaluation of SEM process leads institutions down a road that soon proves impassable. Time is lost to back-tracking to find a suitable route. In addition to the core principles, Cervone (2011) describes five major activities associated with Scrum. The following discusses these in relation to SEMPM.

The first activity is the *kickoff*. In the context of Scrum, this is used to define the initiative's project requirements, determine the goals, and create the backlog (requirements for the project to be complete, including acceptance criteria). In the context of SEM, the author envisions this occurring at the end of the SEM planning stage. (*See* Figure 2, on page 30 for a SEM planning framework provided by AACRAO with proposed SEMPM additions.) After strategies and tactics are developed, the next step is achieving sustainable enrollment outcomes. However, if tactics are not implemented effectively or in sequence, then desired enrollment outcomes will not come to fruition. Another step that would serve as the kickoff of the SEMPM is needed.

The kickoff meeting must contain one crucial step: establishment of acceptance criteria. The initiatives with action steps should be clear so that individuals not associated with one's department can read and understand the action plan. The gap in this study was in the accepted definition of "done." This must be clearly stated as perceptions of completion can vary from person to person. Defining acceptance criteria creates focus not only on detailed results needed but also on timelines and due dates so work can be more targeted and efficient. It also ensures shared understanding by everyone involved in the project.

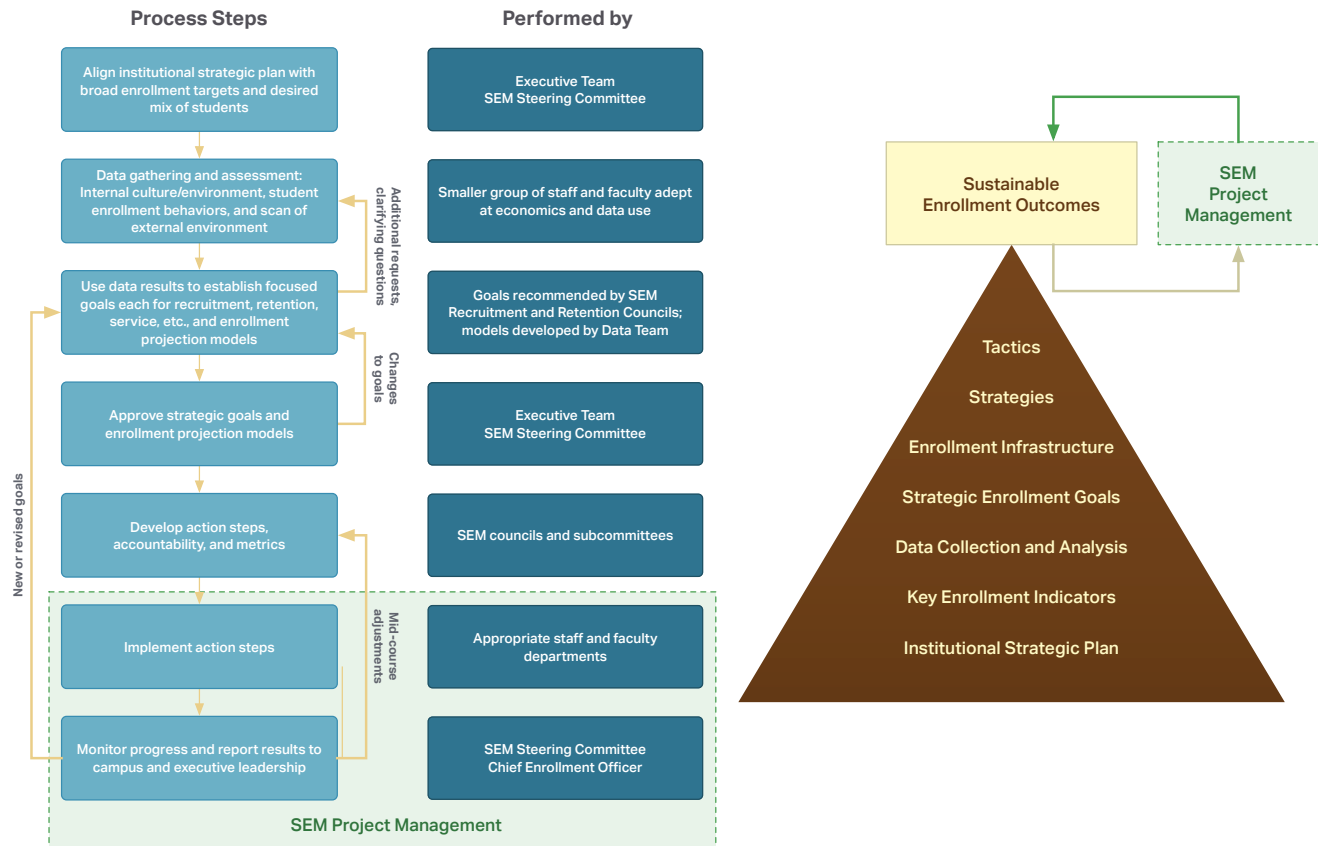


FIGURE 2 ▶ Proposed Inclusion of SEM Project Management in Current SEM Process

Adapted from Green (2017)

The second activity is the sprint planning meeting. In Scrum terminology, a sprint is a time-boxed event in which a piece of the work should be accomplished. Once acceptance criteria for completed work are established, the next step should be to determine how long each task should take. For example, if financial aid leveraging was the overall initiative, a sprint could be creating a communication plan for awarded students. Each sprint completes a portion of the larger project in a short, designated amount of time. The sprint planning meeting provides opportunity for the team to review the backlog and determine the increment of time and resources needed to complete. Sprints are determined and assigned to individuals.

Determining who owns the initiative and who owns the individual tasks (sprints) is critical. This can solve

two problems: First, when changes are needed or decisions need to be made, progress can stall as a result of confusion about ownership. Everyone may assume someone else is addressing the issue or say “It’s not my job” or “I can’t make that decision,” with the result that nothing is accomplished. Second, a declaration of ownership facilitates review of the project while it is in progress and an evaluation of acceptance criteria when it is complete. The owner should have the capability to make changes and adjustments throughout the process and determine whether the acceptance criteria have been met. The owner is responsible not only for this execution but also for sustainability after the project is confirmed complete.

