Salaries & Status of Sustainability Professionals in Higher Education

2023

aashe

The Association for the Advancement® of Sustainability in Higher Education



Results of AASHE's 2023 Higher Education Sustainability Staffing Survey

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On the cover:
The Boston University Sustainability team. Photo credit: Dave Green Photography

Introduction

Every two to three years since 2008, AASHE has conducted a survey of sustainability professionals employed in higher education. These surveys aggregate information from sustainability staff and specialized positions such as recycling & waste staff and academic staff working in sustainability. This report presents the results of the 2023 Higher Education Sustainability Staffing Survey. It examines the nature of sustainability positions at colleges and universities in the United States, Canada and other countries, providing insights into salaries, funding, supervision, job satisfaction, challenges and more.

This report provides an update to AASHE's 2020 staffing survey report, which was conducted on the eve of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the closure of campuses and triggered a major economic downturn. The 2023 survey captures the higher education sustainability sector's reactions to and ongoing recovery from the pandemic.

Respondent Position Types

Survey respondents were grouped into position types based on their titles and other data provided in the survey. Eight position types were found to be similar for comparison, and had sufficient respondents to track and analyze as cohorts. Encompassing nearly 96% of all survey respondents, these position types are used throughout this report as filters for data views where relevant.

For the first time, responses from Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) and similar senior and executive-level positions were listed as a separate comparison category. Respondents at this level rose from seven in 2020 to 11 in 2023. The 2023 survey also captures, for the first time, student sustainability positions (from seven in 2020 to 20 in 2023).

Position Type	Count	Percent
Sustainability Director or similar	114	27.4%
Sustainability Coordinator or similar	103	24.8%
Sustainability Manager or similar	84	20.2%
Asst./Assoc. Director or similar	31	7.5%
Student sustainability staff	20	4.8%
Recycling & waste staff	19	4.6%
Academic staff	16	3.8%
Chief Sustainability Officer or similar	11	2.6%
All other staff	18	4.3%
Grand Total	**416**	**100%**

We observed that Director-level sustainability positions outnumber Coordinator-level positions for the first time (114 Director-level positions in 2023 versus 101 in 2020). The corresponding reduction of Coordinator positions (103 in 2023 versus 130 in 2020) may be an indication of sustainability staff's growing influence and scope of responsibilities.

The "All other staff" category includes 18 respondents whose roles and responsibilities did not allow them to be grouped with enough respondents to be analyzed as a distinct cohort. These respondents had positions focused on administrative support (3), diversity, equity and inclusion (1), dining (2), energy management (3), environmental health (1), facilities (1), research (1), student services (1), transportation (2), and work outside of higher education (3). A reduction in energy management staff respondents (3 in 2023 versus 16 in 2020) meant that this group was no longer included as a separate cohort for analysis in this report.

Respondent Demographics

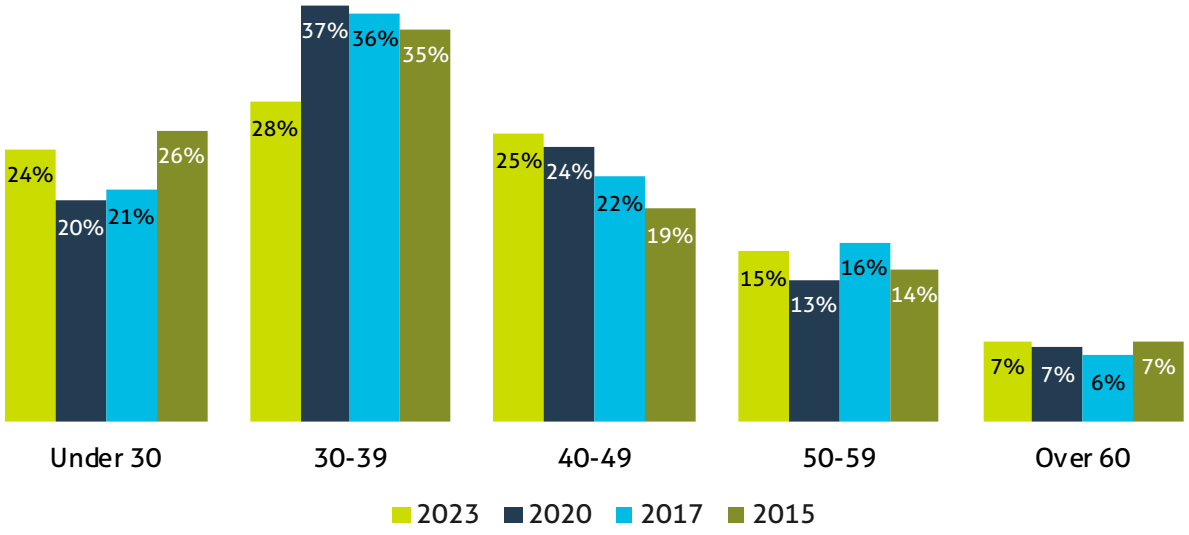


The American University of Sharjah Sustainability Team. Photo credit: Chirag Patel

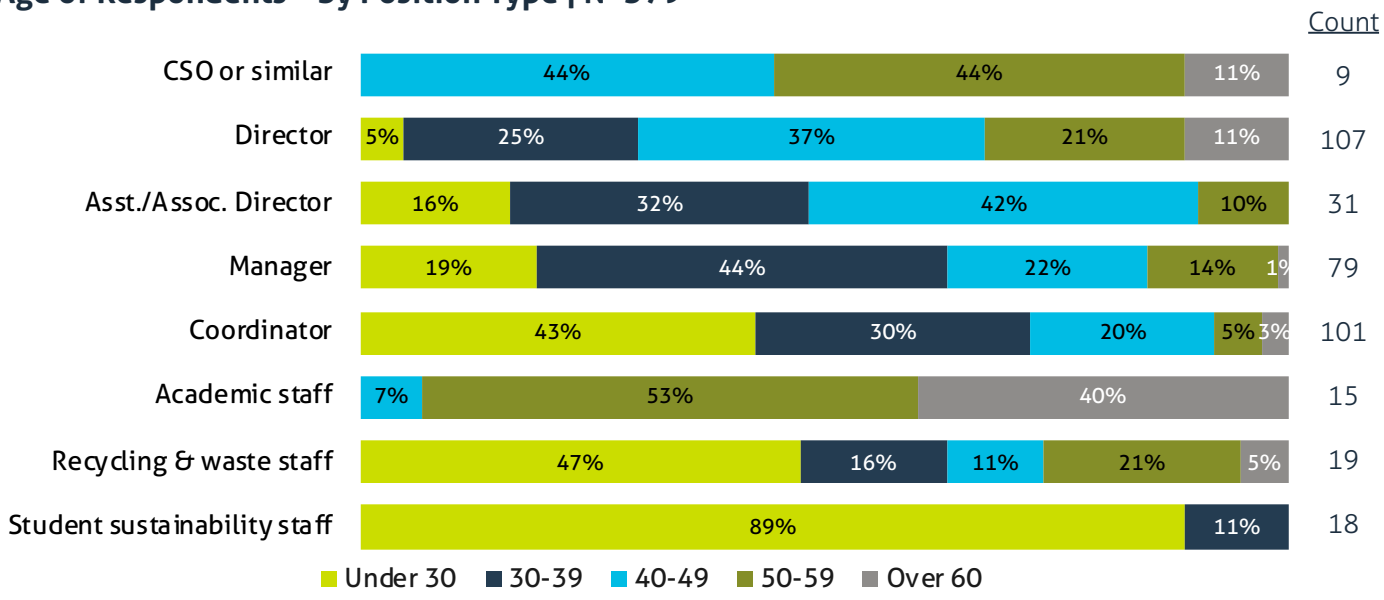
Age

The proportion of respondents under age 40 has dropped consistently since the 2015 survey (52% in 2023, compared to 57% in 2020 and 2017, and 61% in 2015). However, there has been a significant increase in respondents under age 30 (24% in 2023 versus 20% in 2023). This highlights the continued maturation of the field, along with potential career transitions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or other factors. By position type, student sustainability staff, recycling & waste staff, and Sustainability Coordinator positions had the greatest proportion of respondents under age 30. Not surprisingly, higher level positions, including CSOs, Sustainability Directors, and academic staff, had more significant proportions of respondents age 50 or older.

Age of Respondents | N = 393



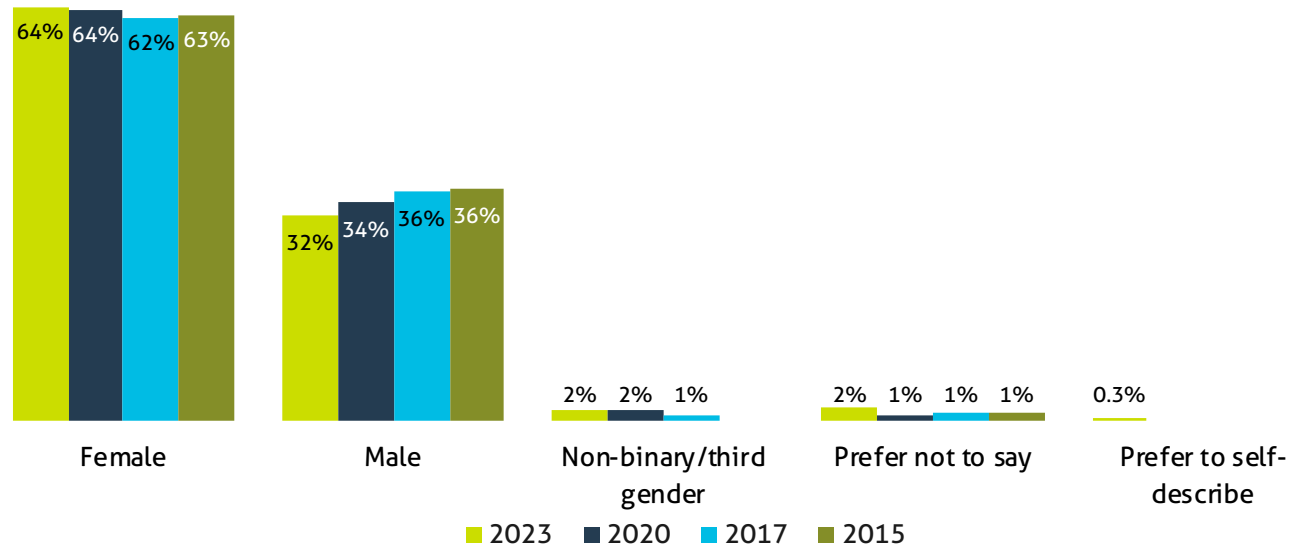
Age of Respondents – by Position Type | N=379



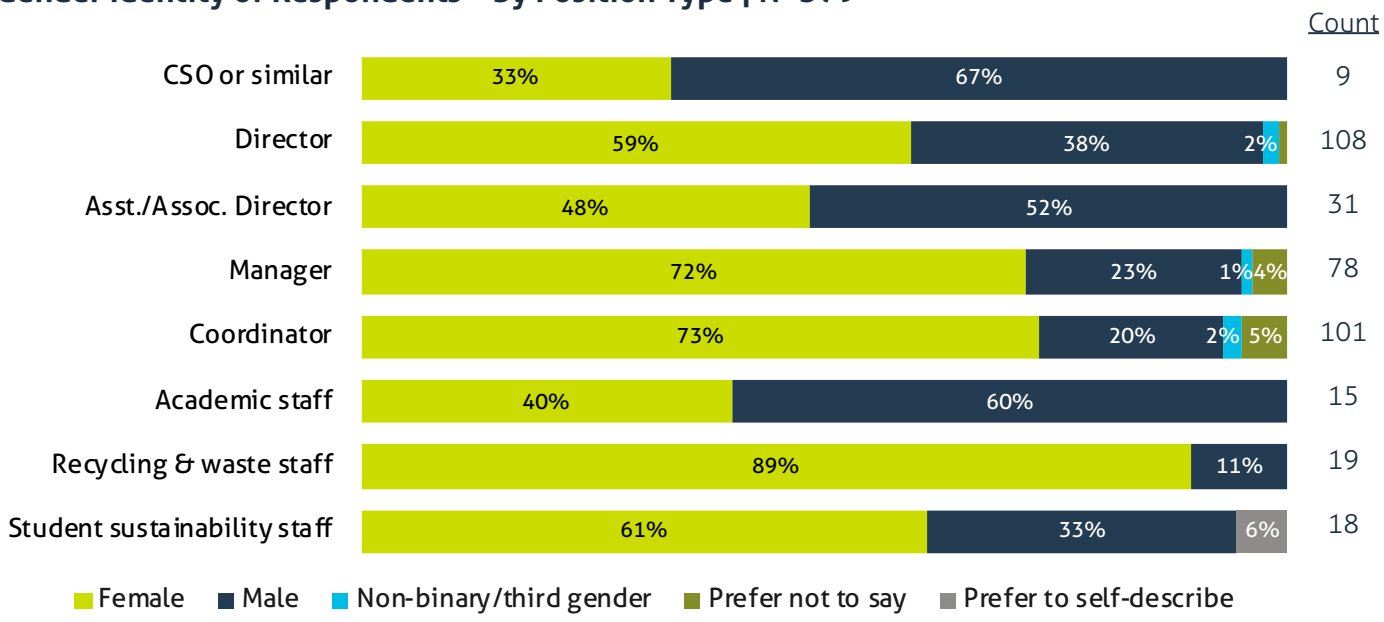
Gender Identity

The proportion of respondents identifying as female has increased slightly over time, with 64% identifying as female in 2023. CSOs, Assistant/Associate Directors, and academic staff were the only position types that skewed male. For the first time, the Sustainability Director position is skewed female (59%). In our 2020 survey, 51% of Sustainability Directors identified as male. These results suggest that the profession is becoming increasingly female over time.

