



academica group

moving higher ed forward

Student Affairs & Services Benchmarking and Planning Survey

2025 SURVEY RESULTS

Jason Hunter, Senior Consultant and Business
Development Officer

September 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Academica’s office is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabek, Chonnonton, Haudenosaunee, and Lūnaapéewak peoples. This land is part of the McKee Treaty of 1790 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum. The region continues to be home to many diverse Indigenous Peoples, including the Deshkan Ziibiing (Chippewas of the Thames First Nation), Oneida Nation of the Thames, and Nalahii Lunaapewaak (Munsee-Delaware Nation)—sovereign nations with longstanding relationships to this land. We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to work on these lands and are committed to actively seeking ways to deepen our understanding and strengthen our relationships with Indigenous communities.

Academica acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of postsecondary communities in Canada and recognizes the contributions of members of diverse communities. We are committed to inclusive research with sensitivity to the needs of equity-deserving groups such as those of racially and culturally diverse backgrounds, the LGBTQ2S+ community, and persons with disabilities. Our research team strives to reduce barriers to research participation and to ensure accessibility for all participants. We know that genuine inclusivity within our research ensures its accuracy and relevance to postsecondary leadership as well as to each member of the postsecondary community.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 4

 Introduction4

 Key Observations and Findings4

Introduction & Method 7

 Purpose7

 Method7

 Report Terms and Standards9

Research Findings 10

 Student Affairs and Services in Canadian PSE10

 Impacts to Budgets & Operations12

 Looking to the Future18

Key Findings and Observations 22

 Concluding Remarks24

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

In response to sweeping changes in Canadian immigration policy—particularly the 2024 cap on international student study permits implemented by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)—Academica Group conducted a survey of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) across Canada. The goal was to assess how these policy shifts have impacted student affairs and services (SAS) departments in terms of budgets, operations, and strategic planning.

The **Student Affairs and Services Benchmarking and Planning Survey** was designed to capture the perspectives of senior student affairs leaders as they navigate shifting budgets, enrolment impacts, and evolving student needs. Given that policy shifts are expected to have a multi-year impact at many institutions, the findings of this study are intended to enable us to:

- **Set benchmarks:** Establish a baseline to measure the evolution of student affairs and services under current and future pressures.
- **Understand the impact of policy changes:** Track the effects of policy changes on student affairs budgets.
- **Guide strategic planning:** Highlight where institutions are making critical investments to support student success under shifting pressure.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

SURVEY RESULTS AT A GLANCE

The survey revealed widespread budget reductions at both institutional and departmental levels, with colleges and polytechnics disproportionately affected in 2025–26 (See: Figure 4). In light of financial constraints, many institutions prioritized maintaining services related to mental health, accessibility, and Indigenous student support, while international student services most commonly faced cuts (See: Figure 5, Figure 6). Some are also investing in key areas such as academic support and career services (See: Figure 7, Figure 8).

About one-third of institutions are exploring cost-saving measures such as outsourcing and/or service elimination (See: Figure 9), while two-fifths are also keeping an eye on the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool for enhancing service delivery (See: Figure 10). On the front of revenue generation, SSAOs said that housing, athletics, and testing services had the greatest

potential. More than half of the surveyed SSAOs said that they are considering revenue generation opportunities at this time (See: Figure 11).

In their comments, SSAOs expressed both hope and concern for the future: optimism about the potential of SAS to drive student success and retention, and anxiety over declining resources, staff burnout, and the erosion of equity-focused initiatives.

This report underscores the need for strategic adaptation, data-driven decision-making, and stronger institutional alignment as SAS navigates the evolving landscape of Canadian postsecondary education.

MAJOR OBSERVATIONS

Through this study, we uncovered several important insights:

- **Differences in reporting lines:** In general, SSAOs at colleges and polytechnics appeared to typically be in vice-president roles (58% vs 24% universities)—and were more likely to report directly to the president (58% vs 20%). This reporting structure can have an impact on the nature of mandates and decisions that are ultimately made about the SAS portfolio, as well as the SSAO’s ability to quickly act on opportunities to outsource, generate revenue, and support the broad and evolving range of student needs.
- **Budget reductions are widespread, but varied:** Policy changes, particularly those made by the IRCC, had a significant impact on budgets in 2025–26, with more than half of respondents reporting reductions to their institutional operating budgets (69%) and/or SAS operating budgets (61%). Many expect this trend to continue into 2026–27. For institutional budgets, the impacts were more ubiquitous in colleges and polytechnics, with 83% reporting reductions compared to 58% of universities. Of the SAS departments that reported reductions, 16% said that they experienced cuts that were deeper than the institution’s.
- **With international enrolment reduced, international student services were most commonly on the cutting block:** Considering all services and programs impacted by reductions, international services were most commonly reduced (53%). This trend aligns with the steep decline in international enrolment, particularly at colleges and polytechnics.
- **Access and wellness remain key focal points for SAS:** A strong, sector-wide commitment to student wellness and inclusion is reflected in the fact that institutions consistently protected mental health and accessibility/disability services. These areas are each offered by 98% of surveyed institutions, and—among those that experienced a budget reduction—were the most commonly selected service areas for “least impacted” (44% each).

- **Indigenous student support remains a priority:** Most surveyed institutions offer Indigenous student services (84%), and there generally appeared to be an interest in preserving these services. Two-fifths of SSAOs (41%) said that Indigenous student programs and services were among the services least affected by budget reductions.
- **There is interest in AI integration:** SSAOs at 41% of respondent institutions indicated that they plan to use AI to enhance service delivery within the next three years. Albertan institutions were among the most interested, with nine of the 12 participating institutions reporting plans to implement it. The most promising areas for AI use were identified as career services (64%) and academic support (61%).
- **Revenue generation and retention are strategic priorities:** SSAOs are focusing efforts on the sustainability and stability of services that can be preserved by contributing to revenue generation and retention. Nearly all institutions (85%) have made or plan to make changes to their approach to student retention, with many either reallocating funds or expecting new incoming funds to support these efforts. Additionally, 58% of institutions are exploring revenue generation, with the strongest opportunities identified in housing, testing, and athletics.

Introduction & Method

PURPOSE

Over the past two years, higher education across Canada has been undergoing transformation. This transformation has been triggered by a range of external pressures, notably including the policy changes made by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to the international student program and the subsequent ripple effects of these changes¹. This has had an impact on the collective brand of Canadian higher education as a place for international students and has significantly impacted enrolment and revenue at institutions across the country.

