



NC-SARA October 2025 Board Meeting

NC-SARA Strategy Committee

Strategic Plan Surveys - Electronic Binder

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1. Final Report: NC-SARA Staff
2. Final Report: NC-SARA Board
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5. Final Report: State Portal Entities

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Survey – Final Report: NC-SARA Staff

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: August 18, 2025

Executive Summary

As part of the NC-SARA 2025 Strategic Planning process, a survey was administered to NC-SARA staff to assess the current state of NC-SARA, identify organizational needs, and gather valuable input for the organization's long-term strategic objectives. Other NC-SARA stakeholders were also surveyed, including SARA-participating institutions, Regional Compact SARA staff, State Portal Entity (SPE) staff, and NC-SARA board members. Individual reports summarizing results for each stakeholder group are also being provided to capture unique perspectives and priorities. These findings form the basis for specific, actionable recommendations to enhance NC-SARA's effectiveness and support for NC-SARA staff moving forward.

Staff expressed strong alignment with NC-SARA's core work and mission, with 94% agreeing with the organization's purpose to a great extent and 100% affirming its relevance to stakeholders. Respondents also reported high satisfaction with their roles and supervisor communication, and all agreed that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community.

Key areas identified for increased focus included technological improvements, educational resources, and institutional engagement. At the same time, staff emphasized the need to streamline internal operations, clarify decision-making authority, and strengthen professional development and recognition. Concerns about workload, morale, compensation, and cross-team communication also emerged, alongside a call for clearer internal policies and more equitable leadership practices.

These findings suggest that while NC-SARA's staff are highly mission-aligned and engaged, internal investments in infrastructure, transparency, and culture will be critical to sustaining effectiveness and supporting long-term strategic goals.

Background & Methodology

To inform its next Strategic Plan, NC-SARA distributed a stakeholder survey to gather input on organizational direction and effectiveness.

1. **Platform:** The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. The survey included 30 questions, both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses.
2. **Dates:** The survey was conducted from June 2–23, 2025.
3. **Respondents:** The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 17 NC-SARA staff members. A total of 17 responses were received, with 94 percent of respondents completing the entire survey. Among the 14 NC-SARA staff members who responded to the question, the majority reported having between 1 and 7 years of experience with the organization:
 1. 29% (4 respondents) have been involved for 1–3 years
 2. 29% (4 respondents) for 4–5 years

3. 21% (3 respondents) for 6–7 years

A smaller portion reported longer tenures:

- 14% (2 respondents) have 8–10 years of experience
- 7% (1 respondent) reported more than 10 years

No respondents reported being associated with NC-SARA for less than 1 year.

This distribution reflects a staff group with a blend of mid-level and long-term institutional experience, with nearly 80% having between 1 and 7 years of involvement.

4. **Analysis:** Responses were filtered using SurveyMonkey’s “Question & Answer” filtering tool. Data was reviewed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and charts were provided via SurveyMonkey and processed for reporting.

Key Findings – NC-SARA’s Core Work

1. **Strong Overall Engagement and Confidence:**

- A strong majority of NC-SARA staff (81%) reported understanding the difference between NC-SARA and SARA “to a great extent,” while the remaining 19% indicated they understood the distinction “somewhat.” No respondents selected “very little” or “not at all,” suggesting a solid overall grasp of organizational roles and responsibilities within the SARA framework.
- Among the NC-SARA staff respondents, 94% agreed with NC-SARA’s core work “to a great extent”. One respondent agreed “somewhat” and no respondents selected “Very little” or “Not at all”. These results reflect overwhelming support for NC-SARA’s core mission and activities among staff, with nearly all expressing strong alignment.
- All NC-SARA staff respondents believe NC-SARA’s core work is relevant to stakeholder needs. Eighty eight percent rated it as “very relevant,” and another 12% as “relevant”. No respondents indicated that the work was “somewhat relevant” or “not relevant.”. These responses reflect a unanimous perception of relevance, with all staff agreeing that NC-SARA’s work aligns with stakeholder needs, most rating it as highly relevant. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Q5: I believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

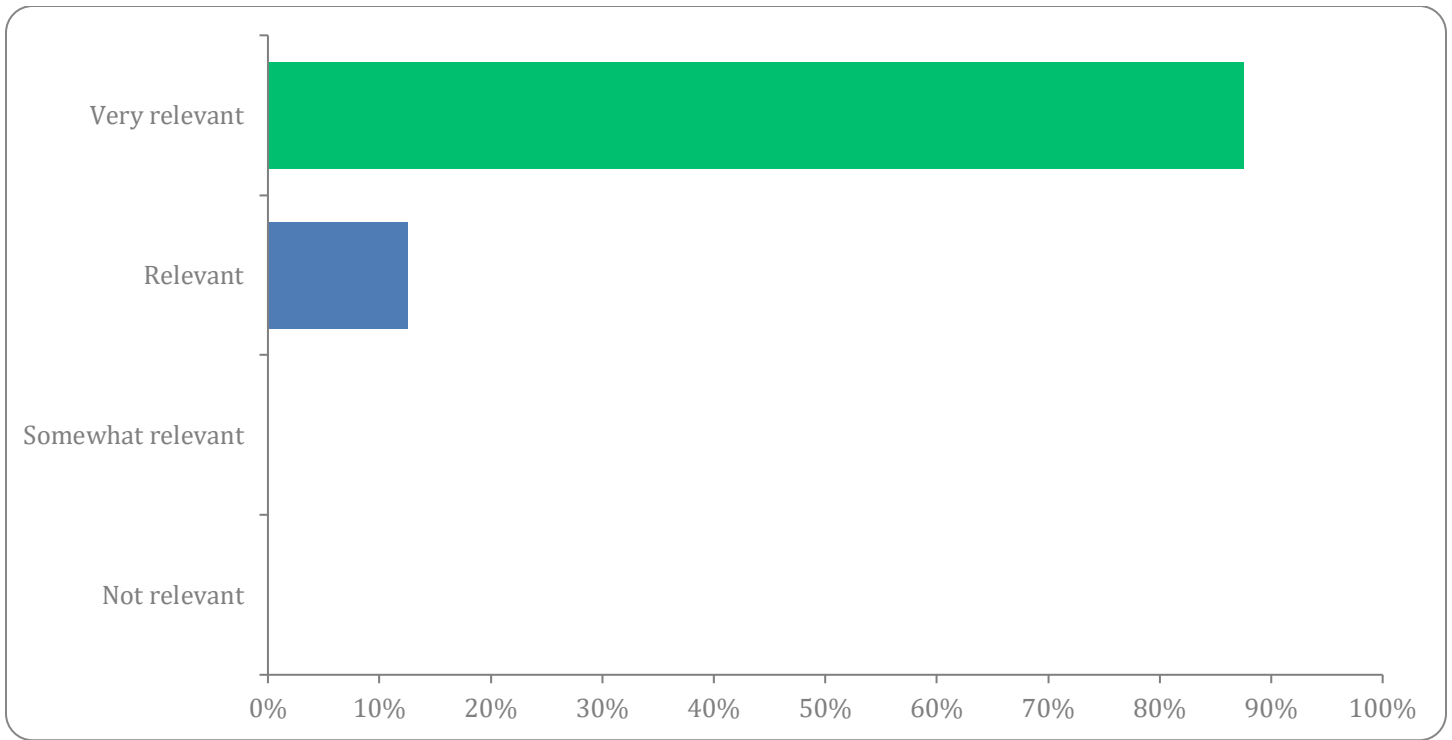


Figure 1: NC-SARA’s Core Work Relevant to Stakeholders Needs

2. Effectiveness in Promoting Value and Collaboration

- Forty-four percent (44%) of respondents indicated that NC-SARA “very effectively” promotes the value of SARA to the higher education community. While 37% of respondents indicated NC-SARA promotes the value “effectively” only 19% selected “somewhat effectively.” No respondents rated NC-SARA as “not effective,.” These results indicate that a large majority (81%) of staff believe NC-SARA is promoting the value of SARA either effectively or very effectively, with a smaller portion (19%) seeing room for improvement. No respondents viewed current efforts as ineffective.
- Overall, 88% of respondents believe NC-SARA promotes a culture of collaboration effectively or very effectively, reflecting broad confidence in the organization’s collaborative approach. A small minority (12%) expressed less positive views, suggesting an opportunity to enhance inclusivity or communication in collaborative processes. (Figure 2 summarizes these findings)

Q8: How effectively does NC-SARA promote a culture of collaboration?

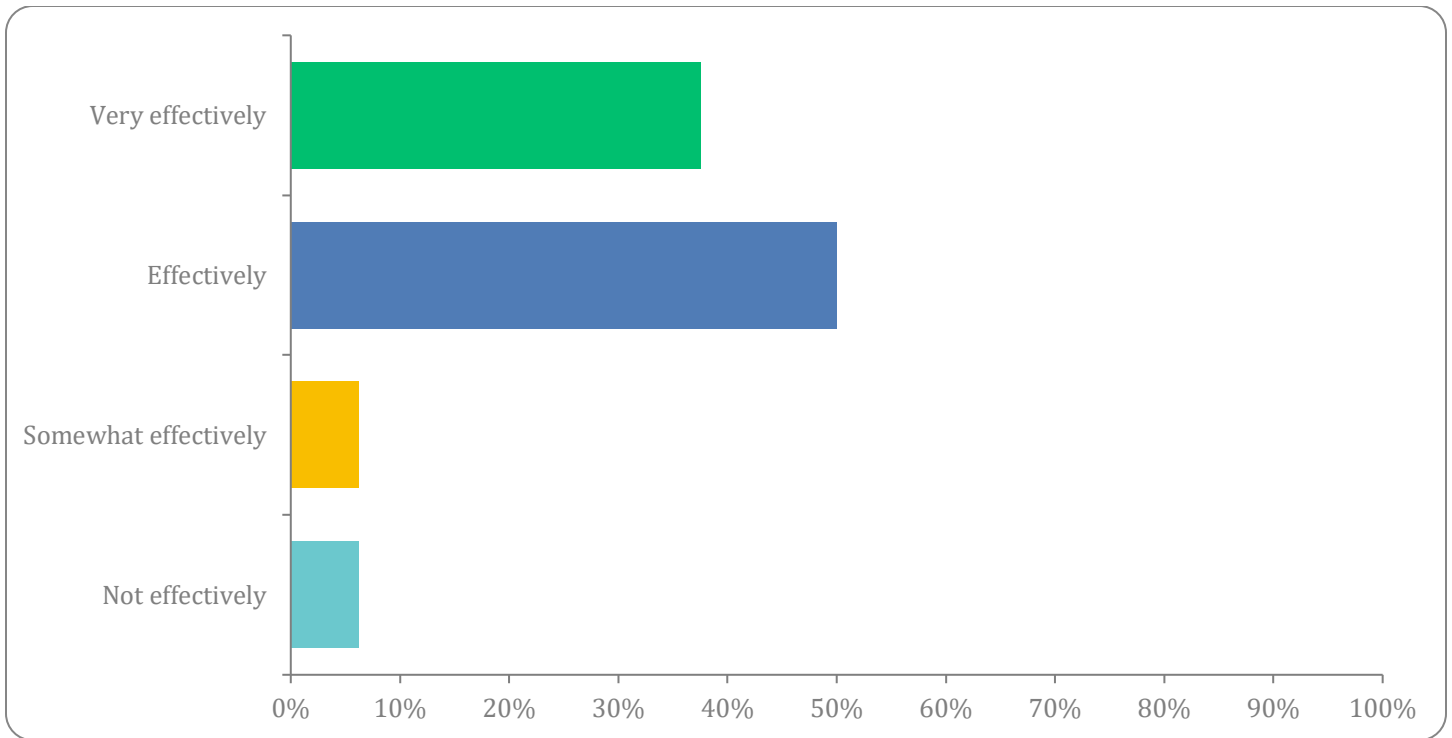


Figure 2: Effectiveness in Promoting a Culture of Collaboration

3. Overall Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work

- All of NC-SARA staff respondents (100%) expressed satisfaction with NC-SARA’s work, with 60% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing. These results indicate general satisfaction.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Communications, Support, and Operations

1. Use of Communications and Provides Necessary Resources

- Overall, 94% of respondents expressed satisfaction with NC-SARA communications, either agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only one respondent (6%) disagreed, suggesting that while communications are generally well received, there may still be minor areas for improvement in clarity, frequency, or relevance.
- 100% of respondents agreed that NC-SARA provides the necessary resources for SARA’s success, with over half expressing strong agreement. This unanimous support indicates high confidence among staff in the adequacy and quality of NC-SARA’s resource provision

2. Operational Efficiency

- The majority of respondents (nearly 69%) view NC-SARA as either “efficient” or “very efficient”, indicating strong internal confidence in operational effectiveness. However, over 30% of responses reflect a perception of moderate or low efficiency, suggesting there may be areas where internal processes could be streamlined or clarified.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

1. Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years (Figure 3 summarizes these findings)

- When asked to identify the biggest challenges NC-SARA may face in the next 3–5 years, NC-SARA staff respondents prioritized a range of external and internal risks. The most commonly cited concern was federal government actions, followed by financial pressures on institutions, declining enrollment, and public perception issues. The results suggest that staff are particularly focused on policy volatility, sustainability concerns at the institutional level, and evolving attitudes toward distance education. **The most frequently cited challenges were:**
 - Federal government actions (e.g., negotiated rulemaking, changes at the U.S. Department of Education) were identified by 76% (13 respondents) as a top concern.
 - Financial challenges for institutions (beyond declining enrollment) were selected by 53% (9 respondents).
 - Institutional declining enrollment was cited by 41% (7 respondents).
 - Public perceptions about distance learning quality and States leaving SARA were both selected by 35% (6 respondents).
 - Accreditation and complexities of postsecondary quality assurance was also selected by 35% (6 respondents).
- **Other Challenges Noted:**
 - Capacity and resources of State Portal Entity staff – 30% (5 respondents).
 - Institutions leaving SARA and Public criticism of SARA – 24% (4 respondents each)
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI) – 18% (3 respondents)
 - Rapid growth of short-term credentials and new providers – 6% (1 respondent)

These responses highlight a broad awareness among NC-SARA staff of both systemic risks (e.g., regulatory changes and financial instability) and reputational factors that could impact the organization's future strategy and positioning.

Q13: What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing NC-SARA in the next 3-5 years? (please select your top 4)

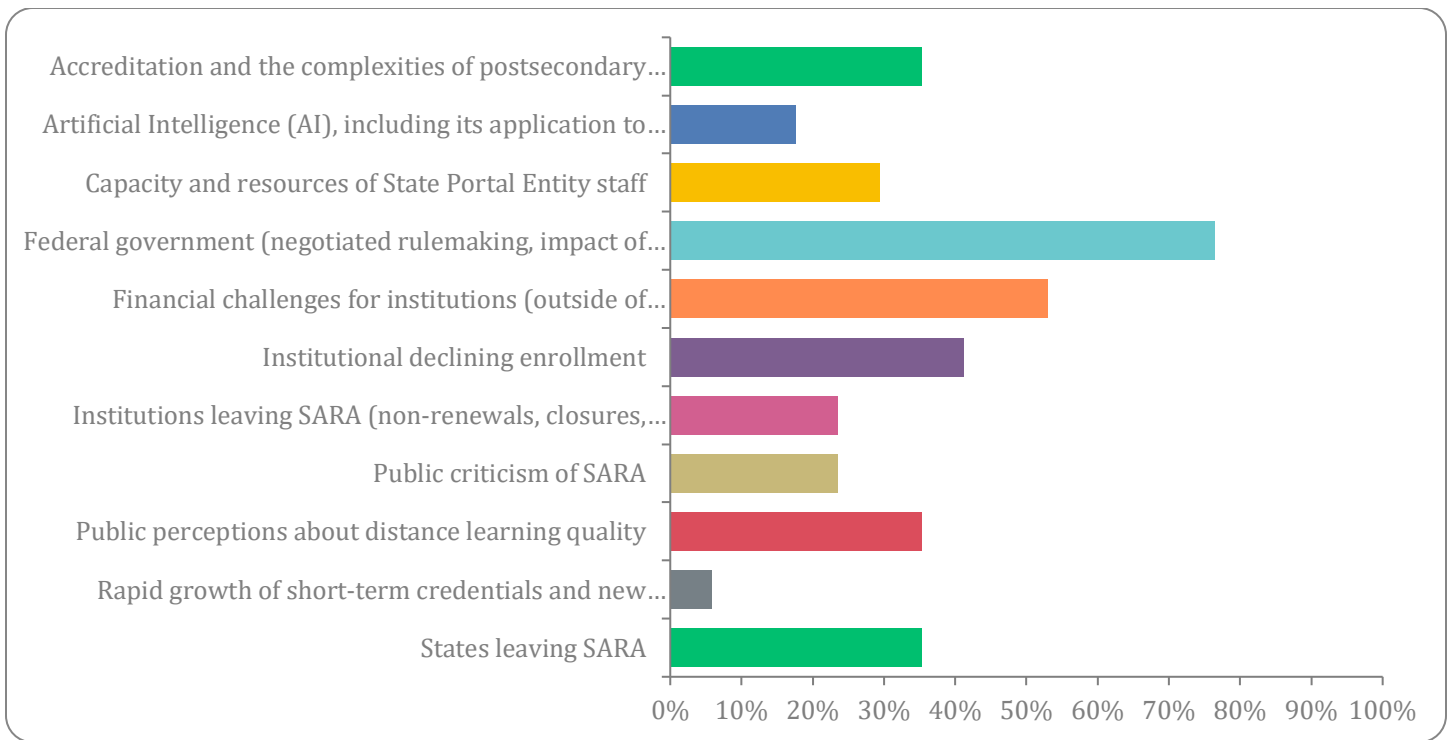


Figure 3: Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years

2. Political Environment as a Risk Factor

- Overall, 76% of respondents view the political environment as a notable risk to NC-SARA, with no respondents expressing strong disagreement. While nearly a quarter of respondents disagreed, the dominant view suggests growing concern about how political dynamics, such as regulatory shifts or state-level pressures, could affect NC-SARA's operations or stability.

3. Economic Environment as a Risk

- A combined 65% of respondents perceive the economic climate as a risk to NC-SARA, while over a third (35%) do not share this concern. These results indicate a moderate level of concern among staff, with economic uncertainty, such as institutional funding pressures or broader financial instability, seen as a potential, though not unanimous, threat to NC-SARA's work.

4. Technological Changes as a Risk

- A majority of NC-SARA staff (60%) agreed that technological changes present a risk for NC-SARA, while 40% disagreed to some extent. This indicates a general awareness of potential challenges posed by evolving technologies, such as the need for updated systems or shifts in stakeholder expectations, though not a high level of urgency or consensus.

5. Confidence in Leadership's Strategic Planning

- A combined 71% of respondents expressed confidence in NC-SARA leadership's strategic preparedness, while nearly 29% disagreed. This reflects a general sense of trust in leadership but also signals a need for greater transparency or communication around strategic planning and risk mitigation.

6. Positive Image in the Higher Education Community

- All NC-SARA staff respondents affirmed NC-SARA's positive reputation in the higher education community, with a combined 100% agreement. While most selected "agree" rather than "strongly agree," the results reflect a consistently favorable perception of the organization's image among this stakeholder group.

Key Findings – Looking Forward

1. Focus Areas for NC-SARA (Figure 4 Summarizes these Findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate whether NC-SARA should place more, less, or about the same level of focus on various organizational functions, including policy work, communications, data and research, and technological improvements. The results provide insight into stakeholder priorities for how NC-SARA engages and informs its audiences. Responses revealed varying priorities across functional areas, with particular interest in data and policy work, and general support for maintaining current levels of focus in several areas.

- **Top Priorities for Increased Focus:**
 - Technological Improvements received the strongest call for increased attention, with a weighted average of 4.13. Seventy five percent (75%) of respondents indicated either “somewhat more focus” or “much more focus” on areas such as the electronic application, forms, and the Salesforce portal.
- **Strong Support for Educational Resources:**
 - Educational Resources for States and Institutions (e.g., online courses, Quick Start Guides, SPE workshops) had a weighted average of 3.50. Forty-four percent (44%) requested more focus, while 56.25% preferred maintaining current levels.
- **Continued Interest in Data and Research:**
 - Data & Research efforts—including the annual data report, dashboards, and SARA student complaints reporting—received a weighted average of 3.31. Thirty one percent (31%) requested more focus, while 63% preferred to keep the focus as is.
- **Communications Seen as Appropriate:**
 - Communications (e.g., newsletters, webinars, presentations) had a weighted average of 3.00, indicating general satisfaction. Twenty-five percent (25%) of respondents preferred more focus; however, 25% also recommended less focus, suggesting mixed views.
- **Lower Priority Areas:**
 - SARA Resources (e.g., licensure guides, SARA Source) had a weighted average of 2.88, with 31% recommending somewhat less focus.
 - SARA Policy Work (e.g., Policy Modification Process, Working Groups) received the lowest score, with a weighted average of 2.81. Thirty-one percent (31%) of respondents suggested somewhat less focus, and only 13% wanted more.

These findings indicate that NC-SARA staff see a strategic opportunity to enhance technological systems and educational tools, while policy-related activities and existing resources may benefit from closer alignment or streamlining based on internal capacity and engagement preferences.

Q19: Which of the following areas, if any, do you believe NC-SARA should focus on?

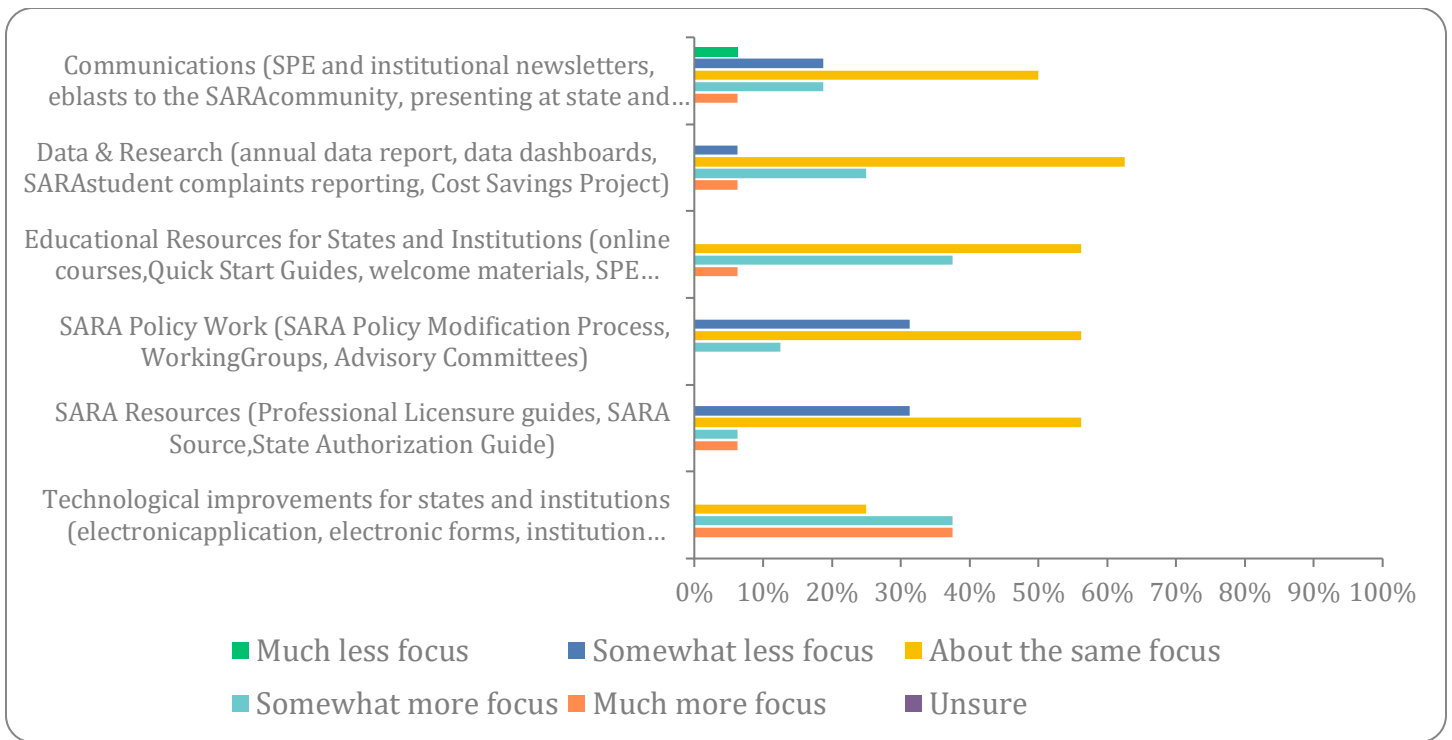


Figure 4: Level of Focus on Various Organizational Functions

2. Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question asked NC-SARA staff to identify areas where the organization should consider reducing its focus or modifying current efforts. The intent was to gather internal perspectives on potential overextension, misalignment with strategic priorities, or burdensome practices. Respondents identified several key themes:

- **Concerns about the SARA Policy Modification Process (PMP):** Multiple responses cited the PMP as overly burdensome, suggesting that its current structure places strain not only on NC-SARA staff but also on regional compact and SPE personnel. One respondent proposed shifting the process to a biennial cycle rather than annual.
- **Need for Strategic Alignment:** One comment emphasized the importance of aligning staff tasks with NC-SARA’s strategic plan and core values, cautioning against responding to individual board member preferences or mistaking inquiries as action items. This suggests a call for greater discipline in prioritization and workload management.
- **Internal Communication and Capacity Balance:** A respondent flagged internal communications and the distribution of work as areas needing better balance, possibly indicating inefficiencies or overlaps that could be streamlined.
- **Board Meeting Frequency:** One respondent questioned the value of quarterly Board meetings, recommending a reassessment of meeting cadence to better reflect organizational needs and capacity.

Overall, NC-SARA staff highlighted a need for strategic focus, reduced operational burdens, and improved internal alignment. The Policy Modification Process and communication demands were the most frequently cited areas for potential recalibration.

3. Suggestions for Areas of Increased Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question asked respondents to identify additional areas where NC-SARA should place greater focus. Responses provide insight into emerging priorities, internal improvements, and external positioning. Six responses were submitted, highlighting the following key themes:

- **Internal Operations and Communications:** One respondent emphasized the need to strengthen internal operations and both internal and external communications. Suggestions included building a clearer organizational narrative and brand identity to better articulate and “sell” the value of SARA to stakeholders. The comment also noted the importance of sustained institutional participation and awareness of competitive reciprocity models that could threaten SARA’s relevance.
- **Technology Improvements:** Another respondent suggested expanding technology infrastructure, specifically recommending enhancements such as an institution portal and electronic forms to streamline engagement and operations.
- **Institution and State Retention & Recruitment:** One response highlighted the importance of maintaining steady-state participation, urging NC-SARA to focus more on retaining current institutions and states and recruiting new ones—with particular emphasis on long-term sustainability, regardless of potential participation by California.
- **Interpersonal and Inter-organizational Relationships:** A respondent called for increased focus on strengthening relationships among NC-SARA staff, regional compact staff, and state partners, pointing to the importance of collaboration and trust in the broader SARA ecosystem.