Gender Identity of Respondents | N=393



Gender Identity of Respondents – by Position Type | N=379

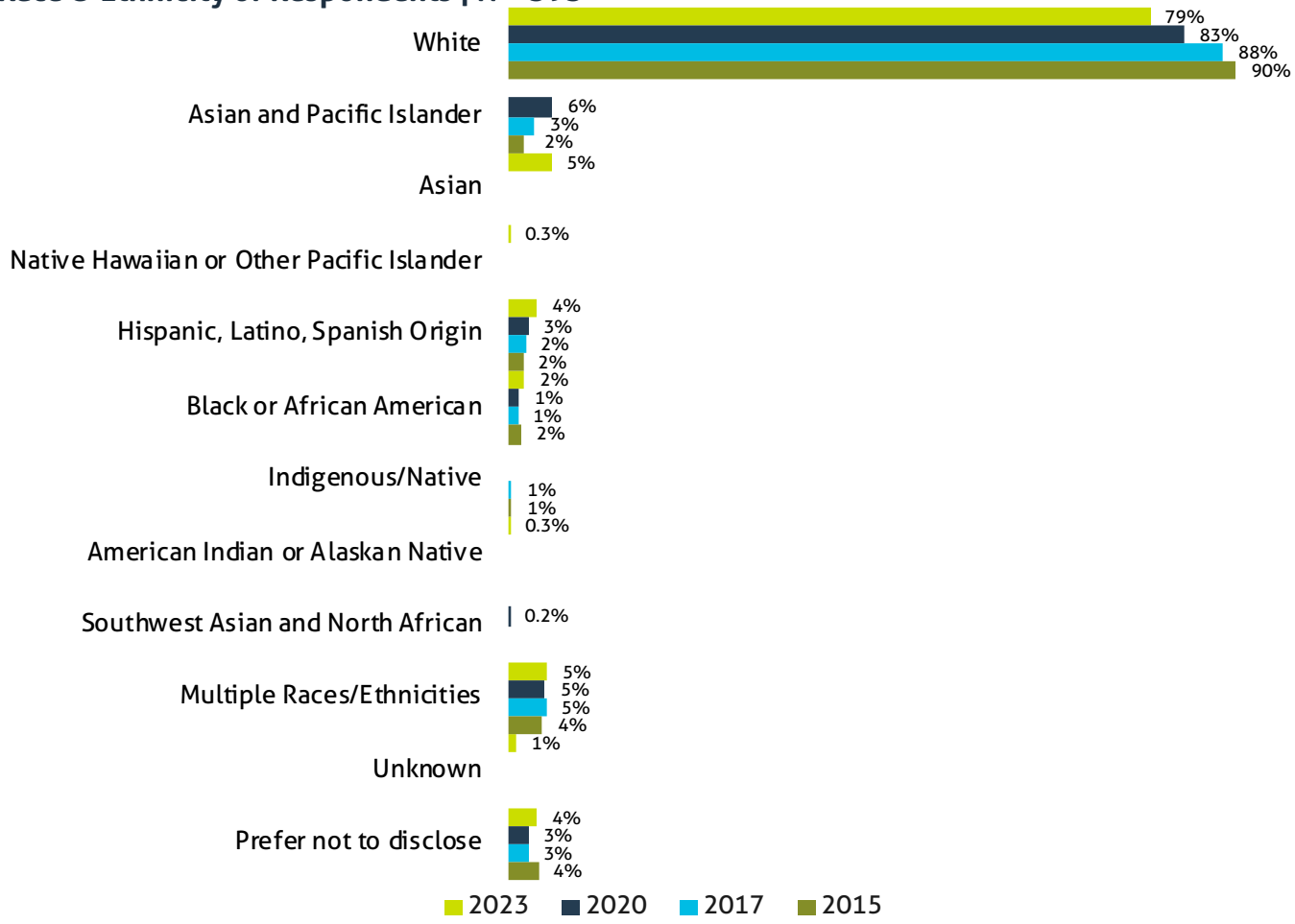


Race & Ethnicity

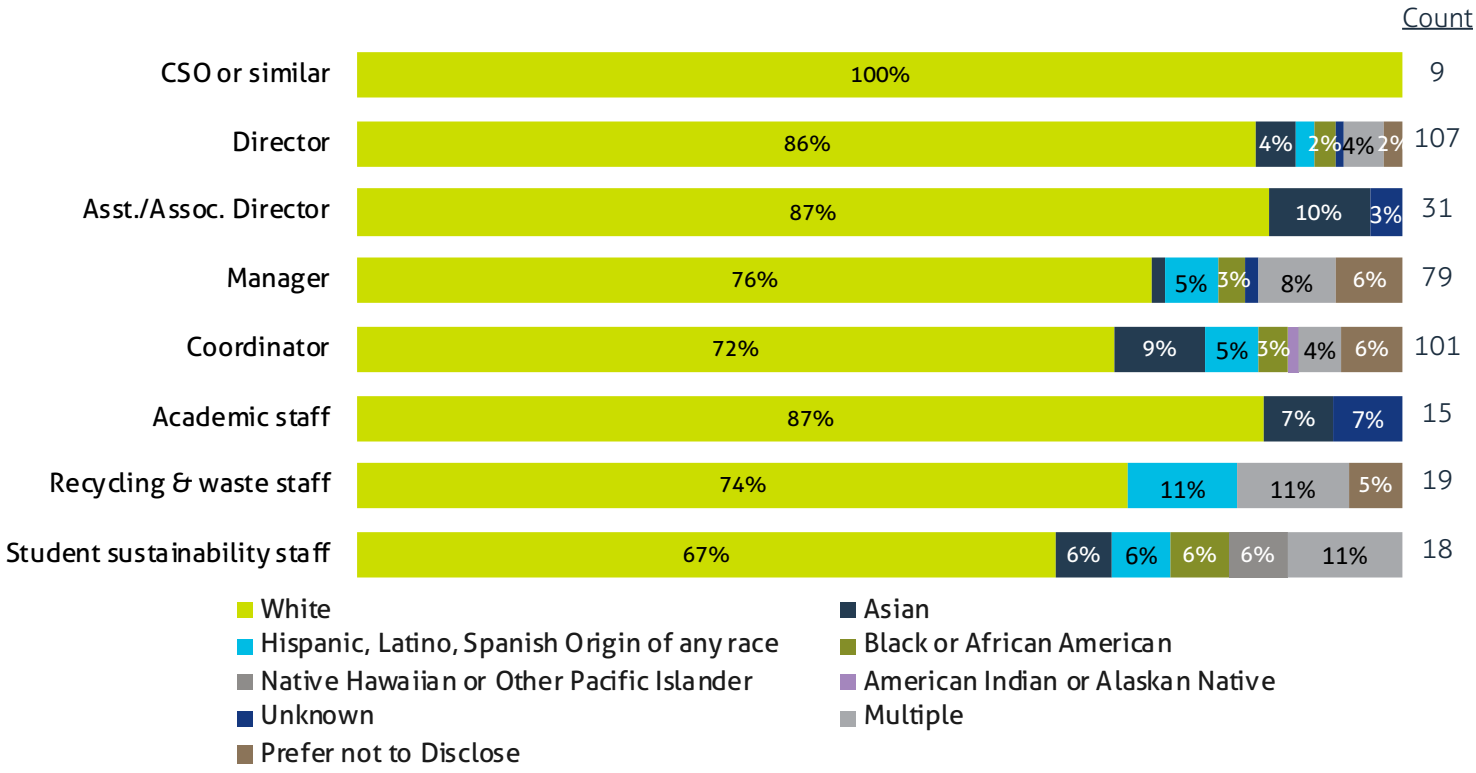
A question on race and ethnicity of respondents is included in every staffing survey, however the response options have changed slightly since 2020 to align with US census standards. In particular: 1) The former category for "Asian and Pacific Islander" has been updated to include two options: "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander". 2) The former category for "Indigenous/Native" has been updated to include "American Indian or Alaskan Native". Responses for other Indigenous identities were captured under "Other, please specify". 3) An option for "Unknown" has been added.

With these changes in mind, results are comparable with past surveys for most but not all response options. The proportion of respondents that identify as "White" with no other race or ethnicity identification has decreased since 2015 (90% in 2015, 88% in 2017, 83% in 2020, and 79% in 2023. Respondents identifying as Hispanic, Latino, Spanish Origin of any race increased by one percent, while respondents identifying as Black or African American increased by ½ percent. There appears to be a continuing gradual trend toward diversification within higher education sustainability positions, though higher education sustainability is still predominantly white. In reviewing identities based on position type, higher level positions (CSO, Sustainability Director, Assistant/Associate Director, academic staff) had higher proportions of respondents that identified as white with no other ethnicities or races listed. The student sustainability staff position was found to be most diverse, with about two-thirds of respondents identifying as white with no other ethnicities or races listed.

Race & Ethnicity of Respondents | N = 393



Race & Ethnicity



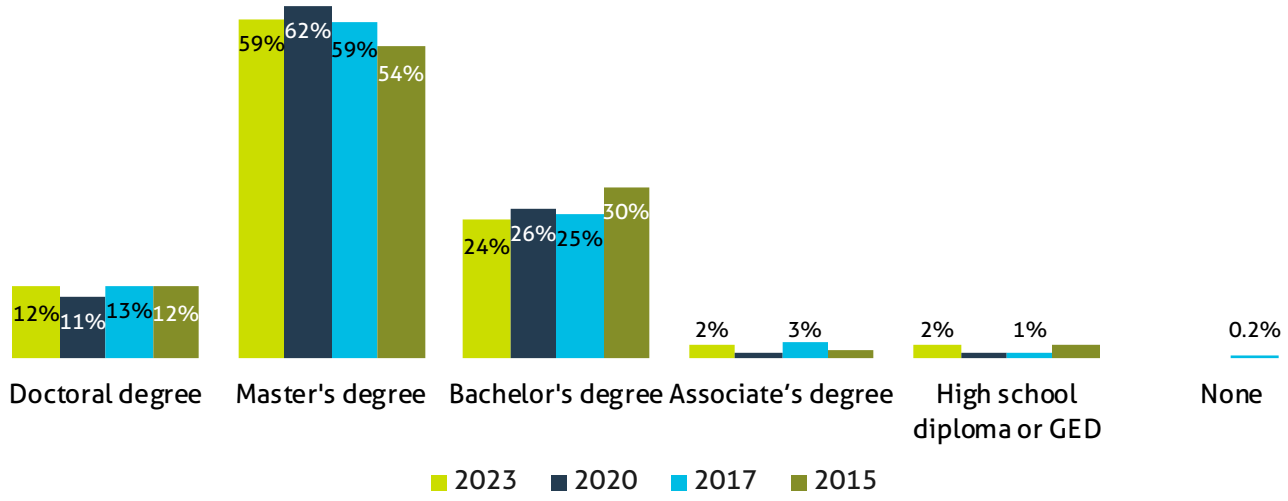


University of Florida Office of Sustainability student interns and friends modeling for the Green Gator Graduation Cord Challenge program. Photo Credit: Lauren Stefan

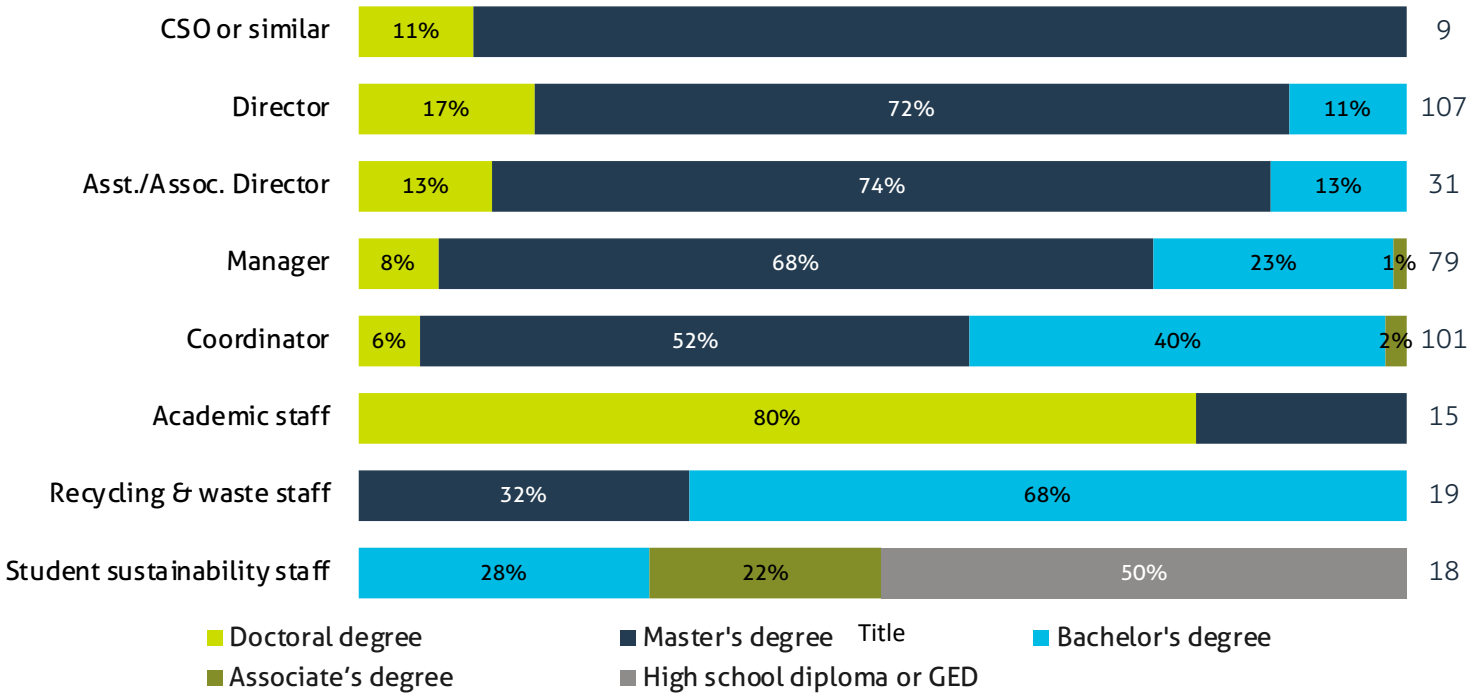
Education Level

Minimal changes in education level were found in comparison to past surveys. A Master's degree continues to be important for many higher education sustainability positions, with 59% of respondents holding a Master's degree as their highest level of education (down from 62% in 2020). Ninety-six percent of respondents held at least a Bachelor's degree (down from 98% in 2020). The proportion of Doctoral degree holders increased from 11% in 2020 to 13% in 2023. By position type, academic staff had the highest percentage of respondents with Doctoral degrees (50%). Sustainability Coordinators and recycling & waste staff had lower percentages of respondents with Master's degrees or higher.

Highest Level of Education Completed | N=393



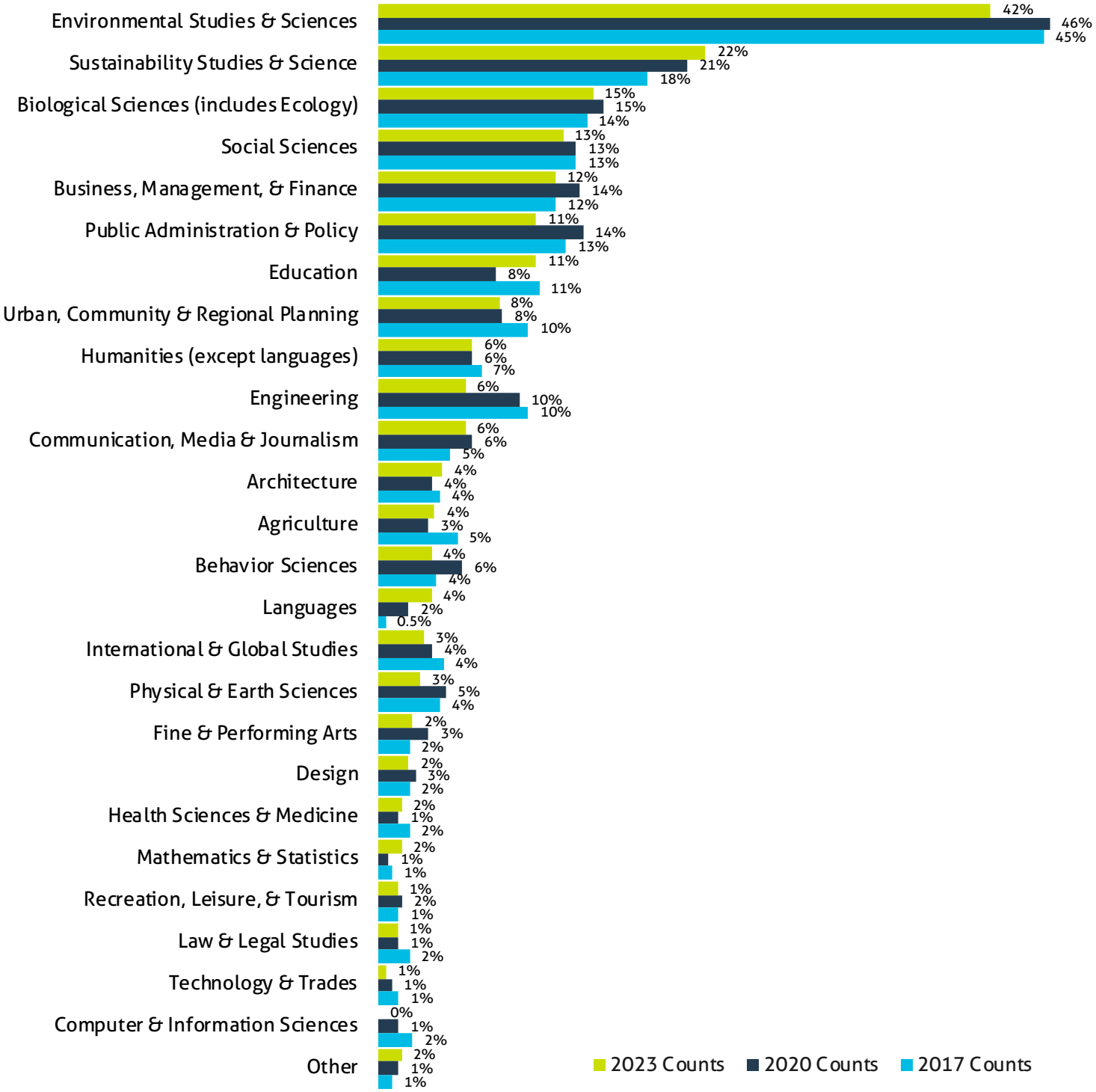
Highest Level of Education Completed – By Position Type | N=379



Academic Background

While most responses for academic background were relatively similar to responses in 2020 and 2017, there were more respondents referencing sustainability studies and sciences (1% increase), and fewer respondents referencing the most common discipline, environmental studies and sciences (4% decrease). No respondents identified computer & information sciences in 2023.

