

Canadian Senior Student Affairs Officers' Perspectives and Experiences Working in Higher Education

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Abstract

The changing higher education landscape requires Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) to have dynamic and diverse competencies and skills to lead this complex work; however, there is limited research examining perceptions of skills needed for Canadian SSAOs. This article identifies skills and competencies required for this leadership role as well as issues and trends facing the field of Student Affairs and Services in Canada. Drawing on data from 75 respondents to the 2022 SSAO Survey representing Canadian universities and colleges, findings show that the top competencies required of an SSAO are diversity, communication, and student development. SSAOs also identified the signals, trends, and drivers facing current and future SSAOs in the field, including responding to students and academics, online learning and services, and mental health and well-being. Results also showed the types of professional development most valued by SSAOs were in-person workshops and mentoring relationships. A unique contribution of this research was gathering SSAOs' assessments of their competencies related to Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation. Participants reported confidence regarding doing land acknowledgements, supporting Indigenous students in finding resources, being open to Indigenous ways of knowing, and expanding their own understanding. They also identified the need for more training to develop relationships with community, human resources strategies for recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff, and fiscal plans and policies for Indigenous student services. The study also considers the implications of leadership training and development for the next generation of SSAO leaders. This study highlights the need for ongoing research into SSAO competencies and the professionalization of the field, as well as the role of research in making evidence-based decisions within Student Affairs and Services.

Keywords

Canada; Student Affairs and Services; Senior Student Affairs Officer; Leadership; Higher Education; Competencies; Signals, trends, and drivers.

Introduction

The field of Student Affairs and Services in North America began as early as 250 years ago in the United States (McClellan & Marquesz Kiyima, 2023). Prior to this, Canada established career advising and housing services to support World War II veterans pursuing post-secondary education (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). Over time, Student Affairs and Services has expanded to incorporate multiple aspects of the student experience, such as academic advising, health and counselling services, orientation, financial aid, accessibility services, and other programs and supports. These services evolved in response to changing student demographics. From predominantly World War II veterans in the 1940s, today's more diverse student population includes women, students with accessibility needs, international students, Indigenous nations, Black and other students of colour, and LBGQTIA2S+ communities (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010; Schreiber et al., 2023).

There are estimated to be 100 organizations and associations globally that influence the practice and scholarship of Student Affairs and Services (Bardill Moscaritolo & Schreiber, 2023; Ferguson et al.,

2020). These professional associations include the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), established in 1971; the Asia Pacific Student Services Association (APSSA), formed in 1988; the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA), which began in the early 1970s; AMOSSHE in the United Kingdom (UK), established in 1976; and the European University College Association (EUCA), formed in 2008. The International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) was formed in 2013. Student Affairs and Services has grown as a professionalized and distinct field of higher education. However, the dearth of research on Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) constitutes a gap in perspectives in the global field of Student Affairs and Services and within SSAO leadership in other regions (such as Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Latin America), as well as Canada.

This study aims to bridge the Canadian gap and provide important insight that will inform the Canadian Student Affairs and Services field, including graduate program curricula and regional and national professional associations.

In Canada, there are over 200 public post-secondary institutions (colleges and universities) that have some form of SSAO. These leaders prioritize student success initiatives, ensure inclusive academic environments, align institutional resources, address recruitment and retention needs, improve teaching and learning, and assess the impact of student-facing efforts at their institutions (Bardill Moscaritolo & Schreiber, 2023; Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Matthews & Newman, 2017; Sandeen, 1991; Schreiber et al., 2023; Strange & Hardy Cox, 2016; Sullivan, 2010).

Increasingly, SSAOs and student affairs professionals are being asked to ensure ongoing development and advancement of their core skills and competencies, as set out by their professional associations (Clement & Rickard, 1992; Fernandez et al., 2016; McClellan, 2016; Roberts, 2007; Rybalkina, 2004; Sandeen, 1991). To support the demand for diverse skills and knowledge from Student Affairs and Services practitioners, professional associations in the United States have articulated competency frameworks that guide professional development and graduate training in America (ACPA – College Student Educators International & NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015). Within Canada, CACUSS has articulated its equivalent competency training for Student Affairs and Services professionals (Fernandez et al., 2016). This connection of core competencies and skills, particularly for SSAOs, directly informs graduate training for Student Affairs and Services future leaders. It also equips professional associations to ensure appropriate training to meet the ongoing professional development needs of all student affairs professionals (Perozzi & Shea, 2023). To provide strategic learning opportunities for SSAOs, researchers must undertake knowledge exchange initiatives to guide the development of effective curricula and training programs and professional development opportunities (DuVivier et al., 2017; Eaton, 2016; Kuk & Banning, 2009; Seifert et al., 2015). Such relevant formal education and continuing professional development appear to be the foundation of high-quality personnel in Student Affairs and Services (Seifert et al., 2015; Winston & Creamer, 1997).