Colleges, polytechnics, and universities in each province and territory suffered varying levels of impact to their student community, workplace environment, and financial wellbeing. In student affairs and services (SAS) departments, this was also true, as institutional leadership found themselves re-evaluating and—in some cases—taking action to restructure their departments and reduce their costs.

In light of all of this change, Academica Group conducted a national benchmarking and planning survey of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) in 2025 to better understand the financial and service impacts that these changes have had on student affairs departments and their services budgets and offerings.

METHOD

This study consisted of an online survey of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) from Canadian postsecondary institutions. The survey explored a range of topics related to student affairs and services, including:

- Services and offerings provided by the institution,
- Impacts of recent federal policy changes on institutional and department budgets, and
- Future plans to improve efficiencies and finances, such as by reducing costs or improving revenue generation.

¹ IRCC issued a series of policy changes between late 2023 and the end of 2024 that included, among other changes, a cap on the number of study permits that would be approved each year, changes to the application process, and changes to the post-graduate work permit program. For more information on the context behind these policy changes and the initial student permit allocations, read “[In Review: Canada’s Changing International Student Program](#)” on the *Academica Forum*.

SSAOs are defined as the most senior member of the student affairs and services team at a postsecondary institution, and include individuals with titles such as:

- Vice President, including VP Students, VP Student Services, and VP Student Success
- Assistant Vice Presidents, including AVP Students, AVP Student Affairs, and AVP Student Success
- Vice Provost Students
- Dean of Students
- Directors and Executive Directors, including Director of Student Affairs, Director of Student Life, and Director of Services

Academica identified individuals with these titles from over 200 Canadian postsecondary institutions in Canada and distributed the survey by email and through targeted advertisements in the *Academica Top Ten* newsletter. Each institution was assigned a unique link to prevent duplicate responses, and recipients of the invitation were encouraged to share the survey with the SSAO at their institution for completion.

Respondents from a total of 85 institutions completed the survey. These institutions reflected a mix of institution types and regions:

- **By Institution Type:** Universities (48%); colleges and institutes (38%), polytechnics (8%), affiliated/federated university colleges (5%), and cégeps (1%). The majority of respondents (96%) were from public institutions.
- **By Region:** Ontario (40%), British Columbia (19%), Alberta (14%), Nova Scotia (8%), New Brunswick (5%), Québec (5%), Saskatchewan (4%), Manitoba (4%), Newfoundland & Labrador (1%), and the Territories (1%).
- **By Size:** Fewer than 5,000 students (45%), between 5,000 and 9,999 students (15%), between 10,000 and 14,999 students (12%), between 15,000 and 19,999 students (6%), and over 20,000 students (22%).

SUBGROUP ANALYSIS

The results of this study were analyzed by type and region, in order to explore some of the regional and typological differences in institutional experiences:

- **Institution type:** The responses of those institutions that are identified as **Colleges and Polytechnics** (incl. cégeps and institutes; n=40) were compared to responses from **Universities** (incl. affiliated university colleges; n=45).
- **Region of Canada:** The responses of institutions from Ontario (n=34), British Columbia (n=16), Alberta (n=12), and Nova Scotia (n=7) were compared to one another to identify differences between their responses. These provinces were selected due to the robustness

of the response from institutions in these regions. We hope to be able to compare all regions of Canada in future iterations of this survey.

Significance testing (95%) was used to identify noteworthy differences between subgroups and guide the discussion in this report. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Independence was applied to categorical variables with multiple comparison correction. However, in all cases, readers are encouraged to keep in mind the smaller n-size of these subgroups.

REPORT TERMS AND STANDARDS

This report uses abbreviations and sector-specific terminology that may be unfamiliar outside of certain contexts. These terms and abbreviations are indicated below along with their definitions or full forms:

- **SSAO: Senior Student Affairs Officer.** The most senior professional working at a Canadian postsecondary institution with responsibility for the student affairs and services department. The specific job title of this individual varies from institution to institution.
- **SAS: Student Affairs and Services.** The department responsible for student affairs and services at an institution.

Percentages throughout this report are rounded to the nearest whole percentage (e.g. 10.12% becomes 10%). As such, given percents may not add up to 100%.

Research Findings

STUDENT AFFAIRS AND SERVICES IN CANADIAN PSE

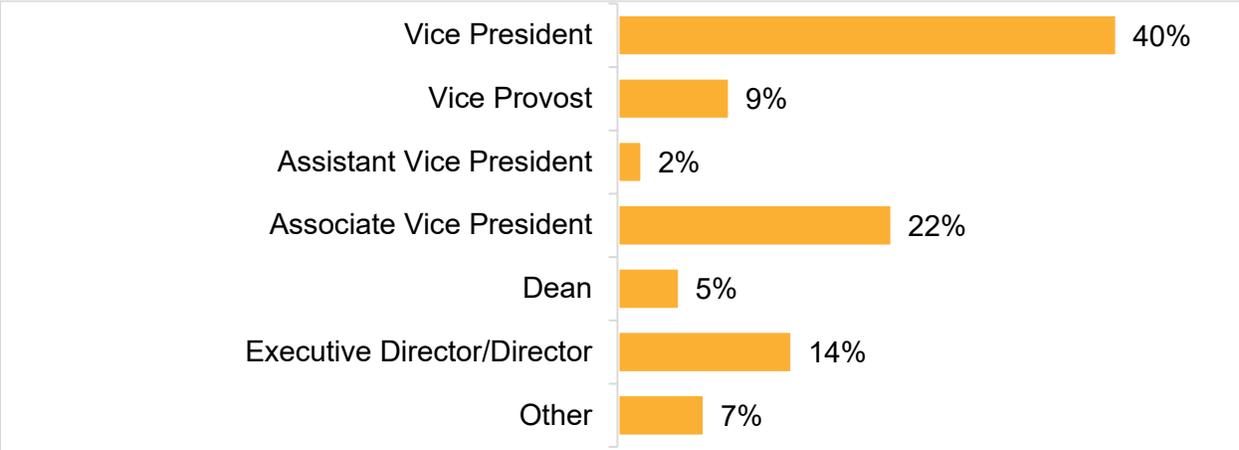
In order to better understand the impact of recent policy changes and other factors on SAS departments, we first need to understand how respondent SSAOs and their departments are situated in their institutions, as well as the various services that they offer.

THE SSAO ROLE IN CANADIAN PSE

SSAOs operate under a range of job titles at institutions across Canada. Most commonly, survey respondents shared that their job title is some variation of vice president (40%), associate vice president (22%), or executive director/director (14%).