Academic Background of Respondents | N = 392



Institution Information

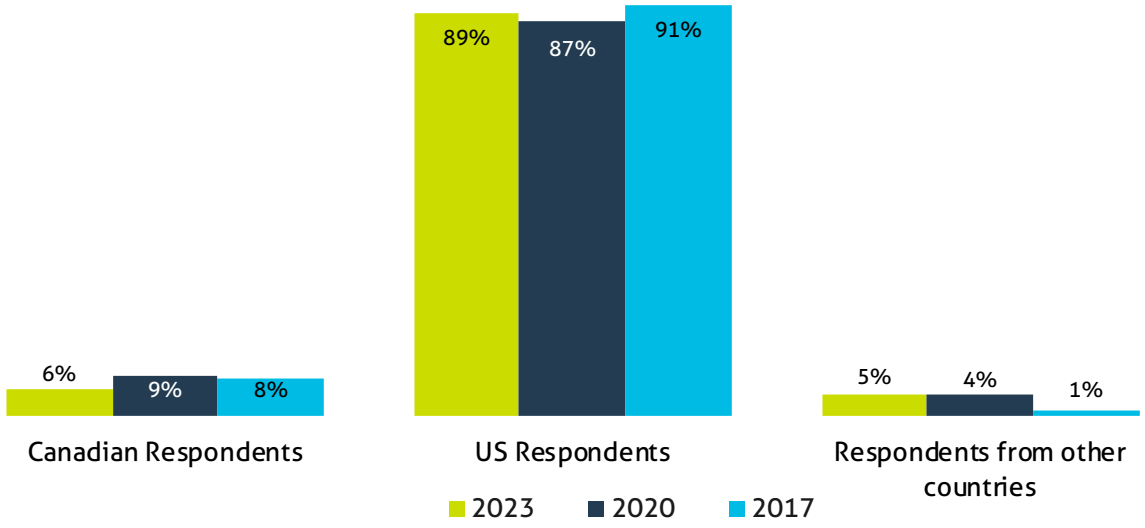


Sustainability staff & student representatives at Muhlenberg College serve as campus open house tour guides at the newly constructed and Core-certified Fahy Commons. Photo credit: Marco Calderon

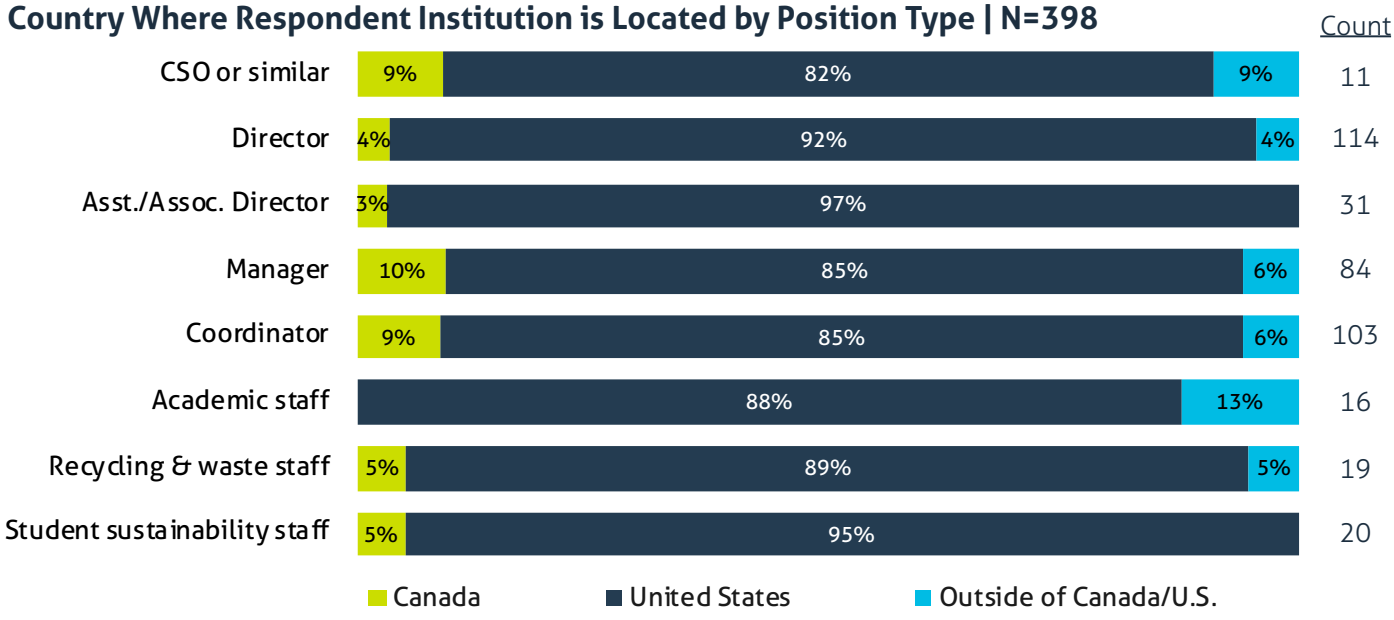
Country

The staffing survey became accessible to respondents in any country in 2017, and historical responses are included from this point. The 2023 survey saw a similar proportion of respondents from the United States as compared to 2020 results (89% in 2023 versus 87% in 2020). Responses from Canadian respondents dropped somewhat (6% in 2023 versus 9% in 2020), however there was an increase in respondents from other countries. A notable increase was found in respondents from Australia (8 in 2023 versus 2 in 2020). This could be attributed to an ongoing partnership between AASHE and the Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS). Responses from countries outside of Australia, Canada and the US were too few to enable meaningful analysis as separate cohorts.

Proportion of respondents by Country and Year - Summary | N=416



Country Where Respondent Institution is Located by Position Type | N=398



Country

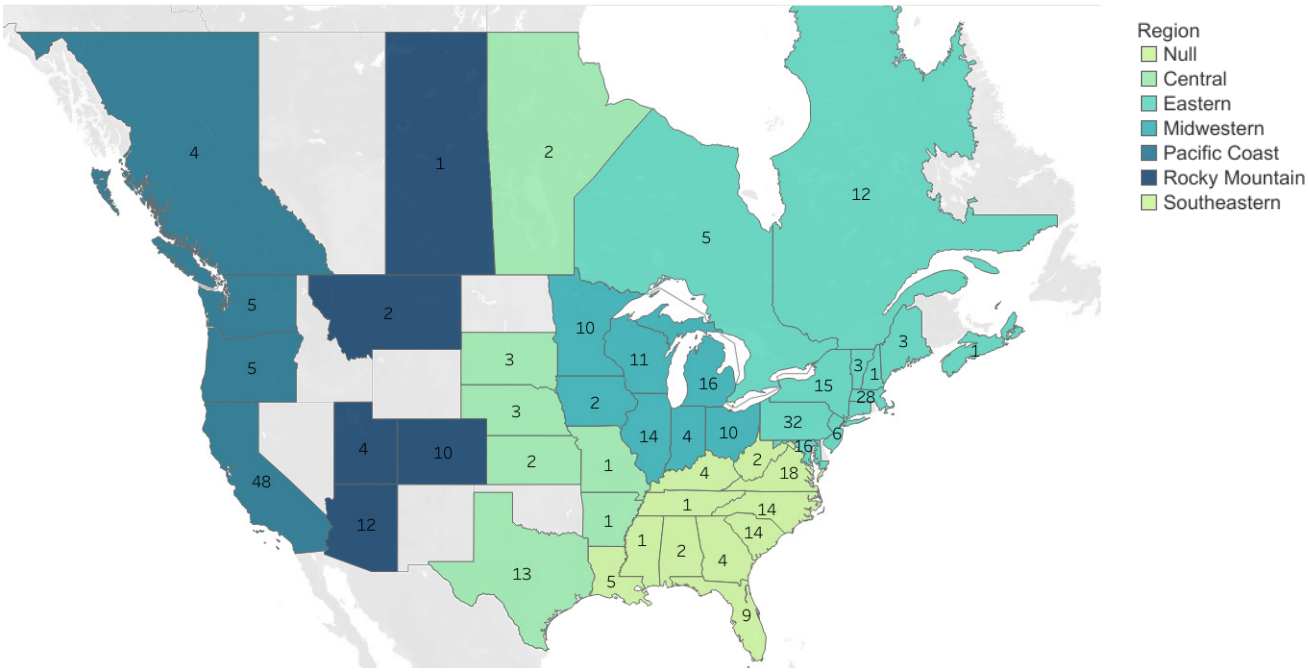
Country Where Respondent Institution is Located - Detail | N=475

Country	2023 Count	2023 %	2020 Count	2020 %	2017 Count	2017 %
Australia	8	1.9%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
Azerbaijan	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Brazil	2	0.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Bulgaria	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Canada	25	6.0%	41	8.6%	37	8.2%
China/Hong Kong	1	0.2%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
Colombia	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Ecuador	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Egypt	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Greece	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
Hungary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Ireland	0	0.0%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
Malaysia	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Mexico	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
New Zealand	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Saudi Arabia	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
South Africa	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%
Sweden	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Switzerland	1	0.2%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Taiwan	1	0.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Uganda	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
United Arab Emirates	2	0.5%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
United Kingdom	0	0.0%	4	0.8%	0	0.0%
United States	371	89.2%	413	86.9%	411	90.9%
Total	**416**	**100.0%**	**475**	**100.0%**	**452**	**100.0%**

Region

Respondents from the US and Canada were asked in which province, territory or state the institution or system office is located. This report references geographical regions defined by APPA, Leadership in Educational Facilities.

Map: 2023 Respondents in North American Regions, States & Provinces | N=396



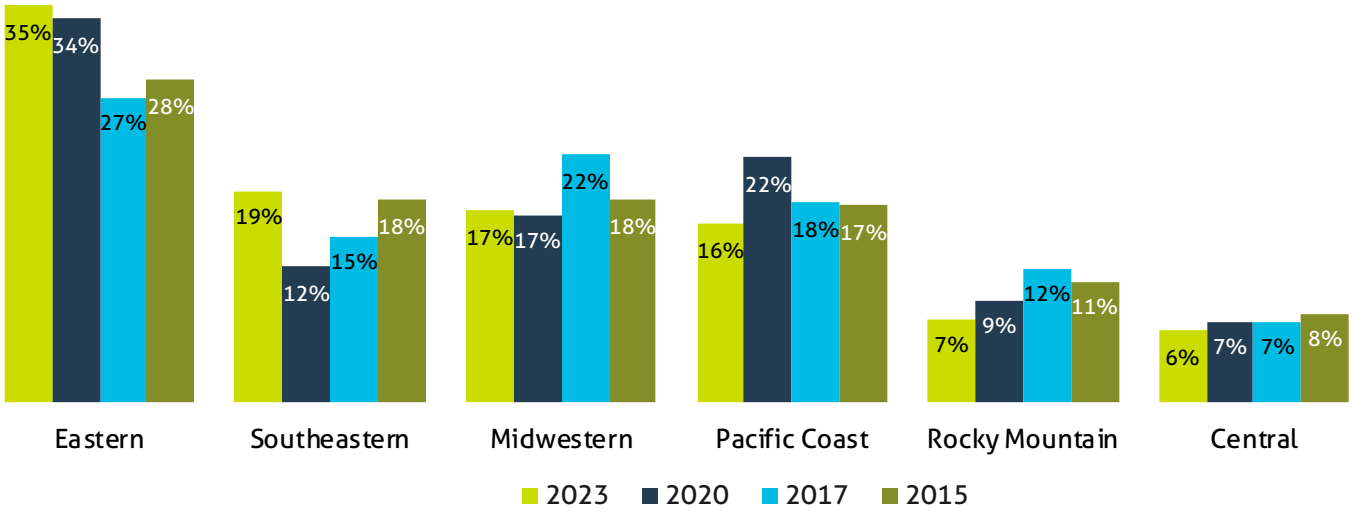


Cleveland State University's Director of Sustainability, a Sustainability Student Intern, and a Facilities staff member participate in a recent EarthFest event. Photo credit: Brian Hart Photography

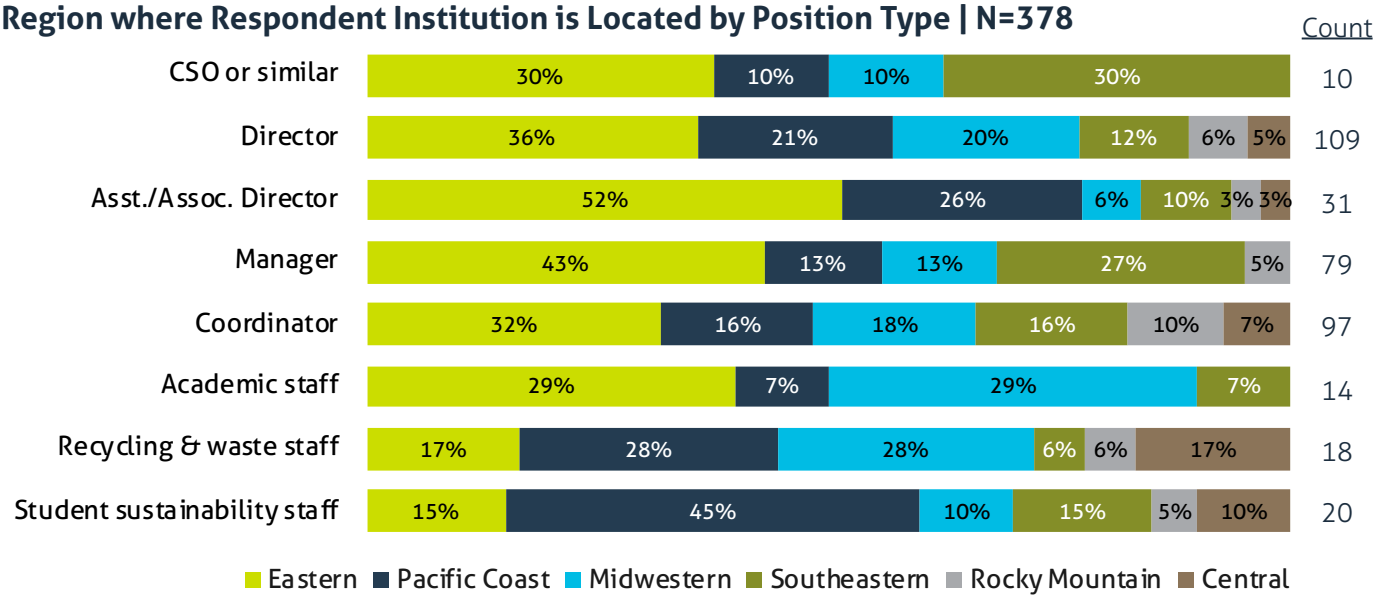
Region

Among U.S. and Canadian respondents, the largest proportion (34%) came from institutions in the Eastern region of the U.S. and Canada – with the lowest proportion (7%) coming from the Central region. In comparison to 2020, there was a higher proportion of respondents from the Eastern and Pacific Coast regions, and a lower proportion of respondents from the Midwestern, Southeastern, and Rocky Mountain regions. Responses varied by position type, with a relatively high proportion of Assistant/Associate Directors from the Eastern region, and a high proportion of student sustainability staff from the Pacific Coast region.

Region where Respondent Institution is Located | N=396



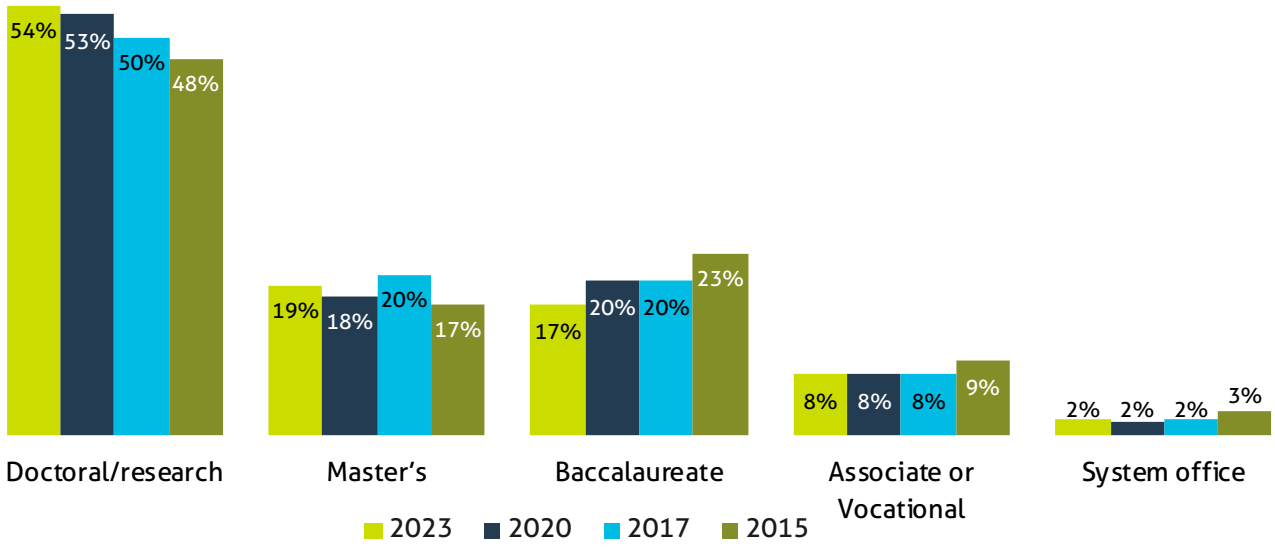
Region where Respondent Institution is Located by Position Type | N=378



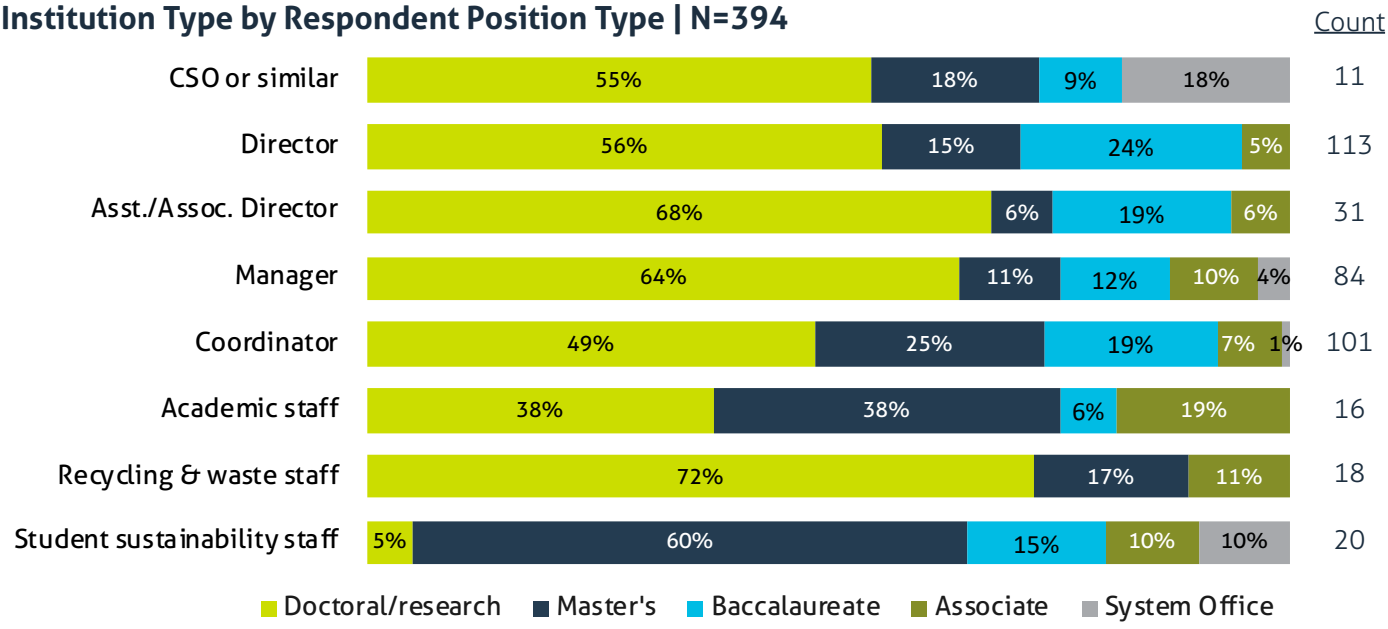
Institution Type

The institution type question is adapted from the Carnegie Basic Type Classification used in the United States. Over half of all respondents were from Doctoral/research institutions, and the proportion of respondents from such institutions has continued to increase since 2015. The percentage of respondents from Baccalaureate institutions decreased in comparison to prior reports. By position type, a high proportion of recycling staff (72%) and Associate/Assistant Directors (68%) was found among Doctoral institutions, while a high proportion of student sustainability staff (60%) was found among Masters institutions.

