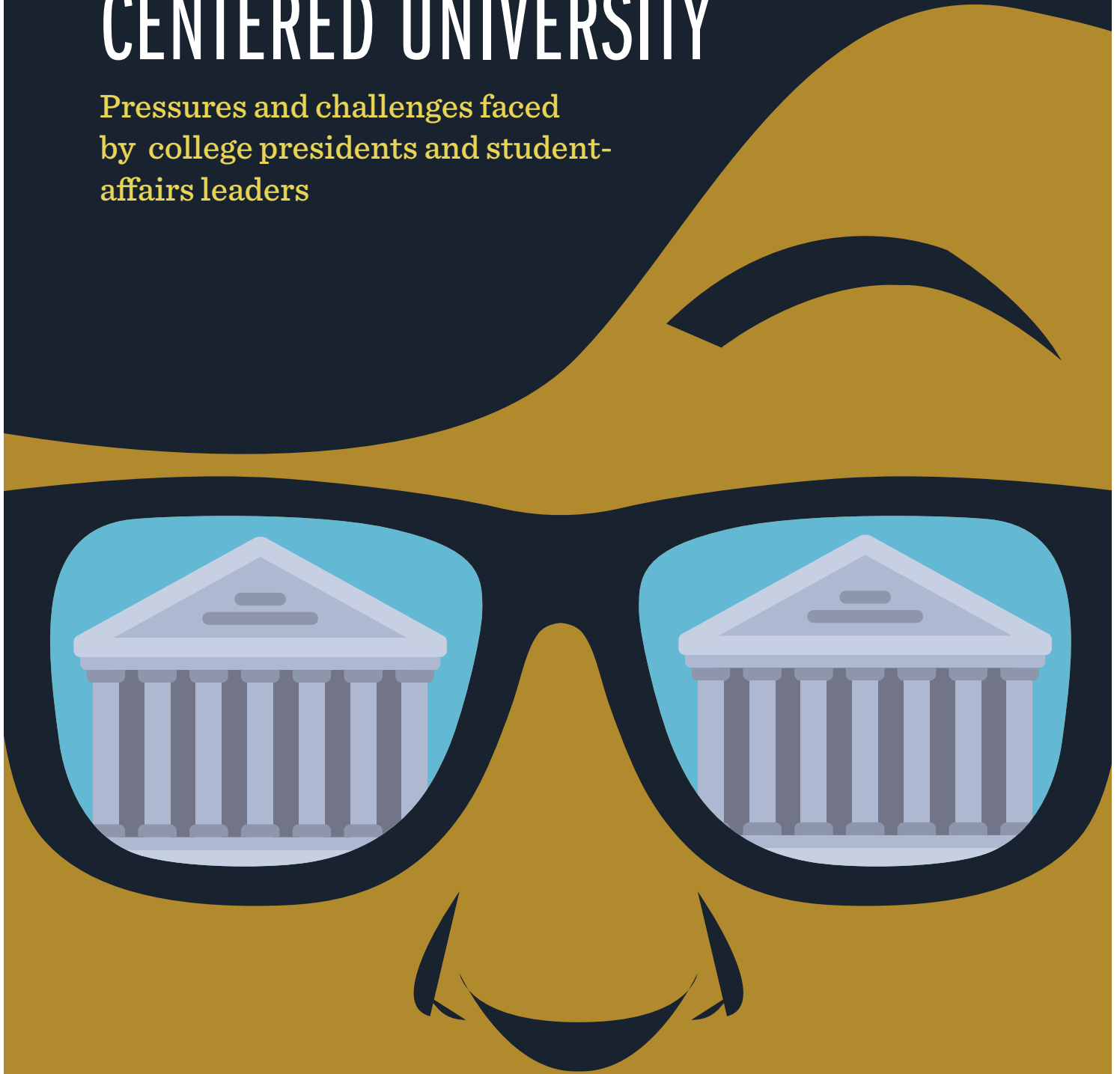


# THE STUDENT-CENTERED UNIVERSITY

Pressures and challenges faced  
by college presidents and student-  
affairs leaders



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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Student Affairs in Strategic Planning	9
Pressing Concerns	12
Differences in Perspectives	15
Putting Money Where Their Worries Are	17
Students as Customers	20
Pathway to the Presidency	22
Conclusion	25
Methodology	26

## HuronEducation

*The Student-Centered University: Pressures and Challenges Faced by College Presidents and Student Affairs Leaders* is based on a survey conducted by Huron Consulting Group, Inc., was written by Julie Nicklin Rubley, a contributing writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education, Inc., and is sponsored by Oracle. The Chronicle is fully responsible for the report's editorial content. Copyright © 2017.

# Executive Summary

**H**igher education is under intense pressure to meet the personal needs, demands, and expectations of an increasingly diverse and complex student population.

More students than ever are struggling with mental-health issues. They're less resilient and more overwhelmed by the demands of college and life. They have an increased passion for social activism. They exhibit diversity in every sense of the word, and they want to be accepted and validated for who they are. Economically disadvantaged students need help getting basic necessities. The more affluent and privileged want nice dorms, good food, and a Starbucks in the library. Parents expect more bang for their bucks.

Colleges must address these outside-the-classroom issues because they affect what is happening inside the classroom—and ultimately impact an institution's effectiveness, retention rates, and marketability.

As a result, colleges are looking to their student-affairs divisions for answers. More and more decisions are being made based on what benefits and satisfies the student. Some colleges tout boldly that they are now, or are transforming into, student-centered institutions. Others choose not to get wrapped up in the catchy label but say that is what they're doing.

As colleges become increasingly concerned about the well-being of students and face more student demands and complaints, higher education is placing a renewed focus on the role of student affairs. On many campuses, the students-affairs divisions are the fastest-growing areas, as colleges add psychological counselors, hire success coaches, and increase their attention to diversity and inclusion.

