Centering the Student Affairs Workforce

NASPA®
Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

Centering the Student Affairs Workforce Workgroup

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Foreword

Centering the Student Affairs Workforce responds to one of the most pressing and persistent challenges facing our field: how we sustain, support, and intentionally develop the skills, preparation, and leadership capacity of the people who do the work of student affairs.

Student affairs professionals operate at the intersection of student needs and institutional priorities. They foster belonging, advance well-being, respond to crises, support learning, and help students navigate increasingly complex personal, academic, and societal realities. Yet these responsibilities too often exist within structures that blur role clarity, stretch capacity, limit growth, and normalize unsustainable expectations. The result is a workforce experiencing rising burnout, disengagement, and attrition. These conditions threaten not only professional vitality but our collective ability to support student success.

This white paper centers the student affairs workforce as a strategic priority—one that is inseparable from student outcomes, institutional resilience, and the future of our profession. The evidence is clear: Staff need healthy and sustainable work environments. When student affairs professionals feel supported, valued, and aligned with purpose, they are better positioned to create the conditions in which students can thrive.

Grounded in national data, leadership insights, and the lived experiences of professionals across institutional types, this white paper

moves beyond surface-level solutions. It offers an actionable, adaptable framework focused on five interconnected areas: staff growth and development; workforce culture; well-being and work–life integration; recruitment and retention; and strategic alignment. Together, these priorities offer a road map for strengthening student affairs as a learning profession by investing in people, clarifying purpose, and aligning values with practice.

Importantly, this document is designed for use, not simply reflection. The strategies that follow are intentionally flexible, recognizing that student affairs looks different across campuses. Whether divisions are large or small, well-resourced or constrained, every institution has opportunities to more intentionally center its workforce and to embed care, clarity, and sustainability into daily practice.

NASPA is uniquely positioned to lead and support this work through research, professional development, shared learning, and collective action. This white paper reflects a commitment to advancing a future-ready student affairs workforce that is empowered, supported, and equipped to meet students' evolving needs.

The invitation is clear: to read with honesty, engage with intention, and act with purpose. Centering the student affairs workforce is not a peripheral concern. It is foundational to the health of our profession and to the success of the students we serve.

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Executive Overview

Higher education is in the midst of a workplace paradigm shift after years of disruption, institutional vacancies, budget constraints, and a deeper cultural challenge that is reshaping staff expectations, engagement, well-being, and commitment. As a result, senior leaders and campus stakeholders, including faculty and staff, are confronting fundamental questions on how higher education moves forward, including how we organize work, lead people, and sustain environments where staff can thrive.

According to Gallup's (2025) *State of the Workplace Report*, U.S. employee engagement[1] across sectors has dropped, which is a rare trend, as engagement has declined only twice in the past 12 years: once during the COVID-19 pandemic and again in 2024. Gallup's findings reveal a much scarier picture: The world's workplace is not headed in the right direction, and the implications of this trend are significant. The relationship between employee engagement and performance is well established. Engaged employees experience greater well-being, stronger retention, lower absenteeism, and increased productivity. Consequently, sustained declines in engagement hinder these outcomes and signal a workplace trajectory that is increasingly unsustainable. This reality highlights a critical opportunity to prioritize the employee experience as a key driver of organizational success. Meanwhile, voices across the field of higher education (see, e.g., McClure, 2025b) are urging colleges and universities to move beyond surface-level fixes and fundamentally reimagine the higher education workplace.

The urgency of this challenge is particularly evident in student affairs. Professionals in this field operate at the intersection of institutional priorities and student needs, facilitating learning, belonging, and well-being while responding to crises in complex, constantly evolving environments (NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2022). Yet these expectations often unfold within structures that blur role clarity, stretch capacity, minimize recognition, and normalize unsustainable demands. Recent studies document rising departures and rising intent to leave among student affairs staff, from early career professionals to senior leaders. These departures are

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[1] Gallup defines *employee engagement* as the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in both their work and their workplace.

driven not only by compensation but by unclear priorities, limited opportunities for advancement, and workplace cultures that no longer align with the realities of the job and working conditions (Bichsel & Schneider, 2025b; McClure, 2025b). Pay matters, but as Chaplin (2025) noted, culture, clarity, flexibility, and growth are equally decisive in sustaining the workforce.

