FEATURE

Interview with Don Hossler

Luke Schultheis

Don Hossler is a Senior Scholar at the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice in the Rossier School of Education, at the University of Southern California. Hossler holds the rank of Distinguished Provost Professor Emeritus in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Indiana University. He has also served as vice chancellor for student enrollment services, executive associate dean of the School of Education. In addition, he is the founding executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. He was an editorial board member for *SEMQ* and is a senior advisor to myFootpath. Hossler's areas of specialization include college choice, student persistence, student financial aid policy, and enrollment management. He has authored or co-authored 23 books and scholarly reports, more than 100 articles and book chapters, and about 200 paper presentations and invited lectures. He has consulted with more than 50 colleges, universities, and educational organizations. He has lived in Russia and has conducted research in postsecondary education there and also in China. Hossler has received career achievement awards for his research, scholarship, and service from the American College Personnel Association, the Association for Institutional Research, the College Board, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. In 2015, he was named a Provost Professor and received the Sonneborn Award for Outstanding Research and Teaching from Indiana University Bloomington. This is the highest award the Bloomington campus awards to its faculty members for a distinguished career of research and teaching.

Schultheis: Hi Don! It's always great to speak with you and thank you for agreeing to an interview for AACRAO's College and University. In just kicking off, I'm guessing you didn't take a career interest survey in high school that indicated you wanted to be engaged in enrollment management, let alone a founder of the field. It probably suggested some- thing a little different. I'm interested, if you remem- ber, what it indicated and how you directed yourself through your career into the field.

Hossler: Oh, well, I did take a career assessment, and it indicated an interest in becoming an attorney. I

do remember that it did not show a high probability of becoming a college professor. Then, you know, I attended school at California Lutheran University. At that time, it was a thousand students, and I went there because it had, according to one of those little guidebooks, a good psychology program. And I thought that their basketball team was sufficiently weak enough that I would be able to play. I started there in 1967, and it had only opened its doors in 1964. By my senior year, it had almost folded because of enrollment issues, and that got my attention. It was obviously something I had never thought of before.

And then, after teaching elementary school for one year, I was asked if I wanted to be the assistant basketball coach. And they also wanted me to be in charge of a residence hall, so I'd be on campus. I took the position and continued to work at Cal Lutheran for almost ten years, during which the university continued to have to hustle to have enough students. During that time, some of my professors were taking me under their wing and saying, you know, if you really want to continue working at a college or university you need to get a Ph.D. Well, my father had a master's degree in school administration. I figured I needed a Ph.D. in higher education administration, which is what I earned. This is when I started pursuing literature related to what would eventually be called enrollment management. I started reading material that I thought was relevant. I remember very vividly talking to a director of admissions one time; at some point he said to me, we seem to get about eight or nine students from Palm Desert High School, whether we go out there once a year or three times a year. Then I said, well, why would you go out there three times a year?

His response was—we have so little understanding of what really makes a difference for students, and three visits is our goal. But we only got there once this year because of staff shortages, so we are worried about the numbers from Palm Desert.

Now, I can't remember if I said it to the director of admissions, but I know I said it to myself, that surely there must be some research that could shed some light on these issues.

At the same time, I was taking a class, and it had a lot of focus on student retention at Claremont Graduate School. The president of Cal Lutheran was entrepreneurial and a good businessman. He had a Ph.D. in business administration. At any rate, he named me the coordinator of student retention in 1976. Who knows (smile), I might have been the first coordinator of student retention.

At first, when I tried to talk to the faculty but did not have data, it didn't have much impact. But even after we started collecting good information, the faculty was not all that interested. Then the president developed what he called the A and B budget model. The A budget and increases in faculty salaries were based on conservative estimates of total enrollment. What's the total enrollment, of course, and thus, who was returning?

The B budget was a stretch budget. It projected larger overall enrollments, and salaries in the B budget were higher. As soon as he put that budget into play, the faculty started asking for regular re- ports on retention.

For me, this was a real heads-up about the linkages between money, enrollment, and strategies re- lated to enrollment management. If you link faculty salary increases to total enrollment, they will show more interest in both recruiting and trying to help retain students.

So anyway, I ended up doing my dissertation on what I would now call college choice, though at that time people didn't really use the term college choice. I was trying to look at the extent to which students decided to go to college because of what they were anticipating in terms of increased salaries. Economists refer to this as the financial rate of return—an idea that had never occurred to me. You know, my parents went to college, so I was going to college. That was about it.