NC-SARA staff see opportunities to enhance the organization’s strategic communication, technological capabilities, institutional engagement, and cross-partner collaboration. These areas of focus reflect a forward-looking approach to sustaining and growing NC-SARA’s impact and infrastructure.

4. Additional Comments on NC-SARA’s Current State – Open Ended

An open-ended question provided respondents with the opportunity to share thoughts on NC-SARA’s current direction, operations, and strategic positioning. Responses provided critical insights into internal capacity, external threats, and organizational preparedness. Two respondents submitted comments that focused on the following themes:

- **External Threats and Strategic Planning:** One respondent emphasized concerns about the broader political and economic climate, including its potential to reduce institutional enrollment, budget stability, and continued participation in SARA. The respondent urged NC-SARA leadership to develop and communicate a comprehensive plan to address these risks, especially considering the cascading impact on states, institutions, and students.
- **Staffing Capacity and Burnout Risk:** Another respondent focused on internal operational capacity, noting that staffing levels should be aligned with the scope of NC-SARA’s projects. In particular, they cited the need for technological improvements but expressed concern that the IT team is under-resourced, which could contribute to staff burnout and hinder high-quality execution.

The responses highlight the importance of strategic foresight and organizational capacity. Internally, there is a call for right-sizing staff resources to match project demands, while externally, stakeholders seek visible leadership planning in the face of a shifting higher education landscape.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Internal Operations

- 1. Employee Experience Survey Results.** NC-SARA staff were asked to rate various aspects of their employee experience, including job satisfaction, communication, morale, compensation, and professional development. Responses were measured on a four-point Likert scale: “Strongly disagree”, “Disagree”, “Agree”, and “Strongly agree”. The goal was to assess internal organizational culture and identify areas of strength and potential improvement.

Overall, the results suggest a generally positive employee experience, with strong agreement around job importance, satisfaction, and supervisor communication. However, notable concerns emerged around team communication, compensation, and morale.

Key Strengths:

- **Job Significance and Resources:**
 - 80% “strongly agreed” that what they do is important to NC-SARA’s success, the highest-rated item with a weighted average of 3.80.
 - 67% “strongly agreed” they have the resources they need to do their jobs well (weighted average: 3.67).
- **Organizational Culture and Leadership:**
 - 71% agreed and 29% “strongly agreed” that NC-SARA is a good place to work (weighted average: 3.29).
 - 93% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their supervisor communicates effectively (weighted average: 3.40).
 - 93% also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the President communicates effectively (weighted average: 3.33).
- **Access and Clarity:**
 - 77% “agreed” they have access to information needed for decision-making (weighted average: 3.08).
 - 80% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they have a clear job description (weighted average: 3.20).
 - 87% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they are satisfied with employee benefits (weighted average: 3.20).

Areas for Improvement:

- **Team Dynamics and Communication:**
 - Only 53% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that morale among co-workers is good (weighted average: 2.67).
 - Just 53% felt there is good communication between teams, with 40% “disagreeing” (weighted average: 2.53).
 - Comfort in sharing honest opinions was split, with 53% “disagreeing” or “strongly disagreeing” (weighted average: 2.60).

- **Compensation and Work-Life Balance:**
 - Only 60% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they are satisfied with their compensation, while 33% “disagreed” (weighted average: 2.67).
 - Work-life balance also had mixed reviews, with a weighted average of 2.87.
- **Empowerment and Development:**
 - While 73% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they are empowered to reach their full potential, 27% “disagreed” (weighted average: 2.93).
 - Satisfaction with professional development resources was generally positive but had room for growth (weighted average: 3.13).

While NC-SARA staff report high levels of job satisfaction, clear roles, and strong support from leadership, challenges remain around inter-team communication, staff morale, and compensation. These findings can inform targeted strategies to enhance workplace culture, retention, and organizational effectiveness.

2. **Organizational Values.** Staff were asked to share their perspectives on what NC-SARA’s organizational values should be. This open-ended question prompted reflections not only on values but also on the structure and design of the survey itself. Several responses included constructive feedback on the survey format, indicating a desire for more nuanced response options and better alignment with internal staff perspectives. Three core themes emerged across the responses:
- **Transparency and Communication:** Staff consistently emphasized transparency, both internally and externally, as a key value. This includes open communication, clear processes, and trust-building with both employees and stakeholders.
 - **Inclusivity and Employee-Centered Culture:** Respondents recommended values such as “acceptance”, “collaboration”, “inclusivity”, and “praise”, pointing to the importance of a workplace culture that acknowledges differences, supports open dialogue, and fosters internal cohesion.
 - **Mission-Driven Focus and Accountability:** Staff expressed the need for NC-SARA to uphold values such as “innovation”, “strategy”, “sustainability”, and “professional growth”, especially in service to its mission and external stakeholders. These values were linked not only to external reputation but also to internal alignment and staff well-being.

Additionally, multiple respondents suggested **survey improvements**, including:

- The addition of neutral or scaled rating options (e.g., “somewhat agree”)
- Text boxes for contextual clarification
- Question framing that better accounts for the internal staff viewpoint, rather than assuming a state or institutional lens

Staff are aligned in their call for organizational values that reflect integrity, inclusion, and mission-alignment. They also voiced a need for NC-SARA to model these values internally, particularly in employee engagement, communication, and decision-making processes.

3. **Internal Operations.** Staff were invited to provide open-ended feedback on the current state of NC-SARA’s internal operations. Eight responses were submitted, offering detailed and constructive insights into organizational challenges, structural inefficiencies, and employee concerns. The data highlight strong staff engagement paired with a clear desire for improvement in leadership practices, role clarity, equity, and operational efficiency. Four major themes emerged:

- **Structural and Operational Inefficiencies:** Respondents expressed significant concern about fragmented processes, a lack of documentation, and limited oversight in areas like HR, accounting, budgeting, and decision-making authority. Comments emphasized the need for a more streamlined and transparent operational framework, with clear roles, protocols, and expectations.
 - “Internal processes need immediate attention. Team leaders require clear understanding of their budgetary authority and decision-making limits, with defined protocols for escalating issues.”
- **Leadership, Equity, and Decision-Making:** Multiple responses pointed to inconsistencies in leadership practices, including perceived favoritism and a lack of fairness in how decisions are made or how resources are allocated. Staff recommended that leadership roles be restructured to increase clarity and oversight—particularly through the creation of a Chief Operating Officer (COO) position to manage internal operations and promote accountability.
 - “Decision-making appears to be overly influenced by personal feelings... creating a tiered system within the agency.”
- **Employee Growth and Recognition:** Staff voiced concerns about limited advancement opportunities and the removal of tools that support professional development. Respondents stressed the need for consistent recognition of employee contributions and equitable access to training and growth.
 - “Opportunities for advancement are unclear... staff need capacity to complete work and do it at a high level.”
- **Call for Transparency and Communication:** A consistent theme across responses was the call for clearer internal communication—about HR decisions, spending authority, job roles, and strategic priorities. The absence of defined policies was linked to decreased morale and trust.
 - “The organization needs to prioritize the ‘feeding and care’ of its internal staff and operations with the same dedication it shows to external stakeholders.”

While staff reported some satisfaction in working at NC-SARA, their feedback underscored a need for comprehensive reform of internal operations. Respondents advocate for a more equitable, efficient, and transparent organization, one where internal infrastructure and staff well-being are supported as intentionally as NC-SARA’s external mission.

Recommendations

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative feedback from NC-SARA staff, the following recommendations are offered to inform NC-SARA’s strategic planning process. These recommendations aim to enhance internal operations, strengthen staff engagement, and align organizational focus with both current capacity and future opportunities:

1. Invest in Technological Improvements and Infrastructure

- Prioritize enhancements to NC-SARA’s digital systems, including development of an institution portal, electronic forms, and upgrades to Salesforce.
- Align IT staffing levels and project timelines with technological demands to reduce risk of burnout and ensure project execution at a high standard.
- Allocate appropriate budget and operational support to ensure sustainability of critical technology platforms.

2. Improve Internal Communications and Operational Clarity

- Strengthen internal communication across teams by clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority.
- Develop and disseminate organizational protocols for budgeting, reporting, and approvals to eliminate ambiguity and improve efficiency.
- Establish regular cross-team communication forums to foster collaboration and transparency across all levels of the organization.

3. Establish and Model Organizational Values Internally

- Engage staff in a participatory process to formally adopt and implement core organizational values such as transparency, equity, collaboration, innovation, and sustainability.
- Ensure values are consistently reflected in both internal practices (e.g., HR, decision-making, recognition) and external engagements.
- Use these values as a guidepost for aligning strategic initiatives, staffing decisions, and organizational culture.

4. Expand Professional Development and Advancement Opportunities

- Reinstate or enhance access to training tools and platforms to support ongoing employee learning.
- Establish and clearly communicate pathways for career advancement, including role expectations, competencies, and promotional opportunities.
- Develop transparent processes for evaluating, recognizing, and rewarding employee contributions.

5. Address Leadership Structure and Operational Oversight

- Consider establishing a Chief Operating Officer (COO) position to provide dedicated oversight of internal operations, including HR, IT, and finance.
- Ensure that executive leadership practices objective, equitable, and transparent decision-making that reinforces trust and accountability across the organization.
- Provide executive coaching or mentorship opportunities for senior leaders to support adaptive and inclusive leadership.

6. Calibrate Organizational Focus and Capacity

- Reassess the frequency and scope of Board-related processes, such as quarterly meetings and the Policy Modification Process, to ensure alignment with staff capacity and organizational priorities.
- Explore transitioning the Policy Modification Process to a biennial cycle to reduce burden on internal and external stakeholders.
- Align NC-SARA's strategic initiatives and workstreams with capacity.

7. Strengthen Strategic Communication and External Positioning

- Develop a clear, cohesive narrative to promote the value of SARA and NC-SARA's role in the higher education landscape.
- Identify and target key audiences—state partners, institutions, and policymakers—with messaging that articulates the value and impact of participation in SARA.
- Monitor external threats (e.g., competing reciprocity models, regulatory changes) and proactively communicate NC-SARA's value proposition.

8. Promote a Collaborative and Inclusive Workplace Culture

- Create structured opportunities for inter-team collaboration, informal connection, and staff input into organizational decisions.

- Establish mechanisms for employees to safely share feedback, voice concerns, and participate in organizational planning.
- Promote workplace practices that support morale, work-life balance, and psychological safety.

These recommendations are designed to help NC-SARA foster a high-performing, mission-aligned, and resilient organization, one that is prepared to meet internal needs while advancing its national leadership in postsecondary reciprocity and student access.

Appendix

This appendix includes a curated set of supplementary materials that provide additional context and clarity on key survey findings. Since NC-SARA maintains full access to the complete survey instrument and raw response data via SurveyMonkey, this section focuses on value-added visuals, select summary tables, and references to support interpretation of the findings presented in this report.

A. Key Quantitative Visuals

Charts generated from SurveyMonkey summarizing respondent feedback on core areas of interest, including:

- Relevance and confidence in NC-SARA's core work
- Effectiveness in promoting a culture of collaboration
- Top challenges identified for the next 3–5 years
- Level of focus on various organizational functions

B. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

A summary of thematic categories used to analyze open-ended responses, including:

- Emerging concerns (e.g., policy risk, compliance gaps)
- Recommendations for expanded support
- Stakeholder views on NC-SARA's image and leadership

This framework provides transparency into how qualitative data was synthesized into themes.

C. Methodological Notes

This section provides additional context regarding the design, distribution, and analysis of the NC-SARA staff survey.

- **Survey Distribution and Response Rate**
 - The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 17 NC-SARA staff members. The survey was open from June 2 to June 23, 2025, and a total of 17 responses were received, with 94 percent of respondents completing the entire survey.
 - Respondents were asked a combination of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into NC-SARA's effectiveness, challenges, and strategic priorities.
- **Use of SurveyMonkey Tools**

- The survey was developed, administered, and analyzed using SurveyMonkey. Key tools used in the analysis included:
- The “Question & Answer” filtering feature, which allowed results to be examined by question and respondent characteristics (e.g., years of tenure).
- Built-in charts and weighted averages, used to visualize and interpret Likert-scale responses.
- Export tools to generate data summaries for use in tables and figures presented in this report.

Charts and figures in the appendix were generated directly from SurveyMonkey or formatted using exported data for clarity and visual consistency.

- **Thematic Coding and Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Open-ended responses were reviewed through a manual thematic coding process to identify common issues, suggestions, and perceptions. Thematic categories were developed inductively, meaning they were derived from patterns and recurring topics in the responses themselves.

Once themes were established, each open-text response was reviewed and tagged with one or more codes. Common themes included:

- Suggestions for Increased Focus
- Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus
- Additional Comments on NC-SARA’s Current State

Representative comments were paraphrased or quoted directly where appropriate, and broad patterns were summarized in relevant report sections and in the qualitative analysis portion of the appendix.

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Survey – Final Report: NC-SARA Board

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: August 18, 2025

Executive Summary

As part of the NC-SARA 2025 Strategic Planning process, a survey was administered to the NC-SARA Board to assess the current state of NC-SARA, identify organizational needs, and gather valuable input for the organization's long-term strategic objectives. Other NC-SARA stakeholders were also surveyed, including SARA-participating institutions, NC-SARA Staff, State Portal Entity (SPE) staff, and Regional Compact SARA staff. Individual reports summarizing results for each stakeholder group are also being provided to capture unique perspectives and priorities. These findings form the basis for specific, actionable recommendations to enhance NC-SARA's effectiveness and support for the NC-SARA Board moving forward.

Key survey results indicate that NC-SARA Board members express strong confidence in the organization's core work, strategic direction, and staff leadership. Respondents consistently affirmed the relevance of NC-SARA's mission and praised the professionalism, responsiveness, and knowledge of its staff. Board members also emphasized the importance of continued operational efficiency and proactive policy leadership.

Looking ahead, respondents identified key challenges such as federal policy changes, shifts in accreditation and quality assurance, and the risk of states withdrawing from SARA. There is strong interest in strengthening NC-SARA's advocacy efforts, modernizing quality standards, and increasing visibility through public storytelling and strategic communications. Board members also expressed support for continued investments in technology and improvements to tools that support state and institutional partners.

Background & Methodology

To inform its next Strategic Plan, NC-SARA distributed a stakeholder survey to gather input on organizational direction and effectiveness.

- I. **Platform:** The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. The survey included 23 questions, both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses.
- II. **Dates:** The survey was conducted from June 2–20, 2025.
- III. **Respondents:** The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 18 NC-SARA board members. A total of 14 responses were received, with 93 percent of respondents completing the entire survey. Respondent tenure with SARA varied, providing a mix of long-term institutional knowledge and newer perspectives. The largest group of respondents (42.9%) reported being associated with NC-SARA for more than 10 years, indicating a strong base of institutional knowledge and long-term engagement on the Board. An moderate share (21%) indicated involvement for less than 1 year, suggesting recent onboarding of new Board members. Smaller portions of the group reported serving 4–5 years (21%) and 6–7 years (14%), with no respondents selecting the 1–3 or 8–10-year ranges.

This distribution suggests a blend of fresh perspectives and deep historical insight among board members, which may support balanced governance and strategic continuity.

IV. **Analysis:** Responses were filtered using SurveyMonkey’s “Question & Answer” filtering tool. Data was reviewed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and charts were provided via SurveyMonkey and processed for reporting.

Key Findings – NC-SARA’s Core Work

1. Strong Overall Engagement and Confidence:

- One hundred percent (100%) of respondents reported high levels of engagement with NC-SARA processes. All responded with "To a great extent" when asked about understanding NC-SARA’s core work and the difference between NC-SARA and SARA.
- Most respondents believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders. Ninety two percent (92%) of respondents indicated that NC-SARA’s core work is “Very relevant” and 8% selected “Relevant” to stakeholder needs. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Q5: I believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

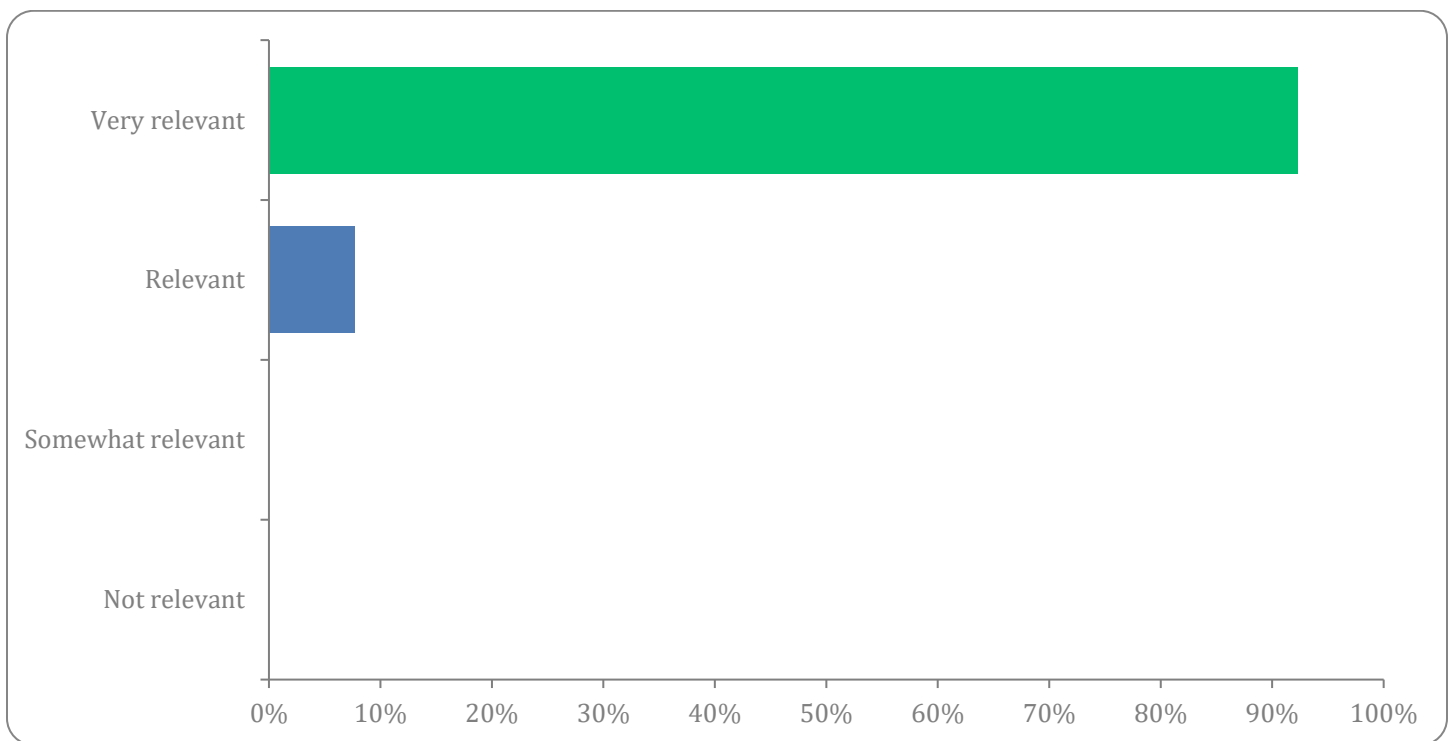


Figure 1: NC-SARA’s Core Work Relevant to Stakeholders Needs

- All respondents, 100%, described themselves as "Very confident" or "Confident" in NC-SARA's capacity to effectively execute its core work.

2. Strong Effectiveness in Promoting Value and Collaboration

- Most respondents believe NC-SARA effectively promotes the value of SARA to the higher education community with 85% respondents reporting “Very effectively” or “Effectively”. The other 15% selected “Somewhat effectively” and no respondents selected “Not effectively.”
- Most respondents believe NC-SARA effectively promotes a culture of collaboration with 92% respondents reporting “Very effectively” or “Effectively”. The other 8% selected “Somewhat effectively” and no respondents selected “Not effectively.”

3. Overall Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work (Figure 2 summarizes these findings)

- All respondents, 100%, “Strongly agree” or “Agree” that they are satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

Q9: Overall, I am satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

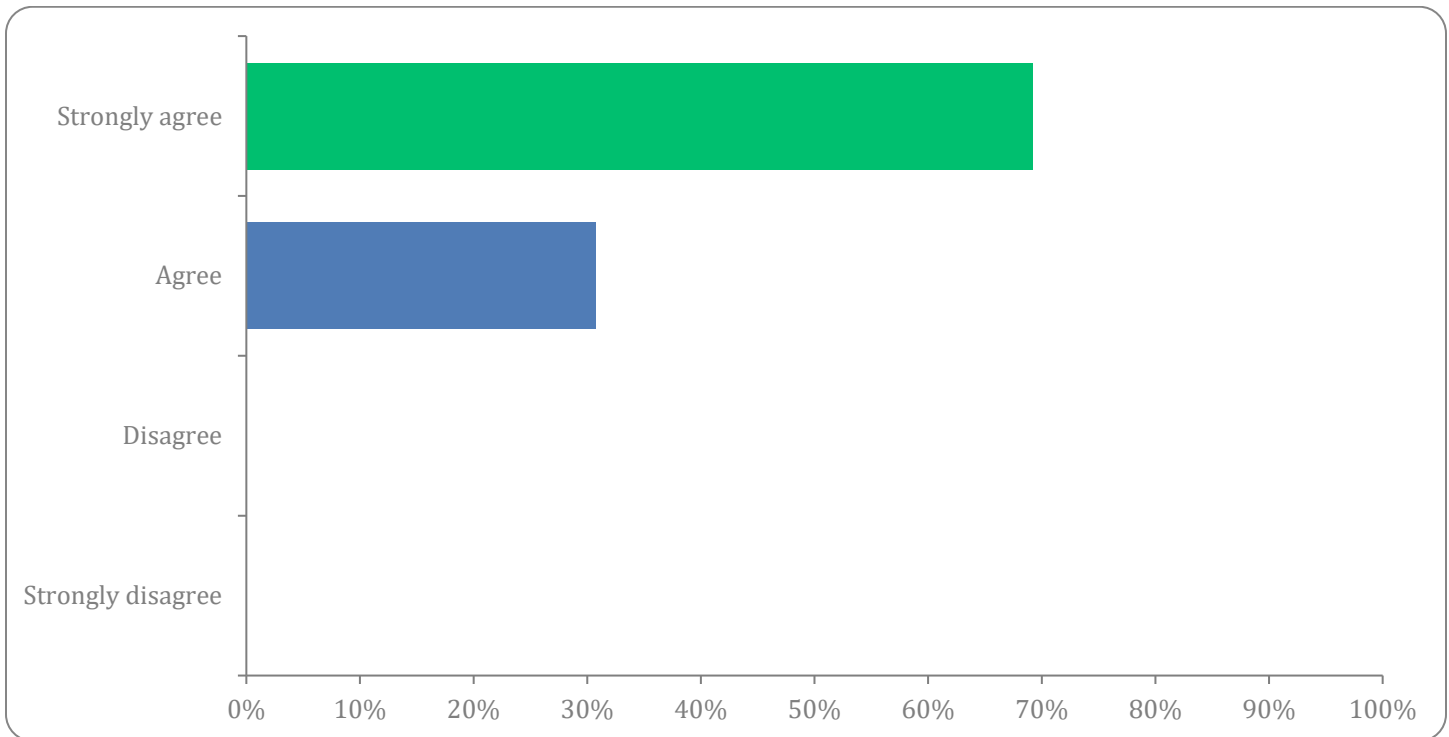


Figure 2: Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work

Key Findings – NC-SARA Communications, Support, and Operations

1. Effective Use of Communications and Provides Necessary Resources

- Respondents largely agreed that they are satisfied with NC-SARA communications. One hundred percent (100%) of respondents “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed” that they are satisfied with the communications they receive from NC-SARA.
- Respondents largely agreed that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA to be successful. One hundred percent (100%) of respondents “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed” that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA to be successful.

2. Operational Efficiency

- A strong majority of respondents (85%) rated NC-SARA as either "Efficient" or "Very Efficient" from an operational standpoint, indicating confidence in the organization's ability to manage its operations effectively. The remaining 15% described NC-SARA as "Somewhat Efficient," suggesting room for continued improvement but no respondents rated the organization as inefficient.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

1. Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years (Figure 3 summarizes these findings)

- **Board members identified a range of potential challenges NC-SARA may face, with the most frequently cited issues reflecting federal policy shifts, accreditation standards, and participation at the state level:**
 - Federal policy changes emerged as the most pressing concern, selected by 77% of respondents. This includes negotiated rulemaking and potential impacts stemming from changes at the U.S. Department of Education.
 - Accreditation and the complexities of postsecondary quality assurance, including the C-RAC 21st Century Guidelines, was the second most frequently cited challenge (62%).
 - States leaving SARA was noted by 54% of respondents, highlighting concerns about ongoing participation and interstate collaboration.
 - Financial challenges for institutions (outside of declining enrollment) were identified by 38% of board members.
- **Less frequently cited challenges included:**
 - Capacity and resources of State Portal Entity (SPE) staff and institutional declining enrollment, each selected by 31%.
 - Public criticism of SARA (31%) and institutions leaving SARA (23%).
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI) and public perceptions about distance learning quality, each selected by 15%.
 - The rapid growth of short-term credentials and new providers identified by only 8%.

These responses suggest that board members are especially focused on external policy risks and system-wide sustainability, with comparatively lower concern around emerging technologies or credential innovation at this time.