This white paper positions staff experience and engagement as a strategic lever for student success and provides actionable guidance for senior leaders seeking to strengthen and sustain their workforce. Building on NASPA research and member insights, it outlines strategies across five critical areas. Together, these strategies form a blueprint for student affairs as part of a learning organization focused on value-driven and mission-aligned work where both staff and students flourish.

Staff growth and development: Advancing professional learning, mentorship, and clear career progression pathways.

Workforce culture: Fostering collaboration, recognition, and alignment with institutional values.

Well-being and work-life integration: Supporting holistic health and balance for all employees.

Recruitment and retention: Attracting and sustaining talent through flexible roles and reimagined structures.

Strategic alignment: Embedding workforce development within divisional and institutional priorities, ensuring that staff experience is reflected in goals, metrics, and governance.

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid change, resource constraints, and shifting student needs, the professionals who support, guide, and connect students are more essential than ever. This heightened emphasis on the student affairs workforce is not just a feeling; it is reflected in the findings from NASPA's (2024, 2025) *Top Issues in Student Affairs*, which elevates staff-focused concerns. The fact that these themes persist emphasizes a simple truth: This conversation isn't going away. If anything, it is becoming more urgent.

This white paper centers the student affairs workforce as a strategic priority, one that is inseparable from student success and institutional vitality. Drawing on a robust blend of national survey data, direct voices of senior leaders, and current research, this publication offers a comprehensive and actionable road map for transformation. The findings and recommendations presented here are not theoretical; they are grounded in the lived realities of staff, strategic insights of those charged with leading divisions, and research in fields of organizational development, human resource education, and organizational psychology.

This document reflects the culmination of a comprehensive examination of the student affairs workforce undertaken by NASPA's Centering the Student Affairs Workforce Workgroup. The purpose of the workgroup was to bring together higher education professionals representing a range of institutional contexts, professional roles, and lived realities in student affairs. The group ensured that conversations about workforce sustainability, staff experience, and professional well-being were grounded in diverse perspectives and informed by the practical challenges facing institutions across the higher education landscape. Members were charged with assessing and advancing strategies to support, develop, and retain a strong, dynamic, and student-centered workforce. Specifically, the group explored approaches to enhancing professional development, clarifying career pathways, strengthening workplace well-being, and fostering employee engagement across student affairs divisions.

Chaired by Darryl Lovett, director of staff experience for student affairs at Florida State University, the Centering the Student Affairs Workforce Workgroup included Mary Blanchard Wallace, assistant vice president for student experience at The University of Alabama at Birmingham; Earl Cabellon, director of staff experience and culture at the University of Maryland; Danny Pape, executive director of the Center for

Career Engagement at Washington University in St. Louis; and Dale Scully, associate vice chancellor of student affairs, engagement, and wellness at the University of Minnesota Crookston. Collectively, the group represented a range of institutional contexts and professional roles across student affairs, spanning public and private institutions, research-intensive universities, regional campuses, and land-grant colleges. Institutions ranged from small campuses with fewer than 20 student affairs professionals to large R1 universities (i.e., doctorate-granting and research-producing institutions) employing hundreds of staff across dozens of departments and serving student populations from 2,000 to more than 40,000. As a result, the workgroup's approach was intentionally *not* a one-size-fits-all model or a single "right" way forward.

