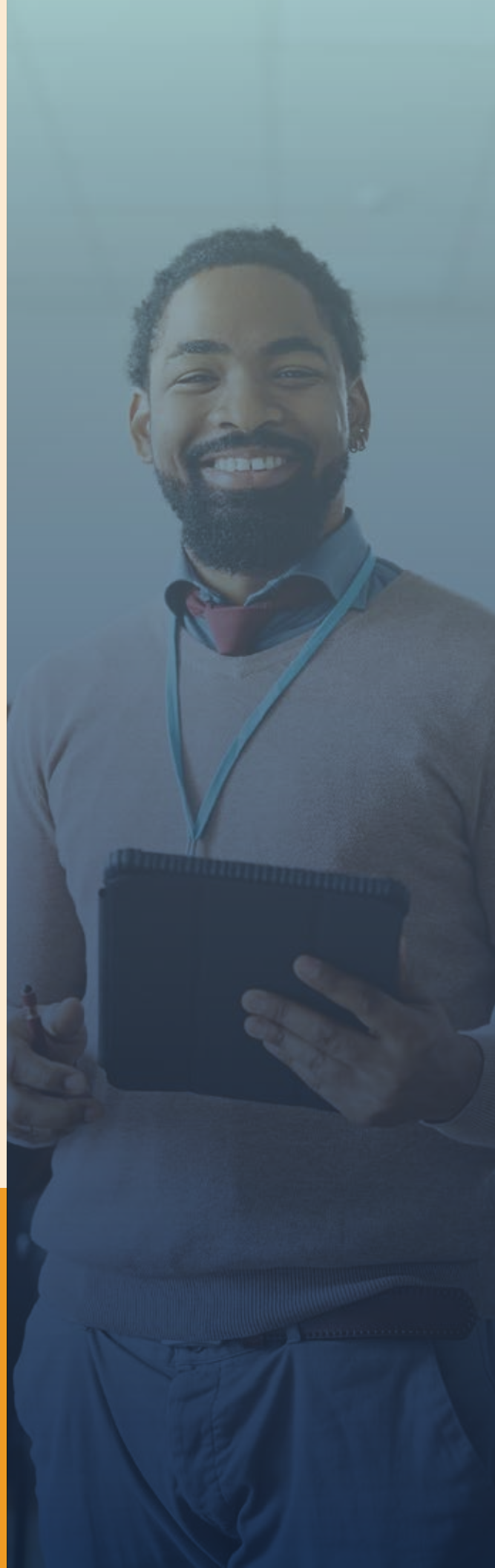


The State of Student Affairs Leadership

The biggest challenges and opportunities facing student affairs leaders, and how these will be addressed at the 2027 Student Affairs Executive Summit.

A prospective look ahead for the 2027
Student Affairs Executive Summit

The Lodge at Spruce Peak
Stowe, Vermont
July 20-22, 2027



What Student Affairs Leaders Are Telling Us About the Work Ahead

Over the past several months, Student Affairs Executive has spoken with dozens of student affairs executives leading broad, cross-functional divisions at institutions of every size. We asked a simple question: what's actually taking up your executive attention right now?

The answers were remarkably consistent. Five themes surfaced again and again, regardless of institution type or region. Taken together, they describe a profession under real pressure to prove its value, stretch its resources and prepare its next generation of leaders — often without a playbook for any of it.

Those five themes now form the core curriculum of the inaugural Student Affairs Executive Summit, taking place July 20–22, 2027 at The Lodge at Spruce Peak in Stowe, Vermont. Read on to learn more.



1. Prove Your Division's Value

DATA, ANALYTICS & EXECUTIVE DECISION-MAKING



THE CHALLENGE

Nearly every leader we interviewed named some version of the same problem: they are being asked to justify their division's existence in a language they were never trained to speak. One VP described sitting in front of a board of trustees — composed largely of business executives — and getting seven minutes to make the case for a new residence hall. Several leaders pointed out that the old proof points, like learning-outcomes mapping, no longer land with provosts and presidents who are focused on enrollment, retention and return on investment. The result is a widespread sense of being under-resourced not because the work lacks value, but because that value hasn't been translated into terms senior leadership actually uses.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Leaders who have moved past this pain point describe a common shift: building direct partnerships with institutional research and business-analytics teams, and correlating student affairs data (belonging, engagement, wellness) with hard academic outcomes like retention and course completion. A handful of institutions are already running multi-year studies linking recreation or resilience programming to GPA and persistence — early proof that student affairs can build its own evidence base rather than borrowing academic affairs' metrics.

HOW THIS WILL BE ADDRESSED AT THE 2027 STUDENT AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

Through a facilitated, peer-driven session on data, analytics and executive decision-making, leaders will examine how institutions are moving beyond participation counts to connect student affairs work with outcomes such as retention, persistence, belonging and student success. Attendees will compare approaches for identifying the right metrics, partnering with institutional data teams and translating results into a case for investment that resonates with presidents, provosts and boards. This directly reflects leaders' desire for data that both informs decisions and demonstrates whether investments are actually moving the needle.

2. Lead Beyond Your Division

INFLUENCING PRESIDENTS, BOARDS, DONORS & LEGISLATORS

THE CHALLENGE

Financial pressure has pushed nearly every leader we spoke with further into fundraising, donor relations and board communication than their training ever prepared them for. Several described this as uncharted territory: how much to share with donors, how to brief a board in a handful of minutes, how to build a relationship with a legislator who impacts state funding. One recurring line of feedback: student affairs has historically been poor at “selling itself” — not out of false modesty, but because the profession has rarely been taught how. Multiple leaders separately used the language of a “boardroom speech” or “elevator pitch” as something they wished someone had taught them years ago.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The leaders furthest ahead on this front have started treating stakeholder communication as its own discipline — investing in executive coaching specifically focused on storytelling to boards and provosts, building standing relationships with faculty governance, and involving student-facing data teams in translating engagement metrics into institutional language.

