

NC-SARA Listening Sessions: FINAL Report

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“NC-SARA truly unites the SARA universe, connecting a national network where collaboration and shared decision-making drive meaningful impact. By keeping every stakeholder informed and empowered with transparent, valuable data and communications, NC-SARA ensures that students have uninterrupted access to quality education. Through its training and support for State Portal Entities, NC-SARA cultivates a strong, resilient foundation for SARA—safeguarding its continuity and shaping a future where every regional compact, state, institution, and student thrives together.”

- Peak Seven Consulting’s summary of listening sessions

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Executive Summary

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) engaged Peak Seven Consulting in the fall of 2025 to gather stakeholder feedback that would inform the development of its next strategic plan. NC-SARA is a private nonprofit organization [501(c)(3)] dedicated to expanding students' access to educational opportunities and supporting more efficient, consistent, and effective regulation of distance education programs. The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) streamline regulatory processes to reduce burden on institutions and improve student protections.

In partnership with NC-SARA, four strategic listening sessions were designed to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives on NC-SARA's role in supporting SARA and to ensure all voices were heard. These discussions produced rich qualitative data and allowed us to explore in greater depth the themes revealed in the NCHEMS and NC-SARA surveys conducted earlier in the year. The listening sessions brought together knowledgeable and deeply engaged participants representing four key stakeholder groups:

1. **State Portal Entities (SPEs)** – In-person session in Salt Lake City on September 10, 2025
2. **NC-SARA Staff** – Virtual session held on October 1, 2025
3. **Regional Compact SARA Staff** – Virtual session held on October 2, 2025
4. **NC-SARA Board of Directors** – In-person session in Boston on October 24, 2025

Although each group brings distinct perspectives and responsibilities within the SARA framework, there was strong alignment regarding NC-SARA's most [significant strengths](#), its overall impact, and the key [challenges and risks](#) facing the organization in a rapidly evolving environment. These findings—along with recommended mitigation strategies—are detailed in this report. Additional supporting data collected during the listening sessions is included in its raw form in the appendix.

The Board session focused specifically on identifying its top three priorities for the organization. These priorities closely mirror the challenges and risks identified across all stakeholder groups:

1. **Mission and Core Work**
There is a need to clearly identify and articulate NC-SARA's mission and core work. Survey results should be used to define and validate the organization's primary purpose, building on the original mission as a springboard. Strengthening mission clarity also requires improved board onboarding—ensuring new board members understand the agreement, NC-SARA's role, and expected board practices ("board hygiene"). Clear, consistent orientation will help maintain alignment around the organization's foundational purpose.
2. **Clarity of Roles**
Uncertainty persists regarding the respective roles of NC-SARA, the board, and staff, particularly around the meaning and scope of "the agreement." This ambiguity increases the risk of damaging future perceptions, such as states feeling disempowered, concerns that NC-SARA does not care about quality, or views that the organization is becoming a

centralized, unaccountable system. Without role clarity, states may consider exiting to form alternatives, and misperceptions or mission creep could take hold. The board's role in listening to stakeholder feedback must be explicit and reinforced to ensure alignment and trust across the system.

3. **Staffing**

Staffing capacity present another area of risk. Staff are responsible for working closely with SPEs and other key partners, and gaps or ambiguities in staffing structure, responsibilities, or workload could undermine consistency and effectiveness. Ensuring the right staffing model is in place—and that staff roles are clear and well-supported—is essential for the system to function cohesively.

The insights gathered through the surveys and listening sessions provide a strong foundation for NC-SARA's strategic planning process. As NC-SARA moves into the drafting phase of its strategic plan, these findings offer a roadmap for strengthening mission clarity, refining roles, and ensuring adequate staffing to support the organization's future growth. With continued commitment to transparency, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement, NC-SARA is well positioned to build a strategic plan that meets the needs of staff, states, regional compacts, institutions, the board, and—most importantly—students.

Key Findings

We met with four of NC-SARAs stakeholder groups (SPEs, NC-SARA Staff, Regional Compact Staff, and NC-SARA Board of Directors) to provide stakeholders an opportunity to voice and have their feedback heard regarding NC-SARA's role in the SARA universe. While each stakeholder group had unique points of view based on their specific SARA involvement, they agreed on a variety of the topics discussed.

Below is a summary of what we learned.

NC-SARA Strengths and Impact

We asked all participants to identify ONE thing that exemplifies NC-SARA's strength and value to stakeholders. From over 70 responses, we found the following to be the most frequently mentioned attributes. We then grouped them into 10 key themes:

Theme 1: Delivery of NC-SARA's Mission and Core Work

All stakeholder groups agreed that NC-SARA provides effective coordination and delivery of NC-SARA's mission and core work:

- To provide broad access to postsecondary education opportunities to students across the country;
- To increase the quality and value of higher learning credentials earned via distance education; and
- To assure students are well served in a rapidly changing education landscape.

We heard opportunities exist to refine the mission and improve alignment with the core work, reduce mission creep and confusion around roles and responsibilities. Leveraging NCHEMS and NC-SARA survey results, and the qualitative data gathered from the listening sessions can help with this.

Theme 2: Building Strong Relationships

Relationship building, community building, and stakeholder relationships were all recognized as NC-SARA's strengths. All stakeholder groups expressed that relationships are at the core of NC-SARA's success. NC-SARA brings states, territories, and institutions together.

Theme 3: Fostering Collaboration

All stakeholder groups agree 'collaboration' is one of NC-SARA's key strengths. SPEs were particularly appreciative of the collaboration opportunities that NC-SARA consistently provides. Collaboration vehicles highlighted include conferences, training sessions, working groups, organizing committees, networking opportunities, and requests for input on initiatives.

Theme 4: Providing Transparent, Consensus-based Decision-making

From the Board, we heard that transparent, consensus-based, bottom-up decision-making is highly valued and is considered a NC-SARA strength. The organization holds stakeholder input and shared ownership in remarkably high regard.

Theme 5: Collecting and Reporting of Robust Data

The Regional Compact participants identified data (collection, reporting, and sharing via a dashboard), as one of the most valued deliverables from NC-SARA. Data reporting enhances transparency and informs decision-making.

Theme 6: Presenting a Responsive Organizational Culture

A noteworthy strength identified by the stakeholders was NC-SARA staff's transparent, kind, responsive, and solution-oriented approach in every interaction.

Theme 7: Sharing of Transparent Communication

Clear, consistent, and transparent communication from NC-SARA continues to keep all stakeholders informed, connected, and engaged. It is an important asset, especially as changes in the SARA universe continue to occur at a rapid pace.

Theme 8: Engaging in Continuous Policy Improvement

Stakeholders identified policy improvement as necessity, both a strength, and an area where there are opportunities for refinement to remain effective.

Theme 9: Offering High-value, Low-cost and Time-saving Participation

Stakeholders agreed that NC-SARA provides efficient, high-impact services with less red tape, and low-cost participation. Institutions are facing reduced budgets, and disruptions that could impact their ability to participate in SARA in the future. As such, there are opportunities for NC-SARA to engage with and support stakeholder groups to make sure the participation in SARA continues to be accessible to all institutions that qualify.

Theme 10: Supporting Student Access, and Ensuring Consumer Protection

Stakeholders agree there is a strong focus on consumer protection and student access which is consistent with NC-SARA's mission.

NC-SARA Risks and Challenges

During our discussions with the stakeholder groups, we also sought to further explore risks and challenges facing NC-SARA in the next four years to help inform the development of the strategic plan.

Below are the key categories of risks/challenges discussed along with some initial ideas from the stakeholders to address the issues.

Risk 1: Mission, Role, and Governance Clarity

Challenges/risks: There is ambiguity around NC-SARA's role, and authority to state sovereignty. Misperceptions about SARA and its implications, accountability, unclear structures, and tension between state autonomy and centralized oversight pose risks.