Institution type | N=410



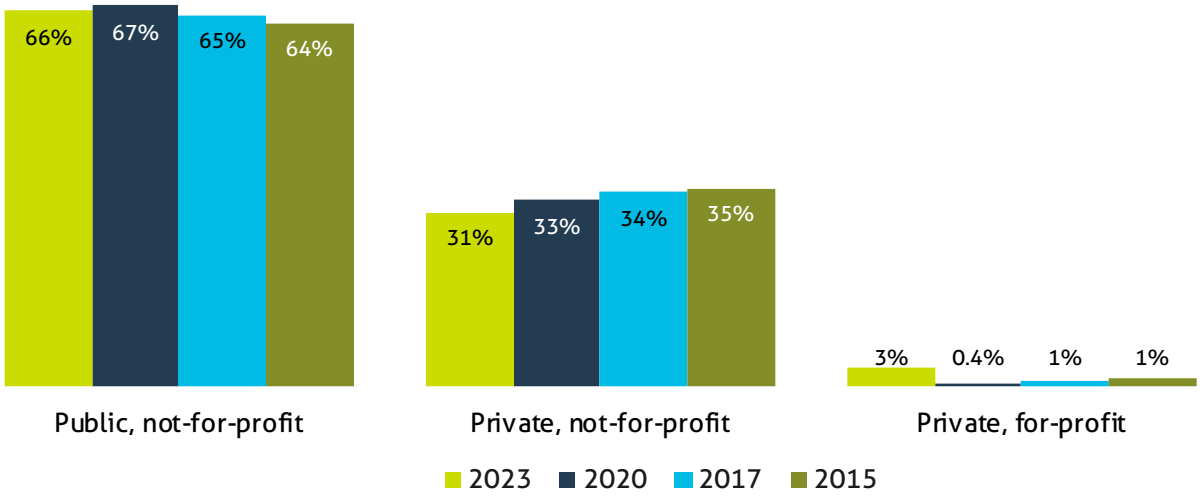
Institution Type by Respondent Position Type | N=394



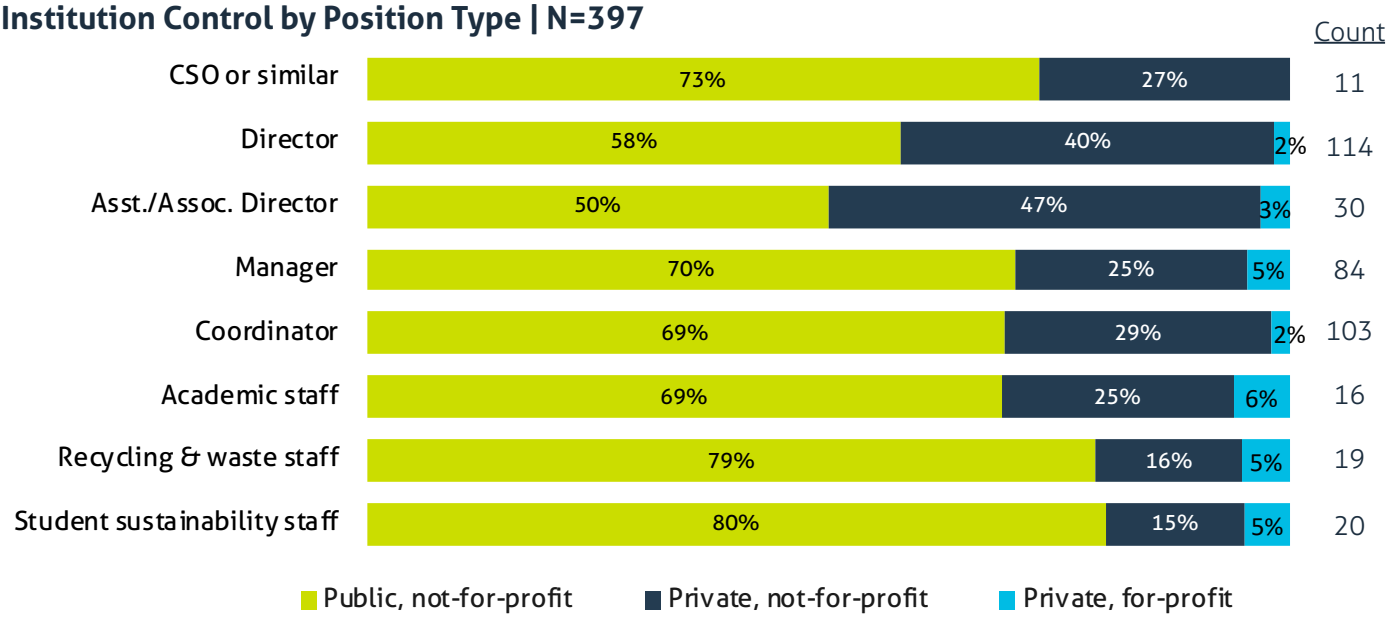
Institution Control

About two-thirds of respondents were affiliated with publicly controlled institutions while one-third were with privately controlled institutions. The percentage of respondents from private, for-profit institutions increased from less than one percent in prior surveys to over three percent in 2023. By position type, the proportion of respondents from private institutions was highest among Assistant and Associate Directors (50/50 split).

Institution Control | N=415



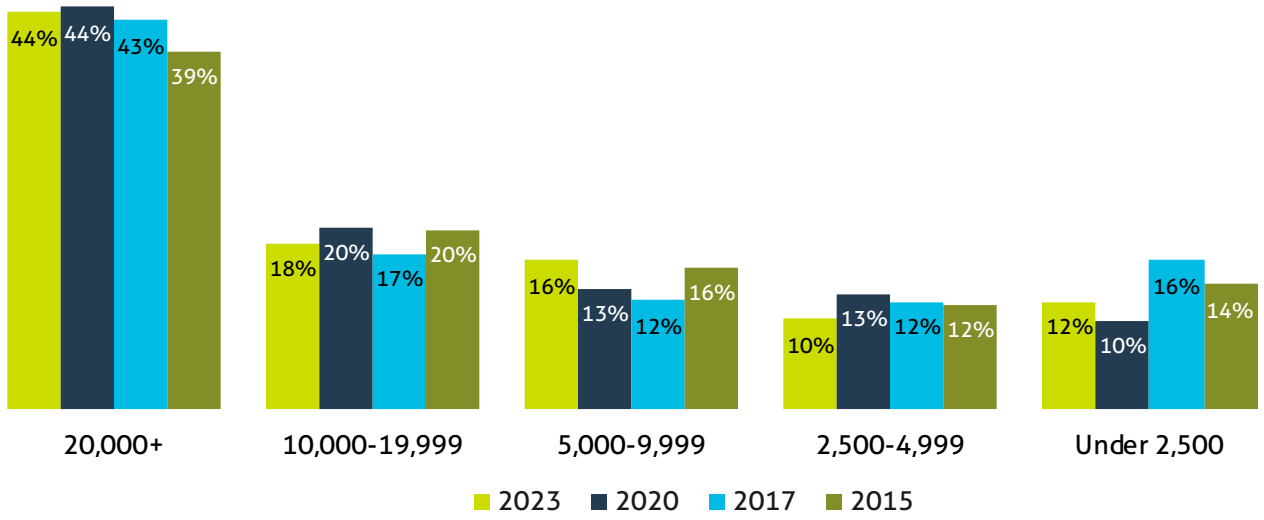
Institution Control by Position Type | N=397



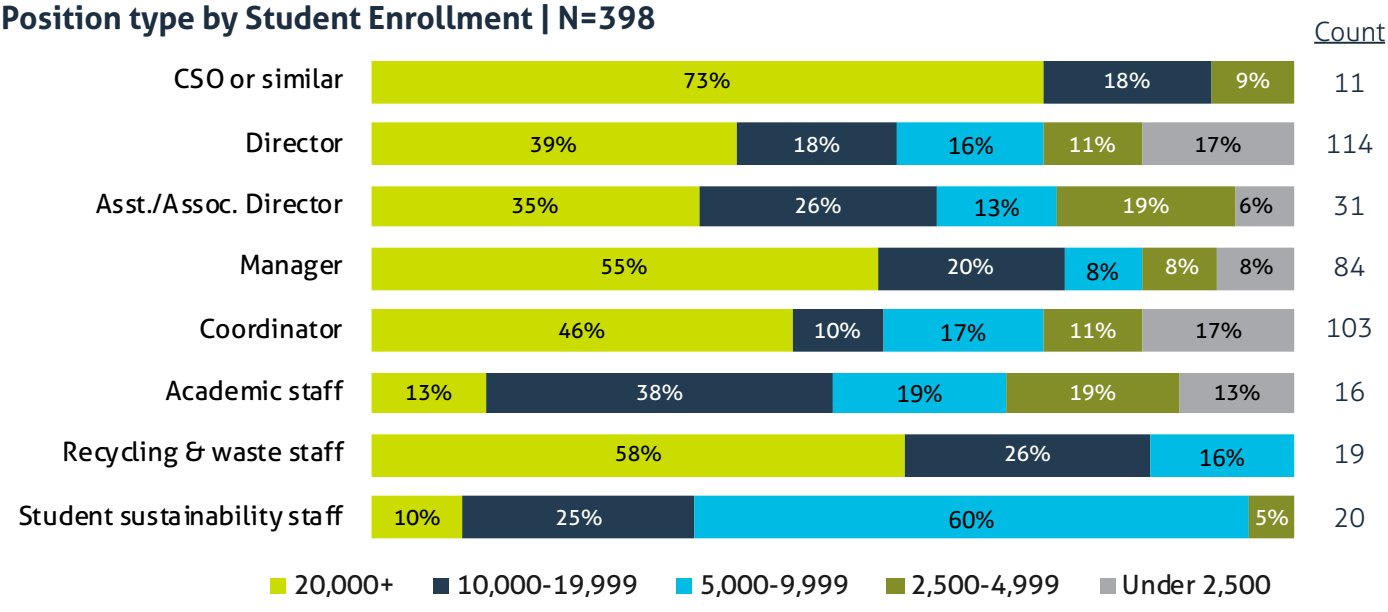
Student Enrollment

The plurality of respondents (44%) were from institutions that enrolled 20,000 or more students, with some fluctuation over survey years. The proportion of respondents from institutions with 5,000-9,999 students increased. By position type, a high proportion of CSO-type positions (73%) were found at institutions with 20,000+ students, while a high proportion of student sustainability staff positions (60%) were found among institutions with 5,000-9,999 students.

Student Enrollment | N=415



Position type by Student Enrollment | N=398



Nature of Position

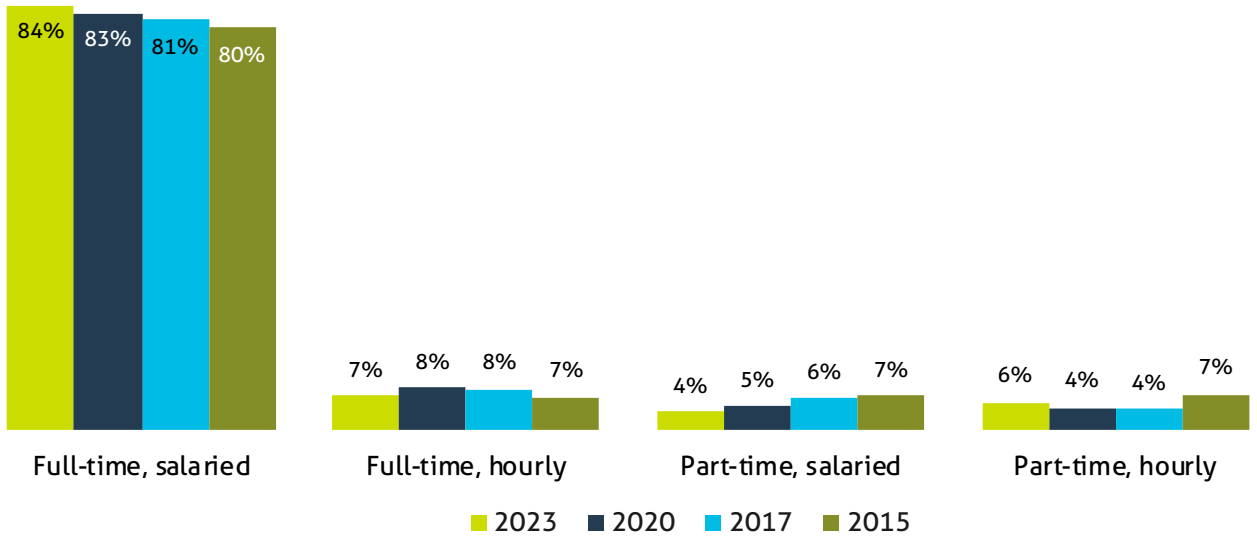


Johns Hopkins University Office of Sustainability staff retreating into nature. Photo credit: Bena Zeng

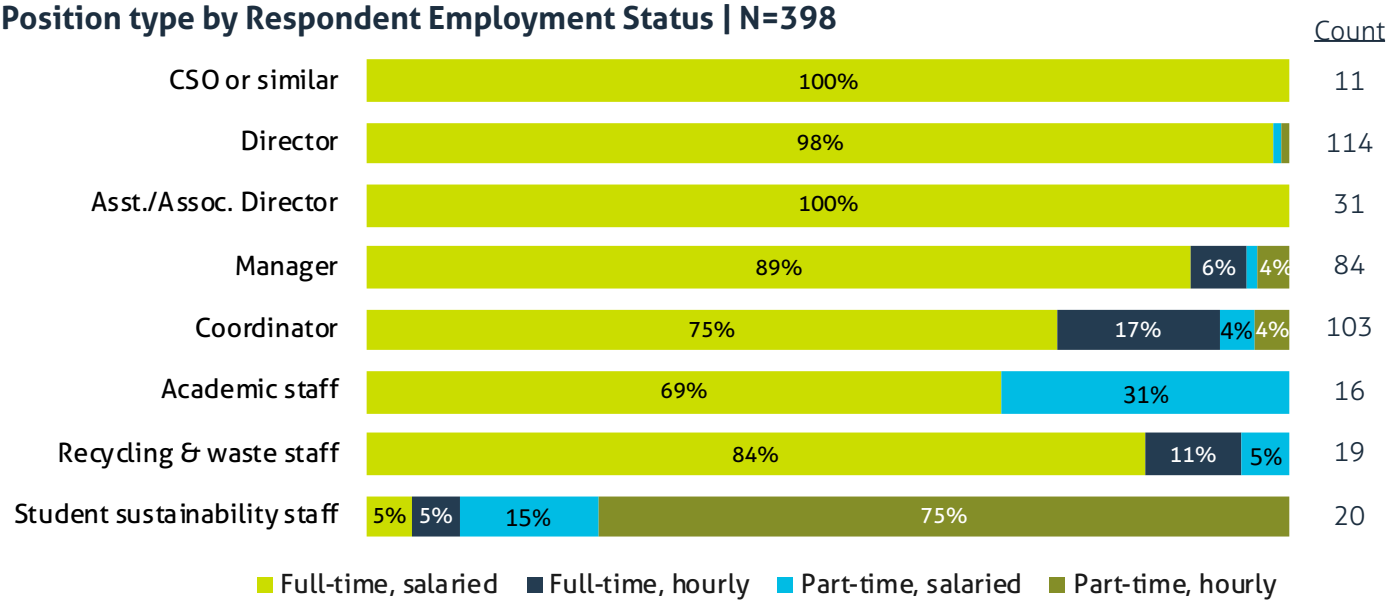
Employment Status

The vast majority of respondents (91%) had full-time positions, and most were in salaried rather than hourly positions (84%). Nearly all positions at the Assistant/Associate Director level or higher were full-time and salaried, and 90 percent of student sustainability staff positions were part-time.

