A Spectrum of Opportunities:
Building the Foundations of a Strong Educational Journey

- Bias Happens: Reduce Its Impact in Your Admissions
A Spectrum of Opportunities:
Building the Foundations of a Strong Educational Journey

BY EMILY CRETELLA, OWNER, CURSIVE CONTENT

Have you ever driven over an immense bridge—maybe the Golden Gate in foggy San Francisco, or Seven Mile Bridge spanning Florida’s keys—and thought, “I hope its cap and piles are secure,” or, “I wonder if its cantilevers are steel or concrete”? Unless you’re an enrollment professional who also moonlights as a structural engineer, the answer is most likely no. Instead (if you’re anything like me), you’re probably thinking, “I hope this thing holds me up.”

Conceptually, you know that a lot of work went into allowing your Jeep Cherokee to traverse open air—but what really matters to you is how all of the disparate pieces beneath you fit together to keep you safe.

The same goes for how families see independent schools. When deciding to begin the enrollment process, families don’t think about your school in terms of departments and tasks. They want to know that everything works together to make your school secure and strong enough to support their child throughout the educational journey.

Yet too often, school leaders see the bridge not as a functioning whole but as a collection of individual elements—and as an enrollment leader, you may feel like you’re the only one who sees how they all fit together. How do you convince someone who wants to focus on fixing the road-way if the entire foundation isn’t secure?

Here at Enrollment Management Association, we understand that your role as one of the many “engineers” who hold up the school might mean it’s difficult to gain all the insights and allies you need to have the impact you desire.
That’s why we created the Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum: a continuous sequence of elements that build upon each other to contribute to your school’s health and success.

This spectrum is designed to articulate the critical work required for independent school enrollment success. It provides an overall roadmap not only for enrollment professionals but also for every school leader to demonstrate how individual impact levers affect a school’s sustainability.

Enrollment is not just a single step that spans the entire student journey. It’s the full, finished bridge. And because of that, you play an integral role in holding it all together.

“Right now, there are significant external forces disrupting schools’ enrollment goals, from shifting demographics, to changing family expectations, to increased competition, to a pandemic, and more. The Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum gives schools a way to respond to those external forces, from the inside out.”

- HEATHER HOERLE, EMA’S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CEO

Developed by EMA, with insights from school enrollment leaders, members of EMA’s volunteer group the Admission Leadership Council (ALC), feedback from Admission Training Institute (ATI) faculty, and others, the Spectrum details the factors that are critical to the enrollment health of a school. These categories are called levers, and they fit into two parts: a core spectrum and an overarching spectrum.

- The core spectrum categories are aspects that tend to make up the central functions of the enrollment office and its most direct partners.
- The overarching spectrum categories are those aspects that cross multiple domains and therefore require leadership from the head of school, board of trustees, and other school leaders.

“Everything from attracting values-aligned candidates to graduating world-ready individuals to the way it feels to be a student in the classroom contributes to your school’s enrollment health. The Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum isn’t only a recipe for enrollment success, it’s also a blueprint for school success.”

- HANS MUNDAHL, EMA’S SENIOR DIRECTOR OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

So how can a school use the Spectrum as a tool in their enrollment efforts?

“When developing the Spectrum, we wanted it to apply to any kind of school, any size, regardless of resources. It is meant to be interpretive. Schools should use it as a framework to decide where to focus their efforts, using their own circumstances as a guide.”

- JOHN HUTCHINS, DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS AND FINANCIAL PHILOMENON ACADEMY (NH)

There are eight levers that work together to support the Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum. By viewing enrollment management as a set of integrated components, all school constituents—including faculty and trustees—can better understand their own critical roles in the enrollment health of your school.
The Yield
Tuition & Financial Strategy
When net tuition and fees make up more than 75% of a school’s income, tuition and financial strategy play a critical role in building enrollment success.
Schools need to take a long-term view on price, financial aid, and fiscal sustainability to ensure they continue to deliver on their mission and achieve their goals. Here are a few ways to become more strategic with your tuition planning:

• **Track** tuition increases over time, and compare those increases with inflation
• **Measure** tuition discount percent over time to ensure this number aligns
• **Audit** the partnership between the enrollment leader and the business officer, and ensure both are working in tandem

Marketing & Recruitment of New Families
Today, 82% of parents considering independent schools are Gen X, while Gen Y and Boomers each account for less than 10%.

This is a notable shift away from Boomers over the past three years, and marketing and recruitment must reflect these generational changes in order to build a robust pipeline of applicants. This means understanding the value your school provides and developing effective stories and messages that share this value with others.

Schools can begin to identify and recruit an adequate number of appropriate families and steward them through the admission process by focusing on a few areas:

• **Track** yield from inquiry to application
• **Measure** cost-per-tuition dollar
• **Audit** the effectiveness of the handoff of families from the marketing team to the admission office

Selection & Onboarding of New Families
98% of families say they are applying to an independent school to develop or maintain their child’s love of learning.