Initial ideas to address:

- Reaffirm and refine NC-SARA's mission to avoid misalignment with core work and "mission creep."
 - Revisit original mission statement as springboard.
 - Leverage the NCHEMS and NC-SARA survey results (focused on federal policy, state politics, mission creep, AI, and staffing), and the qualitative data gathered from the listening sessions to help inform the mission, role, and governance clarifying process
 - Need to balance "*being too centralized yet not centralized enough.*"
- Confirm and communicate the respective purpose, roles and responsibilities of NC-SARA, states, compacts, and institutions
- Continue to clarify and communicate the legal foundation of SARA and the unified agreement to stakeholders
- Think long-term and be the unifier to a common goal
- Be open to change and new ways of thinking
- Ease tensions (i.e. SARA consistency and state autonomy)
- Make it clear to institutions what states and regional compacts do vs. what NC-SARA does
- Continue to reinforce community-building and collaboration with all stakeholders
- Continue to advocate for SARA

"NC-SARA, board, staff: What is the agreement? What does it mean?"

Risk 2: Resource Constraints

Challenges/risks: State Portal Entities (SPEs) and NC-SARA staff report being stretched thin, struggling to manage known (and at times unknown and new) responsibilities with limited resources. Staff are filling gaps they are not intended to fill. SPE fatigue, staff compensation, internal communication gaps, and overall resource allocation pose risks to operational and resource capacity.

Initial ideas to address:

- For NC-SARA staff
 - Clarify roles, compensation, and overtime expectations for NC-SARA staff to ensure they have the necessary support and resources to carry out their roles
 - Identify project prioritization criteria
 - Establish process for workload alignment
 - Increase resources/support where possible
 - Continue to streamline and align processes to increase operational effectiveness
 - Strengthen leadership capabilities across the organization

- For SPEs:
 - Improve usability of NC-SARA website and applications
 - Provide more consistent instructions and standards
 - Provide support and resources for professional licensure disclosures
 - Increase institutional and state employee awareness of SARA
 - Address the lack of timely composite scores (new policy effective November 1, 2025 addresses this)
 - Mitigate resource constraints
 - Review impact of variation in how SPEs are participating in state policy decision-making
 - Find ways to lighten the load for SPEs and states

“SPEs are stretched thin.”

*“There needs to be more bringing together of people and teams.
Here the things we’re going to accomplish, here’s how and when we’re going
to do it and let’s set deadlines to all move in the same direction.”*

Risk 3: Policy Clarity, Consistency, and Compliance

Challenges/risks: Institutions and states seek clearer, more consistent guidance on compliance expectations, and complaint processes. “Gray areas,” inconsistent enforcement, and perceptions of slow or circular policy processes pose risks.

Initial ideas to address:

- Promote transparent, uniform application of SARA policy across states and compacts
- Streamline policy modification cycles to reduce time commitment
- Provide clearer guidance and understanding of institutional compliance, expectations and SARA policy
- Continue to reduce interpretation differences through training and communication channels
- Provide consistent enforcement and clearer standards regarding institutional closures and complaints

“There is all this pressure building up from state laws and federal laws and outside watch groups.”

Risk 4: Strategic Alignment and Organizational Direction

Challenges/risks: Shifting priorities and reactive decision-making create confusion, dilute focus, and increase the risk of leaving initiatives unfinished.

Initial ideas to address:

- As already mentioned, leverage the NCHEMS and NC-SARA survey results (focused on federal policy, state politics, mission creep, AI, and staffing), and the qualitative data gathered from the listening sessions to help inform the development of the strategic plan
- Craft and deploy a well-defined onboarding process for new board members (board hygiene)

“A lot of times in the SARA universe we hear the phrase, we are building the plane as we are flying it.”

Risk 5: Federal, and External Environment Pressures

Challenges/risks: The SARA agreement and NC-SARA’s stability and policies are vulnerable to changes in federal regulation, political shifts, and accreditation uncertainty. Any loss of reciprocity weakens compliance, or instability in balance between the federal government, states, and institutions pose risks.

Initial ideas to address:

- Gather knowledge (and possible influence) of federal framework changes
- Keep focus on strong consumer protections
- Proactively adapt to new federal and AI-related rules
- Contribute more solidly in the Neg Reg process

“There is all this pressure building up from state laws and federal laws and outside watch groups.”

Risk 6: Data, Technology, and Process Infrastructure

Challenges/risks: Multiple disconnected systems, fragmented workflows, and website usability issues hinder efficiency. The loss of institutional memory due to time and turnover pose risks.

Initial ideas to address:

- Integrate and modernize web site, applications and portals
- Improve accessibility, consistency, and user-friendliness of tools
- Codify internal processes to preserve institutional knowledge

“Sometimes I think there are things I deal with that should maybe go to a different group.”

Risk 7: Frequency of Communication

Challenges/risks: Determining the most effective blend of reach, frequency, and timeliness of communications for each stakeholder group is a challenge. Internal silos, uneven workload distribution, and unclear role alignment limit collaboration and pose risks.

Initial ideas to address:

- Continue to deliver NC-SARA’s culture of transparency, empathy, and open communication which are highly valued and visible across the stakeholder groups
- Continue to use a communication plan to drive inclusive, timely, accurate and transparent communication (see appendix page, [NC-SARA Staff-Specific Discussions – Virtual Session](#) for targeted stakeholder communication needs)

“Be timely with communication.”

Additional NC-SARA Risks and Challenges by Stakeholder Group

To deepen our understanding of risks and challenges, we engaged SPEs, NC-SARA staff, and the Regional Compacts in an activity where participants chose an item (in person) or an emoji (virtual sessions) that symbolized the challenges NC-SARA is facing. They were asked to answer these questions about each item/emoji.

- *What is the item/emoji and what specific challenges does it symbolize?*
- *If unaddressed, how might these challenges impact NC-SARA's mission in the short-term or long-term?*
- *What strategies could NC-SARA adopt to mitigate these challenges and turn them into an opportunity for strategic growth?*

Here is what we learned, grouped by stakeholders and the 7 risks/challenge categories discussed in the previous section.

SPEs shared the following during our live session:

Item/emoji challenge	Impact on mission	Mitigation strategy
Risk 1: Mission, Role, and Governance Clarity		
Tape: <i>Transparency</i>	Lose support of outside contingency, loss of trust	Open communication, invite people to learn
Tape: <i>Sticky issue</i>	Loss of state membership.	
Building blocks: <i>Need to get the foundation right</i>	There will be no progress or direction without taking care of the basics: states, students, institutions.	Take care of our people, offer support often, lots of communication and involvement, don't assume.
Slinky: <i>Short lived solutions</i>	We will become unsustainable if we don't think long term.	Make sure the way we address challenges is sustainable - don't just jump on the bandwagon.
Tape: <i>Getting stuck</i>	Don't be afraid of getting stuck.	Be the unifier to facilitate a common goal.
Padlock: <i>Old ways of thinking</i>	Be open to change and not locked in old ways of thinking.	

