interview

Stanley E. Henderson

A story about an epiphany, an octopus, the “Linguini brothers,” silos, the encyclopedia, the choir, God-like personages, and incrementalism: Reflecting on a career in admissions and enrollment management
YOU’VE SPEAKEN ABOUT ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT, YOU’VE WRITTEN ABOUT ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT, YOU’VE TRAINED ON ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT. WHAT IS YOUR OWN DEFINITION OF ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT?

I am reminded that one of my early friends in AACRAO said to me, “You know, no matter what you call it—what fancy name you use—it’s still going to be admissions.” And I always have remembered that. And she really represented another era—the roadrunner era of admissions. It was the beginning of something that was very evolutionary for me—that statement that “enrollment management was by any other name admissions” into what I have always thought of as the foundation of enrollment management, which is Michael Dolence’s definition: enrollment management is a comprehensive process that helps institutions to determine, achieve, and maintain their optimal recruitment, retention, and graduation rates, where “optimal” is defined in the academic context of the institution. And, as such, it is an all-encompassing concept that intrudes really into every aspect of the institution’s functioning and culture.

In the mid and late ’90s, I was mad for structure—putting together the right combination of units and philosophies and approaches. I moved from being the structuralist to articulating the notion of returning to the academic context. We really needed to ensure that enrollment management was grounded in the academic nature of the institution. It had to be part of the curriculum and the faculty. I really think that is still at its core, what is necessary for the academy. Enrollment management has to “wear the academic robe,” so to speak, to be successful.

But in the last couple of years, I have evolved to another level of enrollment management called “the community of strategic enrollment management (SEM).” We talk a lot about the three faces of SEM: (1) the management and structure face, (2) the planning face, and (3) the leadership face. Critical is the leadership that comes from the top and moves, like the tentacles of an octopus, across campus and then back for feedback. The fourth face is one that I refer to as “the human face”—the sense of a return to the notion that “they recruit best who serve best.” If you think
about some of the things that are essential to SEM, focus on service is one of those.

**WHAT HAVE YOU OBSERVED AS THE BIGGEST CHANGE IN THE FIELD OF ADMISSIONS AND/OR ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT SINCE YOUR ARRIVAL TO THE FIELD?**

Three of the biggest changes have been in technology, access, and accountability.

**Technology**

I really think that technology is the overarching change that has happened in the last 40 years that I have been in admissions and enrollment management. Technology allows you to access data, to do evaluation, to provide service, and to approach the comprehensive view of enrollment management.

I view technology in the light of that fourth face—the community of SEM face. Technology in a community of service environment becomes the servant to what enrollment management should be doing. It allows us to really carry out the firm belief that our students should be challenged in the classroom, not challenged and frustrated by trying to navigate the bureaucracy of the institution. The “community of SEM” concept takes technology and applies it in order to streamline service by allowing students to concentrate on their academic success. That is the tremendous advantage and the tremendous change that technology has brought. You have to remember that when I started, there was no e-mail. In fact, we used to mimeograph agendas for on-campus programs. And it’s astonishing to think that you could never contact anybody but only by phone and mail. And now the ways in which we can contact students totally change how we look at what we do.

**Access**

I think that not only from an affirmative action perspective, but also in those states where affirmative action has been banned, access continues to be a huge issue. Consider, for example, the growth of the Latino populations in the country and their low college-going rates. This has enormous implications for our future. If we are not bringing students of color into our colleges and universities, then we are not training the leadership of the future. It will be an incredible problem for future generations of leaders and for all of higher education in the country. We must work to ensure access for students who come from under-prepared educational backgrounds and who increasingly do not have money to go to college because of increasing tuition costs. The loan burden that we are seeing—with students graduating from public institutions with $25,000 of loan debt—cannot be sustained over time. We must work to ensure that we don’t return to the earlier days, when only the elite went to college.