This report seeks to examine the role of student affairs on campuses today, the issues they face with students, what the leaders of those divisions think of their jobs, and what the next decade holds for their work. It is based on a new survey, conducted by the Huron Consulting Group for The Chronicle of Higher Education, of 112 presidents and student-affairs leaders at two- and four-year, public and private institutions. This survey analysis pulls from expert opinions, *Chronicle* reporting, and previous studies.

## Highlights



### STUDENT AFFAIRS IS A BIGGER PRIORITY ON CAMPUSES.

An overwhelming majority, 95 percent, of student-affairs departments reported being represented in strategic planning initiatives at their institutions.



### SOME TRADITIONAL STUDENT-AFFAIRS AREAS MIGHT GET LESS ATTENTION

Survey respondents generally gave less priority to residential life, campus activities, recreation, and student conduct. They expect less money to go into those areas in the coming year.



### STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND DIVERSITY ISSUES WERE THE TOP CONCERNS

Mental health was the No. 1 concern, garnering 66 percent of the responses. Diversity ranked second, with 40 percent.



### MANY PRESIDENTS AND STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS CONSIDER THEIR STUDENTS TO BE CUSTOMERS

Nearly half, or 48 percent, said they shared that perspective.



### CAMPUS SAFETY WAS A SIGNIFICANT CONCERN FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

Thirty-six percent of the presidents were worried about safety, compared to 19 percent of the student-affairs leaders.



### SOME STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS ASPIRE TO BECOME COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

One-third of the student-affairs leaders surveyed said they do now or might someday want to be chief executive.



### CAREER SERVICES STAND TO RECEIVE MORE ATTENTION

Thirty percent of the respondents believe that more resources will go into efforts to help graduating students find jobs.

# Introduction

**P**atricia A. Whitely is seeing a lot of changes she would not have predicted 20 years ago when she became vice president for student affairs at the University of Miami.

Her department has set up a 24-hour hotline that students can call for support—whether they're stressed out from studying, upset over a breakup, or feeling hopeless. The campus has hired four social workers as case workers to track students who are having a particularly difficult time. It now employs a student advocacy coordinator.

She and her staff are busier than ever—helping students plan celebrations for the Lunar New Year, keeping tabs on the LGBTQ center, attending an annual campus drag show, installing footbaths for Muslim students, and celebrating the 50th anniversary of the United Black Students.

Intramural sports have more than doubled over the past two decades, from 21 to 48. The department has arranged for a dining hall to open three times a week, from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m., for students who want food late night.

Staff members are overseeing construction of a new residence hall, and they're working more closely than ever with faculty.

What Miami's student-affairs department is experiencing is playing out on campus after campus. The role, reach, and impact of the departments are widening as they work harder to give students what they need and want.

The departments are being asked to do more with less. They're constantly dealing with changes in state and federal regulations. They're choosing and balancing priorities.

“The bottom line of all this is to remove obstacles that might keep students from being successful,” says Whitely.

The fear is that if a student isn't engaged on campus, isn't emotionally healthy, isn't feeling accepted, or isn't feeling safe, they won't stick around to graduate.

“The kinds of issues and the complexity of issues on campus today are clearly different than a generation ago—and probably 10 years ago,” says Kevin Kruger, president of NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

The stakes are high for the institutions, for their attractiveness to students, and for their bottom lines—as colleges rely more on tuition revenue to sustain their budgets. These student-driven challenges can no longer be dealt with quietly or slowly because they are often played out on the public stage of social media.

“You start ticking down these issues, and they are really complicated not only by themselves, but in how they merge with the safety and success of students—and the image of the institution,” says Kruger.

Although it can differ from campus to campus, student-affairs departments traditionally have reported to the dean of students, although now more and more are reporting directly to the president. They oversee most everything that happens outside the classroom—student health, campus activities, counseling services, dining halls, career advising, residence halls, and Greek life.

The needs and demands of today’s students in those areas outweigh any that campuses have felt before, higher-education experts say. It is not surprising, given that colleges are a microcosm of what’s happening in society.

Anxiety and depression rank as the top two mental-health conditions on campuses today, according to the 2015 National College Health Assessment. The survey, conducted by the American College Health Association, found that 35 percent of college students felt so depressed in the last 12 months, that it “was difficult to function.” Nearly 10 percent had “seriously considered suicide.” Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students.

What’s behind the campus rise in mental-health issues? Aside from technology, distractions, and life’s pressures putting more stress on everyone, earlier diagnosis and more awareness are key factors, experts say. More parents are seeking mental-health treatment earlier for their children. So students who might not have been successful in high school before are now making it to college.

Many mental illnesses present around ages 18 to 24—prime college age. A college lifestyle of sleep deprivation, binge drinking, and sexual activity doesn’t help. Many students are falling victim to society’s perfectionist culture, thinking they have to be the best, look the best, and do the best. Many don’t seek help because of the stigma or because they don’t

recognize they need help. Untreated mental illness gets worse and puts the students and others on the campus at risk. While colleges do not have a legal obligation to provide mental health services, they do have an “ethical responsibility,” Kruger says.

On the diversity front, as the nation moves closer to becoming a minority-majority population, more first-generation college-goers and students of varying nationalities and socioeconomic levels are coming to campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the past four decades, the percentage of Hispanic students has increased from 4 to 17 percent; Asian students from 2 to 7 percent; and African-American students from 10 to 14 percent. The percentage of white students has dropped, from 84 to 58 percent.

Today’s students are much more open and outspoken, and they want to be recognized and respected for their individuality in terms of race, color, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political views, sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, and physical disabilities.

Student activism is common. Students are just as likely to march or demonstrate for broader social and political issues as they are for a deficiency, injustice, or weakness they perceive on campus.

Experts say the protests of today rival those of past decades—and are amplified by Twitter, Facebook, and cell phone videos. “It kind of looks like the 60’s in terms of social activism, but it’s like social activism on steroids because of social media,” says Kruger.