Ruler: <i>Measuring outcomes and success</i>	Short-term: Lack of information available, Long-term: Detracts from SARA's credibility as a whole	Continue utilizing data, build out available data, and focus on transparency.
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Risk 2: Resource Constraints

Rubber band: <i>SPEs are stretched thin</i>	Short term: Lack of optional participation Long-term: Burn out	More SPE support, finding ways to lighten the load for states.
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Risk 3: Policy Clarity, Consistency, and Compliance

Slinky: <i>Refusal to commit</i>	Harm reciprocity by inconsistency in application of SARA policies.	Take responsibility for making choices and enforcing standards. We don't blame them for being skittish after the Lori Wellans incident, but SARA needs leadership, just negotiate it with the compacts.
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Puzzle Pieces: <i>Determining varying policies within states</i>	NC-SARA could act without seeing the whole picture. Stymied progress.	Assemble pieces and get the big picture.
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Red tape: <i>Uncertainty - rolling dice on higher education policies</i>	Budgets may not have funds to join SARA. Political climate can change.	Reduce fees and ensure policies are clear to institutions. Have competent legal counsel.
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Ruler: <i>Measurements different requirements</i>	Different institutions treated differently, equity, accessibility, institutional funding	Streamline policies.
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Risk 4: Strategic Alignment and Organizational Direction

Monkey: <i>Change/disruption is constant</i>	Not addressing the monkey can lead to reoccurrence of issues.
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Time: <i>Life moves fast; we struggle to keep up</i>	Problems don't get better with time. Identify the issue and get in front of the issue.
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Band-Aid: <i>Solutions are at times only a Band-Aid</i>	Quick fixes are not always a long-term solution. Second and third order effects.
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Risk 5: Federal, AI and External Environment Pressures

Uno Card: <i>The reversal of federal policies</i>	Short-term: Confusion of member institutions. Lack of up-to-date guidance. Long-term: Impact on number of state and institutional members	(Continue to) Stay on top of changes and provide reformational resources and guidance.
Ruler: <i>Federal regulations</i>	Reciprocity agreement could end NC-SARA/SARA.	Build relationships with lobbyists, attorney generals, states.
Timer: <i>FRCS / Financial stability</i>	More institutions withdraw from SARA. More closures and mergers.	Coherent strategies to evaluate financial stability and establish processes to protect students/resource list to assist with acceptable auditors.
Orange ball: <i>Changing federal dynamics</i>	Destruction of SARA.	To be included more solidly in the Neg Reg process.
Uno Reverse Card: <i>SARA critics talking to legislators and reversing our program</i>	Reciprocity falls apart.	Advocate for strengths of SARA.
Pink Ghost: <i>Missing students/ ghost students</i>	Lose SARA members and participating institutions and not fulfill mission.	
Monkey: <i>Involvement in policy at federal level - it is our circus and should be our monkeys</i>		Being aware and engaging professionals to promote reciprocity
Band-Aid: <i>We should not put Band-Aids over bullet holes.</i>	If we don't address issues when they arise, they will get worse. We should do a better job on drilling down on the places we don't agree on rather than burying them.	Stop avoiding the hard conversations.
Ruler: <i>Measured approach to myriad challenges</i>	We might "lose our way."	Limiting or reducing frequency of PMP process.
Ruler: <i>Bad actors (institutions) not measuring up to standards and giving SARA a bad reputation</i>		PMP – finding ways to improve consumer protection through SARA to keep bad actors out when they look OK on paper

Risk 6: Data, Technology, and Process Infrastructure

No feedback from SPEs

Risk 7: Frequency of Communication

Hourglass: *Timeliness*

Don't take forever.

Be timely with information.

NC-SARA Staff shared the following during our virtual session:

Item/emoji challenge	Impact on mission	Mitigation strategy
Risk 1: Mission, Role, and Governance Clarity		
No responses		
Risk 2: Resource Constraints		
Glue: <i>As small as this organization is we end up getting siloed into our various teams and work that we do...</i>	...but there isn't enough opportunity to come together and understand the work that we all are doing.	There needs to be more bringing together of people and teams. Here are the things we're going to accomplish, here's how and when we're going to do it and let's set deadlines to all move in the same direction.
A box: <i>We have a lot on instances where we are bringing new furniture into the room, but we don't clean out the old stuff</i>	We are throwing in the quick fixes, but we aren't cleaning out the old stuff, and the room is getting cluttered.	We have these projects that have to get done but is there a way to build expectations to say "yes, but not yet." I don't know the best answer for that.
This Way That Way Sign: <i>We're still a young organization but we are evolving with our roles and responsibilities within staff members...</i>	...and sometimes responsibilities move between staff members, but it is not always clearly communicated.	I just think better clarity of who does what. Who do I go to with a problem? Even in [our team] we are faced with questions that aren't in our wheelhouse. Sometimes I think there are things I deal with that should maybe go to a different group.
Risk 3: Policy Clarity, Consistency, and Compliance		
No responses		
Risk 4: Strategic Alignment and Organizational Direction		
Maze: <i>Our direction changes course too frequently</i>	Sometimes we are moved to action by the loudest voice that may not be reflective of the larger SARA community. We move sometimes by peoples wishes and sometimes their questions that are not necessarily evidence based. Because of that if you start on something, sometimes it's hard to finish.	I am optimistic that the strategic plan will give us direction. That we are focused and going to be super thoughtful and that we will remain steadfast with our strategic plan. Things will change and you have to ebb and flow, but that should be fewer and not all the time. I hope we are deliberate and focused on what we set out to do. I hope we

The direction is changing without clarity as to why we are moving in that way.

don't ebb and flow with emotions.

Band Aid: *A lot of times in the SARA universe we hear the phrase, we are building the plane as we are flying it*

SARA launched far more quickly than people thought and faster than all partnering organizations were prepared for. We try to push forward, and the band aid starts popping off.

We got to push pause and look how to correct the deeper issue.

Risk 5: Federal, AI and External Environment Pressures

Puzzle Piece: *Current political landscape*

States right now, from what I'm seeing, are being very responsive to the whims of this administration. If the administration decides they don't like what a particular mayor or governor is doing. Within this, institutions get lost in how they are supposed to serve their students. I get concerned about the long-term stability of institutions, the student retention, whether they are domestic, or international students. I don't know where NC-SARA is located in all of that. I don't know if what we are providing is seen as a return in this current landscape. Will students still be finding institutions useful and will institutions then still see NC-SARA as useful?

Fire hydrant: *A representation of the things, we have to respond to at the federal level*

The SARA agreement and policy that are in place for compliance of the institutions that participate were all based on things that the federal government already required of institutions. So, the FRC scores for financial reliability,

I really don't see any strategies. I think that we can advocate, but things could happen on the whim of the administration that we don't have a lot of control over, but we rely on.

for accreditation - there's some questioning of what's going to happen with accreditation. We are more at risk of having to respond to things that we can't see coming down the road, and the fact that we relied on those to underpin our work instead of creating new requirements now feels a little risky, because we don't know what is going to happen to those things. We are standing on shakier ground than we have in the past.

Risk 6: Data, Technology, and Process Infrastructure

This Way That Way Sign:

We're still a young organization but we are evolving with our roles and responsibilities within staff members...

...and sometimes responsibilities move between staff members, but it is not always clearly communicated.

I just think better clarity of who does what. Who do I go to with a problem? Even in [our team] we are faced with questions that aren't in our wheelhouse. Sometimes I think there are things I deal with that should maybe go to a different group.

Risk 7: Frequency of Communication

No response

Regional Compact participants shared the following during our virtual session:

Item/emoji challenge	Impact on mission	Mitigation strategy
Risk 1: Mission, Role, and Governance Clarity		
<p>This Way This Way Sign: <i>Finding agreement is messy</i></p>	<p>Their (NC-SARA) role is to convene and have us as the states discuss and try to find a conclusion. How can we get to some level of agreement without going to NC-SARA to dictate how we are supposed to interpret policy. It's going to be messy I think unfortunately.</p>	<p>NC-SARA's role is to convene the states so we can discuss issues and work toward a resolution. The challenge is finding agreement among us without relying on NC-SARA to dictate how policy should be interpreted. It may be a messy process, unfortunately.</p>
<p>Puzzle Pieces: <i>Roles and responsibilities</i></p>	<p>Who's in charge of that and making sure that we are consistent and clear. Potentially different interpretations and applications of policy.</p>	<p>The way NC-SARA is set up, I don't feel like that is something NC-SARA is solely supposed to fix. Maybe it's for us to collaboratively, we in the compacts and with NC-SARA need to address and figure out. As agreements are maturing, policy is getting modified, agreement in policy application is a big challenge for SARA, not necessarily NC-SARA.</p>
<p>This Way This Way Sign: <i>Misunderstanding intended outcome of SARA</i></p>	<p>There is sometimes the misunderstanding from outside entities of what the intended outcome of SARA is. I think we need to be unified in the intent of the agreement, what is reasonable to expect from the agreement, what we can and cannot do, is it reasonable for NC-SARA to be the final word? What is SARA supposed to look like? We need to be telling the same story of what NC-SARA does.</p>	<p>External entities sometimes misunderstand SARA's intended outcomes. To address this, we need a shared and consistent understanding of the agreement: its purpose, its reasonable expectations, its limitations, and the extent to which NC-SARA should serve as the final authority. Alignment on this narrative is critical to ensure we present a unified message about what SARA and NC-SARA do.</p>

Puzzle Pieces: *Voluntary Agreement between states and we have almost completed the puzzle*

The only state we still need is California, but then might we start to face the potential issue of a completionist mentality.

