

Chief Enrollment Officers in an Era of Great Expectations

A WittKieffer Survey Report



WittKieffer

Enrollment Leadership in Flux

For chief enrollment officers, responsibilities have become increasingly complex and expectations have multiplied. Presidents, provosts, and boards expect enrollment leaders to provide insightful counsel and comprehensive data in support of institutional goals and strategy. Administrative colleagues, from student affairs to marketing to finance to alumni relations, require close collaboration and transparency as enrollment goals impact areas across an institution. Meanwhile, enrollment leaders are often the public face of their institutions, known across campus and to prospective students and families considering major investments in the institution. The core responsibilities of the role remain: to find the best match and right number of students for one’s institution, even as the available pool of students shrinks.

All of this takes its toll on enrollment leaders. “I love the field but it is exhausting and all-consuming,” is a common refrain voiced in our recent survey of chief enrollment officers.

And there is concern for the profession: “High expectations, heavy work load, high stress . . . I’m worried about the next generation of enrollment management leaders,” says another.

These comments were part of a survey conducted of more than 130 chief enrollment management officers (CEMOs). The survey was undertaken with an eye toward these leaders’ greatest pain points and career challenges. It looks at salary ranges and expectations, whether or not certain skill areas are now more critical to success in the field, and whether diversification of enrollment leadership is happening quickly enough.

As expectations rise for the profession, pressure mounts, and it is easy to understand how some enrollment professionals can question or reconsider their careers. These concerns emerge in the data presented in this report. And yet, the survey finds significant optimism among enrollment leaders. Most say that they are poised to adapt to heightened expectations and deliver as needed. “Despite the challenges, boards, presidents, and others are paying attention to issues of debt, retention, and student success,” another enrollment officer notes. “That has to bode well for our work.”

Indeed, one executive states, “The enrollment profession has never been more important to the sustainability of higher education.”

Optimism, Mixed with Words of Caution

CEMOs are, as a whole, strongly optimistic about the future of their profession. As shown in Figure 1, “Yes” responses outnumber “No” answers by a more than 80/20 margin. However, those basic responses are qualified, hedged, and otherwise tempered with many thoughtful comments worth noting. Respondents cited external forces to be faced (politics and state budgets, for example) and internal pressures from various stakeholders. The question, “Do you plan to stay in the enrollment field?” prompts a mixed response: 64% say “yes.”

Figure 1:

Are you optimistic about the future of the enrollment profession?

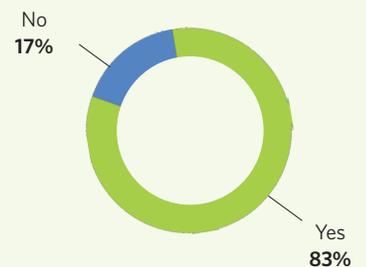
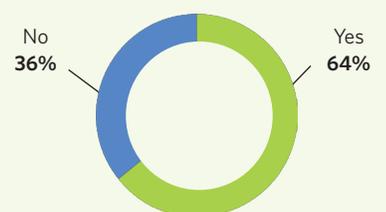


Figure 2:

Do you plan to stay in the enrollment field?



Among the opinions that capture a sense of optimism and opportunity around enrollment leadership are the following:"

"It's a great position if you want to be at the intersection of institutional strategic planning and tactical execution, but it requires nerves of steel!"

"It will become even more challenging, but for strong professionals who care about students and the power of education, it will continue to be a rewarding profession."

Managing Expectations: Opportunity for Improvement

Enrollment stakeholders are numerous and diverse. "The public, politicians, educators, faculty, administrators, parents, and students" bring expectations that "are frequently in conflict," one respondent points out. Enrollment goals are ever increasing even as the population of, and competition for, the right students rise. Still, fully two-thirds of survey respondents agreed that expectations are realistic, with caveats added. For some, unrealistic goals are set with limited knowledge, so CEMOs must be educators. How? By, as one CEMO suggests, presenting enrollment as "an institutional commitment" for the school rather than the work of one department. The work is not about lowering expectations; it's about managing them. The following are some quotations from respondents that reflect current concerns regarding expectations:

"We need to balance the various demands of numbers, quality, quantity, and revenue from our presidents, provosts, and CFOs. It's hard to dance well with all three people at the same time."

"This is not for the faint of heart, but every tuition-driven institution is facing the same expectations. The trick is to balance them all."

"My institution understands the challenging environment in which we operate, and it is my responsibility to educate leadership about those challenges."

"The expectations are unreasonable, but I engage the provost, president, CFO, deans, and others for understanding and support. We can't carry the load on our own."

Leaving the Field? Why, When, and for What?