Archie W. Ervin, vice president for institute diversity at the Georgia Institute of Technology, says the protests are fueled by students’ frustrations and a strong belief that they can bring change.

“It is about the environment on campuses,” says Ervin, who also is president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education. “Some aspects of our campuses are not inclusive or supportive of our communities that are making them up.”



# Student Affairs in Strategic Planning

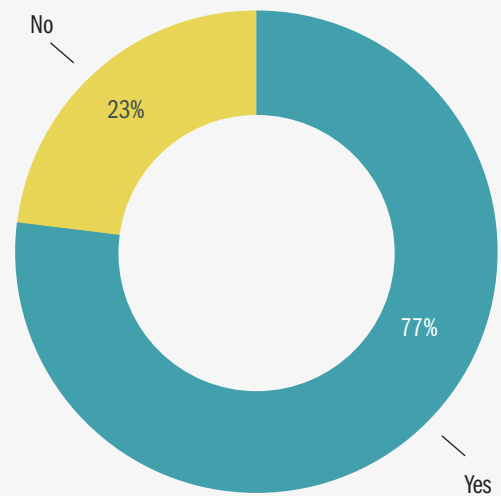
“The efforts are not tucked away inside a student-affairs division,” says Rhonda H. Luckey, vice president for student affairs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. “We are working as a university in very intentional ways.”

The results of The Chronicle survey indicate that student-affairs divisions are gaining more influence on campuses—and that, for the most part, division leaders feel their presidents understand the pressures they face.

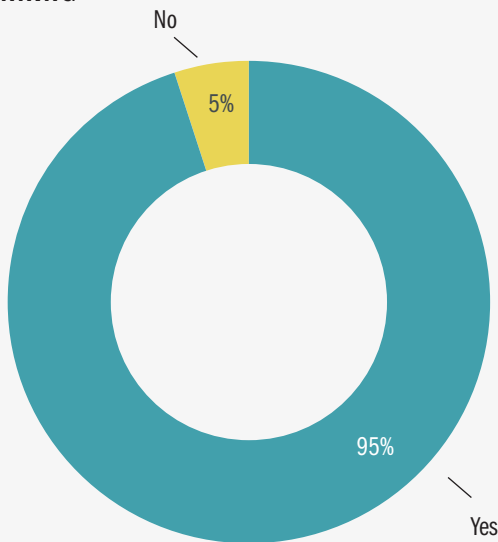
About 77 percent of the leaders said they report directly to the president. An overwhelming majority, 95 percent, reported being represented in strategic planning initiatives.

In fact, in the last five years, that role has increased for most. More than half, 52 percent, said their division is playing an increased role in strategic planning. (See Figures 1, 2, 3.)

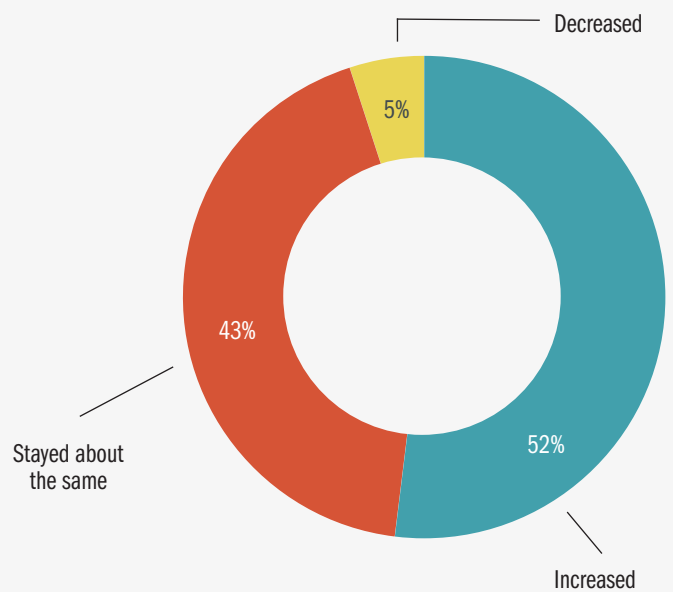
**FIGURE 1  
PERCENT OF STUDENT-AFFAIRS  
LEADERS WHO REPORT DIRECTLY  
TO PRESIDENT**



**FIGURE 2  
PERCENT OF STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS  
INVOLVED DIRECTLY WITH STRATEGIC  
PLANNING**



**FIGURE 3  
PERCENT OF STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS WHO  
SAY THEIR DIVISION IS PLAYING AN INCREASED  
ROLE IN STRATEGIC PLANNING**

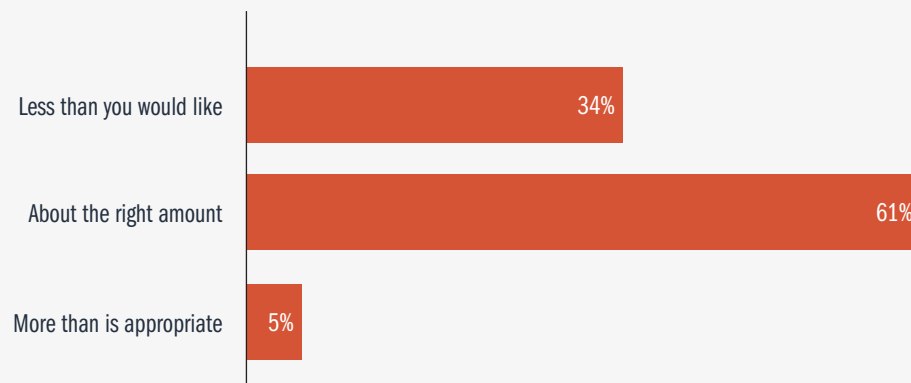


Over the past three years, Indiana University of Pennsylvania has pushed forward on a strategic plan to become a student-centered institution. Student affairs is a key player. They've moved enrollment management into its own department to open up student affairs for other needs. The campus has created a military resource center to support the large proportion of students who have a military connection. In January 2018, the campus plans to open a multicultural center.

