# Deloitte.

# The student-centric imperative

## Meeting the needs of Canada's higher education learners

2024

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# Introduction

Higher education in Canada is at a tipping point. Economic, societal, and technological changes that have been disrupting the industries for years are coming to head, along with the potential financial impacts of international student policy. Colleges and universities are thinking hard about how they can be successful in the future.

More than ever, the success of post-secondary institutions depends on their ability to provide high-quality, flexible, and relevant learning through an experience focused on students' needs. In the year since we published our last education survey results, the focus on the financial viability of post-secondary institutions across Canada has intensified. It's making headlines and illustrating, once again, the need for renewed strategies to ensure the sustainability of these institutions. Other disruptions impacting higher education include demographics, admissions changes, and a housing crisis squeezing student recruitment; an overabundance of choices for and pressures on prospective students; and students questioning the value of higher education, a trend we've noted over the past two years. It's time for Canada's institutions to take a deep look at the value they offer and strategize accordingly.

To ensure long-term viability, every institution should aim to generate and support a sustainable flow of learners through to graduation and beyond. Every institution should seek to understand who its learners are—their needs, their struggles, their aspirations. This understanding is crucial to developing more efficient operations and delivering academic and student services that meet students' needs, help them through their struggles, and empower them to realize their aspirations.

That's why we've been surveying post-secondary students for the past three years: to learn about their experiences and to identify where Canada's higher education institutions are succeeding and where there are opportunities for improvement. **Our aim is to understand—from the student perspective—the key drivers of student retention and academic success.**

This year, we took our survey global. We worked with Deloitte colleagues in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Australia to understand how students in different countries perceive their post-secondary experiences. We're sharing some of the high-level results here to contextualize the opinions of Canadian students with comparisons to the opinions of students worldwide. The full results of our global survey will be published in July 2024.
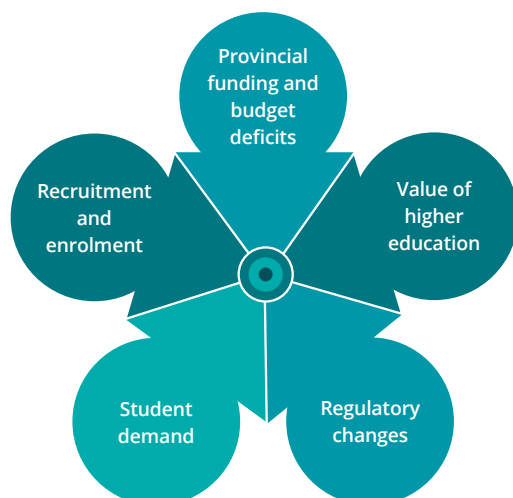


> Our aim is to understand— from the student's perspective—the key drivers of student retention and academic success.

# Key survey results

**In the fall of 2023, we surveyed more than**

## 1,500

post-secondary students enrolled in institutions across Canada

**Demographics of survey respondents**

## 1,000
**from universities**

## 500
**from colleges**

**The survey included approximately**

## 1,000
undergraduate students

## 500
graduate students

**80%** of the participants were enrolled in full-time studies

**20%**
of the participants were enrolled in part-time studies

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Despite the external challenges institutions in Canada face, our survey results offers hope and a direction for focus.

We're delighted to report that for a second consecutive year there has been an overall increase in student satisfaction levels as institutions return to more normalized operations post-pandemic. For the third year in a row, however, they show the same declining trend over the course of the student journey. This drop in satisfaction is consistent across our global results.

Overall, our findings about how student-centric respondents think their institutions are can be summarized in four broad themes:

1. Students think their **institutions are doing better**. Year over year, the percentage of students who agree their institutions are focused on their needs is increasing.

2. There's a persistent trend of **student satisfaction declining from the early stages** of the student journey through to student life and student services. For the past three years, students told us that institutions are less focused on their needs during their time at school than they are during application and registration.

3. **Different student groups have significantly different experiences** in higher education. Students with mental health issues or disabilities and students from lower socio-economic statuses, for example, consistently report that their institutions are less focused on their needs.

4. **Students expect a seamless digital experience** on campus. Survey comments make it clear that students are anchoring their expectations on their digital experiences with the platforms and products of Google and Apple: a high bar to meet.

These insights provide important focus areas for the higher education ecosystem as it navigates through a period of transition and adaptation.
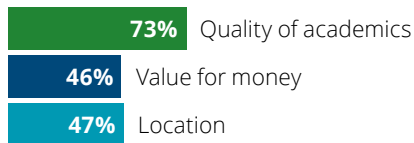
**Percentage of students who agree that their school is focused on and attentive to their needs**
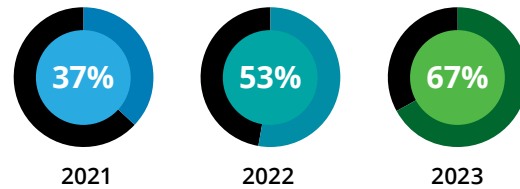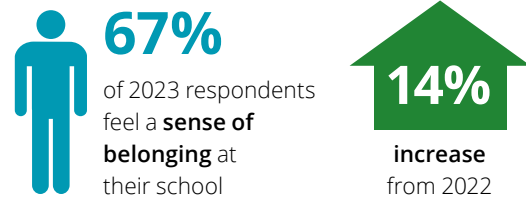
2022
**52%**
<
2023
**78%**
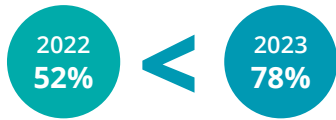
**Percentage of students who would recommend their school to a friend**

2022
**77%**
<
2023
**89%**
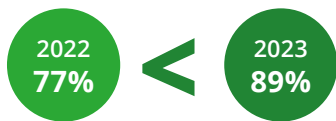
**Students' reasons for recommending it**

| | |
|---|---|
| **73%** | Quality of academics |
| **46%** | Value for money |
| **47%** | Location |

**Percentage of students who feel a sense of belonging**

**67%**
of 2023 respondents feel a **sense of belonging** at their school

**14%**
increase from 2022

**37%** 2021
**53%** 2022
**67%** 2023

**Satisfaction at application versus graduation**

**International students** perceive their school to be more responsive to their needs at the beginning of their student journey, a trend consistent with our Canadian findings from 2021 and 2022.