**Accountability**

The third big change is one in which the full impact has not yet been seen: accountability, for all of higher education. [People] are outraged at what people in colleges and universities make and at the money we spend on recreational facilities and residence halls. They are outraged at what they see as incredible waste. They believe that is the direct result of soaring tuition. Colleges and universities cannot sustain that into the future without some serious repercussions. But I think that rather than resist accountability (which we do, in my humble opinion), we need to be much more mindful of it: We need to listen to people and not dismiss them as not understanding how much it costs to run a university.

**WHAT IMPACT DOES ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT HAVE ON STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS?**

The key to enrollment management is what I call the “cradle-to-endowment” approach, where you start interacting with students before they even know they want to come to your university. The cradle-to-endowment approach is a way of embodying—of giving practical life to—the notion of enrollment management as a comprehensive approach. It really does impinge upon the entire process. In doing so, it helps students to be successful because it’s not the funnel approach to enrollment. I have always said that admissions, recruitment, and orientation are the beginnings of retention. If you do a good job selecting the class, and if you imbue the members of that class with the expectations of the campus and culture so that there is a good fit, then they are more likely to be successful. So the approach of strategic enrollment management encircles the entire enrollment continuum, from recruitment to graduation to life as an alumna.

Enrollment management has tools which really facilitate looking at the student enrollment continuum as a
whole rather than at pieces of it. Enrollment management has more impact on student academic success than anything taken as a piece. You really need to make sure that when we talk about student engagement in the classroom that we talk as well about student engagement out of the classroom. Enrollment management is quintessentially an academic enterprise: It is a part of the academic enterprise, and it contributes to the academic enterprise.

I AM AWARE THAT YOU HAVE QUITE A FEW PROFESSIONAL MANTRAS, OR “HENDERSON-ISMS,” AS I CALL THEM, THAT YOU USE IN YOUR WORK WITH STUDENTS. WHAT ARE YOUR MOST SIGNIFICANT MANTRAS, AND WHY?

I know that some of the things I have always said to students are “you never know who your audience is” and “there is more than one way to tell the truth.” And the one the students glom onto the most is “to be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late, and to be late is unforgivable.” You put those three together, and I think they form a mantra of excellence and high expectation. I would tell students that they had to approach being an orientation leader or being a tour guide in admissions or being a student leader in supplemental instruction professionally. It can’t be something that’s just a throw-away. You have to commit to it.

I also had a part of the training program for orientation leaders at the University of Cincinnati that I’ll never forget. I used to tell them, “I will make you cry, I will make you laugh, and I will always support you.” That was a way of expressing my personal commitment to their success and [of affirming that they were] the most important people on campus because of what they were doing for students.

Here is one of the things that I value the most about working here [at the University of Michigan–Dearborn]: The highest compliment I’ve ever had here, in seven years, was from a student—a former orientation leader—who said, “Vice chancellor, you’re the face of the university.” That’s very, very meaningful because it’s a way of saying “you’re doing what you said you would.”

My other mantra goes back to my days at Michigan State University: “They recruit—and retain—best who serve best.” (The original mantra was “They recruit best who serve best,” but I modified it.)

WHO HAD AN IMPACT ON YOUR DEVELOPMENT AS A CAMPUS LEADER?

There are two people, one of whom influenced me as a vice chancellor to a very large extent, both positively and negatively, and how I interact with students. And [there was] my mentor. I never go through a day without being reminded of him or of something I adapted from him. He has been the most significant impact on me.

Gordon Sabine

The one who influenced me the most in terms of my interactions with students was Gordon Sabine, who was vice president of special projects at Michigan State University (MSU). He was the man who created what I consider to be the first enrollment management–oriented admissions office (actually, more of an enrollment management operation). This was back in the 1960s, a full dozen years or so before Frank Capanella at Boston College wrote about enrollment management. Sabine put together an admissions operation with an embedded financial aid component, a scholarship program (the Alumni Distinguished Scholarships), and an orientation program that he pulled out of counseling and testing services—a brilliant combination that nobody was doing at the time. He was a “larger than life” kind of person—a faculty member—and a solid communications theoretician. He was a very demanding kind of individual.