At some point, as I started to build expertise in these areas, I decided I would like to try being a professor. There were two reasons for this, and both were selfish. First, I wanted to see if I could actually, so to speak, be a producer of knowledge. I knew I'd never do that if I was a full-time administrator. In

addition, I knew that if I was going to stay in higher education and eventually return to administration that being a faculty member would enable me to be competitive for senior campus administrative positions. This is not true now, but at that time, the odds of becoming a provost or a president or anything like that, were low if you had never been a faculty member. So, I thought, with a smile, the worst thing that is going to happen is that I don't get tenure, but at least I will have had five or five years of being a faculty member.

Well, I discovered I liked being a faculty member. And once I was doing that, I ended up focusing al- most all of my research on areas that we now think of as enrollment management. But I also had the privilege of serving as the vice chancellor for enroll- ment services for eight years. I served as the execu- tive associate dean for the School of Education, and I was the founding director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. My point here is that I ended up doing a fair amount of administra- tion along with being a faculty member.

Schultheis: That's really interesting. So, today we see all sorts of folks deciding the return on investment in higher education is not worth it. At least that's what we're hearing, you know? What's your armchair quarterback observation about what's going on today?

Hossler: Luke you've recently been a senior enrollment officer, but I stepped down from that role at Indiana University in 2005 and returned to the faculty. Thus, you have been a lot closer to living this than I have. The financial pressures at many schools is huge, and this gets passed on to the en- rollment manager. They're told you have to fix this by enrolling and retaining more students. Unfortu- nately, a number of presidents and boards seem to be totally unrealistic in their expectations for en- rollment growth. This places enrollment managers in high pressure positions. You're the person whose supposed to make sure the classes are full and all of the bills get paid.

Schultheis: Is there something that's fundamentally changed with the student choice model? Maybe people have grown up and they see what college gets you today, versus what it used to get you? Do you think that's led to some of this slowdown in enrollment?

Hossler: Well, COVID-19 really, really disrupted things. I looked at this for Lumina Foundation (probably the last really heavy-duty, empirical research I'm ever going to do). They wanted me to take a deep dive. What happened with college enrollments, and what can we learn about it? COVID-19 was a major disruptor in so many different ways. It is interesting. For example, students who were more likely to be predisposed to go to regional colleges were less likely to go matriculate at all, whereas students applying to more selective schools were more likely to go, regardless of COVID-19. And of course, then with community colleges, the students are all local. And some of what I found was that if infection rates were going up, it affected local enrollments.

So, post-COVID-19, college choice hasn't changed for more affluent students who were most likely to go to college. I think what is very much in flux are those students who were maybe going to go. Will they go; will they aspire to earn an AA degree and transfer; or will they be looking at career programs with recognized certificates of value? Finally, many of these "maybe students" are not sure about the rate of return on the investment (though I think research over the decades has found that a college degree is a good investment).

But what a career, though, to go into right now—being an enrollment manager. I think for most four-year schools, the pressures intersect around geographic location; student demographics; level of selectivity; and institutional wealth. And you know the other thing that's happened making this a less tenable job is that the average tenure of a college president is five-and-a-half to seven years now. Wow!

These new presidents are coming in and thinking they must show that they've produced right away. And when you think about that, what things can presidents do to show that they're being successful in a short period of time?

Well, it turns out that to have new faculty become famous for something, it takes time. Right? You hire

someone. You know, they're unlikely four years later to have become famous in their field of study. One of the few things the president can possibly do in four or five years is have an impact on enrollment. Thus, this is another source of the additional pressure that enrollment managers are feeling.

Schultheis: Right! Some of the initial work that I did, which was greatly inspired by yours, was studying choice models for low socioeconomic students in urban environments—especially the Latino population. That group is going to be increasing in numbers of high school graduates. We've heard this for years. Have you seen any significant movement by institutions to put themselves in front of those fam- ilies and address their needs and support them if they do enroll?

Hossler: You know, I can tell you how impressed I am with my alma mater, where the faculty used to argue about how many Lutheran students and faculty there needed to be to be a Lutheran college. It's now officially a Hispanic-serving institution, which is fascinating.

I'm not that close to the ground anymore to have a good sense of how they may be recruiting Latino students. The good news is that second-generation Latino students enroll in college at the same rate as white students.

So, we just have to get over some humps here. And, you know, something also makes me think that at least for the student who's going to a four-year, who by eighth or ninth grade decided this, that things haven't changed too much. I don't know if you've seen the work of Jennifer Delaney and her colleagues. They have been looking at the states that now have guaranteed admissions programs. And they find no impact. And I will say, no kidding! You wait until a student is a senior and tell them they're guaranteed to be admitted if they want to go. Most students decided if they're going to college by ninth or tenth grade. That's when we should start talking to them. My point here is I actually ran a quick and dirty perusal of recent research on college choice. I didn't see anything that was showing dramatically different terms of when students are making decisions and the things that are influencing them.