Application → Graduation
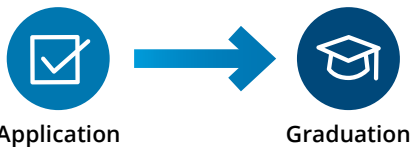
| 2021 | 63% | > | 42% |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2022 | 76% | > | 64% |
| 2023 | 77% | > | 62% |

**Stages where institutions were ranked as least responsive in 2023**

**52%** Application
**61%** Graduation
**69%** Student services
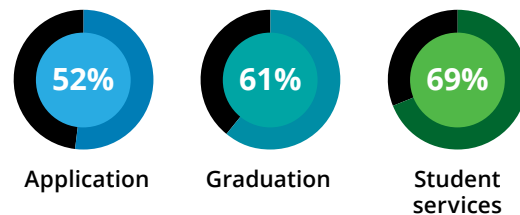
These three stages were deemed the least responsive to students' needs in 2022, and this trend persisted in 2023. However, overall scores improved compared to 2022, indicating that universities and colleges are making progress.

# Stages of the student journey

**Inquiry**
Initial research into an institution, possibly through an online search or connecting with a school representative

**Return**
Staying connected, alumni services, communications, fundraising, volunteering, mentorship, lifelong learning/continuing education, etc.

**Application**
Process of applying to the institution to join a program

**Graduation**
The experience of graduation, including the process of applying for it and any follow-up

**The student journey**

**Registration**
Selecting and registering at an institution for programs, classes, housing etc.

**Student life**
Experiences outside the classroom that build community, a sense of belonging, and access to co-curricular programming

**Academics and learning**
Experiences with classes, professors, libraries, etc.

**Student services**
Experiences with services (accessibility, career services, support for international students, health and wellness, etc.)

Analysis of student perceptions throughout their academic journey reveals a concerning trend, consistent with previous years.

## Relative to the early journey stages of inquiry and application, satisfaction declines significantly at the core stages of student services and student life.

The final stages of graduation and return are also significantly lower than the initial stages. This decline is particularly pronounced among international students, who report diminishing satisfaction with their schools' responsiveness to their needs over time. Overall, the returning, student services, and student life stages were ranked as the least responsive areas, similar to the 2021 and 2022 results.

The trend of decreasing satisfaction from initial to later journey stages among Canadian students is consistent with the results of our survey of their global counterparts, with declines from the inquiry to returning stages in all five countries sampled. Canadian student satisfaction declined from inquiry to return by 19%. The United Kingdom had the largest decline at 29% and India had the lowest at 9%.

While this trend shows up in a similar way, Canada lags slightly behind Australia and the United States throughout the journey, which suggests important opportunities for improvement as these countries are key competitors for international students.

Despite this continuing trend, our most recent survey demonstrates a general increase in positive student perceptions of their experiences. There's an increase of more than 20% of students agreeing that their school is attentive to their needs. Responses vary across programs of study, with 96% of students earning professional degrees in agreement, 81% of those studying for master's degrees, and 75% of those working toward bachelor's degrees.

**Percentage of students who agree their institution is focused on their needs**

| Stage of the student journey | Australia | Canada | India | United Kingdom | United States |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inquiry | 73% | **67%** | 65% | 65% | 70% |
| Application | 81% | **74%** | 70% | 78% | 81% |
| Registration | 75% | **75%** | 67% | 75% | 77% |
| Academics and learning | 80% | **81%** | 69% | 79% | 86% |
| Student services | 69% | **68%** | 58% | 65% | 75% |
| Student life | 58% | **59%** | 60% | 58% | 65% |
| Graduation process | 66% | **60%** | 66% | 45% | 66% |
| Returning | 52% | **48%** | 57% | 37% | 57% |

**Canada: Year-over-year change**

| Stage of the student journey | Agreed in 2022 survey | | Agreed in 2023 survey | YOY change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inquiry | 59% | < | 67% | **8%** |
| Application | 68% | < | 74% | **6%** |
| Registration | 65% | < | 75% | **10%** |
| Academics and learning | 65% | < | 81% | **16%** |
| Student services | 56% | < | 68% | **12%** |
| Student life | 51% | < | 59% | **8%** |
| Graduation process | 58% | < | 60% | **2%** |
| Returning | 41% | < | 48% | **7%** |

Students' views of their overall journey tend to decline from the initial application phase through student life to graduation, with the exception of academics and learning.

## How student-centric are Canada's higher education institutions?



↓ Agree (%)

