

A note from...

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The Four Ps of Enrollment Management: A Framework for Future-Proofing Strategy

For decades, the classic marketing mix – Product, Price, Place, and Promotion – has served as a reliable compass for building consumer demand. In higher education, however, our work is not about selling a single product; it's about building equitable student pathways, aligning operations across silos, and strengthening institutional resilience. At Iron Bridge Resources, we find that another Four Ps framework offers a sharper lens for assessing and optimizing enrollment strategy: *People, Processes, Platforms, and Policies*.

While there was a [4.5% rebound](#) in postsecondary enrollment in Fall 2024, this increase was largely driven by older first-year students. Indeed, this gain should not be mistaken for a return to stability. Associate and bachelor's degree enrollment still lags behind 2019 levels, and long-term projections, including the anticipated "enrollment cliff," suggest continued turbulence. Strategic action is required – not just to sustain enrollment, but to future-proof it.

To drive sustainable enrollment growth, institutions must rigorously assess their infrastructure across these Four Ps.

People: Aligning Human Capital with Institutional Strategy

According to a [2024 United Educators report](#), 71% of campus leaders rank enrollment as their top institutional risk. This issue cannot be mitigated through staffing alone. The key lies in empowering the right people, in the right roles, and creating an environment where collaboration and student engagement are paramount.

Critical Focus Areas:

- Cross-functional alignment: Are marketing, admissions, financial aid, and advising sharing data and strategy, or operating in silos?
- Staff development: Are enrollment staff equipped to leverage data, understand emerging market trends, and support students in a personalized way?
- Community activation: Are faculty, alumni, and student ambassadors mobilized to tell the institution's story and foster authentic engagement with prospects?
- Leadership and vision: Is there a clear enrollment philosophy across the institution, championed by senior leadership and implemented through clear metrics?

Institutions that invest in people and collaboration are better prepared to weather enrollment challenges and seize new opportunities.

Processes: Creating Seamless, Student-Centered Workflows

While students increasingly expect streamlined, tech-enabled processes, many institutions still rely on outdated workflows. In [RNL's most recent national survey](#), 72% of students reported that applying to college was difficult. Operational inefficiencies (such as fragmented communication timelines and opaque application procedures) erode student confidence and slow conversion.

Common Process Pitfalls:

- Overly complex application procedures and unclear next steps
- Lagging timelines between admissions and financial aid decisions
- Delayed or inconsistent communications across stages of the funnel

Iron Bridge advises institutions to conduct comprehensive process mapping exercises to identify redundancies, bottlenecks, and opportunities to better align operational workflows with student expectations.

Platforms: Making Technology Work for You

Too many institutions have powerful tools they barely use. In fact, only 41% of U.S. colleges and universities currently leverage a CRM, according to the [LISTedTECH database](#), and even fewer integrate these systems with student services or predictive analytics platforms.

Strategic Technology Use Includes:

- CRM Optimization: A well-integrated CRM bridges marketing, admissions, and aid efforts, while reducing manual outreach and improving responsiveness.
- Predictive Modeling: Institutions that understand retention risks early can proactively intervene but only if data is clean, connected, and accessible.
- Ecosystem Integration: Technology platforms supporting advising, billing, registration, and career services should contribute to a shared student success framework.

A technology audit – assessing tools, workflows, integrations, and user training – can illuminate both opportunities and risks.

Policies: Building a Framework for Equity and Access

As the [13% enrollment cliff](#) looms in 2041, policies that once served to filter or gate student access may now be liabilities. Forward-looking institutions are reimagining policy to open doors, remove friction, and respond to new learner demands.

Emerging Policy Levers:

- Direct Admissions: Simplifies entry and supports equity by removing barriers.
- Credit for Prior Learning (CPL): Honors real-world experience for adult and military learners.

- Transfer-Friendly Pathways: Streamlines degree completion for the growing population of mobile students.
- Flexible Learning Policies: Supports hybrid, accelerated, and year-round models that reflect today's realities.

Not every newfangled policy strategy fits every institution, but earnestly looking at novel solutions should indeed happen. These innovations aren't merely tactical, they are essential for remaining relevant to future students.

Why the Four Ps Matter Now

Assessing the Four Ps – People, Processes, Platforms, and Policies – is no longer optional; it is a strategic imperative for institutions that want to thrive in an era of disruption and choice.

How to Begin:

- Conduct an enrollment audit using these Four Ps as a framework
- Benchmark your performance against similar institutions
- Engage an external partner to bring data-driven insight and fresh perspective

At Iron Bridge Resources, we help institutions build comprehensive strategies that are equitable, efficient, and future-ready. The Four Ps are where that work begins.

About the Author

Shane Pruitt is a Senior Consultant at Iron Bridge Resources and a nationally recognized enrollment strategist. He brings nearly two decades of campus and consulting experience to help institutions reimagine the way they recruit, admit, and support students.
