

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Surveys – NC-SARA Stakeholder Survey Summary Report

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: September 3, 2025

Introduction

This summary report synthesizes input gathered from five stakeholder surveys conducted as part of NC-SARA's 2025 Strategic Planning process. The surveys aimed to assess perceptions of NC-SARA's effectiveness, identify key challenges and priorities, and gather strategic input from the following groups:

- State Portal Entities (SPEs)
- Institutions
- NC-SARA Staff
- NC-SARA Board
- Regional Compact SARA Staff

This report highlights major areas of consensus and divergence across stakeholder groups and presents unified recommendations. Overall, engagement was strong across all audiences, with a blend of quantitative and qualitative data providing deep insight into priorities and concerns.

Key Areas of Consensus Across Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder responses across all five surveyed groups reveal strong alignment on several core dimensions of NC-SARA's work and value. While each group brings a unique perspective based on its role in the SARA ecosystem, the following areas consistently emerged as shared priorities or positive affirmations:

- **Confidence in NC-SARA's Core Work:** Across groups, the majority of respondents indicated they are either "Very confident" or "Confident" in NC-SARA's ability to effectively carry out its core responsibilities. Institutional staff and board respondents all rated the organization's capacity positively, with SPEs showing 83% confidence in execution.
- **Perceived Relevance and Value:** Institutional and SPE respondents alike affirmed the relevance of NC-SARA's work to their day-to-day responsibilities. For example, 71% of SPEs and 88% of institutions rated NC-SARA's core work as "Very relevant" or "Relevant" to stakeholder needs, and similar positive sentiment was echoed by staff (100%) and board members (100%).
- **Communications and Responsiveness:** Communications were another strong point of alignment, with 97% of SPE respondents and 92% of institution respondents indicating they were satisfied with the quality and frequency of NC-SARA communications. Similar approval was reflected in staff (94%) and regional compact feedback (60%), highlighting NC-SARA's effectiveness in keeping stakeholders informed.

- **Staff Professionalism and Engagement:** Feedback from open-ended responses and Likert-scale ratings consistently praised NC-SARA staff for their helpfulness, responsiveness, and knowledge. Over 90% of respondents across all groups agreed that staff are approachable and supportive. Open-ended feedback from institutions and regional compacts described staff as “accessible,” “solutions-oriented,” and “trusted partners.”
- **Support for Strategic Focus Areas:** Across groups, there was shared support for NC-SARA’s continued investment in key focus areas such as federal policy engagement, educational resources, and technology infrastructure. Institutions highlighted the value of training and compliance clarity, while regional compacts emphasized technology alignment and national-level advocacy.

These consistent responses across stakeholder types provide a strong mandate for NC-SARA to build on its strengths in communication, engagement, and operational efficiency while advancing key strategic initiatives in policy, technology, and training.

Areas of Divergence or Differentiated Emphasis

While stakeholders across all five groups expressed broad support for NC-SARA’s mission and core work, the survey responses also revealed notable variations in emphasis, priorities, and perspectives based on each group’s unique role in the SARA ecosystem. These differences provide important insight into where tailored strategies may be needed to better serve specific stakeholder needs.

Compliance and Policy Clarity

- Institutions expressed greater concern about institutional compliance oversight and the need for clearer guidance around SARA policy expectations. This contrasted with SPEs and NC-SARA staff, who emphasized the structure and transparency of the policy modification process itself.
- Open-ended feedback from institutions frequently referenced a desire for more consistent enforcement and clearer standards related to institutional closures and complaints.
- Regional Compacts offered minimal commentary on this issue, instead deferring to state-level administration and institutional autonomy.

Operational and Resource Capacity

- SPEs were more likely to highlight operational challenges and resource limitations, particularly in managing state-level responsibilities with limited capacity.
- In contrast, board members and NC-SARA staff focused more on internal strategic readiness, governance models, and ensuring NC-SARA remains responsive to evolving policy demands.
- Institutions did not focus heavily on operations beyond their own system experiences. Regional compacts framed their concerns around alignment and coordination between NC-SARA and compact-led initiatives, rather than operational strain.