Legend: 2022, 2023

Categories (Student journey →): Inquiry, Application, Registration, Academics and learning, Student services, Student life, Graduation process, Return
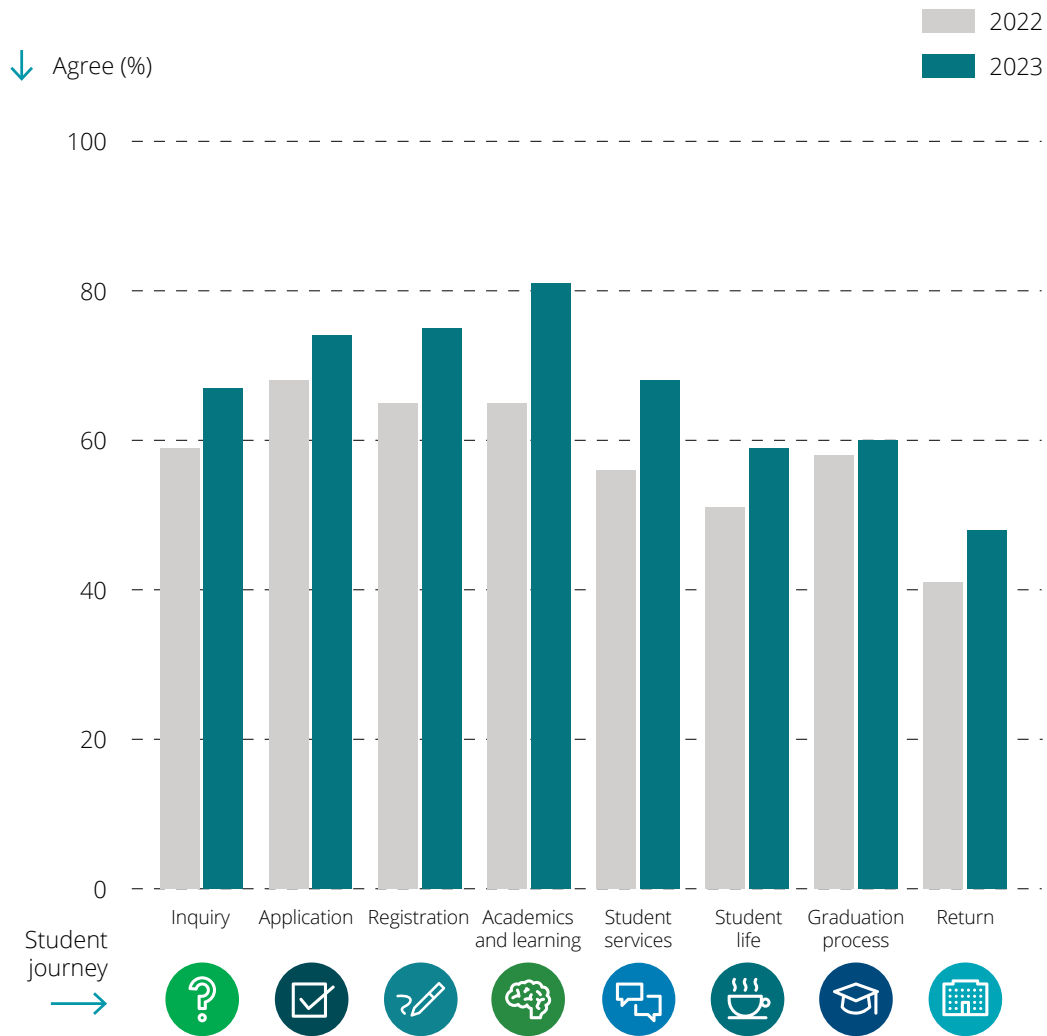
Students' reported sense of belonging, which plays a crucial role in retention, also increased by 14% compared to 2022. This metric can be driven by engagement in campus activities and organizations. A study in the *Journal of College Student Development* found that students who are part of a campus organization are 58% less likely to drop out after their first semester and 24% less likely to drop out after their second or third semester.[1] Student retention is not measured solely by graduation rates; it also considers persistence and progress throughout the academic journey.

In another key metric for student satisfaction, the proportion of students who would recommend their school increased by more than 10% since 2022.

This upward trend not only reflects their growing satisfaction but also underscores the positive experiences and outcomes they have encountered during their academic journey. In the midst of all the difficulties institutions are facing, leaders should celebrate improvements in the student experience and acknowledge the pivotal role that thoughtful interventions can have in student success, retention, and persistence.

The proportion of students who would recommend their school to peers has grown since our previous survey, which is tied to their satisfaction with institutional technology. Students who are more satisfied with the adoption and use of technology at their institutions tend to advocate more strongly for their schools. This trend is consistent among age groups and socio-economic statuses.

Overall, about 76% of respondents are satisfied with the use of technology in their institutions. However, around 50% are only moderately satisfied. Furthermore, our survey indicates that students are significantly more satisfied with the ease of use and availability of university-owned technology platforms compared to the technology used by instructors in the classroom, where students spend most of their time. Qualitative feedback from students indicated they are frustrated with the use of classroom learning tools specifically. Considering that these tools are an integral component of the learning process, shortcomings can overshadow the positive aspects of other technology solutions deployed by the institution.

When asked what technology has the most impact on a student's learning experience, the following key words recurred:

| AI, ChatGPT, or ML | Laptop | Phone or cell |
|---|---|---|
| **417** | **826** | **231** |
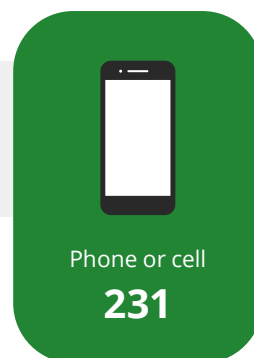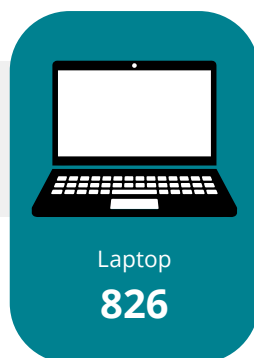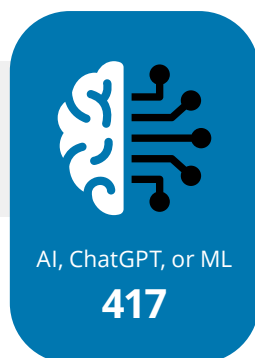
# Differing experiences across student groups

While our latest survey is a good news story in aggregate—similar to the previous two years—it demonstrates significant variations in experience across different student groups.

In particular, there's a significant rise in the proportion of students self-identifying as having mental health conditions, climbing from **25% in 2022** to **40% in 2023**.

This increase diverges from the relatively stable percentage of the Canadian population grappling with mental health conditions, which remains at about 18%.

Further analysis into the experience of students with mental health conditions also demonstrates that students who opt for hybrid and online learning have approximately 10% more mental health conditions than those who choose in-person learning. These types of differences are important for leaders to consider as they think through how they deliver student services in hybrid learning environments.

Our Canadian survey also highlights a clear link between mental health and economic status. In our survey, students self-reported their socio-economic status from five categories, ranging from "poor" to "wealthy." Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds consistently reported fewer mental health issues than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Notably, over half of the students who identify as "poor," "lower middle class," or "middle class" also report experiencing mental health conditions, representing a substantial portion of the student population, as about 80% of students identify as being in one of these three economic classes.