Employment Status of Respondents | N=416



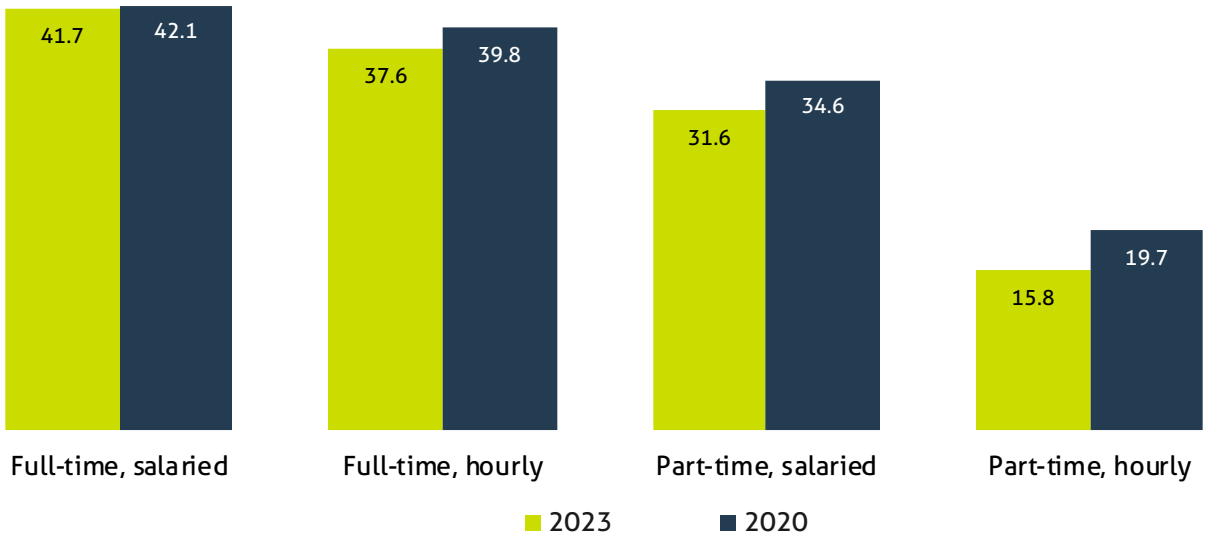
Position type by Respondent Employment Status | N=398



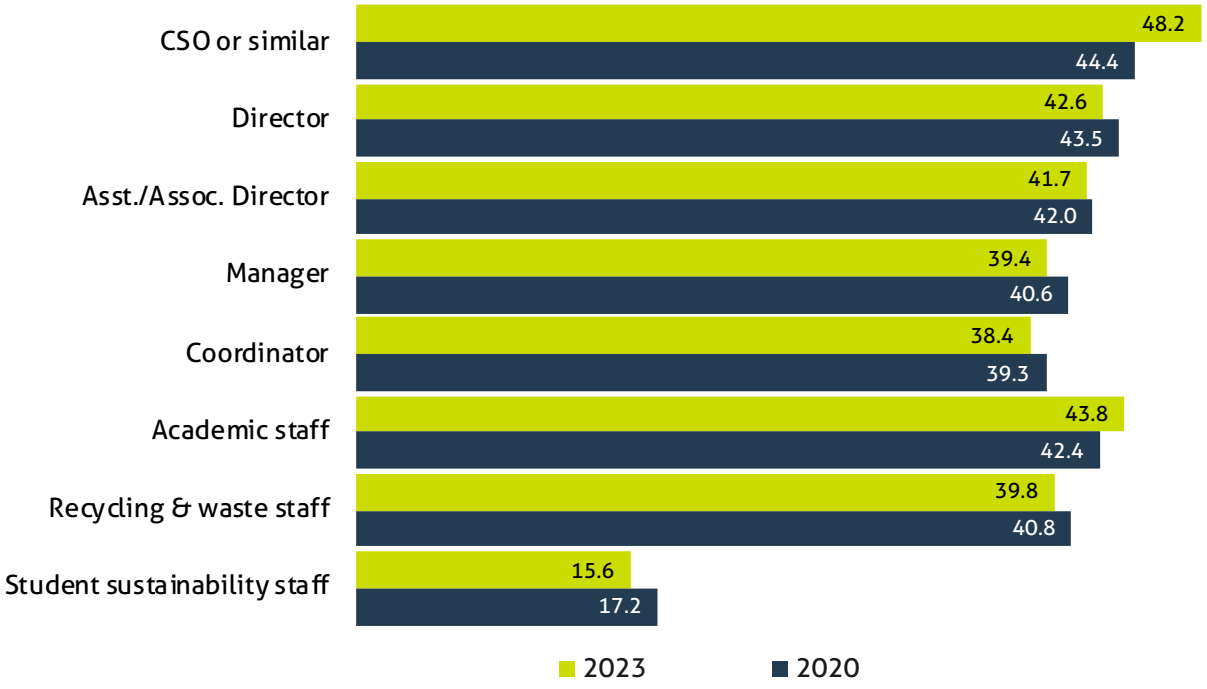
Hours Worked

This year, as in our 2020 survey, respondents were asked about how many hours they work in a typical week. Average responses are outlined below for full-time and part-time salaried and hourly positions. Salaried employees worked more hours than hourly employees, and averages across all position categories dropped slightly since 2020. CSO and similar positions as well as academic staff positions reported the greatest number of average hours worked in a typical week.

Average Hours Worked in a Typical Week | N=416



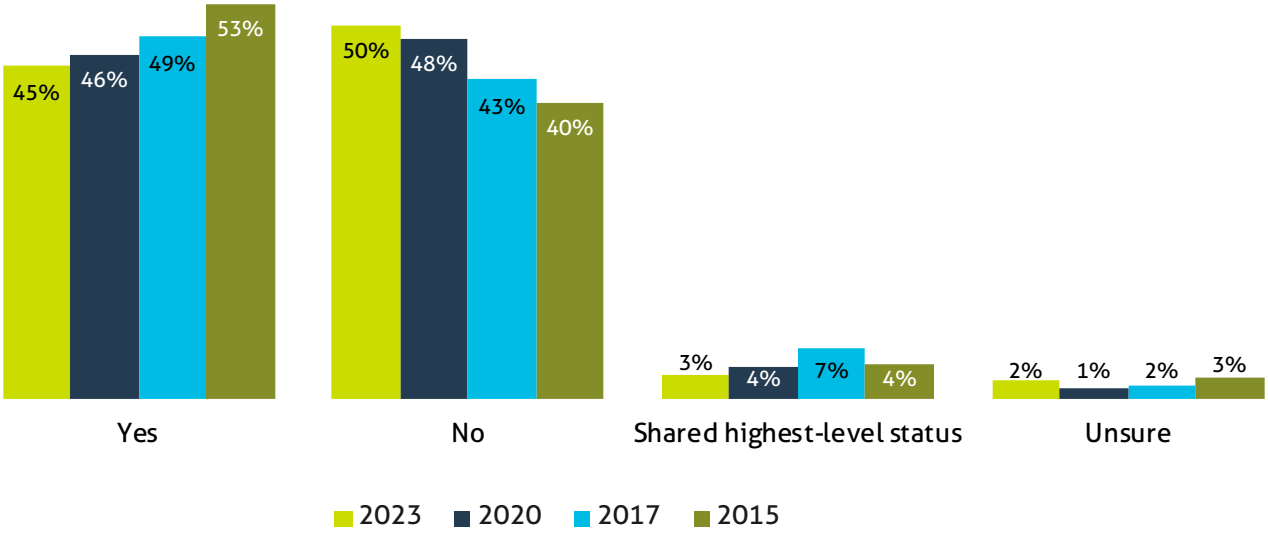
Average Hours Worked in a Typical Week by Position Type for Full-time Employees | N=398



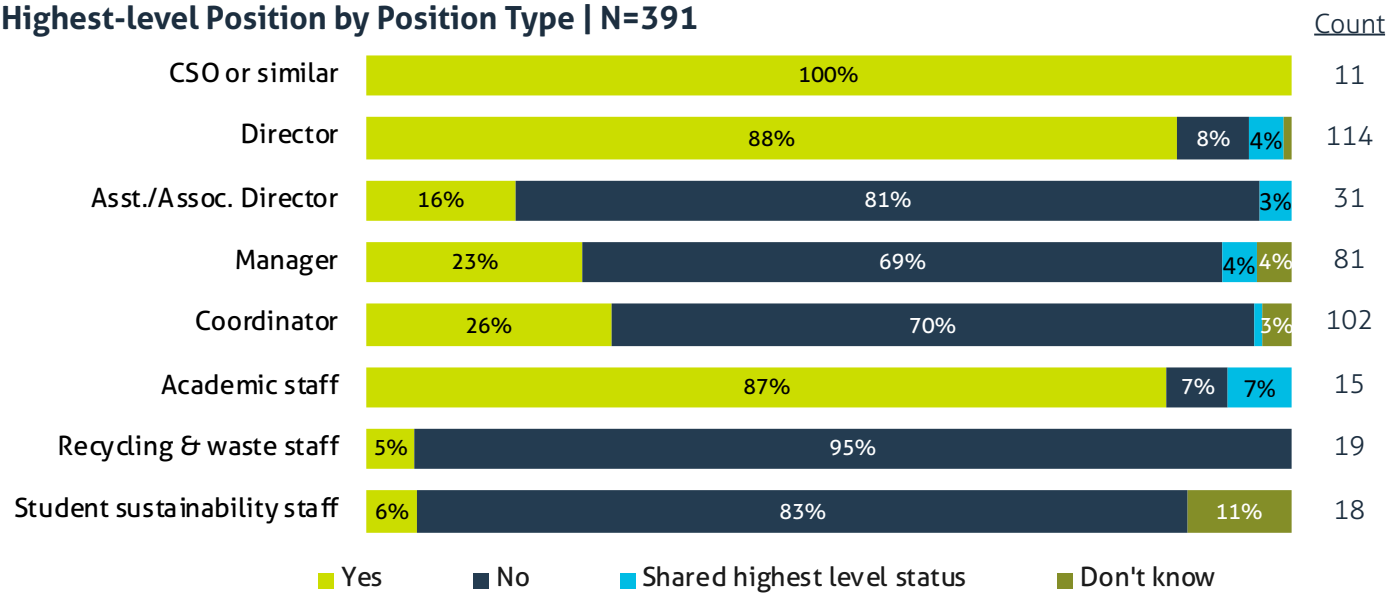
Highest Level Positions

To gain insight into leadership roles for various sustainability positions, respondents were asked, "Is your position the highest-level sustainability position at your institution or organization?" Answer choices included "Yes", "No", "Not sure" and "My position shares highest-level status with one or more other positions." There has been a steady decrease in the proportion of respondents who hold their institution's highest level sustainability position since 2015, suggesting consistent growth in new and lower level positions. Responses varied by position type. CSO and Sustainability Director positions were the most likely to be the highest-level sustainability positions at the institution (100% and 88% respectively). Recycling & waste staff and student sustainability staff were least likely to be the highest-level positions at the institution.

Highest Level Position | N=406



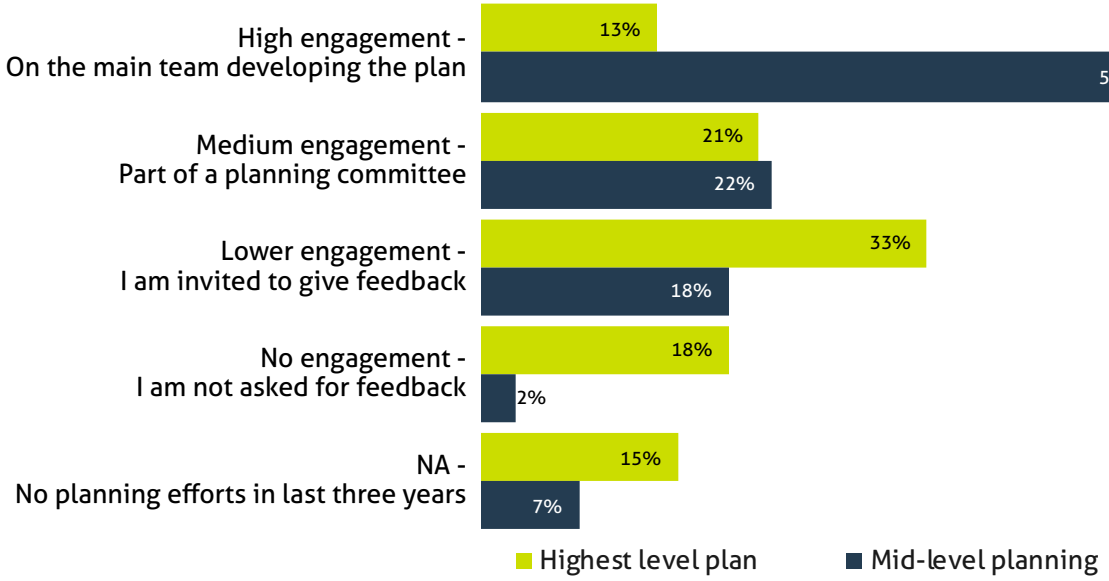
Highest-level Position by Position Type | N=391



Involvement in Strategic Planning

A question about involvement in institutional strategic planning was updated in 2023 to capture involvement in highest level plans as well as mid-level plans such as sustainability, climate action, divisional or disciplinary plans. Responses from 2020 are not easily comparable due to these updates. The majority of respondents (50%) are on the main planning teams for one or more mid-level plans, while a much lower proportion (13%) are on the main planning teams for the highest level plans.

Involvement in Strategic Planning | N=403



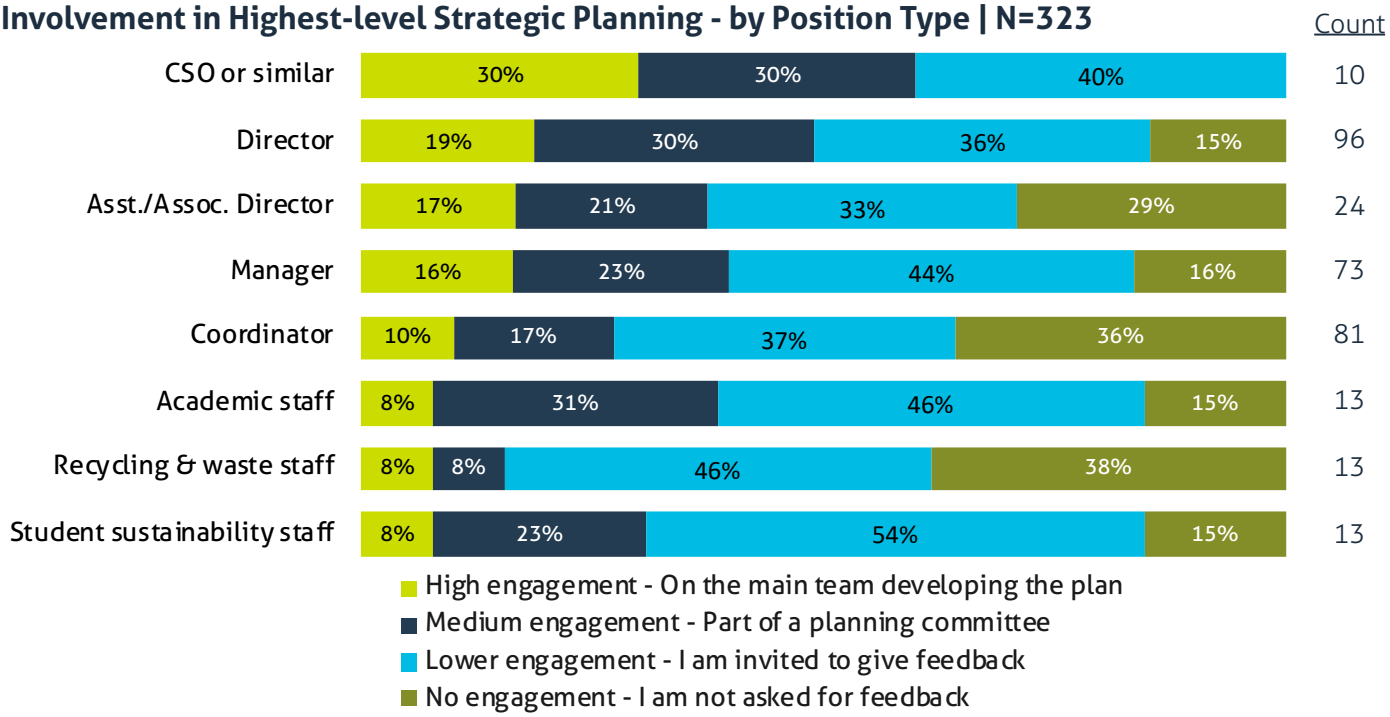


USC Students, faculty, and staff gather to hear updates at a recent Sustainability Townhall.
Photo credit: University of Southern California