Additionally, such standards and competencies for SSAO leaders require flexibility and adaptability, addressing the skills needed for leading in this field while also being responsive to the local and global influences on higher education (Eaton, 2016; Schreiber et al., 2023). Again, much of the research on competencies in the profession has been conducted primarily in the United States.

For example, Parnell and Wesaw's (2020) survey of Vice-Presidents of Student Affairs who were members of NASPA differentiated key competencies from foundational, intermediate, and advanced executive tasks and skills required to oversee their functional areas. Such research informs how the roles and responsibilities of the SSAO leader are understood. While supporting

student success remains a core value of the field, SSAOs—as leaders in the field—must balance supporting their units in providing student supports amidst local and global changes influencing the day-to-day experiences of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. This project provides important points of comparison for understanding Student Affairs and Services and the SSAO leadership role in higher education contexts outside the United States.

Student Affairs and Services graduate programs and professional development programs have opportunities and responsibilities to offer relevant knowledge and skills development (Dickerson et al., 2011; DuVivier et al., 2017; Eaton, 2016; Fernandez et al., 2016; Kuk & Banning, 2009; McClellan & Marquesz Kiyima, 2023; Munsch & Cortez, 2014; Seifert et al., 2015; Sriram, 2014). Approximately 12 Canadian public institutions have created graduate programs and/or certificates specializing in Student Affairs and Services, leadership, higher education, and post-secondary education. This has come in response to the growing need for Canadian Student Affairs and Services practitioners, researchers, and leaders over the last 15 years. The literature reflects a growing number of Student Affairs and Services scholars in the United States and United Kingdom conducting their graduate research on SSAO-related topics. This demonstrates the foundational impact that graduate programs are having on this burgeoning area of scholarship (Camp, 2017; DuVivier et al., 2017; Estrada Torries, 2019; Roberts, 2014; Rybalkina, 2004; Saritas & Smith, 2011). Yet, there remain few peer-reviewed publications and/or up-to-date and relevant books that contribute to the Canadian or other countries' perspectives of SSAO leadership across various aspects of the Student Affairs and Services field. Wesaw and Sponsler (2014) identified three reasons why collecting information from SSAOs is valuable: (1) providing context and information to those outside the field of Student Affairs and Services, (2) a resource for SSAOs to compare their roles to peers, and (3) a resource for those who desire to move into an SSAO role in the future by providing insight into the skills required as well as trends and challenges associated with the position. This current research enables significant contributions to the Canadian and international comparative literature of SSAOs currently absent from the literature. This article aims to identify those issues and trends facing the field of Student Affairs and Services in Canada, whilst also considering the implications of leadership training and development for the next generation of SSAO leaders.

The article examines the literature pertaining to issues and trends in the field and the role of the SSAO leader in navigating complexity and change in higher education. The authors draw on data from the 2022 Canadian SSAO Survey, which is part of a longitudinal project on SSAOs in the country. This survey provides a contemporary understanding of the issues and trends facing Canadian higher education. These findings then provide insight into the leadership skills and training needed for the SSAO to help build capacity in the field through a variety of means (e.g., professional development, mentoring, and practical experience).

Method

Research design

The Canadian SSAO project is a longitudinal quantitative research study that utilizes a survey adapted from similar research in the United States (Rybalkina, 2004). With permission from the original author, the adapted survey has been administered in Canada approximately every five years since 2005 (Browne et al., 2015). With each iteration, the Canadian SSAO Survey is updated to reflect changes relevant to evolving technology, new educational opportunities, contemporary issues, and trends that may affect the competencies required of Student Affairs and Services professionals. There are also consistent sets of questions asked within the Canadian SSAO Survey to ensure comparative data analysis between data sets over time. For the purposes of this article, we

are presenting the findings from the 2022 Canadian SSAO Survey only.

Ethics

The study received ethical review by Memorial University and Simon Fraser University.

Implied consent was inferred, as each participant expressed their consent to participate in the study upon completing and submitting the survey. Once participants clicked the link to access the survey, the webpage displayed the researchers' contact information as well as providing participants with information on how to request a summary of the study's results.

Instrument

The 2022 Canadian SSAO Survey remained largely the same as previous iterations, with the addition of a section on Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation. This section was added in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) *Final Report* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015b) and, in particular, the Calls to Action (TRC, 2015a) directly relevant to Canadian universities and colleges.

Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation activities have become paramount in many Canadian institutions. Arguably, institutions can take every possible action to advance these mandates (Pete, 2016), which require new interpretations of competencies or even wholly new competencies. To investigate SSAOs' readiness to engage with these issues, we adapted questions from Cull et al.'s (2018) competencies. The insights gained from the SSAOs' responses can be used to inform training and education on these critical issues. A final change was the adaptation of the previous surveys' section on trend spotting. We modified this section with more sophisticated delineation of trends from the work of Saritas and Smith (2011), so respondents could comment on weak signals (short-term events and phenomena that are surprising or interesting and may indicate developing trends, p. 297), trends (medium-term patterns of change, p. 293), and drivers (long-term or powerful forces and factors influencing change in respondents' worlds, p. 294) of change influencing the leadership of SSAOs.

Participants

CACUSS provided an email list of SSAO positions in colleges and universities in Canada. The research team then cross-checked this list with publicly available information on post-secondary websites. These data became the Canadian database of SSAOs (or equivalent positions of senior leadership within Student Affairs and Services portfolios) working at public and private universities ($n=119$) and colleges ($n=138$). These numbers account for the fact that several larger institutions may have had one or more senior student affairs positions (e.g., Vice President of Students or Associate Vice President of Students, or a multiple campus model with an SSAO role at each campus). The range of position titles were captured within the questions asked in the 2022 SSAO survey and are reported in the findings.

The email invitation was sent in English and French, providing a brief overview of the study, instructions on how to access the survey, and contact information for the Primary Investigator and Co-Investigator to address any questions. The online survey was delivered through Qualtrics software hosted by Memorial University. The survey link was live from 10 May to 24 June 2022.

While our database contained 257 SSAO contact details, upon sending out the email invitation, a number of emails bounced back. The research team investigated any returned emails and found that the people in the roles had changed (and updated the contact accordingly). This resulted in 206 potential participants contacted via their public email address after email duplication and

verification were completed. Qualtrics tracked the number of times the survey was accessed (91 times), resulting in 75 surveys completed with a 36% overall response rate. This is comparable to previous response rates, which have ranged from 31%–41%. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Demographic Category	Variable	Percentage
Gender	Female	48
	Male	46
	Non-binary	6
Age Range	31–40	13
	41–50	46
	51–60	35
	Over 65	6
Years of Full-time Experience in Student Affairs and Services	< 10 years	42
	11–20 years	29
	21–30 years	27
	> 31 years	2
Time in Current SSAO Role	< 3 years	19
	3–5 years	31
	6–8 years	31
	> 8 years	19
Education	Diploma, Certificate, Trade	0
	Bachelor degree	15
	Masters degree	52
	Doctorate	33
Academic Discipline of Highest Degree Completed	Education	50
	Humanities	19
	Business	15
	Social Sciences	13
	Physical Sciences	2
Institutional Type	University (public)	50
	College (public)	31
	University/college (private)	6
	Other (Church College, Federated University, Polytechnic)	13

Of those who responded, 48% identified as female, 46% as male, and 6% as non-binary. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 41–50 (46%) or 51–60 (35%). Forty-two percent

of survey participants had less than 10 years of full-time experience in Student Affairs and Services, 29% had 11–20 years, 27% had 21–30 years, and only 2% had 31–35 years of experience.

When asked about how long they had served in their current SSAO role, equally 31% of respondents reported either 3–5 years or 6–8 years. An observation both in the literature (Parnell & Wesaw, 2020) and in the field is the increasing credentialization of Student Affairs and Services. Regarding the current survey participants' highest degree completed, the majority indicated a masters degree (52%), while 33% had earned doctorates and only 15% reported a bachelor degree. These data align with trends noted in the literature regarding the increasing professionalization of Student Affairs and Services through specialized graduate degrees. This was reflected in the predominant field of study reported as the SSAOs' academic background (i.e., Education, 50%). However, there remained diversity in that other SSAO participants came from the fields of Humanities (19%), Business (15%), Social Sciences (13%), and Physical Sciences (2%).

Of the 75 participants, the majority were from public universities (50%), then public colleges (31%), private universities (6%), and 13% worked at other institution types (e.g., Church College, Federated University, Polytechnic). When asked what their institutional focus was, 50% of respondents indicated teaching/undergraduate, 27% were comprehensive, 15% polytechnical, and 8% were research focused. For context, Canada's higher education is provincially/territorially governed and is a system of predominately public non-profit institutions. While there are many for-profit colleges offering a variety of training, there are very few for-profit universities.

Another observation from the literature is the diversification of titles for those who hold the senior leadership role in the Student Affairs and Services portfolio (Parnell & Wesaw, 2020). Our respondents were no different; 35% were Directors, 21% were Vice President of Students, 19% were Associate Vice President Academic Students, 13% held the title of Dean of Students, 8% held the title Executive or Senior Director, and 4% held the title Manager or Assistant Dean. Further, 15% of all respondents had additional components to their titles, such as CFO (Chief Financial Officer), Internationalization, Registrar, Institutional Planning, or Indigenous Education.