Beginning in May 2025, workgroup members aspired to build a framework that institutions could interpret through their own realities, resources, and goals. The objective was to create something people could use and not a dense, overly technical report. This document is intended to be an easy-to-read resource that sparks ideas, inspires action, and supports meaningful change in the student affairs workforce, whether on a global scale or on a single campus working with limited capacity. It focuses on providing adaptable, scalable opportunities and strategies.

This approach also reflects NASPA's commitment to serving the full breadth of student affairs and higher education. NASPA's institutional members represent all 50 states and more than 20 countries, including public and private 4-year institutions, community colleges, and campuses worldwide. This diversity matters, and it shaped how the workgroup crafted this document: with flexibility and the belief that every institution deserves tools that make sense for its context and its people.

This white paper illuminates the barriers that hinder professional growth, well-being, and advancement as well as the innovative strategies and promising practices emerging across the field. It highlights the urgent need for intentional investment, structural reform, and a culture of care, valuing student affairs staff holistically and recognizing their central role in advancing the mission of higher education.

The field stands at a pivotal moment. By centering the workforce, this document not only addresses pressing challenges but also unlocks the potential for lasting institutional resilience and student success. It offers both a diagnosis and a call to action to reimagine workplaces, invest in people, and build a future where student affairs professionals can thrive.

Problem Statement

The student affairs profession faces a critical workforce sustainability issue as institutional systems and resources fail to keep pace with the expanding scope of student needs. Structural limitations, such as insufficient career pathways, restricted advancement opportunities, and inadequate investment in professional development, have contributed to widespread burnout, disengagement, and attrition among professionals in the field. Evidence of this crisis is well documented. More than one third of student affairs professionals are actively considering leaving the profession (Southern Association for College Student Affairs & Skyfactor, 2022). Retention has emerged as a significant challenge across higher education, driven by excessive workloads, inadequate pay, and limited access to remote work opportunities (Bichsel & Schneider, 2025a).

These concerns are reinforced by results from the 2025 College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) retention survey, which indicate that more than 40% of staff are somewhat to very likely to seek alternative employment due to workplace culture, job-related stress, and a desire for remote work flexibility (Bichsel & Schneider, 2025b). These trends align with findings from NASPA's (2024, 2025) *Top Issues in Student Affairs*, which emphasize hiring and retaining staff and reimagining roles and organizational structures to meet students' evolving needs. In 2025, 92% of survey respondents identified developing strategies to retain skilled professionals who reflect the student population as very important or somewhat important[2]. These challenges are not isolated; they are echoed across institutional types, regions, and roles, underscoring systemic barriers that threaten the sustainability of the student affairs workforce (Nyunt et al., 2024). Collectively, these data and narratives signal an urgent need for intentional, systemic change to address workforce instability and ensure the profession's capacity to meet the complex needs of today's students.

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[2] The most senior student affairs leaders on campus participate in NASPA's annual *Top Issues in Student Affairs* survey.

Purpose of the White Paper

This white paper illuminates the urgency of student affairs workforce reform and identifies actionable strategies for transformation. By integrating survey data, leadership perspectives, and field research, this document provides a comprehensive road map for centering, strengthening, and sustaining the student affairs workforce, ensuring that staff are empowered to thrive and, in turn, advance the mission of higher education.

Methodology

This white paper is grounded in a rigorous, multistage methodology. The findings and recommendations are both evidence based and deeply reflective of the realities across the student affairs profession.

Members of the Centering the Student Affairs Workforce Workgroup performed a comprehensive review of existing literature and national data reports from leading associations and organizations, including NASPA, ACPA–College Student Educators International, Gallup, CUPA-HR, and the Association of College Unions International, as well as relevant scholarly publications. This foundational step provided critical context on workforce trends, persistent challenges, and emerging practices shaping the field.

Building on this foundation, the workgroup conducted a targeted survey of senior leaders in student affairs from a variety of colleges and universities. The survey explored the core themes emerging from critical areas: professional growth strategies, barriers to career progression, recruitment strategies, retention strategies, professional sustainability, and alignment with divisional priorities. Distributed through professional networks and NASPA constituent groups, the survey captured both quantitative and qualitative insights and illuminated the strategies, barriers, and opportunities that leaders experience across the field.