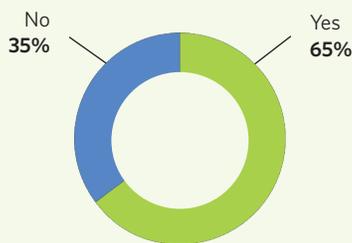
When asked whether they would leave the field, and their reasons for leaving, enrollment professionals often are quick to reply most often with "pressure" and "burnout." Explains one CEMO: "The job can be incredibly meaningful . . . [but] there is intense pressure to ensure the financial health of the school through meeting enrollment goals." Many are anticipating retirement. Consulting is a popular alternative.

Some of the more intriguing responses in this regard include:

"I could no longer find opportunities at institutions where I could personally 'buy into' the mission, advocate with genuine enthusiasm, and deliver on expectations of the president and board."

Figure 3:

Do you feel the expectations of your position are reasonable?



We are in a disruptive age that requires willingness to adapt very quickly.



"This is an incredibly high-pressure role and I frequently feel under-supported . . . this sense of isolation coupled with pressure can lead to burnout."

"In an era of declining high school graduation rates and increased demand upon full-time employees, the chief enrollment officer will be in a no-win situation."

The Right Skills for Today . . . and Tomorrow

Remarkably, all survey respondents felt that they have the skills to do their jobs now. Nearly all are ready to meet future demands (Figure 4). Participants were asked to rate the importance of a list of skills and capabilities on a scale of "not important" to "very important." The top 10 skills identified as the most critical 10 years from now include:

- Data-informed
- Strategic
- Results-driven
- Adaptable
- Innovative
- Communicative
- Collaborative
- Visionary
- Resilient
- Culturally compliant

It is interesting to note the emphasis on driving results, while skills such as being "self-aware," "emotionally intelligent," and "having a sense of humor" fell short on the list.

As one survey respondent points out, "We are in a disruptive age that requires willingness to adapt very quickly." Many colleagues agree, with 74% feeling that they will need to reinvent themselves or at least develop new skills to meet job demands—partly to keep up with students' interests, but also to keep up with emerging business trends (Figure 5).

Expected proficiencies for enrollment leaders cited in the survey include social media, (big) data analysis, population trends, and partnerships.

Ongoing Challenges

There are immense challenges for today's enrollment leaders. Finding success requires enrollment officers to take on new and greater responsibilities, to manage expectations, to continually assess their established practices and required skills, and even to defend themselves against critics. "The environment today is highly political with administrators always being pointed to as the 'bad' guys," one respondent noted. "This makes it challenging to feel like the work we do is important, when the public and campus community make us out to be the enemies." This executive added: "The pay in higher education does not compensate for the workload, demands and the stress associated with the position."

Indeed, the pressures and problems can outweigh the rewards for some enrollment leaders, which may mean retirement or moving on to a new profession. For others, there is optimism that the prestige, profile, and compensation of enrollment managers will continue to grow. There is a willingness to anticipate change and adapt accordingly. Said one chief enrollment management officer on the uncertain future: "I find it invigorating."

Figure 4:

Do you feel that your skills are a good fit for the future demands of the position?

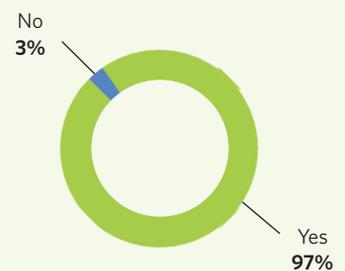
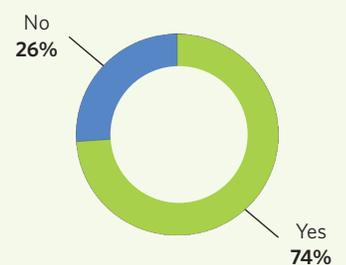


Figure 5:

If you stay in the field, do you feel you have to reinvent yourself or develop new skill sets?



Survey Methodology and Respondent Demographics

For this online survey, 137 higher education professionals in the U.S. with the title of chief enrollment management officer or equivalent responded. Slightly more than half of the CEMOs work at private colleges or universities (55%); the others work at public institutions. About two-thirds work at postgraduate and research institutions. Most are in influential positions, reporting directly to the president with a seat at the president’s table.

As we know, people in top leadership roles in enrollment largely identify themselves as white and male. In our survey, 8 out of 10 respondents classify themselves as white, and approximately 1 in 10 as African American. A few respondents listed a preference to not answer. In this survey, the gender division is relatively even between men and women.

