Campus Challenges and Strategic Priorities in a Time of Change

A National Survey of Campus Stakeholders

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INTRODUCTION

AAC&U periodically surveys its members to better understand how colleges and universities are defining and articulating learning outcomes, providing access to engaging learning experiences (i.e., "high-impact practices"), and assessing student success. Though equity has been a focal point for campuses in recent years, the tidal wave of change in higher education spurred by the converging crises of COVID-19 and renewed emphasis on systemic racism in the United States and globally have required nearly every campus to rethink its game plan. Adaptation has been essential, but lasting change is still an unknown. In this report, we seek to illuminate the challenges and priorities across a diverse sample of colleges and universities. Moreover, because the vantage point on obstacles and opportunities varies by position on campus, results have been analyzed according to respondents' campus roles.

The pandemic has challenged a number of stubborn assumptions about higher education—e.g., that change is slow, that faculty can't adapt, that student learning can be neatly separated from students' everyday lives, or that all students have the same opportunities to succeed. Based on a survey administered in the fall of 2020, this report presents findings during a historic period as campuses managed the uncertainties of a global health pandemic and reacted to calls for social justice spurred by the murder of George Floyd and police violence against African Americans. This report paints a picture of how campus challenges and strategic priorities persist in ways we have come to expect as "business as usual," but also how bubbles of normalcy can burst under the force of external pressure.

Survey Background

The results of this national survey represent the perspectives of over seven hundred higher education professionals across a range of campus roles and institution types. The following page provides an overview of the survey respondents and the institutions they represent.

The report first examines the top challenges campuses faced as they persisted through the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the country's racial unrest. Informed by those challenges, the second section of this report looks at the strategic priorities identified by campus stakeholders to help us understand how higher education may be plotting a path forward after more than a year of turmoil.

Throughout the report, we disaggregate results by factors such as respondents' campus role, institutional types, and institution sizes. As noted on the following page, respondents from two-year institutions represent just 4% of the sample—a total of 26 respondents. As such, results for two-year institutions should be considered directional data and not representative of two-year institutions as a whole.

Figure 1. Profile of Survey Respondents[1]

Race/Ethnicity[2]

White	84%
Black or African American	6%
Hispanic or Latino	4%
Asian	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
Other	3%
Prefer Not to Respond	4%

Gender Identity

Female	57%
Male	40%
Transgender	0%
Other/Non-Binary	1%
Prefer not to respond	2%

Campus Role[3]

Faculty	66%
Senior Administrator	17%
Mid-Level Administrator	16%
Other	1%

Years in Higher Education

10 Years or Less	8%
11-20 Years	28%
More Than 20 Years	63%

Level of Education

Bachelor's Degree	1%
Master's or Professional Degree	9%
Doctoral Degree	88%
Other	1%
Prefer Not to Respond	1%

Type of Institution

Two-Year College	4%
Four-Year Public	43%
Four-Year Private	53%
Other	<1%

Enrollment

Fewer Than 5,000	44%
5,000 to 15,000	27%
15,001 to 30,000	18%
More Than 30,000	10%

1 Some percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding.
2. Total percent exceeds 100% because respondents could select multiple categories.
3. Faculty include Professors; Associate Professors; Assistant Professors; Instructors; and Lecturers.
   Mid-Level Administrators include Deans of Academic Affairs or Student Affairs; Academic Department Heads; Directors of Institutional Effectiveness, Assessment, or Institutional Research; and other Director-Level Academic and Student Affairs professionals.
   Senior Administrators include Presidents; Chief Academic Officers or Provosts; Vice Presidents of Student Affairs; and Assistant/Associate Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs.

SECTION I:
TOP FIVE CAMPUS CHALLENGES

TOP CAMPUS CHALLENGES

The five most significant challenges cited by respondents were: **financial constraints** (74%), **recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities** (46%), **capacity-building for institutional change/ transformation** (37%), **articulating the value of the liberal arts for career preparation** (30%), and **communicating the overall value of liberal education** (24%).

Figure 2. Most Significant Challenges for Higher Education Institutions

Challenge	Percentage
Financial constraints	74%
Recognizing and overcoming persistent inequalities	46%
Capacity-building for institutional change/transformation	37%
Articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation	30%
Communicating the value of liberal education	24%
Meeting external/policy pressures or mandates	17%
Faculty/professional development	16%
Unbundling of higher education	12%
Providing competency-based education	5%

The prevalence of these challenges, and even their ranked order, remained largely consistent across respondents regardless of their campus profile (i.e., two-year or four-year; public or private; enrollment size) or their position on campus.