This love of learning is cultivated when a student finds their right fit and when a school aligns with their unique needs and learning styles.

Schools can ensure that they welcome the right families into the enrollment process by having effective practices and tools in place to determine applicant fit, and by helping new families smoothly join the community. Here’s how you can test to see if your school is successful in this area:

• **Track** yield from application to enrollment
• **Measure** student impact over time
• **Audit** the effectiveness of your admission criteria for predicting student success

Core Categories

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Families are seeking schools that stand for something larger than themselves. Among non-academic factors for selecting a school, 92% of families want their child to develop a strong moral character, and 61% say they want to expose their child to a more diverse student group (up from 55% in 2017). To ensure a school delivers on family expectations, all aspects of the school must be deeply and authentically connected to its mission and values—and both internal and external audiences must clearly understand that mission and those values. There are a few ways you can test to see if your school is on the right track:

- **Track** family satisfaction as well as external metrics such as AP/IB scores
- **Measure** net promoter score
- **Audit** how compelling and true your mission is

91% percent of families expect schools to support their child’s emotional and social development. Families want their child to feel a sense of belonging within the school community and to know that the school is a safe space in which to grow. This means that schools need to live out their values through their daily practices. All members of a school’s community should feel known, needed, and supported—not just those children who historically have been well-represented at independent schools, but historically underrepresented groups as well. Students should have a chance to shape their environment and feel like they can become their authentic selves. How can your school improve on this?

- **Track** student stress, faculty retention, and positive parent engagement
- **Measure** the effectiveness of DEI efforts
- **Audit** your school culture, including the perspectives of historically underrepresented groups

The goal, of course, is for families to stay at your school through graduation. However, that cannot be left up to luck—a fact that many schools are recognizing as a priority. Last fall, 34% of schools had a formal retention committee (up slightly from 2019). Schools should use both reactive and proactive strategies to ensure appropriate engagement and retention. Here’s how to start:

- **Track** the reasons students voluntarily depart the school prior to graduation
- **Measure** attrition percent and compare it to national, regional, and historical benchmarks
- **Audit** the effectiveness of your retention program, including the partnership with the director of diversity, equity, and inclusion

“Rather than focusing on engaging and retaining new students, we need to shift our thinking to engaging and retaining families. We cannot retain a student if we don’t retain the parents and family.”

- VICTORIA MURADI
  DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES
  DURHAM ACADEMY (NC)
Overall, the Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum is designed to help enrollment professionals at all levels of their careers build the bridge between outdated admission practices and current enrollment management strategies by streamlining efforts, effectively using resources, and uniting school leaders across departments.

If you’re just getting started in your career as an enrollment professional, the Spectrum can help you understand your responsibilities and how they interlock with others. Seasoned enrollment professionals can use the Spectrum to develop action plans, advocate for school-wide change, and claim a well-deserved seat at the leadership table.

“I think this is a wonderful tool for enrollment professionals to use to start meaningful conversations with their heads of school and school leadership. It can help you demonstrate the strategy behind your decisions and allow you to make a case for allocating your resources in the best way to reach your goals.”

— LAUREL BAKER TEW  
ASSISTANT HEAD OF SCHOOL FOR ENROLLMENT, VIEWPOINT SCHOOL (CA)

Want more support as you apply the Strategic Enrollment Management Spectrum at your school?  

Scan the QR code from the inside back cover of this issue for helpful resources as you make strides in improving the long-term health and success of your entire school community.

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1 FY 2019 NBOA Business Intelligence for Independent Schools (BIIS) Data  
2 EMA’s Ride to Independent Schools 2020 Survey, Total N= 2,887  
3 EMA’s 2020–2021 The Ride to Independent Schools Report  
4 EMA’s Ride to Independent Schools 2020 Survey, Total N= 2,887  
5 2020 U.S. Census  
6 EMA’s 2020–2021 The Ride to Independent Schools Report  
7 Source: EMA’s Ride to Independent Schools 2020 Survey, Total N= 2,887  
8 EMA’s State of the Admission Industry Report 2019 & October 2021 Flash Survey
EMILY CRETELLA

Emily Cretella is a strategic storyteller, content marketer, and school marketer’s best business friend. The owner of Cursive Content, Emily helps school marketers tell powerful stories that attract dream families, increase inquiries and enrollment, strengthen communities, and grow school influence.

Prior to founding Cursive in 2012, Emily was the director of strategy at a Connecticut marketing agency, where she managed the execution of large-scale traditional and online marketing campaigns for clients ranging from schools and nonprofits to Fortune 500s. She now works solely with independent and private schools, colleges, and universities.