

## **The Difference Between Right and Wrong**

By Dr. Mary Lou D'Allegro

Catchy business phrases and buzz words are numerous in higher education. Most recently, the concept of getting the “right people on the bus” has flourished within higher education’s realm of communication and publications. Introduced by Jim Collins in “Good to Great” (2001), this adage has been a guiding principle at West Chester University for the last two years.

Admittedly, the phrase is a bit worn, for the concept has been applied to strategic planning efforts, admissions departments, enrollment management, faculty development, computer system conversions and campus marketing strategies. This single-mindedness, however, may be a threat to team productivity by also allowing the wrong people on the bus for a ride.

This is true for West Chester University, where the fanfare to get the right people on the bus often obscures any consideration of identifying the wrong people. Many committees and task forces are an amalgam of both the right and the wrong people. In some cases, the committees are so ingrained in the campus culture that it is difficult to dismiss the wrong members—often the most senior or most adamant—from these service obligations. Further, it is all but impossible to disband a bus of the wrong people, for example, a committee that has outlived or has long since demonstrated its usefulness.

First, a word about the right people is in order. The right people are those who have the right skill set, are committed to the task at hand and have previously illustrated perseverance with difficult projects. Jim Collins (2001) warns that the most important characteristics may be the latter two, work ethic and dedication. Knowledge skill sets are easily obtained after employees are hired, but dedication and commitment are inherent personality traits that will transport and be engaged regardless of project or responsibility. According to Robert Sevier (2005), the right people have vision but not necessarily the technical skills. Most importantly, the right people are persuasive and willing to influence the other people on the bus to their vision and way of thinking.

Obviously, the wrong people are those who do not have the right skills, are not committed to the task at hand or have not demonstrated that they can successfully execute difficult projects. Notably, they do harm to the right people. They alienate the right people. They undermine the supervising team who has allowed the wrong people to stay on the bus. They obstruct forward momentum.

That said, getting the right passengers on the bus and the wrong people off the bus before the journey begins is imperative.

Before the bus leaves the station, a brief description of the new enrollment management infrastructure at West Chester University is called for. In spring 2004, West Chester University reorganized its committee structure to encompass an integrated enrollment management organizational arrangement. A team composed of student service staff, the graduate office personnel, institutional research employees, and faculty was purposefully assigned to the existing Retention Committee and Marketing Committee. In addition, a newly developed Enrollment Projections Team convened to elucidate the market and economic forces affecting enrollment and program choice popularity at the university.

The Enrollment Projections Team coordinates enrollment trend analyses with both the Marketing Committee and the Retention Committee. Related to this effort, the Marketing

Committee and the Retention Committee use the enrollment projections as the basis of their five-year strategic plans. In turn, the Enrollment Projections Team dovetails the Marketing Committee and Retention Committee objectives to help designated campus constituents to meet the enrollment projections of the next academic year or cycle.

In sum, the enrollment management infrastructure consisted of three integrated committees. The responsibilities of each committee are fourfold. First, each committee is charged with the typical day-to-day business of a retention or marketing or enrollment projections team. Second, each committee is expected to provide support and assistance to the other two teams. Third, each committee develops a strategic plan, specific to its focus. Fourth, and most importantly, each committee is responsible for the integration of the three strategic plans into a comprehensive enrollment management plan. As such, the success of this enrollment management reorganization depends on getting the right folks on the bus. It is equally important to reexamine constantly the mix of talent to ensure that the right staff and faculty are traveling along the enrollment management's conceptual framework.

Below are some guidelines about maintaining the optimal passenger list. Although these suggestions border on being tongue-in-cheek, West Chester University has found that they help build creative and effective teams. Accompanying each guideline is an example of how it was applied to the newly created Enrollment Projections Team [YES at West Chester University.

1. **Do not micromanage.** Another buzz word borrowed from business, “micromanaging” is the tendency to scrutinize every detail, question every idea and second-guess every action. The right people on the bus will scrutinize adeptly and handle the details as needed. Importantly, if the right people need help, they know to ask the right people. The right people are successful because they know what they do not know and are able to recognize when they need support. In addition, the right people know whom to ask and where to go to continue being successful. In most cases the right people will involve the executive team if they need help. Otherwise, bus people will work independently and productively.

When the Enrollment Projections Team was created, the executive team insisted on approving every enrollment projection parameter under consideration. The Enrollment Projections Team members, all independent, self-motivated employees, were dispirited and frustrated at this perceived lack of trust. Attendance at meetings declined and deadlines were missed. Seeing that the close oversight was detrimental to the bus, the executives gave the committee greater autonomy. As a result, the Enrollment Projections Team delivered a five-year enrollment projections plan two weeks ahead of schedule. Furthermore, the enrollment projections plan is aligned with and supports the institutional strategic plan, the facilities plan and the projected budget.