There were some differences in the typical titles and reporting lines between institution types. At colleges and polytechnics, SSAOs were most likely to hold the title of vice president (58%), while at universities, SSAOs were more likely to be in an associate vice president role (29%) than a vice president role (24%).

Figure 1. Which of the following best reflects the title of the most senior student affairs officer at your institution? (n=85)



In terms of their reporting structure, SSAOs typically reported to the vice president academic/provost (46%), the president (38%), or another vice president (9%).

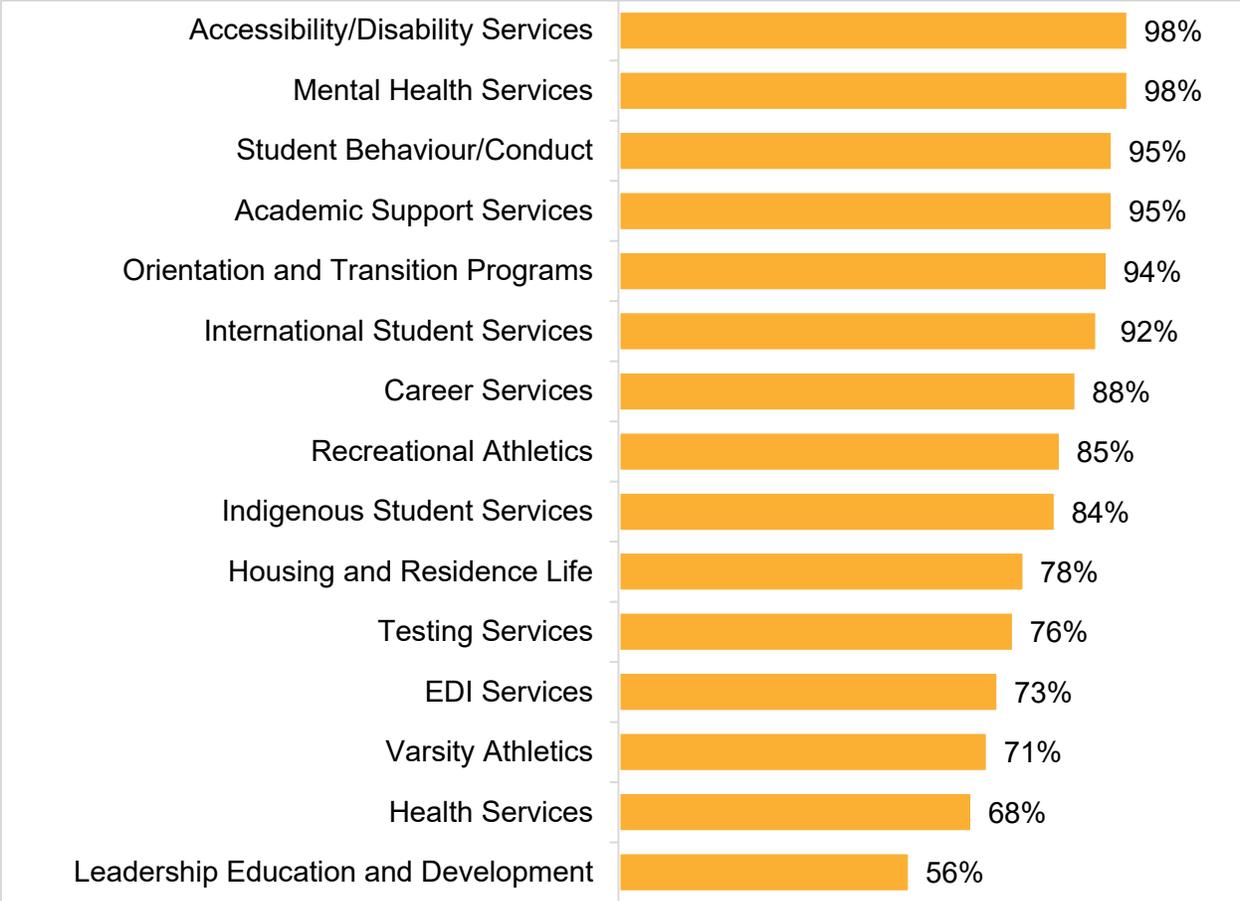
SSAOs who held the title of vice president (n=34) most commonly reported directly to the president (82%). Direct reports to the president are far more common in colleges and polytechnics (58%) than in universities (20%).

The reporting structure has a direct influence on an SSAO’s authority to make institutional decisions related to budget and strategy, so the variation in reporting lines means that the extent of control that these professionals have over SAS decision-making varies across institutions.

CURRENT STUDENT SERVICES AND OFFERINGS

When asked about the current student supports and services being provided at their postsecondary institutions, nearly all respondents said that they provided accessibility/disability services (98%), mental health services (98%), student conduct services (95%), academic support services (95%), orientation and transition programs (94%), and/or international student services (92%). Many also reported providing career services (88%), recreational athletics (85%), and Indigenous student services (84%). By contrast, only 73% provide EDI-related services.

Figure 2. Which of the following student supports and services does your institution provide? (n=85)



When comparing institutions by type, most service offerings appear to be provided in relatively similar proportions. There are some notable exceptions: Universities more commonly reported offering varsity athletics (80% vs 60% colleges and polytechnics), while colleges and polytechnics more commonly reported offering testing services (90% vs 64% universities).

IMPACTS TO BUDGETS & OPERATIONS

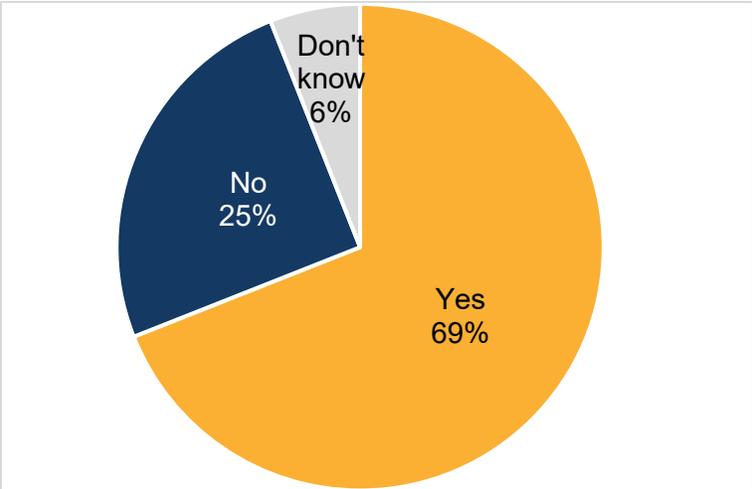
With this understanding of the context that survey respondents are operating in, we sought to better understand how institution-wide and SAS-specific budgets and operations have changed over the last year. We also explored what changes SSAOs are anticipating to their future budgets and operations.

