

ELEVATING STUDENT AFFAIRS AND SERVICES IN CANADA: BRIDGING GAPS AND BUILDING FUTURES

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The role of student affairs and services in North American post-secondary education has grown significantly (Clarke & Arnold, 2022; Henning & Roberts, 2023; Long, 2012; Roper, 2015; Seifert et al., 2011). Student affairs and services influence student success, and hence it is crucial to integrate research and theoretical frameworks into this field to evaluate current practices and informing future developments (Henning & Bentrim, 2022). Scholarship focused on student affairs and services is gradually expanding, providing academics and scholar-practitioners with valuable opportunities to elevate the visibility and importance of their collective work, yet important gaps remain. This special issue is a space to draw together critical Canadian scholarship to bridge these gaps.

Student affairs and services refer to the divisions or units within post-secondary institutions that support students' development and promote their health and well-being. Functional areas include academic advising, accessibility services, career services, counselling and mental health services, health services, housing and residence life, Indigenous services, and learning skills services, among others. The programs, services, and initiatives that are offered by student affairs and services professionals promote student success and contribute to campus communities.

There has been a call to action within student affairs and services in North America for the integration of assessment, evaluation, and research into practice (Henning & Roberts, 2023; Wise & Davenport, 2019). Student affairs

and services professionals are committed to advancing the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS)'s *Strategic Planning, Research, and Assessment* and American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)'s *Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER)* competencies within their daily work with students.

Student affairs and services encompass integral roles and responsibilities in educating students and adhering to increased accountability standards with limited resources (Henning & Roberts, 2023; Keeling, 2004, 2006; Manning et al., 2014; Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Assessment, evaluation, and research are becoming a standard part of service delivery, shaping programs and initiatives (Henning & Roberts, 2023). Embedding research within student affairs and services initiatives strengthens student learning and success. Regular monitoring and evaluation ensure services are effective and responsive to student development needs (Bresciani, 2010; Henning & Roberts, 2023).

In Canada, cultivating a culture of evidence means integrating assessment, evaluation, and research across everyday practice and using data transparently to guide improvement. It is time to advance and mobilize knowledge and understanding of the student affairs and services field; build a platform for dissemination and reflection on theory, research, and practice; and archive and chronicle the evolution of student affairs and services across provinces.

ADVANCING SCHOLARSHIP THROUGH A FOCUSED APPROACH

In 2022, we began mapping the Canadian student affairs and services research landscape through our article, “An Analysis of Trends and Themes in Canadian Student Services Articles.” That scoping review, published in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* special issue, “Looking Back, Looking Forward,” examined scholarly Canadian contributions to the field. We reviewed articles related to student success, the student experience, and student affairs and services, which appeared in national (*Canadian Journal of Higher Education*) and international journals (*Journal of College Student Development*; *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*; *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*; *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*; and *Student Success*).

We organized the selected articles around the four overarching meta-research questions outlined by Hanson and Denzine (2000):

1. Who are today’s college and university students?
2. How do they experience post-secondary education?
3. What do students learn during their time in higher education, and how are they transformed?
4. In what ways does post-secondary education shape student learning and identity?

To this set, we added an emerging fifth meta-research question:

5. What organizational and communication structures define student affairs and services divisions, and what competencies and qualifications support the profession?

This latter question is significantly underexplored in Canadian research, with limited attention to the roles, standards, ethics, values, and approaches that define professionals.

Additional scholarship is required across all five meta-research questions within the Canadian student affairs and services landscape. This acknowledgement was the motivation for this special issue. We aim to deepen the body of literature addressing the four established meta-research questions and to catalyze scholarly inquiry into the fifth, underrepresented question. It is important that we highlight research that concentrates on the student affairs and services profession, the student communities and populations that these professionals serve, and the experiences and expertise that characterize these valued post-secondary members’ livelihoods.