To further develop the analysis, the team held structured and informal conversations with senior leaders and staff. These discussions provided real-time examples of promising practices and ongoing challenges, adding depth and nuance to the survey findings.

Finally, a snowball sampling approach was used to broaden participation beyond formal leadership roles. Staff involved in campus initiatives focused on employee experience were invited to share their perspectives, ensuring that the analysis reflected a spectrum of roles, identities, and institutional contexts.

This methodology provides a robust and holistic foundation for the white paper's analysis and recommendations. The result is a set of strategies grounded in research and shaped by the lived experiences and aspirations of the student affairs workforce.

Key Findings

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To contribute to a clearer understanding of the workforce landscape, this section offers an overview of the **FIVE CRITICAL AREAS** that emerged through the assessments:

1   **Supporting Staff Growth, Mentorship, and Career Progression**

2   **Enhancing Workforce Culture**

3   **Addressing Workforce Well-Being, Workload Balance, and Professional Sustainability**

4   **Exploring Innovative Recruitment and Retention Strategies**

5   **Aligning Workforce Development Efforts With Divisional and Institutional Priorities**

The workgroup identified specific challenges within each theme that warrant attention. This section highlights these challenges to guide the development of recommendations that strengthen the workforce and support meaningful, sustainable improvement.

1

Supporting Staff Growth, Mentorship, and Career Progression

The student affairs profession continues to evolve alongside the changing landscape of higher education. As highlighted in NASPA's (2022) *The Compass Report*, the field must continually reassess staffing structures, competencies, and approaches to remain responsive to emerging student needs. Although the focus on student success remains central, parallel attention to staff experience, growth, mentorship, and career progression has not kept pace.

Challenges Identified

Findings from the workgroup revealed several key challenges affecting staff development and progression in student affairs. First, opportunities for growth and advancement are often inconsistent across departments, institutions, and the field. Many staff members reported limited access to professional development, unclear career ladders, and a lack of structured pathways for upward mobility. This inconsistency is compounded by divisions that are under resourced, leaving little capacity to prioritize staff development beyond essential operational needs.

A second challenge lies in mentorship. The value of mentorship is widely recognized, but its availability and quality vary significantly. Some institutions have robust, formalized mentorship programs, whereas others rely solely on informal networks. Barriers such as time constraints, unclear expectations, and limited institutional support prevent mentorship from being a sustained developmental tool.

Last, the absence of clear and reasonable systems for career progression has contributed to staff disengagement and turnover. Without visible pathways for growth—or the resources to pursue them—many professionals feel stalled in their development. This reality not only affects retention but also limits the overall capacity of divisions to adapt and innovate in response to evolving student needs.

2

Enhancing Workforce Culture

Building a wide-ranging, engaging, collaborative, and human-centered workplace requires more than reactive responses. It calls for an intentional, sustained commitment from leadership and the institution as a whole. As the student affairs workforce continues to evolve and employee expectations shift, the need for intentional strategies to create thriving workplaces is urgent.

Challenges Identified

Some staff described environments that prioritize productivity and student outcomes but offer limited structural support for connection, psychological safety, or meaningful engagement. At the same time, leaders are under pressure that complicates their ability to fully articulate or implement equity-centered approaches to hiring, compensation, feedback, professional development, recognition, accessibility, and accommodations.

Acknowledging this reality matters. Even within constraints, leaders carry a responsibility to maintain conditions that honor dignity, encourage connection, and support the people doing the work. The path may look different across institutions, but the commitment remains the same. It is to respond to staff's lived experiences in ways that affirm their value and contribute to a healthier, more human-centered workplace.