Figure 3. Top Challenges among Four-Year Public and Private Institutions

Top Challenges among Four-Year Public Institutions

Challenge	%
Financial constraints	72%
Recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities	47%
Capacity-building for institutional change/transformation	34%
Meeting external/policy pressures or mandates	28%*
Articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation	25%*
Communicating the value of liberal education	19%*
Unbundling of higher education (non-linear pathways through college)	16%*
Faculty/professional development	15%
Providing competency-based education	8%

Top Challenges among Four-Year Private Institutions

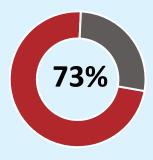| Challenge	%
Financial constraints	74%
Recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities	47%
Capacity-building for institutional change/transformation	36%
Articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation	36%*
Communicating the value of liberal education	31%*
Faculty/professional development	16%
Unbundling of higher education (non-linear pathways through college)	8%*
Meeting external/policy pressures or mandates	6%*
Providing competency-based education	3%

* Denotes a statistical difference between groups.

Challenge 1: Financial Constraints

Nevertheless, some notable variations did emerge when taking a closer look within these top challenges. Larger institutions (more than 30,000 students) are less concerned about financial constraints (52% of respondents cited it as a top challenge) when compared to respondents from institutions with fewer than 30,000 students. Financial concerns loomed large for respondents, regardless of their campus roles. No significant differences were found between faculty and administrators.
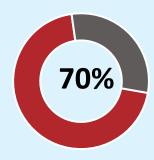
Figure 4. Percent of Respondents by Institutional Size Who Identified "Financial Constraints" as a Significant Challenge

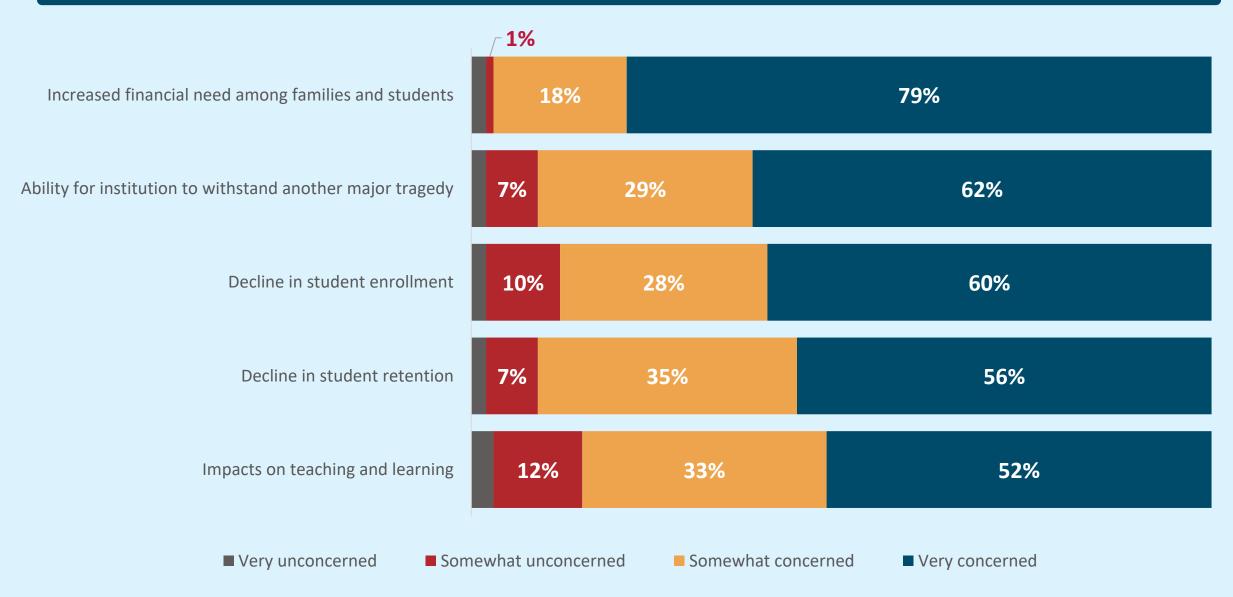| **79%**	**73%**	**70%**	**52%***
Institutions with fewer than 5,000 students	5,000 to 15,000 students	15,001 to 30,000 students	Institutions with more than 30,000 students

* Denotes a statistical difference among "institutions with more than 30,000 students" when compared to all other groups.

Though resources are often a concern for campuses, anxieties have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

When asked to rate their level of concern about the potential long-term financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic...

60% of respondents indicated they are very concerned about the overall financial stability of their institution.

Figure 5. Additional Areas of Concern Regarding Potential Long-Term Financial Consequences of COVID-19

	Very unconcerned	Somewhat unconcerned	Somewhat concerned	Very concerned
Increased financial need among families and students		1%	18%	79%
Ability for institution to withstand another major tragedy		7%	29%	62%
Decline in student enrollment		10%	28%	60%
Decline in student retention		7%	35%	56%
Impacts on teaching and learning		12%	33%	52%

Areas of financial concern related to COVID-19, particularly perceptions of the ability to withstand another large-scale tragedy, differ by institutional characteristics and campus role, suggesting varied levels of optimism as campuses emerge from the pandemic.