This is the first publication that the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* has produced with an exclusive focus on student affairs and services. The Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE), our journal’s home, partnered with the Canadian Association of College & University Student Services (CACUSS) for this initiative. The two societies encouraged and supported this opportunity for student affairs and services research dissemination and publication among their members and communities. The level of interest across Canada in response to the call for submissions for this special issue exceeded our expectations and, as such, this is the first issue in a double special issue feature. This double special issue serves as an outlet for new and established researchers and scholar-practitioners to learn from one another about topics and themes of relevance to those researching, working, or studying in the student affairs and services field.

POSITIONALITY

As Canadian faculty members situated within Faculties of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Wilfrid Laurier University, the two of us approach this work with a deep commitment to advancing scholarship and practice in student affairs and services at the post-secondary level.

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Adult Education/Post-Secondary program in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Kathleen Clarke is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University. Our roles involve teaching and supervising graduate students who are themselves emerging scholars and practitioners in post-secondary education. In these capacities, we are attuned to the systemic and institutional structures that influence student experiences and outcomes and shape student affairs and services professionals. We have served and are members of several Canadian post-secondary education organizations, associations, and councils, including the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE), Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), Atlantic Association of College and University Student Services (AACUSS), and Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer (PCCAT), among others.

We recognize that our identities as researchers and faculty members embedded within Canadian institutions of post-secondary education shape the questions we ask and the ways in which we interpret work in our shared field. Our positionality reflects a commitment to critical inquiry and practical application. As such, this special issue is a foundational step toward developing a comprehensive, systematic resource for scholars and practitioners committed to supporting post-secondary student success across Canada.

In declaring our positionalities, we aim to be transparent about how our roles, contexts, and commitments influence our epistemic stance and methodological decisions. We recognize that through this work we not only analyze existing scholarship, but also co-construct narratives about student affairs and services, institutional dynamics, and student success—narratives that we hope are shaped through reflection and responsibility toward the communities we serve. Scholars and practitioners' visions and perspectives were supported throughout the review process by ensuring that those working and researching within the field were consulted. Those with foundational experience in student

affairs and services were essential when maintaining quality and integrity.

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

For this double special issue feature, we encouraged contributions addressing multi-institution, sector, system, and nationwide research from academic and scholar-practitioners. The articles that we received each address multiple embedded concepts yet can be clustered meaningfully on the basis of the five meta-research questions stated above:

1. Who are today's college and university students?
2. How do they experience post-secondary education?
3. What do students learn during their time in higher education, and how are they transformed?
4. In what ways does post-secondary education shape student learning and identity?
5. What organizational and communication structures define student affairs and services divisions, and what competencies and qualifications support the profession?

The articles in this first issue of the double special issue feature examine specific post-secondary student populations, policies and procedures, and the student affairs and services profession.

First in the special issue, we present three articles that focus on specific post-secondary student populations and their experiences and reflections. Vanessa Ellis Colley et al.'s article, "Experiences of Black International Graduate Students: Encounters of Racial Disparities Amidst EDI Rhetoric at a Canadian University" commences the special issue. The authors explore the experiences of Black international graduate students in Canadian universities, highlighting how racial disparities intersect with their academic and social transitions. Although international students contribute billions of dollars annually to Canada's economy

(Roslyn Kunin and Associates, Inc., 2023) and to the nation's cultural diversity, the specific experiences of Black graduate students are often overlooked. This study, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, draws from interviews and focus groups with 12 Black international graduate students to examine their encounters with race, equity, and student support. Findings reveal emotional strain, isolation, and systemic barriers faced by these students, as well as shortcomings in institutional support that often failed to meet their nuanced needs.

Despite efforts by universities to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), many Black international graduate students still face subtle and overt forms of racism that hinder their sense of belonging and academic success. The study emphasizes that existing support structures—such as orientation programs and cultural activities—often fall short due to a lack of racial consciousness and integration of academic and psychosocial needs. The authors advocate for more dynamic and holistic support systems that recognize racialized experiences, urging universities to move beyond surface-level EDI rhetoric and meaningfully engage with the realities faced by Black international graduate students.