The third activity is the actual sprint. This should be an aspect of the project that is doable in the given

amount of time. Deviation from the sprint can derail the project as elements depend on the completion of other parts. This is where cross-campus collaboration is key. The set-up of each sprint—including expectations of who will need to be involved—is critical and helps ensure that when the time comes for a particular sprint to begin, all stakeholders are ready, informed, and prepared to complete the work.

The fourth activity is what makes the sprints stay on track: the daily Scrum meeting, or, in the case of SEM, the recurring SEMPM meeting. Enrollment leadership teams may not be able to meet daily; weekly should suffice. This meeting should be extremely focused and should answer these questions: (1) what did you do since the last SEMPM meeting in regard to the sprint, (2) what are you doing until the next SEMPM, and (3) what is stopping you (or your team) from making progress?

Your project management plan is worthless unless it is visible to the team as a living, breathing entity. There are several app- and computer-based project management tools, but they require learning a new system. One basic yet extremely effective way is to create a simple sticky-note board in a prominent place visible to the team. Columns labeled “Do,” “Doing,” and “Done” create an interactive process.

The “Do” column includes tasks that have not yet been started. At the beginning of the project, all of the tasks related to it will appear here. The “Doing” column includes tasks currently/actively being worked on. The “Done” column includes all completed tasks. (Note: these tasks need their own pass/fail criteria.) When all the sticky notes are in the “Done” column, the project is complete. All tasks should have a timeline specifying when they will begin and when they should be complete. Sprint meetings are not for discussion of the entire project at length but rather should focus on the “Doing” column only. This meeting time should be considered sacred, and no other topics should derail this valuable time.

This visualization allows several key things to occur: First, everyone is held accountable because progress is public knowledge. Simply moving a sticky note across the board also produces satisfaction; progress is visible.

Second, viewing the process as a team, and meeting regularly to discuss progress (however briefly), it is easy to identify issues and solve problems. If a task isn’t on the board but a lot of time is being spent on it, the question should be “why?” Third, if a task is not progressing, this serves as a red flag for investigating or changing course. Finally, tasks can be changed, and new tasks can be added as the project progresses. Factors such as funding, resources, and staff changes can impact a project and require agile responses. With repeated review of where you are in the process, changes can be made to keep the project on track.