Schultheis: There were many changes COVID-19 brought about. The test-optional situation is one. I'm thinking about the lead generation opportunities from the tests that are drying up. And now we've got several states that are just admitting students who have a certain GPA. And I can't imagine the amount of noise in the ears of prospective students about the different institutions. If I'm one of those institutions and you're accepted to five of my peers, how do I become distinctive to you?

The other thing is just how public flagships explode at the expense of regional campuses. I mean, I'm sure there are probably a few public flagships where enrollment just didn't take off, but for most of them it did. And in most states, regional campuses are really hurting now. I've been a little surprised that legislators representing the districts in which these regional schools are located haven't said, wait a minute...this is destroying the institutions we built to serve people in our geographic area.

Hossler: That's right. We've got to fix this.

Schultheis: Right! You know, I live ten minutes from a flagship university. There are billboards on the roads near the school from the regionals. I was thinking, what a waste of money; the whole situation is bizarre. Another situation is that we have a lot of governors who say, I'm committing to our state, that we will have 60 percent of our population having attained some type of degree or credential within a short number of years. What do you think is driving them?

Hossler: Now, this is not an area where I have robust expertise. But I was at a dissertation defense many years ago that was looking at the relationship between what college majors stayed in the state from which they graduated and who went elsewhere to work. It's no surprise if you're an engineering major and you live in a state that's not a high-tech state, you're not going stay there. And so, it's more complicated than just having a number of people with postsecondary education. It's the structure of the labor market, the

business and industries within those states that also play a really important role in all of this.

Schultheis: We've discussed some great topics. Let's talk about today's doctoral students, or maybe even the graduate students who are going to be pursuing administrative work in universities. Are there some courses or areas of focus that should be more dominant than they have been?

Hossler: I don't know if I'll answer quite the way you're asking. I will say that I know there's a lot of pressure on enrollment managers, but I still think it's got to be one of the more exciting areas of administration. If you're the provost, and you're going to make difference, you know it's going be very slow and incremental, and you better plan on spending at least fifteen or 20 years at the institution. It's funny...I'm a big believer in faculty governance, but I would never be in the faculty senate, because the meetings can be boring. I've been a department chair. I've been an associate dean. When you're with a group of faculty and talking about a tough issue, you can't necessarily force a decision. You could be having that same discussion for the next ten years. One of the wonderful things about being on the administrative side, like enrollment management, is that you can say: This has been a really good discussion. Now, this is what we're going to do. And I do think it's one of the few areas where there are many tools available to do that. You can make a difference in relatively short periods of time.

Back to the question. I always think that anybody who wants to be any kind of a senior administrator, especially an enrollment manager, should never get out of graduate school without taking a course on budgeting and finance. It's a little bit like biology in the sense that there are all of these specialized terms. And you don't want to be at a meeting and feel like your eyeballs are rolling into the back of your head when somebody starts talking about quasi-endowments or how to generate some money. Because if you understand the incentive structures and the budgeting system the institution uses, you're more likely to be able get some things done.

I was talking to my son who is a professor at Rhodes College. They're making a pitch on something, and I told him to ask for one-time money. Don't ever ask for base funds. Just ask for one-time money, because if the initiative doesn't work, there's no permanent commitment. I think budgeting and finance is really critical. And then I really think, as administrators, it probably depends. If you're more attracted to the academic side of things, you better take courses and teach them and keep learning. If you're pursuing the enrollment management side, you want to hope that there's a course that at least offers some sessions and focuses on college choice and on student attrition.

Schultheis: Speaking of attrition, when I was on the AACRAO board, I was the VP of admissions and enrollment. There were a few of us trying to advance a movement, a push to incorporate student success into that title and student success would be the code, I guess, for retention. But what I'm seeing today when I look at these various job boards is the student success positions have become subsumed. What I've seen to a large degree in student affairs divisions, is more often it is just the "new word." The same old departments that we'd see in student affairs are in student success now.

Hossler: So, you've probably seen vice presidents for student success titles. I still think the best place to put student retention is enrollment management. It is the only unit on campus that knows that they're evaluated on the basis of the number of students who are enrolled. People with different titles can get drawn out to give their attention to other administrative areas. If retention is under student affairs or academic affairs, while important and valuable, they are not necessarily areas that are directly connected with retention. Many enrollment managers came up through the admissions world. I do know a few who came up through the financial aid world. And I've seen a very few enrollment managers come up through the registrar world. So, often when I'm talking with some institutions, they essentially think enrollment management means admissions.

And then student success and retention are overseen by student affairs, or not overseen by anyone.

The other thing enrollment managers know is, if you've developed a research unit within enrollment management that has done a lot of work on the recruitment end, those data are the same data you want to use to analyze retention. You already have a great start for a built-in retention research unit.