One area where these tensions are particularly visible is in the implementation of accessible practices. Institutions vary widely in their understanding and application of accessibility, both for visible and invisible disabilities. Without proactive structures and sustained awareness, barriers persist that prevent all employees from contributing fully and comfortably in their work environments. True inclusion requires intentional design of workplace systems that normalize accommodations, distribute resources and information equitably, and empower staff to advocate for their needs without fear of stigma or reprisal.

3

Addressing Workforce Well-Being, Workload Balance, and Professional Sustainability

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the impact of global and national political climates and the growing mental health crisis among students, has amplified long-standing challenges within higher education related to workload, burnout, and professional sustainability. Even before these compounding factors, higher education had been operating within a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). This broader landscape continues to be characterized by shifting demographics, increasing accountability pressures, and constrained resources. These intersecting forces have deepened the strain on student affairs professionals, who navigate increasingly complex student needs, evolving institutional priorities, and diminished staffing capacity, all while striving to model well-being for others. The well-being of the workforce is no longer a secondary concern, and it is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for institutions seeking to cultivate environments where students and staff can truly thrive.

Challenges Identified

In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* interview (Wilhelm, 2024), student affairs leaders noted that burnout is both individual and systemic. It cannot be solved by self-care alone, and it requires institutional cultures that support reasonable workloads, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging. Similarly, McClure (2025a) challenged higher education leaders to make employees' care a strategic priority, arguing that "caring universities" intentionally humanize policies, practice fair compensation, and cultivate leaders who center empathy and trust.

McClure (2025b) provided a research-based road map for creating thriving workplaces and highlighted the critical link between staff well-being and student success. His findings reinforce that thriving campuses must move beyond rhetoric to embed care into leadership development, structures, and daily practices.

4

Exploring Innovative Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Building on CUPA-HR's 2025 survey findings (Bichsel & Schneider, 2025b), effective recruitment and retention strategies are essential for attracting and sustaining top talent in student affairs amid shifting workforce expectations, limited resources, and heightened competition across higher education and beyond. The evolving landscape, marked by demographic change, generational differences, and post-pandemic workplace realignments, invites institutions to adopt more creative, equitable, and people-centered approaches to hiring and retention.

Challenges Identified

Data from NASPA's (2022) *The Compass Report*, including survey and discussion group responses, as well as findings from NASPA's (2025) *Top Issues in Student Affairs*, revealed ongoing challenges in both recruitment and retention. Many divisions continue to rely on reactive, traditional hiring practices that are often confined to familiar networks or limited platforms, which can restrict the candidate pool and result in less transparent recruitment efforts. A lack of leadership engagement and unclear expectations during the hiring process frequently lead to mismatched hires and diminished long-term satisfaction. In some cases, job descriptions do not accurately reflect the role's actual responsibilities, which contributes to early burnout or attrition once new hires encounter the realities of the position.

Retention challenges often reflect broader issues found in recruitment. Employees frequently point to factors such as excessive workloads, limited flexibility, and a disconnection between organizational values and personal priorities as key contributors to disengagement and turnover. Financial limitations, stagnant compensation structures, and the scaling back of inclusive workplace initiatives further undermine workforce stability. Individuals across various roles and backgrounds, particularly those early in their careers, those from underrepresented groups, or those entering higher education through nontraditional pathways, are more likely to explore other opportunities when pathways for growth and a sense of belonging and value are absent.

5

Aligning Workforce Development Efforts With Divisional and Institutional Priorities

A strategic approach to workforce development goes far beyond hiring and training. It is about building a sustainable, forward-looking pipeline of talent that aligns with institutional goals, values, and the evolving needs of higher education. For student affairs divisions, this means preparing, supporting, and investing in people not only for the roles they hold today but also for the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Challenges Identified

Findings from the workgroup's surveys, interviews, and facilitated discussions revealed that workforce development in higher education often occurs in silos and is disconnected from divisional and institutional priorities. Importantly, these insights reflect perspectives from staff at all levels. Staff members expressed uncertainty about how their growth aligned with the broader mission of their institutions. In some cases, limited investment in professional development and advancement opportunities led employees to question whether they were truly valued.