Might the organization start to look at how the organization works in order to get there and may it start adjusting standards just to get there, just to appease states rather than sticking to your standards.
I don't worry about that issue too much, but it is something to be weary of.

Risk 2: Resource Constraints

No responses

Risk 3: Policy Clarity, Consistency, and Compliance

Turtle: *External perceptions at how slow the policy modification process is and changing policy in impactful ways...*

...whether or not that is a true fact is one thing, but the perception from some of the outside stakeholders is that we are slow to change and adopt policies that protect students.

Better storytelling and better communications with stakeholders. Being better at shaping your communications and tailoring them to the stakeholder groups you are in conversation with rather than a blanket E-blast that goes out to everybody.

This Way This Way Sign: *Before policy modification process, although I still think it happens, policy is circular and it still leaves room for interpretation rather than being so clear that you just follow it.*

This leads to different compacts interpreting it differently which leads to a lack of consistency in application across the nation. We need to get over the hurdle of one policy being interpreted different ways.

I don't know if that is up to NC-SARA to fix. Is it safe to say that people look to them for the answer, when we look for guidance for the more correct interpretation of policy, how do they position themselves to be the resolution to the issue.

Risk 4: Strategic Alignment and Organizational Direction

No responses

Risk 5: Federal, AI and External Environment Pressures

Fire hydrant: *Fire hydrants are built on pressure, and I think NC-SARA is facing a lot of pressure*

There is all this pressure building up from state laws and federal laws and outside watch groups. I think we try with our policy modification process to address all of it at once to where it pops the lid off the fire hydrant without giving it enough time to see

I think it's good to pause and reflect to see how it is all going to work out.

how it's all going to work. We have had policy modification over the last three years, and I don't think we have given it the time to see how it is going to play out.

Risk 6: Data, Technology, and Process Infrastructure

No responses

Risk 7: Frequency of Communication

No responses

Additional Feedback Provided from Regional Compact Staff: mind map



NC-SARA Future Impact

We asked the participants at the end of each listening session to describe a future where NC-SARA has made a **meaningful impact, creating great value** in a shifting higher education environment. They were encouraged to think about what impact/value would be most important to them and what that might look like?

These are their 6-word stories about NC-SARA's future impact grouped by key themes.

1. Access to Education & Student Opportunity

- Provide the permission to access education.
- Access created for brighter days ahead.
- SARA brings students opportunities to achieve success.
- Increased access to attainable degree programs.
- Students granted access to achieve success.
- Education access. Student support. Goal achievement.
- Access value sharing opportunities savings leverage.
- Leverage savings value opportunities sharing access.
- Protected student access. Shared among states.
- States offer college students choice anywhere.
- Student centered. State driven. Strong partnership.
- Increasing access, improving outcomes, student centered.
- State Directed, Mission Focused, Student Centered.

2. Reciprocity, Value, and Savings

- Opportunities leverage savings reciprocity sharing value.

3. Consumer & Student Protection

- True and equitable consumer protection for all!
- Independent systems of consumer protection standards.
- Steadfast protection, education access, student choice.
- Protected student access. Shared among states.

4. Mission, Identity & Purpose of SARA

- State Directed, Mission Focused, Student Centered.
- SARA brings students opportunities to achieve success.
- Advocate for military connected students.
- Impactful coordinated connection creates great success.
- Shared among states.

- Effectively coordinates implementation of SARA.
- Coordinates structure. Listens. Presents unified message.
- Increasing access, improving outcomes, student centered.
- Connecting states, enhancing education, and empowering institutions.
- Student centered. State driven. Strong partnership.
- Advocate for military connected students.
- Stay in the NC-SARA.

Comparing Survey Data with Listening Session Results

During the listening sessions, we were able to take a deeper look at the issues and themes identified in the NCHEMS and NC-SARA survey results. We found strong areas of alignment, including stakeholders' confidence in NC-SARA's core work, their appreciation for the engaged and responsive staff, and their view that NC-SARA effectively keeps stakeholders informed. There was also broad support for strategic focus areas such as federal policy engagement, educational resources, and technology infrastructure.

A notable difference between the survey and the listening sessions was the emphasis on relationship-building and collaboration as core strengths of NC-SARA. Stakeholders clearly value the community NC-SARA has helped cultivate—an element that may be the “special sauce” essential to the success of the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA).

Both the survey and listening sessions identified anticipated challenges and risks related to federal policy shifts and the resource limitations faced by State Portal Entities (SPEs). Additional shared areas of concern included technology priorities, ongoing SARA policy work, and communications.

Next Steps/Actionable Recommendations

According to NC-SARA's *Developing the Strategic Plan* document, the next step in the strategic planning process is to begin drafting the plan. An overview of sessions and survey will be presented to the Board in February 2026, with the goal of launching the final strategic plan in 2027.

With the extensive data gathered through the survey and listening sessions, the drafting phase is now well-equipped with meaningful feedback and insights from all stakeholder groups.

We recommend beginning the drafting process by reviewing the seven [challenges/risks](#) to NC-SARA outlined in this report. These issues were identified by stakeholders during the listening sessions and include the three top concerns highlighted by the Board:

1. articulating NC-SARA's mission and core work,
2. clarifying roles and responsibilities, and
3. addressing staffing needs.

Appendix

Board-Specific Discussions – Live Session

Question 1: What one thing do you think others (states, institutions, or students) most value about NC-SARA?

1. Quality & Standards for Online Learning

- Setting parameters for what quality post-secondary, online learning looks like
- Robust data
- Responsiveness
- Timeliness

2. Policy Development, Change & Transparency

- Policy modification
- Transparency regarding policy modification
- Support for policy modification process

3. Student Experience & Protection

- Students (when they know about it) complaint process
- Ease of access to education options

4. Collaboration, Coordination & Cohesion

- Collaboration
- Coordination of cohesion
- Cohesive – connects regions

5. Communication & Public Understanding

- It is a focus point for the public
- Good communication they put out to tell people what we do

6. Efficiency & Value

- Cost savings
- Time-savings

Question 2: As Board members, with the magic wand in hand, which future-forward strategies should NC-SARA put in place to mitigate the top risks and challenges you identified in the next four years?

Strategy 1: Mission and Core Work

There is a need to clearly identify and articulate NC-SARA's mission and core work. Survey results should be used to define and validate the organization's primary purpose, building on the original mission as a springboard. Strengthening mission clarity also requires improved board onboarding—ensuring new board members understand the agreement, NC-SARA's role, and expected board practices ("board hygiene"). Clear, consistent orientation will help maintain alignment around the organization's foundational purpose.

Strategy 2: Clarity of Roles

Uncertainty persists regarding the respective roles of NC-SARA, the board, and staff, particularly around the meaning and scope of "the agreement." This ambiguity increases the risk of damaging future perceptions, such as states feeling disempowered, concerns that NC-SARA does not care about quality, or views that the organization is becoming a centralized, unaccountable system. Without role clarity, states may consider exiting to form alternatives, and misperceptions or mission creep could take hold. The board's role in listening to stakeholder feedback must be explicit and reinforced to ensure alignment and trust across the system.