Differences by Institutional Type

Student Retention

Four-year private institutions are significantly more concerned with the effect of the pandemic on **retaining current students** (**59% very concerned**), as compared to four-year public institutions **(49% very concerned)**.

Differences by Institutional Size

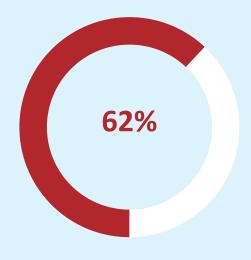### Overall Financial Stability

Smaller institutions (fewer than 5,000 students) are significantly more concerned about their institution's **overall financial stability** (**68% very concerned**) than large (15,001 to 30,000 students) and very large institutions (30,000+ students) (**55%** and **44% very concerned**, respectively).

Enrollment Declines
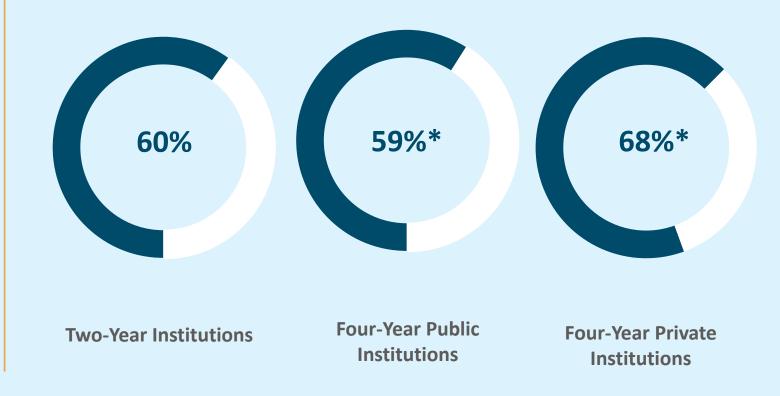
Institutions with fewer than 5,000 students are significantly more likely to express concern over potential **enrollment declines** due to COVID-19 (**68%** very concerned), when compared to large (**50% very concerned**), and very large (**38% very concerned**) colleges and universities.

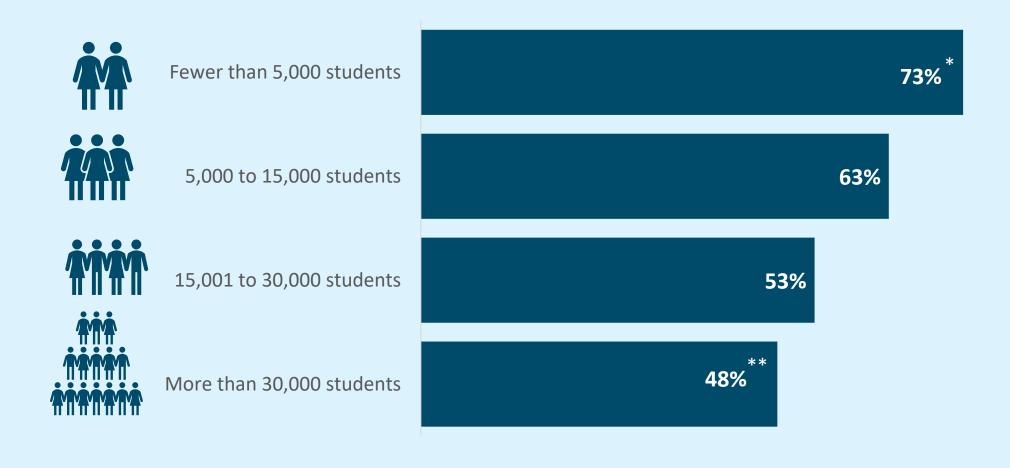**Figure 6. Very Concerned about Withstanding Another Large-Scale Tragedy**

62%

All Respondents

Figure 7. Very Concerned about Withstanding Another Large-Scale Tragedy by Institutional Type

60%

Two-Year Institutions

59%*

Four-Year Public Institutions

68%*

Four-Year Private Institutions

* Denotes a statistical difference between "four-year-public" and "four-year private institutions."

Figure 8. Very Concerned about Withstanding Another Large-Scale Tragedy by Institutional Size

Fewer than 5,000 students — 73%*

5,000 to 15,000 students — 63%

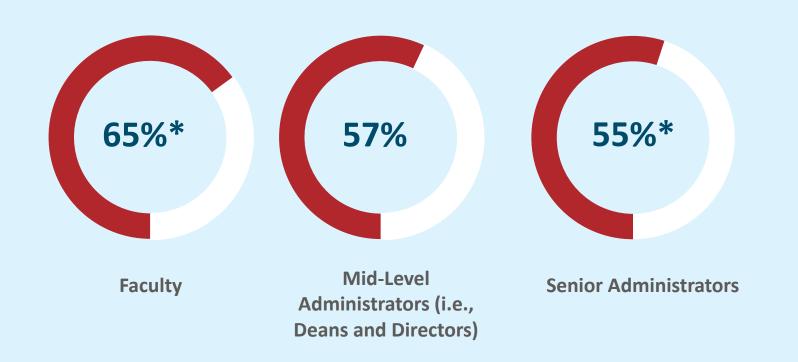15,001 to 30,000 students — 53%

More than 30,000 students — 48%**

* Statistical difference when compared to all groups.
** Statistical difference when compared to "fewer than 5,000 students" and "5,000 to 15,000 students."