IMPACT TO OPERATING BUDGETS

INSTITUTION-WIDE BUDGETS

When comparing their 2025–26 operating budgets to those from 2024–25, more than two-thirds (69%) of respondents said that their institution-level budgets had been reduced due to the 2024 IRCC policy changes and other factors. Of that group (n=59), 31% experienced drops of 15% or greater and an additional 38% reduced their budgets by 5–14%.

Figure 3. Compared to 2024–25, has your institution's 2025–26 operating budget been reduced due to the 2024 IRCC policy changes and/or other factors? (n=85)



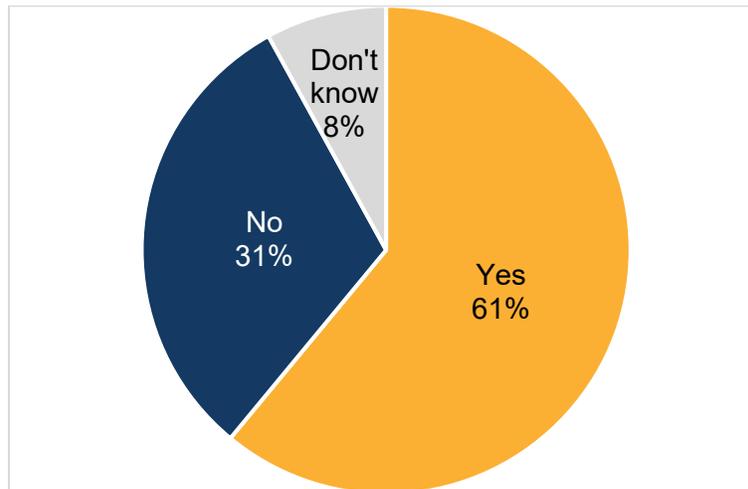
There were only minor differences noted across regions, but by institutional type, colleges and polytechnics were more likely to report a budget reduction than universities (83% vs 58%).

Looking ahead, 75% of those who had already experienced reductions (n=59) said that they anticipated further negative budget impacts.

SAS BUDGETS

Respondents then shared whether their student affairs and services department’s 2025–26 budget had been reduced from 2024–25 levels. More than half (61%) reported that their department’s operating budgets were reduced.

Figure 4. Compared to 2024–25, has your department’s 2025–26 operating budget been reduced due to the 2024 IRCC policy changes and/or other factors? (n=85)



Of those whose SAS operating budgets were reduced (n=43), 16% indicated that they experienced a higher cut than the institution’s overall reduction.

Again, budget impacts did not appear to be uniform across institution types. College and polytechnic respondents were far more likely to report reduced SAS budgets than their university comparators (75% vs 49%), though it was more common for them to report SAS reductions that were lower than the institution’s overall budget reduction (33% vs 6% of universities). Universities, on the other hand, were more likely to report a reduction that was equal to the overall institutional budget reduction (81% vs 48% of colleges and polytechnics).

For those SAS teams that needed to reduce the budgets of their units (n=52), 62% took a targeted approach while 25% went across-the-board (ATB). About half of affected respondents who were navigating an across-the-board cut (n=13) said that their budgets were reduced by less than 10% (54%).

TARGETED APPROACH: SERVICES AFFECTED

One of the objectives of the survey was to explore which services are more likely to be protected or preserved. The 32 institutions that used a targeted budget approach shared the areas that had been least and most affected by budget reductions (Figure 5; Figure 6). While this does not serve as a comprehensive view of all changes to service offerings, this early look reveals some interesting trends.

Overall, the services that were least impacted were those related to accessibility and disability services (44%), mental health services (44%), and Indigenous student services (41%). On the other hand, when considering what areas were *most impacted*, institutions most commonly pointed to international student services (53%). This was followed by orientation and transition programming (25%) and academic support services (22%).

Figure 5. What three (3) areas were least impacted by budget reductions? (n=32)

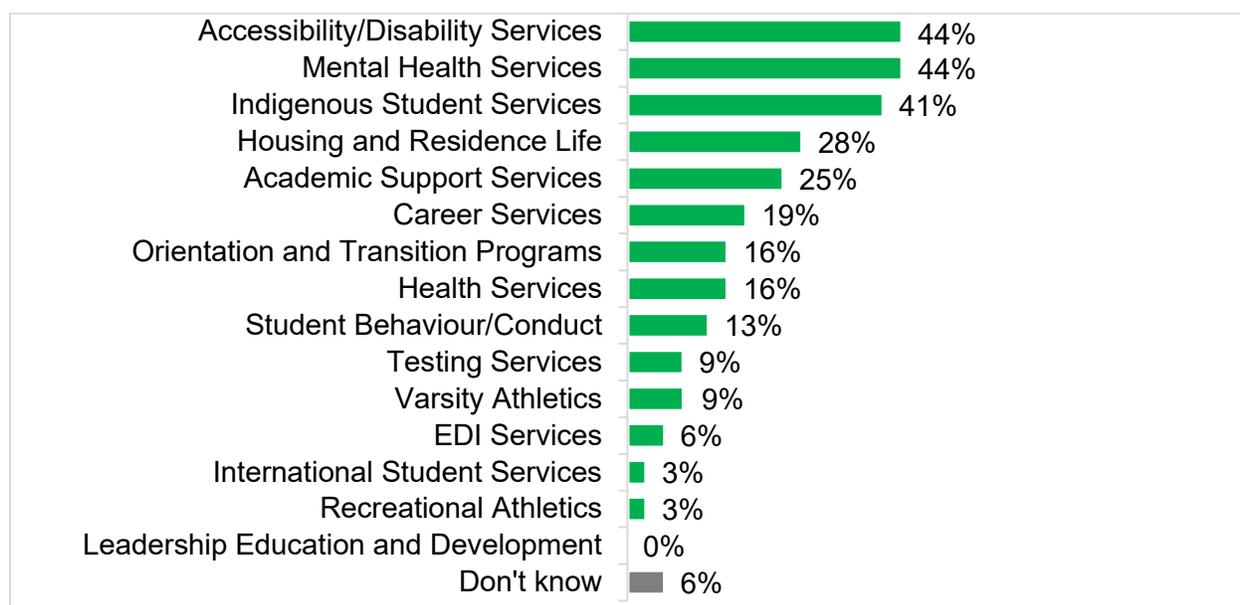
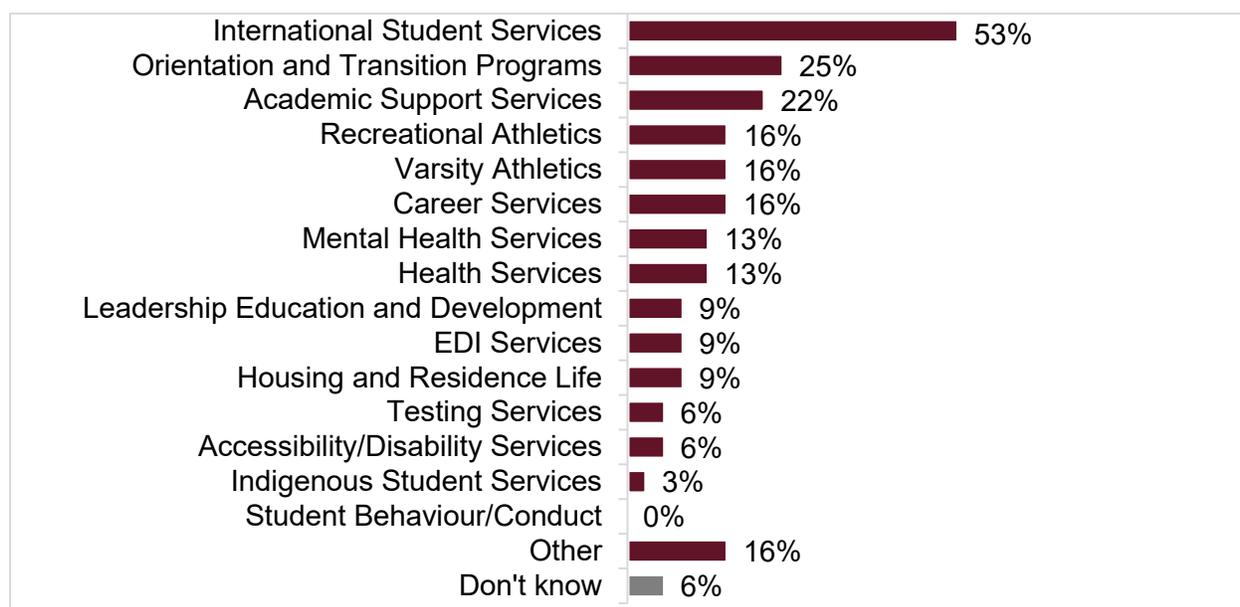