The absence of intentional workforce planning (i.e., anticipating future talent needs, addressing skill gaps, and preparing successors) was a consistent concern. Many institutions rely heavily on reactive approaches and fill vacancies as they arise rather than proactively develop internal talent. Budget planning and workforce strategy are frequently misaligned; professional development is viewed as a discretionary expense rather than a strategic investment.

Also, few divisions maintain a clear inventory of current skills or future needs. This lack of visibility makes it difficult to align staffing structures with changing student needs, emerging technologies, and institutional transformation efforts. Without this alignment, divisions risk burnout, turnover, and diminished capacity to fulfill their mission.

Recommendations, Strategic Options, and Implementation Tips

This section offers a comprehensive and adaptable framework for strengthening the student affairs workforce. Each of the following components serves a distinct purpose:

❑ **Recommendations** outline high-level priorities and actions that can drive meaningful improvement.

❑ **Strategic options** provide flexible approaches and ideas for how institutions might pursue each recommendation, offering multiple pathways rather than a single prescriptive method.

❑ **Implementation tips** highlight practical considerations and insights to support successful adoption, helping institutions anticipate challenges and tailor solutions to their unique context.

These elements are grounded in research, leader insights, and current campus practices. They are designed to be flexible rather than prescriptive. Not every recommendation or option will apply to every institution, and no single correct sequence or approach exists. Institutions vary in size, structure, resources, and culture. Therefore, it is important to select, scale, and sequence the elements that best fit each institution's context and priorities. This section can be used to identify practices that advance institutional goals and integrate them into planning and operations.

Although the recommendations and strategies align with the identified critical areas of culture, growth, sustainability, well-being, equity, recruitment, and evidence-driven planning, they are intentionally designed to extend across multiple areas rather than correspond one-to-one. During analysis, the workgroup observed significant synergy across themes, which allowed ideas to flow naturally and reinforce multiple priorities simultaneously. As a result, the framework emphasizes interconnectedness rather than rigid categorization, ensuring that strategies support holistic improvement across the student affairs workforce.

Lead the Culture and Center People

Recommendation

Senior leaders play a pivotal role in shaping culture and staff experience by modeling caring, emotionally intelligent leadership. When belonging, inclusion, and professional growth are made visible and meaningful, staff are more likely to feel engaged and connected to the institution's mission. Aligning daily decisions with institutional values invites an environment where development, community, and care are experienced as authentic, supported practices.

Strategic Options

❑ Build belonging through competent, compassionate leadership that elevates voices and balances accountability with empathy.

❑ Normalize timely, specific recognition linked to purpose and performance.

❑ Communicate value alignment; close the loop on decisions by showing how investments in people drive outcomes.

❑ Humanize the talent lifecycle; lead with mission and candidate care from first contact through onboarding.

Implementation Tips

❑ Treat belonging, inclusion, community, and connection as success metrics reflected in employee experience, engagement, and retention.

❑ Train supervisors in empathetic leadership, feedback, and recognition; reinforce best practices at all levels.

❑ Make values visible in resource allocation and communications; connect staff development and well-being to institutional outcomes.

❑ Use listening structures (e.g., regular one-on-one meetings, town halls, stay interviews) to strengthen trust, clarity, and retention.

Foster Professional Growth and Development

Recommendation

Intentional, accessible professional development has the potential to strengthen staff capability and commitment. When individualized growth plans, transparent career ladders, and opportunities for developmental relationships are embedded in the division, staff may see clearer pathways for advancement and feel valued in their roles. Senior leaders who champion continual learning and limit barriers to participation help cultivate a culture where growth is anticipated, supported, and celebrated.

Strategic Options

❑ Align pathways to ACPA and NASPA professional competency areas; clarify role families, progression criteria, and expectations.