Strategy 3: Staffing

Staffing capacity present another area of risk. Staff are responsible for working closely with SPEs and other key partners, and gaps or ambiguities in staffing structure, responsibilities, or workload could undermine consistency and effectiveness. Ensuring the right staffing model is in place—and that staff roles are clear and well-supported—is essential for the system to function cohesively.

NC-SARA Staff-Specific Discussions – Virtual Session

Question 1: We asked, “For these five stakeholders (institutions, states/DC/territories, regional SARA staff/PMP, higher education organizations, and students), what are the most important goals and concerns as it related to SARA?”

Stakeholders	For these stakeholders, what are the most important goals and concerns as it relates to SARA?	To address these goal and concerns. how should NC-SARA best engage with this audience?
Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordability, help understand what SARA gives them -- value (out of state learning placements without seeking authorization), HIGH staff turnover (huge, re renewals, process learning, reminders about renewals go to people who left, uninterrupted), 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Without creating more work... policy? Leveraging opportunities where institutions are present (conferences), 1:1 talking time, make ourselves more accessible, listen to concerns, personal touch, market us, connections/relational, recruitment, training, messaging, workshop, legislature – getting back to our roots – VALUE of SARA, new to institutions don’t understand purpose and value prop, “who is SARA and why does she need my data”, last 1.5 yrs we provided state grants which served us well (7500) use to bring institutions together – state meetings! We’re national so they put on at tables in the front! Solve their problems to help them be in compliance! Keep it real, what’s in it for me. SPEs have inconsistent data which affects institutions...
States, District of Columbia and Territories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of resources/people and it’s getting worse, work with them to set policy, turnover in state representation, don’t have people who understand core of SARA, as policy evolves how much is NC-SARA engaging with states? policy modification process is KEY and a drain --- added layer of work on top of what SARA is (the management of the agreement), some states are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing resources, empower states, make sure they have the information they need, checklists and templates for guidance, share experiences with other states, what does another year mean to people who are already depleted (support them), more visibility to SARA staying together

	<p>still dissenting (CA), WA is considering a different agreement, risk to agreement staying together</p>	
<p>Regional SARA staff PMP</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging to know what your role is and where you fit, regional staff is pseudo staff of NC-SARA so helping define roles is KEY, capacity struggles have increased while communication has decreased among those teams, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarity, communication, engagement
<p>Higher education organizations (accreditors, think tanks, researchers, consumer protection, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Century Foundation – strengthening consumer protection by weakening SARA (audio), higher education licensure pros (HELP) trying to get business (issue of professional licensure), they’re friends but have their own take and agenda – we try to stay down the middle (we don’t push back or step in all the time), proliferation of these some called “SARA experts”, some people see business opportunity and NC-SARA is still in the middle but not getting in the mud, SAN (state authorization network, nested in WICHE (and funds WICHE), making money talking about SARA) – push/pull 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We ensure accuracy Confusion with SAN vs NC-SARA (friends... yet)
<p>Students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some students contact NC-SARA re accrediting body and afraid lose credits, see NC-SARA as important, may feel like their institutions are not being as transparent as they should be, check on internships being legitimate, Students and parents are confused about what NC-SARA provides think it’s a personal thing... not an institutional thing, my institutions sometimes tell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short video on web site because they can’t read it all – easy to get into weeds, keep it topical for them, institutions don’t have the staff to help sometimes so NC-SARA can help (checklists?), CA hanging out there by itself – NC-SARA runs interference – who do you streamline this without overwhelming

	<p>students they can't enroll or participate in something because of SARA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency has gotten better on website – posting provisional status of institutions and complaints etc. – continue progress • What's the role, clear up confusion at institutional level
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Question 2. Participants were given different topics and asked to select which three they would choose to send support to.

(At the outset, we provided the following as options to consider: Leadership transparency, consultation regarding initiatives, support for regional staff, engagement practices, administrative burden, communications, role alignment, workload/capacity, administrative committee support).

They added the following areas/issues and voted on their top 3. These are the results:

- Workload: 11 votes
- Compensation: 10 votes
- Decision Making Authority: 6 votes
- Cross Team Communication: 6 votes
- Internal Policies: 5 votes
- Leadership Practices: 5 votes
- Internal Operations: 4 votes
- Morale: 3 votes
- Health and Wellbeing: 3 votes
- Professional Development: 1 vote
- Technological Improvements: No votes

Question 3. At the end of the session, we asked NC-SARA Staff, “What topics are most important to you? What feedback do you still want to share?”

Here is what they said:

- More sessions like this
- Increased feedback (constructive and feedback)
- Leadership reorganization – having a third VP for operations or federal issues
- Internal operation
- At least an annual staff retreat to build connections as a team
- Mutual respect from the top down
- The last time the organization did this six years ago, the strategic plan was not very good. My council is to really help create buckets that make sense.
- Clear job descriptions with proper compensation. Fairness in being handed extra work.
- Evaluating staff roles and creating systems and structure, and ways to advance equitably.
- I think it would be helpful to have project-based internal communication. Internal project focused on communication and alignment.

- Idea generator where SPEs can share their feedback with us so we can come together as a team to tackle certain projects each year. Then we can give the information of “in the coming year this is the projects we are going to work on.” Then maybe if they can drop their ideas somewhere that other SPEs can see it and second it.
- Being treated fairly and not by position
- Not being handed random job duties that others don’t want to do
- Who really makes decisions

This is a transcript of the discussion that followed the question above about what topics are important.

*We need to know what some of the priorities are and deadlines. **We may make something a priority that is in conflict with other units.** So, we need some streamlining of what the workload is for other units and how we can streamline it. **I want to make sure we are fair to our coworkers and not contributing to imbalances.***

*If we’re not clear about who is doing what, then you can’t help other people when they need it, you can’t protect their work. I want IT to stick around. **If we don’t know exactly who is making the decision, then people get pulled in different directions and workload gets off balance. There’s been a lot of change in duties, but we need to know who is doing what and who is in charge of doing what.***

*Part of the beauty and challenge of the place the organization is in, in the past two years there has been an explosion of change. **One of the main issues is that we need a strategy for cross team communication and collaboration. We have grown a lot, so we need time in person to be able to have conversations. Partially remote, partially in person sometimes removes those important conversations.***

*I think the workload issue is a workload issue. When we try to address that issue, it creates work temporarily. **Slowing down on the things that are reactive and cutting the fat temporarily, to give us the time to deal with things.** Sometimes we are in the mindset of just get it done, rather than pairing down what we are doing so there is room to be strategic. If we can find a way to slow down and identify what we can cut right away, then start looking at workload.*

How do we access staff workload and capacity in NC-SARA? And how do we realign roles to support that?** I agree with slowing down and pressing pause. I think we just keep slapping on the Band-Aids and are not getting to the root of the issue. **This organization has tripled in terms of staff in a short amount of time. I think we need space to slow down and access what needs to change.

***From a supervisor's perspective, it is not clear what is compensation increase worthy.** Sometimes staff are taking on more responsibility, and normally that would earn greater compensation. As a supervisor, can I recommend that and is it noticed? There’s no clear guidance on this. No clear steps of increase.*

*There’s no “if I do this thing or am here for this amount of time, then I can expect this,” on compensation. **We need more transparent and formal compensation policy.***

SPE-Specific Discussions – Live Session

Question 1: In small table groups, we asked the SPEs to complete an empathy map focused on NC-SARA’s stakeholders. We asked, “For these stakeholders, what are the most important goals and concerns as it related to SARA?”