HOW THIS WILL BE ADDRESSED AT THE 2027 STUDENT AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

A session on executive influence and stakeholder communication will challenge leaders to sharpen how they communicate with presidents, provosts, boards, donors and other external and internal stakeholders. Through real-world scenarios and peer discussion, attendees will explore how to distill complex student affairs work into a compelling executive narrative, make the case for resources and adapt their message for different audiences — building the “boardroom speech” many leaders said they were never taught to deliver.



3. Fund the Future

BUDGET STRATEGY, REVENUE & FINANCIAL LEADERSHIP

THE CHALLENGE

Budget pressure was, without exception, the single most-cited issue across our interviews. Leaders described state funding cuts, inflation that has outpaced budget growth for years, and units that have become “heavily financially supplemented” to the point of being unsustainable. Several were candid that student affairs, as a field, has historically avoided the harder financial conversations — sunsetting underperforming programs, building real fundraising capacity, treating the budget as a strategic tool rather than a constraint to manage around.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Leaders finding traction here are diversifying revenue deliberately: corporate and community partnerships, sponsorship models that don't compromise the student experience or add to student loan costs, and closer coordination with institutional advancement on major gifts. A number of leaders specifically asked for practical, peer-sourced frameworks for building fundraising confidence — not fundraising theory, but what has actually worked at institutions of comparable size and structure.

HOW THIS WILL BE ADDRESSED AT THE 2027 STUDENT AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

During a session on budget strategy, revenue and financial leadership, attendees will compare how peers are responding to constrained resources through fundraising, corporate and community partnerships, sponsorships, alternative delivery models and more strategic allocation of existing dollars. Rather than focusing on financial theory, the conversation will surface practical approaches leaders can evaluate against their own institution's size, structure and priorities — and leave with ideas they can realistically pursue when they return to campus.



4. Lead in the AI Era

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS & STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

THE CHALLENGE

AI came up unprompted in a majority of conversations, almost always framed as a gap rather than a strategy. Leaders are aware their divisions will be affected — in staffing models, in student expectations, in day-to-day operations — but few described a clear point of view on how to evaluate tools, govern their use, or separate genuine efficiency gains from vendor hype. This is one of the few areas where leaders told us directly they have no peer network to turn to yet.

THE OPPORTUNITY

A small number of leaders are already experimenting deliberately — piloting AI in narrow, low-risk operational areas, building simple internal governance guidelines before rolling tools out broadly, and using early wins to build staff confidence rather than fear.

HOW THIS WILL BE ADDRESSED AT THE 2027 STUDENT AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

A dedicated AI panel and executive discussion will move beyond the hype to examine how AI is beginning to affect student affairs operations, staffing, decision-making and the student experience. Leaders will hear from institutions already experimenting with AI, then discuss where the technology can create meaningful efficiencies, where human judgment remains essential and what responsible adoption should look like within their own divisions. The goal is for attendees to leave better equipped to develop an AI strategy rather than simply react as the technology evolves.



5. Build the Next Generation of Leadership

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY, SUCCESSION & TALENT DEVELOPMENT

THE CHALLENGE

Two workforce problems came up constantly, and they compound each other. First, a genuine generational shift: leaders described entry- and mid-level burnout, a shrinking pipeline of classically trained candidates coming out of higher-education master's programs, and a workforce that expects different boundaries around hours and communication than the generation now leading it. Second, a leadership pipeline problem: many student affairs officers expect to be out of their current role within five years, yet succession planning is rarely formalized. Leaders new to the AVP or VP level in particular described arriving with no consistent foundation and no roadmap for the jump — "leading from the middle," supervising subject-matter experts in areas they've never worked in, and managing up, often for the first time.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The leaders who feel most prepared are the ones treating succession planning as a standing practice rather than a crisis response — building formal "business continuity" documentation for every function in the division, running regular retreats focused on org structure rather than day-to-day fires, and rethinking hiring models to reflect a smaller pool of traditionally trained candidates. On the workforce side, the common thread is investment in direct, human connection with newer staff — reassurance and mentorship from senior leaders, not just policy.

HOW THIS WILL BE ADDRESSED AT THE 2027 STUDENT AFFAIRS EXECUTIVE SUMMIT

A facilitated session on organizational strategy, succession and talent development will help leaders look beyond today's vacancies and consider the long-term health of their divisions. Attendees will exchange approaches to succession planning, developing emerging leaders, transferring institutional knowledge, retaining a changing workforce and preparing staff for broader responsibilities. The discussion will focus on tangible practices leaders can bring home — from business-continuity planning to intentionally creating cross-functional development opportunities for their staff.





Closing Reflection

The Student Affairs Executive Summit July 20–22, 2027 • The Lodge at Spruce Peak, Stowe, Vermont

These five themes will anchor the 2027 Student Affairs Executive Summit, where a small, curated group of VPs and AVPs will come together to openly discuss the challenges they're navigating — and learn how their peers are responding. If you see your own challenges reflected in this report, we invite you to join the conversation.

2027 Student Affairs Executive Summit

Learn more by visiting

PeakeMediaEvents.com/Student-Affairs-Executive-Summit

or emailing

rachel@peakemedia.com