Additionally, faculty are more likely to be very concerned (65%) than senior administrators (55%) about their institution's ability to withstand another large-scale tragedy.

Figure 9: Very Concerned about Withstanding Another Large-Scale Tragedy by Campus Role

65%*

Faculty

57%

Mid-Level Administrators (i.e., Deans and Directors)

55%*

Senior Administrators

* Denotes a statistical difference between "faculty" and "senior administrators."

Challenge 2: Recognizing and Overcoming Inequities

46% of respondents cited recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities across campus as a major challenge.

Though no significant differences were found between institutional types or across stakeholder roles regarding the challenge of recognizing and overcoming inequities on campus, there were differences by institutional size.

Midsize institutions and large institutions were more likely to cite recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities as a challenge, as compared with smaller institutions.

Figure 10. Challenge of Recognizing and Overcoming Persistent Inequities by Institutional Size

Institutional Size	Percentage
Fewer than 5,000 students	41%*
5,000 to 15,000 students	51%
15,001 to 30,000 students	58%
More than 30,000 students	45%

* Denotes a statistical difference between "fewer than 5,000 students" and both "5,000 to 15,000 students" and "15,001 to 30,000 students."
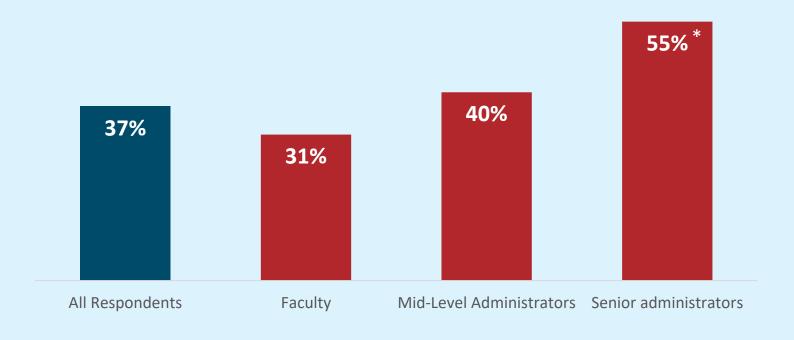
Challenge 3: Capacity Building for Institutional Change

37% of respondents cited capacity building for institutional change and transformation as a significant challenge for their institutions.

Though there were no significant differences by institutional type or by size of enrollment, senior administrators were significantly more concerned than faculty or mid-level administrators about building capacity.

Figure 11. Capacity Building for Institutional Change by Campus Role

All Respondents	Faculty	Mid-Level Administrators	Senior administrators
37%	31%	40%	55% *

* Denotes a statistical difference when compared to "mid-level administrators" and "faculty."

Challenge 4: Articulating the Value of the Liberal Arts in Career Preparation

30% of respondents indicated that articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation is a significant challenge for their institution…

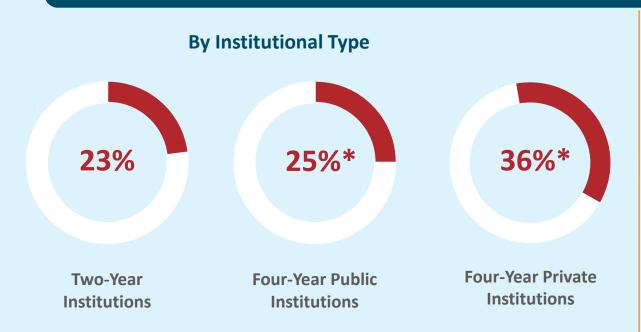…even though AAC&U's report, ***How College Contributes to Workforce Success: Employer Views on What Matters Most***, illustrates the ways in which employers value an array of skills developed through a well-rounded liberal education that includes the liberal arts.

With a core emphasis on the liberal arts, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents from four-year private institutions were more likely to cite articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation as a significant challenge compared to those from four-year public institutions. Similarly, respondents from small institutions (fewer than 5,000 students) were more likely to cite this as a significant challenge than those at midsize (5,000 to 15,000 students) and large (15,001 to 30,000 students) institutions.