The fifth activity is the sprint review meeting. This meeting is used in Scrum to discuss the acceptance criteria of each sprint and whether they were successfully achieved. For SEMPM, the weekly meeting can address this. However, once all sprints for a major initiative are complete, there should be a meeting to review and agree that the project is complete. This would also increase transparency to the rest of campus. In higher education, initiatives may be complete without a formal announcement, or they may fizzle and never be mentioned again. This results in a level of ambiguity and skepticism with regard to measuring success or progress. For example, if an initiative is a CRM, then phase I is implementation, phase II is training of staff, and so on. If a target date is set for implementation to be complete, then that part can be “closed,” and a new sprint series can be set up for phase II. Advantages of these five activities are that roles are clearly defined, team members are held accountable, and opportunities for transparency and communication result. The following describes some specific details of SEMPM that are also adapted from Scrum and that would benefit SEM planning.

The SEMPM Structure

This article has compared the four core principles of Scrum to SEMPM; adapted the five main activities for use in SEM; and described some of the specifics, such as developing acceptance criteria. To go one step further is to propose a new organizational structure to include a cross-functional team, product owners, and

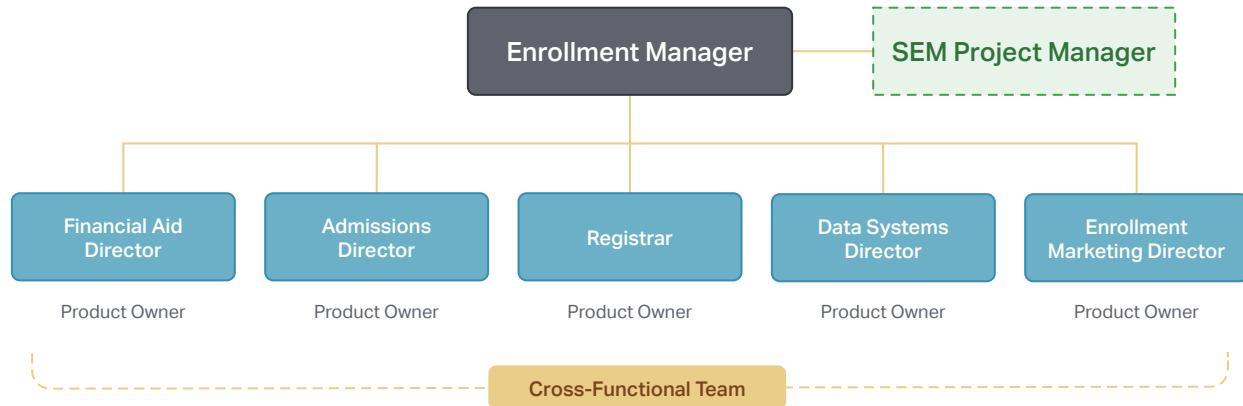


FIGURE 3 ► Proposed Organizational Structure With SEM Project Manager Position

Enrollment team structures vary across institutions; the cross-functional team is flexible

a SEMPM project manager. The cross-functional team is the group of individuals (*i.e.* enrollment leadership) responsible for achieving the SEM plan. The product owners communicate directly with individuals (*i.e.* department directors) responsible for completing specific aspects of the project. The SEMPM project manager is accountable for monitoring all of the initiatives, looking for obstacles, and identifying delays or inconsistencies. (See Figure 3 for a proposed chart and Table 1 [on page 33] for a glossary of SEMPM terms.)

The role of the enrollment manager is not new in higher education, but its critical importance has been realized over the last decade. No longer is it a role that requires just bringing in students, but now it also requires creating sustainable revenue. It requires strategic thinking to compete with budget cuts and other types of education that promise cheaper and faster results. It is expected to bring diversity to campus and to retain and fuel academic success “across the graduation line.” As the need to strategically address enrollment in this changing landscape grows, so, too, does the need for expertise in all areas of SEM. Thus, it can be argued that today’s SEM is a young field with more possibilities for expansion. In the organizational chart, a position should be created for a SEM project manager. This position would be responsible for in-depth assessment of

the plan’s progress and for managing all aspects of the SEMPM. Evidence supports this new role.