Russell Wentworth

My mentor is Russell Wentworth, who was one of the first people I met at MSU. He was part of the recruiting process. And when I went to work in my first job in the admissions office at MSU, Russ was a part of that operation. Russ became the dean in the national search Wichita State did. He hired me to be director of admissions. So I went to Wichita (at 24 years old, I was the youngest admissions director at an NCAA Division I school in the country). I am quite certain that I was one of the most obnoxious 24-year-olds you could possibly imagine—“full of myself” doesn’t quite fit. But it was a great experience because Russ provided so much teaching. He was so creative in what he did and had such commitment to students. He was an incredible presence who influenced me in so many ways. My speaking comes from Russ. He’s a splendid speaker; He is
absolutely amazing in how he can capture an audience and pull them in.

Incidentally, Sabine was also Russ’s mentor. I couldn’t possibly have accomplished what I have if I had not been influenced by those two people.

WHAT’S THE SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUR UNOFFICIAL CAMPUS TITLE AS “VICE CHANCELLOR OF HOLIDAYS?”

It began when students in the Muslim Student Association came to me early in my first year here and asked me if I would send something to faculty/staff about Ramadan because they sometimes had difficulty with faculty who didn’t understand that Ramadan was a holy month of fasting and what it was all about. So I did some research and I wrote something and I sent it out to faculty. Just as soon as I had done that, I realized that that year, Ramadan was very close to the high holidays of Judaism—Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—so I had better do something about those as well. Pretty soon, it was Canadian Thanksgiving, then U.S. Thanksgiving, then it was Hanukah and Christmas and Boxing Day and Kwanzaa, and that particular year, Eid Al-Adha came in there, and I ended up doing something for all the month of December that particular year. I took the approach that students, faculty, and staff were celebrating these holidays and that that really said something about who we were and that it gave new meaning to the phrase “happy holidays.” I’ve kept it up throughout all of the years, and it sort of has become an expectation and a way of expressing the sense of community of UM–Dearborn.

HARKENING BACK TO SOME OF YOUR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES, WHICH COLLEGE COURSE WAS MOST MEMORABLE, AND WHY?

The course that had the most impact on me in many ways was a doctoral course I had at the University of Illinois. It was the “History of American Higher Education.” It really was a wonderful introduction. The professor, Joann Fly, was a splendid teacher; what a wonderful teacher she was. That is what got me interested in writing history. Doing the ”On the Brink of a Profession,” the history of SEM chapter I did for the SEM Revolution, I really went back to that wonderful course, the two major texts for which were Rudolph’s The American College and University (1962) and Veysey’s The Emergence of the American University (1965). I think it’s timeless. Veysey’s is a classic, and it’s based on his doctoral dissertation. And it’s an incredible look at American universities and the rise of graduate education in America.

WHO HAS SHAPED YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT FIELD?

Michael Dolence is most significant for me. He was very instrumental in working with me and in developing AACRAO’s national SEM conference. He did a lot to popularize enrollment management. He introduced the strategic part to it and provided a lot of the definitions; he put it into a sort of tool set that you can use to make it work practically. Michael is certainly one of the major influencers in the field and on me.

Don Hossler, a wonderful researcher from Indiana, is the one who first introduced the academic perspective of enrollment management: He put it into the research and took it out of the marketing area [in which] it first began. He took it into the research halls of the academy and continues that academic practice as he now runs the research center for the National Student Clearinghouse. I have a great relationship with Don and enjoy working with him and with the Clearinghouse.

David Kalsbeek, a vice president at DePaul University, is probably the most brilliant mind in enrollment management. If you have ever seen David do a presentation, you know from experience that you have to record it: You couldn’t possibly take notes because he talks so fast! He usually has 130 slides that he goes through in 60 minutes. And they’re so dense and so incredibly labyrinthine. He’s just an amazing individual who I think is incredibly important.