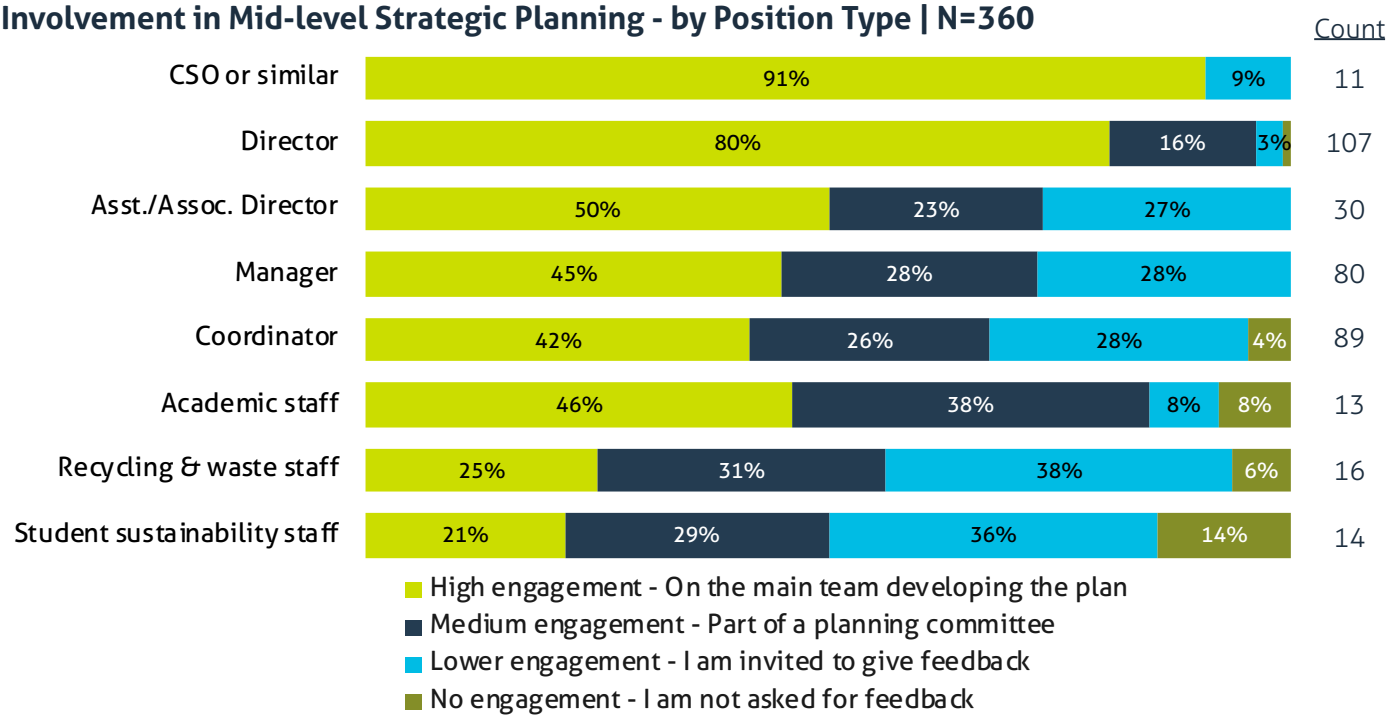
Involvement in Strategic Planning

By position type, CSOs and Sustainability Directors were more highly involved in both levels of strategic planning. Academic staff were more likely to be directly involved in mid-level strategic planning teams or committees.

Involvement in Highest-level Strategic Planning - by Position Type | N=323



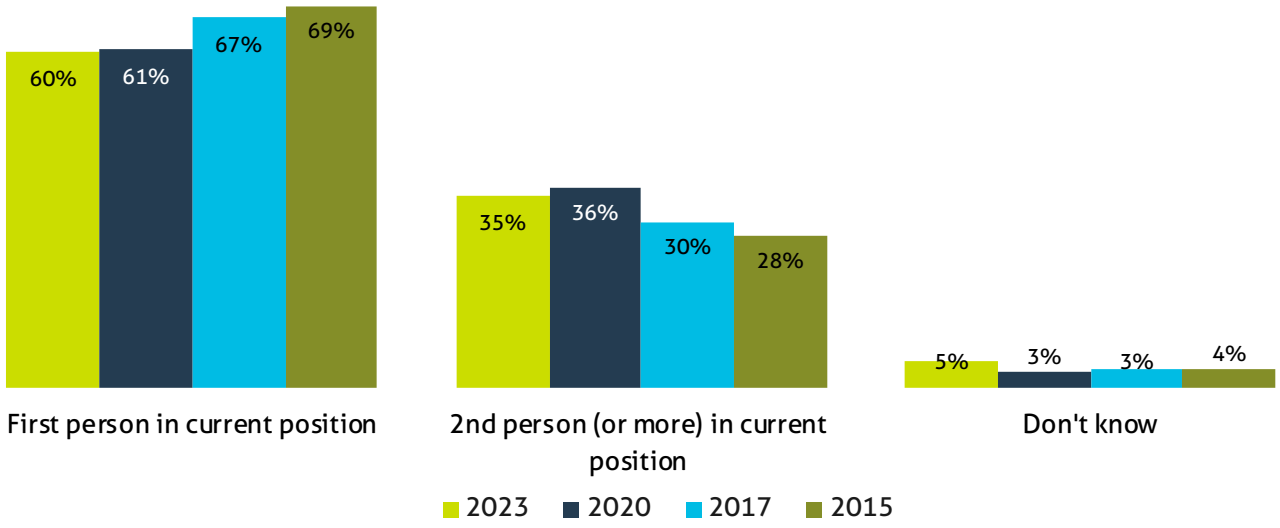
Involvement in Mid-level Strategic Planning - by Position Type | N=360



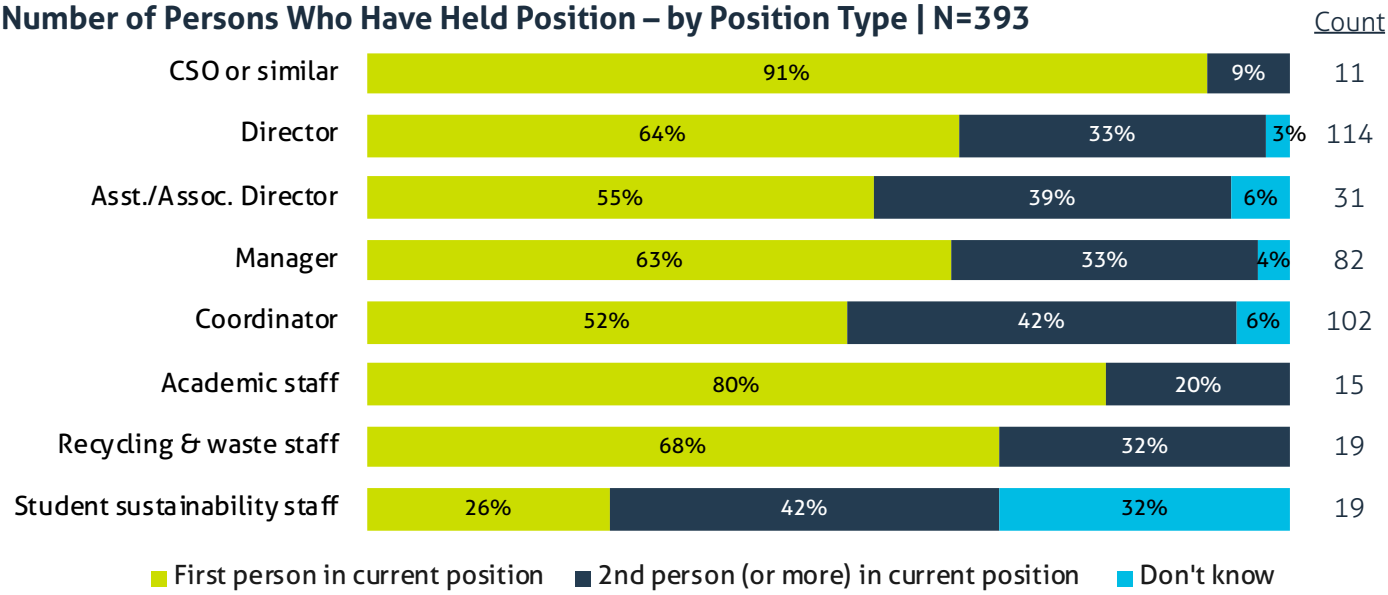
Number who have held Position

To help identify trends in the creation of new sustainability positions, respondents were asked to indicate if they were the first person to hold their position at its current rank or level. The majority of respondents (60%) were the first person to hold their current position, a slight decrease from 2020, which aligns with a steady decline since 2015. By position type, notably larger percentages of CSO were the first to hold their positions, potentially highlighting the newness of this position. Student sustainability staff were more likely to not know, or be the second or more in a position.

Number of Persons Who Have Held Position | N=408



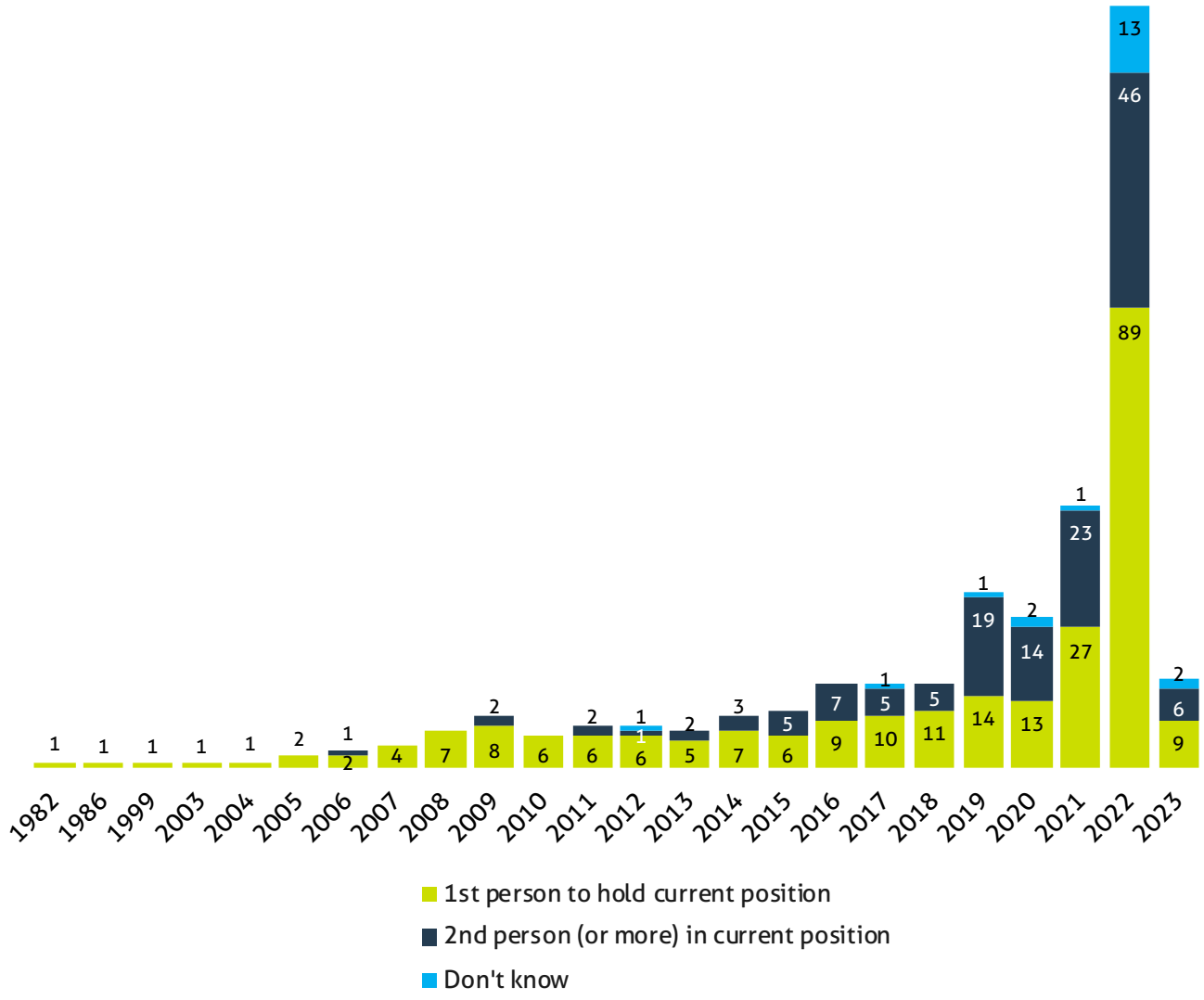
Number of Persons Who Have Held Position – by Position Type | N=393



Year Work Began

To provide insight into the growth of campus sustainability positions over time, respondents were asked to answer the question, "In what year did you begin working in higher education sustainability overall?" By filtering results of this question with respondents who indicated that they were the first person to hold their position at its current rank/level (see preceding section), the number of new annual positions in campus sustainability each year can be estimated. The 2020 survey shows steady growth of positions in recent years and particularly in 2022, with a balance of new positions and positions that have been refilled. While these findings suggest continued growth in new sustainability positions, they also may be indicative of turnover in existing positions.

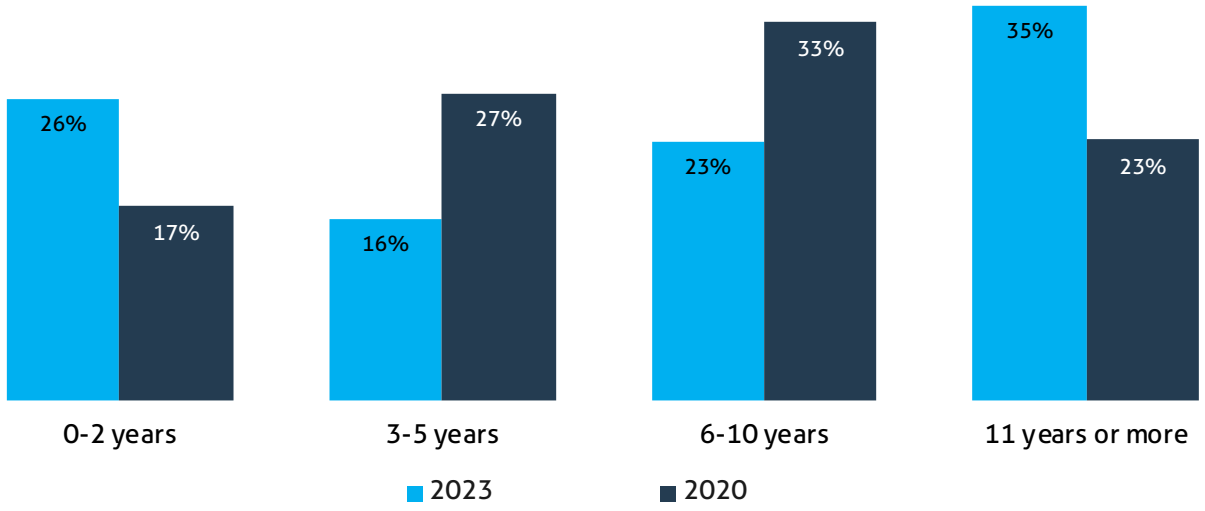
Year when Higher Education Sustainability Work Began | N=408



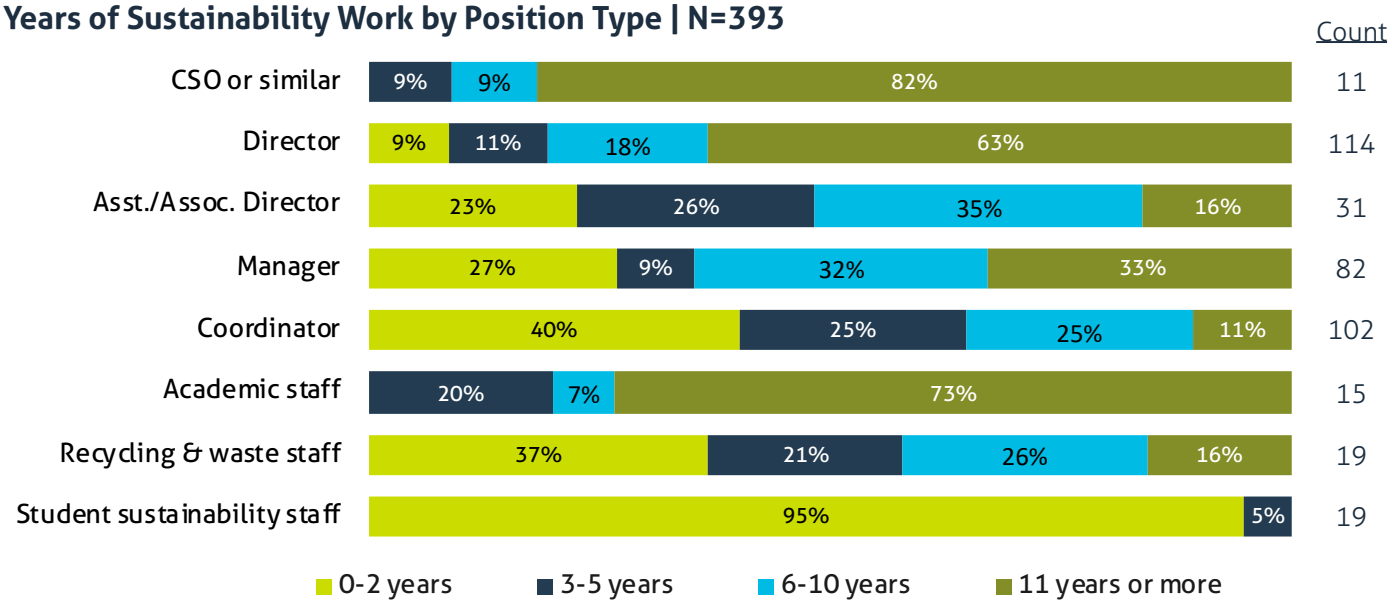
Years of Sustainability Work

Respondents were asked about how many years they have worked in higher education sustainability. Responses can be compared with 2020 results only, as the format of this question was different in 2017 and prior surveys. In comparison to 2020 respondents, a larger proportion of 2023 respondents were new to higher education sustainability (0-2 years). In addition, there was an increase in the proportion of highly seasoned employees working on sustainability for 11 years or more. This bifurcation of the field may coincide with pandemic-related job transitions as well as maturing of the field. The middle categories (3-10 years) had more respondents in 2020. By position type, CSOs had the greatest number of years of sustainability experience, as expected, followed by Academic Staff and Sustainability Directors. Students and Sustainability Coordinators had the fewest years of experience.