Q13: What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing NC-SARA in the next 3-5 years? (please select your top 4)

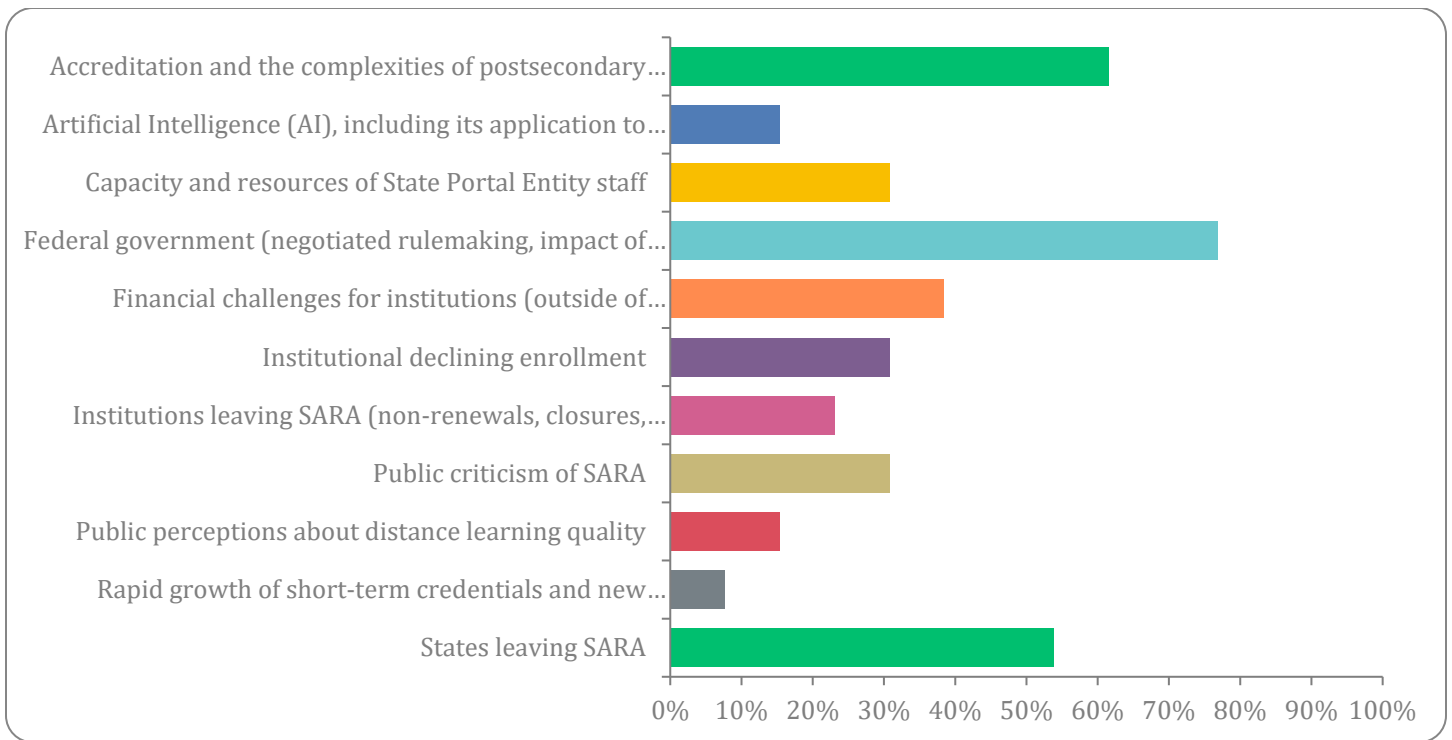


Figure 3: Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years

2. Political Environment as a Risk Factor

- A majority of Board respondents (85%) agreed that the political environment poses a significant risk to NC-SARA, with 31% strongly agreeing and 54% agreeing. In contrast, 15% of respondents disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These results suggest that NC-SARA Board members hold a strong and unified view that political dynamics represent a meaningful risk to the organization, with little dissent among respondents.

3. Economic Environment as a Risk

- A majority of Board respondents (69%) agreed that the economic climate poses a significant risk to NC-SARA, with 23% strongly agreeing and 46% agreeing. In contrast, 31% of respondents disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These results indicate that while most Board members recognize the economic climate as a risk, there is a notable minority who view it as less concerning.

4. Technological Changes as a Risk

- A large majority of Board respondents (92%) disagreed that technological change poses a significant risk to NC-SARA, with 85% disagreeing and 8% strongly disagreeing. Only 8% of respondents agreed, and none strongly agreed. These results suggest that technological change is not currently viewed as a major threat by Board members, indicating general confidence in NC-SARA's ability to adapt to evolving technology.

5. Confidence in Leadership's Strategic Planning

- A strong majority of Board respondents (85%) agreed that NC-SARA's Board and Senior Leadership have a plan in place to address the threats or obstacles the organization faces. A small minority, 2 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results indicate a generally high level of confidence in leadership's preparedness, though a few respondents expressed concern or uncertainty about the organization's strategic planning efforts.

6. Positive Image in the Higher Education Community

- All respondents (100%) agreed that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community, with 25% strongly agreeing and 75% agreeing. No respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating unanimous affirmation of NC-SARA's reputation among Board members. These results suggest strong confidence in NC-SARA's standing and credibility across the higher education landscape.

Key Findings – Looking Forward

1. Focus Areas for NC-SARA (Figure 4 Summarizes these Findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate whether NC-SARA should place more, less, or about the same level of focus on various organizational functions, including policy work, communications, data and research, and technological improvements. The results provide insight into stakeholder priorities for how NC-SARA engages and informs its audiences. Overall, Board members expressed strong support for NC-SARA's current areas of focus, with particular interest in expanding efforts related to technological improvements and policy work, while communications, data, and educational resources were generally viewed as appropriately prioritized.

- **Highest Priorities - The strongest support for increased focus included the following:**
 - Board members expressed the strongest support for increasing NC-SARA's focus on technological improvements, which received the highest weighted average (4.25). A combined 58% of respondents indicated a desire for *somewhat more* or *much more* focus on enhancements such as electronic applications, forms, and the Salesforce institution portal.
 - SARA policy work also emerged as a top priority, with a weighted average of 4.00. One-third of respondents selected each of the top three positive response options, reflecting broad support for continued focus on policy modification processes, working groups, and advisory committees.
- **Maintain Current Focus - A majority of respondents preferred about the same level of focus for:**
 - Educational resources for states and institutions received a weighted average of 3.64, with 45% wanting the current focus maintained and another 45% seeking increased attention. This includes support for online courses, Quick Start Guides, welcome materials, and SPE-specific trainings.
 - Data and research activities received a moderate level of support (3.50), with 66.7% preferring the current level of focus and 33.3% seeking additional attention to efforts like the annual data report, dashboards, complaints reporting, and the Cost Savings Project.
 - Communications efforts (e.g., newsletters, presentations, webinars) also received general approval, with 64% preferring the current level of focus and 36% requesting somewhat more focus (weighted average: 3.36).
- **Very Limited Desire for Less Focus - SARA resources such as the Professional Licensure Guide, SARA Source, and State Authorization Guide received the lowest average rating (3.08), with 17% suggesting less focus and no respondents requesting much more.**

Q19: Which of the following areas, if any, do you believe NC-SARA should focus on?

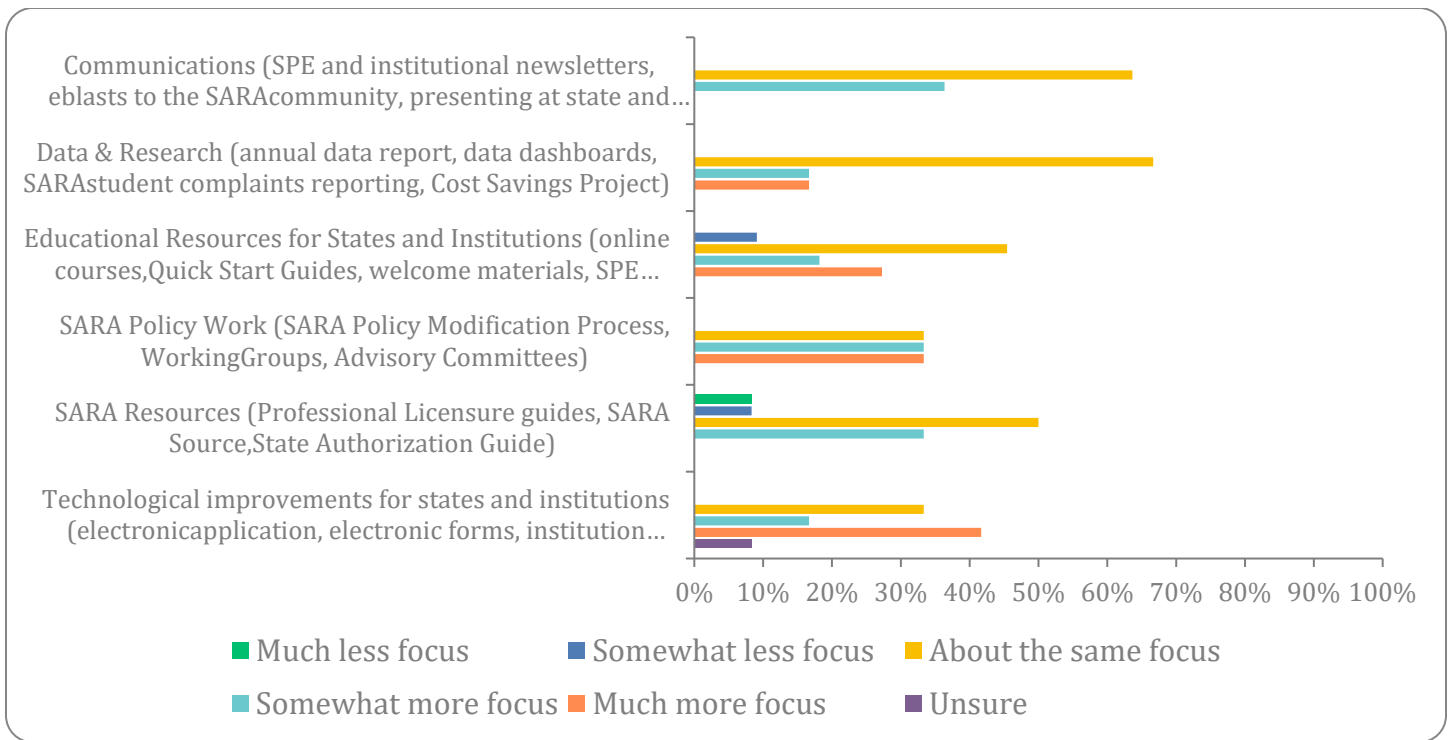


Figure 4: Level of Focus on Various Organizational Functions

2. Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question invited Board members to share any additional perspectives on areas where NC-SARA may be overextended or misaligned, including functions or priorities that may benefit from reduced emphasis or refinement. Responses were intended to help inform strategic streamlining and ensure resources are allocated effectively.

- A small number of Board respondents provided suggestions for areas where NC-SARA could consider reducing or refining its focus. Several comments emphasized the importance of forward-looking strategies and minimizing distractions from past conflicts or external criticism.
- One respondent recommended that NC-SARA spend less time reacting to SARA critics, suggesting a shift toward more proactive, mission-focused communication.
- Another emphasized the need to move beyond past personalities and disputes, encouraging the organization to prioritize processes and policy implementation over individual dynamics.
- A third comment suggested that once technological improvements are in place, NC-SARA could transition to routine evaluations rather than ongoing intensive development.
- Two respondents indicated no additional suggestions (noted as "N/A").

These comments reflect a shared desire for NC-SARA to maintain a strategic and forward-focused posture, particularly by streamlining efforts in areas that may no longer require intensive attention.

3. Suggestions for Areas of Increased Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question asked Board members to identify additional areas where NC-SARA should increase its efforts. Responses emphasized the need for stronger storytelling, external engagement, modernization of standards, and proactive policy leadership in an evolving higher education landscape. A summary of key themes includes:

- **Telling the NC-SARA Story:** Respondents encouraged NC-SARA to invest more in public storytelling and visibility, including:
 - Sharing student and institutional success stories that highlight the impact of SARA on access and outcomes.
 - Having staff present at conferences in an official capacity to elevate the organization's presence and credibility.
 - Developing a student success or institutional impact page to regularly communicate the value of participation.
- **Political and Policy Advocacy:** Multiple comments pointed to the importance of actively engaging in the external policy environment, especially at the federal level, where there are concerns about existential threats to SARA's future.
 - Suggestions included working closely with Congress, the National Governors Association (NGA), and other influential bodies. One respondent specifically warned of the potential for sudden federal action and emphasized the importance of shaping the narrative before policy decisions are made.
- **Constructive Engagement with Consumer Advocates:** One comment noted the need for NC-SARA to build bridges with consumer protection advocates to reduce adversarial dynamics and potentially align around shared goals.
- **Accreditation and Quality Assurance:** A respondent highlighted the need to address uncertainty in accreditation policy, noting that state and federal shifts may challenge current SARA requirements.
 - They recommended forming a Quality Working Group to revisit and update the C-RAC guidelines, potentially incorporating national experts like Quality Matters to develop a more contemporary and robust framework.
- **Technology Enhancements for States:** One Board member suggested continued improvements to technology platforms used by SPEs, such as administrative forms, the SARA portal, and the application system, to improve operational efficiency and support.

These responses suggest Board members are eager to see NC-SARA take a more visible, modern, and strategically proactive role, particularly in the areas of communication, advocacy, and quality leadership.

4. **Additional Comments on NC-SARA's Current State – Open Ended**

An open-ended question provided respondents with the opportunity to share thoughts on NC-SARA's current direction, operations, and strategic positioning. Comments highlighted both appreciation for current efforts and perspectives on future priorities and challenges.

- **Positive Feedback and Appreciation:** Several respondents expressed gratitude and confidence in NC-SARA's current efforts, with comments such as *"Thank you for the good work you all do!"* and *"I think NC-SARA is on the right track."*
- **Strategic Positioning and Future Outlook:** Respondents noted that NC-SARA is at a pivotal juncture and that future success will depend on strengthening internal policy processes, the Board of Directors, and relationships with state and federal decision-makers. One comment emphasized that the pause in federal regulatory changes is not a long-term victory, but rather an opportunity to fortify NC-SARA's position.
- **Survey Feedback:** One respondent suggested improvements to the survey design, noting a preference for neutral response options and comment fields for elaborating on specific answers.

These responses indicate both confidence in NC-SARA's trajectory and recognition of the need for proactive steps to ensure its long-term success and sustainability.

Key Findings – Engagement with NC-SARA Services

Respondents were asked to rate their experiences interacting with NC-SARA staff across several dimensions, including helpfulness, responsiveness, approachability, and subject-matter expertise. One additional item measured interest in increased engagement opportunities. A summary of key findings includes:

- **Unanimous Positive Ratings on Core Staff Qualities:** Respondents gave exceptionally high marks across key engagement indicators:
 - 100% strongly agreed that NC-SARA staff are *helpful, responsive*, and that they feel *comfortable approaching staff with concerns or feedback*.
 - 92% strongly agreed that staff are *knowledgeable*, with one respondent (8%) selecting *agree*.
- **Diverse Views on Engagement Preferences:** Responses were more mixed when asked whether they would like more engagement opportunities with staff:
 - 58% disagreed, suggesting that the current level of interaction is sufficient.
 - 42% expressed interest in increased engagement, including 17% who strongly agreed.
 - The lowest weighted average score (2.58) across all items reflects these differing preferences.

Overall, the data reflect extremely high satisfaction with staff professionalism and accessibility, while also indicating that interest in expanded engagement varies among respondents. This suggests NC-SARA staff are viewed as trusted and competent, and that engagement strategies may benefit from being optional or flexible to meet individual preferences.

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, the following recommendations are offered to inform NC-SARA's strategic planning:

1. Strengthen Policy Leadership and Advocacy

- Elevate federal policy engagement by proactively shaping the national conversation around reciprocity, quality assurance, and institutional participation.
 - Actively coordinate with federal stakeholders (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, Congress, NGA).
 - Develop a rapid response framework for anticipated regulatory actions (e.g., accreditation, consumer protection).
- Enhance positioning around accreditation and quality standards.

- Form a Quality Working Group to revisit and modernize the C-RAC Guidelines in collaboration with national quality assurance experts.
- Explore contingency planning for changes to accreditation recognition or alternative quality metrics.

2. Increase Visibility Through Storytelling and Public Communications

- Develop a strategic narrative that tells the “SARA success story” through the lens of student outcomes, institutional savings, and cross-state access.
 - Launch a “Student & Institution Spotlight” campaign to humanize SARA’s impact.
 - Create a recurring communications piece (e.g., webpage or digital bulletin) to highlight testimonials and data-driven successes.
- Amplify NC-SARA’s presence at national and regional events.
 - Ensure NC-SARA staff are presenting under the organizational banner at conferences.
 - Consider light branding (e.g., lapel pins, signage) to increase visibility and engagement.

3. Advance Technology Systems for Institutional and State Efficiency

- Prioritize user-centered technology upgrades, especially for State Portal Entities.
 - Continue to refine the SARA portal, application system, and admin forms with feedback loops for SPEs and institutions.
- Adopt a long-term technology roadmap that balances development with ongoing maintenance and evaluation.

4. Sustain Focus on Core Functions While Remaining Agile

- Maintain the current level of attention on:
 - Educational resources (e.g., online courses, Quick Start Guides)
 - Data and research efforts (e.g., dashboards, complaint tracking, cost savings)
 - Communications (e.g., newsletters, webinars)
- Consider scaling back focus in areas where:
 - Functionality is mature (e.g., once tech systems are stabilized, shift to maintenance mode)
 - Resources are being spent defensively (e.g., excessive energy on addressing critics or internal conflicts)

5. Cultivate Strategic Relationships and Coalition-Building

- Invest in relationship-building with higher education stakeholders and influencers to strengthen support and reinforce NC-SARA’s role in the national postsecondary landscape.
- Engage consumer protection groups constructively to identify shared goals and reduce adversarial positioning.

6. Continue Strong Internal Operations and Leadership Practices

- Maintain the high standards of responsiveness, helpfulness, and approachability that earned unanimous praise from Board members.
- While most respondents are satisfied with current engagement levels, offer flexible opportunities (e.g., office hours, periodic check-ins) for those seeking deeper interaction.
- Continue to reinforce confidence in NC-SARA’s governance by transparently sharing progress on strategic risks and long-term planning efforts.

7. Monitor and Reassess External Risks

- Regularly revisit potential threats from the political, economic, and institutional environment.
 - While Board members largely dismissed technological change as a risk, NC-SARA should remain alert to evolving EdTech trends that could shift institutional expectations or delivery models.
- Use a dashboard or horizon scan framework to keep the Board informed of emerging challenges and mitigation strategies.

These recommendations reflect the Board’s strong confidence in NC-SARA’s core work and staff, coupled with a clear call for increased visibility, strategic advocacy, and system modernization to position the organization for long-term success.

Appendix

This appendix includes a curated set of supplementary materials that provide additional context and clarity on key survey findings. Since NC-SARA maintains full access to the complete survey instrument and raw response data via SurveyMonkey, this section focuses on value-added visuals, select summary tables, and references to support interpretation of the findings presented in this report.

A. Key Quantitative Visuals

Charts generated from SurveyMonkey summarizing respondent feedback on core areas of interest, including:

- Relevance and confidence in NC-SARA’s core work
- Top challenges identified for the next 3–5 years
- Level of focus on various organizational functions

B. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

A summary of thematic categories used to analyze open-ended responses, including:

- Emerging concerns (e.g., policy risk, compliance gaps)
- Recommendations for expanded support
- Stakeholder views on NC-SARA’s image and leadership

This framework provides transparency into how qualitative data was synthesized into themes.

C. Methodological Notes

This section provides additional context regarding the design, distribution, and analysis of the SPE stakeholder survey.

- **Survey Distribution and Response Rate**
 - The survey was distributed electronically via email to 18 NC-SARA board members. The survey was open from June 2 to June 20, 2025, and a total of 14 responses were received. Of these, 93% completed the entire survey, indicating strong engagement from the respondent group.
 - Respondents were asked a combination of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into NC-SARA’s effectiveness, challenges, and strategic priorities.

- **Use of SurveyMonkey Tools**

- The survey was developed, administered, and analyzed using SurveyMonkey. Key tools used in the analysis included:
- The “Question & Answer” filtering feature, which allowed results to be examined by question and respondent characteristics (e.g., years of tenure).
- Built-in charts and weighted averages, used to visualize and interpret Likert-scale responses.
- Export tools to generate data summaries for use in tables and figures presented in this report.

Charts and figures in the appendix were generated directly from SurveyMonkey or formatted using exported data for clarity and visual consistency.

- **Thematic Coding and Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Open-ended responses were reviewed through a manual thematic coding process to identify common issues, suggestions, and perceptions. Thematic categories were developed inductively, meaning they were derived from patterns and recurring topics in the responses themselves.

Once themes were established, each open-text response was reviewed and tagged with one or more codes. Common themes included:

- Suggestions for Increased Focus
- Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus
- Additional Comments on NC-SARA’s Current State

Representative comments were paraphrased or quoted directly where appropriate, and broad patterns were summarized in relevant report sections and in the qualitative analysis portion of the appendix.

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Survey – Final Report: Institutions

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: August 18, 2025

Executive Summary

As part of the NC-SARA 2025 Strategic Planning process, a survey was administered to SARA-participating institutions to assess the current state of NC-SARA, identify organizational needs, and gather valuable input for the organization's long-term strategic objectives. Other NC-SARA stakeholders were also surveyed, including State Portal Entity (SPE) staff, NC-SARA Staff, NC-SARA Board members, and Regional Compact SARA staff. Individual reports summarizing results for each stakeholder group are also being provided to capture unique perspectives and priorities. These findings form the basis for specific, actionable recommendations to enhance NC-SARA's effectiveness and support for SARA-participating institutions going forward.

Respondents overwhelmingly support NC-SARA's core mission and find its work highly relevant. Institutional confidence in NC-SARA's leadership, resources, and communications is strong, with over 90% expressing satisfaction with the organization's efforts. However, survey responses also highlight several opportunities for improvement. Key areas include clarifying the role of NC-SARA versus SARA/state compacts, improving awareness and usability of tools and resources, reducing administrative burden, especially for small institutions, and continuing to invest in federal advocacy, professional licensure support, and technology modernization.

Institutions identified top risks facing NC-SARA in the next 3–5 years: federal policy changes, accreditation complexity, financial pressures, and the evolving technological and political landscape. Stakeholders support increased focus on policy advocacy, streamlined reporting, clearer communications, and improved onboarding and training materials. There is also strong endorsement for expanding the use of Quick Start Guides, online courses, and digital platforms to simplify compliance and participation.

Background & Methodology

To inform its next Strategic Plan, NC-SARA distributed a stakeholder survey to gather input on organizational direction and effectiveness.

- I. **Platform:** The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. The survey included 35 questions, both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses.
- II. **Dates:** The survey was conducted from June 2–20, 2025.
- III. **Respondents:** The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 9,267 individuals representing over 2,400 SARA-participating institutions. A total of 673 responses were received, with 82 percent of respondents completing the entire survey. The majority of institutions that responded to the survey are small to mid-sized institutions:
 - Half (50%) of respondents reported enrollment under 2,500 FTE, making small institutions the largest represented group in the survey.

- One-third (34%) reported 2,500–9,999 FTE, reflecting strong participation from mid-sized institutions.
- Just over 12% reported 10,000–29,999 FTE, and
- Only 4% represented large institutions with 30,000+ FTE.
- Overall, survey responses closely mirror the distribution of SARA participants by enrollment size: 54% of respondents represent institutions with fewer than 2,500 FTE, 34% with 2,500–9,999 FTE, 9% with 10,000–29,999 FTE, and 3% with 30,000 or more FTE.

Survey responses reflect a similar distribution to the broader SARA institutional population. Public institutions accounted for 50% of responses, closely aligning with SARA’s overall composition of 49% public institutions. Similarly, 44% of respondents represented private non-profit institutions, compared to 43% in the SARA population. Private for-profit institutions made up 6% of survey responses, consistent with their 8% representation within SARA overall.

Most respondents were from 4-year institutions (61%), which also mirrors the SARA-wide figure of 72%. Two-year institutions comprised 32% of respondents, aligning with SARA’s overall 27%. An additional 8% of respondents (50 institutions) selected “Other,” which may include institutions offering a mix of degree types or specialized credentials.

A majority (over 57%) have been engaged with NC-SARA for 1–5 years, indicating a well-established base of participants with practical experience. A smaller but meaningful portion of respondents (over 20%) have long-term engagement (6+ years), suggesting institutional stability and potential for longitudinal insights. The presence of newer participants (10% with less than a year) also points to recent growth and continued expansion of SARA participation across institutions.

- IV. **Analysis:** Responses were filtered using SurveyMonkey’s “Question & Answer” filtering tool. Data was reviewed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and charts were provided via SurveyMonkey and processed for reporting.

Key Findings – NC-SARA’s Core Work

1. Engagement and Confidence:

- While nearly 75% of institutional respondents report at least some understanding of the difference between NC-SARA and SARA, only one-quarter (25%) feel they understand it fully. A significant portion, roughly 25%, have limited or no understanding, suggesting a need for continued education and clarification on the distinct roles of NC-SARA and the broader SARA framework. Enhanced outreach and communication may improve stakeholder comprehension and engagement.
- Institutional respondents overwhelmingly support NC-SARA’s core work, with nearly 97% expressing at least some level of agreement. Over half of respondents (58%) strongly affirmed the organization’s mission and activities. Minimal disagreement (3%) suggests broad alignment with NC-SARA’s purpose across the higher education institutions.
- The majority of institutional respondents (nearly 88%) believe NC-SARA’s core work is “Relevant” or “Very relevant” to stakeholder needs, signaling broad support for the

organization's strategic focus. A small portion (12%) expressed uncertainty or concern, suggesting an opportunity to clarify or better communicate the impact of NC-SARA's work to all institutional audiences. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Q8: I believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

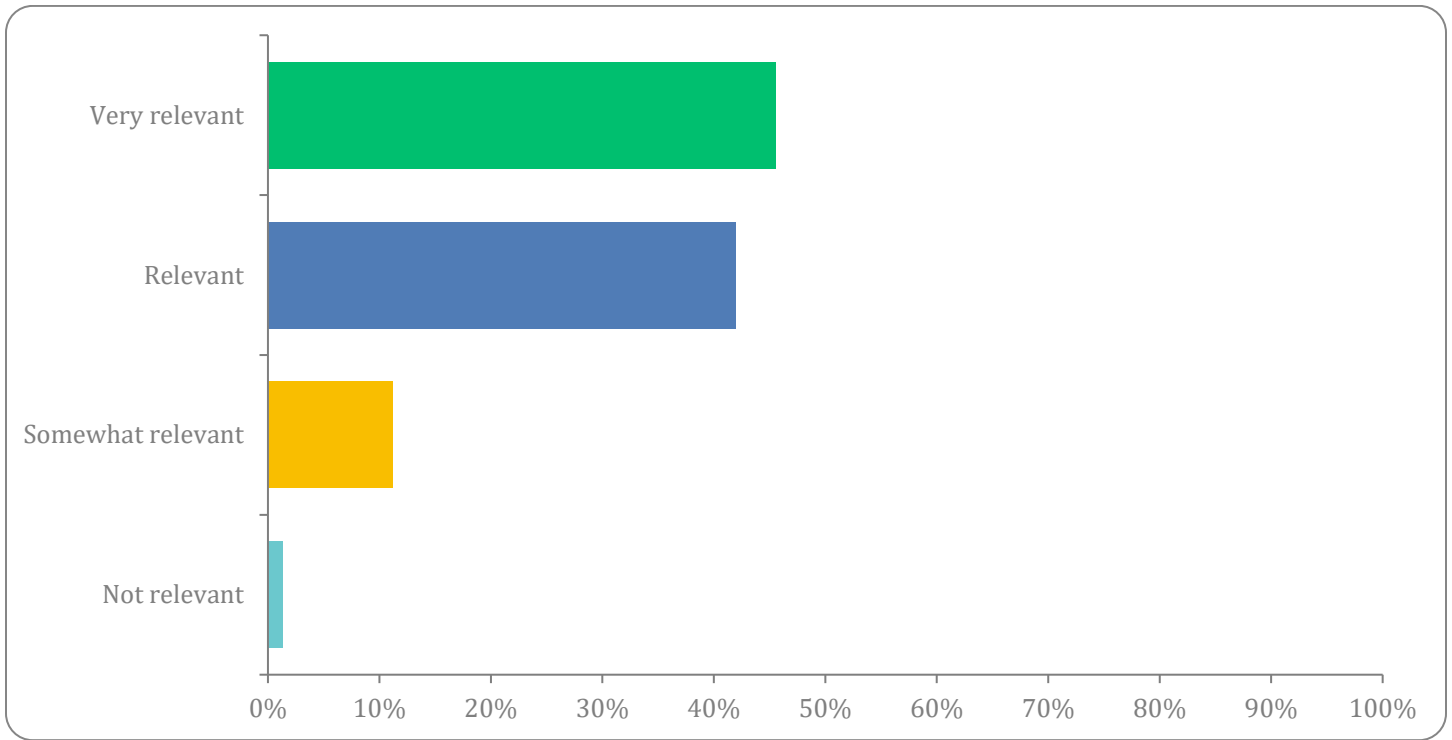


Figure 1: NC-SARA's Core Work Relevant to Stakeholders Needs

- An overwhelming majority of institutional respondents (over 87%) expressed confidence in NC-SARA's ability to carry out its core work, with more than one-third indicating they are "Very confident". Fewer than 2% indicated a lack of confidence, suggesting strong institutional trust in NC-SARA's capacity and performance.