Technology and System Usability

- There was broad agreement on the need for digital modernization, but institutional respondents more often raised concerns about the usability of the Salesforce portal, while SPEs prioritized improvements in application forms and submission systems.
- Interest in AI and emerging technologies was notably low among SPEs (only 9%), while Board and staff respondents identified it as a growing area to monitor.
- Regional compacts voiced interest in technological interoperability across states but did not identify specific tools.

Engagement and Communications Preferences

- Roughly 50% of SPE respondents indicated they would like more engagement opportunities with NC-SARA staff, while 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed, revealing a split in preferred levels of interaction.
- Institutions and regional compacts expressed more interest in tailored, proactive storytelling to counter public misconceptions, whereas board respondents emphasized maintaining a consistent, mission-focused message.

Risk Perception

- SPEs and staff expressed high concern about the political environment as a threat to NC-SARA's operations (79%), while institutional respondents were more divided on the potential risk posed by the economic climate (56% agreed it was a concern, 44% disagreed).
- Board respondents highlighted regulatory uncertainty, particularly at the federal level. Regional compacts expressed concern about maintaining alignment amid evolving federal and state pressures.

Thematic Findings by Focus Area

Thematic analysis across all five stakeholder groups revealed shared priorities in several strategic areas, with nuanced differences in emphasis. This section presents comparative insights organized around the most prominent focus areas from the survey instruments.

1. Top Anticipated Challenges

- Federal policy shifts (e.g., negotiated rulemaking, accreditation changes) were the top concern across groups, with 88% of SPE respondents selecting this as a primary challenge.
- Accreditation and postsecondary quality assurance followed closely (73%), with institutional and regional compact respondents echoing concern about the evolving federal landscape.
- Resource capacity of State Portal Entities was noted by 55% of SPE respondents, indicating concern about sustainability at the state level.
- Other concerns such as public criticism, short-term credentials, and declining enrollment were cited less frequently but remain relevant to institutional respondents in particular.

2. Technology Priorities

- There was strong cross-group consensus in favor of digital modernization:

- 72% of respondents supported increased focus on electronic institutional forms (weighted avg: 4.19 out of 5).
- State-level application forms and submission portals also received high support (weighted avg: 4.13–4.15).
- While the Salesforce institution portal received a slightly lower score (weighted avg: 3.84), it was still seen as an area for continued enhancement.
- SPEs prioritized efficiency, while institutions emphasized user experience and accessibility of systems.

3. Educational Resources

- Online courses for SPEs and institutions received some of the highest support in this category:
 - Institutional training courses had a weighted avg of 3.73.
 - SPE-focused courses followed closely at 3.67, with 48%+ of respondents favoring more focus.
- Quick start guides (avg: 3.55) and onboarding kits (avg: 3.50) were viewed positively, particularly by SPEs.
- Institution welcome materials received the lowest score (avg: 3.34), with most respondents preferring the current level of investment.

4. SARA Policy Work

- Engagement in federal negotiated rulemaking was strongly supported across audiences:
 - Weighted avg: 3.67, with 49% of respondents wanting continued or increased focus.
- The public forums for SARA policy modification drew more mixed responses:
 - Weighted avg: 3.18
 - While 52% supported maintaining the current focus, 18% suggested less, indicating fatigue or diminishing perceived value from this engagement method.

5. Communications

- High interest in expanded visibility through:
 - National conference presentations (58% want more; avg: 3.76)
 - Topical webinars (55% want more; avg: 3.76)
 - SPE workshops (43% want more; avg: 3.67)
- Routine communications like the SPE newsletter received high satisfaction:
 - 85% preferred maintaining current levels (avg: 3.30)
- Institutions expressed a desire for more tailored, narrative-driven outreach that underscores SARA's impact on student outcomes.

6. SARA Resources

- The Professional Licensure Guides received the strongest support:
 - Weighted avg: 3.82, with 57% recommending more focus
- Feedback on The SARA Source was mixed (avg: 3.42), with 15% recommending less focus.
- The State Authorization Guide was seen as stable and useful, though not a priority for further enhancement (avg: 3.21)

Summary Recommendations

The recommendations below are grounded in quantitative response patterns and recurring themes identified across all five stakeholder groups. They are designed to address areas of strong consensus, respond to persistent challenges, and guide NC-SARA's strategic planning and operational improvements in the coming years.