STUDENTS	
<p>Think and Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown • Confused • They want to pursue higher education to improve their lives • They want to obtain necessary credentials for employment • Lack of control / fear if NC-SARA goes away 	<p>See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • Opportunity • Lots of options • Lots of info
<p>Say and Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What does NC-SARA do for me?” • Enroll at institutions • Seek help when needed 	<p>Hear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumer Protection • Professional licensure disclosures • Competitive advantage • Something vague about NC-SARA • Rumbling of closure of the school or other • Complaints / expression of peril
<p>Pain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not accomplishing their goal if this does not work out • Information does not appear student-friendly (geared more toward institutions) 	<p>Gain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve resolution to problems • Access across borders • Opportunity to choose programs • Increase in program quality
<p>How this should inform NC-SARA’s strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate clearly with students and institutions • Show how NC-SARA supports SPE work with students and schools • Make sure student success stories are communicated 	

INSTITUTIONS	
<p>Think and Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrations with applications and renewal documents 	<p>See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National instability in the higher education environment
<p>Say and Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (No explicit entries listed) 	<p>Hear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting due to lack of resources • Regulation • Resources • Money • Variety of rules • Confusion • Being behind “DA Bronc” or ahead of the curve
<p>Pain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources • Regulation • Time required for verification • Complexity and inconsistency in rules 	<p>Gain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory efficiency • More student access • Access to more students • Streamlined processes • Stronger community
<p>How this should inform NC-SARA’s strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly communicate the benefits and value of NC-SARA • Clearly communicate rights and responsibilities • Communicate: past, present, and future direction 	

STATES, DC, TERRITORIES	
<p>Think and Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy • Frustrated • Thankful • Confusion with changes • Feeling stretched thin with institutional concerns 	<p>See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A constant presence • Concerted efforts to collaborate and advise
<p>Say and Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SERVICE • Promote SARA • Compilation of information • Training • Process applications • Collaborative conversations, though outcomes vary 	<p>Hear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expansion of access / recent or pending federal requirements • Frustration about tasks taken on by NC-SARA • Rumors about federal triangle • Policy modification triangle • State fees
<p>Pain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMP • Capacity issues • Workload • Policy modification triangle • State fees collected 	<p>Gain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased recognition • Protecting students • Cost savings for institutions, students, and possibly states
<p>How this should inform NC-SARA's strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain strong two-way communication • Provide more comprehensive information to institutions to lessen the burden on states 	

REGIONAL COMPACT SARA STAFF	
<p>Think and Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional compacts want to be the “500-lb gorilla”; NC-SARA wants to operate cooperatively 	<p>See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (No explicit entries)
<p>Say and Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (No explicit entries) 	<p>Hear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ineffectiveness Increasing fragmentation Mission creep (from reciprocity to national consumer enforcement) Stuck between NC-SARA board/staff and states One-way communication
<p>Pain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deadlock Ineffectiveness Fragmentation Conflicts between compacts, states, and NC-SARA 	<p>Gain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NC-SARA is positioned to create standards for distance education, beyond reciprocity, including consumer protection Directors should produce reports after board meetings
<p>How this should inform NC-SARA’s strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen communication lines and clarity of roles Support collaborative, consistent communication between NC-SARA, states, and compacts 	

HIGHER EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS (think tanks, researchers, consumer protection groups, etc.)	
<p>Think and Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distrust • Unfamiliarity • Belief that NC-SARA doesn't care about consumer protection • Belief that NC-SARA is not responsive enough to student complaints 	<p>See</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional closures • Policy changes • They don't see what NC-SARA does
<p>Say and Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perpetuate negativity and misinformation • Express confusion, frustration, or dismissiveness 	<p>Hear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misinformation • Confusing information • Misleading information • Limited or negative network chatter • Belief that student complaints aren't sufficiently researched • Belief that consumer protection is insufficient
<p>Pain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of control • Distrust of other entities • They don't think student complaints are addressed adequately 	<p>Gain</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More collaboration • More control • Student success — more stakeholders onboard strengthens the ecosystem
<p>How this should inform NC-SARA's strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue engagement and communication • Articulate NC-SARA's process clearly • Sell the value of NC-SARA • Acknowledge current perceptions and demonstrate improvements • Promote what NC-SARA does 	

Question 2: We asked the SPEs to share their response to this prompt, “It’s 2030, what #onehashtag would you use to capture the success of NC-SARA over the last 5 years?”

THEME 1: Student-Centered Focus

#StudentFocused
#HelpingStudents
#CollaborativeSuccessForStudents
#Increase+EffectiveStudentProtectionThatDoesn’tCreateOverRegulation
#ResponsiveToConsumerProtection

THEME 2: Opportunities & Access

#ExpandedOpportunities
#Opportunity
#SuccessDespiteDistance
#GoingTheDistance

THEME 3: National Reach & Collaboration

#All50States (mentioned 2x)
#PanSARA
#Unity
#Connect
#Collaborative
#CollaborationToDistance

THEME 4: Quality, Transparency & Excellence

#DistancedTransparency
#CreatingAStandardOfExcellence
#NationalInnovator
#Resilient

THEME 5: SARA Impact & Success

#SARASuccess (mentioned 2x)
#Efficiency
#EfficencyInUseOfStateReserves

THEME 6: Data & Policy

#DataInformed (mentioned 2x)
#SARAPolicyProgress
#SARAPolicyChangesEvery5Years
#ConsistencyHEDAauthorization

THEME 7: Support for States, Compacts & Institutions

#MoneySaving
#NCSARAFocusesOnCompactsStatesAndInstitutions

Question 3: We heard that NC-SARA continuing to tell its story is a priority. So, we asked the SPEs to tell us, “*What one priority should NC-SARA focus more energy on when telling its story?*”

Student Success & Impact

- Student success story
- Student success (tangible examples)
- Mission, Efficiency, Enrollment Data, Student Success
- The benefit to students
- Student success (telling their story)

Student & Consumer Protection

- Student Protection
- Consumer Protection
- Benefits of student protections on NC-SARA
- Benefits to students and institutions
- Access for students – leverage the access point
- Its support of institutions in reciprocity

NC-SARA Narrative & Identity

- Focus of NC-Story
- Tell its story (NC-SARA responds too much)
- Who they are: NC-SARA vs. SARA
- Story of compacts, states, and institutions
- Telling story how policy keeps institutions in compliance

Government & Policy Engagement

- Network with state legislators
- Continue to be a resource on national conversations
- Federal policy

Consistency & Coherence Across States

- Coherent across states
- Uniformity

Organizational Strength & Future Stability

- Sustainability and reliability of future of organization
- Professional Licensure

Question 4. We also wanted to know the SPEs thoughts on the following, “*In one word, how can NC-SARA leadership improve their readiness to address threats and obstacles?*”

Collaboration & Relationship Building

- Collaboration
- Collaborate
- Communications
- Relationships
- Relationship building

Proactivity, Awareness & Being Informed

- Proactivity
- Proactive
- Current
- Relevant
- Informed
- Anticipate
- Responsiveness
- Awareness

Listening & Focus

Planning & Preparedness

- Planning
- Plan
- Contingencies
- Reverse-engineering

Advocacy & Government Engagement

- Advocacy
- Legislation
- Lobbying
- Professionalism (federal lobbying)

Transparency

Question 5. In small table groups, using superhero character cards, we asked the SPEs to... “Imagine you are superheroes swooping in to save NC-SARA. Using the superhero powers on each of the cards, reimagine what NC-SARA could do in each of these areas. What is the best balance for NC-SARA between policy, compliance, and support for states and institutions? Where should their strategic focus be? How might they be most effective in each of these areas?”