2. Effectiveness in Promoting Value and Collaboration

- A majority of institutional respondents (68%) believe NC-SARA is "Effective" or "Very effective" in promoting the value of SARA within the higher education community. However, over one-quarter (26%) feel efforts are only "Somewhat effective", and a small portion (6%) view them as "Not effective", indicating there may be opportunities to strengthen outreach and communications.
- Nearly three-quarters of institutional respondents (73%) view NC-SARA as "Effective" or "Very effective" in fostering a culture of collaboration. About 22% indicated only "Somewhat effective", and a small segment (5%) do not see the organization as effective in this area, suggesting there is general support but also room for improved engagement and inclusivity.

3. Overall Satisfaction with NC-SARA's Work (Figure 2 summarizes these findings)

- The majority of respondents, 92%, “Strongly agree” or “Agree” that they are satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.
- Only 6% “Disagreed” that they are satisfied with the work of NC-SARA. Two percent “Strongly disagreed”.

Q12: Overall, I am satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

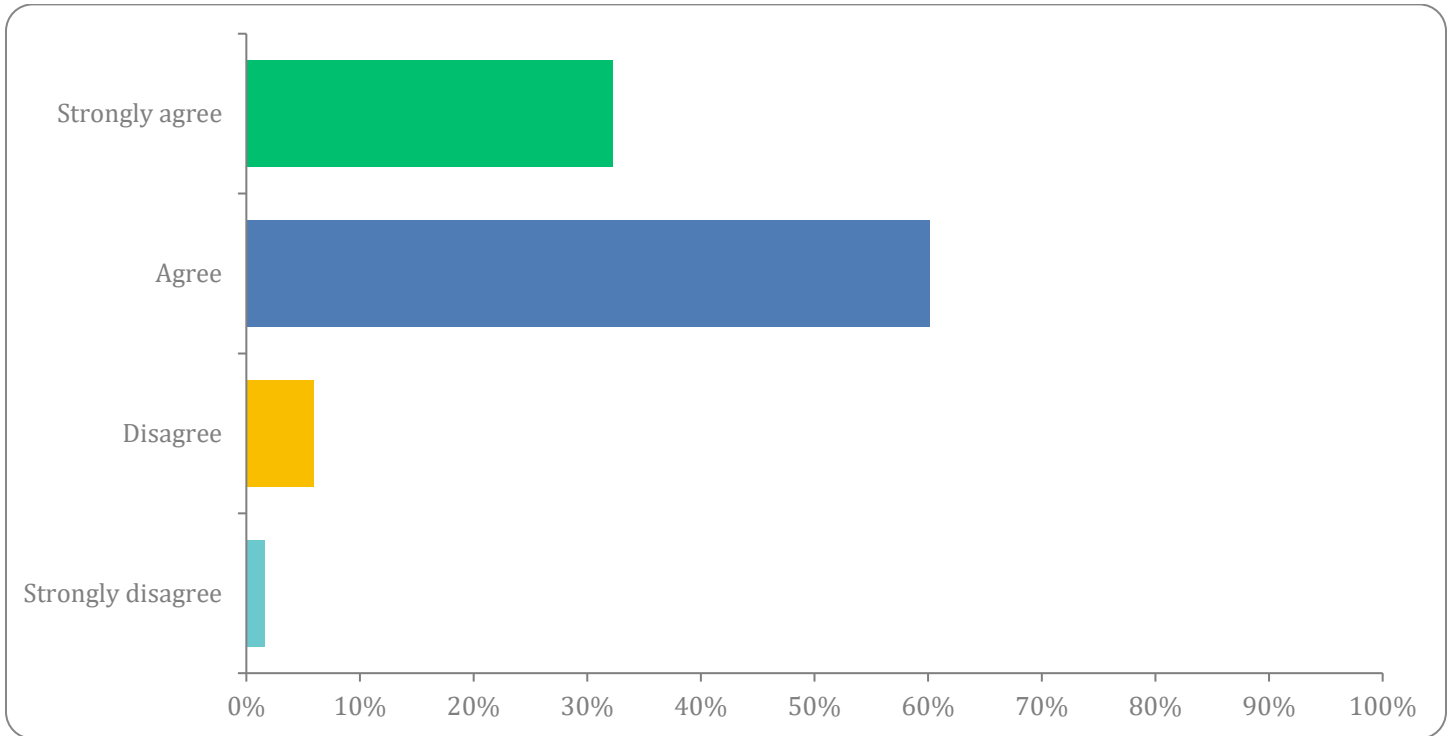


Figure 2: Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work

Key Findings – NC-SARA Communications, Support, and Operations

1. Effective Use of Communications and Provides Necessary Resources

- Over 92% of institutional respondents expressed satisfaction with NC-SARA’s communications, with the majority either “Agreeing” or “Strongly agreeing”. Fewer than 8% indicated dissatisfaction, highlighting overall positive perceptions of NC-SARA’s outreach and information sharing, though there may be limited opportunities to further refine messaging or communication frequency.
- A large majority of respondents (over 92%) “Agreed” or “Strongly agreed” that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA’s success. This indicates widespread confidence among institutions in the organization’s support structures, though a small portion (about 8%) expressed concerns or dissatisfaction, suggesting a potential area for improvement in resource distribution or visibility.

2. Operational Efficiency

- Nearly 80% of respondents rated NC-SARA as either “Efficient” or “Very efficient”, suggesting strong institutional confidence in the organization’s operational performance. However, approximately 20% expressed that NC-SARA is only “Somewhat efficient” or “Not efficient”, indicating there may be opportunities to improve internal processes or external-facing systems to better meet stakeholder expectations.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

1. Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years (Figure 3 summarizes these findings)

- **Respondents identified a range of anticipated challenges that NC-SARA may face in the coming years, with responses reflecting concern about policy shifts, accreditation complexity, and sector-wide pressures:**
 - Federal government actions were identified as the most pressing issue, selected by 89% of respondents. This includes negotiated rulemaking and potential impacts stemming from changes at the U.S. Department of Education.
 - Accreditation and the complexities of postsecondary quality assurance (including the C-RAC 21st Century Guidelines) were selected by 63%, indicating widespread concern about the evolving standards landscape
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI), including its implications for operations and stakeholder expectations, was selected by 40% of respondents.
 - Financial challenges for institutions (outside of enrollment declines) were cited by 38%, reflecting ongoing concerns about institutional sustainability.
 - Institutional declining enrollment was selected by 32%, pointing to continued concern about enrollment trends across sectors.
- **Less frequently cited challenges included:**
 - Public perceptions about distance learning quality (27%)
 - Rapid growth of short-term credentials and new providers (24%)
 - States leaving SARA (19%)
 - Capacity and resources of State Portal Entity (SPE) staff (15%)
 - Institutions leaving SARA (11%)
 - Public criticism of SARA (6%)

While concerns about federal and accreditation-related issues were predominant, responses suggest a broader awareness of operational and reputational risks that may shape NC-SARA’s strategic direction.

Q16: What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing NC-SARA in the next 3-5 years? (please select your top 4)

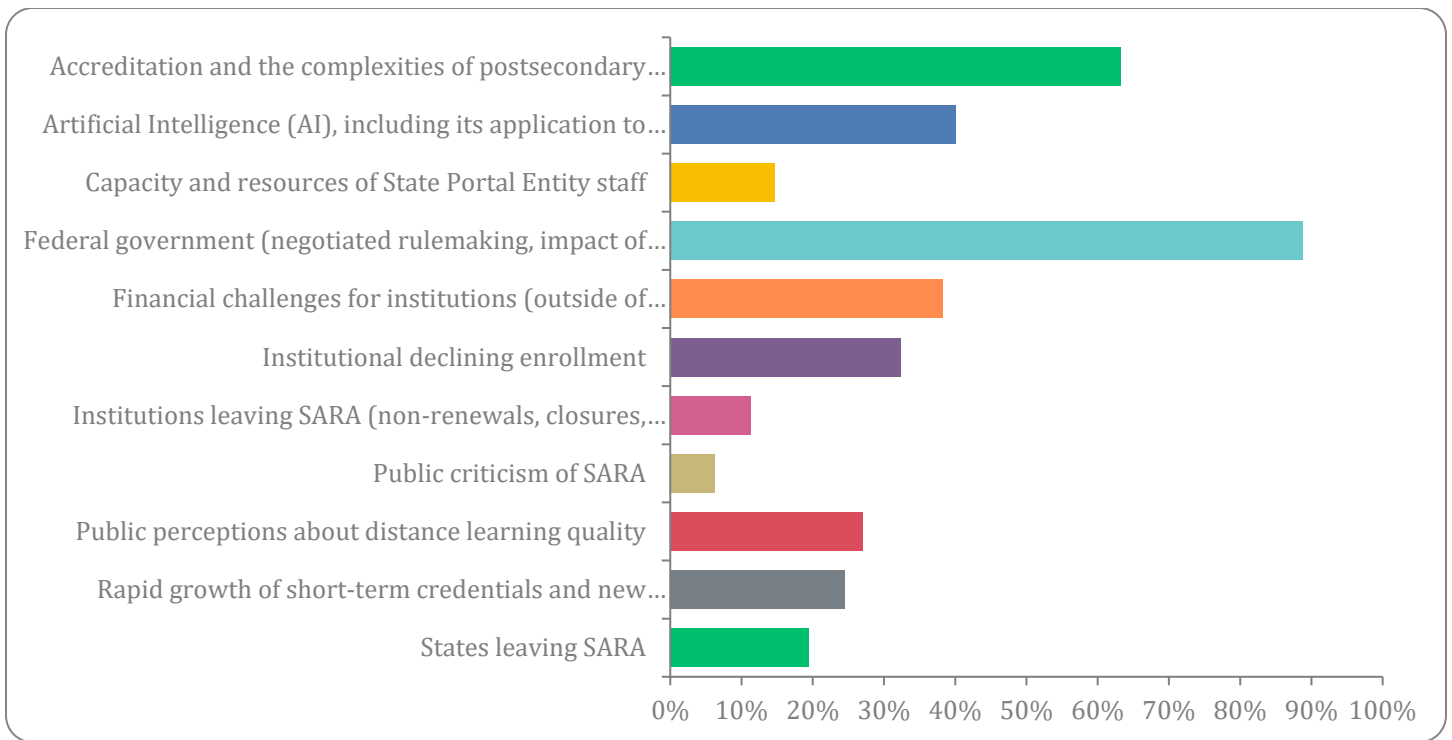


Figure 3: Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years

2. Political Environment as a Risk Factor

- A large majority of respondents (89%) view the political environment as a significant risk to NC-SARA with 43% “Strongly agreeing” and 46% “Agreeing”. In contrast, 11% of respondents disagreed to some extent, including 10% who “Disagreed” and 1% who “Strongly disagreed”. This strong consensus highlights concern about potential federal or state-level policy changes and their implications for the organization’s stability and continued participation across states and institutions.

3. Economic Environment as a Risk

- Most institutional respondents perceive the economic climate as a significant risk for NC-SARA with 80% either “Strongly agreeing” or “Agreeing”. In contrast, 20% of respondents either “Disagreed” or “Strongly disagreed”. While most see it as a risk, nearly 1 in 5 respondents disagreed, indicating varied perspectives based on institutional context.

4. Technological Changes as a Risk

- Respondents were divided on whether technological changes represent a significant risk for NC-SARA. While a slight majority (53%) saw technology as a potential challenge, a large portion of institutions (47%) did not view it as a major concern at this time, possibly reflecting varying institutional capacity or perspectives on innovation readiness.

5. Perceptions of NC-SARA Leadership Readiness

- A majority of respondents (77%) agreed that NC-SARA’s Board and Senior Leadership have a plan to address threats and obstacles, with 4% strongly agreeing and 73% agreeing. While the majority of institutional respondents expressed confidence in NC-SARA’s leadership planning efforts, over one-fifth of respondents indicated skepticism or uncertainty. These results suggest a generally positive perception of strategic preparedness but point to a need for increased transparency or communication about how NC-SARA is addressing emerging risks.

6. Positive Image in the Higher Education Community

- An overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) agreed that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community, with 18% strongly agreeing and 71% agreeing. Nearly one in ten respondents expressed dissenting views. This data reflects a strong and broadly favorable perception of NC-SARA's standing and image among institutional stakeholders.

Key Findings – Looking Forward

1. Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts (Figure 4 Summarizes these Findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate whether NC-SARA should place more, less, or about the same level of focus on various communications efforts. The results provide insight into stakeholder priorities for how NC-SARA engages and informs its audiences. Overall, stakeholders expressed support for continuing or increasing focus across most communications activities, with few respondents recommending less focus in any area.

- **Highest Priorities - The strongest support for increased communication was for:**
 - Special Topics Webinars - e.g., professional licensure, negotiated rulemaking (69% recommended more focus; weighed average: 4.16)
- **Maintain Current Focus - A majority of respondents preferred about the same level of focus for:**
 - Presenting at Regional Compact Steering Committee (42% selected “about the same”, while 31% preferred more focus; weighed average 3.95)
 - Presenting at SARA State Meetings (43% selected “about the same”, while 33% preferred more focus; weighed average 3.92)
 - Presenting at National Conferences (37% selected “about the same”, while 42% preferred more focus; weighed average 3.83)
- **Lower Priority / Maintain or Reduce Focus-** One communications area showed lower priority for increased focus, with many respondents supporting the status quo:
 - Institution Communications (Nearly half of respondents recommended “about the same level” of focus and 46% preferred more focus).

Although institution communications received the lowest weighted average among categories, it still reflects a general endorsement for continued or modestly increased focus. Very few respondents recommended reducing focus in any area.

Q22: Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts

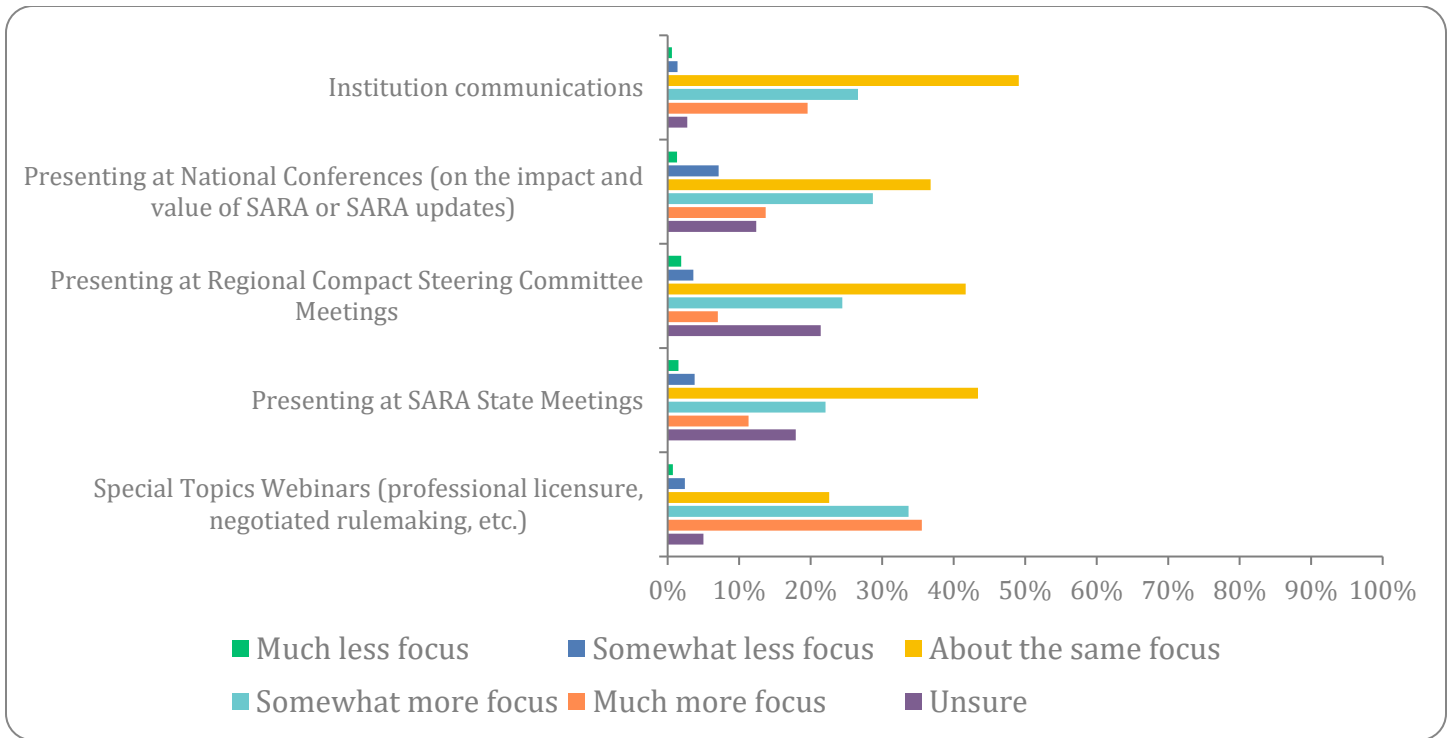


Figure 4: Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts

2. Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research (Figure 5 summarizes these findings)

Respondents were asked how much focus NC-SARA should place on key data and research activities, including the annual data report and the cost savings project. The following summary categorizes each activity by level of support based on weighted averages and response distribution.

- **Highest Priority for Increased Focus:**
 - **Cost Savings Project**
 - 47% of respondents recommended more focus (28.63% “somewhat more”, 18% “much more”)
 - Only 2% recommended less focus
 - Weighted Average: 4.01
 - A relatively high number (13%) were unsure, possibly due to limited awareness or engagement with the project to date.
- **Maintain Current Focus:**
 - **Annual Data Report (not dashboards)**
 - A majority (52%) preferred to maintain current focus
 - 38% supported more focus (23% “somewhat more”, 15% “much more”)
 - Weighted Average: 3.65
 - Minimal interest in reduced focus, with only 4% selecting “somewhat less” or “much less”

Institution respondents broadly support continuing or expanding NC-SARA’s work in data and research. The Cost Savings Project received stronger calls for increased attention, while the annual data report was seen as appropriately prioritized but still valued by a significant portion of the audience.

Q23: Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research

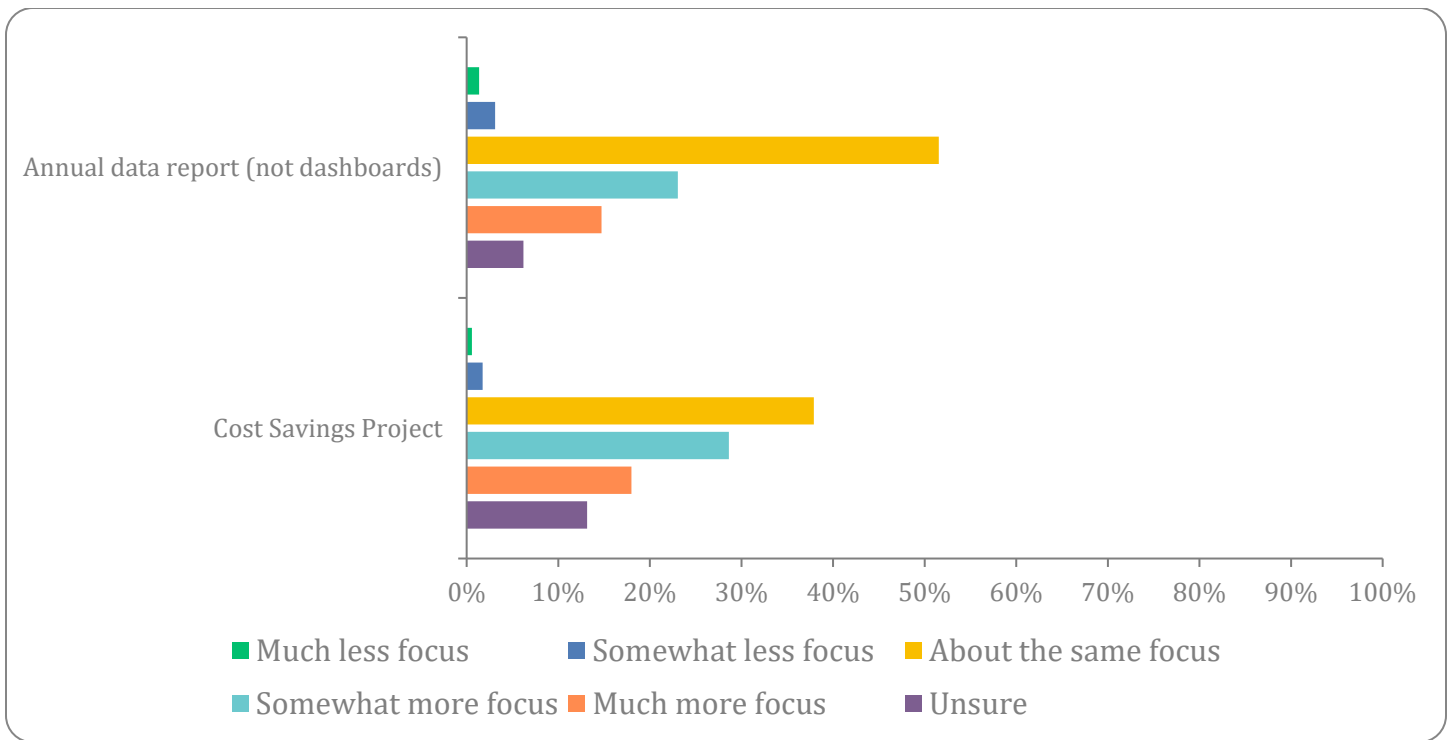


Figure 5: Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research

3. Feedback on Educational Resources for Institutions (Figure 6 summarizes these findings)

Respondents were asked how much focus NC-SARA should place on different educational resources designed to support institutional understanding and participation in SARA. The following summarizes findings by priority category based on weighted average scores and response distributions.

- **Highest Priority for Increased Focus:**
 - **SARA Policy Quick Start Guides for States and Institutions**
 - 60% of respondents recommended more focus (34% “somewhat more”, 26% “much more”)
 - Weighted Average: 3.98
 - Very few respondents indicated less focus was needed (1%).
 - **Online Courses for Institutional Personnel**
 - 82% of respondents recommended more focus (32% “somewhat more”, 28% “much more”)
 - Weighted Average: 3.96
 - Only 3% suggested less focus, showing strong support across the board.
- **Maintain Current Focus:**
 - **Institution Welcome Materials**
 - Nearly half (45%) indicated current levels of focus are appropriate
 - 42% supported more focus (26% “somewhat more”, 17% “much more”)
 - Weighted Average: 3.84
 - Minimal interest in reduction (3%), though a higher “unsure” rate (9%) may reflect limited awareness of these materials.

Institutional respondents strongly support NC-SARA’s continued and increased focus on educational resources. Quick Start Guides and online training courses were the highest-rated priorities, signaling demand for accessible, self-directed tools that clarify SARA policy and processes. While welcome materials were viewed positively, the slightly lower rating suggests they are seen as less essential compared to other educational offerings.

Q24: Priorities for Educational resources for institutions:

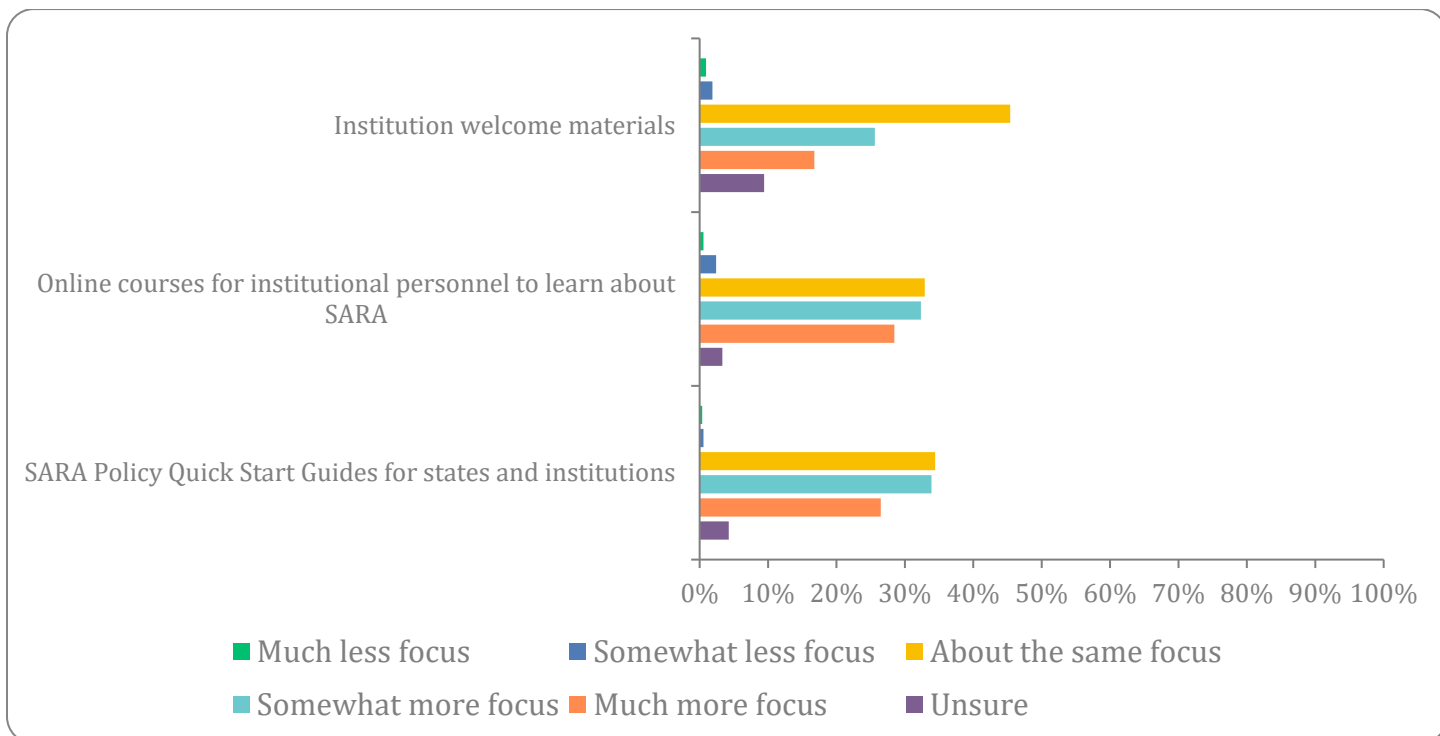


Figure 6: Priorities for Educational resources for institutions and states:

4. Priorities for SARA’s Policy Work

Respondents were asked to indicate how much focus NC-SARA should place on two core areas of policy work: Negotiated Rulemaking calls to action and the SARA Policy Modification Process Public Forum. The data shows support for maintaining or moderately increasing focus, with notable differences in perceived priority between the two areas.