This also aligns with to whom the SSAO leader reported—35% reported to the President, 35% reported directly to the Vice President Academic/Provost, 13% reported to the Vice President, Provost or Executive Director of Students, 8% reported to another Vice President position (e.g., Vice President Human Resources), and the remaining 9% reported to others in their institution (e.g., Registrar, Vice Provost, and Associate Vice President Research).

Data analysis

The data analysis was done using SPSS software, relying on descriptive statistics to understand the SSAO perspective. While we were able to conduct some comparative analysis, there were few tests of significance we could conduct due to limitations of sample size. Moreover, refining the data further could potentially identify participants and/or institutions. Any open-ended responses were analyzed following a thematic analysis using NVivo software.

Results

The career pathways into SSAO positions in Canada are diverse. Accordingly, the survey results indicated that 65% of participants were working in student affairs prior to taking their leadership role, 58% were in administrative roles, 48% were in academic positions, 4% came with human resources experience, and few (2%) came from the financial fields. The skills and competencies required for SSAO leaders can be informed by a variety of disciplinary approaches. From the survey, respondents ranked key skills and competencies required of the SSAO leader under the

categories of Leadership, Student Development, Communication, Human Resource Management, Fiscal Management, Personal and Professional Development, Research, Evaluation and Assessment, Legal Issues, Technology, and Diversity (Table 2). Participants were asked to rate the degree of importance of various skills and competencies relevant to Student Affairs and Services work. The scale ranged from 1 ("not important") to 4 ("essential"). If they were unsure, they could choose "don't know". The response count ranged from 54 to 59 participants across the items. The percentages reflect those who answered the question.

Table 2

Participants' Rankings of Required SSAO Skills and Competencies

Skills and Competencies	Not important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Important (%)	Essential (%)	Don't know (%)
LEADERSHIP					
Gaining commitment from the top leadership	0	0	22	78	0
Following the profession's ethics	0	5	20	73	2
Communicating the department's mission and vision	0	3	29	68	0
Role-modelling behaviours to other professionals	2	5	27	66	0
Developing collaborative relationships with another division	0	5	31	64	0
Promoting the academic mission of the institution	0	5	31	64	0
Developing the mission and vision of the department/division	0	3	32	64	0
Working in the institutions' political environment	3	10	25	61	0
Developing the strategic plan with realistic goals	2	2	36	61	0
Utilizing the expertise of others	0	2	39	59	0
Implementing appropriate decisions under certain conditions	0	2	39	56	3
Utilizing effective techniques to motivate staff	0	3	51	46	0
Delegating where appropriate	0	3	51	46	0
Supporting staff professional competency development by understanding ongoing professional needs of the field	0	9	59	33	0
Engaging with broader societal challenges (e.g., social justice and sustainability issues)	0	22	56	22	0
Promoting engagement with global professional networks	19	36	32	14	0
STUDENT DEVELOPMENT					
Providing assistance and services to diverse student populations	0	3	15	81	0
Supporting and spreading awareness among students in mental health, well-being, and learning	0	3	24	72	0
Responding to students' crisis	0	3	19	78	0
Assessing student needs	0	2	27	71	0
Coordinating with student association to identify and address needs	2	5	42	51	0
Promoting student engagement to increase academic performance	2	8	42	47	0
Including students in policy-making decisions	0	3	51	44	2

Skills and Competencies	Not important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Important (%)	Essential (%)	Don't know (%)
Applying student development theories in decision making	5	22	41	31	2
Advising student groups	0	24	51	24	2
Organizing events at your institution to gain more student attention	5	24	49	22	0
Training students to perform paraprofessional duties	5	39	42	12	2
Providing opportunities for students interested in the field	8	39	49	12	2
COMMUNICATION					
Maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality	0	2	9	90	0
Writing effective correspondence and reports	0	5	45	50	0
Presenting and public speaking	0	7	48	45	0
Accurately interpreting attitudes and needs of others	0	3	48	48	0
Effectively communicating with the media	3	34	41	19	2
HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT					
Aligning needs for diverse staff with changing population	0	0	40	60	0
Recognizing accomplishments of others	2	5	34	59	0
Using appropriate staff selection techniques	0	7	46	48	0
Mediating conflict among staff	0	9	45	47	0
Supervising professional staff	0	3	53	44	0
Terminating professional staff following due process	2	12	42	39	5
Evaluating professional staff	0	4	60	37	0
Applying successful professional staff recruiting techniques	0	10	54	36	0
Developing staff through continuing education programs	0	22	42	36	0
Training staff using appropriate instructional techniques	2	7	59	33	2
FISCAL MANAGEMENT					
Strategically channelling available resources	0	0	37	63	0
Projecting future priorities and needs	0	0	39	61	0
Understanding the financing of higher education	0	14	39	46	0
Responding to budget cuts	0	8	51	41	0
The compliance of financial aid programs	0	14	48	33	5
Using effective cost models with effective development models	0	24	42	31	2
Analyzing financial reports	2	22	51	25	0
Writing grants and contracts to garner additional resources	2	29	51	19	0
Applying budget development techniques	0	17	63	17	3
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT					
Keeping abreast of current issues in Student Affairs and Services	0	7	26	67	0
Practicing effective self-care	2	9	24	66	0

