Reengineering Student Success: A Reflexive Case Study of Strategic Recruitment and Retention in a Midwestern University Post-COVID-19

Prof. Francis Ebenezer Godwyll[1], Jill Bisbee[2]

[1]*Illinois State University, Department of Educational Administration and Foundations. Normal. USA*

[2]*Western Illinois University, Recruitment, Retention, and Student Success Officer, College of Education and Human Services, USA*

Abstract

This study investigated innovative institutional responses to emerging enrollment challenges in higher education, focusing on strategic recruitment, retention, and student success planning. Traditional methods prove insufficient as institutions face declining high school graduate populations, intensified competition from alternative educational models, and post-pandemic disruptions. This study explored how one Midwestern university employed systems thinking and double-loop learning to reimagine student engagement across multiple institutional   levels.
Using a reflexive case study design, data were drawn from institutional documents, student surveys, departmental plans, and strategic frameworks implemented between 2020 and 2022. The study employed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Argyris' Double-Loop Learning Model, and Systems Theory to evaluate planning, stakeholder engagement, and the impact of interventions. Findings highlighted the importance of multi-layered communication, faculty/staff engagement, and co-curricular programming as integral to student success. Early implementation resulted in improved alignment between institutional units, better support for marginalized student groups, and enhanced accountability systems. The case underscored the need for culturally responsive and adaptive institutional strategies beyond recruitment to support retention and success holistically. Institutions must develop iterative, feedback-driven models to remain competitive, inclusive, and responsive. Recommendations included ongoing evaluation cycles, capacity-building for faculty/staff, and transparent accountability structures.

Keywords: double-loop learning; ecological systems theory; institutional transformation; strategic planning in higher education; student engagement frameworks