Years of Sustainability Work | N=408



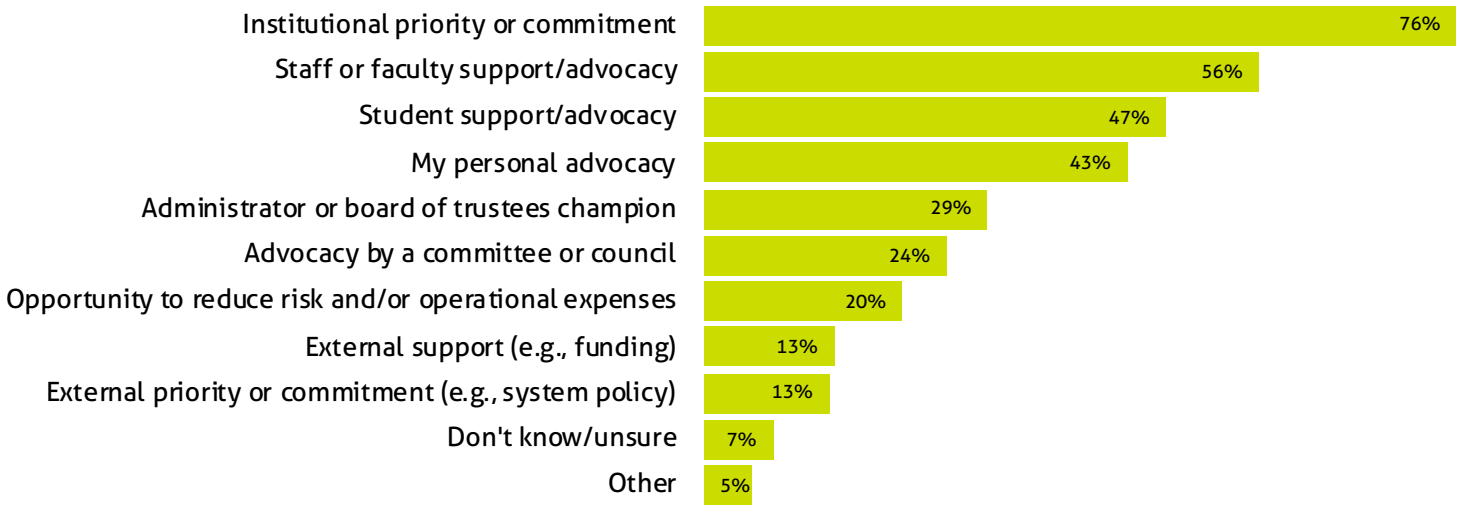
Years of Sustainability Work by Position Type | N=393



Main Driver for Position Continuation

A question about the main driver for the *continuation* of one's current position was updated from being a free response question in 2020 to a question with multiple responses plus "other" in 2023. A question in 2020 about main drivers for the *creation* of current positions was excluded from this year's survey. Respondents could select up to five most significant drivers. The most common option identified was "institutional priority", with over three-quarters of respondents indicating that this was a main driver for their position's continuation.

Main Driver for Position Continuation | N=406



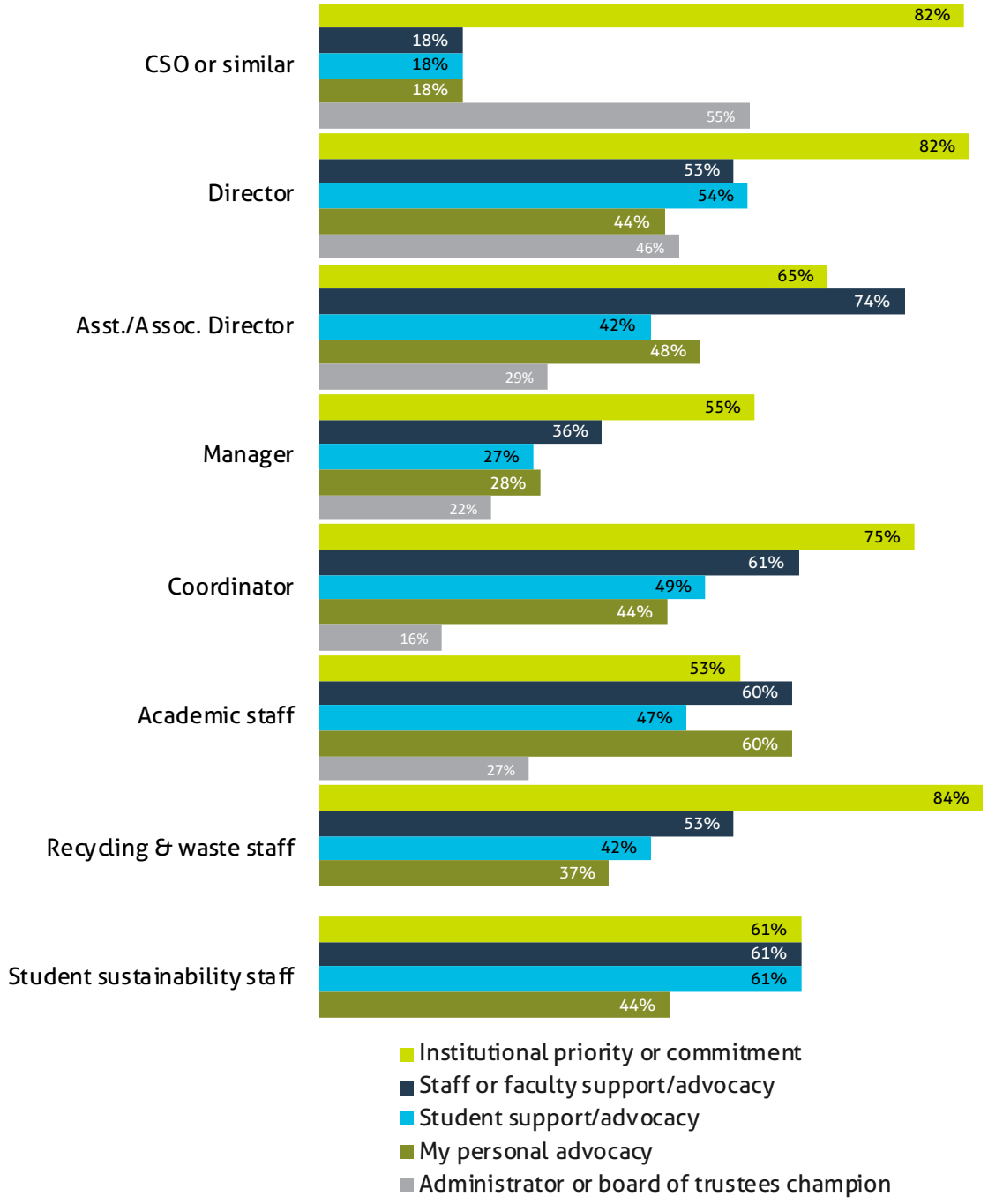


Endicott College Sustainability Office, Fall 2022. Photo credit: David Le

Main Driver for Position Continuation

For the 5 most common drivers, responses were analyzed by position type. "Institutional priority or commitment" was most frequently cited as a main driver for recycling & waste staff (84%) and for CSOs and Directors (82%). For the CSO position, advocacy by Administration and Board of Trustees was particularly important.

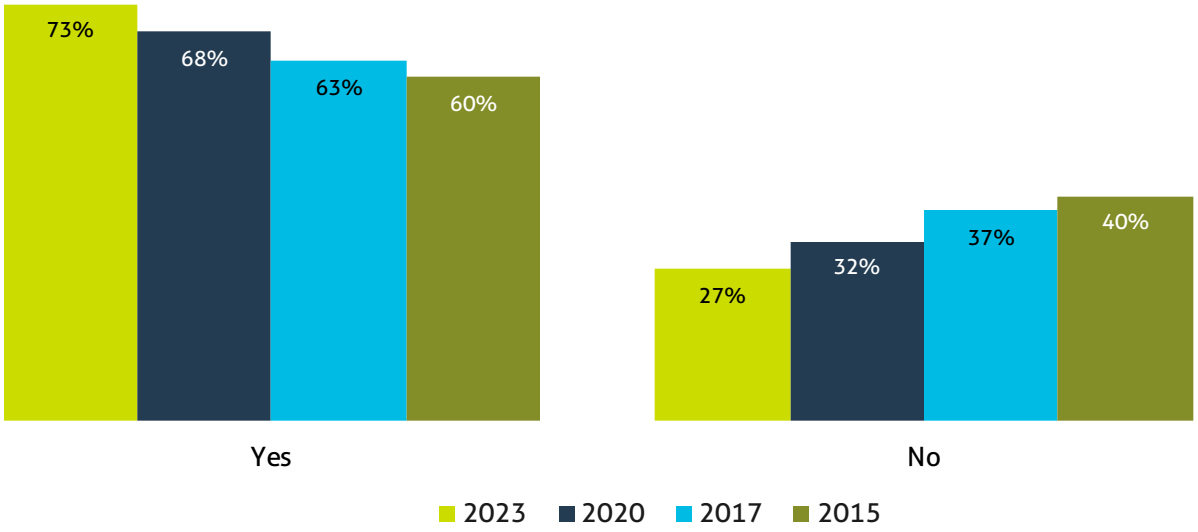
Main Driver for Position Continuation by Position Type | N=391



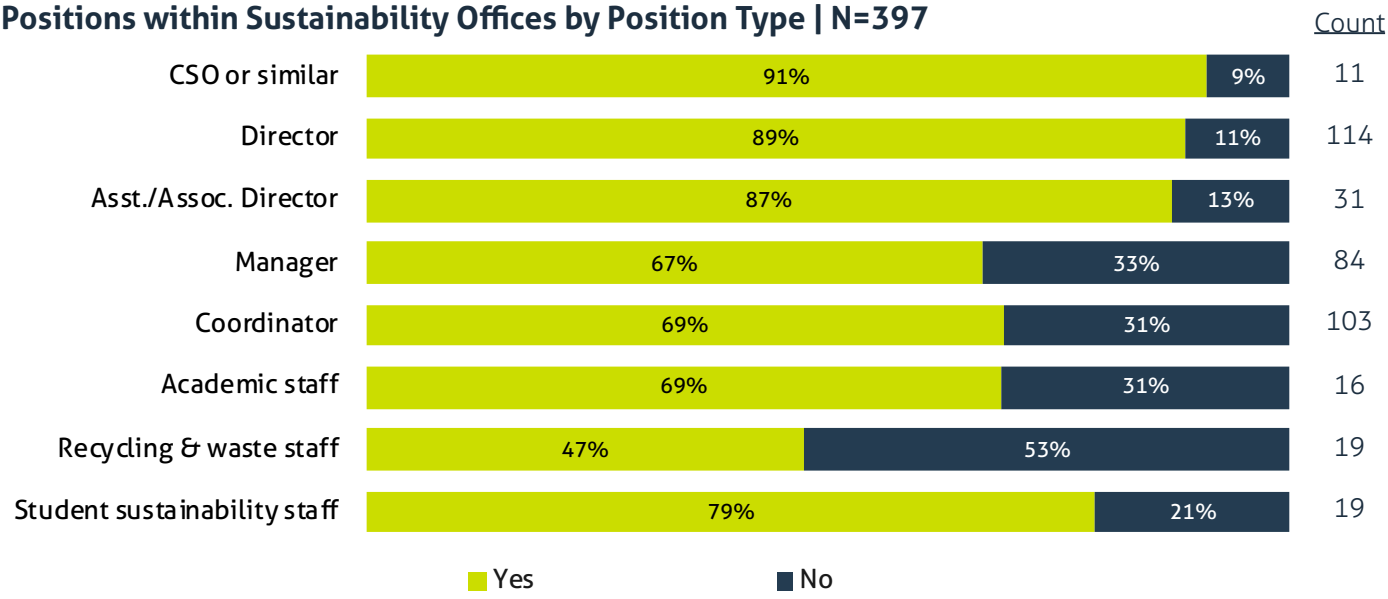
Positions housed in Sustainability Offices

The 2023 survey asked respondents, "Is your position housed in a sustainability office, unit, center, or institute with "sustainability" in its name?" We continue to see a trend toward more sustainability offices over time, with 73% of respondents indicating that their position was housed in an office or unit with sustainability in its name, compared to 68% in 2020, 63% in 2017, and 61% in 2015. By position type, CSOs, Sustainability Directors and Assistant or Associate Directors were most likely to be housed in sustainability offices, while recycling & waste staff positions were much less likely to be housed in sustainability offices.

Positions housed within Sustainability Offices | N=414



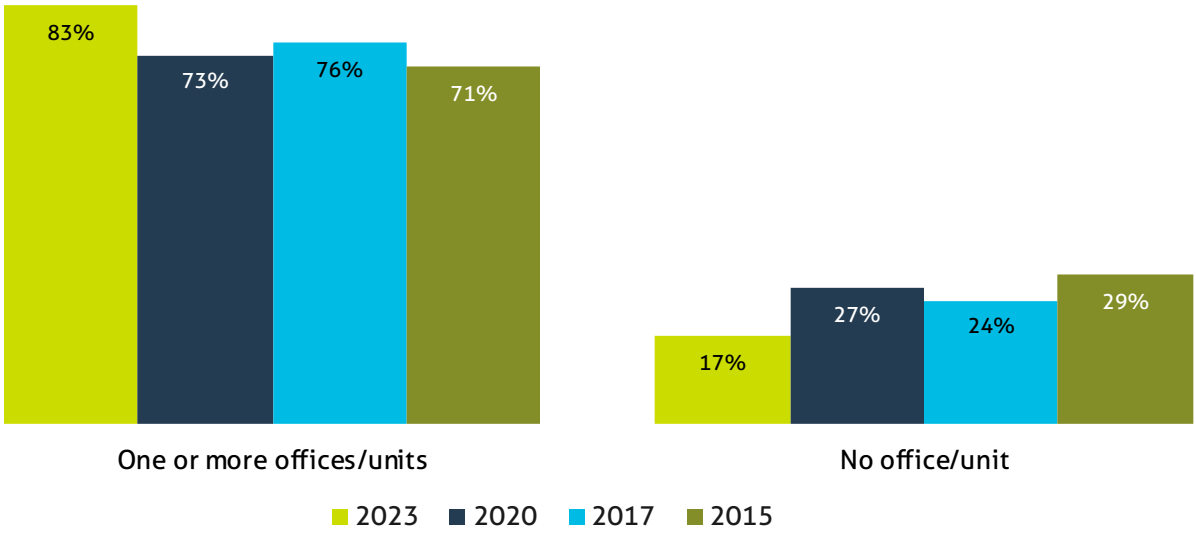
Positions within Sustainability Offices by Position Type | N=397



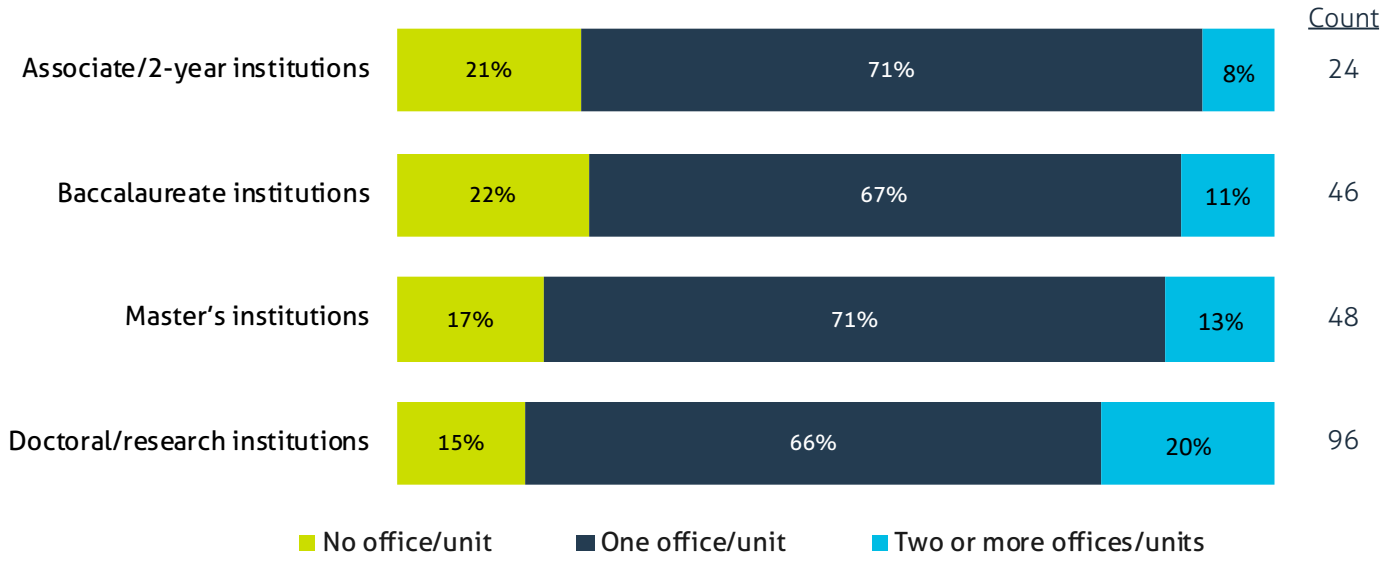
Number of Sustainability Offices

Self-identified sustainability points of contact (one per institution) were asked whether sustainability efforts at their institution/system office were centralized in an office, unit, center, or institute with "sustainability" in its name. Overall, 83% of institutions reported having at least one office, center, or institute with "sustainability" in its name, compared to 73% in 2020, 76% in 2015 and 71% in 2015. Responses were also analyzed based on institution type. Baccalaureate institutions were most likely to have no office, unit, or center with "sustainability" in its name (22% did not), followed by Associate institutions (21%). Doctoral/research institutions were most likely to have two or more offices, units or centers.