- **Negotiated Rulemaking Call to Action** - Respondents generally support increased attention to negotiated rulemaking efforts, viewing it as a timely and strategic area of engagement.
 - 48% of respondents indicated NC-SARA should place “somewhat more” or “much more” focus on this area
 - Only 3% said “less focus”
 - Weighted average: 3.90
- **SARA Policy Modification Process Public Forum** - While still valued, the policy forum is seen as more of a steady-state activity with fewer respondents calling for expanded attention.
 - The majority (54%) prefer to maintain “about the same” level of focus
 - Fewer respondents (30%) called for “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - Slightly more respondents (6%) suggested “less focus” compared to negotiated rulemaking

- Weighted average: 3.64

Negotiated Rulemaking is viewed as a more pressing area for increased NC-SARA engagement. SARA Policy Modification Forums are seen as functioning adequately with little demand for expanded emphasis. Both areas reflect moderate to strong support, with minimal calls for reduced focus.

5. Feedback on SARA Resources

Respondents were asked to indicate how much focus NC-SARA should place on three core resources it provides to support institutions and states: Professional Licensure Guides, SARA Source, and the State Authorization Guide. The data indicates that stakeholders generally favor maintaining or increasing attention to these tools, with the Professional Licensure Guides receiving the strongest support for expanded focus.

- **Professional Licensure Guides** - This resource is clearly valued and viewed as a high-priority area for continued or increased investment.
 - 61% of respondents support “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - Only 1% said “less focus”
 - Weighted average: 4.11
- **SARA Source** - While still seen as important, SARA Source has a more neutral response, with a significant number of respondents (20%) unsure of its relevance or use.
 - Most respondents (44%) preferred to “maintain” current levels of focus
 - 33% recommended “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - Weighted average: 4.02
- **State Authorization Guide** - The guide is broadly supported as a helpful resource, and many respondents see value in continuing to invest in or expand its availability.
 - 51% of respondents support “somewhat more” or “much more” focus.
 - Minimal respondents (1%) indicated “less focus”
 - Weighted average: 3.97

Professional Licensure Guides are the highest-rated resource for increased focus. State Authorization Guide is also widely valued. SARA Source may benefit from increased outreach or clarification of its purpose, given the relatively high percentage of “unsure” responses.

6. Feedback on Technological Priorities for States and Institutions

Respondents were asked to assess how much focus NC-SARA should place on technological improvements to support states and institutions. Overall, the data indicates strong support for increased investment in technology tools and processes, especially those that streamline administrative tasks and improve user access.

- **Institution Portal in Salesforce** - The institution portal is seen as a valuable tool, though many respondents may need more clarity or experience with it, given the high “unsure” rate.
 - 36% of recommend “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - 40% prefer maintaining the current level of focus
 - 21% selected “unsure”
 - Weighted average: 4.10 (highest of all tech options)

- **Electronic State Forms** - Strong support for improving the electronic submission and management of state forms, indicating a desire for process efficiency at the state level.
 - 47% support “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - Only 1% selected “less focus”
 - Weighted average: 3.97
- **Electronic Application** - Institutions and states value further automation and digitization of the application process, with no respondents recommending less focus.
 - 51% of respondents support “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - 42% prefer maintaining current focus
 - Weighted average: 3.90
- **Electronic Institution Forms** - Similar to the application process, improvements in institutional forms are viewed as a clear priority for simplifying processes.
 - 53% of respondents support “somewhat more” or “much more” focus
 - Weighted average: 3.87

There is consistent support across all technological improvements, with no more than 3% of respondents recommending “less focus” on any category. The highest priority appears to be the Institution Portal in Salesforce, though it also has the highest “unsure” rate, suggesting the need for greater user education or engagement. Broadly, stakeholders desire continued and enhanced investment in digital tools to improve administrative efficiency across states and institutions.

7. Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus – Open Ended

In response to an open-ended question about areas where NC-SARA might reduce or adjust its focus, respondents offered feedback related to unnecessary administrative burden, such as frequent communication, duplicative reporting requirements, and complex professional licensure processes. Many also encouraged simplification and consolidation of resources, improved clarity around roles and expectations, and a more targeted, needs-based approach to compliance and policy changes.

- **Streamline Administrative Burden and Reporting Requirements:**
 - Reduce complexity in administrative processes, particularly around state-specific requirements and compliance.
 - Limit reporting frequency and target requests to specific times of year.
 - Several noted the Out-of-State Learning Placements (OOSLP) reporting as burdensome and questioned its usefulness.
 - Suggested that professional licensure disclosures have become overly emphasized and may have increased institutional risk.
- **Simplify Communications and Resources:**
 - Feedback indicated there are too many emails, especially about negotiated rulemaking and policy changes.
 - Suggestions included providing quick guides or summaries to accompany longer documents to help prioritize review time.
 - Some find the volume of NC-SARA resources overwhelming and want more concise, user-friendly formats (e.g., lay language explanations).
- **Technology & System Concerns:**

- Questions raised about the effectiveness and accessibility of Salesforce and online reporting tools.
- The dual fee payment process between NC-SARA and state SARA organizations was seen as inefficient.
- **Policy & Scope Adjustments:**
 - Concern about "scope creep", suggestions that NC-SARA is extending into areas beyond its core mission (e.g., enforcing federal policy or covering non-distance programs)
 - Calls to review every activity against core functions and eliminate "nice to have" items that strain limited resources.
 - Several respondents emphasized that policy changes should not be expected unless necessary.
- **Equity and Institutional Capacity:**
 - Smaller institutions expressed difficulty in meeting compliance demands, especially related to licensure and professional program disclosures.
 - Requests for greater flexibility, support, and tools that allow "not applicable" answers or alternative data entry methods.
- **Cost & Value Concerns:**
 - Frustration over increased costs, including duplicate fees to NC-SARA and state entities.
 - Some questioned whether NC-SARA is effectively communicating the value proposition of SARA participation and data collection efforts.
- **Miscellaneous Suggestions:**
 - Better alignment with national higher ed organizations.
 - Address misinformation about state authorization and the role of NC-SARA in public forums.
 - Deemphasize AI threats, which some feel are overstated.

8. Recommendations for Areas of Increased Focus – Open Ended

In response to an open-ended question about where NC-SARA should increase its focus, respondents shared a wide range of thoughtful suggestions related to increasing its focus on federal advocacy, clearer communication, and professional licensure support, particularly in light of evolving regulations. Many also called for improved training resources, streamlined reporting and application processes, and greater transparency around NC-SARA's value and role—especially for institutions with limited capacity.

- **Policy Advocacy & Federal Engagement**
 - Many respondents emphasized the need for stronger federal advocacy and public relations, especially regarding threats to SARA or anti-SARA legislation.
 - Suggested greater visibility and leadership in federal policy discussions, including support for institutions during negotiated rulemaking and Title IV licensure disclosure regulations.

- Encouraged NC-SARA to act as a national voice advocating for online learning and reciprocity.
- **Clearer Communication & Transparency**
 - Requests for more frequent, timely, and simplified communication about policy changes, federal developments, and NC-SARA's advocacy efforts.
 - Suggested improvements in communication strategies: webinars, user-friendly materials, and better responsiveness.
 - Emphasis on justifying institutional costs by showing impact and value of NC-SARA's work.
- **Professional Licensure Support**
 - Strong interest in additional resources, training, and clarity around professional licensure disclosures, especially related to evolving federal requirements.
 - Desire for centralized directories, templates, and clearer definitions for when disclosures are necessary. Smaller institutions noted limited staff capacity and asked for practical tools to reduce the burden of compliance.
- **Training, Onboarding & Resource Development**
 - Repeated calls for an electronic application and renewal process.
 - Frustration with outdated, email-based systems; desire for modern, user-friendly portals.
 - Simplify and consolidate reporting—particularly OOSLP and EDEE—into intuitive systems with upload templates and examples.
- **Clarifying Roles & Purpose**
 - Several asked for better explanation of NC-SARA's role vs. SARA vs. state compacts.
 - Requests to clarify NC-SARA's value proposition—to internal audiences (e.g., presidents, provosts) and external ones (e.g., legislators, accreditors).
 - Suggestions to educate institutional stakeholders to build awareness of compliance responsibilities.
- **Supporting Institutional Capacity**
 - Many emphasized the burden that compliance places on small institutions with limited staff.
 - Requests for shared resources, such as licensure directories, to avoid duplication.
 - Suggestions to align responsibilities with institution types (e.g., not forcing unnecessary compliance on institutions with no affected programs).
- **National Coordination & Unification**
 - A few called for unifying the four regional compacts under one umbrella for consistency and efficiency.
 - Others suggested more national-level collaboration and alignment across compacts, states, and NC-SARA to reduce administrative complexity.
- **Data Modernization & Accuracy**
 - Feedback noted IPEDS limitations in accurately reflecting online learning.

- Desire for more inclusive data strategies that reflect modern credentialing, part-time learners, and hybrid formats.
- Ensure NC-SARA data collection supports meaningful advocacy and decision-making.

9. Feedback on Current State of NC-SARA – Open Ended

In response to a final open-ended question, respondents shared general reflections on NC-SARA. Many respondents expressed appreciation for NC-SARA's role in supporting interstate distance education and praised the organization's responsiveness and educational resources. However, others raised concerns about increasing complexity, administrative burden, scope creep, and confusion around roles and communications. Several called for streamlined processes, improved clarity in reporting and policy changes, and more visibility around NC-SARA's purpose and impact, especially for small institutions with limited capacity.

- **Positive Feedback & Appreciation:**
 - Many respondents expressed appreciation for NC-SARA's efforts to expand access to distance education and maintain compliance across states.
 - Trainings, webinars, and staff responsiveness were noted as especially valuable resources.
 - A number of participants praised recent improvements, such as updates to the reporting process and portal usability.
- **Communication & Awareness:**
 - Respondents want clearer, more concise communication, especially around policy updates, reporting expectations, and NC-SARA's broader purpose.
 - Some noted a lack of awareness or understanding among institutional leaders and the general public about NC-SARA's role.
 - Suggestions included simplifying emails, tailoring content to specific audiences, and increasing NC-SARA's visibility and advocacy.
- **Reporting Process & Administrative Burden:**
 - Concerns were raised about the complexity and repetitive nature of annual reporting, particularly for small institutions.
 - Several requested more user-friendly formats (e.g., Excel upload options, checklists, one-pagers) and streamlined state/institutional coordination.
 - Some respondents expressed frustration over differing state-level processes, fees, and overlapping responsibilities.
- **Policy Modification Process:**
 - Many called for a slower, more deliberate policy change cycle, proposing longer intervals (e.g., every 3 years) to reduce confusion and allow for deeper review.
 - Scope creep was a recurring concern, with institutions feeling overwhelmed by growing requirements that may exceed NC-SARA's original purpose.
- **Support for Small Institutions:**
 - A significant number of comments focused on the disproportionate burden NC-SARA places on smaller institutions with limited staff and resources.

- Requests included reduced fees, free training for new staff, and additional support for maintaining compliance with minimal overhead.
- **Strategic Focus & Advocacy:**
 - Respondents encouraged NC-SARA to maintain a strong national presence in federal and state policy conversations and to actively counter misinformation from detractors.
 - Suggestions included improving public relations, clarifying value to state legislatures, and engaging in national conversations around quality assurance and student protection.
- **Technology & Integration:**
 - Some respondents noted regression in the technology used for reporting, preferring past electronic entry systems over current upload methods.
 - A few expressed confusion about NC-SARA's relationship with Salesforce and other systems, requesting more transparency and integration guidance.

Key Findings – Engagement with NC-SARA Services

1. SARA Quick Start Guides Usage (Figure 7 summarizes these findings)

A total of 513 respondents answered the question about which SARA Quick Start Guides they accessed in the past year. The guides are designed to support institutions in understanding and communicating SARA requirements across key compliance areas. The data show that institutions heavily rely on guides related to annual data reporting, licensure, and fees, areas closely tied to core compliance functions, while niche topics saw less engagement. Additionally, there is a notable opportunity to increase awareness and usage of the guides, as over a quarter of respondents were either unaware of the resource or had not yet used it.

- **Top Accessed Guides:**
 - **Annual Data Reporting** – Accessed by 67% (342 respondents), making it the most commonly used guide.
 - **Professional Licensure** – Used by 35% (179 respondents), indicating strong institutional interest in navigating licensure-related compliance.
 - **SARA Fees** – Accessed by 29% (149 respondents), reflecting relevance to financial compliance.
 - **Institution Applications** – Selected by 21% (107 respondents).
- **Lesser Accessed Topics:**
 - Guides related to California students (7%),
 - Military bases (2%),
 - Field trips (2%),
 - Overseas students (3%),
 - Short courses (4%), and
 - SARA Late Fees (3%) had significantly lower usage, suggesting limited relevance or awareness.
- **Awareness:**
 - 18% (90 respondents) were unaware of the Quick Start Guides.
 - 9% (47 respondents) were aware but have never used them.

Q31: SARA Quick Start Guides are intended to help institutions easily understand SARA requirements to help them maintain compliance, communicate with colleagues regarding SARA, and explain SARA to students and other stakeholders. Please indicate which of the Quick Start Guides that you accessed in the past year: (select all that apply)

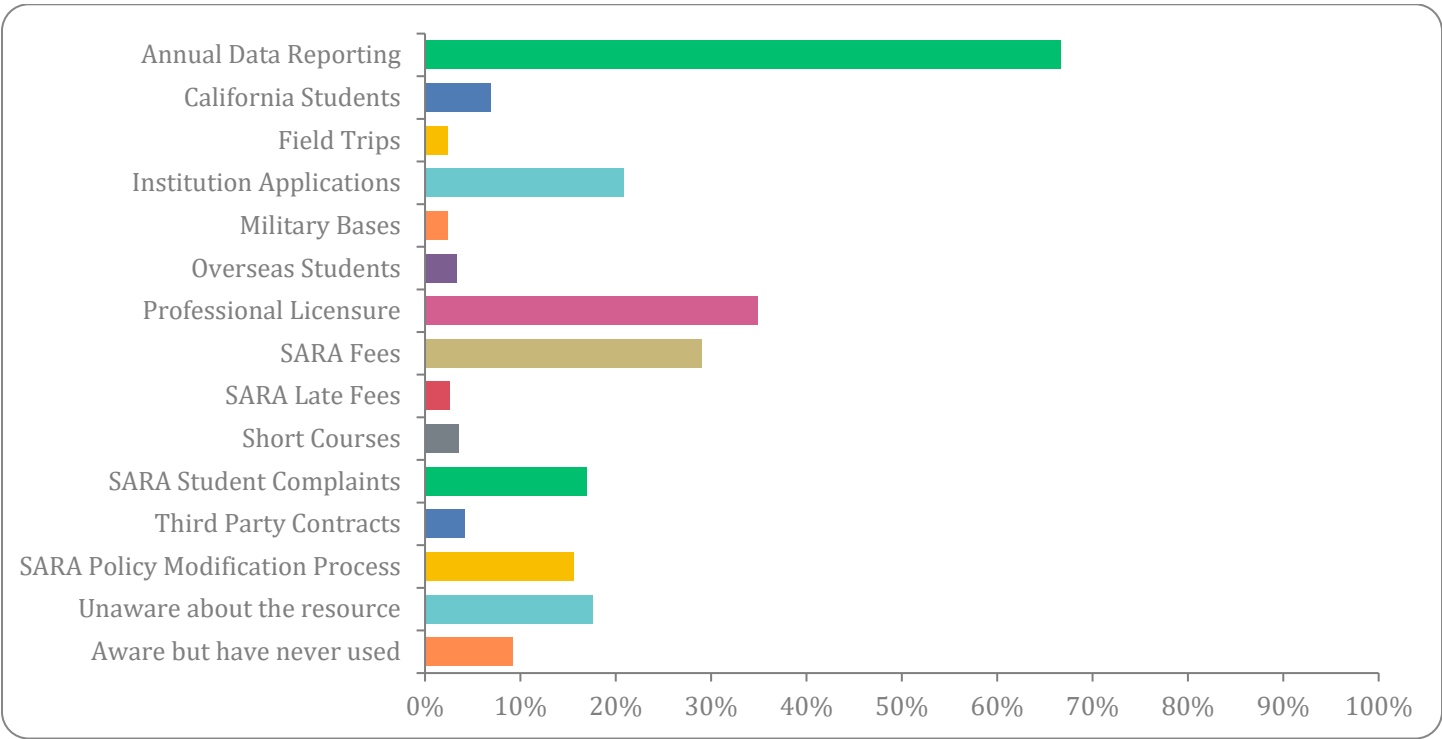


Figure 7: SARA Quick Start Guides Usage

2. SARA Online Courses Usage

A total of approximately 500 respondents shared their awareness and usage of SARA's three main online training courses for institutions. The results highlight moderate usage, high awareness, and a notable portion of respondents who are still unfamiliar with the resources. While nearly one-third of respondents accessed the Annual Data Reporting course, suggesting strong relevance for operational tasks, usage of the other two courses was lower. Additionally, awareness remains a challenge, with 40–46% of respondents unaware of the training opportunities. These findings suggest both the usefulness of the courses and the need for improved outreach to expand engagement, particularly around the “Preparing for and Maintaining SARA Participation” course.

Usage by Course

- **SARA 101: An Overview**
 - 24% accessed the course
 - 34% were aware but had never used it
 - 42% were unaware of the resource
- **Foundations of NC-SARA Annual Data Reporting**
 - 28% accessed the course (highest usage)
 - 33% were aware but had never used it

- 39% were unaware
- **Preparing for and Maintaining SARA Participation**
 - 18% accessed the course (lowest usage)
 - 36% were aware but had never used it
 - 46% were unaware

3. SARA Support Desk Usage

Among the 498 respondents, use of SARA's support desks was relatively limited, with the majority of respondents either unaware of or not engaging with the available contact points. While info@nc-sara.org and data@nc-sara.org were the most utilized, overall engagement remains low, with over 70% of respondents either unaware or not using the support desks. These results point to an opportunity for NC-SARA to better promote these contact channels and clarify their specific functions to improve access and user support.

Usage Highlights

- **Most Accessed:**
 - info@nc-sara.org – 20% (100 respondents)
 - data@nc-sara.org – 16% (79 respondents)
- **Least Accessed:**
 - it@nc-sara.org and education@nc-sara.org – each 1% (5 respondents)
 - accounting@nc-sara.org – 5% (24 respondents)
- **Awareness:**
 - **27%** were unaware of the support desk options
 - **44%** were aware but had never used any of the support emails

4. Participation in the SARA Policy Modification Process

Among 519 respondents, most reported limited engagement in the SARA Policy Modification Process. While nearly one-third of stakeholders have engaged passively by listening to forums, active participation, such as submitting public comments, remains low. A majority (59%) reported no involvement at all. These results suggest a need for broader outreach, clearer communication, and more accessible engagement opportunities to encourage greater involvement in shaping SARA policy.

Participation Highlights:

- 57% (304 respondents) indicated no participation in any part of the process.
- 31% (163 respondents) listened to the policy modification forum, making it the most common form of engagement.
- 16% (85 respondents) listened to presentations at the NC-SARA Board meeting.
- Only 6% (32 respondents) reported submitting public comments.

5. Engagement with NC-SARA Staff

Respondents were asked to evaluate their experiences engaging with NC-SARA staff, including perceptions of staff helpfulness, responsiveness, approachability, knowledge, and interest in additional

engagement opportunities. Survey respondents reported **high levels of satisfaction** with NC-SARA staff in terms of helpfulness, responsiveness, and knowledge:

- Staff are helpful: 97% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” (weighted avg: 3.24)
- Staff responsiveness: 96% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” (weighted avg: 3.25)
- Staff are knowledgeable: 97% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” (weighted avg: 3.27)
- Staff are approachable: 94% felt comfortable approaching staff (weighted avg: 3.21)

In contrast, views were more mixed on the desire for **increased engagement opportunities**:

- 65% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” they would like more engagement
- 35% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed”
- Weighted Average: 2.73

Overall, stakeholders view NC-SARA staff very positively, especially in terms of responsiveness, knowledge, and approachability. However, there is a moderate demand for expanded engagement opportunities, suggesting that while current interactions are strong, some stakeholders desire more proactive or structured opportunities to connect with staff.

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, the following recommendations are offered to inform NC-SARA’s strategic planning:

1. Enhance Communication & Education

- Clearly differentiate the roles of NC-SARA, SARA, and state compacts across all materials.
- Expand use of brief, accessible communication formats (e.g., summaries, one-pagers, FAQs).
- Improve onboarding materials and increase awareness of underutilized resources like Quick Start Guides and online courses.
- Continue webinars and policy updates, with particular attention to institutional roles and federal policy implications.

2. Streamline Administrative Processes

- Review and simplify reporting requirements, particularly for OOSLP and EDEE
- Explore consolidating application and renewal processes into a centralized, digital portal.
- Provide upload templates and tools that reduce time and staff burden, especially for smaller institutions.

3. Prioritize Technology Modernization

- Invest in enhancements to the institution portal in Salesforce and electronic submission systems.
- Clarify system functions and provide training to increase user confidence and adoption.
- Address concerns about accessibility, user experience, and fee payment systems.

4. Support Small Institution Capacity

- Develop scalable compliance tools for institutions with limited staff (e.g., templates, “not applicable” options).
- Consider tiered resources or support programs aligned to institution size and scope.
- Emphasize flexibility and user-friendliness in all tools and systems.

5. Strengthen Federal Policy Engagement

- Expand NC-SARA's presence in federal higher education discussions, particularly negotiated rulemaking and licensure regulation.
- Serve as a proactive advocate for reciprocity, online learning, and institutional autonomy.
- Build partnerships with national organizations to unify messaging and amplify impact.

6. Maintain and Clarify NC-SARA's Strategic Focus

- Avoid "scope creep" by anchoring initiatives to core mission and evaluating proposed changes against organizational priorities.
- Increase transparency around decision-making processes and communicate how stakeholder feedback is incorporated.

7. Increase Participation in Policy Engagement

- Promote opportunities for institutions to engage in the SARA Policy Modification Process through accessible channels (e.g., comment guides, briefings).
- Provide summaries of proposed changes and their implications to encourage broader involvement.

8. Expand Training & Professional Licensure Support

- Increase focus on professional licensure tools, including directories, templates, and guidance.
- Continue development and promotion of online courses and scenario-based training modules.
- Address institutional concerns about disclosure burdens by offering clear guidance aligned with federal expectations.

9. Elevate Value Communication

- Reinforce the value proposition of SARA participation through data, impact stories, and advocacy.
- Provide talking points and tools for institutional leaders to communicate SARA's benefits to internal and external stakeholders.

Appendix

This appendix includes a curated set of supplementary materials that provide additional context and clarity on key survey findings. Since NC-SARA maintains full access to the complete survey instrument and raw response data via SurveyMonkey, this section focuses on value-added visuals, select summary tables, and references to support interpretation of the findings presented in this report.

A. Key Quantitative Visuals

Charts generated from SurveyMonkey summarizing respondent feedback on core areas of interest, including:

- Relevance and confidence in NC-SARA's core work
- Top challenges identified for the next 3–5 years
- Prioritized focus areas for communications, data & research, and educational resources
- SARA Quick Start Guides Usage

B. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

A summary of thematic categories used to analyze open-ended responses, including:

- Emerging concerns (e.g., policy risk, compliance gaps)
- Recommendations for expanded support
- Stakeholder views on NC-SARA's image and leadership

This framework provides transparency into how qualitative data was synthesized into themes.

D. Methodological Notes

This section provides additional context regarding the design, distribution, and analysis of the institution stakeholder survey.

- **Survey Distribution and Response Rate**
 - The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 9,267 individuals representing over 2,400 SARA-participating institutions. A total of 673 responses were received, with 82 percent of respondents completing the entire survey.
 - Respondents were asked a combination of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into NC-SARA's effectiveness, challenges, and strategic priorities.
- **Use of SurveyMonkey Tools**
 - The survey was developed, administered, and analyzed using SurveyMonkey. Key tools used in the analysis included:
 - The "Question & Answer" filtering feature, which allowed results to be examined by question and respondent characteristics (e.g., years of tenure).
 - Built-in charts and weighted averages, used to visualize and interpret Likert-scale responses.
 - Export tools to generate data summaries for use in tables and figures presented in this report.

Charts and figures in the appendix were generated directly from SurveyMonkey or formatted using exported data for clarity and visual consistency.

- **Thematic Coding and Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Open-ended responses were reviewed through a manual thematic coding process to identify common issues, suggestions, and perceptions. Thematic categories were developed inductively, meaning they were derived from patterns and recurring topics in the responses themselves.

Once themes were established, each open-text response was reviewed and tagged with one or more codes. Common themes included:

- Requests for enhanced communication strategies
- Concerns about institutional compliance
- Calls for technological improvements
- Recognition of staff helpfulness and professionalism

Representative comments were paraphrased or quoted directly where appropriate, and broad patterns were summarized in relevant report sections and in the qualitative analysis portion of the appendix.

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Survey – Final Report: Regional Compact SARA Staff

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: August 18, 2025

Executive Summary

As part of the NC-SARA 2025 Strategic Planning process, a survey was administered to Regional Compact SARA staff to assess the current state of NC-SARA, identify organizational needs, and gather valuable input for the organization's long-term strategic objectives. Other NC-SARA stakeholders were also surveyed, including SARA-participating institutions, NC-SARA Staff, State Portal Entity (SPE) staff, and NC-SARA board members. Individual reports summarizing results for each stakeholder group are also being provided to capture unique perspectives and priorities. These findings form the basis for specific, actionable recommendations to enhance NC-SARA's effectiveness and support for Regional Compact SARA staff moving forward.