Figure 12. Percent Indicating That Articulating the Value of the Liberal Arts in Career Preparation Is a Significant Challenge

By Institutional Type

23%
Two-Year Institutions

25%*
Four-Year Public Institutions

36%*
Four-Year Private Institutions

By Institutional Size

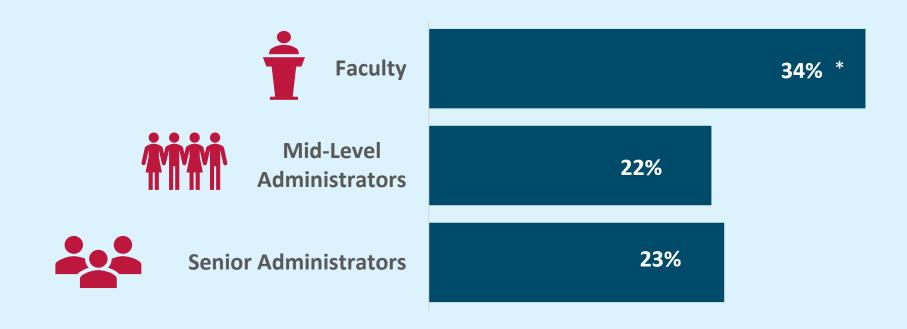| 40%* | 24% | 19% | 29% |
| Fewer than 5,000 students | 5,000 to 15,000 students | 15,001 to 30,000 students | More than 30,000 students |

* Denotes a statistical difference between "four-year private" and "four-year public institutions."

* Denotes a statistical difference between "fewer than 5,000 students" and both "5,000 to 15,000 students" and "15,001 to 30,000 students."

Additionally, a significantly higher percentage of faculty respondents rated articulating the value of the liberal arts in career preparation as a major challenge than mid-level (22%) and senior administrators (23%).

Figure 13. Percent Indicating That Articulating the Value of the Liberal Arts in Career Preparation Is a Significant Challenge by Campus Role

Faculty — 34% *

Mid-Level Administrators — 22%

Senior Administrators — 23%

* Denotes a statistical difference Between "faculty" and both "mid-level administrators" and "senior administrators."

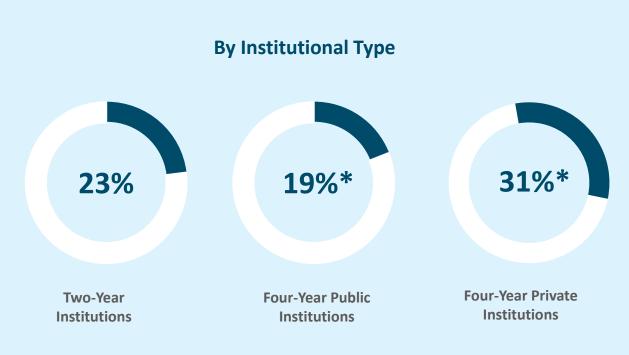# Challenge 5: Communicating the Value of a Liberal Education

Nearly **25%** of respondents indicated that communicating the value of a liberal education is a significant challenge for their institution.

As noted in AAC&U's publication, *What Liberal Education Looks Like*, a liberal education, while inclusive of the liberal arts, is not limited to these disciplines alone. Thus, articulating its significance and value presents its own set of challenges and opportunities for campuses.

As with other challenges, the perceived significance of this challenge varied by institutional type, size, and campus role of the respondent.

Respondents at four-year private institutions were more likely to indicate that communicating the value of a liberal education is a significant challenge (31%) than those at four-year public institutions (19%). Additionally, respondents at smaller institutions (fewer than 5,000 students) were more than twice as likely to report communicating the value of a liberal education as a challenge compared to those at large institutions (15,001 to 30,000 students).
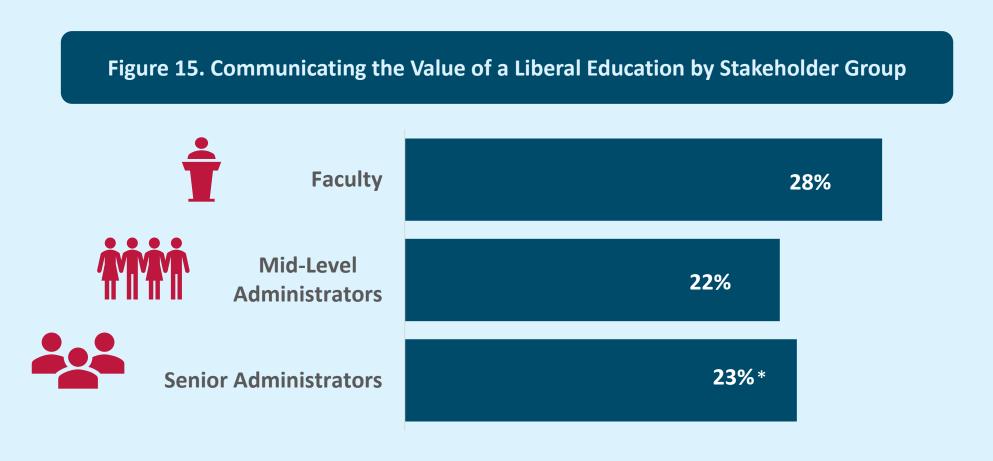
Figure 14. Percent Indicating That Communicating the Value of a Liberal Education Is a Significant Challenge