Using superhero powers, the SPEs identified the following ideas to achieve the best balance for NC-SARA between policy, compliance, and support for states and institutions:

Superpower: Not identified

- Mold federal landscape
- Fast applications
- Fast FRCS scores
- Faster policy process
- Online app for institutions
- Renewal app
- Licensure disclosure
- Build full compendium of state licensure requirements
- Resource like Clippy
- Fix complaints before they happen (prevent them)
- Policy
- Compliance
- NC-SARA should focus on needs of states and support states in support of institutions

- Should NC-SARA still be as partner in the UA?:
 - Should its role be purely administrative?
 - OR Should states – NC – executive branch = legislature (we think so) (a lot)

Superpower: Just in Time

- Be the neutral source of good information in real time
- Change policy so SPE can approve extensions without RSC: NC-SARA signing

Superpower: I.Q. Superian

- Legacy Knowledge Management
- Identify clear solutions instead of persistently ruminating on identified shared problems
- Robust resources, PMP
- #1 Facilitate conversation and collaboration so states can come into alignment
- Figure out a better way to determine financial health of an institution besides composite score

Superpower: Mr. Roboto

- Info systems that talk to each other
- Automative applications
- Robotize state and institutional applications
- Robotize FRS

Superpower: Speed Storm

- Either have info rapid/rapid response
- Elec app
- Convince ED to publish FRCS consistently and timely
- The amount of time it takes states to bring laws into compliance with SARA policy

Cadman

- Centralized location

Question 6. In small table groups, we asked participants to take a look in each of the six hats on the table and answer the questions in each one... by tossing their thoughts (written on an index card) in the hats!

Hat 1. What education and support would help people better follow, manage, or improve NC-SARA's processes and procedures?

- Webinars
- On demand focused training
- On demand training for institutions
- Flow charts
- A process map incorporating specific timelines
- Checklists for common SARA processes
- Wiki-Style online policy manual
- Training and mentoring to encourage accessing resources online
- Improve its website to be more user-friendly so users can more easily search the site to have appropriate items returned.
- More real-life examples
- Standardized resources, checklists for professional licensure disclosures and complaints, could include a disclaimer, a tool that could be shared with institutions would create consistency across states for guidance being issued.
- Consistent direction on non-discretionary policies
- Policy manual summary: Eligibility, coverage, data collection
- More transparency on due dates, etc. to institutions
- More outreach engagement
- Connecting various forms into an intuitive form - "If I am renewing an IHE on provisional status, "attach" the provisional form to the renewal application."

Hat 2. What opportunities do we have right now to address gaps in education and support?

- Annual data: national, regional, state - at set time each year
- NC should survey all states/territories to gather a list of current local consumer protections state by state to inform PMPs.
- Provide definitive guidance on questions, such as what is a SARA complaint
- Speak at conferences, continue to post on social media, try to get in front of state legislatures, and congress.
- Share more examples of best practices to help students
- Able to communicate w/ Bd, RCSs
- PMP
- Fresh start for everyone: institutions, students, states - based on turnover
- Consumer protection
- Leverage distance education for opportunity for everyone

Hat 3. What education and support would help people clearly understand and use NC-SARA requirements, rules, and data?

- I think many of the fact sheets NC has been helpful - expand this effort.
- FAQs/Fact Sheets
- NA quick guides or fine
- NC-SARA create more robust and comprehensive compilation of reports and increased frequency of data collection for more up to date data annually.
- Robust data dashboard
- More digestible easy to use and accessible NC SARA collected data
- Prominently displayed data on institutional savings, though NC-SARA already does this fairly well.
- More webinars and in person meetings
- On demand focused training
- SARA commercial infomercial
- Which people- states? Institutions? Students? Policy manual better written, and more logically arranged. Great strides have been made but it's still a mess.
- More legal issue support from NC SARA staff and assistance in policy interpretation and application.
- An explanation that not following SARA rules and regulations will lead to expulsion.
- Stop changing rules and policy so much!
- More general public/student awareness of the existence and purpose of SARA
- Social media marketing
- Communicate and ensure student dissemination of protection info
- Need program data

Hat 4. What emerging issues (policy, technology, consumer protection) should NC-SARA begin to prepare people for?

- AI (2x mentioned)
- AI policies
- AI, consumer protection (i.e. closures and mergers), uncertainty of fed regulation agencies affecting student ed
- Utilizing AI in a meaningful and effective way
- Ghost students
- Fake universities
- Consumer protections should be strengthened
- States inability to agree on critical issues such as consumer protection
- Reconciling different states with differing levels of student consumer protections
- State shopping, Increasing consumer protections (consistent application and enforcement), accreditation minimizing
- How to deal with the coming FTE cliff
- Physical presence standardization
- Digitize application
- End of current higher ED paradigm

- Ways to make PMP less onerous
- Proposed federal rule changes in the horizon
- Transfer credit 101 common explanations
- Micro credentials

Hat 5. What education and support would directly respond to the unmet needs of students, institutions, and states?

- Provide very clear guidance about what SPEs should be doing (versus just ideas for how other states do it).
- Demonstrate NC-SARA value
- I think more direct education focused on students may help.
- Open Ed Resources
- Tech Support
- AI Chatbot
- Form language related to complaints and professional licensure disclosure
- Emphasize the opportunity of distance learning to meet financial needs of students
- Surveys on various topics related to academic quality, to student rights, to transfer credit

Hat 6. What education or support would prepare people to handle common problems, risks, and points of confusion with SARA?

- Forming community of practice to support ideas and introduction
- Provide more webinars or physical meetings to discuss SARA's mission
- More F-Z-F meetings and webinars
- Ability to reach out to other SPEs
- FAQ (organized) and some level of best practices guide and again revision of policy to clarify confusing things upfront rather than interpret it to death.
- Common questions on website - answers written to naive reader
- Repository of frequently asked questions
- Workflows for common issues
- Easily available and digestible resources organized by audience. E.g. Studentloans.gov
- Fully guided online institutional applications
- List serv
- Clarity: SARA versus NC-SARA
- Opinions from NC-SARA staff that can be shared with all SPE's
- Student intern (thesis prep)

Question 7. We asked the SPEs to choose 5+ photos (provided on the table in front of them) to create a photo essay on the impact SARA has on students. And how NC-SARA might enhance and promote student-centered outcomes. Here are their captions:

Photo Story One

- Nationwide
- Accomplish difficult tasks
- From home
- Innovation
- Tools and Resources
- Kaleidoscope of students and institutions
- Knowledge
- Team

Photo Story Two

- Global engagement
- Data management
- Opportunity
- Success
- Career oriented
- Accessibility

Photo Story Three

- Find the right institution for you regardless of location.
- Interstate reciprocity
- Distance learning
- End up in the workforce
- Success

Photo Story Four

- Academic journey begins.
- A problem arises.
- The student feels lost without a solution.
- The student seeks help.
- Through locating required information related to complaints on the institutions websites they find a path to seek help.
- Direction is clearer based on info received.
- A solution may be in sight.
- Strategy - Ensure info is easy for students to find.
- Strategy - Make sure SPEs are equipped to assist students.

Photo Story Five

- Student Success
- Savings/Managing Risk
- Learn
- Inspiration to begin
- Start looking
- Navigate a complex array of options (a mess)

Photo Story Six

- Bridging the gaps with accessibility
- Creates opportunity
- Cost efficient/affordability of higher education
- Photo Story Seven
- By thinking outside of the box and evaluating the cost to provide access to online education for a good work/life balance while protecting the student no matter who you are or where you are.

Photo Story Eight

- Your race, your pace!
- Students can choose their own path and aren't limited to where they reside.
- Advocate for the students and communicate loudly the benefits.
- The mountain of educational opportunities can be intimidating. SARA is the compass to guide the explorer.
- Can capture mobile students and keep them on track to achieve their education.
- Begin - wherever you are.
- Improve access to students of their options for educations.

Photo Story Nine

- Students find their way through access to education and opportunity.
- Distance education is global.
- Telling the story.
- Cutting over regulation to improve access.
- Beacon of student access to HE opportunities.

Photo Story Ten

- Smooth sailing with protections.
- Access to distance education with consumer protection so students can focus on their education.
- Access

Regional Compact-Specific Discussions – Virtual Session

Question 1: “What does NC-SARA need to know about you?”

When working with NC-SARA, what do they need to know about regional compacts?

- SARA is only one program among many, and often only 1–1.5 staff are available to support it.
- Regional directors are first responsible to their member states in all activities.
- NC-SARA generally does a great job engaging with regional compacts and facilitating collaborative discussions.
- Compacts are unique entities embedded within their states; they are agencies or bodies of corporate—not simple membership associations.
- Compacts operate as part of their state governments, influencing structure, priorities, and capacity.