Overall, Regional Compact SARA staff expressed confidence in NC-SARA's ability to execute its core work, with a majority reporting high levels of satisfaction with staff responsiveness, helpfulness, and knowledge. The organization is viewed as efficient and collaborative, with unanimous agreement that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community. However, some respondents noted room for improvement in communications, leadership transparency, and alignment of roles between NC-SARA and the compacts.

Respondents identified federal regulatory changes and limited SPE capacity as the most pressing challenges facing NC-SARA in the coming years. While most do not view technological shifts as a significant threat, there is a desire for continued focus on data and research, policy development, and educational resources. Suggestions for increased focus also included reducing SPE administrative burden, enhancing research on distance education outcomes, and strengthening administrative support for committees.

Qualitative feedback emphasized the need for early consultation with regional compacts before launching new initiatives, more clarity around staff roles, and thoughtful engagement practices to avoid fatigue among state partners. While participation in NC-SARA's support services and educational resources was limited, awareness remains high, and there may be opportunities to better tailor these tools to Compact needs.

The findings in this report will inform the development of NC-SARA's next strategic plan and support efforts to strengthen collaboration and effectiveness across the SARA network.

Background & Methodology

To inform its next Strategic Plan, NC-SARA distributed a stakeholder survey to gather input on organizational direction and effectiveness.

- I. **Platform:** The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. The survey included 32 questions, both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses.
- II. **Dates:** The survey was conducted from June 2–20, 2025.

- III. **Respondents:** The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 8 Regional Compact SARA staff members. A total of 5 responses were received, with 100 percent of respondents completing the entire survey. Among the five Regional Compact SARA staff respondents, the majority reported having multiple years of experience with NC-SARA, reflecting a well-established relationship with the organization. Specifically:
- 40% (2 respondents) reported 6–7 years of involvement,
 - 20% (1 respondent) reported 8–10 years,
 - 20% (1 respondent) indicated more than 10 years of experience, and
 - 20% (1 respondent) reported 1–3 years of involvement.
 - No respondents reported less than 1 year or 4–5 years of engagement.

This distribution suggests a group with deep institutional knowledge and long-standing engagement with SARA processes, complemented by at least one newer staff member bringing a more recent perspective.

- IV. **Analysis:** Responses were filtered using SurveyMonkey’s “Question & Answer” filtering tool. Data was reviewed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and charts were provided via SurveyMonkey and processed for reporting.

Key Findings – NC-SARA’s Core Work

1. Strong Overall Engagement and Confidence:

- A strong majority of Regional Compact SARA staff (80%) reported understanding the difference between NC-SARA and SARA “to a great extent,” while the remaining 20% indicated they understood the distinction “somewhat.” No respondents selected “very little” or “not at all,” suggesting a solid overall grasp of organizational roles and responsibilities within the SARA framework.
- All Regional Compact SARA staff respondents expressed agreement with NC-SARA’s core work. While 40% agreed “to a great extent,” the majority (60%) selected “somewhat,” indicating general support for the organization’s mission, though with some room for deeper alignment or clarity around specific activities. No respondents indicated low or no agreement.
- All Regional Compact SARA staff respondents believe NC-SARA’s core work is relevant to stakeholder needs. Forty percent rated it as “very relevant,” another 40% as “relevant,” and 20% as “somewhat relevant.” No respondents indicated that the work was “not relevant,” suggesting broad, though varied, recognition of its importance and alignment with stakeholder priorities. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Q5: I believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

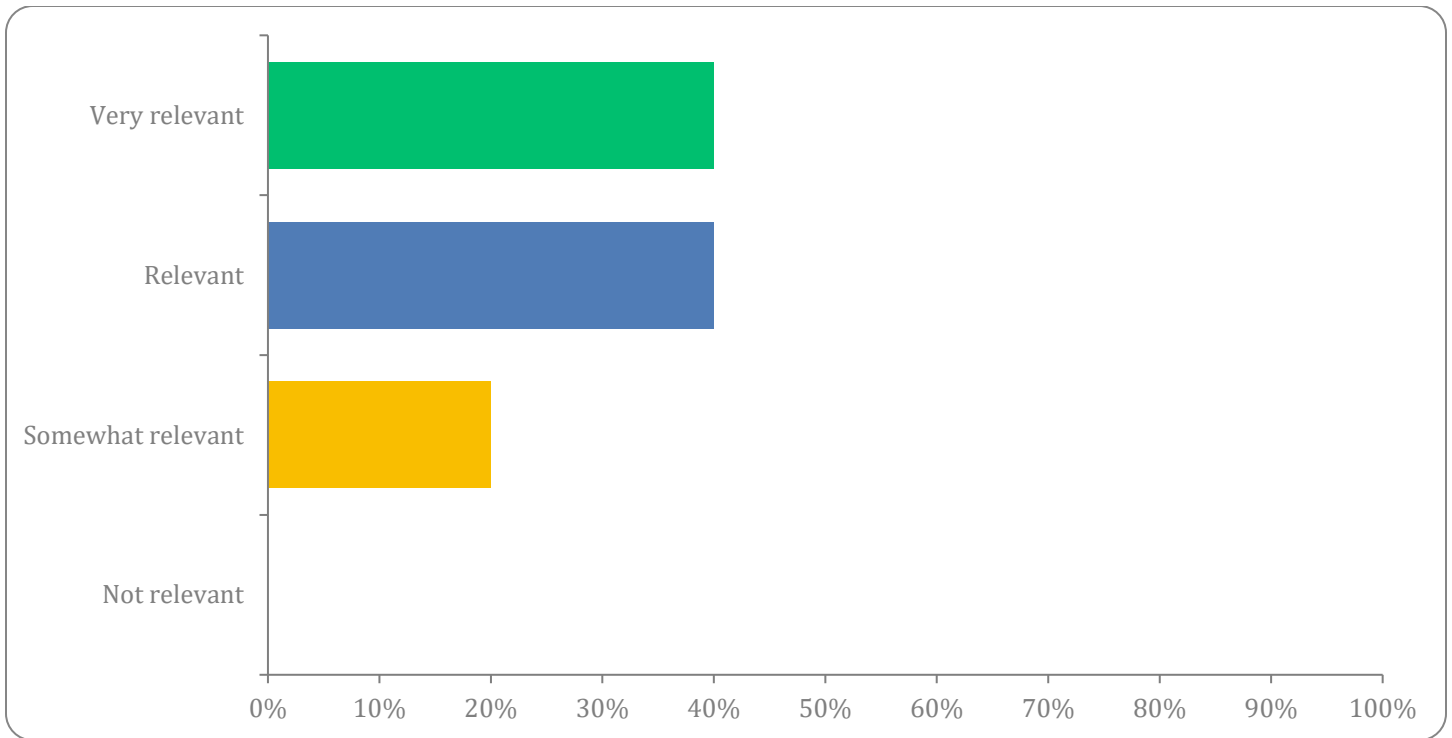


Figure 1: NC-SARA's Core Work Relevant to Stakeholders Needs

- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff respondents expressed confidence in NC-SARA's ability to execute its core work, with 40% indicating they are "very confident" and 20% selecting "confident." An additional 40% reported being "somewhat confident," and no respondents indicated a lack of confidence. These results reflect overall trust in NC-SARA's operational capacity, though some respondents may see opportunities for continued strengthening.

2. Strong Effectiveness in Promoting Value and Collaboration

- Regional Compact SARA staff offered mixed perspectives on NC-SARA's effectiveness in promoting the value of SARA. While 40% of respondents indicated NC-SARA promotes the value either "very effectively" or "effectively," a majority (60%) selected "somewhat effectively." No respondents rated NC-SARA as "not effective," suggesting general approval, though with room for more impactful outreach and messaging.
- All Regional Compact SARA staff respondents (100%) agreed that NC-SARA promotes a culture of collaboration effectively. Of those, 40% selected "very effectively" and 60% selected "effectively." No respondents indicated lower levels of effectiveness, suggesting strong confidence in NC-SARA's collaborative approach across stakeholders.

3. Overall Satisfaction with NC-SARA's Work (Figure 2 summarizes these findings)

- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff respondents (80%) expressed satisfaction with NC-SARA's work, with 40% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing. One respondent (20%) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These results indicate general satisfaction, with a small portion of respondents suggesting room for improvement.

Q9: Overall, I am satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

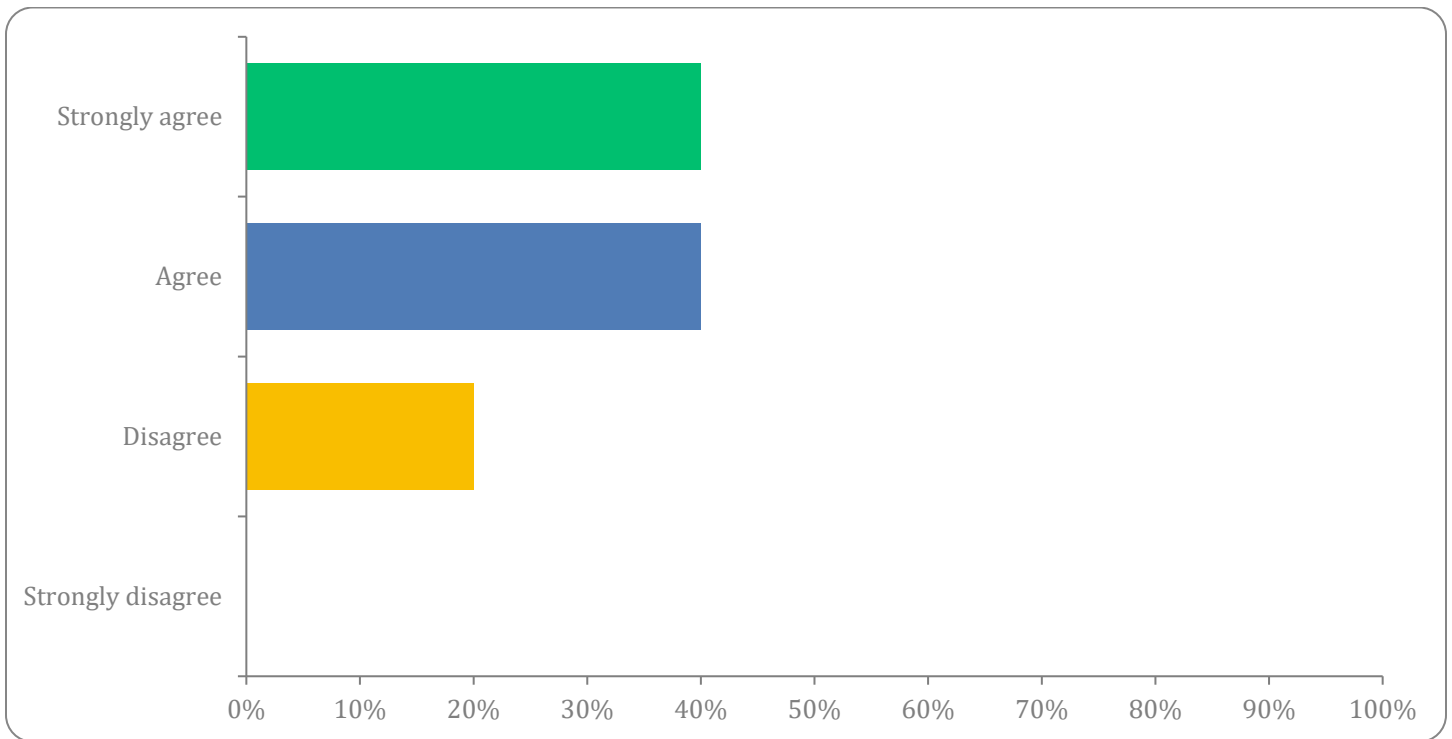


Figure 2: Satisfaction with NC-SARA's Work

Key Findings – NC-SARA Communications, Support, and Operations

1. Use of Communications and Provides Necessary Resources

- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff respondents (60%) agreed that they are satisfied with the communications they receive from NC-SARA, while 40% disagreed. No respondents strongly agreed or strongly disagreed. These results suggest moderate satisfaction overall, with a notable portion of respondents indicating room for improvement in communication practices.
- Most respondents (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA to be successful, with 20% strongly agreeing and 60% agreeing. One respondent (20%) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These results indicate general satisfaction with resource provision, though some concern or unmet needs may remain.

2. Operational Efficiency

- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff (80%) rated NC-SARA as “Efficient” from an operational standpoint, while 20% selected “Somewhat efficient.” No respondents rated NC-SARA as “Very efficient” or “Not efficient.” These responses suggest a positive view of operational performance overall, with some room for improvement in achieving higher levels of efficiency.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

1. Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years (Figure 3 summarizes these findings)

- **Regional Compact SARA staff identified several anticipated challenges that may affect NC-SARA’s future, with a particular emphasis on external policy and operational capacity. The most frequently cited challenges were:**
 - Federal government actions (e.g., negotiated rulemaking, regulatory changes at the U.S. Department of Education), selected by 80% of respondents.
 - Capacity and resources of State Portal Entity staff, also selected by 80%, reflecting concern about workload and infrastructure at the state level.
- **Other concerns were cited less frequently but still reflect potential risks, including:**
 - Accreditation and the complexities of postsecondary quality assurance (40%).
 - Several issues selected by 20% of respondents each, such as institutional financial challenges, declining enrollment, institutional or state departures from SARA, public criticism, and public perceptions of distance learning quality.
- Notably, Artificial Intelligence (AI) was not selected by any respondents, suggesting it is not currently perceived as a pressing issue by this group.

Overall, these responses reflect a strategic focus on regulatory risk and the need to support implementation capacity across states.

Q13: What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing NC-SARA in the next 3-5 years? (please select your top 4)

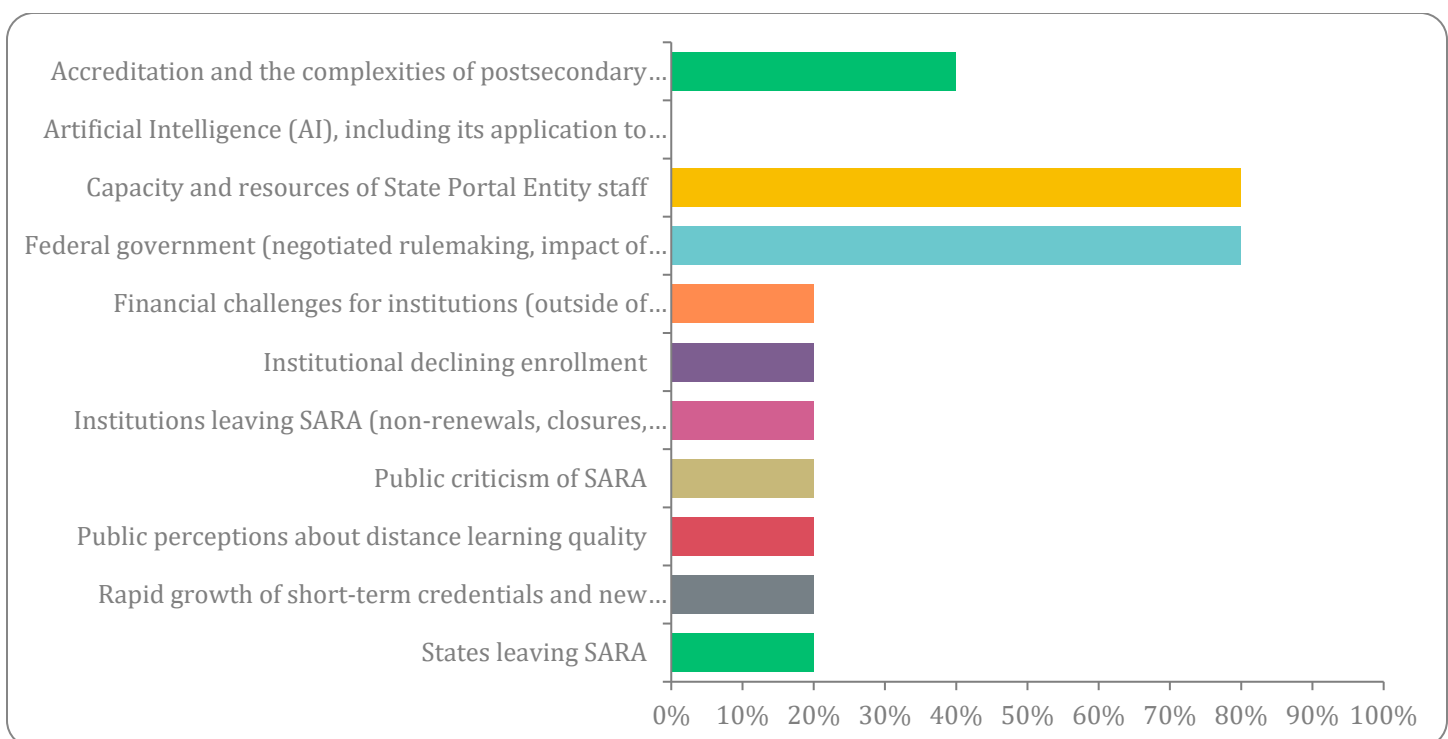


Figure 3: Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years

2. Political Environment as a Risk Factor

- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff respondents (80%) agreed that the political environment poses a significant risk to NC-SARA, with 20% strongly agreeing and 60% agreeing. One respondent (20%) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These responses indicate a general consensus that political dynamics present a meaningful external risk, though not all respondents view it as a high-level threat.
- 3. Economic Environment as a Risk**
- Responses were evenly split regarding the economic climate as a risk for NC-SARA. While 60% agreed that it poses a significant risk (40% strongly agreed and 20% agreed), 40% disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed. These results suggest a moderate level of concern, with no clear consensus on the extent to which economic factors threaten the organization.
- 4. Technological Changes as a Risk**
- A majority of Regional Compact SARA staff (60%) disagreed that technological changes pose a significant risk to NC-SARA, while 40% agreed. No respondents strongly agreed or strongly disagreed. These results indicate that most staff do not view technology as a major threat, though a minority see potential risk, suggesting some need for continued attention to technological adaptability.
- 5. Confidence in Leadership’s Strategic Planning**
- Responses were evenly divided on whether the NC-SARA Board and Senior Leadership have a plan to address the threats or obstacles the organization faces. Half of respondents (50%) agreed, while the other half (50%) disagreed. No respondents selected "Strongly agree" or "Strongly disagree," indicating mixed confidence in leadership's strategic preparedness and highlighting an opportunity for increased transparency or communication around planning efforts.
- 6. Positive Image in the Higher Education Community**
- All Regional Compact SARA staff respondents (100%) agreed that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community. While no one selected “Strongly agree,” the unanimous agreement reflects consistent confidence in NC-SARA’s reputation and credibility among this stakeholder group.

Key Findings – Looking Forward

1. Focus Areas for NC-SARA (Figure 4 Summarizes these Findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate whether NC-SARA should place more, less, or about the same level of focus on various organizational functions, including policy work, communications, data and research, and technological improvements. The results provide insight into stakeholder priorities for how NC-SARA engages and informs its audiences. Responses revealed varying priorities across functional areas, with particular interest in data and policy work, and general support for maintaining current levels of focus in several areas.

- **Top Priorities for Increased Focus:**
 - Data & Research and SARA Policy Work both received a weighted average of 3.80, indicating strong interest in expanding efforts related to research products, complaints reporting, and policy development. Two respondents in each category selected “Much more focus.”
 - Educational Resources for States and Institutions had a weighted average of 3.40, with 40% requesting “Somewhat more focus” and 60% preferring to maintain the current level.

- **Mixed Preferences and Neutral Support:**
 - Technological Improvements received more varied responses, with a weighted average of 3.20. While 40% of respondents supported “Much more focus,” another 40% recommended either “Much less” or “Somewhat less focus,” suggesting mixed views on this area.
- **Areas Seen as Appropriately Prioritized:**
 - Communications and SARA Resources both had weighted averages of 3.00, with the majority preferring “About the same focus.” Only one respondent in each category selected “Much less” or “Much more focus,” indicating that these areas are generally seen as appropriately emphasized at present.

These results suggest that Regional Compact staff value NC-SARA’s work in data, policy, and educational support, while holding more divided views about the organization’s technology and communications strategies.

Q19: Which of the following areas, if any, do you believe NC-SARA should focus on?

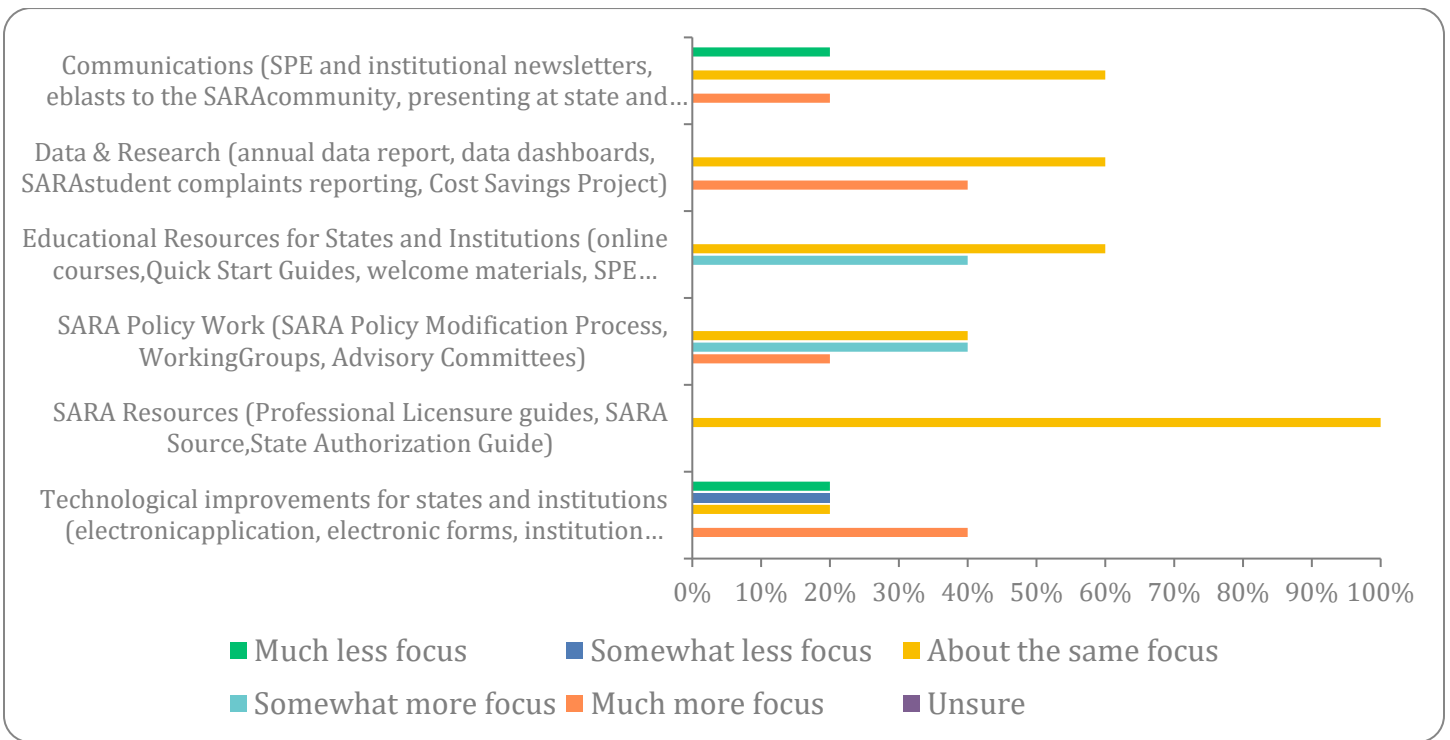


Figure 4: Level of Focus on Various Organizational Functions

2. Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question invited respond to share any additional perspectives on areas where NC-SARA may be overextended or misaligned, including functions or priorities that may benefit from reduced emphasis or refinement. Responses were intended to help inform strategic streamlining and ensure resources are allocated effectively.

- Responses highlighted a desire for improved coordination and role clarity between NC-SARA and the regional compacts. One respondent suggested that NC-SARA engage in earlier

dialogue with compacts before initiating projects that may already fall within the compacts' purview. This would help avoid duplication of effort and clarify responsibilities.

- Another comment focused on joint professional development, recommending that NC-SARA collaborate more closely with compacts to support SPE capacity through shared training efforts.
- One respondent indicated no suggestions for change.

Overall, the feedback suggests a desire among Regional Compact staff for strengthened coordination and a more collaborative approach to planning and implementation to better leverage existing roles and avoid duplication.

3. Suggestions for Areas of Increased Focus – Open Ended

An open-ended question asked respondents to identify additional areas where NC-SARA should place greater focus. This open-ended question aimed to surface emerging needs, strategic opportunities, and priorities not fully addressed through existing efforts. Respondents identified several areas for potential increased focus:

- **Administrative Support for Committees:** One respondent recommended that NC-SARA provide more support for the administrative needs of the Policy Modification Process (PMP) and other committees.
- **Reducing SPE Burden:** Another respondent emphasized the importance of identifying additional ways to reduce the administrative and compliance burdens on State Portal Entity (SPE) staff.
- **Equity, Access, and Impact Research:** A respondent suggested deeper research on key topics including:
 - The quality and effectiveness of distance education;
 - Its accessibility for marginalized, adult, and rural/remote learners;
 - Its role in reskilling and upskilling workers; and
 - Utilization by military-connected students.
- One respondent indicated they had no additional suggestions.

These comments reflect a desire for NC-SARA to bolster its support functions, advance equity-centered research, and improve the operational experience for key partners such as SPEs.

4. Additional Comments on NC-SARA's Current State – Open Ended

An open-ended question provided respondents with the opportunity to share thoughts on NC-SARA's current direction, operations, and strategic positioning. Responses included both praise and constructive feedback:

- **Staff Responsiveness and Clarity of Roles:** One respondent commended NC-SARA staff for being responsive and easy to work with. However, they noted that as new staff join, it would be helpful to clarify their roles to streamline communication and support.
- **State Influence and Governance Balance:** A respondent highlighted concerns about the influence of institutions in shaping NC-SARA's core work and called for stronger mechanisms to elevate the voices of states in governance and strategic direction.
- **SPE Burnout and Communication Fatigue:** A concern was raised regarding the volume and frequency of NC-SARA communications, particularly surveys and volunteer requests.

- The respondent warned of increasing burnout among SPEs, especially in the context of the Policy Modification Process, and recommended more mindful engagement practices.
- One respondent indicated they had no additional comments.

These responses reflect a generally positive perception of staff while also emphasizing the need for improved internal communication clarity, stronger state voice in decision-making, and better-managed outreach practices to prevent partner fatigue.