"The efforts are not tucked away inside a student-affairs division," says Rhonda H. Luckey, Indiana's vice president for student affairs. "We are working as a university in very intentional ways."

In the survey, the majority of student-affairs leaders were satisfied with how much their president cares about the department's duties. Sixty-one percent described the level of caring as the right amount; 34 percent felt they were receiving less than they would like. (See Figure 4.)

**FIGURE 4**  
**STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS' SATISFACTION WITH HOW MUCH THEIR PRESIDENT CARES ABOUT THEIR ISSUES.**



In the survey, student-affairs leaders were asked to reply anonymously to the question, "What does your institution's president not understand about your job?" Here is a sampling of responses:

"The frequency of disturbing student incidents, the attitudes of today's students about sex and substances, and the skill and training our staff receive before being hired."

"The spectrum and volume of student complaints and the complexity posed by disability and mental health concerns."

"The amount of time I spend working on policy and rule compliance."

"That we are working with people and not numbers or widgets. We cannot make students do what they do not want to do."

"That we are contributors to the growth and development of students—we are not just service providers."

"The amount of time and energy one incident related to a student takes to assess, monitor, mediate, and resolve."

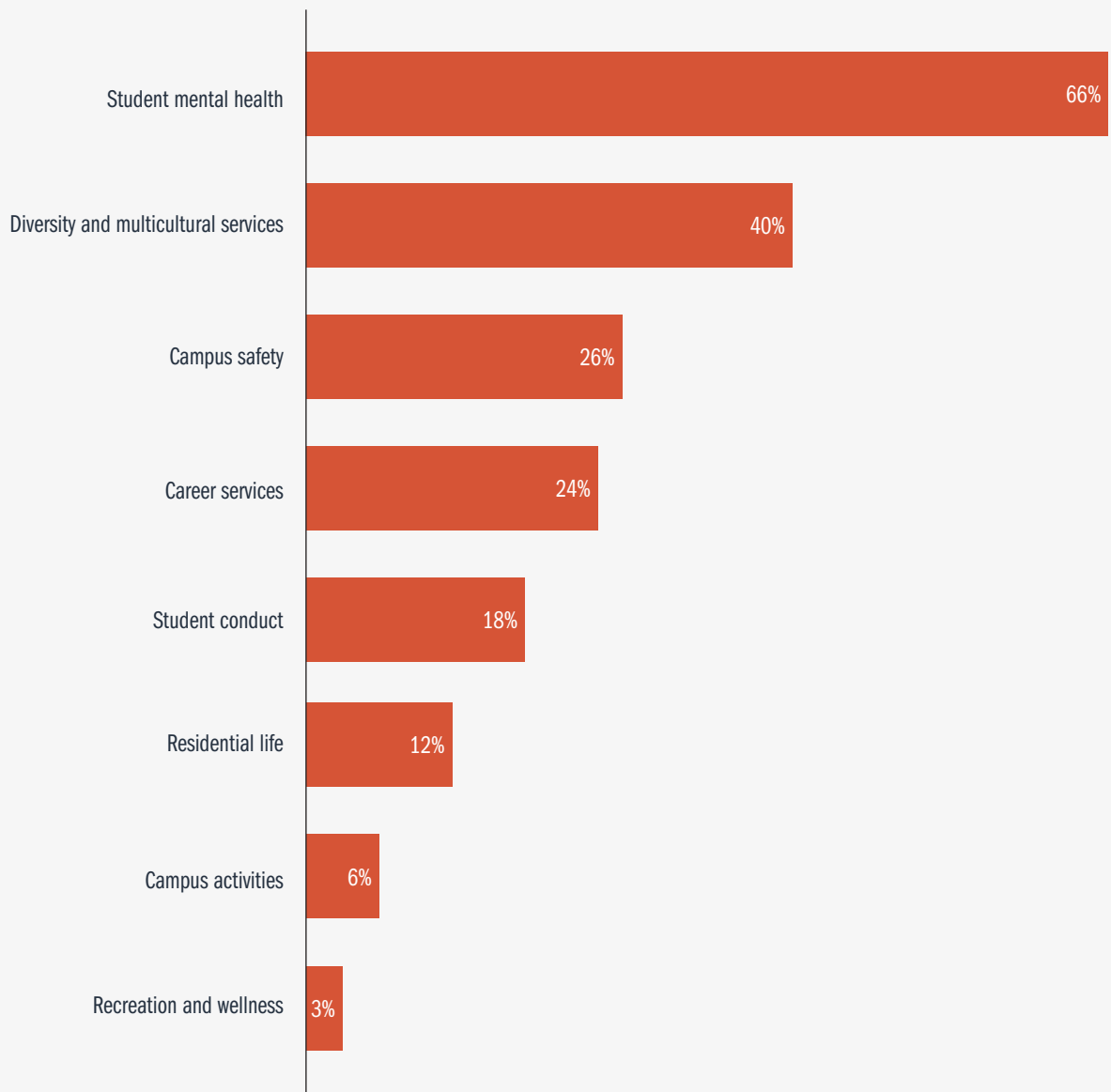
# Pressing Concerns

Sixty-six percent identified student mental health as the top issue ... The next most serious concern [was] diversity and multicultural issues.



The survey asked all respondents to identify two major concerns outside the classroom. Overwhelmingly, 66 percent identified student mental health as the top issue. It far outweighed the next most serious concern, diversity and multicultural issues, which 40 percent of the respondents identified. (See Figure 5.)

**FIGURE 5**  
**MAJOR CONCERNS OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM**



On the mental-health front, many campuses, including Appalachian State, George Washington and Tulane Universities, have been shaken by multiple suicides. Counseling services are stretched thin. Students are being put on waiting lists.

As a result, colleges are contracting with outside providers, making mental health an orientation topic for new students, showing videos on suicide prevention, starting mindfulness initiatives, and setting up kiosks where students can quickly assess their emotional state.