By Institutional Type

23%

Two-Year
Institutions

19%*

Four-Year Public
Institutions

31%*

Four-Year Private
Institutions

By Institutional Size

32% *

23%

15% *

21%

Fewer than 5,000
students

5,000 to 15,000
students

15,001 to 30,000
students

More than 30,000
students

* Denotes a statistical difference between "four-year private" and "four-year public institutions."

* Denotes a statistical difference between "fewer than 5,000 students" and "15,001 to 30,000 students."

A significantly smaller percentage of senior administrators cited communicating the value of a liberal education as a key challenge, as compared to mid-level administrators and faculty.

Figure 15. Communicating the Value of a Liberal Education by Stakeholder Group

Faculty: **28%**

Mid-Level Administrators: **22%**

Senior Administrators: **23%***

* Denotes a statistical difference between "senior administrators" and both "mid-level administrators" and "faculty."

SECTION II:
TOP CAMPUS STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Top Strategic Priorities

In addition to identifying top challenges, respondents were also asked to identify the top strategic priorities for their institutions regarding undergraduate teaching and learning.

For purposes of analysis, the initial list of eighteen strategic priorities to the right was condensed using a factor analysis, which yielded eight major strategic priority areas. These areas are explored further in the following pages.

Figure 16. Top Strategic Priorities	
Improving student retention and completion	59%
Improving campus diversity, equity, and inclusion	57%
Fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion on campus	36%
Increasing faculty diversity	34%
Expanding civic engagement/community-based learning	30%
Implementing and scaling high-impact practices	28%
Preparing students for long-term career success	26%
Implementing online learning technologies	26%
Ensuring equity in student outcomes	22%
Addressing campus climate issues	21%
Supporting student well-being	21%
Using assessment to improve teaching, learning, and student success	21%
Fostering global learning	20%
Promoting effective teaching with technology	19%
Reforming general education	14%
Expanding faculty/professional development opportunities	13%
Integrating the liberal arts with STEM disciplines	7%
Reforming undergraduate STEM education	4%

Figure 17. Consolidated Strategic Priorities Areas for Campuses

Improve and Increase Diversity

✓ Improving campus diversity, equity, and inclusion

✓ Increasing faculty diversity

Expand Global & Community Learning

✓ Expanding civic engagement/community-based learning

✓ Fostering global learning

Foster and Ensure Equity & Inclusion

✓ Fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion on campus

✓ Ensuring equity in student outcomes

Support Student Success

✓ Preparing students for long-term career success

✓ Using assessments to improve teaching, learning, and student success

Expand and Promote Faculty Development

✓ Expanding faculty/professional development opportunities

✓ Promoting effective teaching with technology

Implement and Scale High-Impact Practices

✓ Implementing and scaling high-impact practices

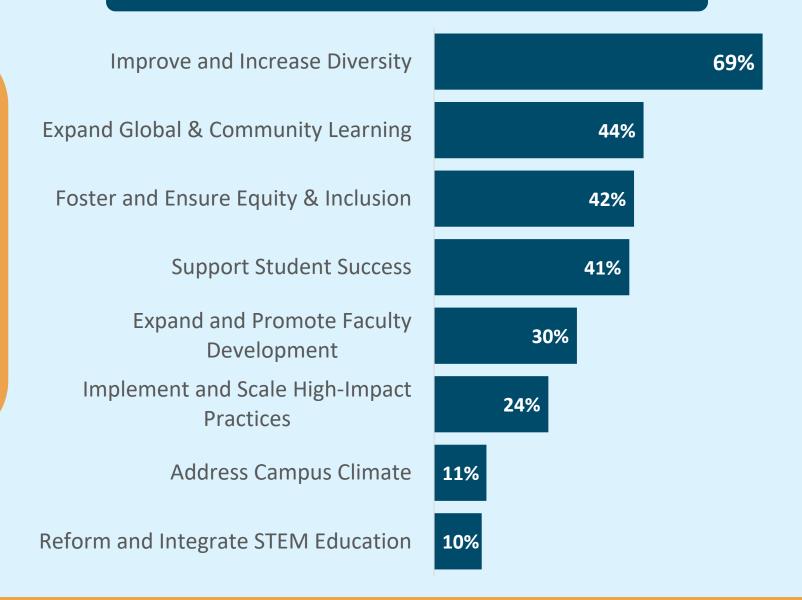## Address Campus Climate

✓ Addressing campus climate issues

Reform and Integrate STEM Education

✓ Reforming undergraduate STEM education

✓ Integrating the liberal arts with STEM disciplines

Figure 18. Top Strategic Priorities

Nearly **70%** of respondents identified the need to improve and increase diversity at their institution—a clear indication that this is a major strategic priority shared across campuses.