Continuing this discussion, Hend Shalan et al.'s article "Exploring Safe Spaces in On-Campus Residences: Perspectives of Black and Racialized Students Through Auto-Photography" resumes our investigation with Black and racialized students. This article explores the experiences of Black and racialized students in on-campus residences at Canadian universities, with a focus on the ways these environments impact students' sense of belonging and well-being. Recognizing that first-year university residences are often students' first experience living independently, the study emphasizes how residence design, programming, and communication can significantly shape students' transitions. Although many institutions have committed to EDI in the wake of movements like Black Lives Matter, Black and racialized students often face systemic barriers that hinder full participation and comfort in campus housing.

To address the gap in Canadian research on this topic, the study uses an auto-photography case study at the University of Waterloo to examine how these students experience and interpret "safe spaces" within campus residences. By centring the lived experiences of racialized students, the findings highlight the need for more inclusive policies and practices in university housing. The study contributes to ongoing EDI efforts in post-secondary education by offering evidence-based insights that can help institutions design more welcoming and supportive on-campus living environments.

Moving forward, Emerson LaCroix and Janice Aurini's article "How Can Post-Secondary Institutions Support Transfer Students? Lessons from Ontario" extends our investigation to credit transfer students. The article explores the concept of "transfer shock," the academic and social disruptions students often face after transferring between post-secondary institutions. Although previous Canadian studies have focused primarily on transfer outcomes at the endpoint of academic journeys, this research offers a longitudinal, qualitative view by tracking 56 students across 107 interviews as they transitioned among two colleges and three universities in Ontario, Canada. The study reveals that transfer shock is not a singular event but rather a series of "jolts" that occur throughout the first year in the new institution, especially in academic adjustment and social integration. Even students who reported satisfaction with the transfer process often faced lingering social challenges that persisted well beyond their initial adjustment period.

Ontario's post-secondary system, originally designed without transfer in mind, continues to evolve toward a more integrated structure, yet students still face institutional barriers, delayed graduations, and reduced academic performance. The study highlights that sending and receiving institutions must each play proactive roles in supporting transfer students—through pre-transfer workshops, dedicated orientation events, peer-mentorship programs, and transfer-specific advising. By examining students' lived experiences, the authors recommend targeted interventions that recognize the unique

needs of transfer students, emphasizing the importance of social belonging alongside academic readiness in improving transfer outcomes.

The second cluster of articles in this special issue focus on policies and procedures related to student learning and identity formation and the mechanisms with which post-secondary institutions govern student and student-campus community interactions. Noah Arney's article, "What is Prohibited: Non-Academic Conduct Policies in Canadian Universities" advances the special issue. This article explores how non-academic student conduct is regulated in Canadian universities, focusing on the policies overseen by student affairs and services professionals. These codes of conduct aim to promote acceptable community standards, drawing heavily on the North American Model Student Code. However, the article challenges how these policies define and represent "misconduct," applying Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) post-structuralist framework to critically analyze the assumptions built into these regulations. The analysis centres on identifying which behaviors are prohibited, how these prohibitions are justified, and what is treated as uncontroversial or taken for granted in the policies.

Prompted by renewed scrutiny following student protest encampments in 2024, the research highlights the need for a reflective and educative approach to non-academic conduct regulation. The authors critique the lack of attention paid to the ways misconduct is framed and interpreted in institutional policies within Canadian public universities. By comparing policies across institutions and analyzing their shared assumptions, the study uncovers patterns in the ways students are expected to behave and how those expectations are enforced. The article concludes with two guiding principles and six proposed guidelines for developing thoughtful, inclusive, and context-sensitive student conduct policies, encouraging administrators to recognize that existing frameworks are not fixed and can be reimagined.