CEMOs as a group in this survey are seasoned professionals. A lifelong commitment to admission/enrollment is clear, with fully a third of them counting more than 25 years on the job and about half between 13 and 25 years. Future classes of CEMOs may not be as large, if the numbers of newcomers surveyed are any indication: There is a drop from the 9- to 12-year range (9%) to the 6- to 8-year range (4%), perhaps foreshadowing a shallower talent pool in the future. This is consistent with a profession in which it’s increasingly hard to find leadership candidates.

While CEMOs are well established in their profession, they don’t seem to be nearly as well-established in their organizations. About half of those surveyed have held their current positions for less than 3 years, and about a quarter have been in place for 3 to 5 years. These numbers nearly mirror time at current institutions. So, in both position and institutional longevity, the numbers of CEMOs on the senior end of the spectrum are relatively few. This is a dynamic profession.

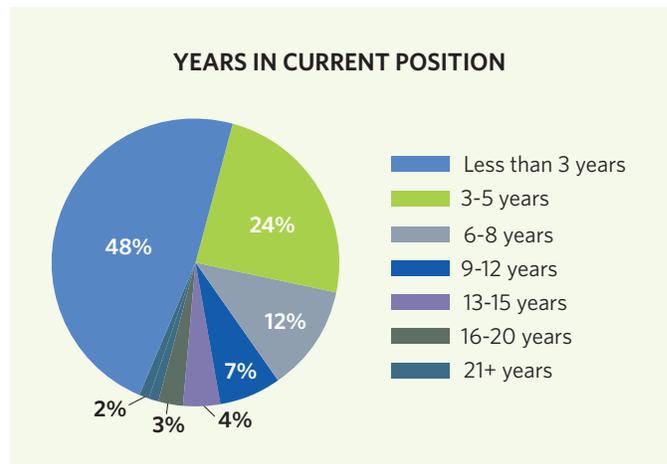
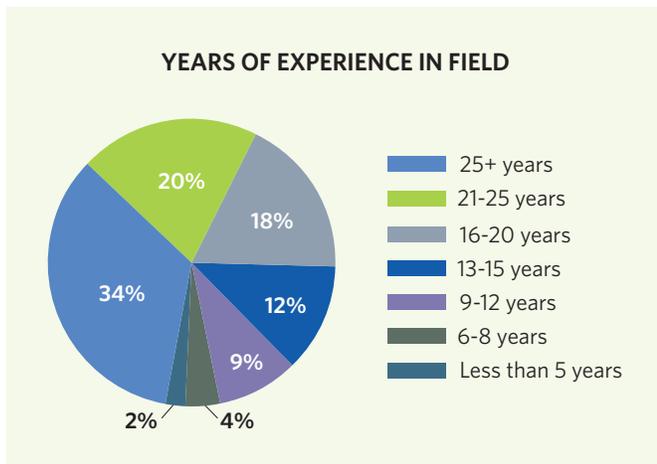
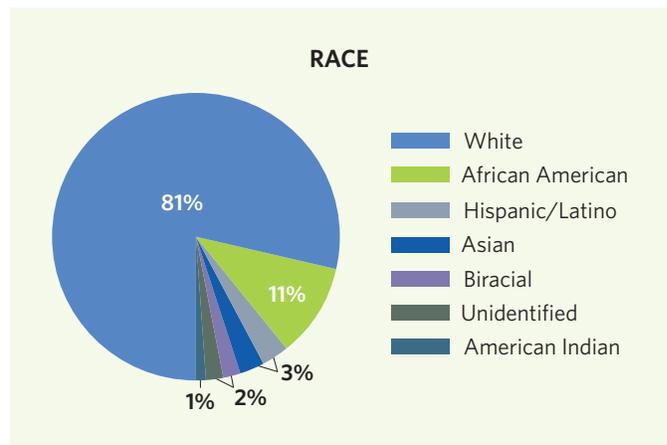
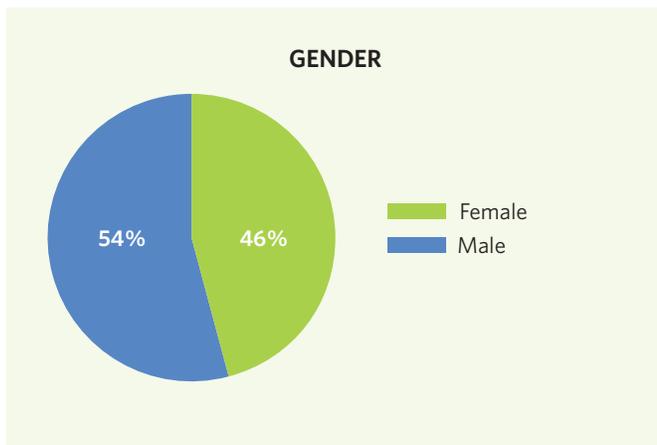