Figure 6. What three (3) areas were most impacted by budget reductions? (n=32)



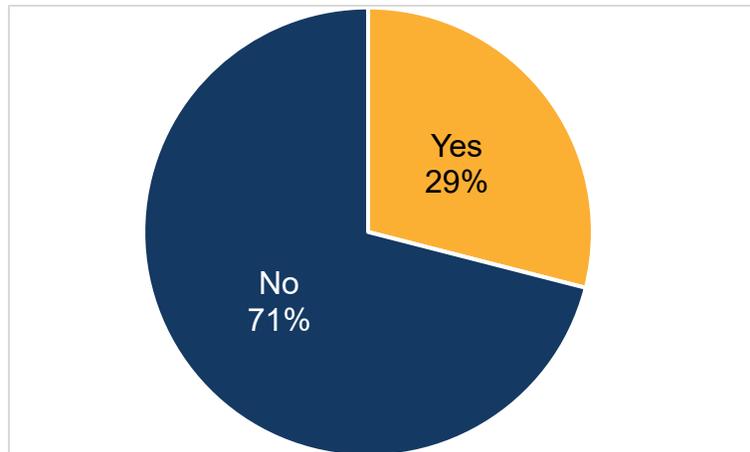
While it is reassuring to see that the commitment to resourcing Indigenous initiatives remains, we do not see evidence here that other services related to equity and inclusion are receiving a similar level of protection.

INCREASED INVESTMENTS

While much of this study focused on decreases to budgets, given the financial climate for much of the postsecondary education sector in 2025, there are also new or renewed investments being made in SAS initiatives at this time. Notably, over one-quarter of responding institutions shared

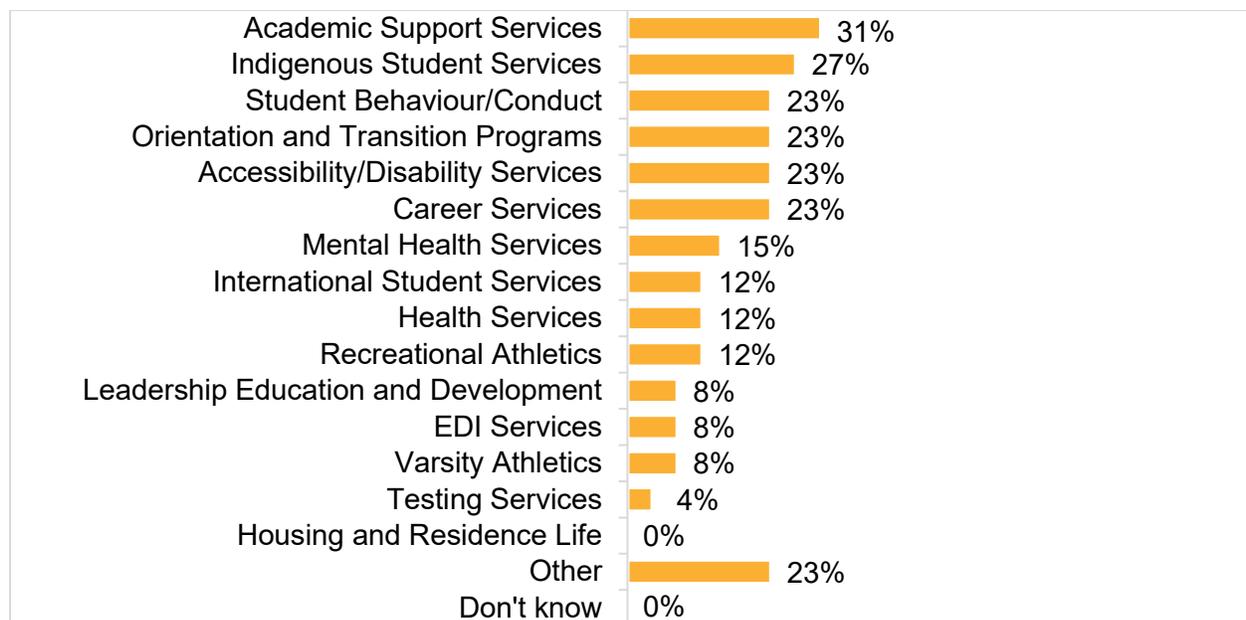
that their SAS portfolios had seen their budgets **increased** for various services for 2025–26 (29%).