Key Findings – Engagement with SARA Services

1. SARA Quick Start Guides. A question asked Regional Compact SARA staff which SARA Quick Start Guides they accessed in the past year. These guides are designed to help institutions understand SARA requirements, communicate effectively about SARA, and support compliance and stakeholder engagement. Respondents could select multiple guides or indicate lack of awareness or use. Out of five respondents:

- One respondent (20%) reported accessing a wide range of Quick Start Guides, including:
 - Annual Data Reporting
 - California Students
 - Field Trips
 - Institution Applications
 - Military Bases
 - Overseas Students
 - Professional Licensure
 - SARA Fees
 - SARA Late Fees
 - Short Courses
 - SARA Student Complaints
 - Third Party Contracts
 - SARA Policy Modification Process
- Four respondents (80%) indicated they were aware of the Quick Start Guides but had never used them.
- No respondents indicated they were unaware of the resource.

These results suggest that while Regional Compact staff are aware of the Quick Start Guides, the vast majority are not actively using them—highlighting a potential opportunity to clarify their role, relevance, or applicability to compact-level work.

2. SARA Online Courses. A question asked Regional Compact SARA staff to indicate their level of engagement with specific SARA Online Courses in the past year. These courses are intended to support institutional understanding and implementation of SARA requirements and processes. A summary of responses includes:

- SARA 101: An Overview of State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements had the highest engagement, with 40% (2 of 5 respondents) having accessed the course and 60% aware but not having used it.
- The SPE Courses: Overview of Essential Duties of SPE Staff was accessed by 20% (1 respondent), while the remaining 80% were aware but had not used it.

- For all other courses — including *Managing Initial and Renewal Applications*, *Institution Courses*, *Foundations of NC-SARA Annual Data Reporting*, and *Preparing for and Maintaining SARA Participation* — none of the respondents had accessed them. However, 80% were aware of the courses, and 20% were unaware.

These results suggest that while awareness of SARA Online Courses is relatively high among Regional Compact staff, actual usage remains low, with only limited engagement beyond introductory materials. This may indicate a need for NC-SARA to clarify the relevance of these resources to Compact roles or explore how course content could better support their specific responsibilities.

- 3. SARA Support Desks.** A question asked Regional Compact SARA staff to identify which SARA support desks they accessed in the past year. The intent was to understand usage patterns and familiarity with the available support channels.
 - All respondents (100%) reported using info@nc-sara.org, indicating it is the primary and most widely used point of contact.
 - 60% of respondents accessed it@nc-sara.org, showing significant engagement with technical support.
 - 40% used data@nc-sara.org, reflecting use of data-related assistance.
 - 20% accessed accounting@nc-sara.org, suggesting occasional financial or billing-related inquiries.
 - None of the respondents reported using education@nc-sara.org, and no respondents were unaware of any support desks or selected that they were aware but had never used them.
- 4. SARA Policy Modification Process.** A question asked Regional Compact SARA staff to describe the ways in which they participated in the SARA Policy Modification Process (PMP). The goal was to understand the depth and breadth of involvement across various stages of the policy process, including regional and national engagement.
 - 100% of respondents reported participating in all of the following:
 - Attending regional meetings to develop, review/amend, and consider policy modification proposals.
 - Listening to the policy modification forum.
 - Listening to presentations at the NC-SARA Board meeting related to the process.
 - 80% participated in inter-regional steering committee meetings and in PMP working group or team meetings.
 - 40% presented or moderated at the public policy forum.
 - 0% reported submitting public comments or not participating at all.

These responses indicate that Regional Compact staff are highly engaged throughout the full lifecycle of the SARA Policy Modification Process, particularly at the regional level. Their involvement spans from proposal development to board-level review, with fewer participating in public-facing roles such as presenting or commenting. This reflects both strong institutional commitment and deep process knowledge among the regional staff.

- 5. Engagement with NC-SARA Staff.** A question asked Regional Compact SARA staff to assess their experiences engaging with NC-SARA staff across several dimensions, including staff helpfulness, responsiveness, approachability, and subject-matter expertise. It also measured interest in expanding engagement opportunities.
 - Staff Helpfulness, Responsiveness, and Knowledge - Respondents gave consistently positive ratings in these categories:

- 60% “strongly agreed” and 40% “agreed” that staff are helpful, responsive, and knowledgeable.
- The weighted average for each of these items was 3.60, indicating high satisfaction.
- **Comfort Approaching Staff:**
 - 80% “strongly agreed” and 20% “agreed” that they feel comfortable approaching NC-SARA staff with concerns or feedback.
 - This item had the highest weighted average of 3.80, suggesting strong trust and accessibility.
- **Interest in More Engagement Opportunities:**
 - Responses were more mixed here: 50% “disagreed”, 25% “agreed”, and 25% “strongly agreed” that they would like more engagement opportunities.
 - The weighted average for this item was 2.75, reflecting varied preferences and potentially differing needs for additional engagement.

Regional Compact staff expressed high satisfaction and strong confidence in the professionalism and support of NC-SARA staff. While most are comfortable with the current level of interaction, a minority indicated interest in expanded engagement opportunities, suggesting a need for optional or customized approaches to staff interaction.

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, the following recommendations are offered to inform NC-SARA’s strategic planning:

1. Strengthen Coordination Between NC-SARA and Regional Compacts

- **Enhance pre-project consultation:** Ensure early and ongoing dialogue with regional compacts when considering new initiatives that may overlap with compact responsibilities. This will help avoid duplication, clarify roles, and foster shared ownership of deliverables.
- **Formalize collaboration protocols:** Consider establishing clearer processes or working agreements to guide communication and coordination with compacts across major projects and policy developments.

2. Clarify Roles and Strengthen Internal Communication

- **Increase visibility of staff roles:** Develop and share updated organizational charts or contact directories that clarify staff responsibilities, especially as new team members are added—to streamline communication and improve issue resolution.
- **Support inter-stakeholder communication:** Facilitate information-sharing between NC-SARA, SPEs, and Regional Compacts to ensure aligned understanding of changes, expectations, and emerging priorities.

3. Expand Research and Equity-Focused Work

- **Advance data and research initiatives:** Continue growing NC-SARA’s research portfolio, with particular emphasis on distance education quality, equitable access for marginalized and rural learners, workforce relevance, and outcomes for military-connected students.
- **Prioritize impact-driven data collection:** Ensure that research not only informs internal strategy but also serves external stakeholders seeking to understand SARA’s value and effectiveness.

4. Provide Targeted Support for Committees and the Policy Modification Process

- **Increase administrative support:** Respondents suggested NC-SARA could do more to support the logistical and administrative needs of the Policy Modification Process (PMP) and other governance functions. Consider dedicating additional staff time or tools to these efforts.
- **Monitor SPE burden:** Compact staff observed growing fatigue among SPEs. Streamline PMP-related communications and participation requests where possible to reduce burnout and promote sustainable engagement.)

5. Improve Communication Practices and Resource Utilization

- **Refine communication cadence and clarity:** While many respondents found NC-SARA communications sufficient, 40% expressed dissatisfaction. Explore ways to reduce communication fatigue, particularly through better timing, bundling of requests, or segmenting by audience relevance.
- **Increase relevance of institutional tools to compacts:** Although compacts are aware of SARA's Quick Start Guides and online courses, few use them. Review and adapt these tools to better support Compact-specific needs—or communicate their intended utility to this stakeholder group more clearly.

6. Reinforce Strategic Planning Transparency

- **Clarify leadership's strategic direction:** Only half of respondents felt confident that NC-SARA leadership has a clear plan to address future risks. Increase transparency around strategic planning efforts by sharing updates and offering opportunities for feedback during development stages.

7. Explore Optional Engagement Opportunities

- **Offer differentiated engagement pathways:** Most Regional Compact staff are satisfied with current interactions, but some expressed interest in deeper engagement. Provide voluntary opportunities—such as informal roundtables, working groups, or open office hours—for those who wish to participate more actively.

These recommendations aim to help NC-SARA sustain strong relationships with Regional Compact staff, align efforts across the organization, and advance its mission with clarity, collaboration, and credibility

Appendix

This appendix includes a curated set of supplementary materials that provide additional context and clarity on key survey findings. Since NC-SARA maintains full access to the complete survey instrument and raw response data via SurveyMonkey, this section focuses on value-added visuals, select summary tables, and references to support interpretation of the findings presented in this report.

A. Key Quantitative Visuals

Charts generated from SurveyMonkey summarizing respondent feedback on core areas of interest, including:

- Relevance and confidence in NC-SARA's core work
- Top challenges identified for the next 3–5 years
- Level of focus on various organizational functions

B. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

A summary of thematic categories used to analyze open-ended responses, including:

- Emerging concerns (e.g., policy risk, compliance gaps)
- Recommendations for expanded support
- Stakeholder views on NC-SARA's image and leadership

This framework provides transparency into how qualitative data was synthesized into themes.

C. Methodological Notes

This section provides additional context regarding the design, distribution, and analysis of the regional compacts stakeholder survey.

- **Survey Distribution and Response Rate**
 - The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 8 Regional Compact SARA staff members. The survey was open from June 2 to June 20, 2025, and a total of 5 responses were received, with 100 percent of respondents completing the entire survey.
 - Respondents were asked a combination of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into NC-SARA's effectiveness, challenges, and strategic priorities.
- **Use of SurveyMonkey Tools**
 - The survey was developed, administered, and analyzed using SurveyMonkey. Key tools used in the analysis included:
 - The "Question & Answer" filtering feature, which allowed results to be examined by question and respondent characteristics (e.g., years of tenure).
 - Built-in charts and weighted averages, used to visualize and interpret Likert-scale responses.
 - Export tools to generate data summaries for use in tables and figures presented in this report.

Charts and figures in the appendix were generated directly from SurveyMonkey or formatted using exported data for clarity and visual consistency.

- **Thematic Coding and Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Open-ended responses were reviewed through a manual thematic coding process to identify common issues, suggestions, and perceptions. Thematic categories were developed inductively, meaning they were derived from patterns and recurring topics in the responses themselves.

Once themes were established, each open-text response was reviewed and tagged with one or more codes. Common themes included:

- Suggestions for Increased Focus
- Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus
- Additional Comments on NC-SARA's Current State

Representative comments were paraphrased or quoted directly where appropriate, and broad patterns were summarized in relevant report sections and in the qualitative analysis portion of the appendix.

NC-SARA Strategic Plan Survey – Final Report: State Portal Entities

Prepared by: Lauren Sisneros, LS Consultants, LLC

Date: August 2, 2025

Executive Summary

As part of the NC-SARA 2025 Strategic Planning process, a survey was administered to State Portal Entity (SPE) staff to assess the current state of NC-SARA, identify organizational needs, and gather valuable input for the organization's long-term strategic objectives. Other NC-SARA stakeholders were also surveyed, including SARA-participating institutions, NC-SARA Staff, NC-SARA Board, and Regional Compact SARA staff. Individual reports summarizing results for each stakeholder group are also being provided to capture unique perspectives and priorities. These findings form the basis for specific, actionable recommendations to enhance NC-SARA's effectiveness and support for SPEs going forward.

Key survey results indicate that SPEs express strong confidence in NC-SARA's core work, communications, and responsiveness, with notable appreciation for staff professionalism and helpfulness. Stakeholders also highlighted future challenges such as federal policy shifts, resource constraints, and institutional compliance support. There is broad interest in expanding technological tools, student-centered resources, and proactive communication strategies that reflect SARA's value and impact in the higher education landscape.

Background & Methodology

To inform its next Strategic Plan, NC-SARA distributed a stakeholder survey to gather input on organizational direction and effectiveness.

- I. **Platform:** The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. The survey included 29 questions, both closed-ended Likert-scale questions and open-ended responses.
- II. **Dates:** The survey was conducted from June 2–20, 2025.
- III. **Respondents:** The survey was distributed electronically via email and a link to 103 State Portal Entity staff across SARA member states. A total of 37 responses were received, with 86 percent of respondents completing the entire survey. Respondent tenure with SARA varied, providing a mix of long-term institutional knowledge and newer perspectives. Nearly one-third (32%) have been involved for more than 10 years, while an additional 11% reported 6–10 years of experience. Approximately 46% of respondents have 1–5 years of experience, and 11% have been involved for less than a year. This distribution reflects a mix of long-term engagement and newer perspectives across the State Portal Entity community.
- IV. **Analysis:** Responses were filtered using SurveyMonkey's "Question & Answer" filtering tool. Data was reviewed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and charts were provided via SurveyMonkey and processed for reporting.

Key Findings – NC-SARA’s Core Work

1. Strong Overall Engagement and Confidence:

- A majority of respondents reported high levels of engagement with NC-SARA processes, with responses like "To a great extent" frequently selected when asked about understanding NC-SARA’s core work and the difference between NC-SARA and SARA.
- Most respondents believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders. Seventy-one (71%) of respondents indicated that NC-SARA’s core work is “Very relevant” or “Relevant” to stakeholder needs. Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Q5: I believe NC-SARA's core work to be relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

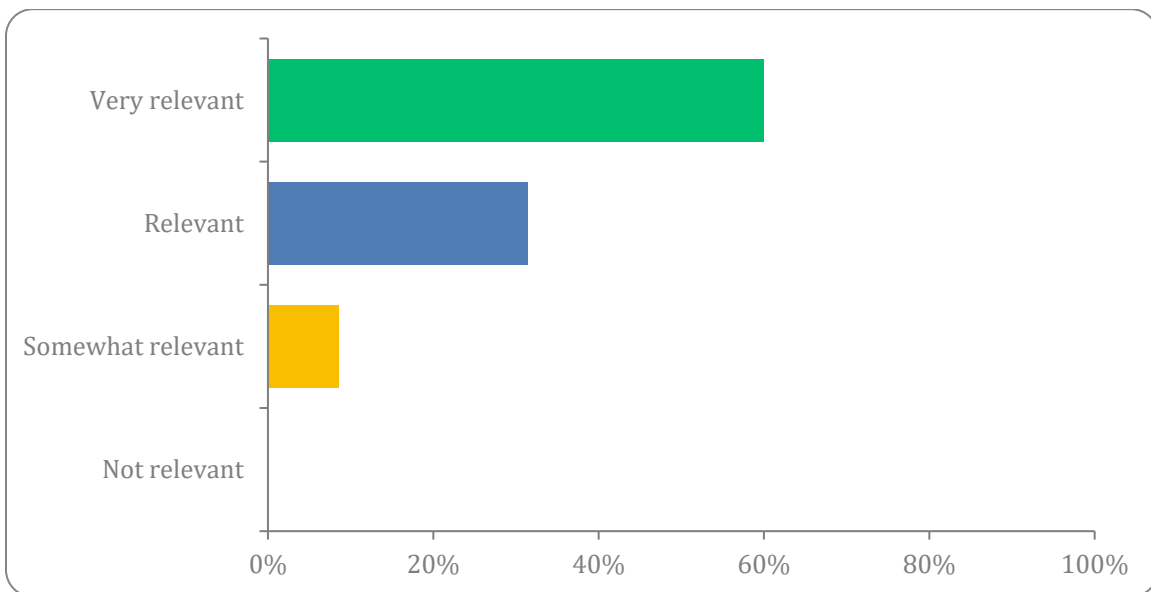


Figure 1: NC-SARA’s Core Work Relevant to Stakeholders Needs

- Most respondents, 83%, described themselves as "Very confident" or "Confident" in NC-SARA's capacity to effectively execute its core work. The other 17% described themselves as somewhat confident in NC-SARA’s capacity to effectively execute its core work. No respondents described themselves as “Not confident” confident in NC-SARA’s capacity to effectively execute its core work.

2. Strong Effectiveness in Promoting Value and Collaboration

- Most respondents believe NC-SARA effectively promotes the value of SARA to the higher education community with 74% respondents reporting “Very effectively” or “Effectively”. The other 26% selected “Somewhat effectively” and no respondents selected “Not effectively”.
- Most respondents believe NC-SARA effectively promotes a culture of collaboration with 78% respondents reporting “Very effectively” or “Effectively”. The other 22% selected “Somewhat effectively” and no respondents selected “Not effectively”.

3. Overall Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work (Figure 2 summarizes these findings)

- The majority of respondents, 91%, “Strongly agree” or “Agree” that they are satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.
- Only 9%, or 3 respondents, “Disagreed” that they are satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

Q9: Overall, I am satisfied with the work of NC-SARA.

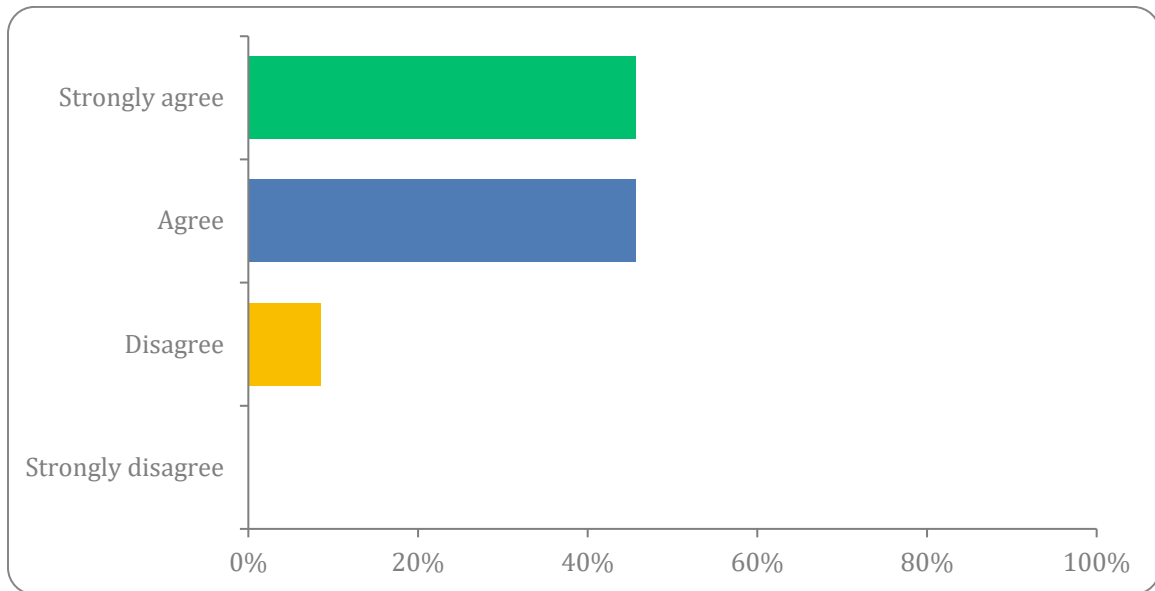


Figure 2: Satisfaction with NC-SARA’s Work

Key Findings – NC-SARA Communications, Support, and Operations

1. Effective Use of Communications and Provides Necessary Resources

- Respondents largely agreed that they are satisfied with NC-SARA communications. Ninety seven percent (97%) of respondents “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed” that they are satisfied with the communications they receive from NC-SARA. Only 1 respondent indicated that they “Disagreed” that they were satisfied.
- Respondents largely agreed that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA to be successful. Ninety seven percent (97%) of respondents “Strongly agreed” or “Agreed” that NC-SARA provides the resources necessary for SARA to be successful. Only 1 respondent indicated that they “Disagreed”.

2. Operational Efficiency

- A strong majority of respondents (76%) rated NC-SARA as either "Efficient" or "Very Efficient" from an operational standpoint, indicating confidence in the organization’s ability to manage its operations effectively. The remaining 24% described NC-SARA as "Somewhat Efficient," suggesting room for continued improvement but no respondents rated the organization as inefficient.

Key Findings – NC-SARA Risks, Challenges, and Opportunities

1. Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years (Figure 3 summarizes these findings)

- **Respondents identified a range of potential challenges NC-SARA may face, with the most frequently cited issues reflecting external policy shifts and resource constraints:**
 - Federal policy changes emerged as the most pressing concern, selected by 88% of respondents. This includes negotiated rulemaking and potential impacts stemming from changes at the U.S. Department of Education.
 - Accreditation and postsecondary quality assurance, including the C-RAC 21st Century Guidelines, was the second most frequently cited challenge (73%).
 - Capacity and resources of State Portal Entity (SPE) staff was selected by 55%, signaling concerns about adequate infrastructure to support SARA operations.
 - Financial challenges for institutions (outside of enrollment declines) were noted by 48% of respondents.
- **Less frequently cited challenges included:**
 - Public criticism of SARA and the rapid growth of short-term credentials, each selected by 27%.
 - Public perceptions about distance learning quality (21%), States leaving SARA (21%) and institutional declining enrollment (15%).
 - Concerns such as institutions leaving SARA and states leaving SARA received fewer responses, suggesting these are not currently viewed as widespread threats.
 - Notably, only 9% identified Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a major future challenge, indicating it is not yet a top-of-mind concern among respondents.

Q13: What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing NC-SARA in the next 3-5 years? (please select your top 4)

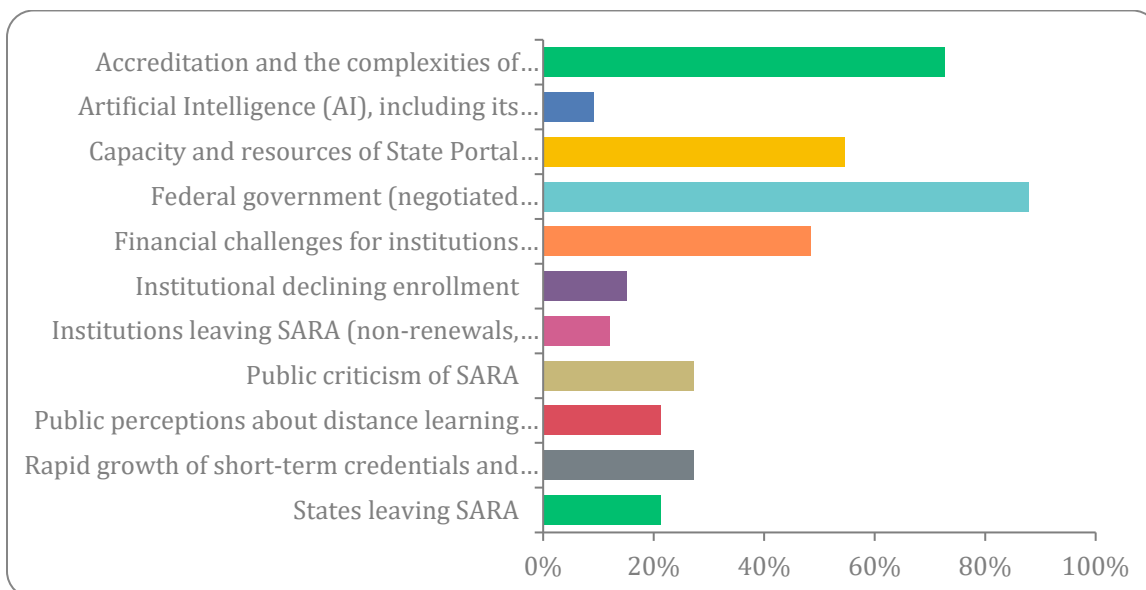


Figure 3: Top Anticipated Challenges Facing NC-SARA in the Next 3–5 Years

2. Political Environment as a Risk Factor

- A majority of respondents (79%) agreed that the political environment poses a significant risk to NC-SARA, with 21% strongly agreeing and 58% agreeing. In contrast, 21% of respondents disagreed to some extent, including 18% who disagreed and 3% who strongly disagreed. These results suggest that while there is broad concern about political dynamics, a small segment of respondents see the risk as less pressing.

3. Economic Environment as a Risk

- Stakeholder views on the economic climate as a risk to NC-SARA were mixed. While 56% of respondents expressed some level of agreement that the economic climate poses a significant risk (21% strongly agree, 35% agree), a notable 44.12% disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed. This split suggests that while economic concerns are present for over half of respondents, a substantial portion does not view the economic environment as a major threat to NC-SARA's work at this time.

4. Technological Changes as a Risk

- The vast majority of respondents (85%) disagreed that technological change poses a significant risk to NC-SARA. Only a small minority (15% total) agreed to some extent (3% strongly agree, 12% agree), and no respondents strongly disagreed. These results suggest that stakeholders currently view technological change as a low-risk factor for the organization.

5. Perceptions of NC-SARA Leadership Readiness

- A majority of respondents (64%) agreed that NC-SARA's Board and Senior Leadership have a plan to address threats and obstacles, with 12% strongly agreeing and 52% agreeing. However, over one-third (36%) expressed concerns, with 32% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. These results suggest that while there is general confidence in leadership preparedness, a significant portion of respondents are uncertain or skeptical about the organization's planning for potential risks.

6. Positive Image in the Higher Education Community

- An overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) agreed that NC-SARA has a positive image in the higher education community, with 31% strongly agreeing and 63% agreeing. Only 1 respondent disagreed, and no respondents strongly disagreed. These results indicate broad confidence in NC-SARA's reputation and standing within the field.

Key Findings – Looking Forward

1. Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts (Figure 4 Summarizes these Findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate whether NC-SARA should place more, less, or about the same level of focus on various communications efforts. The results provide insight into stakeholder priorities for how NC-SARA engages and informs its audiences. Overall, stakeholders expressed support for continuing or increasing focus across most communications activities, with few respondents recommending less focus in any area.

- **Highest Priorities - The strongest support for increased communication was for:**
 - Presenting at national conferences (58% want more focus; weighted average: 3.76)
 - Special topics webinars (55% want more focus; weighted average: 3.76)
 - SPE Workshops (43% want more focus; weighted average: 3.67)
- **Maintain Current Focus - A majority of respondents preferred about the same level of focus for:**
 - SPE Newsletter (85% selected "about the same"; weighted average: 3.30)

- Presenting at SARA State Meetings (67%; weighted average: 3.33)
- Presenting at Regional Compact Steering Committee Meetings (66%; weighted average: 3.44)
- Institution communications (53%; weighted average: 3.72)
- **Very Limited Desire for Less Focus** - Very few respondents selected "much less" or "somewhat less focus" across any category, indicating overall satisfaction with the current communication strategy and an openness to modest expansion in several areas.