Respondents to an AACRAO study (Kilgore, Lucido and Green 2017) noted that enrollment managers and their staff and/or colleagues desired more training in data collection and analysis. The survey also found that although enrollment management is a field that has reached a higher level of importance with varied responsibilities and demands, little formal education or training is available: 83 percent noted a need for a degree in enrollment management. Introducing a tool into the SEM curriculum that can aid in data analysis and help institutions meet the demands of SEM seems a logical next step.

Conclusion

Consider again the origin of Scrum and the game of rugby to explain the cultural impacts SEMPM can have on enrollment management. Institutions do not have one enrollment manager but a team. In rugby, team members pass the ball to one another as play moves down the field; there is never a lone ranger or superstar working alone. In enrollment management, staff can retreat to their areas of expertise and become superstars. Yet without input from or coordination with one’s team, one can find oneself alone, waiting for projects to

TABLE 1 ► Glossary of Strategic Enrollment Management Project Terms

Term	Definition
Cross-Functional Team	The enrollment management team that has all the skills necessary to achieve the definition of done in every sprint.
Daily/Weekly SEMPM Meeting	Time-boxed event of 15 to 30 minutes for the cross-functional team to plan the next day/week of development work during a sprint.
Definition of Done	A shared understanding of expectations that the completed product/task must live up to in order to move to the next phase/project; managed by the cross-functional team.
Product Backlog	An ordered list of the work to be done in order to create, maintain, and sustain a project/task; managed by the product owner(s).
Product Owner	The role in SEMPM accountable for maximizing the value of a product, primarily by incrementally managing expectations for a product to the cross-functional team.
SEMPM	Strategic Enrollment Management Project Management—A framework to support teams in complex enrollment management development.
SEMPM Board	A physical, interactive board to visualize information and progress.
SEMPM Project Manager	The role within a team accountable for guiding, coaching, teaching, assessing, and assisting the team and its environments in a proper understanding and use of SEMPM.
Sprint	Time-boxed event of 30 days or less that serves as a container for other SEMPM events and activities. Sprints are done consecutively, without intermediate gaps.
Sprint Goal	A short expression of the purpose of a sprint, often a portion of a SEM initiative. Functionality can be adjusted during the sprint in order to achieve the sprint goal.
Sprint Review	Time-boxed event of four hours or less to conclude the development work of a sprint. It serves for the cross-functional team to inspect the product resulting from the sprint, assess the impact of the work performed on overall progress, and update the product backlog in order to maximize the value of the next period.

Source: Adapted from Noneman (2018) and Schwaber and Sutherland (2017).

catch up or having to backtrack because things changed while we were looking down the field. Consider the following example from the case study: One of the initiatives was financial aid leveraging. There was a pause in this initiative due to the way a student population was coded by the registrar's office. When financial aid and the registrar focused only on their area, progress was slowed. When the visualization board revealed the obstacles, they began passing the ball back and forth and this issue was resolved.

Enrollment teams are not made up of people with the same skills. As is in rugby, everyone brings a certain skill element to the game. (This is where the power of the cross-functional team comes in.) In the SEMPM

pilot, cross-functional team members were able to flex and provide skilled support in another's area. Everyone wins when every team member is on track.

The team sprints together. In rugby, the team runs the ball down the field, and all the concentration is on the ball and working it down the field. If enrollment teams are not focused on the same metaphorical ball, chaos ensues. Each member feverishly tries to get her own ball down the field. Everyone works hard to reach the goal, but actual productivity is minimal.

Unlike football, rugby does not utilize predetermined plays. Rather, the strategy can be adapted as needed as the team uses its judgment given the current situation. The ability to be agile in a fast-paced environment can mean

the difference between failure and success. The value of SEMPLM is the ability of the cross-functional team to identify changes that need to be made early on and not to just stay the course because it's written in a document.

Many resources from AACRAO and other higher education partners are available to support SEM planning. The next logical phase is to develop resources to manage this planning through implementation, realignment, maintenance, and change. There is a wealth of information on what strategic enrollment management is;

what enrollment leaders need is literature on how to manage the intricate, codependent, and time-sensitive processes that accompany any SEM plan. Higher education institutions are always being asked to do more with less, whether it is staff, time, or resources. Having an effective way to plan and manage massive enrollment initiatives can enable enrollment managers not only to better support their staff but also to streamline processes in order to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes.

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