Schultheis: What type of research do you think we should be conducting now to better understand what's going on? I've seen very little on COVID-19. You know we've all got our anecdotes and things like that, but are there a couple of areas you think are paramount for today?

Hossler: I'd want to take a closer look at the sequences of decision-making by tenth graders. We did that big study of 5,000 students in the state of Indiana on the odds of someone going to college who hadn't decided by ninth or tenth grade that they were going to go. We surveyed them twice a year. When we would see an eleventh or twelfth grader who suddenly says, yes, I'm going to college and you follow it up to see what they actually did, the odds of them actually going to college were really quite small. Then there were the students who said they were undecided. The odds of them going to college were really quite small. This is some of the research that hasn't been widely replicated. I suspect the outcomes are still the same, but we need to research this. What's going on in the minds of young students in regard to college? When do they start thinking about college, when do they decide to enroll, and when do they decide where they will enroll?

There was a shocking finding in the Lumina study I authored. More than half of all high school students in the United States are now enrolled in Title 1 high schools. More than half of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The other background characteristics that you look for related to college going include: Are you in a single household family? Did either of your parents go to college? Is English not the primary language spoken at home? The only one of those factors improving is the slight uptick in the number of fathers who've gone to college.

That tells us that these students are going to know less about college. It tells us that financial aid is going to be really important. And students have to develop a sense to go to college as early as their freshman or sophomore year of high school. I think these are the areas that states and institutions need to conduct a lot more research and develop programs that encourage postsecondary enrollment.

Schultheis: Knowing that you are not researching and practicing 24 hours a day, what do you like to spend a little bit of time on every week?

Hossler: I am definitely slowing down. I used to always wake up at five in the morning. It didn't matter what time the alarm went off, I was up, and the coffee was on by 5:30 at the latest. I no longer wake up at five. I promised my wife we would have a leisurely breakfast every morning, which I do, and I enjoy it. I try to be involved in some political causes that have a chance of making the world better and more equitable. I always have one to two books I am reading. And about 15 to 20 percent of me is still interested in higher ed and enrollment management, so I still read several electronic newsletters and research articles. Finally, I get an hour or more of exercise four to five days a week.

I recently completed a book chapter in a volume edited by Steve Burd that takes a critical look at enrollment management and EM consulting organizations. In doing background work for this chapter, I ran across an article from The New York Times about a regional campus of the University of Wisconsin. The article describes a company this campus hired that tracks where prospective students go on their website every moment. It reports on how long someone was on their website, and where they spend most of their time. The firm produces a report that gives them the odds that each one of these individual students will enroll. We know that there are retention programs that report students' every move. I have reservations about these kind of tracking activities. Do we tell prospective students that they are being closely tracked on our website? Do we tell students, or ask for their permission, when we are using their ID cards to track their activities?

Schultheis: And it may be alarming for students to hear they are being monitored. Finally, Don, any words of encouragement for the enrollment managers or even higher ed in general? I guess it's a challenging time for everybody.

Hossler: You know, this is more a reflection of my personality. First, my golden rule is never take yourself seriously, but take your work seriously. My words of encouragement for enrollment managers are to get to know your institution and their potential markets as much as possible. Be data oriented and have realistic goals. Don't drag decisions out. Make them happen.

About the Author

Luke Schultheis, Ph.D., is a higher education consultant and an adjunct faculty member at Fairleigh Dickinson University, teaching enrollment management in the doctoral program since its inception. He is also a senior advisor to myFootpath, which focuses on re-enrolling adults who did not complete their degree studies. His initial career was in hospitality management in New York City, from which he transitioned into a faculty member, chair, and founding dean before devoting his career to enrollment management.

Dr. Schultheis served as the inaugural vice president for enrollment, strategic planning, and effectiveness at Fairleigh Dickinson University, after leading the Neighborhoods Initiative at Michigan State University—the national model for combined living-learning—and serving as liaison to the University Innovation Alliance. Previous work experience included overseeing 22 units as the inaugural vice provost of strategic enrollment management at Virginia Commonwealth University and leading the enrollment management and student services portfolio at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

He was elected vice president for admissions and enrollment management on the Board of Directors at AACRAO for three years. He has authored book chapters and journal articles on higher education and has made more than 80 presentations at national conferences as well as served on several prominent journal editorial review boards, including SEMQ.

Schultheis received his Ph.D. in education studies–higher education administration from the University of Nebraska, an Ed.M. and M.A. in higher education administration from Columbia University, an M.S. in hospitality industry studies: asset management from New York University, a B.S. in English: poetry from the City University of New York Baccalaureate Program and an A.S. from Johnson & Wales University.