Figure 6:

The departments that report to me are:

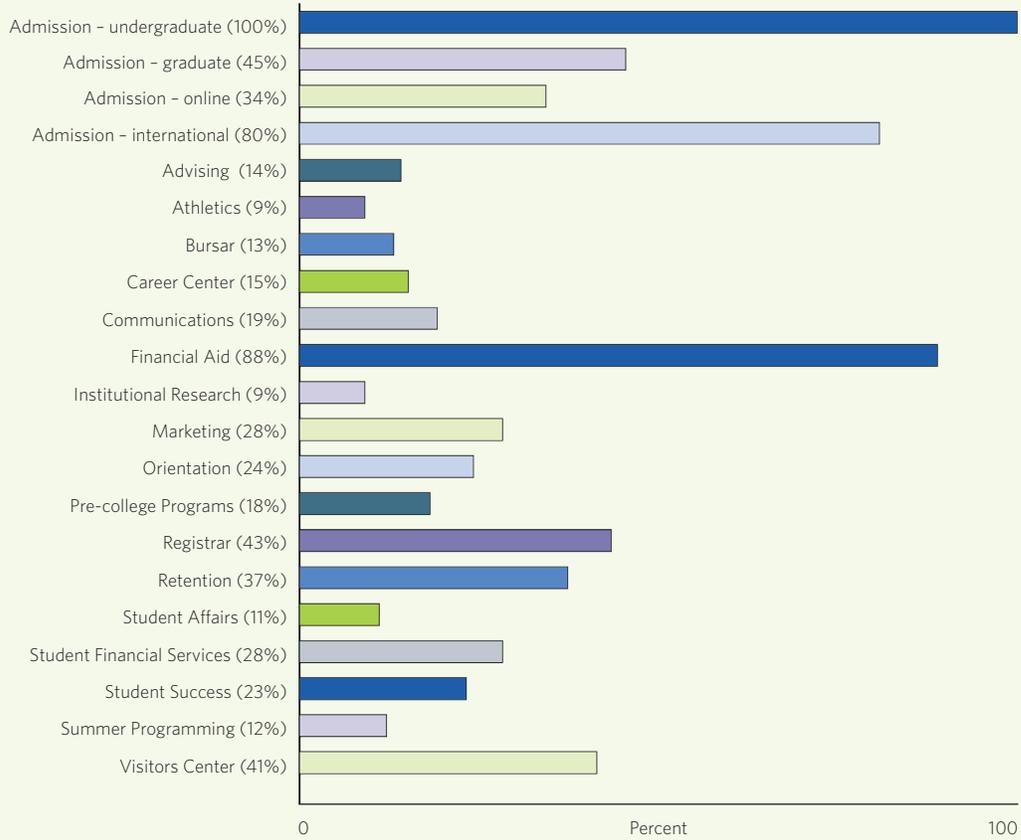
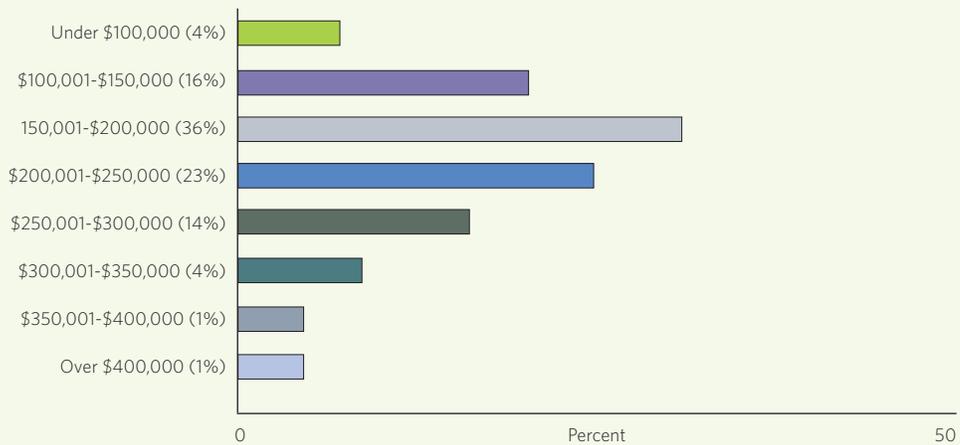


Figure 7:

My annual gross salary is:





"We need to develop a more business-like approach to enrollment management. If you don't have a high comfort level with big data, you won't survive."



"This profession is constantly changing, and so are our students. I can't imagine staying in the profession and not needing to grow."



"This work requires a commitment to learning and growing professionally. We need to be attentive to the market, strategic planning, and nimble in course-correction based upon sound data analysis."



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