Priority	Percentage
Improve and Increase Diversity	69%
Expand Global & Community Learning	44%
Foster and Ensure Equity & Inclusion	42%
Support Student Success	41%
Expand and Promote Faculty Development	30%
Implement and Scale High-Impact Practices	24%
Address Campus Climate	11%
Reform and Integrate STEM Education	10%

The finding that the need to "improve and increase diversity" and "foster and ensure equity and inclusion" were among the most selected strategic priorities for respondents is even more salient when coupled with the finding that over half (56%) of respondents reported an incident of hate, including hateful speech, against minoritized populations on their campus over the past year.

Senior administrators (46%) were significantly less likely to indicate their institution experienced an incident of hate on their campus in the past year, as compared with mid-level administrators and faculty.

56% of respondents reported their campus had experienced an incident of hate (including hate speech) in the last year.

Figure 19. Percent of Respondents by Campus Role Who Indicated an Incident of Hate on Their Campus in the Last Year

57%

Faculty

61%

Mid-Level Administrators

46%*

Senior Administrators

* Denotes a statistical difference between "senior administrators" and both "mid-level administrators" and "faculty."

Respondents from four-year private institutions, as compared with those from four-year public institutions, were more likely to cite strategic priorities related to increasing diversity (75% vs. 64%), expanding and fostering global and community learning (49% vs 41%), and reforming and integrating STEM disciplines (13% vs 8%).

By contrast, respondents at four-year public institutions were more likely to cite implementing and scaling high-impact practices (30%) as a top strategic priority, relative to those at four-year private institutions (19%).

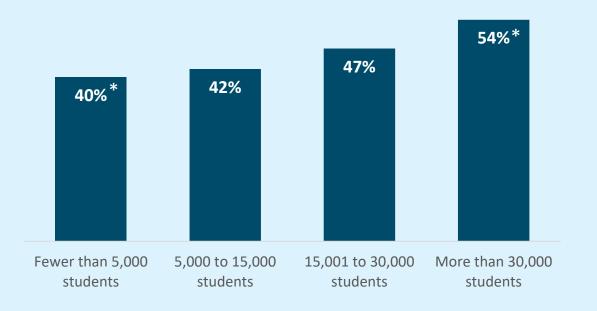## Figure 20. Differences in Strategic Priorities by Institutional Type

Four-Year Public Institutions

1. Improving and Increasing Diversity	64%*
2. Fostering and Ensuring Equity & Inclusion	44%
3. Expanding and Fostering Global & Community Learning	41%*
4. Supporting Student Success	38%
5. Implementing and Scaling High-Impact Practices	30%*
6. Expanding and Promoting Faculty Development	27%
7. Addressing Campus Climate	10%
8. Reforming and Integrating STEM	8%*

Four-Year Private Institutions

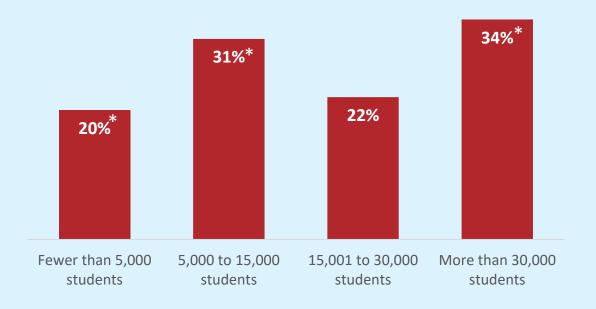|	
1. Improving and Increasing Diversity	75%
2. Expanding and Fostering Global & Community Learning	49%
3. Fostering and Ensuring Equity & Inclusion	42%
4. Supporting Student Success	40%
5. Expanding and Promoting Faculty Development	26%
6. Implementing and Scaling High-Impact Practices	19%
7. Addressing Campus Climate	13%
8. Reforming and Integrating STEM	13%

* Denotes a statistical difference between four-year public and four-year private institutions.

Figure 21. Differences in Strategic Priorities by Institutional Size

Foster and Ensure Equity & Inclusion

- Fewer than 5,000 students: 40%*
- 5,000 to 15,000 students: 42%
- 15,001 to 30,000 students: 47%
- More than 30,000 students: 54%*

Implement and Scale High-Impact Practices

- Fewer than 5,000 students: 20%*
- 5,000 to 15,000 students: 31%*
- 15,001 to 30,000 students: 22%
- More than 30,000 students: 34%*

* Denotes a statistical difference between "fewer than 5,000 students" and "more than 30,000 students."

* Denotes a statistical difference between "fewer than 5,000 students" and both "5,000 to 15,000 students" and "more than 30,000 students."