The University of Iowa this past fall hired two new counselors, bringing the total to 22. Officials plan to add another six by next fall. The campus is using an “embedded” approach, by assigning some of the counselors to residence halls, as well as other places.

George Washington University opened a \$3 million health center in 2015. It employs more than 40 counselors and continues to hire more. The university has created peer support groups, an online self-help library, and an online process to identify students who might be struggling emotionally.

Occidental College is making changes where mental health and multicultural diversity intersect. Last year, students demanded that physicians of color be hired “to treat physical and emotional trauma associated with issues of identity.” Within months, Occidental hired an African-American therapist, who has since started a multicultural therapy group.

On the diversity front, students are demanding social change. They’ve staged Black Lives Matter demonstrations. At Boston College, students marched against what they considered the administration’s lack of response to a gay slur. At the University of Missouri, racially charged protests led to the resignations of two top leaders.

When it comes to efforts to build inclusion, more and more student-affairs departments are working with trained diversity officers. Campuses also continue to create dedicated spaces where students can gather with others with whom they identify.

In fall 2016, Miami opened the LGBTQ Student Center. Over the past decade, membership in the campus LGBTQ organization has more than doubled, from 50 to 130. A task force identified the need for the center. “We are visibly saying we are a place that respects you,” Whitely says.

Georgia Tech’s Ervin says efforts toward inclusion must be woven into all aspects of a campus. Currently he is working with the Greek organizations to have them interact more, in an effort to help their diverse memberships find common ground.

“These are not ‘one and done’ things,” Ervin says. “These have to become part of the fabric of the institution.”

**When it comes to efforts to build inclusion, more and more student-affairs departments are working with trained diversity officers. Campuses also continue to create dedicated spaces where students can gather with others with whom they identify.**

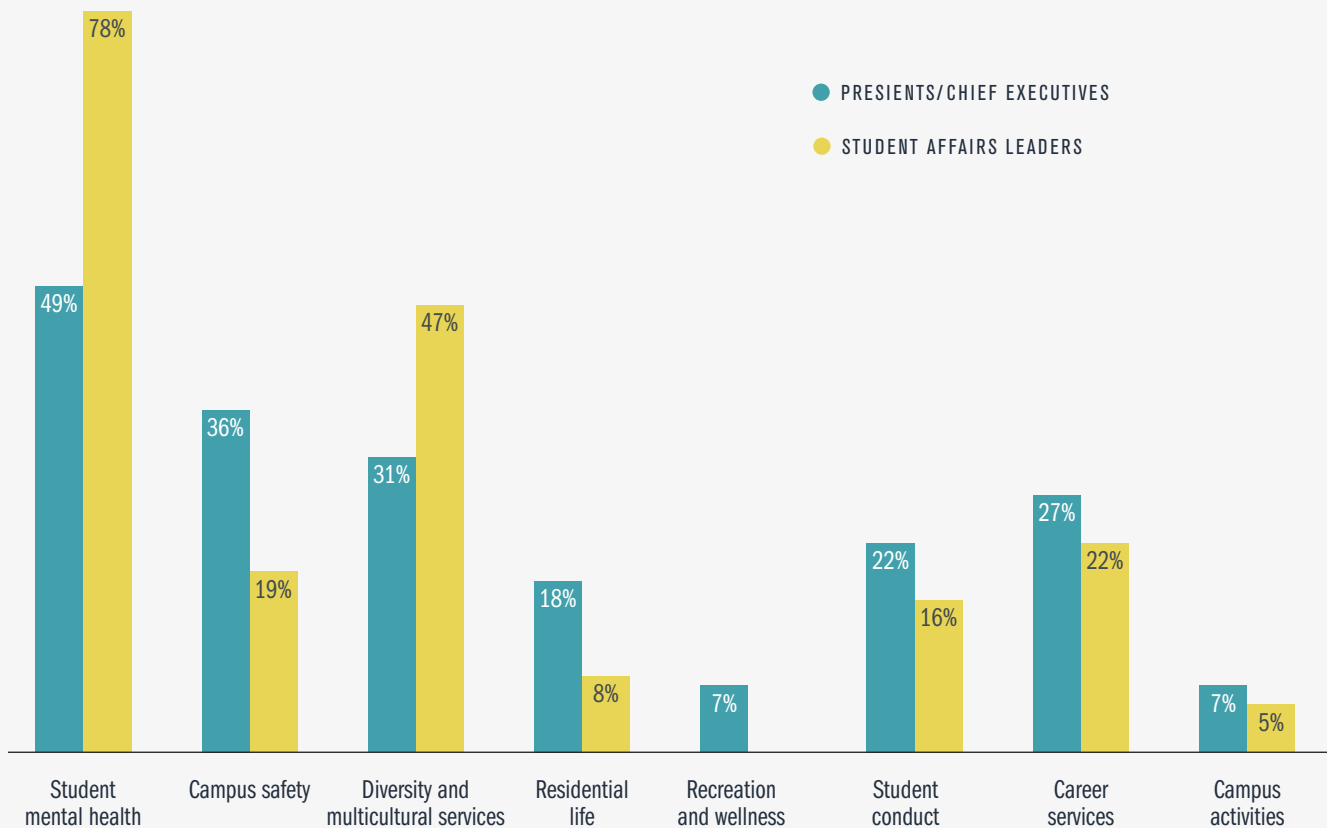
# Differences in Perspective

“Safety fits right in there with shelter and food,” says Larry Dietz, president of Illinois State University.



When the survey compared the responses of student-affairs leaders to those of presidents, there were numerous differences. For example, although student mental health ranked as the top concern for both groups, the survey indicated that the issue might be a bigger concern for student affairs. Seventy-eight percent of the student-affairs leaders ranked it as their top priority, compared to 49 percent of the chief executives. Student-affairs leaders also gave more weight to diversity issues. The presidents expressed more concern for residential life, recreation, student conduct, career services, campus activities, and campus safety. In fact, 36 percent of the presidents were worried about campus safety, compared to 19 percent of the student-affairs leaders. (See Figure 6.)

