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Response to EIU enrollment includes new outreach, technology

KARSTEN BURGSTAHLER JG-TC Staff Writer Feb 10, 2015

CHARLESTON – There was only one item on the agenda for the Feb. 3 Eastern Illinois University Board of Trustees Executive and Planning Committee meeting: an enrollment update.

Assistant Vice-President for Academic Affairs Mary Herrington-Perry and Director of Admissions Chris Dearth got up to bat and explained the good spots (freshman admits and deposits are ahead of last year -- deposits are up 33 percent from this time last year) and the spots that may still need work (fewer admits at the transfer level, but the gap is closing, Herrington-Perry said).

One of their main efforts is to increase the yield of accepted freshmen -- or the number of students who actually enroll in the university after acceptance. The university had a 24 percent freshman yield last fall, Herrington-Perry said.

“(24 percent) is too low for us,” Herrington-Perry said. “And for that reason, Chris (Dearth) is working very hard at yield events this spring that are designed to increase that number.”

After the update, board Chairman Christopher Goetz said he was happy to hear the higher numbers. But he was hesitant to celebrate.

“This is probably the third year in a row where we get a really positive report in January,” he said. “Right now it’s really hard to predict, so we just need to continue to keep our heads down” and keep pushing forward.

So Herrington-Perry and Dearth have honed in on translating those early indicators into an actual yield rate that could show positive trends in enrollment for a university that hasn’t seen an overall climb since fall 2006. The university now has its own task force dedicated to the process: Enrollment Worx, headed up by Herrington-Perry. The 18-member committee is dedicated to examining every possible angle of the enrollment process; last week the group looked at how other institutions portray costs on their websites to discuss if EIU should make changes to its website.

Herrington-Perry said the point is to bring together any office on campus that has a direct stake in enrollment.

“This is a group President Perry put together going on four years ago now, but it was new for us,” Herrington-Perry said. “We never had that cross-VP collaboration that we do now.”

The group continues to look at traditional, pound-the-pavement methods of expanding enrollment -- for instance, Director of Marketing Stacia Lynch is responsible for outreach at local high schools, attending athletics and school-related events to meet with potential students, Herrington-Perry said.

But as technology has evolved during the last decade, EIU has also brought in some new programs to try to stay ahead of the curve. Enter predictive modeling, a method the university adopted two years ago which, according to Herrington-Perry, allows the university to focus its marketing efforts on the students most likely to take the leap to Charleston -- meaning recruiters and counselors can focus their attention on specific students and the university can save money by not sending marketing materials and extensively pursuing students unlikely to come to EIU.

Josh Norman is the specialist working with the modeling program. It's broken down into four different sections -- new inquiring freshmen, admits who are new freshmen, new inquiring transfers and admits who are new transfers. Behaviors are different between the inquiries and the admits, but the data points are also different, Norman said.

"You have different information for students (that) are inquiries, because they've only inquired -- they're still prospective students. Until they have applied and been admitted, you don't have all the information that you have once they fill out an application," Norman said. "And a lot of times they're telling you their interests rather than 'This is the program I'm planning to go into,' so a lot of that major curriculum-centric information is different as well."

The technology uses code to look over a variety of factors -- 13 for inquires, 15 for admits -- all the way down to how many times prospective students log in to their myEIU portal. The information is constantly changing as students interact more with the university. It then updates the student's profile to reflect his or her chance of attending EIU: If the student is in the green group, he or she is considered highly likely to enroll; in the blue group, somewhat likely; in the red group, least likely.

Norman knows what factors equate to what outcomes -- for instance, students who call the university with questions are 10 percent more likely to ultimately enroll than their cohorts who don't call. The modeling had a 90 percent accuracy rate in the green group last year, Norman said.

"(Using) the predictive model to predict how many students are going to be here in the fall -- it's not a good thing to do that," he said. "It's about, 'Tell me who are the students who are most likely to enroll,' so that we can be fiscally responsible."

Each year Norman puts all the figures from the program together and presents their accuracy to administrators. And every three years he digs deeper to ensure programs are addressing the right factors to get the highest accuracy possible; what's important to college students today could be different just a few years down the road, he said.

Of course, that technology has to have road warriors out actually making contact with these students, and the office welcomed a new face last August: Dearth, who said when starting out he found there was somewhat of a disconnect between EIU and area high schools.

"It just seems like people didn't completely feel comfortable with what was going on at Eastern, just because they hadn't really heard from anyone in admissions," Dearth said.

So Dearth is working to rebuild that trust. That means ensuring recruiters are out in the field making EIU known in a crowded field. He's now hearing from school counselors who are hoping to hear positive news from campus.

He's also addressing the changes on the way in the applicant pool. As several of the candidates for the EIU presidency stated, the pool is expected to grow larger, but it will be though the Latino demographic. That means reaching out through bilingual counselors -- EIU has two, Dearth said.

Overall, Dearth said he's found community support in the university's efforts to reverse the enrollment trend -- events like Paint the Town Blue, where storefronts feature the school colors and employees wear blue -- go a long way to influencing potential students, he said.

"For (students) to drive through the community and see how the town supports the institution, I think really goes a long way and helps our cause," he said.


Contact Burgstahler at kburgstahler@jg-tc.com or 217-238-6839.

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