Skills and Competencies	Not important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Important (%)	Essential (%)	Don't know (%)
Assessing one's own personal and professional development needs	0	7	45	48	0
Seeking feedback from peers and staff	0	14	40	47	0
Attending professional development activities	0	14	60	26	0
Learning and adapting from international networks and practices in the profession	7	29	38	24	2
Maintaining a scholarly background in one's discipline	9	24	48	19	0
Being involved in a professional association	5	34	48	12	0
Writing an article for professional and/or academic publication	31	48	19	0	0
RESEARCH, EVALUATION, AND ASSESSMENT					
Evaluating programs for effectiveness	0	8	39	53	0
Utilizing results of studies	0	15	51	34	0
Using evidence-based assessment to develop educational programming	2	10	54	32	2
Assessing learning outcomes	3	17	49	29	2
Developing a comprehensive assessment plan	2	17	53	25	3
Initiating or developing surveys or studies	7	27	41	24	2
Interpret research as reporting in professional literature	0	20	56	22	2
Keeping up to date on research, evaluation, and assessment methods and tools	2	20	56	20	2
Interpreting and/or analyzing statistical methods and results	3	37	37	19	3
Performing self-studies for accreditation reviews	8	25	39	17	10
LEGAL ISSUES					
Using proactive risk management techniques	0	3	39	58	0
Implementing due process concepts	0	2	34	58	7
Understanding personal and professional liability issues	0	7	39	54	0
Keeping abreast of current legislative issues	0	15	49	36	0
Keeping abreast of current cases	0	34	46	19	2
Finding and reviewing past cases or past issues related to a current case	0	31	56	14	0
TECHNOLOGY					
Using technology to develop a professional presentation	2	7	33	59	0
Addressing the needs and demands of online programming and supports	2	9	44	46	0
Understanding the use of technology in the marketing and promotion of events	0	9	49	42	0
Using social media for promotion of programs and facilitating student contact	2	18	44	37	0
Creating and maintaining one's digital identity	2	9	54	35	0
	5	41	29	23	2
DIVERSITY					
Understanding needs of underrepresented students	0	0	9	91	0
Considering needs of diverse populations when making decisions	0	0	12	88	0

Skills and Competencies	Not important (%)	Somewhat important (%)	Important (%)	Essential (%)	Don't know (%)
Providing services for underrepresented students	0	0	17	83	0
Working with Indigenous groups in culturally appropriate ways	0	2	16	81	0
Working effectively with someone with a different background than oneself	0	3	22	74	0
Recruiting, supporting, and mentoring diverse staff	0	3	24	73	0
Promoting recruitment and admissions of diverse students	0	2	32	66	0
Participating in educational events to understand people different than oneself	0	5	36	59	0
Applying minority development theories to understand underrepresented students	3	7	45	41	3

Based on the responses to items within Table 2, participants were then asked to rank the top three skills and competencies. Respondents identified diversity (91%), communication (90%), and student development (81%). There are threads of connection between these skills and how the SSAO participants responded to other questions within the survey (e.g., leading during COVID-19 and identifying signals, trends, and drivers of SSAO leadership). Respondents ranked elements of skills within each category as essential, important, somewhat important, and not important.

Diversity skills that were rated as essential for SSAOs were understanding needs of underrepresented students (91%), considering needs of diverse populations when making decisions (88%), providing services for underrepresented students (83%), and working with Indigenous groups in culturally appropriate ways (81%).

Communication was also highly ranked as an essential skill that included maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality (90%), while presenting and public speaking was spread between essential (45%) and important (48%). In addition, accurately interpreting attitudes and needs of others was equally identified as essential and important (48% each). Writing effective correspondence and reports was ranked as essential by 50% of respondents, while another 45% felt it was an important SSAO communication skill.

Student development skills essential to the role of SSAOs were providing assistance and services to diverse student populations (81%); responding to students' crises (78%); supporting and spreading awareness among students in mental health, well-being, and learning (72%); and assessing student needs (71%). Interestingly, some elements of student development (e.g., including students in policy making decisions and advising student groups were ranked important (51% each). If we combine the essential and important responses together, then 95% of respondents valued including students in decision making and 75% felt the SSAO role included advising students.

Leading during COVID-19

Given the timing of this survey, we anticipated COVID-19 would have an impact on how our participants responded to the questions. Therefore, specific questions were included to ensure they had a space to reflect and respond to the leadership challenges encountered during the global pandemic of 2020–2022. The top three competencies they relied on as leaders were leadership and outreach (48%), flexibility and adaptability (43%), and clear communication (40%).