Further analysis reveals a strong correlation between student satisfaction and economic status (see graph below). Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to express higher satisfaction levels with institutional responsiveness and are more inclined to recommend their institutions to others. This trend is consistent among students at both colleges and universities.

As we'll explore in the following section, understanding the intersection of mental health and economic status is imperative for designing services that support retention and achievement. The relationship between economic status and achievement is well documented. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds work more, study less, participate less in extracurricular activities, and have lower GPAs and persistence rates compared to their peers with higher socio-economic status backgrounds.[2] The impacts of mental health are also well documented, with students' mental well-being positively predicting academic persistence.[3]

Overall, our survey demonstrates that while there are significant improvements in how students perceive their experiences, institutions have more work to do to understand how the life experiences of a diverse student body drive large differences in their satisfaction across the student journey. This underscores the importance of examining that journey through multiple and intersecting lenses, including mental health, socio-economic status, and learners' evolving needs. Understanding how students' unique life circumstances impact their experience and success is integral to higher education institutions' mission to develop lifelong learners with the skills to take on meaningful and impactful work.

**Student satisfaction relative to income class**

Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to express **higher satisfaction levels** with institutional responsiveness and are more inclined to recommend their institutions to others.

Percentage of students who agree
their institution is responsive to their needs

# The student-centric imperative

## The financial implications of student attrition

Imagine a four-year program with an annual international tuition price of

**$30,000** and a cohort of **100 students**.

A **first-year attrition rate** of **10%** would cost the institution in unrealized revenue:

**$300,000** in year 2

**$300,000** in year 3

**$300,000** in year 4

That makes a total of

**$900,000** in lost tuition alone.

**The cost of the attrition of even a single matriculated student is significant.**

Beyond tuition, attrition comes with losses in:
- Ancillary fees
- Grant funding
- Investments in recruitment, program-related expenditures, student services, and more

Throughout our research on student-centricity and our work with institutions across Canada, we often return to a seemingly simple but crucial question: **are your key initiatives to support student retention and success the ones your students actually need?**

This mission is inseparable from an institution's financial sustainability. The cost of the attrition of a single matriculated student is significant, including unrealized tuition, ancillary fees, and grant funding. Imagine a four-year program with an international tuition price of $30,000 per year and a cohort of 100 students. A first-year attrition rate of 10% would cost the institution $300,000 in unrealized revenue in the second, third, and fourth years for a total of $900,000—for the lost tuition alone.

In addition to the unrealized revenue, institutions should factor in investments already made in their students, such as recruitment costs, to capture the true cost of attrition.

Operating with budget constraints, increasing student expectations, and student populations with diverse needs, institutions need to ensure that the resources they're allocating to services are maximizing improvement to the student experience per dollar spent. The cap on the number of international students admitted to the country will amplify the need for Canadian institutions to prioritize tactics that diversify their enrolment strategies and provide differentiated experiences that support student success.

Institutions looking to shift to student-centric enrolment strategies to improve retention and success can focus on a two-pronged approach: increasing the participation rate of domestic students and improving overall student success. Diversifying enrolment can include attracting, admitting, and retaining students from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds to foster greater inclusivity and representation within Canadian educational institutions. The majority of post-secondary students in Canada originate from upper-middle-class backgrounds. This trend is even more pronounced among medical students, as more than 75% have parents with university degrees and high income brackets. Only 56% of students whose parents are below the 60th income percentile enrol in post-secondary education, compared to 75% of those whose parents are above it.[4] Meanwhile, more than two-thirds of the 3.5 million Canadians aged 18 to 24 are in middle or lower-income brackets.[5] These numbers suggest that there's a large market of middle and lower-income bracket learners that institutions can focus on to improve their enrolment, participation, and success rates.

By providing services that better meet the diverse range of students' needs, institutions can retain more students from registration through graduation, avoiding the significant costs of attrition. They will also improve their ability to meet their broader goals of diversifying and enriching the learning experience for all. Achieving this requires a deep understanding of the student population, learners' distinct and varying needs, and how to design technology-enabled initiatives that meet those needs. Institutions can use the student-centric framework that we've refined over the past three years to help them answer important questions about their success strategies and service offerings to find the best way forward.

# The five pillars of student-centricity



**Are your offerings:**

Personalized, flexible, and option-oriented to meet the unique needs of diverse student groups?

Holistically supportive of students' needs?

Digitally enhanced for seamless access?

Informed by student data?

Built to support learners' post-graduation aspirations?