2. **Keep the bus moving but stay out of its way!** In truth, this is as an extension of the first guideline, but this corollary deserves attention. The responsibility of the executive team is to keep the bus moving forward and in the right direction. The executive team functions as the guide rails and the double yellow lines. When the bus is moving and moving in the right direction, the executive team can reinforce that positive energy. When the bus crosses the double yellow lines, the executive team provides helpful feedback to get the bus back into the correct lane. That said, the employees chosen for the particular bus should be able to drive the vehicle, with the executive team providing

feedback that the bus is moving and the velocity is appropriate. Moreover, Jim Collins (2001) recommends that the right persons for the bus be chosen first; the direction and momentum will automatically follow.

In its perceived greatness, the Enrollment Projections Team created several enrollment projection scenarios. Although there was forward momentum, the team was losing track of its purpose of constructing institutional enrollment projections. During one of the bimonthly meetings with the executive team, a decision was made to choose one scenario and move forward with enrollment projections based on that scenario. With that direction, the Enrollment Projections Team continued to dialogue with other campus constituents, but now with a particular focus. This focus led to a better institutional understanding of the process and an increased willingness to be part of this project.

3. **Whiny passengers are not allowed on the bus.** Many faculty and administrators are talented and academically gifted. By nature of the profession they have chosen, faculty are profuse communicators. Unfortunately, that bountifulness can hinder success. In a word, fortitude supersedes skills, knowledge and the propensity to communicate. Although Jim Collins (2001) stresses that employees with “basic intelligence” are more important than those with requisite skills, attitude is also essential to forward momentum. Grumbling passengers, no matter what their level of talent, slow the bus. Positive passengers, those with an inherent ability to conceptualize the vision, will overcome the most obstinate problems and issues.

When the Enrollment Projections Team was first conceived, more than 20 members were proposed for it. Eight of those chosen were asked by the “bus” members to not return. When the executive team asked why they were asked to leave, the most frequent response was that the Enrollment Projections Team would be stymied by their protests and complaints. Although conceivably valuable to the process, the eight people would be consulted individually but not as part of the whole group.

4. **The passengers must enjoy the ride.** Committees and teams succeed because their members like one another and the work of fellow members is respected. In fact, members are chosen because they are collaborative and are able to build cohesive environments within their own areas of focus. It stands to reason that committees that get along are more likely to have fun than those that fight or brood. Undoubtedly, committees that have fun will communicate more frequently than those that refuse to work out their differences, and, most importantly, they will communicate more positively. A well-known educational axiom is that increased academic engagement correlates with improved student success. The same logic applies to committees.

The members of the Enrollment Projections Team were chosen because each had a reputation for working well with others. In one instance, however, a disruptive member was removed from the committee. After this dismissal, meeting discussions were productive and little time was used to discuss character imperfections and weaknesses. Additionally, meetings finished on time and agendas were adequately covered. The bus turned onto the right highway and continued its quest to develop institutional enrollment projections.

5. **A house with a garage is always nice.** In other words, construct a performance rubric, which will illustrate acceptable performance standards. Of course, this rarely will be needed for the right people. Hence, they will not need the garage. Concomitantly, the earlier in the project the wrong people get off the bus the better the probability that the right people will succeed. Furthermore, it will be easier to eliminate the wrong people from the project with the performance rubric in place. Clearly delineating job performance expectations will mitigate possible confrontation and disagreement about meeting performance standards. Performance rubrics also elucidate and reinforce work values and work culture.

The Enrollment Projections Team developed its own performance standards and adopted them as part of the working culture. Credence to work hard, to be dedicated to the task and to communicate positively about the project was the norm. Each committee member agreed to those expectations. The payoff was institutional acceptance of the projections when they were presented to the campus community. This commitment abetted the credibility of the Enrollment Projections Team members as well as the enrollment projections.

Faculty and staff are burdened with other responsibilities, therefore their time to commit to institutional projects and committees is limited. One reason to get the right people on the bus and keep the wrong people off the bus is to maximize the efficient use of that time. Another reason is that choosing the right people increases productivity, improves morale and encourages subsequent dialogue and collaboration. In turn, the bus leaves the station, turns in the right direction and arrives at its destination on time. Regardless of the latest buzz words and fancy phrases, this is one business model that higher education should emulate [YES].

## References

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*Dr. Mary Lou D'Allegro is the director of institutional research at West Chester University. West Chester University is the second largest state school system in Pennsylvania. As such, enrollment management, marketing, retention efforts and enrollment projections are presidential priorities. Dr. D'Allegro has also served as the dean of institutional effectiveness at Joliet Junior College (JJC), a large community college in Illinois. Among her charges at JJC were conducting an enrollment services audit, providing customer service training and facilitating planning and assessment in the enrollment services area. She has been an AACRAO member since 1995.*