Professional development

SSAO participants were asked what forms of professional development they found most effective. Responses indicated the most effective was in-person workshops (92%), second was specific student affairs/services professional development workshops (88%), and third was mentoring relationships (86%).

SSAOs advancing Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation.

Since the TRC's 2015 Calls to Action, there has been a shift in post-secondary institutions responding to Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation. Respondents were asked about their own skills and competencies in this respect that could help inform future professional development for SSAOs in Canada.

The participants self-reported their skills in various elements of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation (Table 3). Overall, 80% or higher of participants reported they were confident or very confident in their abilities in the following skills: conduct a land acknowledgement, identify support services for Indigenous students, be open and approachable regarding Indigenous ways of knowing, be open to Indigenous perspectives to expand their own understanding, and know how to seek opportunities to make and strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities.

Table 3

SSAO Self-assessment of Competencies to Support Reconciliation, Indigenization, and Decolonization

Competencies	No knowledge/ experience (%)	Very little knowledge/ experience (%)	Enough skill/ knowledge to do this confidently (%)	Very confident to do this (%)
Formally acknowledge the territory(ies) that my institutional campus(es) are built upon	0	11	36	53
Demonstrate approachability and openness to Indigenous ways of knowing and being	0	11	39	50
Respect the practices, customs, values, and norms of Indigenous persons, cultures, and backgrounds	2	21	33	44
Examine my own personal beliefs about the experiences of trauma and reflect on the impact these have on my interactions with Indigenous students, colleagues, organizations, interactive competencies, and systems	2	21	35	42
Identify the services and resources available to Indigenous students on my campus and within my community	0	11	52	38
Demonstrate awareness of, and responsiveness to, challenges and systemic barriers faced by Indigenous students	0	24	40	36
Sharing information with my institution and beyond to inform current and prospective Indigenous students of the array of services, programs, and supports available to them at my institution	4	21	42	33

Develop awareness and sensitivity of Indigenous cultures at my institution and understand the diversity of Indigenous peoples across Canada	2	23	46	30
Actively participate in policy and practice change that aligns with Indigenous strategic priorities for my department/institution	5	23	41	30
Collaborating with Indigenous colleagues and students in support of decolonization work to identify and overcome systemic barriers for Indigenous students faced at my institution	2	39	39	30
Seek opportunities to make connections and strengthen relationships with Indigenous students and Indigenous community members	2	18	55	25
Promoting the importance of the Indigenization of curricula (including co-curricular and extracurricular) through responsive programming, orientation, and instruction	2	28	45	25
Develop fiscal plans and policies to develop and sustain Indigenous programming and support services	6	31	37	25
Actively encourage the development of reciprocal relations with my Indigenous students and Indigenous student services on and off my campus(es)	4	30	43	24
Generate, and when appropriate, implement solutions to mitigate these challenges within my designated area of responsibility	2	34	41	23
Fostering intercultural engagement among Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, faculty, and staff	2	27	49	22
Demonstrate awareness of, and responsiveness to, verbal and nonverbal communication across cultures	2	30	47	21
Involving Elders and Indigenous community in all programs offered on and off my campus(es)	4	17	58	21
Foster programming for non-Indigenous students to build awareness and knowledge on the realities, histories, cultures, and beliefs of Indigenous people in Canada	2	27	51	20
Facilitating partnerships among educational and local Indigenous communities to maintain an open, collaborative, consultative, and reflective process on the specific needs of Indigenous students	4	45	35	16
Welcoming Indigenous perspectives to expand my own understanding of others	0	13	73	14
Develop human resource strategies that increase the number of Indigenous staff and/or faculty applying to, hired at, and retained at my institution	4	42	42	12

Table 3 also identifies the items in which SSAOs ranked themselves as having very little to no knowledge or expertise and would require more training/support to incorporate such elements into their work. Forty-nine percent of participants felt they had very little (or no) knowledge to facilitate partnerships within local Indigenous communities. Forty-six percent would need training to develop human resource strategies for the recruitment and retention of Indigenous students, staff, and faculty. Fewer (37%) indicated they had very little or no knowledge on how to develop fiscal plans

and policies to support Indigenous programming and services. Thirty-four percent of participants felt less confident in their ability to develop reciprocal relationships with Indigenous students and communities (on and off campus) and to generate and implement solutions to challenges faced by their unit.