Most importantly, designed to encompass the entire student journey?
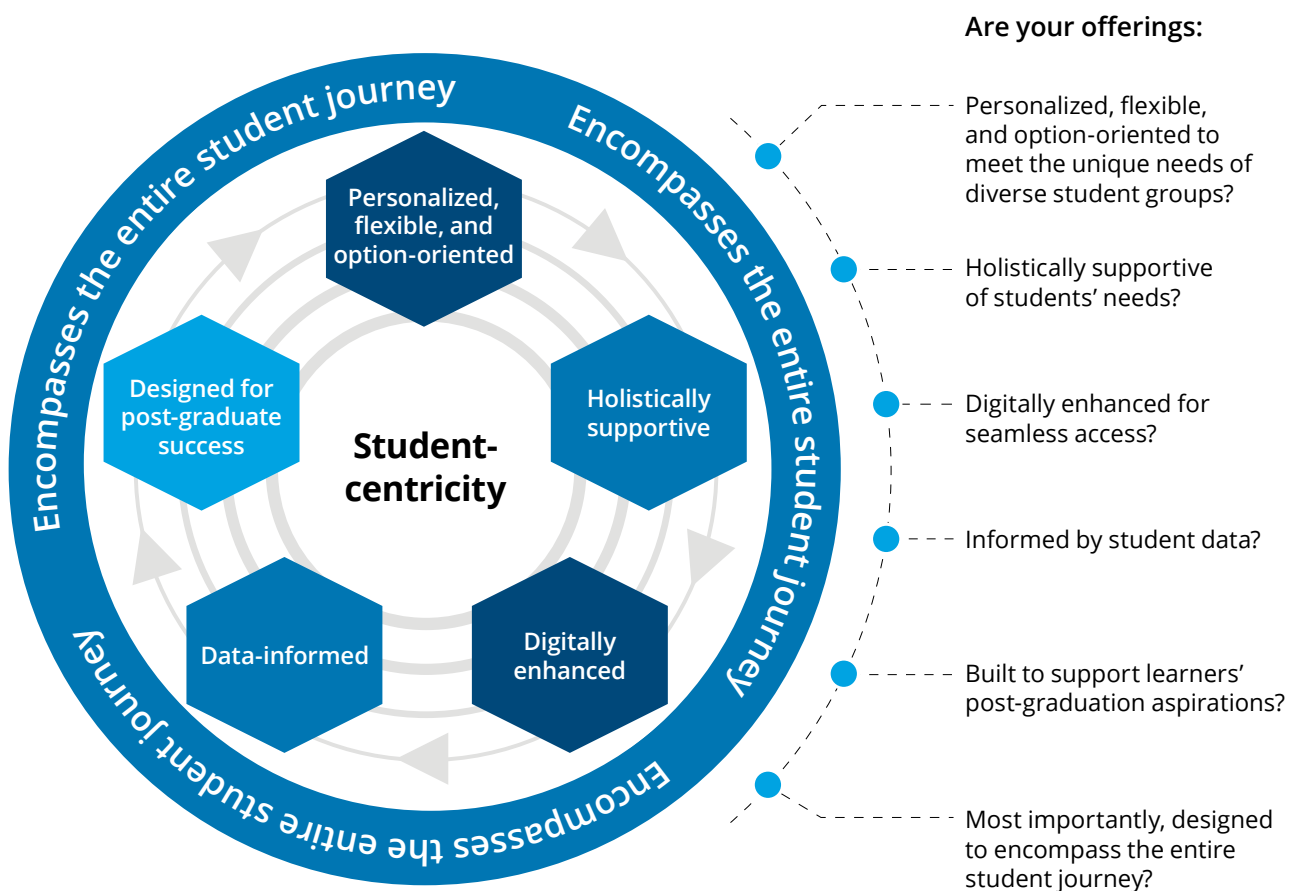
Consider, for example, students' perceptions of their journey and what can impact their experience:

## Are student needs being met?



Legend:
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

Categories:
- The school offers a program that I am interested in
- The school has a good reputation
- The school has good career supports and
- The school is in a location that is good for my needs
- The school has a vibrant campus life
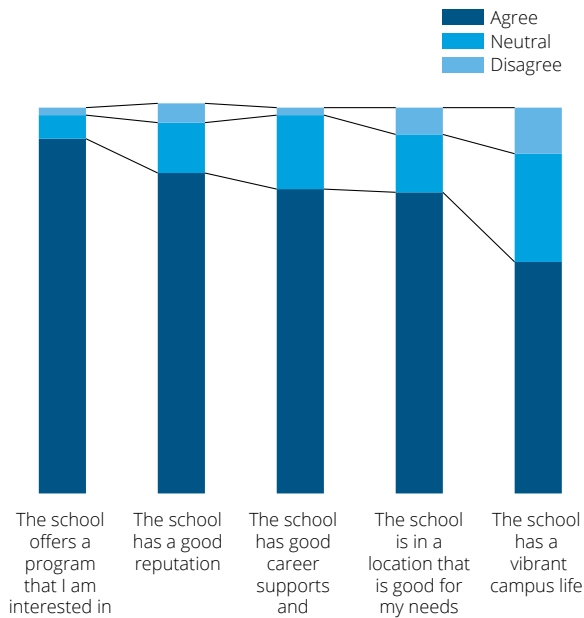
## What drives students to change their academic focus?



- 80% Courses/classes
- 64% Instructor
- 53% Career services
- 50% Co-op/work-integrated learning
- 49% Student body
- 35% Clubs

## What factors do students deem highly beneficial toward their future endeavours?



- 72% Co-op
- 71% Networking
- 68% Group work
- 64% Extracurricular experiences
- 63% Leadership experience
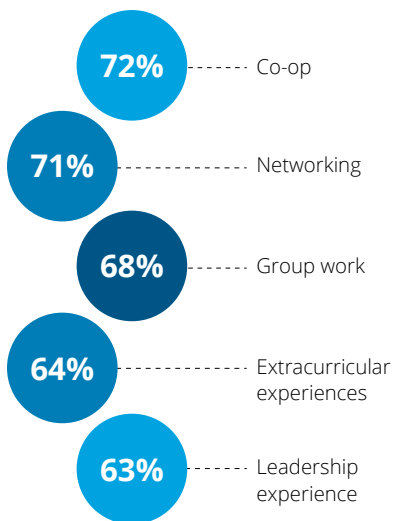
Investigating what students perceive as most impactful to their experience can reveal gaps between what is commonly understood to be an important offering and what students want or need. Emerging technologies such as Generative AI and ML/AI-powered analytics tools, which are being increasingly adopted on campuses, offer powerful opportunities t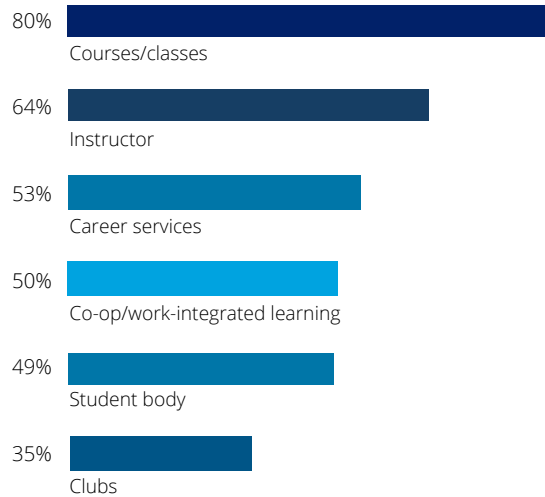o close the gaps in our understanding of students' needs. For example, our data reveals that students with mental health conditions prefer online or hybrid learning modalities. Offering flexible learning environments is a powerful student-centric move for institutions to support many types of learners as they manage diverse life circumstances, including their mental health.