❑ Pair mentoring with executive and life coaching; include traditional, reverse, and executive mentorship models.

❑ Use practice-based learning (e.g., job shadowing, rotational assignments, cross-functional projects).

❑ Offer cohort-based onboarding and learning models; integrate microtrainings during team meetings.

Implementation Tips

❑ Dedicate consistent funding for conferences, certifications, institutes, and internal training; provide on-campus and virtual options for accessibility.

❑ Establish individualized professional development plans with semiannual check-ins.

❑ Provide scholarships and tuition support for advanced credentials; expand opportunities.

❑ Strengthen supervisory practice (e.g., regular one-on-one meetings, meaningful feedback); tie development to evaluations and divisional goals.

Promote Professional Sustainability

Recommendation

Long-term sustainability for student affairs professionals can be enhanced by designing roles, structures, and compensation practices that support career longevity and well-being. Attention to salary compression, competitive and equitable pay, and visible pathways for growth—even in flat or small organizations—empowers staff to thrive, adapt, and remain engaged. These approaches contribute to retaining talent and strengthening a resilient workforce.

Strategic Options

❏ Modernize tools and environments; normalize advocacy for accessibility and individual needs.

❏ Build equitable pathways using data-informed hiring, flexible support structures, and authentic recognition.

❏ Identify sustainable role designs (e.g., reasonable scope and workload, clarity of responsibilities) and reinforce boundaries to prevent burnout and lack of engagement.

❏ Consider democratizing leadership coaching to all levels within your unit or department.

Implementation Tips

❏ Redesign structures to show progression within and across roles (e.g., role families, skill tiers), even when titles are limited; recognize high performance within levels.

❏ Conduct market analysis and review pay bands regularly; address compression; ensure salary transparency in hiring and progression.

❏ Train supervisors for accessibility awareness and inclusive practice; foster open dialogue about barriers and accommodations.

❏ Offer career resilience supports: coaching for pivots, résumé and career design assistance, and pathways that acknowledge the realities of enrollment and budget cycles.

Prioritize Well-Being and Human-Centered Work Design

Recommendation

Workforce well-being can serve as an important lever for institutional effectiveness. When work is thoughtfully designed with attention to workload, autonomy, flexibility, and emotional labor (Lynch & Klima, 2021), staff are better positioned to sustain high performance and personal health. Considering well-being in planning and offering support during transitions and reflective supervision encourage a culture of care that enhances engagement and effectiveness.

Strategic Options

❏ Enable flexible, sustainable practices (e.g., hybrid and remote options, meeting-free windows, protected focus time).

❏ Develop caring leaders via emotional intelligence, coaching, and well-being practices; model boundaries and rest.

❏ Standardize workload assessment and equitable distribution; align roles to human needs.

❏ Actively promote and normalize the debriefing structures and mental health resources (i.e., employee assistance program and beyond) to support emotional labor.

Implementation Tips

❏ Embed well-being goals and measures (e.g., engagement, belonging, energy) in divisional plans and performance conversations.

❏ Encourage leaders to visibly take breaks, avoid after-hours emails, and share personal well-being strategies.

❏ Offer structured training on emotional intelligence, active listening, and coaching skills.

❏ Create forums for staff to share challenges and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing practices and support.

❏ Train supervisors to mention available resources during one-on-one meetings and team huddles.

Advance Equity, Inclusion, and Leadership Pipelines

Recommendation

Advancing equity, inclusion, and leadership pipelines benefits from intentional efforts to reduce systemic barriers such as implicit bias and uneven access to networks. Developing inclusive mentorship and sponsorship practices, transparent career pathways, and equitable access to development fosters a culture where all staff have opportunities to grow and lead. Investing early in emerging leaders and using thoughtful succession planning expand leadership opportunities that reflect the diversity and strengths of the division.