Another person who is very significant is Amanda Yale at Slippery Rock University. Amanda, in my judgment, is the preeminent practitioner of retention-based enrollment management and the use of data. As she says, “If it moves, we measure it.” Amanda has done so much for that school. I consider her to be someone who has shaped my approach to retention particularly. She is someone who takes the wonderful work of people like John Gardner and Vince Tinto and the “Linguini brothers” (my way of referring to Terenzini and Pascarella) and applies it.
WHAT HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF YOUR CAREER, EITHER PERSONALLY OR PROFESSIONALLY?

I think it’s actually more than a challenge: I would call it an epiphany. I always saw my career arc as moving up the reputational ladder. You know, I started at Michigan State University, where I was trained as an admissions officer, and then I went to Wichita State, and that was a wonderful opportunity. Then I had the opportunity to go to Western Michigan University (WMU). From WMU, I went to Cincinnati, which was a Research I campus with a medical school and a law school and a graduate school. It was the step up. I had some of the most wonderful experiences at Cincinnati, including building the University Pavilion (which convinced me that in another life I would be an architect). It was a great experience, but when the Illinois opportunity came along, that was the culmination—the apex—of my career. I had been on that trajectory to end up at a real flagship school—and Big 10 was even better. And probably within the first six to nine months, I realized they had made me associate provost when what they really wanted was for me to be a director. And more important, I realized that Illinois was not a place where, in my position, I could make a difference. And what was really important to me was making a difference. And so my entire career trajectory had been false, essentially, and that was my epiphany.

Finally, UM–Dearborn was the right fit for me. It was the place where I needed to end up, where I really could feel like I could make a difference. As I moved from Wichita State to Western to Cincinnati to Illinois, I had less and less interaction with students, and that was not healthy for my career. I was made to interact with students and to work to help students achieve their dreams and goals.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE AN INCOMING NEW STUDENT TO ENSURE THAT SHE WAS SUCCESSFUL IN COLLEGE?

My one-word response is “engage.” Students need to come to college with a commitment to engage in the classroom with faculty and with other students in the class and also to engage outside of the classroom. Too many students come as passive vessels, and they expect that the university will peel back their heads and pour them full of knowledge. It simply doesn’t work that way. If you’re not willing to commit yourself to digging in—and, as I like to say to students, “sucking out everything that the university has to give to you,”—then you’re not going to benefit as much. I say to our students at UM–Dearborn that they have to think of themselves as members of the community. If you’re in a community, you have to be engaged. You have to participate and contribute. That’s a part of the expectation for them.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED AS AN AACRAO SENIOR CONSULTANT?

I never go on another campus as a consultant without learning something that is useful on our campus. A part of the success of a consultant is how much he brings back to the home campus. Because there are things you see. Even if a campus is really in distress, there are some things that are going on that are great. I probably refer most often to my work with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). I’ve consulted at four different HBCUs over time. They are a wonderful part of American higher education in the legacy they give to higher education. I’m such a huge believer in the quality of the education that they bring to students of color. They provided access to higher education when it wasn’t available at predominantly white institutions. Much of what you find in an HBCU can be brought into a predominantly white institution. I have always tried to find the kernels of commitment and legacy on another campus that I find in such abundance and in such celebration at an HBCU.

THOSE WHO WORK WITH YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE AN EQUALLY TALENTED ORATOR AND AUTHOR. DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE SPEECH?

My favorite speech is probably the “Well, you made it.” speech at the end of the Medallion Scholarship Competition at Western Michigan University. I would speak about the fact that the competition was over—that was “well, you made it”—and that we had worked at challenging you throughout the day. At the closing event, I introduced the Medallion Scholars simply by saying how many of them had been presidents of organizations, leaders of this or that organization, and that they had done this many internships. It was an incredible litany of accomplishments for such a great group of people. Then I moved to “lest you think of them as God-like personages on God-like
heights, they also stumble and sometimes don’t get all As.” In other words, they’re just like any normal students, and that’s what makes them so special.