Online and hybrid courses enable students to learn at their own pace and from the comfort of their own environment, which can reduce the stress and anxiety associated with traditional classroom settings. By incorporating emerging technologies into the development and delivery of online courses, institutions can also gain deeper insights into students' preferences and needs in terms of mental health support. This integration can ultimately enhance the overall student experience and their well-being.

# Looking ahead



How higher education institutions can ensure student needs are central to how they plan, including for as-yet-unknown disruptions

The continuing development of GenAI and advanced analytics tools presents an important opportunity to integrate the student voice into planning and decision-making. Canadian institutions are at various levels of adoption of these powerful technologies. Approximately one-quarter of all public post-secondary institutions in Canada have formal guidelines or policies in place for AI use.[6] Surveys of leaders indicate that a majority think AI will play a crucial role in higher education, with its capabilities to personalize teaching methods, automate administrative tasks, and support the design of evidence-based institutional policies.[7]

For those willing to make bold moves, these tools have vast potential to improve our understanding of learners' needs and support the creation of thoughtful interventions to improve retention.

Looking to the future of using these tools to improve student outcomes—and at the risks that must be mitigated—leaders can reflect on three questions to expand their thinking on integrated, data-driven student services and the policies.

# Integrated approach

How can my institution adopt a more integrated approach to services that's enabled by emerging technologies and targets the distinct needs of diverse groups of students?

## Student-centric solution

Developing a strategy that includes investments in AI-enabled technology can help institutions successfully deliver more personalized services for increasingly diverse student needs, including outside of regular business hours. By reducing the need for students to navigate multiple layers of institutional systems and giving them self-service, on-demand options can simplify and improve the overall student experience. Analytics tools can use student data to provide personalized services and support that can have a meaningful impact on student success. As suggested in our survey data, intersecting student data points such as socio-economic status, mental health, academic performance, and campus engagement could be analyzed to identify at-risk students who would likely benefit from additional student services. Enabled by the integration of data across institutional systems, AI algorithms can identify warning signs that students may be struggling and trigger alerts to relevant support services that can proactively reach out to students. Institutions need to evaluate their current data integrity and governance as part of this strategy, working to cleanse and maintain data to develop confident algorithms that the institutional community can trust. This, in addition to training and improving data literacy, will be critical for institutions to achieve both the successful adoption of AI technologies and positive returns on their investments in these tools.

## Solution in practice

### Personalized student services

Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana conducted a pilot study utilizing AI to gather data from 10,000-course sections. This initiative **identified 16,000 students at risk of failing** within the first two weeks of the semester. In response, the college assigned outreach workers to contact each student and provide necessary support. As a result, by the end of the semester, **3,000 students were rescued from failing**, with 98% of the contacted students achieving a grade of C or better. Through initiatives like **Project Student Success**, the college has already **assisted 34,712 students**.

Many universities are embracing innovation and focusing on implementing their technology transformation strategy. York University's SAVY is a virtual assistant that's highly accessible to all student groups through their smart devices and computers at any time throughout the year. It aims to reduce resource exhaustion and provide a one-stop triage solution through its integration with York's eClass platform, assisting students at every step of their academic journey. The notable trend in our survey results that students feel less supported after registration can be mitigated with the help of AI. By leveraging virtual assistants that offer assistance with academic advising referrals, campus life questions, mental health and wellness resources, campus services, and more, there's great potential for AI to significantly enhance the student journey through improved connectivity, which students expect and appreciate. A year after the implementation of SAVY, **the tool had supported over 60,000 conversations on 500 topics—and 43% of those conversations occurred after hours, delivering 24/7 student support and decreasing dependency on administration staff.**[8]

**Solution in practice**

### Early intervention and targeted outreach

As educational institutions continue to advance their capabilities in supporting student well-being and academic performance, the evolution from current data analytics to predictive analytics supported by AI algorithms represents a significant shift. This transition will enhance early intervention and targeted outreach through more sophisticated, anticipatory measures. Enabled by the integration of data across institutional systems, AI algorithms can proactively identify warning signs that students may be struggling and trigger alerts to relevant support services that can reach out to them. To improve support for students' well-being, mental health considerations must be at the centre of institutional policies, and AI tools can help institutions detect at-risk students and provide support. The interdisciplinary Global Center for AI in Mental Health at the University of Albany, for example, works at the intersection of mental health, research, and AI to pioneer solutions for the mental health crises today's students are experiencing, with a special focus on underserved communities.

In addition to AI tools that utilize data points such as attendance and course enrolment to detect at-risk students, institutions are also leveraging AI tools that simulate role-play conversations to teach evidence-based strategies for initiating discussions about mental health. The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse uses Kognito's online AI-based simulation to train faculty, staff, and students on recognizing signs of psychological distress. The number of students that faculty and staff participants approached to offer a referral to support services increased by an average of 49% over the three months following the simulation.

**Solution in practice**

### Seamless communication through chatbots

Many institutions have already implemented AI-powered chatbots to enhance student experiences and success. Toronto Metropolitan University developed ProfBot, an AI-powered chatbot designed by Professor Sean Wise. ProfBot serves as a reliable study companion for undergraduate students, offering personalized feedback and guidance on course material 24/7 through a chatbot interface that mimics popular messaging apps. Preliminary testing has shown promising results, with over 50% of students who used the chatbot experiencing a 5% or greater increase in their final exam grades. Several Canadian universities, including McGill University, Concordia University, Queen's University, and the University of Ottawa, provide tutoring chatbots through an AI tool called Studnt. These examples of successful early adoption of AI-powered chatbots to engage with students and provide insights at their fingertips illustrates how investments in these technologies are beneficial to improving the student experience and may soon become necessary for all higher education institutions.