Figure 7. Was the budget increased for any area(s) within the student affairs and services portfolio in 2025–26? (n=85)



Most commonly, these respondents (n=26) said that increases had targeted academic support services (31%) and Indigenous services (27%), followed by career services (23%), accessibility services (23%), orientation and transition programs (23%), and student conduct (23%). No institutions reported increases to their housing and residence life portfolio, and very few indicated that they were investing in testing services (4%), leadership development (8%), EDI services (8%), and/or varsity athletics (8%).

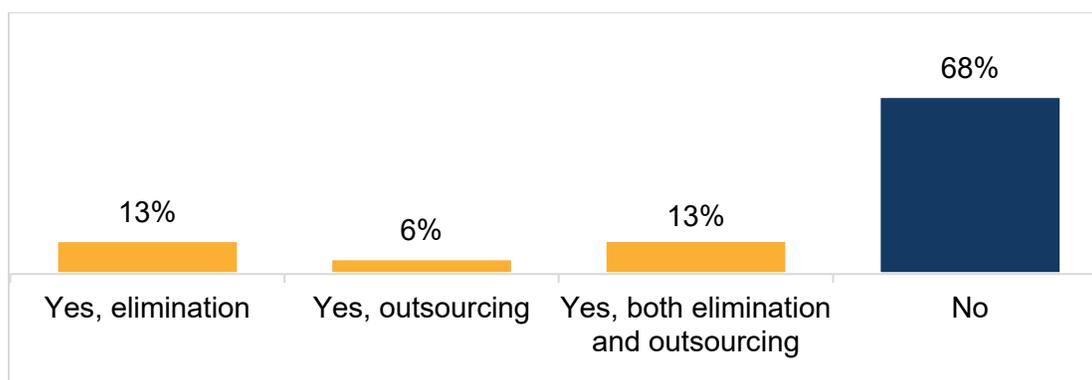
Figure 8. Which areas received a budget increase in 2025/26? Please select all that apply. (n=26)



OUTSOURCING AND ELIMINATION OF SERVICES

Overall, about one-third of respondents indicated that they intended to change service offerings through elimination, outsourcing, or some combination of these two efforts (Figure 9). Just over two-thirds (68%) of all institutions reported they were not considering these options at this time.

Figure 9. Are you considering the elimination or outsourcing of any services over the next 1 to 3 years? (n=85)



When asked what areas were being considered for *elimination*, these SSAOs (n=22 considering elimination) reported a wide range of services under consideration. There was no clear trend in the range of services being considered for elimination, reflecting that, at this stage, this process is highly unique to each institution and their students' needs.

On the subject of *outsourcing*, these SSAOs (n=17 considering outsourcing) were most commonly considering health services (35%) and/or mental health (29%).

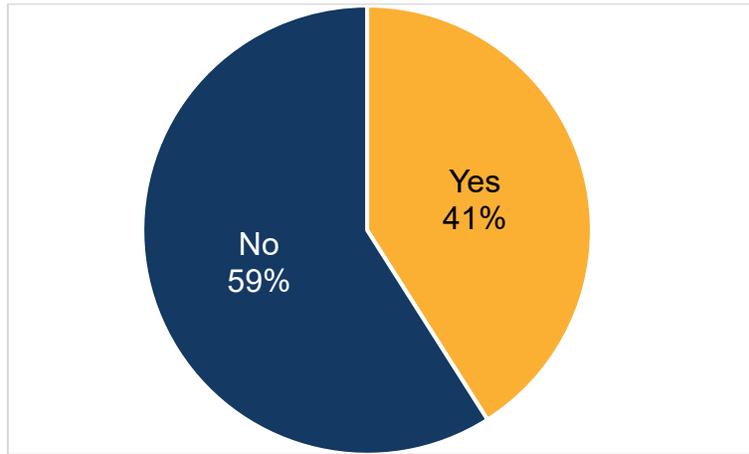
OTHER INITIATIVES OF NOTE

INTEGRATION OF AI

SSAOs felt that there were numerous areas of SAS that had the potential to benefit from integrating AI into their operations. When asked to pick the top three student services that they felt would benefit from AI integration, respondents overwhelmingly clustered around two service areas in particular: career services (64%) and academic support services (61%). These were followed distantly by accessibility services (27%) and orientation (26%). These answers were popular across institution types and regions, indicating that this perspective was relatively uniform across the country.

When asked whether there were any plans to use AI on campus, two-fifths (41%) of institutions indicated that they intended to use it to augment or change service delivery. Albertan institutions appeared to be particularly interested in AI, with nine of the 12 participating SSAOs reporting their intent to use AI to augment or change service delivery.

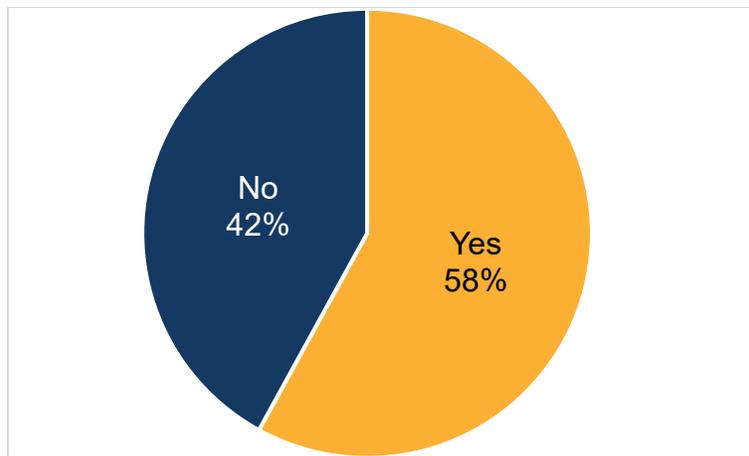
Figure 10. Do you have current plans to use artificial intelligence (AI) to augment or change the delivery of existing student services? (n=85)



REVENUE GENERATION

Given the funding challenges that all institutions are experiencing and their downstream impact on student affairs and services, many institutions are seeking opportunities to generate revenue to support various services. Just over half of all respondents (58%) indicated that they were considering or working toward revenue generation opportunities to fund specific services.