Continuing this dialogue, Manon Bergeron et al.'s article, "Signalement d'une situation de violence sexuelle à l'université: l'importance

du soutien dans l'expérience des personnes victimes" extends our investigation with sexual violence procedures and reports. Cette étude explore l'expérience des personnes ayant été victimes de violences sexuelles en milieu d'enseignement supérieur (VSMES) et ayant signalé leur situation à leur institution. Bien que près de la moitié des étudiantes et un tiers des étudiants aient subi des VSMES selon Statistique Canada, moins de 10 % ont signalé ces violences. Quatre provinces canadiennes, dont le Québec, ont adopté des lois pour contrer ce phénomène, obligeant notamment les établissements à offrir des services de soutien. Cependant, peu d'informations récentes existent sur la qualité de l'accompagnement réellement offert aux victimes. L'étude, basée sur des entrevues avec 22 personnes francophones issues de sept universités, vise à identifier les facilitateurs et les obstacles rencontrés lors du parcours de signalement, en s'appuyant sur le modèle socioécologique adapté au contexte universitaire.

Les résultats montrent que le soutien social est un facteur clé tout au long du processus de signalement, et qu'il va au-delà du rôle des équipes d'intervention désignées. Plusieurs obstacles relevés concernent les structures organisationnelles et la perception négative des réponses institutionnelles, soulignant ainsi des zones d'amélioration possibles pour les établissements. L'étude recommande d'adapter les services aux besoins spécifiques des victimes et de former l'ensemble de la communauté universitaire, en particulier les services étudiants, afin qu'ils puissent jouer un rôle actif dans la prévention et l'accompagnement. Cette recommandation est renforcée par des données montrant une prévalence accrue des VSMES parmi certains groupes vulnérables, comme les personnes en situation de handicap, les étudiant·es internationaux·ales, ainsi que les minorités sexuelles et de genre.

The final article in this special issue brings attention to a third topic, the student affairs and services profession itself. This article focuses on Indigenous Student Centres (ISCs) and the cumulative realities of the Indigenous staff members. Stephanie Waterman, Shaw-

na Cunningham, and Michelle Pidgeon's article "Understanding the Heartwork of Indigenous Student Services During the Challenging Times of Reconciliation, Decolonization, and Indigenization" concludes the special issue. This article explores ISCs as culturally significant spaces within post-secondary institutions in Canada, created to support the unique needs of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students. Emerging alongside Indigenous academic programs in the late 1960s and 1970s, ISCs embody Indigenous ways of being and provide holistic services that nurture the physical, emotional, intellectual, and cultural wellbeing of Indigenous learners. Grounded in Indigenous Knowledges and guided by frameworks such as the 4Rs (Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility) and Indigenous storywork, ISCs offer relational, rather than transactional, support. They also serve as welcoming gathering spaces for community, fostering a strong sense of belonging, cultural safety, and educational sovereignty.

Despite their importance, ISC staff continually navigate systemic challenges rooted in colonial structures. These include underfunding, cultural illiteracy within institutions, and reconciliation fatigue among Indigenous staff due to the additional emotional and cultural labour expected of them. Although often under-resourced, ISC professionals are also expected to fill institutional gaps in reconciliation, community engagement, and intercultural education. The article underscores the need for institutions and allies to support ISCs meaningfully—not just through symbolic gestures, but through sustainable investment, cultural literacy, and shared responsibility in the ongoing processes of Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation.

To round out the issue, we also have two book reviews: Ashenafi Aboye has reviewed Merli Tamtik's *Indigenous Knowledges and Higher Education in Canada* and Piaf des Rosiers discusses *The Emerald Handbook of Wellbeing in Higher Education* (edited by Keith Walker and Benjamin Kutsyuruba). Our thanks to book review editor, Walter Archer, for overseeing these reviews.

Collectively, the articles in this first issue of the double special issue feature provide a

showcase of research methods, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and explorations of the students that Canadian post-secondary institutions serve and the policies, procedures, and professional practices that guide student affairs and services across campuses. Later this year, we will launch the second issue of this double special issue feature as we continue our efforts to build a robust scholarly record to support student affairs and services in Canadian post-secondary education.

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