Q19: Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts

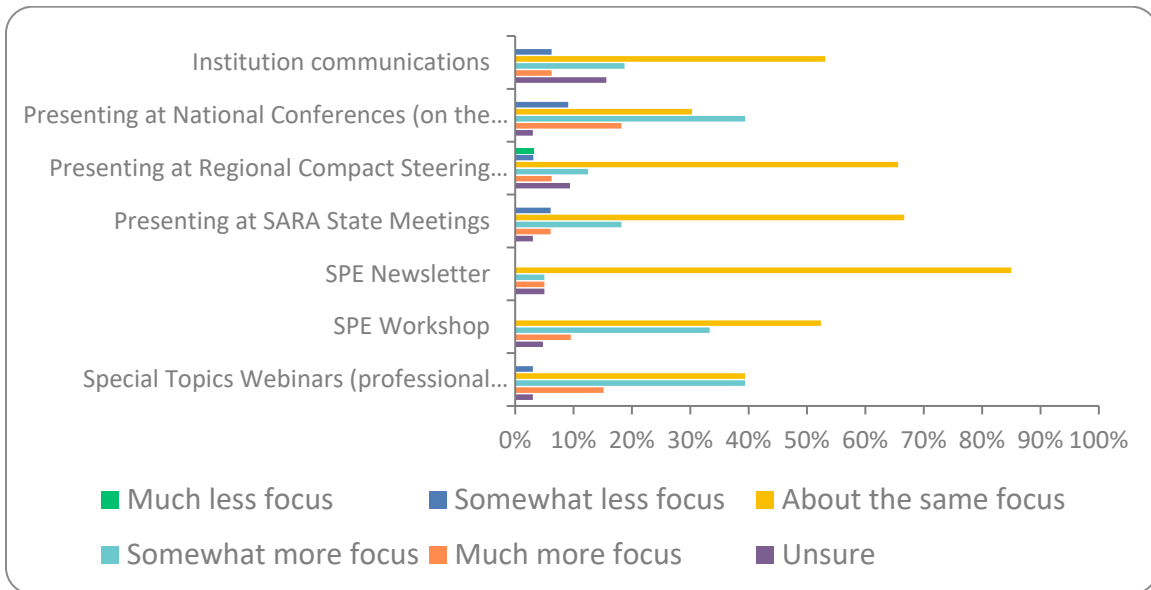


Figure 4: Priorities for NC-SARA Communications Efforts

2. Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research (Figure 5 summarizes these findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate how much focus NC-SARA should place on specific Data & Research activities, including the annual data report and the cost savings project. The results help inform how NC-SARA can align its research efforts with stakeholder expectations.

- **Annual Data Report (not dashboards):** A majority of respondents (57%) indicated NC-SARA should maintain its current level of focus on the annual data report, while 33.3% suggested an increased focus (27% somewhat more, 6% much more). Only 3% recommended less focus. The weighted average score of 3.55 indicates general satisfaction with the current approach, with modest support for enhancement.
- **Cost Savings Project:** Nearly half of respondents (48%) felt the current level of focus was appropriate, while 32% recommended greater emphasis (26% somewhat more, 7% much more). A small percentage (13%) suggested less focus. The weighted average of 3.45 reflects a slightly lower—but still positive—interest in continued development of this project.

Q20: Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research

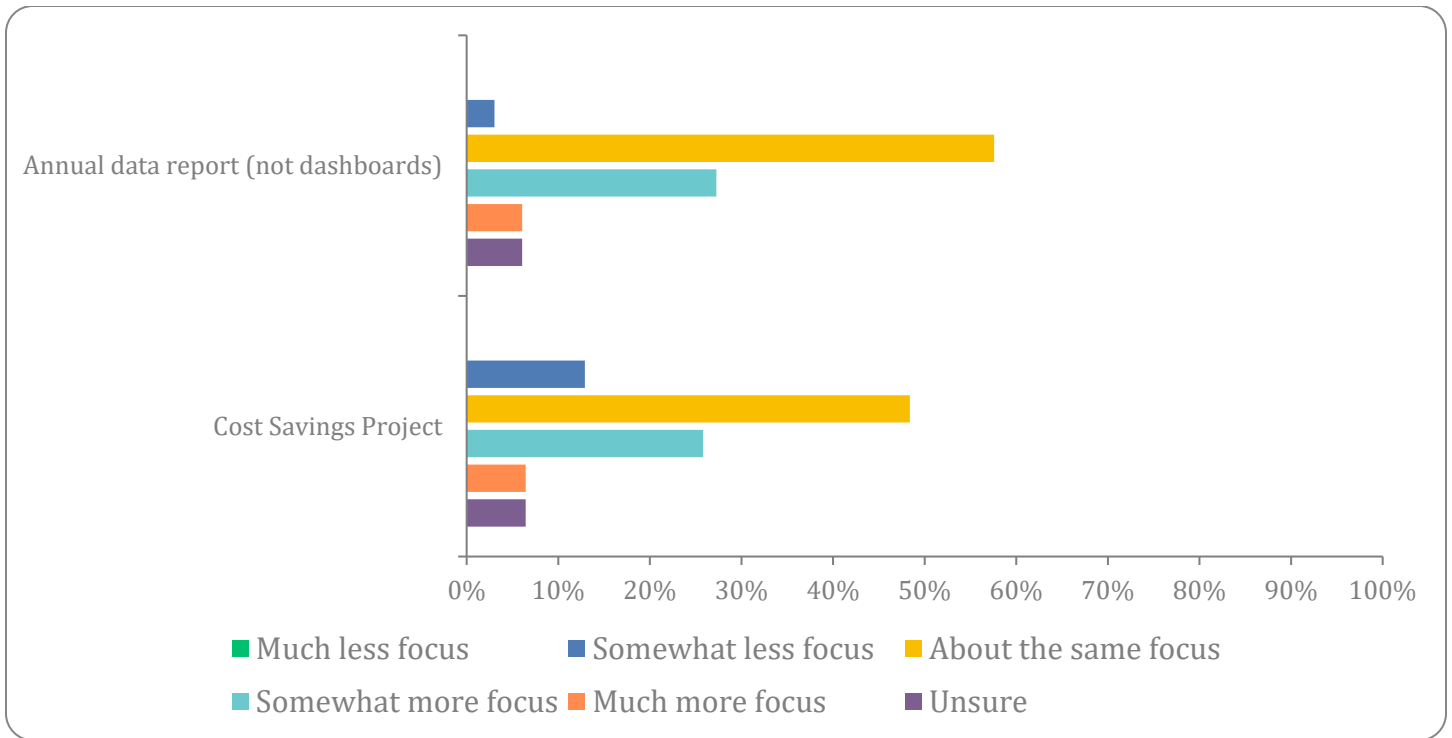


Figure 5: Priorities for NC-SARA Data & Research

3. Feedback on Educational Resources for Institutions and States (Figure 6 summarizes these findings)

Respondents were asked to rate how much focus NC-SARA should place on developing and maintaining various educational resources aimed at supporting institutions and State Portal Entities (SPEs). Their responses help guide priorities for onboarding, training, and support tools.

- **Strongest Support for Online Training:** Respondents showed the greatest interest in online courses for both institutional personnel (weighted average: 3.73) and SPEs (3.67), with over 48% or more supporting increased focus. Notably, no respondents recommended less focus for either course type, suggesting strong support for expanding digital training resources.
- **Quick Start Guides and Onboarding Materials Also Valued:**
 - The SARA Policy Quick Start Guides received a weighted average of 3.55, with 33% wanting increased focus and no respondents recommending less.
 - SPE onboarding materials (Welcome Kit) had a similar trend (3.50), with 32% wanting greater focus and 68% indicating the current level is appropriate.
- **Institution Welcome Materials:** While 75% of respondents felt the current focus is appropriate, a smaller portion (16%) supported increased attention, resulting in a weighted average of 3.34, the lowest of the five items but still indicating general satisfaction.

Q21: Priorities for Educational resources for institutions and states:

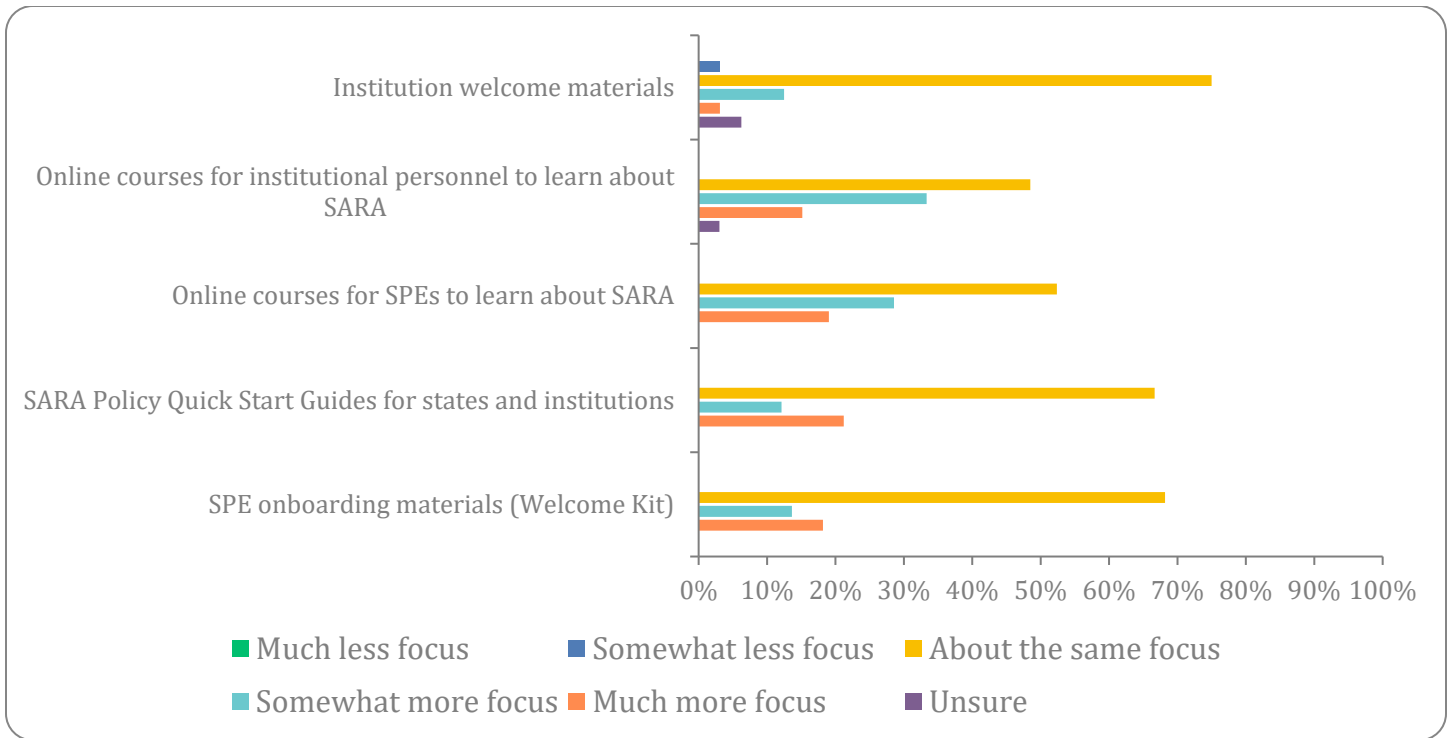


Figure 6: Priorities for Educational resources for institutions and states:

4. Priorities for NC-SARA’s Policy Engagement

Respondents were asked to assess how much focus NC-SARA should place on two key areas of SARA policy work: engagement in federal negotiated rulemaking and public forums on policy modification. Their feedback highlights where stakeholders see value in advocacy and transparency.

- **Strong Support for Federal Engagement:** The Negotiated Rulemaking Call to Action received a weighted average of 3.67, with 49% of respondents favoring the current level of focus and another 49% calling for increased attention (27% somewhat more, 21% much more). No respondents recommended less focus, indicating strong consensus for continued or enhanced federal policy engagement.
- **Mixed Views on Public Forums:** The SARA Policy Modification Process Public Forum had a weighted average of 3.18, reflecting more divided opinions. While over 52% preferred maintaining the current level of focus, 18% supported increased attention. However, 18% also recommended *less* focus, suggesting a need to evaluate the perceived value and format of these forums moving forward.

5. Feedback on SARA Resources

Respondents were asked to indicate how much focus NC-SARA should place on various SARA-related resources, including professional licensure tools, communications like the SARA Source, and guidance on state authorization. The data reflect stakeholder priorities for refining and expanding informational supports.

- **Strongest Support for Professional Licensure Guides:** The Professional Licensure Guides received the highest level of support for increased focus, with a weighted average of 3.82. Over

57% of respondents recommended more focus (33% somewhat more, 24% much more), while only 6% felt focus should be reduced.

- **Mixed Feedback on SARA Source:** The SARA Source, NC-SARA's newsletter or communication channel, received a weighted average of 3.42. While 55% of respondents supported maintaining the current focus, 15% suggested reducing it. This suggests that while the resource is generally valued, it may not be seen as a top priority for enhancement.
- **State Authorization Guide Viewed as Stable:** The State Authorization Guide earned a weighted average of 3.21, with nearly 64% of respondents indicating the current level of focus is appropriate. Only 24% suggested increased focus, and 9% recommended less. These results suggest the guide is meeting expectations but may not need significant changes at this time.

6. Feedback on Technological Priorities for States and Institutions

Respondents were asked to indicate how much focus NC-SARA should place on specific technological improvements that support states and institutions, including electronic forms and portals. The responses highlight areas where stakeholders see opportunities for increased efficiency and modernization.

- **Strong Support for Digital Form Enhancements:** Respondents showed clear enthusiasm for improving **electronic forms**:
 - Electronic institution forms received the highest weighted average of 4.19, with 72% of respondents supporting more focus and no one recommending less than current levels.
 - Electronic state forms and electronic application processes also received strong support, with weighted averages of 4.13 and 4.15, respectively. Nearly 70–75% of respondents wanted increased focus in these areas, with virtually no calls for decreased attention.
- **Moderate Support for Institutional Portal Improvements:** The institution portal in Salesforce received a lower—but still positive—weighted average of 3.84. While nearly half of respondents preferred to maintain the current level of focus (47%), about 38% supported increasing efforts. This suggests that while the portal is important, it may not be viewed as urgent a priority as electronic forms.

7. Suggestions for Reducing or Modifying Focus – Open Ended

In response to an open-ended question about areas where NC-SARA might reduce or adjust its focus, respondents offered feedback related to communications, compliance, and public positioning.

- **Improve Post-Approval Communication:** One respondent suggested that NC-SARA send a follow-up communication to newly approved institutions as a reminder of SARA policies and compliance expectations, and to better notify states of any institutional changes.
- **Shift Focus from Critics to Impact Narrative:** A stakeholder recommended reducing emphasis on responding to SARA critics and instead investing in proactive storytelling that highlights NC-SARA's role in expanding access to quality education and reducing institutional costs.

- **Rebalance Policy vs. Compliance Efforts:** Another comment expressed concern that NC-SARA may be overly focused on policy modification processes while underemphasizing enforcement or monitoring of institutional compliance with existing policies.

8. Recommendations for Areas of Increased Focus – Open Ended

In response to an open-ended question about where NC-SARA should increase its focus, respondents shared a wide range of thoughtful suggestions related to student-centered outcomes, public communication, policy engagement, compliance, and technology. The responses reflect a desire for NC-SARA to be more visible, proactive, and adaptive in a changing higher education landscape.

- **Strengthening Communications and Public Presence**
 - **Proactive messaging:** Respondents urged NC-SARA to focus on shaping its own narrative—highlighting student benefits, access, and cost savings—rather than responding to critics.
 - **Myth busting and education:** Suggestions included launching a data-driven, proactive communications strategy to correct misinformation before it drives policy decisions.
- **Enhancing Student-Centered Impact**
 - **Focus on student outcomes:** Respondents want NC-SARA to better demonstrate the student impact of reciprocity, including outcomes from SARA enrollments.
 - **Complaint and response standards:** One response recommended NC-SARA take part in setting standards for responding to student complaints, particularly in online learning scenarios.
- **Elevating Institutional and State Support**
 - **Institutional compliance and oversight:** Several comments expressed concern that while policy modifications receive attention, institutional compliance enforcement is under-emphasized.
 - **Support for states:** There is a desire for more assistance helping states meet authorization goals, better institutional support for SPEs, and acknowledgment of the resource imbalance between state and institutional savings.
- **Policy and Governance Leadership**
 - **Shared leadership within the five-partner model:** Stakeholders encouraged NC-SARA to take a more active leadership role in working groups, policy development, and resource creation
 - **Preparation for federal policy shifts:** Several emphasized the need for NC-SARA to engage more directly with issues around accreditation, institutional quality, and participation of non-accredited institutions.
 - **Institutional closure safeguards:** Suggestions included developing transparent timelines for closure-related policy work, exploring tuition recovery models, and providing interim guidance to states.
- **Technological Improvements**
 - **System usability:** One respondent highlighted limitations in Salesforce functionality, suggesting enhancements like enabling comment fields in institution records.

- **Electronic processing:** Additional suggestions included expanding support for electronic submission and processing of applications and forms.

9. Feedback on Current State of NC-SARA – Open Ended

In response to a final open-ended question, respondents shared general reflections on NC-SARA's current performance, staff engagement, technological priorities, and future considerations for communication and feedback processes. A summary of the key themes include:

- **Appreciation for NC-SARA and Its Staff:** Multiple respondents expressed gratitude and praise for NC-SARA's staff, noting their sincerity, dedication, and professionalism. Comments such as *"Keep up the great work"* and *"The work of every staff member... is greatly appreciated"* reflect a strong sense of stakeholder goodwill.
- **Technological Improvements Remain a Priority:** One respondent emphasized the need for technological enhancements for both states and institutions, reinforcing similar themes seen in other parts of the survey.
- **Policy and Framework Considerations:** A respondent raised the issue of 100% virtual institutions and the complexities surrounding physical presence and home state determination, suggesting this as an area NC-SARA may need to address more directly.
- **Survey Process Improvement:** One participant suggested including an option for survey respondents to receive a copy of their submitted responses, indicating a desire for more transparency or record-keeping in future engagements.
- **Nuanced Perceptions of Public Image:** One response noted that perceptions of NC-SARA's image in the higher education community may vary significantly depending on the audience, suggesting that stakeholder segmentation may be important when evaluating reputation.

Key Findings – Engagement with NC-SARA Services

1. Participation in the SARA Policy Modification Process (Figure 7 summarizes these findings)

Respondents were asked to indicate all the ways they participated in NC-SARA's Policy Modification Process. The results reflect broad engagement, particularly in observation and discussion phases, with fewer participants involved in formal public comment or leadership roles.

- **High Engagement in Listening and Discussion Activities:** The most common forms of participation were listening to the policy modification forum (74%) and attending NC-SARA Board presentations about the process (68%).
- **Lower Levels of Formal Leadership and Commenting Roles:**
 - Only 16% presented or moderated at the public forum.
 - Just 6% reported submitting public comments.
 - One respondent indicated no participation at all (3%).

This distribution suggests that while stakeholders are highly engaged in attending and observing key points in the policy process, there may be opportunities to increase participation in more active and influential roles.

Q28: Please provide information regarding your participation in the SARA Policy Modification Process. How were you involved in the SARA Policy Modification Process? (select all that apply)

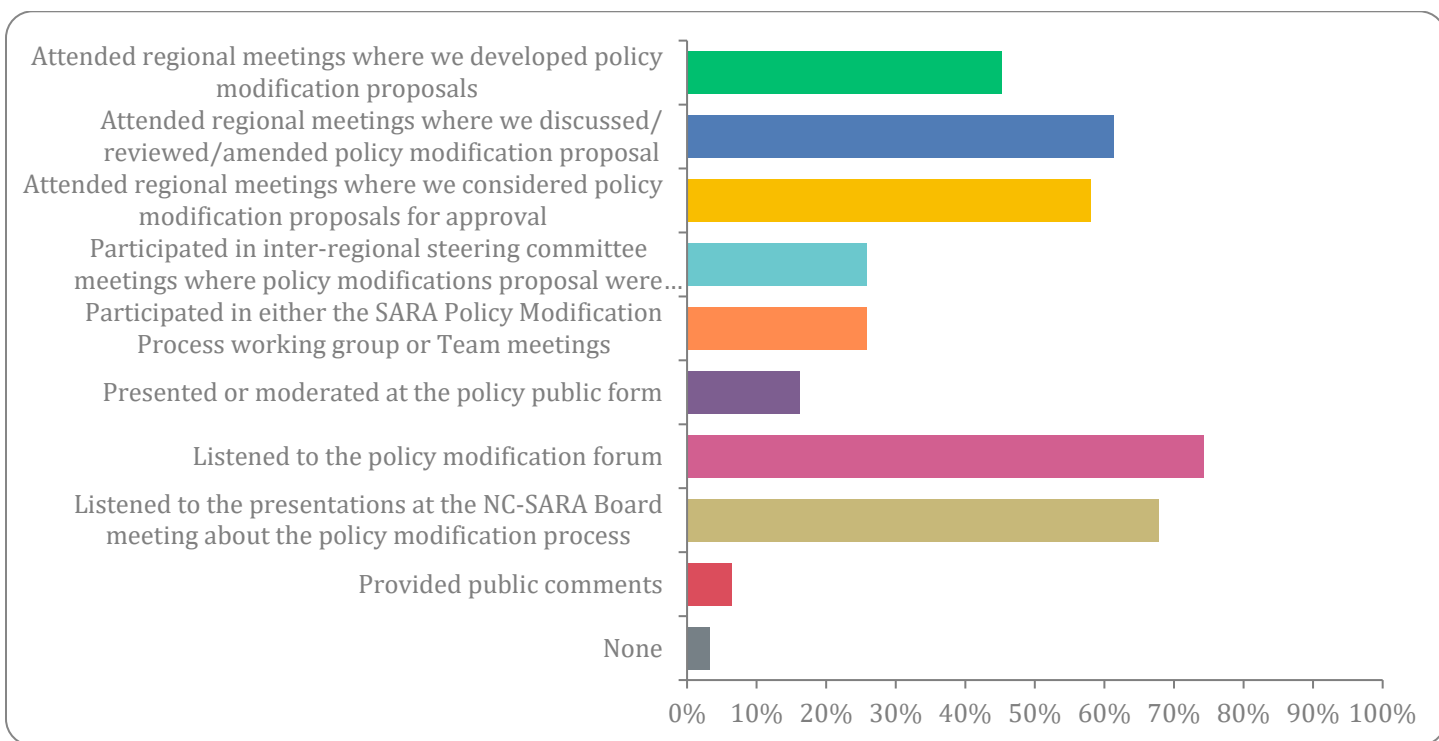


Figure 7: Participation in the SARA Policy Modification Process

2. Engagement with NC-SARA Staff

Respondents were asked to evaluate their experiences engaging with NC-SARA staff, including perceptions of staff helpfulness, responsiveness, approachability, knowledge, and interest in additional engagement opportunities. Overall, the responses reflect strong satisfaction and trust, with some room to consider preferences for increased interaction.

- **High Levels of Satisfaction and Trust in Staff:** Most respondents rated NC-SARA staff very positively:
 - **Helpfulness:** 96.6% agreed or strongly agreed staff are helpful (weighted average: 3.45)
 - **Approachability:** 96.9% felt comfortable approaching staff with concerns (3.47)
 - **Responsiveness:** 93.8% said staff are responsive when they have questions (3.44)
 - **Knowledge:** 93.8% agreed staff are knowledgeable (3.44)
- **Desire for More Interaction Is Mixed:** The lowest-rated item was the statement “*I would like more engagement opportunities with NC-SARA staff*”, which had a weighted average of 2.57. While 50% agreed, 43% either disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating diverse preferences regarding increased staff engagement.

These findings suggest that NC-SARA staff are broadly seen as professional, approachable, and responsive. While some stakeholders welcome more engagement opportunities, others may feel the current level of interaction is sufficient. This could inform a flexible or tiered approach to engagement strategies moving forward.

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, the following recommendations are offered to inform NC-SARA's strategic planning:

1. Strengthen Federal Policy Engagement and Advocacy

- Continue and expand engagement in negotiated rulemaking processes.
- Develop proactive messaging to articulate NC-SARA's role in supporting state compliance and institutional cost savings.
- Track and prepare for potential policy changes affecting distance education and reciprocity.

2. Enhance Technological Tools and Digital Services

- Prioritize modernization of electronic forms for institutions and states.
- Improve Salesforce usability and feedback loops (e.g., allow comment fields).
- Explore additional digital solutions to streamline authorization processes and institutional reporting.

3. Invest in Training and Onboarding Resources

- Develop and promote online training courses for both institutional personnel and SPE staff.
- Update and expand onboarding kits and quick start guides for clarity and usability.
- Consider resource disparities across states and customize support as needed.

4. Support Institutional Compliance and Enforcement

- Increase attention to institutional compliance monitoring and enforcement of SARA policies.
- Provide more structured guidance on complaint resolution and closure protocols.
- Elevate compliance support to a core organizational priority alongside policy development.

5. Promote Student-Centered Outcomes and Messaging

- Highlight the impact of SARA participation on student access, affordability, and consumer protection.
- Integrate student benefit metrics into communications, annual reports, and public-facing resources.

6. Customize Stakeholder Engagement

- Maintain high levels of responsiveness while exploring tiered engagement strategies for those desiring more interaction with staff.
- Offer targeted engagement pathways (e.g., working groups, forums) for those interested in shaping policy or systems.

Appendix

This appendix includes a curated set of supplementary materials that provide additional context and clarity on key survey findings. Since NC-SARA maintains full access to the complete survey instrument and raw response data via SurveyMonkey, this section focuses on value-added visuals, select summary tables, and references to support interpretation of the findings presented in this report.

A. Key Quantitative Visuals

Charts generated from SurveyMonkey summarizing respondent feedback on core areas of interest, including:

- Relevance and confidence in NC-SARA’s core work
- Top challenges identified for the next 3–5 years
- Prioritized focus areas for communications, data & research, and educational resources
- Participation in the SARA Policy Modification Process

B. Thematic Coding Framework (Qualitative Responses)

A summary of thematic categories used to analyze open-ended responses, including:

- Emerging concerns (e.g., policy risk, compliance gaps)
- Recommendations for expanded support
- Stakeholder views on NC-SARA’s image and leadership

This framework provides transparency into how qualitative data was synthesized into themes.

D. Methodological Notes

This section provides additional context regarding the design, distribution, and analysis of the SPE stakeholder survey.

- **Survey Distribution and Response Rate**

- The survey was distributed electronically via email to 103 State Portal Entity (SPE) staff across NC-SARA member states. The survey was open from June 2 to June 20, 2025, and a total of 37 responses were received. Of these, 86% completed the entire survey, indicating strong engagement from the respondent group.
- Respondents were asked a combination of Likert-scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions to provide both quantitative and qualitative insight into NC-SARA’s effectiveness, challenges, and strategic priorities.

- **Use of SurveyMonkey Tools**

- The survey was developed, administered, and analyzed using SurveyMonkey. Key tools used in the analysis included:
- The “Question & Answer” filtering feature, which allowed results to be examined by question and respondent characteristics (e.g., years of tenure).
- Built-in charts and weighted averages, used to visualize and interpret Likert-scale responses.
- Export tools to generate data summaries for use in tables and figures presented in this report.

Charts and figures in the appendix were generated directly from SurveyMonkey or formatted using exported data for clarity and visual consistency.

- **Thematic Coding and Analysis of Open-Ended Responses**

Open-ended responses were reviewed through a manual thematic coding process to identify common issues, suggestions, and perceptions. Thematic categories were developed inductively, meaning they were derived from patterns and recurring topics in the responses themselves.

Once themes were established, each open-text response was reviewed and tagged with one or more codes. Common themes included:

- Requests for enhanced communication strategies
- Concerns about institutional compliance
- Calls for technological improvements
- Recognition of staff helpfulness and professionalism

Representative comments were paraphrased or quoted directly where appropriate, and broad patterns were summarized in relevant report sections and in the qualitative analysis portion of the appendix.