Figure 11. Are you considering any revenue generation opportunities to fund specific services? (n=85)



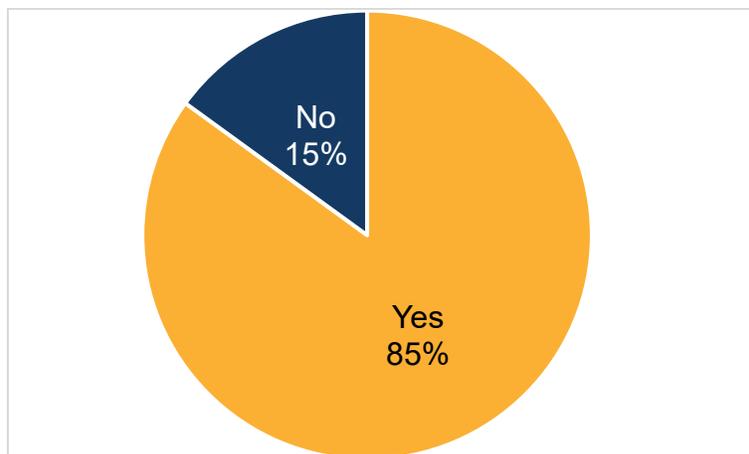
Regardless of their plans on their own campus, SSAOs were asked to identify any services that they felt were best positioned for revenue generation. Over half pointed to housing and residence life (53%). This was distantly followed by testing services (29%), varsity athletics (25%), recreational athletics (22%), health services (22%), and career services (22%).

There were few differences across regions on this front, but respondents from colleges and polytechnics were more likely to identify opportunities with testing services (43% vs 18% universities).

STUDENT RETENTION EFFORTS

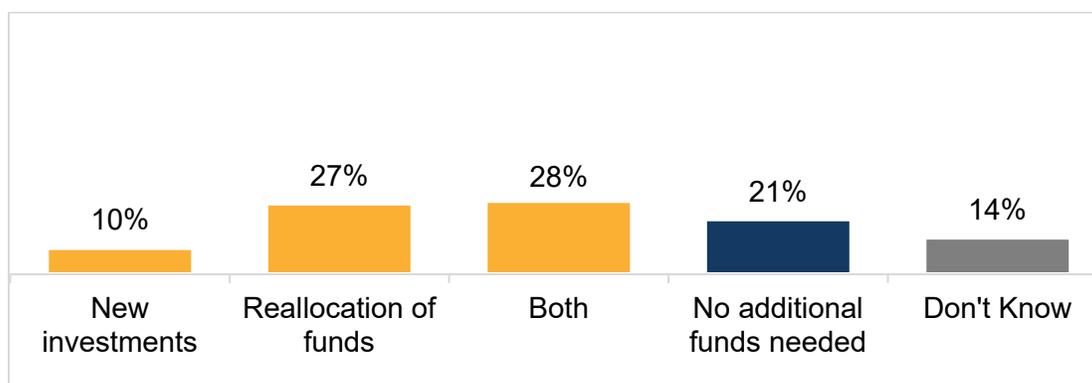
Another mechanism to maintain revenue and decrease expense, given the relative cost of recruiting each new student, is to improve student retention. With specific consideration to SAS, the majority of respondents said that they are planning to or have already made changes to their approach (85%).

Figure 12. Are you planning to or have you already made changes to your approach to student retention within student affairs and services? (n=85)



When asked how the changes to student retention would be resourced, over half of respondents were considering drawing on new investments and/or the reallocation of funds. One-fifth (21%) indicated that they did not require any further resources for retention efforts.

Figure 13. Will these changes to your student retention approach be accompanied by new investments from other areas of the institution or reallocation of funds from your own? (n=71)



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In the concluding portion of the survey, we invited SSAOs to share their hopes and fears for the future of student affairs. In their comments, respondents demonstrated a deep belief in the role of

SAS departments to ensure that students could thrive while pursuing their education, but they expressed numerous concerns about the circumstances in which they were currently working.

HOPES

The hopes that SSAOs most frequently shared were related to the potential for SAS to ensure that students and the institutions are successful.

Most SSAOs shared the perspective that their departments provide services that contribute to a welcoming environment by offering holistic supports that are both accessible and inclusive. In an ideal world, these services would integrate into the student experience seamlessly, creating a postsecondary experience where students can progress academically while developing as whole people and preparing to contribute to society in the best way that they are able. Related to this, several SSAOs shared the importance of and opportunities for improvement in areas such as mental health, wellness, and well-being, as well as the areas of EDI and Truth and Reconciliation.

The need for stable funding was recognized by many SSAOs, along with the corresponding hope that the value demonstrated by SAS would drive both institutions and governments to provide the funding necessary to maximize outcomes. To this end, some respondents emphasized the role that SAS can and should play in retention, which keeps funds in-house, particularly at a time when it is no longer a viable strategy to focus on the top of the enrolment funnel and assume there will be sufficient revenue despite attrition. They added that SAS offers a broader and more holistic (if not uniformly implemented) vision of retention efforts than registrarial and academic units.

Among SSAOs, there is an awareness that SAS needs to become more data-driven and provide evidence of contributions that will validate stable or additional resource allocation. There is also a hope that SAS can change with the times, adapting to the needs of current and future students rather than continuing to do things in old, comfortable ways that are no longer as necessary or as valued by the institution or students. This includes the potential introduction of AI into many services and programs.

Student affairs and services have often been known to be collaborative with, if not deferential to, academic units. Improved institutional positioning is desired by many respondents, both by developing true academic partnerships and by gaining the appreciation and understanding of senior leaders and other decision makers. Some SSAOs noted that students can and should be treated as partners by involving them—through clubs and organizations, such as student unions—in collaborative processes.

FEARS

Most of the fears that SSAOs expressed in the survey were in relation to things perceived to be beyond the control of SAS.

Unsurprisingly, some expressed their concern that declining enrolment will continue to have a profound impact on budgets, which commenters felt would create an increasingly single-minded focus on enrolment, revenue, and workforce development. This in turn, they said, would lead to SAS being viewed as more peripheral and therefore subject to increasing budget reductions and service constrictions. Some SSAOs worried that this would result in more control from governments that they felt lacked the necessary understanding of the inner workings of institutions and SAS programs and services.

Further reductions and layoffs were a particular point of concern. SSAOs shared that they expected these events to result in an increasing workload for remaining staff and, in turn, more staff attrition and burnout. In addition, they shared the fear that budget cuts would inordinately impact students from the most marginalized groups. In particular, some were concerned that budget cuts would result in services related to accessibility and mental health, to the extent that they are maintained, becoming more responsive rather than proactive. Others worried about the erosion of gains in the areas of EDI and Indigenization, given the extent to which SAS champions these important initiatives. Some SSAOs also expressed a related concern over the means by which these services would be funded in the future, as funding models such as fee-for-service could ultimately exclude students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Some expressed a lack of confidence in SAS's capacity to adapt quickly enough to meet student and institutional expectations, in part due to a change in work ethic both related to the return from the pandemic and a (perhaps reasonable) unwillingness among new generations of staff to go above and beyond in their jobs in the midst of declining resources. At the same time, the creativity and resiliency of SAS staff was noted as a mitigating factor to the range of potential negative outcomes in the current or foreseeable environment.