**FIGURE 6**  
**TOP CONCERNS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM OF PRESIDENTS AND STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS**



In interviews, presidents said that at conferences and meetings, they often discuss concerns over campus shootings, sexual assaults, and how to keep students safe. They say students need to know that they can walk safely on campus and be safe in their dorms, classrooms, and libraries.

“Safety fits right in there with shelter and food,” says Larry Dietz, president of Illinois State University. “It is one of the foundational parts of the Maslow hierarchy. If people don’t feel safe, it is hard to go to a higher point of intellectual capability.”



# Putting Money Where Their Worries Are

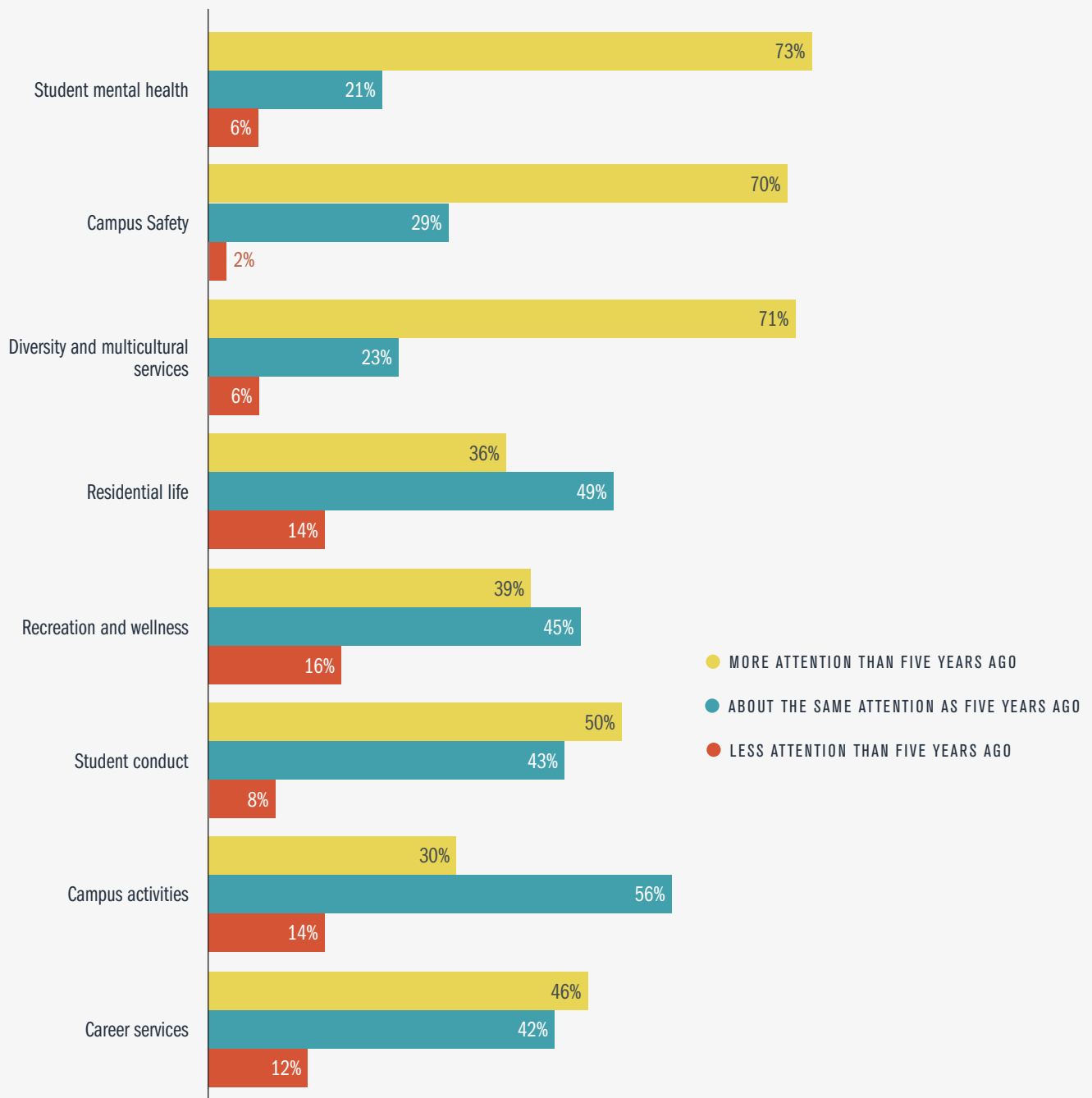
Career services ranked as the third highest priority for spending, at 30 percent, even though it had not been identified as a major worry.



The survey indicates that colleges and universities plan to put more resources into their biggest concerns.

Seventy-three percent of the respondents said that in the past five years, they have been paying greater attention to mental health; 71 percent said diversity; and 70 percent said campus safety. These were the top three areas of increased attention by a wide margin. (See Figure 7.)

**FIGURE 7**  
**ATTENTION PAID TO TOP CONCERNS IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS**



When asked to predict where more time, money, and staffing will go in the next year, the top responses correlated once again to the primary concerns. Not surprisingly, 36 percent said diversity and 35 percent said mental health.

It is interesting to note, however, that career services ranked as the third highest priority for spending, at 30 percent, even though it had not been identified as a major worry. (See Figure 8.)