WHAT IS YOUR PERCEPTION OF THE EXTENT OF COLLABORATION THAT TAKES PLACE BETWEEN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS AND ACADEMIC AFFAIRS ENTERPRISES ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES?

It’s exceptionally hard work. The academics are more tied to their discipline nationally and internationally than they are to the campus. There is that sense of the academics always having the solution—their solution. It leads to the notion of what makes enrollment management challenging on a college campus. It’s that silo nature of college campuses that I have used for years—the idea that college academic units are like silos. They’re not agrarian silos but the old ICBM silos from Kansas and North and South Dakota where you could drop an atomic bomb on them and it couldn’t crack them because they’re so hard. They are impervious many times to the tendrils that come out from enrollment management.

It also has to do with the incremental manner of enrollment management. That is important. Incrementalism is not a weakness. It really is a path that is more likely than a forward frontal assault to lead to success in enrollment management. Think about how long it takes for a theory in political science or a biological theory to develop: It doesn’t just spring up full-blown in the discipline overnight. We should try to bring people in a little bit more incrementally. When we want to involve faculty in some program, I always say they need to be oriented to it. But we never want to say that we want to train faculty. We want to orient faculty because they are immediately resistant to the notion that they need to be trained, because that’s what their discipline does. Enrollment management nibbles around the edges, and it finds the friendly folks on campus—the members of the “choir.” And then we use them to proselytize for us so we don’t have to.

HOW DID YOU KNOW THIS PROFESSION WAS A PERSONAL FIT FOR YOU?

As I was finishing at Cornell, I was looking for a job, so I wrote to my friends in the admissions office at Michigan State. And literally, the day that my letter arrived, one of the admissions officers resigned to take another job. It was in the days before affirmative action, so they called me in and offered me the job. I got excited because, as I was trained at Michigan State, “they recruit best who serve best.” I would go out to my schools in “the thumb” of Michigan and I would always have one or two students that I had just made an admission decision on, so I would say, “Is so-and-so in the group?” And he would put his hand up. And I would say, “I want to congratulate you because I just admitted you to Michigan State last night.” And the class would clap. And I thought to myself, “Wow, this is really great!” What a cool field to be in when you can bring that kind of delight to a student. I was hooked at that point.

MANY OF US KNOW THAT YOU HAVE AN INTEREST IN U.S. PRESIDENTS. TELL US MORE ABOUT THIS INTEREST AND HOW IT HAS INFLUENCED YOUR THINKING.

Well, it actually goes back to when I was in the third grade when I had rheumatic fever and was in bed for six weeks. I started reading the set of WorldBook Encyclopedias, and somehow I got intrigued with the articles about the presidents. I went to those articles in the WorldBook Encyclopaedia and I would copy the face shots of the presidents and would put them in my room. I learned all about them. My first presidential biography was the first volume of Irving Brant’s biography of James Madison which I bought in 1959. [My collection] has grown: I now have a definitive biography of all of the presidents except for about three. It’s become my hobby to learn all of the trivial kinds of things about the presidents.

It’s been a wonderful part of my relaxation to know and understand the presidents. When you get older, you need to exercise your mind, so I’ve started memorizing the presidents’ wives’ names, their wives’ maiden names, their vice presidents’ names, their opponents in the elections, and now I’ve finished memorizing all of the names of the children of the presidents.

About the Author

CHRISTOPHER W. TREMBLAY is Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. He has known Vice Chancellor Stanley Henderson since 1991, when Tremblay served as an orientation student leader at Western Michigan University. Since then, Tremblay has served under Henderson’s leadership in five different capacities at two universities. Regardless of Henderson’s title, Tremblay will always know him as “Mr. H.,” just like all of the orientation leaders whose lives he touched.