Finally, there was a wariness around the potential for AI to be used to eliminate jobs and provide social services at the expense of student success. Similar concerns were expressed about outsourcing.

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM SSAOS

In their final comments, several SSAOs shared the recurring thought that academic and student affairs, whether in direct reporting relationships or reporting in parallel, need to be aligned rather than siloed. In order to achieve this state, presidents must provide a mandate for this alignment and the expectation of collaboration, regardless of reporting structure.

SSAOs expressed that adaptability will be critical in the areas of AI application, adjusting to ongoing budget pressures, and understanding and meeting evolving student needs. In order to maximize opportunities based on available resources, data and assessment must be prominent in all services and programs.

Finally, SSAOs recognized that surveys like the one this study is based on are not often undertaken and the resulting data and information is not made widely available. They expressed

hope that the outcomes of this report would serve as a tool for demonstrating the value of and the need for stable—if not robust—student affairs and services funding.

Key Findings and Observations

Given how much is changing and developing in the sector, the sentiments expressed by SSAOs at this critical juncture were not surprising. There were several themes that stood out in the study findings—including some that will require further exploration to fully understand their nuance and implications for the sector and SAS departments in Canada. These are detailed below in no particular order.

REPORTING LINES: AT COLLEGES AND POLYTECHNICS, SSAOS HAVE THEIR PRESIDENT'S EAR

At the time of the survey, we noticed an interesting difference in the reporting lines between colleges and polytechnics and their university counterparts. In general, SSAOs at colleges and polytechnics appeared to typically be in vice-president roles (58% vs 24% universities) and were more likely to report directly to the president (58% vs 20%). This reporting structure does affect the nature of mandates and decisions that are ultimately made about the SAS portfolio. It also impacts the SSAO's authority to take advantage of opportunities to outsource, generate revenue, and support the broad and evolving range of student needs.

As the sector responds to financial issues, there is a noticeable amount of reorganization and realignment occurring on several campuses, so this finding may change with time.

BUDGET REDUCTIONS: WIDESPREAD, BUT HIGHLY VARIED

The evidence is clear that IRCC policy changes had a significant impact on both institutional and student affairs and services budgets in 2025–26, with many expecting this trend to continue in 2026–27. However, the scale of that impact, and how those budget changes played out, varied noticeably across respondents:

- When discussing institutional budget changes, more colleges and polytechnics reported that their budgets had been impacted in 2025–26 (83% vs 58% of universities).
- On the topic of SAS-specific budgets, colleges and polytechnics were also more likely than their university counterparts to say that their budgets had declined (75% vs 49%). However, college and polytechnic respondents tended to see a decrease that was either equal to (48%) or less (33%) than their institutional decline, while university SAS departments overwhelmingly saw a decrease equal to their institutional budget's decrease (81%).

SHIFTING SERVICES: WHAT WAS PROTECTED, WHAT COMMONLY DECLINED

Of the 85 SSAOs that we received feedback from, 32 said that they undertook a targeted approach to budget reductions in their department. Across these respondents, there were some notable commonalities in the services that were least and most impacted by budget reductions:

- Mental health and accessibility services—which are each offered by 98% of all responding institutions (n=85)—remain a priority. These services were generally reported as the least impacted by reductions (44% each). Very few respondents listed accessibility/disability services (6%) or mental health services (13%) among the most affected services on their campus.
- Indigenous services and programs seem to have survived budget reductions (41% of respondents said these were among the least impacted services; 3% said they were among the most impacted). Given that some institutions later suggested that they were also making new investments in these services (n=26, 27%), this outcome is particularly heartening, as it reflects a strong commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.
- International student services were the most common service area that SSAOs said had been most affected by reductions (53%). This is a distinct shift for Canadian postsecondary education, as nearly all respondents (n=85, 92%) said that they currently offer these services. This trend aligns with the steep decline in international enrolment due to the student cap and other policy impacts, particularly at colleges and polytechnics.
- EDI services—which were less commonly offered by respondent institutions than other services (n=85, 73%)—appeared to be relatively less protected (9% most impacted, 6% least impacted). While SSAOs demonstrated that they valued EDI efforts in their comments, it is not clear what the future of these services is.

FUTURE PRIORITIES: RETENTION & REVENUE GENERATION

Several SSAOs are focusing their efforts to ensure the sustainability and stability of their services. Most SSAOs said that they are planning or actively making changes to their student retention strategies within SAS (85%), largely by reallocating funds and/or making new investments (n=71, 65%).

Additionally, 58% of institutions are exploring revenue generation. When asked about the areas that presented the most opportunity, SSAOs generally pointed to three areas: housing and residence life (53%); testing services (29%), which was especially popular among colleges and polytechnics (43% vs 18% of universities); and varsity athletics (25%). Varsity athletics is among the greatest surprises in terms of optimism for the future and potential to generate revenue. Postsecondary institutions provide an important venue for competitive athletes to

continue in their sport, but Canadian institutions have generally lagged in their recognition of the opportunity to enhance brand, student experience, donor engagement, and revenue through sport.

AI INTEGRATION: A MARKED INTEREST FROM SSAOS

SSAOs at 41% of respondent institutions indicated that they plan to use AI to enhance service delivery within the next three years. There is a particular interest in AI among respondents from Alberta, with nine of 12 participating institutions reporting plans to implement it. SSAOs generally viewed career services (64%) and academic support services (61%) as the most promising areas to use AI.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As anticipated, the survey signaled some notable trends and directions for student affairs and services in 2025–26 that are expected to be reflected again in 2026–27 and beyond. While the reasons for these are largely externally driven, they must be internally managed in a sensitive, timely, and effective manner. SSAOs must boldly lead the way for SAS in Canadian postsecondary education in order for their departments to remain central and critical to the achievement of institutional goals.

The results of this survey will continue to be tested in the coming years, as the factors affecting postsecondary education and SAS departments change. We will continue to connect with SSAOs and monitor the trends in order to understand how SAS departments are navigating the challenges anticipated over the coming years.



This report was published by Academica Group,
a Canadian market research and institutional consulting firm.

131 Wharncliffe Rd S
London ON
N6J 2K4

e: info@academica.ca

t: 1.866.922.8636 | 1.519.433.8302