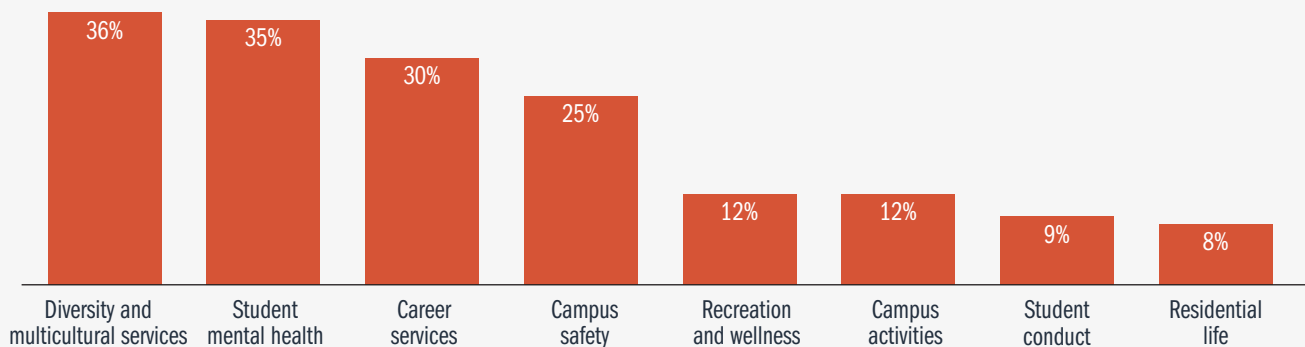
In January 2014, Miami opened a new state-of-the-art career center, the result of a \$4 million renovation. It has six interview suites, 360-degree video recording, and videoconferencing. The center is directly tied to student outcomes and reassures parents their children will find jobs.

“We have seen it as a great asset as we recruit students,” Whitely says.

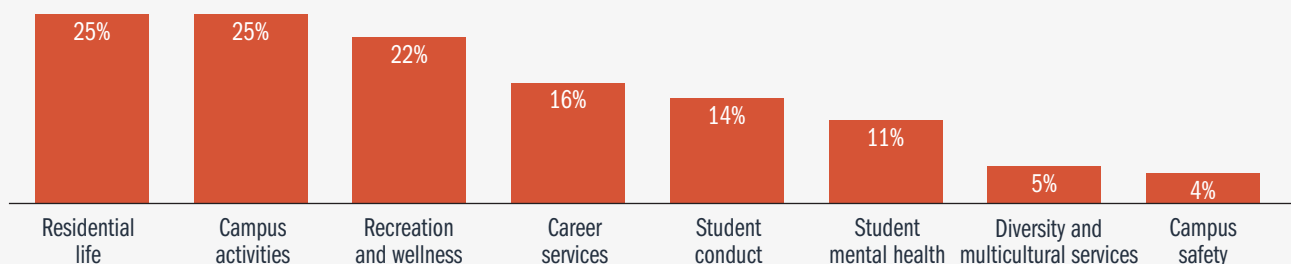
In the survey, respondents said that residential life, campus activities, and recreation will get less time, money, and staffing over the next year. (See Figure 9.) This finding raises the question of whether colleges are becoming so focused on mental health, diversity, and safety that they are pulling back on what some might consider less critical items.

In interviews, college officials said the traditional areas still remain a spending priority. “The students who are coming to us now have never shared a bedroom or bathroom in their entire life,” says Dietz. “They want more than the old dormitories where you just used to eat and sleep.”

**FIGURE 8**  
**AREAS RESPONDENTS BELIEVE WILL RECEIVE *INCREASED* RESOURCES IN THE NEXT YEAR**



**FIGURE 9**  
**AREAS RESPONDENTS BELIEVE WILL RECEIVE *FEWER* RESOURCES IN THE NEXT YEAR**



# Students as Customers



“The rising cost of education has led to a more instrumental and transactional view of higher education for both students and their families.”

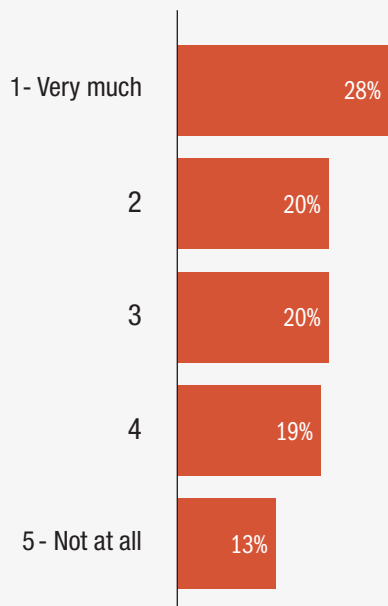
Many colleges are taking a more business-like approach to their marketing strategies—and their lingo. They refer to their students as “customers,” and they strive to provide good customer service. It’s a practice with which many in academe take issue. Professors argue that the practice connotes that students are buying grades and that it could devalue the education process.

In the survey, nearly half, or 48 percent, of the presidents and student-affairs leaders said they consider students to be customers. (See Figure 10.)

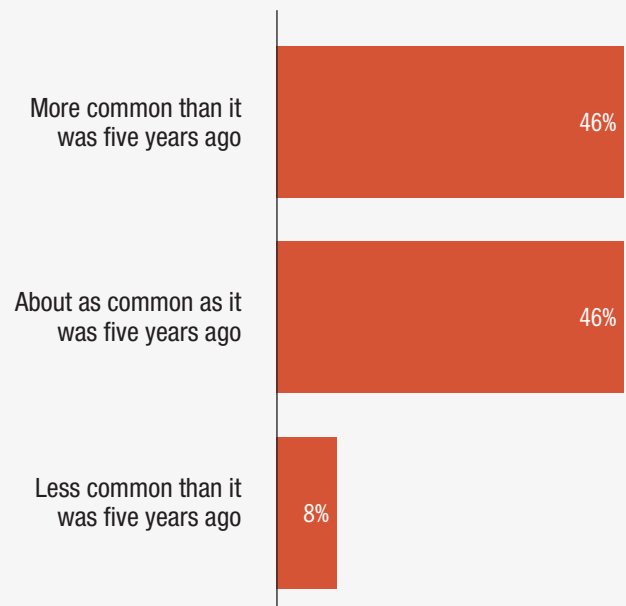
About half of the respondents believe that perspective is more common than it was five years ago. (See Figure 11.)