# Flexible policies

How can my institution adopt flexible policies that support the design of tailored solutions to better acknowledge the diverse needs and circumstances of students?

## Student-centric solution

The strong relationships between a student's economic status and factors such as satisfaction, sense of belonging, and support are consistently revealed in our study. Student satisfaction, for example, is crucial for retention and on-time graduation. Institutions can create supportive environments that embrace flexibility to help students overcome barriers, improve their sense of belonging, and succeed academically. Flexible institutional policy, combined with leaders empowered to make decisions based on the needs of the student, is critical. Flexibility, across the student journey, includes:

- Non-traditional admission policies

- Accessible leave policies

- Accommodations for students struggling with physical, mental health, or financial challenges

- Alternative assessments

- Students having the power to choose how, where, and when they learn

- Holistic, wrap-around services that address even basic needs such as food or housing

**Solution in practice**

### Supportive and flexible policies for differing needs

Reimagining policy based on differing student needs is important for institutions to shift to a student-centric model. Queen's University has adapted its admissions policies and introduced key funding initiatives to empower lower socio-economic students. As part of this shift, Queen's introduced its Major Access Bursaries, providing more than 100 bursaries that are renewable for four years of study, and Promise Scholars program, which provides funding in addition to wrap-around support for academics and career development.

**Solution in practice**

### A one-stop shop for students' basic needs

The University of Berkeley's Basic Needs Center aims to foster a sense of belonging on campus.[9] By addressing a variety of students' basic needs under its umbrella and reducing resource exhaustion, this initiative contributes to overall student satisfaction and well-being. The impact is evident in the data on students' sense of belonging, which increased from 75% in 2018 to 81% in 2022. Students' perception of the value of education also rose, from 68% to 75%. These positive outcomes are particularly noteworthy considering the declining trend in sense of belonging observed in our previous student-centricity surveys.

By adopting a similar approach, institutions can create a supportive environment where students' basic needs are met, reducing their stress and enabling them to focus on their studies. This, in turn, enhances their satisfaction, sense of belonging, and overall academic success.

### Individualized learning plans and flexible course offerings

The University of Texas at Austin's Degree Planner tool allows students to create personalized academic plans based on their degree requirements and individual goals. It provides real-time information on course availability, prerequisites, and degree progress, enabling users to make informed decisions about their course selections and map out their academic journey.

### Flexibility in how and where students learn

Georgian College empowers students with choice and flexibility throughout their learning journey. It offers a range of hybrid, in-person, and online options, and its GC (Georgian College) Flex option provides technology-enabled, purpose-designed learning spaces where professors can simultaneously deliver lectures or labs in the classroom and online. Georgian College also invests in upskilling and supporting faculty members and staff through its Centre for Teaching and Learning, ensuring seamless implementation and delivery of its flexible learning options.

### Improving access through funding

Our survey findings indicate that students from Saskatchewan have the highest sense of belonging and feel strongly that their universities effectively cater to their needs. This sentiment is further supported by data from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, which revealed a significant increase in post-secondary enrolment in the province. In the 2019–20 academic year, there were over 43,000 students enrolled, representing a 25% increase from a decade ago. Notably, there has been a substantial increase in international student enrolment (35%) and Indigenous student enrolment (20%).

A key factor in the growth of post-secondary education in Saskatchewan is the high level of provincial funding per full-time equivalent (FTE) student, among the highest in Canada.[10] The provincial funding spans an array of opportunities to promote accessibility and affordability through scholarships and grants. The combination of high provincial funding and an affordable cost of living creates a favourable environment for students, ensuring they receive a high-quality education and value for their investment in their higher education.

Another factor contributing to this overall growth is the expansion of post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan, particularly in the form of new campuses and programs. For example, the University of Saskatchewan has opened satellite campuses in Prince Albert and Regina, while the Saskatchewan Polytechnic has expanded its offerings in important, in-demand areas such as mining, engineering, health sciences, and Indigenous studies.

# Student-centricity

## How can my institution embed student-centricity in our institutional culture and at the core of strategic decision-making and execution?

### Student-centric solution

Our research shows that students have diverse experiences throughout their student journeys, and that they are less satisfied in student services, student life, graduation, and return than they are during inquiry, application, and registration. The consistency of this trend over the last three years indicates that institutions must shift their strategies to hear what students need to support their success, especially in the later stages of their journeys, and improve persistence. This requires a multi-pronged approach, including improving the quality and diversity of student feedback, introducing innovative feedback mechanisms, developing formal processes to embed feedback in strategy decision-making, and ensuring better student representation at formal and informal governance tables. Creating spaces for student leadership and contributions in institutional decision-making and improvement fosters a sense of ownership and partnership with students, leading to improved engagement and success. Feeling heard and being more actively involved in problem-solving can also enhance students' learning experiences and development, preparing them for real-world challenges.

**Solution in practice**

### Innovation and entrepreneurship opportunities and support

The University of Toronto's Innovation Hub (iHub) is a student-led initiative that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship among students at the university. It provides a supportive ecosystem with resources, mentorship, and funding opportunities to empower students to turn their ideas into successful ventures. By offering co-working spaces, workshops, networking events, funding options, and more, iHub prioritizes the needs and aspirations of students, empowering them to explore their entrepreneurial potential and be at the centre of creating meaningful change on campus.

**Solution in practice**

### Space for students to reimagine and architect campus life

Humber College's Leadership Initiative Fund (LIF)[11] program provides students with leadership and program management experience while allowing them to define and create the elements of campus life they want to see. Students submit proposals for events or initiatives that will contribute to the college community's health and well-being, sustainability, or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Faculty and student leaders review the proposals and select those that will receive funding and support from the program for students to bring the initiatives to life.

**Solution in practice**

### Collaborative decision-making and continuous improvement

The University of Leeds recognizes the importance of seeing students as equal partners and has taken steps to embed the student voice in institutional decision-making and all evaluative processes. The school understands that differing students have differing needs, and uses authentic, representative data to reach out to students from diverse backgrounds to improve the student experience. Beyond standard surveys, it has diversified the mechanisms that capture student feedback, including informal feedback-gathering sessions, listening rooms, and reverse mentoring, and improved student representation throughout their governance structures. Through its Student Idea Fund and in collaboration with the student union, the university offers grants that empower students to shape improvements to the student experience.