What pain points do you have that NC-SARA could do better to support you?

- Salesforce is difficult to use and creates frustration, though it has gradually improved.
- Some stopped using Salesforce because it caused more headaches than benefit.
- Frequent meetings feel repetitive, often covering the same topics repeatedly.
- Even if meetings feel redundant, some acknowledge they may still be necessary.
- Cross-regional project coordination often falls on regional directors; **if the work is national, NC-SARA should lead the coordination.**
- NC-SARA may be overly cautious about inclusion, which can result in compacts being pulled into co-hosting or co-coordinating workgroups unnecessarily.

What goals do you have so that NC-SARA could do better to support you?

- (No explicit goal statements were provided.)

What can NC-SARA do better to engage with you?

- Reduce the barrage of emails and requests.
- Be willing to pick up the phone and talk through challenges directly.
- Address concerns related to meetings (e.g., frequency, repetition).
- Improve clarity and communication around when meetings or engagement are necessary.

Question 2: “Thinking about the education and support that NC-SARA provides, where might NC-SARA focus future efforts?”

Facts and Data:

- Challenges:
 - I don't think NC-SARA should dictate exactly how to interpret policy. I appreciated their Tuesday Topic webinars – when there is uncertainty about something they have people come forward and say, “this is how my state does it.” Giving those examples of proper procedure.
 - Who initially wrote the first version of the policy manual? – NC-SARA will say this was the intention of the policy – who gets to set the intentions of the policy? I still thought NC-SARA was still the source to go to get the intent.
 - Do we need somebody to decide the truth? Probably yes. I think ultimately the important thing is to keep pushing the states forward. How do we have NC-SARA reflect the consensus among the participating states?

Innovation:

- Institutional compliance – the policy cycle has been to add stronger requirements focused on consumer protections – I don't believe all the institutions are compliant with policy. Is Harvard ripping off their online students – the answer is probably, yes.
- With some of the marginal institutions, are any of those under investigation? Do we have a way of knowing if they are being compliant with the new policies?
- SARA policy in some parts leans heavily on the other legs of the triad to do their jobs and take action so that we have things to base our actions on. Giving the reduced capacity of the department of education to do some of the things that historically has been asked of the department – more of that will fall to the states and how can we support the states in that? What will the changing roles of the accreditors look like?

Process Lens:

- I feel like there's a lot of stuff that we just do, but it's not written down anywhere. We need a process and procedure manual to dictate the flow. With more turnover we lose institutional knowledge. If we all quit our jobs tomorrow, everything will fall apart because there is nowhere to look for knowing how to do different things.

Question 3. Participants were given different topics and asked to select which three they would choose to send support to.

(At the outset, we provided the following as options to consider: Leadership transparency, consultation regarding initiatives, support for regional staff, engagement practices, administrative burden, communications, role alignment, workload/capacity, administrative committee support.)

- Administrative Committee Support: 5 votes
- Communications: 5 votes
- Role Alignment: 4 votes
- Workload/Capacity: 4 votes
- Administrative Burden: 3 votes
- Leadership transparency: No votes
- Consultation regarding initiatives: No votes
- Support for Regional Staff: No votes
- Engagement Practices: No votes

This is a transcript of the discussion that followed the support question above.

Just because something didn't get votes doesn't mean it isn't important. Some of the topics overlap in subject. How to reduce the burden on state folks when we bring them into committees. If we go back to the idea of how this organization that's meant to coordinate an agreement between states, how can we use them more as decision makers and less as worker bees in the committees. Can we do all the research and data collection ahead of time and present that data to them to make their decisions?

*I disagree that state workers are volunteers, they are the designated workers for their states. **If they take on a committee role, then they should be responsible for getting the work done.***

This is an agreement between states; they should be responsible for doing the work. There needs to be some expectation for them to do the work. There should be that buy in and responsibility to do that work.

NC-SARA is great to mobilize and coordinate the effort, but at the end of the day, this is an agreement between states to do this work, not just follow the work done by an organization. I think the right amount of work is more than anyone wants to commit to. Day to day I don't know that the states are overwhelmed. SREV states at least. We have seen a number of states volunteer for working groups, but when it comes time to show up, they don't really contribute and are barely present. If you volunteer for a subcommittee or working group, be mindful of what is being asked and be committed.

*NC-SARA should have more communication with the state portal agencies, saying this is the level of work required. I think that could alleviate the state members required to do the work. **Being clearer on this is the amount of work and expected level of work and how much***

time it might take, that way states can allot the appropriate amount of time and workers to do the work.

*I think more of this discussion is specifically about things coming out of the policy modification process and not NC-SARA and the agreement as a whole. **Ideally the policy modification process is supposed to be a part of the administration of the agreement. In recent years it has been a part of what we do and is taking up a lot of our time and everyone is burnt out. The support for the standing committees, NC-SARA does a great job with those committees. You're just hearing a lot of fatigue arising out of the policy modification process. That's what I'm seeing happening with this conversation.***

A lot of the messaging we hear from NC-SARA on the work groups is “thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to do this work. We're so grateful you'd take out your time to do this burdensome work.” Rather than, “this is work you should want to do to make your stuff better.”

It is hard for states to be positive about doing the work that they have been told is annoying.

*I can just speak for the West, if NC-SARA says that our states should be doing more with working groups, I think we would have a huge problem with that. NC-SARA can communicate that to us and then we can have that conversation as states, but that is not for NC-SARA to decide. I think we should have that conversation collectively as partners, how can we make it efficient and as less burdensome as possible. **I don't want NC-SARA to tell our states how we should be participating.***

Question 4. What topics are most important to you? What feedback do you still want to share?

- This has been great. I think the tricky thing with a strategic plan like this is situating it properly within the governance structure and model that is fairly unique to SARA... trying to focus this plan on what NC-SARA ought to strategize is essential.
- Direct connection from NC-SARA to institutions – typically in our region we leave most of the communication to the states, and then I do some routine communications. **We as compacts get lots of communication with NC-SARA, and based on the recurring questions that I get, my concern is the information is not properly rolling down to the institutions. So, I'm not sure how those institutions could also connect more with NC-SARA.**
- Greatly appreciate this opportunity to share the compact perspective.
- I think it is really important that there is strength to and commitment to identity and purpose. I feel like I've seen some attempts as mission creep, and there needs to be a focus on being excellent in what we are supposed to be doing before adding in new tasks/goals/responsibilities/etc.

Quick Actions & Quick Wins

While the strategic planning process may take time, there are several quick actions that can be taken to achieve some quick wins while the plan is being written.

Here is a list of actions to consider.

- Action:** Deploy internal (NC-SARA) communication updates focused on current and upcoming projects
Win: Align NC-SARA staff on priorities, deadlines, workload, roles and processes
- Action:** Document existing communication topics, delivery channels, and messaging frequency for each stakeholder group
Win: Rapid identification of communications by stakeholder type, enabling targeted improvements, and provide a foundation for future communication planning
- Action:** Add NC-SARA elevator pitch (tagline, mission, etc.) and a short “I can help with...” statement to staff members’ NC-SARA email signatures
Win: Consistent, low-effort reinforcement of who NC-SARA is, what it does, and how staff can help, improving clarity and reducing confusion across every external interaction
- Action:** Log SARA policy interpretation incidents (topic, solution, etc.)
Win: Inform future policy drafts
- Action:** Encourage recharge/reset moments during staff meetings
Win: Improve engagement and morale
- Action:** Allow stakeholders to add SARA or NC-SARA insights and feedback to an “idea generator” (could be a web form)
Win: Quickly capture stakeholder insights and innovations, strengthening trust and surfacing practical improvements without requiring formal meetings
- Action:** Log stakeholder success stories
Win: Access to credible, real-world examples that support communications, board discussions, and external storytelling