Kruger, of NASPA, predicts the practice will continue to grow. “The rising cost of education has led to a more instrumental and transactional view of higher education for both students and their families,” he says.

**FIGURE 10**  
**PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO CONSIDER STUDENTS TO BE “CUSTOMERS”**



**FIGURE 11**  
**PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAY CONSIDERING STUDENTS TO BE “CUSTOMERS” IS MORE COMMON THAN FIVE YEARS AGO**



# Pathway to the Presidency

The student-affairs job ... is not getting any easier. The demands are exhausting emotionally and physically.

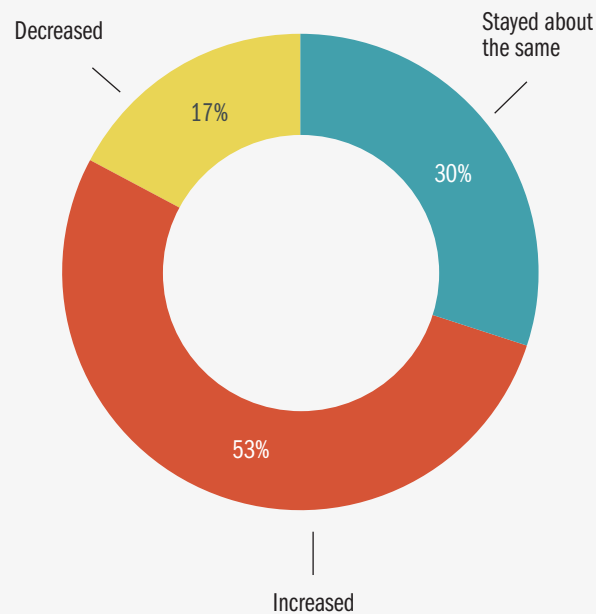


The survey indicates that student-affairs departments are getting bigger. More than half, 53 percent, of respondents said the size of the staff had grown over the past five years. (See Figure 12.)

The job, however, is not getting any easier. The demands are exhausting emotionally and physically, directors say. At Miami, the staff was dealing with too many late-night calls from campus police and residence hall assistants. In August, student affairs added a night shift. Two night managers are now on the campus from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. for emergencies.

“Now our staff doesn’t have to be up all day and all night,” Whitely says. “The jobs at times could lead to burnout, so we need to do everything we can to help our entry-level staff and mid-level staff.”

FIGURE 12  
**THE SIZE OF THE STUDENT-AFFAIRS STAFF HAS INCREASED,  
ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS**



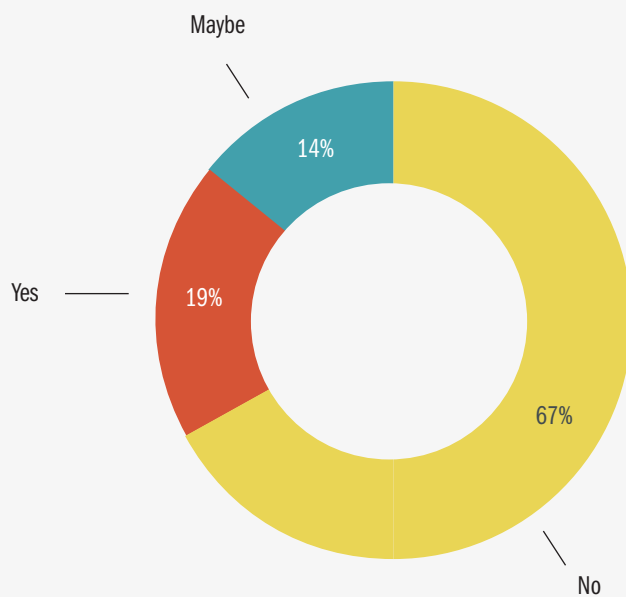
**“The complexity of this work rivals the opportunities and challenges faced by a university president on a daily basis.”**

While some in higher education argue that college presidents must come from the halls of academe, others say that student affairs is a perfect training ground. In the survey, 19 percent of the division leaders said they aspire to a presidency; 14 percent said they might consider it. (See **Figure 13.**)

Indeed, a growing number of student-affairs leaders are becoming presidents. Brian O. Hemphill, president of Radford University in Virginia, says his years in student affairs taught him to work with tight budgets, deal with student emergencies, coordinate building projects, engage with the community, and raise money.

“The complexity of this work rivals the opportunities and challenges faced by a university president on a daily basis,” he says.

**FIGURE 13**  
**STUDENT-AFFAIRS LEADERS WHO ASPIRE TO BE PRESIDENT SOMEDAY**





# Conclusion

The issues facing student-affairs offices have intensified and become more complicated over the past decade.

The departments are being given more priority in strategic, long-term planning. They are taking steps to improve mental-health services. They're creating individualized student centers, hiring diversity officers, and trying to be inclusive and accepting of all forms of diversity. They're working with other departments in a more holistic way than ever before.

Higher-education experts say the complex needs and wants of students won't change any time soon. If anything, they might get more challenging.

Colleges, they say, have to keep chipping away at the obstacles and difficulties students face.

Student-affairs divisions, they predict, will play an even larger role in helping with retention, attainment, and success. Colleges will have to pay particular attention to the economically disadvantaged.

At the same time, the fiscal difficulties colleges face will continue to "bump up against the demographic issues," says Kruger.

He predicts that at some point, colleges will have no choice but to start moving money out of "traditional student affairs functions" and into the more critical ones.

"These will be hard choices, but necessary in the next decade as resources decline, while the issues facing students get more urgent and serious," he says.

# Methodology

The results of *The Student-Centered University: Pressures and Challenges Faced by College Presidents and Student Affairs Leaders* are based on the responses of presidents and student-affairs leaders at colleges and universities. Huron Consulting Group, of Chicago, conducted the online survey for The Chronicle. The data collection took place in January 2017. Copyright © 2017.

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