Issues of leadership facing the next generation

Participants were asked to provide their insights into the issues of leadership facing the next generation of SSAO leaders in terms of signals (i.e., short-term events), trends (i.e., medium-term patterns), and drivers (i.e., long-term forces of change) (Saritas & Smith, 2011). Within our survey responses, approximately 30 participants identified issues facing the Student Affairs and Services field. Table 4 summarizes the top issues, as identified by the respondents, that were currently impacting the field and were expected to do so for the foreseeable future. These included responding to students and academics, online learning and services, and mental health and well-being, which are arguably all interconnected. Respondents were asked to consider changes affecting students, faculty, staff, and post-secondary institutions in general and identify 2–3 important short-term signals, medium-term trends, and long-term drivers of change.

Table 4

Participants' Perceptions of Short-term Signals, Medium-term Trends, and Long-term Drivers Facing Canadian Higher Education

Issues	Short-term Signals (#)	Medium-term Trends (#)	Long-term Drivers (#)
Responding to students and academics	10	15	14
Online learning and service delivery	17	11	8
Mental health and well-being	11	6	5
Financial and economic (e.g., funding costs and tuition; post-COVID-19 recovery)	9	4	5
Equity, diversity, and inclusion (along with Indigenization and decolonization, TRC)	2	9	10
Great resignation (human resources)	7	7	5
Other (e.g., data and evaluation, government and policy, environment and sustainability)	0	3	4

It is evident in their open-ended responses that the SSAOs were considering the short-, medium-, and long-term impact of COVID-19. For example, as a signal, Participant 11 said “the pandemic led to the need to offer more online or hybrid services, including mental health counselling. This may signal a longer-term preference and need for flexibility regarding the mode of student affairs service delivery”. They were also seeing the impact of COVID-19 on the financial situation and economic influences on their portfolios and services.

Across the signals, trends, and drivers of students and the academy, participants were observing that there were ongoing and shifting demographics of students themselves, including age range, diversity, and accessibility needs. As a signal, participants were seeing that “students are older with families and busy lives” (Participant 70), while another observed “an increase in part-time enrollment and/or time off during degree completion” (Participant 66). Others suggested more mature students and/or delaying time to completion would continue as a trend, with comments such as “there seems to be a fairly strong tendency to delay entering college and to drop out quickly to travel or work as soon as the student program does not meet expectations” (Participant 1). Another participant noted as a driver that they saw “demographic shifts and the need to broaden and diversify student recruitment away from the typical 18–24-year-old domestic high school

graduates” (Participant 69). Others spoke about students' learning needs and preferences also changing (e.g., online learning, part-time learning, and artificial intelligence). Participant 30 suggested an increasing trend for “anytime, anywhere” demand for supports and services. Another indicated such demands would continue into the future as a driver influencing Student Affairs and Services to be “more robust, affordable, and accessible teaching technologies and resources” (Participant 11).

The demand for hybrid/remote services was also conveyed by Student Affairs and Services staff who wished to do more online and remote work. Several participants identified staffing issues as a signal, trend, and driver in the field; we categorized this as the “great resignation”. Several responses observed that the broader changes in the field (e.g., students, online services, mental health) would impact whether some Student Affairs and Services staff wished to stay in the field as more services were offered online/hybrid. Others noted that increasing demands for online/remote services by students would influence staffing, increasing demands for online and remote work options from human resources. As some participants signaled, they were already seeing a “demand in flexible work” (Participant 56) and a future trend of increasing “employee demands for remote and hybrid work” (Participant 16). This directly links to one of the lingering impacts of COVID-19 on higher education.

Mental health services were seen as a current issue and one that would only see increased demand with the changing student demographics, changing delivery formats, and the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of staff and students. One participant noted a trend they were seeing was the “growth in awareness of the impact of mental health and socialization on overall well-being” (Participant 30). Another acknowledged they were observing a “destigmatization of mental health challenges in the general population” (Participant 19) reflected in the student population, thus influencing increased demand for support services.

Discussion

The 2022 Canadian SSAO Survey provided significant insight into SSAOs working in Canadian higher education. Furthermore, it illustrated the competencies and skills SSAOs most valued, as well as their perceptions of the trends and issues facing the Student Affairs and Services field. In reviewing the literature and the 2022 SSAO Survey data set, there were a few surprising insights. For example, survey respondents felt that research and assessment were not a core competency of SSAO leadership (79% ranked it as somewhat or not important). This made us pause, as we see there being an increased need for research and evidence-based decision making in the future service provision, policy, and practice of the Student Affairs and Services field.

The influence of equity, diversity, and inclusion and Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation across Canadian higher education was evident in the synergy between theory and SSAO practices. For example, 85% of respondents felt it was essential or very important that SSAOs use minority student development theories to understand underrepresented students. SSAOs also identified that they felt comfortable with various aspects of the work of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation (e.g., supporting Indigenous students, conducting land acknowledgements, and being open to Indigenous ways of knowing and being to deepen their own understanding). However, participants also identified that they need more professional development and/or resources to enact Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation in their human resource practices to recruit and retain Indigenous staff and align their financial and other policies to support Indigenous student services. This identified gap provides clear direction for SSAO professional development to deepen understandings and enrich SSAO leadership enactment of Indigenization,

decolonization, and reconciliation in practice. We acknowledge as a nation we have been working towards the TRC's (2015a) Calls to Action and there is much more work to be done.

