If yours is a sought-after school with a large supply of well-qualified applicants, your leaders’ endorsement of enrollment management can only make it better. If your school lacks a strong reputation and corresponding appeal, your leaders cannot expect it to continue to exist unless they have this critical management tool in place and help make it work.

What is enrollment management?

Enrollment management is an institutional response to the challenges and opportunities that recruiting and retaining the right student body present to a school’s financial health, image, and student quality. It’s a research-based process that creates a synergy among recruitment, pricing and financial aid, academic affairs, student life, and constituent relations.

Although some believe success depends solely on the efforts and activities of the admission office, others think the entire school shares responsibility for enrollment management. No matter which philosophy your school embraces, the full support of your head of school and senior leadership team is crucial. Your school will be most successful when all members of your adult community understand the vital, interrelated roles they play in the dynamic process of enrollment management.

Enrollment management encompasses four key areas.
Admission management, a subset of enrollment management, is the coordinated effort that advances and tracks students from prospect to enrolled student and beyond. The admission function interacts strategically with the functions involved in managing your school’s financial aid, registration, orientation, curriculum, and student life.

Retention focuses on your school’s ability to keep and re-enroll students from one year to the next. It is the backbone of every independent school’s reputation. To ensure that the students you admit can succeed, your programs and community members (especially teachers, school leaders, counselors, and those overseeing student life) need to be both effective and aligned. It is vital to collect and analyze data that can help you identify students who may be struggling and at risk of withdrawing from your school.

Research involves collecting and analyzing data on internal and external factors affecting enrollment, student success (including retention), and your school’s image. Your staff should conduct research daily, weekly, monthly, annually, and even on an ad hoc basis, and that research should accurately represent the perceptions and actions of the school’s constituents. Data enable your school to make appropriate adjustments on an as-needed basis to critical areas that affect your living and learning environment.

Marketing, broadly defined, is the process that matches a product’s or service’s strengths and distinguishing characteristics to the identified needs, interests, and abilities of prospective purchasers and then promotes accordingly. At independent schools, marketing activities include clarifying institutional image, establishing enrollment targets to meet school composite goals, understanding the school’s niche in the marketplace, and integrating marketing and communication efforts.

Why is it important for independent schools to have a formal enrollment management process?

1. Enrollment management is essential for revenue optimization. Every independent school is tuition dependent. That is, regardless of endowment size, prestige, or selectivity, every independent school has an operating budget that depends heavily on enrollment revenue. According to 2011 NAIS data, day schools typically receive 80 percent or more of their revenue from tuition that families pay, while boarding schools tend to generate 60 percent or more of their revenue through tuition collected. Therefore, your school will be best served when your administrative offices work cooperatively to develop and
execute a plan that ensures you can meet your enrollment and net-tuition revenue goals.

Enrollment management begins with the head of school, who is charged with shaping and communicating a shared vision. This vision should include a strategic use of institutional financial resources to achieve the four conventional enrollment goals of quantity of students, quality of students, student body composition, and net-tuition revenue.

An awareness that success extends beyond admission statistics underscores the leadership role your head of school plays in enrollment management, especially as it pertains to financial planning. (See Chapter 2 on strategic enrollment management and tuition setting.)

2. Relevant, accurate data provide essential information for the school as a whole. The quantitative and qualitative research that’s part of every effective enrollment management effort informs all aspects of your school. It helps you improve the student experience, gauge your value proposition, and tell a more compelling story to prospective families and future benefactors. It influences the process of setting price and financial aid levels. It’s a vital part of the planning and decision making involved in financial viability because it helps identify marketplace shifts.

In sum, enrollment management-related research gives you more control over your school’s future. (See Chapter 3 on how institutional research is at the core of strategic leadership.)

3. Marketing and enrollment practices that maximize the student and family’s lifelong connection with your school help ensure their enthusiasm and cement the school’s brand. Enrollment management involves coordinating the four previously mentioned critical areas: admission management, retention, research, and marketing. By making these areas work together, your school increases the likelihood that students will achieve success and want to remain connected as alumni. The adage “Happy and satisfied students beget happy and satisfied parents, who in turn beget happy alumni and happy past parents” may sound simplistic, but it is a theme that drives successful enrollment processes. (See Chapter 6 on school branding and internal marketing.)

A clear sense of your school’s brand empowers community members to assist in responding thoughtfully to market challenges and marketing opportunities. (See Chapter 4 on creating a meaningful marketing strategy.)
4. **Just as technology has transformed society, it is transforming enrollment management in ways that will improve your internal processes and connect your school community to the external world.** Using technology as a foundation for enrollment management helps your school leaders do reports and benchmarking that will inform your decision making. It will also support convenient new modes of communication that convey your core messages in a variety of formats so you can reach your audiences effectively in an increasingly competitive marketplace. (See Chapter 5 on technology and enrollment management.)

5. **When maintaining a systematic approach to managing enrollment — one that includes regular two-way communication — your school nurtures a more informed community that better serves students and families.** A transparent environment of information sharing supports a healthy enrollment management process. Your head of school is the chief spokesperson for communicating to all stakeholders his or her excitement about your extraordinary teachers and programs. The two-way element comes into play when, as Chapter 6 notes, “current and prospective students, parents, alumni, faculty, and donors visualize your school’s story, invest in that story, want to be part of it, and want to tell that story to others.”

When your school’s brand is clear, your community better understands its role in making the school an attractive alternative to competitors. A focus on the fundamentals of superb teaching and learning leads to the best marketing. (See Chapter 6 on school branding and internal marketing and Chapter 7 on enrolling and keeping the right students.)

**How might a school structure enrollment management?**

Although independent schools vary in the ways they organize around enrollment issues, they tend to choose one of these four models, or structures:

1. Senior Administrative Team Model,
2. Committee Model,
3. Admission Office Model, or
4. Divisional Model.

The first three approaches are the ones independent schools use most often. The fourth, the Divisional Model, occurs most frequently in colleges and universities, but an increasing number of independent schools have adapted it for their use.