Our 2023 survey revealed significant improvements in student's perceptions of their post-secondary experience. While leaders should take pride in these improvements, our results also indicate that there's more work to be done to support a student body with an increasingly diverse set of needs and expectations. To address these needs, institutions must examine the student experience through intersecting lenses, including mental health and economic status, to reveal how the most impactful moments in the learner journey differ across the student body. Diversifying institutional enrolment strategies will also become a financial imperative as they manage the operational and financial realities of reduced funding, regulatory changes, increased costs, and other disruptive forces.

Developing a data-informed view of how learner experiences differ is more important than ever. As institutions plan for reductions in international enrolments and systemic budget deficits, leaders must ensure their resources are effectively allocated to maximize student retention and success.

To the leaders of Canada's colleges, polytechnics, and universities: we understand the tremendous effort that has gone into improving student experience in the midst of disruptions across the sector this past year. Our research shows that more student-centric solutions must be embraced to meet students where they are, to continue demonstrating the value of higher education, and to ultimately ensure the long-term sustainability of the country's post-secondary institutions.

# Steps you can take now

To provide high-quality student-centric experiences throughout the learner journey, institutions should consider the following actions:

**Start with strategy**
Signal student success in your strategy and review your top-down institutional strategies to ensure integration, alignment, and collaboration across the journey.

**Develop a shared vision for student-centricity**
Aim your student success and student service initiatives at providing a holistic, frictionless, and digitally enabled experience that can address diverse student needs in one place. Create a road map enabled by emerging technologies to move toward this goal.

**Align institutional policies with a student-centric vision**
Design policies that support your movement toward achieving your goals for student success and experience. Ensure these policies have the flexibility to evolve along with your diverse student body and adapt to the increasing pace of change in higher education.

**Put the voice of students at the centre of governance**
Create structures that ensure student voices are represented in institutional decision-making. Empower students to tell you what they want from their post-secondary experience and respond accordingly.

**Invest in emerging technology**
Digital technology, particularly AI-enabled solutions that can easily integrate into core systems, demonstrates strong promise for increasing administrative and operational capacity to create impactful and measurable improvements to the student experience. By ensuring they are deployed through student-centric approaches and leverage behaviour-based personas and journey maps, your institution can make incredible strides in reimagining your systems to support students success.

# Endnotes

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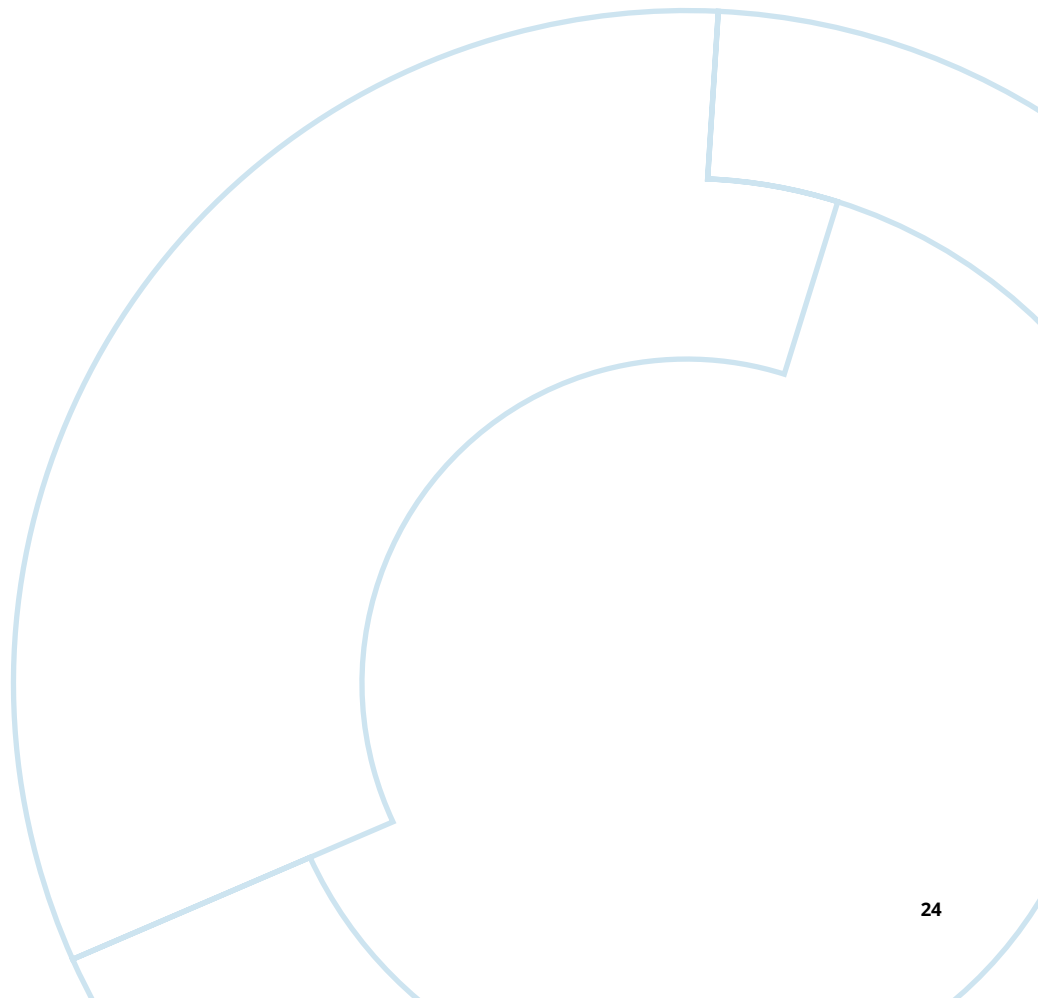Senior Manager, Consulting

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