Strategic Options

❏ Equip supervisors to proactively address accommodations and inclusive practice; modernize tools and environments with accessibility in mind.

❏ Make growth a core promise with equitable access to development and transparent pathways (i.e., clearly defined criteria tied to competencies and outcomes).

❏ Reimagine the talent life cycle; connect attraction, onboarding, mentoring, and feedback to sustained and equitable career mobility.

Implementation Tips

❏ Build comprehensive mentorship and sponsorship frameworks across roles and identities; link to succession planning.

❏ Address barriers through ongoing education, transparent advancement processes, and equitable access to resources.

❏ Invest early during onboarding; use divisional storytelling and recognition to increase visibility and belonging.

Strengthen Recruitment and Retention

Recommendation

Effective recruitment and retention practices help build a resilient and high-performing workforce. Leading with mission and values, widening recruitment pipelines, and refining hiring processes can attract professionals who align with institutional priorities. Comprehensive onboarding, ongoing development, and a culture of care and recognition create conditions where staff are more likely to remain and contribute to long-term engagement and success.

Strategic Options

❑ Expand pipelines via graduate programs, professional associations, and trusted networks; share authentic institutional storytelling.

❑ Offer competitive, transparent compensation; conduct market analyses; clarify scope in job descriptions.

❑ Strengthen candidate care (e.g., efficient follow-up, transparent processes, meaningful interview engagement).

❑ Retain through culture: recognition, flexibility, strong supervision, and visible growth opportunities.

Implementation Tips

❑ Lead recruitment with mission, values, and supportive candidate experience; include on-campus and virtual engagement to assess compatibility.

❑ Broaden applicant pools (e.g., graduate programs, associations, personal networks); reduce barriers (e.g., salary transparency, reasonable scope).

❑ Invest in comprehensive onboarding, regular check-ins, and ongoing development for new hires.

❑ Use stay interviews and deep listening to personalize retention strategies; recognize contributions consistently.

Align Workforce Development with Strategy and Evidence

Recommendation

Aligning workforce development with divisional and institutional priorities provides a pathway to long-term success. Using engagement surveys, performance indicators, and other data-informed tools allows institutions to tailor development efforts to organizational climate and emerging needs. Proactive forecasting, thoughtful resource alignment, and cross-unit collaboration elevate talent management as a shared responsibility that supports retention, morale, and institutional performance.

Strategic Options

❏ Link talent management to divisional goals and annual processes; integrate workforce planning with strategy and finance.

❏ Use evidence (e.g., surveys, dashboards) to guide action; communicate how investing in people advances mission outcomes.

❏ Plan leadership pipelines and succession; invest in upskilling (e.g., leadership, data literacy, emerging technologies).

Implementation Tips

❏ Integrate staff development into strategic plans; align individual objectives and evaluations to divisional priorities.

❏ Forecast workforce needs (e.g., skills inventories, gaps from retirements, promotions, turnover); use predictive analytics thoughtfully.

❏ Foster cross-unit collaboration for alignment across organizational levels; communicate progress regularly.

❏ Learn from proven innovation (e.g., flexible work programs, engagement tools, structured development at peer institutions) to inform practice.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: Centering the student affairs workforce is not a peripheral concern. It is foundational to the vitality and future of higher education. This white paper, informed by the direct voices of senior leaders, comprehensive survey data, and a synthesis of field research, demonstrates that institutional success is inseparable from the well-being, growth, and engagement of the professionals who serve at their core.

Investing in professional development, reforming organizational structures, prioritizing well-being, advancing equity, and aligning workforce strategies with institutional goals do more than improve staff experience. These practices create the conditions for student success and institutional resilience. The recommendations in this report include actionable strategies, complemented by strategic options and practical advice on implementation, each grounded in the lived realities and aspirations of the workforce.

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NASPA is the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. Our work provides high-quality professional development, advocacy, and research for 15,000 members in all 50 states, 29 countries, and 8 U.S. territories.