Another observation from the data was the role of mentoring and student development in creating pathways not only into the Student Affairs and Services profession but also into SSAO leadership roles. The United States intentionally creates such paraprofessional pathways during undergraduate and graduate degrees (e.g., residence advisors, orientation coordinators). The Canadian SSAO Survey respondents felt training students to perform paraprofessional duties was less important (54% felt was important/essential, while 46% felt this was somewhat important/not important). When asked how they felt about providing opportunities for students interested in the Student Affairs and Services field, there was more value in that 61% felt it was important/essential; however, 39% of respondents felt it was somewhat important/not important. We see possible future research given potential career pathways and desire to support growth in the profession in Canada.

In reflecting further on the findings, a significant component of the research focused on the core competences of SSAO leadership, among which participants ranked diversity (91%), communication (90%), and student development (81%) as the top three. While the instrument in this study was created before the CACUSS Competency Model in 2016, which has identified 11 competencies, the top three listed above are all included in the CACUSS Competency Model. It should be noted that the CACUSS model is intended more for new and mid-career Student Affairs and Services professionals, and not specifically SSAOs; however, it is expected SSAOs would be at the highest level of these competencies (West & Henning, 2023). This SSAO survey sets out to specifically examine and rank the competencies SSAOs need to execute their senior leadership role. Other Student Affairs and Services organizations around the world have identified competencies for student affairs professionals, including ACPA/NASPA in the United States, which identified 10 competency areas with foundational, intermediate, and advanced levels of attainment (West & Henning, 2023). Their list includes similarities to the current study, including Student Learning and Development and Social Justice and Inclusion, but did not specifically identify communication. It is challenging to compare competency frameworks across organizations and countries. A comparison completed of similarities and differences of competency areas across countries revealed there was some overlap, but more differences than similarities, across the various existing frameworks and models (Bardill Moscaritolo & Roberts, 2016; West & Henning, 2023). This highlights the value of the current research, as it provides a deeper analysis of the competencies required specifically for Canadian SSAOs, and more generally for the Student Affairs and Services field. This research contributes to the global competency work that currently exists and continues to evolve.

In relation to issues/signals, trends, and drivers, the responses highlighted (1) responding to students and academics (i.e., changing demographics, diversity, and expectations), (2) online learning and services, and (3) mental health and well-being. In comparison to other research exploring trends, a review of the Top Issues in Student Affairs survey conducted by NASPA (2024) revealed the top ranked issues in the United States were related to health, safety, and well-being. The following issues were highest ranked: providing health, safety and well-being-related education and training; increasing awareness of and access to mental health services; and increasing campus-wide collaboration and approach to health, safety, and well-being. Other issues that fell in the top 10 were related to administration and governance and assessment and evaluation. Technology and innovation and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion did not fall in the top 10 but the report recognized these as essential components requiring attention in the student affairs space (NASPA, 2024). Within the Canadian SSAO Survey, respondents identified how contemporary issues of the global pandemic and artificial intelligence were currently influencing the field and would be future issues that SSAOs would have to address in terms of policy (e.g., human resources, remote work) and practice (e.g., artificial intelligence-driven service provision). Researchers noted that there is

little to no recent data collection examining signals, trends, and drivers outside North America. There is also little information on the demographics of SSAOs. Both of these provide yet another valuable line of inquiry for future research.

Conclusion

The SSAO Survey project adds a unique Canadian perspective to the literature, predominately from the United States, and paves the way for exploring other SSAO perspectives on a global scale. This project makes important contributions to the literature regarding Canadian SSAO leaders by identifying competencies necessary to flourish in this senior leadership role and voicing the issues and trends in Student Affairs and Services in Canada. This research captures the demographics of these senior leaders, providing key insights into who the current SSAOs in Canada are, as well as their preferred professional development methods. These data are useful to national associations and graduate training programs in providing relevant and timely information and training. SSAOs self-reporting their competencies in various elements of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation illustrates progress in the TRC's (2015) Calls to Action in the area of Student Affairs and Services but also identifies where more training and support is required. While the research presented provides valuable insight, further research is required. The next iteration of the SSAO survey will be done in 2027 and the aim is to expand the survey globally. With future plans to advance the longitudinal analysis of the SSAO data sets, the researchers will be able to articulate the evolution of the field of SSAO leadership in Canada. Furthermore, future SSAO surveys will provide unique Canadian insights into the work of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation. We feel strongly that there is much to be learned from SSAO leadership in Canada and globally as the Student Affairs and Services field continues to evolve in supporting diverse students in complex times.

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