1. Modernize Digital Tools and Submission Systems

- 72% of respondents supported increasing focus on electronic institutional forms (weighted avg: 4.19).
- Both SPEs and institutional respondents emphasized the need for streamlined application and reporting tools.
- Recommendation: Continue prioritizing enhancements to Salesforce and form automation, especially for institutions and state-level users.

2. Strengthen Compliance Guidance and Oversight

- Institutions expressed concerns about inconsistent application of policy and enforcement, particularly regarding closures and complaint handling.
- Open-ended responses from multiple groups emphasized the importance of clarity in compliance roles.
- Recommendation: Develop more transparent compliance guidance and consider periodic reviews or spot-check processes for institutions.

3. Expand Training and Onboarding Resources

- Online training for institutional respondents and SPEs received strong support (weighted avgs: 3.73 and 3.67, respectively).
- Stakeholders praised the usefulness of onboarding kits and quick start guides, particularly for new staff.
- Recommendation: Invest in self-paced training modules, refresh welcome materials regularly, and consider tiered onboarding based on stakeholder type.

4. Continue and Deepen Federal Policy Engagement

- No respondents indicated a desire to reduce NC-SARA's role in federal policy engagement.

- 49% wanted increased focus, with a weighted avg of 3.67, indicating wide recognition of the importance of strategic positioning in federal discussions.
- Recommendation: Maintain strong presence in negotiated rulemaking and communicate NC-SARA’s role clearly to stakeholders.

5. Enhance Storytelling and Public Communication

- Several stakeholder groups called for more proactive communication that highlights student impact, state-level value, and cost savings.
- Respondents encouraged NC-SARA to “shape the narrative” rather than merely react to critics.
- Recommendation: Develop a proactive communications strategy focused on SARA’s tangible benefits, and tailor messaging for policymakers, institutions, and the public.

6. Tailor Stakeholder Engagement Strategies

- SPE responses were split on the desire for more engagement with NC-SARA staff: 50% in favor, 43% not in favor.
- This suggests a need for flexible engagement rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Recommendation: Offer differentiated engagement pathways (e.g., working groups, listening sessions, technical forums) and allow stakeholders to opt into the level of involvement that best suits them.

Appendix: Supplemental Analysis and Data Tables

This appendix provides supporting detail and visual evidence for the findings outlined in the NC-SARA Stakeholder Survey Summary Report. Tables were generated based on the complete quantitative and qualitative data collected from five stakeholder groups: State Portal Entities (SPEs), Institutions, NC-SARA Board, NC-SARA staff, Regional Compact SARA staff.

A. Tables Provided

The following data tables are referenced in this report and included in the supplemental file:

Table Number	Title	Description
Table 1	Enhanced Summary of Recommendations	Includes stakeholder support levels, rationale, and thematic connections for each recommendation.
Table 2	Focus Area Ratings by Stakeholder Group	A matrix indicating which groups supported major focus areas (technology, training, policy, communication, resources).
Table 3	Thematic Focus Area Ratings	Provides data on each theme’s associated focus area, weighted average Likert ratings (when applicable), levels of respondent support, and qualitative stakeholder insights.
Table 4	Areas of Divergence and Differentiated Emphasis	Comparative breakdown of how stakeholder groups differ in perceived priorities and challenges.
Table 5	Recommendations by Stakeholder Group	A matrix indicating which groups supported each recommendation based on survey responses and coding of open-ended feedback.

B. Methodological Notes

- Surveys were distributed in June 2025 via SurveyMonkey to representatives of each stakeholder group.
- Both Likert-style and open-ended responses were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach to ensure data integrity.
- All Likert averages were calculated using a 1–5 scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree or equivalent).
- Tables were compiled from raw exports and validated through manual review and qualitative coding.

C. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

All open-ended responses were coded using a grounded thematic analysis method. Key themes that emerged include:

- Technology Modernization – Requests for better digital tools, Salesforce portal upgrades, and electronic forms.
- Policy Clarity and Consistency – Need for guidance on compliance, closures, and complaints.
- Training and Onboarding – Strong support for self-paced courses and onboarding kits for new users.
- Federal Engagement – Support for NC-SARA’s presence in federal policy discussions and negotiated rulemaking.
- Strategic Communications – Interest in proactive storytelling, public messaging, and stakeholder visibility.

Themes were validated across stakeholder groups to assess cross-audience alignment and divergence.