Regardless of campus role, stakeholders were equally likely to note the need to "improve and increase diversity" as a top strategic priority. However, senior administrators were **more likely** to indicate the need to "expand global and community learning," "support student success," and "expand and promote faculty development" as strategic priorities and **less likely** to identify "foster and ensure equity and inclusion" than were faculty and mid-level administrators. Conversely, faculty were **more likely** than senior administrators to indicate the need to "address campus climate" and "reform and integrate STEM education" as strategic priorities.

Figure 22. Differences in Strategic Priorities by Campus Role

Faculty

1. Improving and Increasing Diversity (70%)
2. Fostering and Ensuring Equity & Inclusion (47%)
3. Expanding and Fostering Global & Community Learning (42%*)
4. Supporting Student Success (38%**)
5. Expanding and Promoting Faculty Development (27%*)
6. Implementing and Scaling High-Impact Practices (21%***)
7. Addressing Campus Climate (13%**)
8. Reforming and Integrating STEM (13%**)

Mid-Level Administrators

1. Improving and Increasing Diversity (68%)
2. Expanding and Fostering Global & Community Learning (42%*)
3. Supporting Student Success (42%)
4. Fostering and Ensuring Equity & Inclusion (39%)
5. Implementing and Scaling High-Impact Practices (34%***)
6. Expanding and Promoting Faculty Development (28%*)
7. Addressing Campus Climate (10%)
8. Reforming and Integrating STEM (3%)

Senior Administrators

1. Improving and Increasing Diversity (71%)
2. Expanding and Fostering Global & Community Learning (56%*)
3. Supporting Student Success (53%**)
4. Expanding and Promoting Faculty Development (44%*)
5. Implementing and Scaling High-Impact Practices (31%***)
6. Fostering and Ensuring Equity & Inclusion (26%*)
7. Addressing Campus Climate (6%**)
8. Reforming and Integrating STEM (5%**)

* Denotes a statistical difference between "senior administrators" and both "faculty" and "mid-level administrators."
** Denotes a statistical difference between "senior administrators" and "faculty."
*** Denotes a statistical difference between "faculty" and both "mid-level administrators" and "senior administrators."

Considerations for Moving Priorities to Actions

Though the need to "improve and increase diversity" and "foster and ensure equity" were top strategic priorities for respondents, other findings suggest there is opportunity for campuses to do more in translating strategic priorities into action steps. For example, although more than nine out of ten respondents reported that their institutions disaggregate retention and graduation rates by race/ethnicity, and four out of five similarly disaggregate metrics for developmental education courses, **only about half** of respondents indicated that their campus performs such disaggregation on participation in high-impact practices or on students' achievement of learning outcomes.

Figure 23. Percent of Respondents Who Indicated Their Campus Tracks and Disaggregates Data by Race/Ethnicity
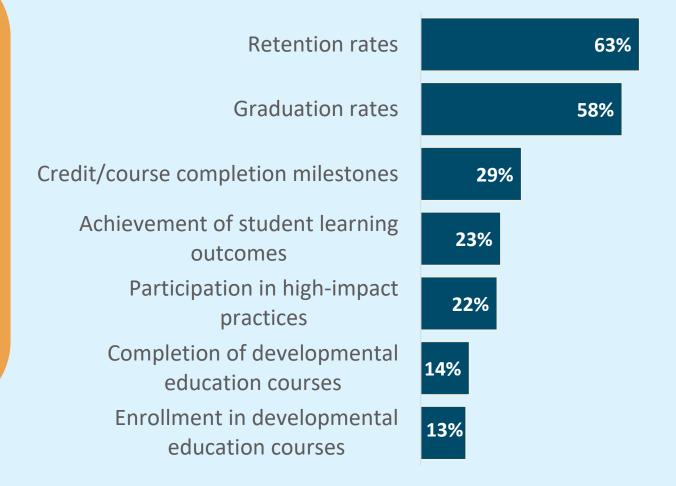
Student Metric		Tracked by Institution	Disaggregated by Race/ Ethnicity
Graduation rates		100%	93%
Retention rates		100%	93%
Credit/course completion milestones		86%	78%
Achievement of student learning outcomes		83%	45%
Participation in high-impact practices		65%	55%
Enrollment in developmental education courses		61%	81%
Completion of developmental education courses		59%	81%

Though nearly **2/3** of respondents reported that their institution sets goals for closing equity gaps in retention rates, only **1/4** do the same for closing equity gaps with regard to student learning outcomes.

Figure 24. Percent of Respondents Who Indicated Their Institution Sets Equity Goals for...

Category	Percent
Retention rates	63%
Graduation rates	58%
Credit/course completion milestones	29%
Achievement of student learning outcomes	23%
Participation in high-impact practices	22%
Completion of developmental education courses	14%
Enrollment in developmental education courses	13%

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