Number of Sustainability Offices/Units | N=221



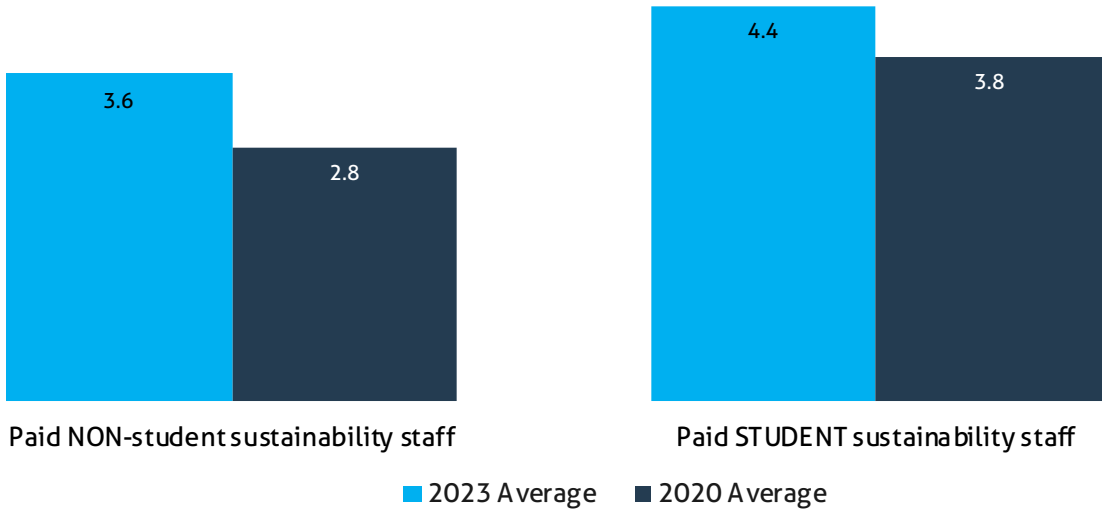
Number of Sustainability Offices/Units by Institution type | N=232



Number of Sustainability Staff

Self-identified sustainability points of contact (one per institution) were asked to indicate the number of paid sustainability staff - both non-student and student. This question was modified in 2020 and is only comparable with those results. The chart below includes averages of total reported student and non-student sustainability staff counts overall. Median amounts were analyzed also, but showed little variation and are not displayed. (The median response for both student and non-student staff was 2 in 2023 and in 2020.) On average, there were 3.6 non-student sustainability staff and 4.4 student staff overall, with significant increases in both areas from 2020 averages.

Average Number of Sustainability Staff | N=220



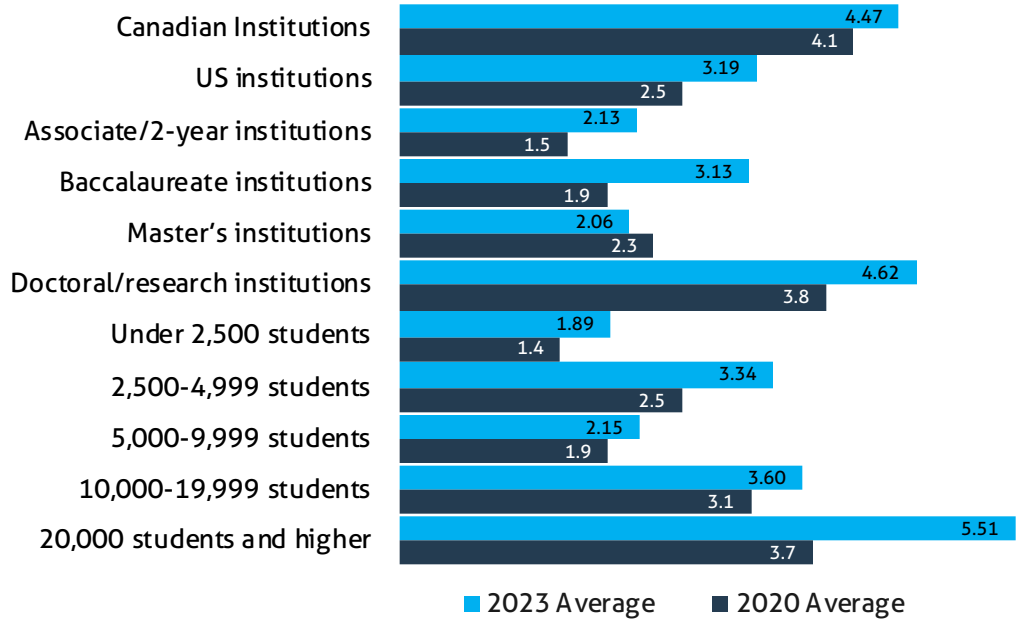


Rice University's Administrative Center for Sustainability & Energy Management staff gather for a photo after a tour of a Materials Recovery Facility in Houston. Photo Credit: Kristianna Bowles

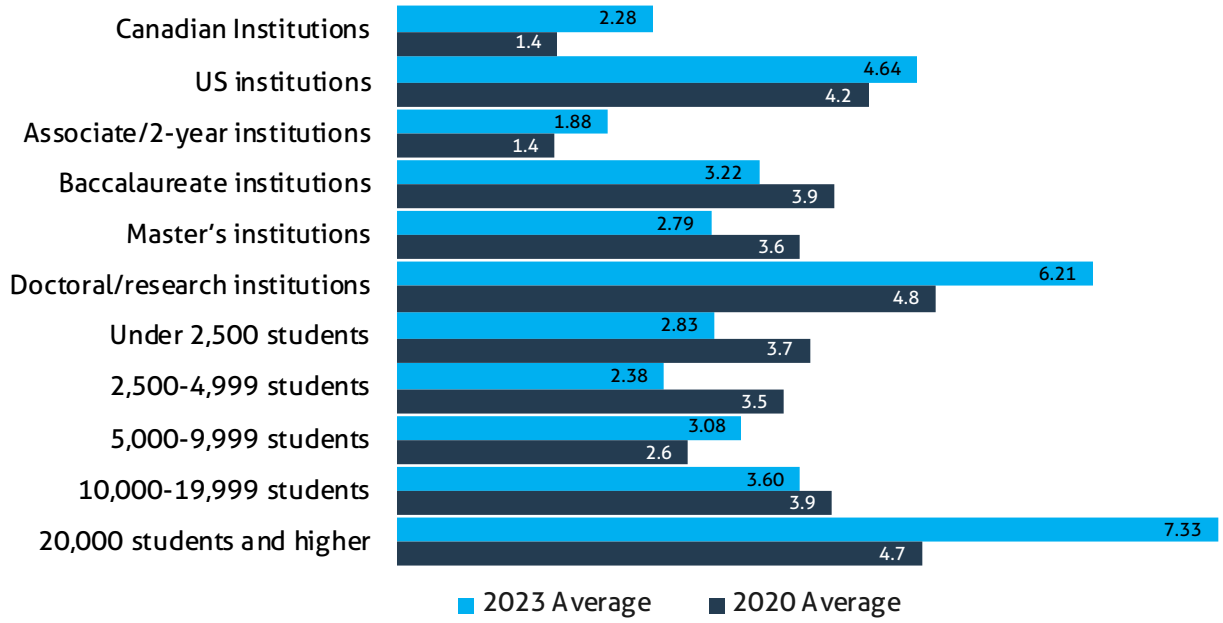
Number of Sustainability Staff

The charts below include averages of total reported student and non-student sustainability staff counts based on country, institution type, and student enrollment. Canadian institutions had more non-student staff and fewer student staff in comparison to US institutions. Doctoral institutions and institutions with over 20,000 students had more student and non-student sustainability staff in comparison to institutions with less research intensity and smaller student FTE.

Average Number of NON-STUDENT Sustainability Staff | N=220



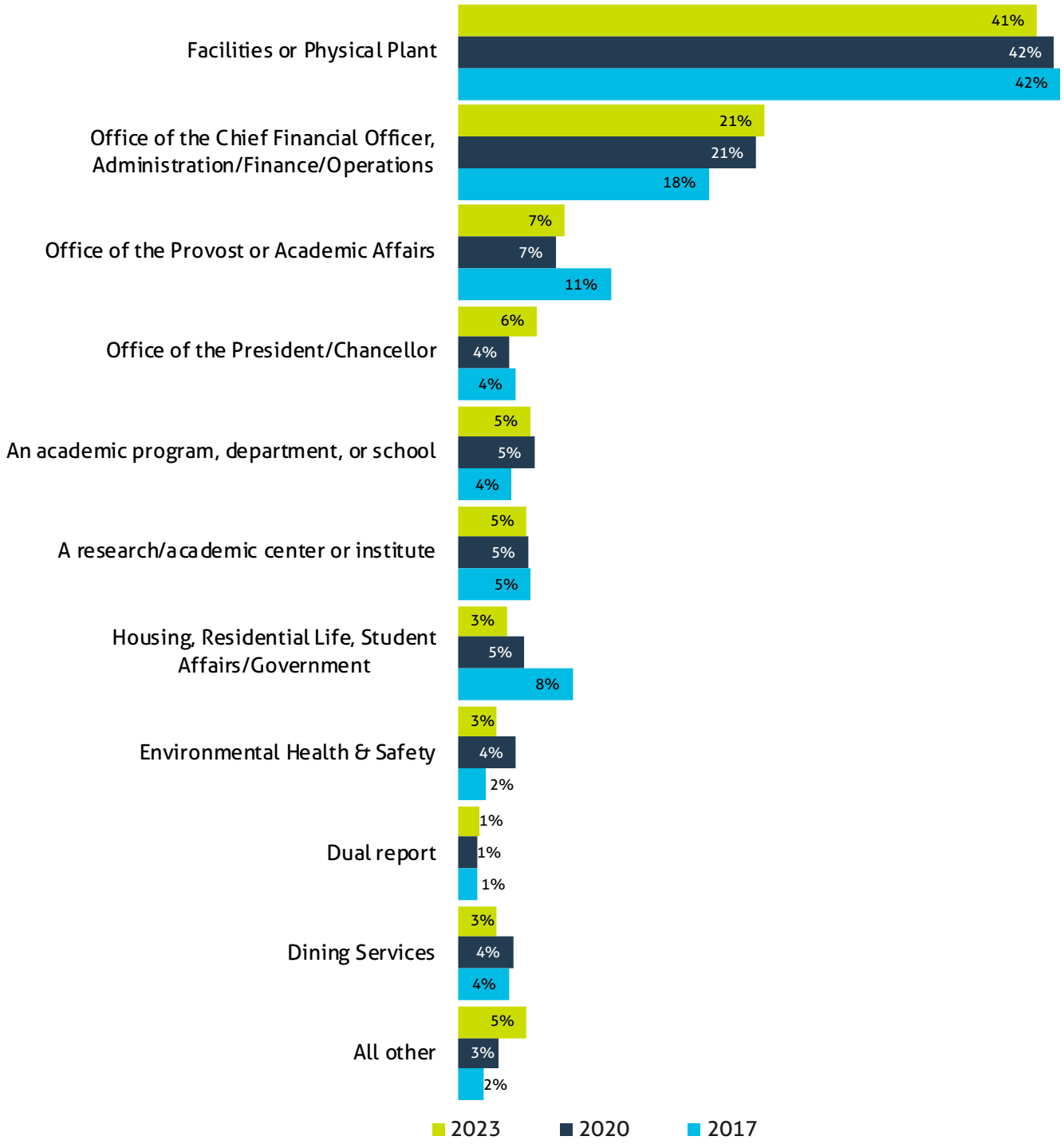
Average Number of STUDENT Sustainability Staff | N=220



Where Position/Office is Housed

Respondents were asked to provide an indication of where their sustainability position, office, and/or unit is housed organizationally. Responses were broadly similar to the 2020 and 2017 results, with a continued slight decline in respondents based in Facilities or Physical Plant. The greatest change occurred for respondents with positions housed in the Office of the President or Chancellor, which increased by two percent since 2020.

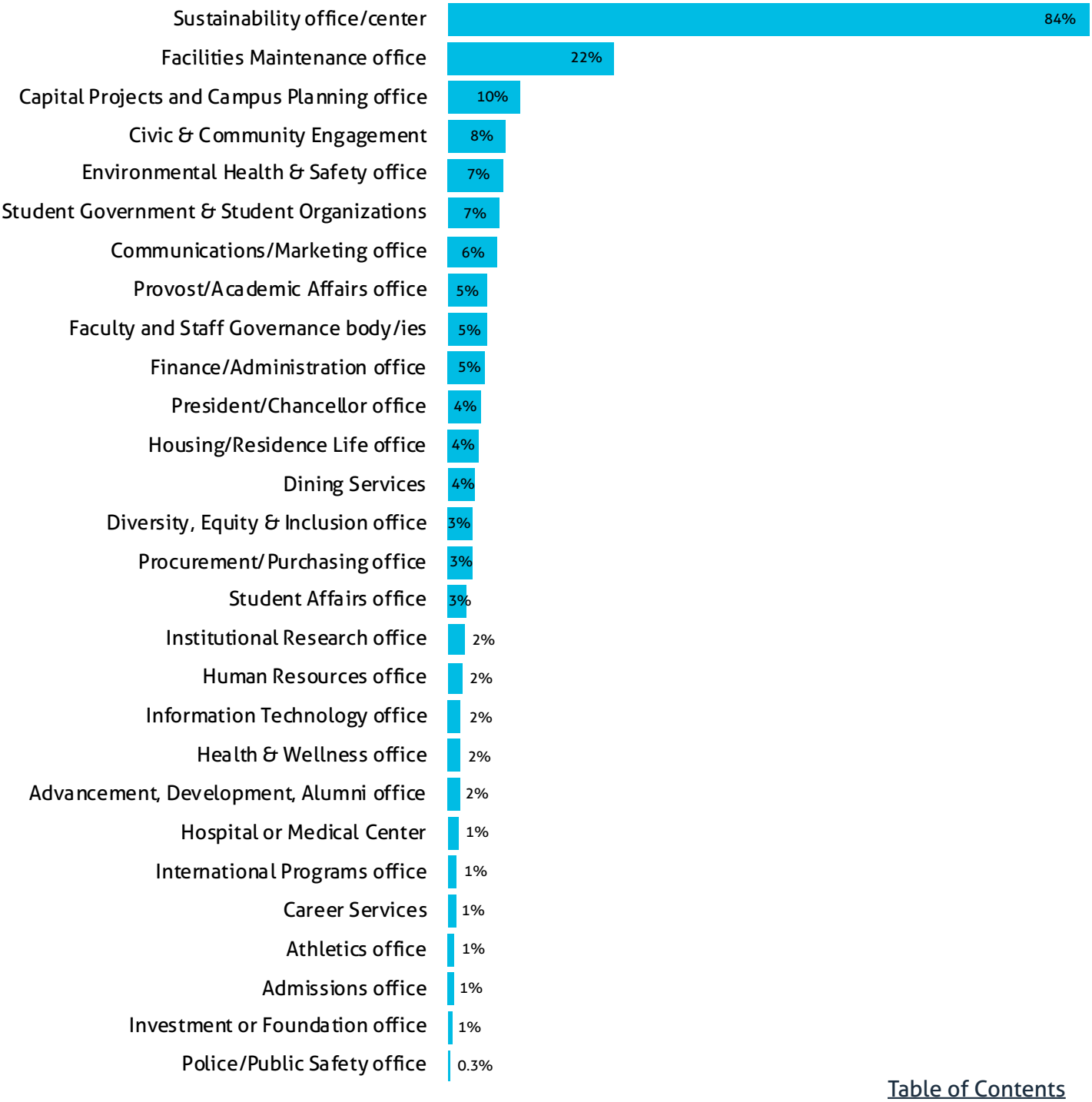
Where Sustainability Positions are Housed | N=414



Level of Responsibility

Respondents were asked about the level of responsibility and engagement with offices, divisions and departments across the institution. A similar question was asked in previous years, but included different weightings, so results are not comparable. As in past surveys, direct responsibility for a sustainability office and/or center was cited most frequently by a significant margin. The next highest categories were facilities and capital projects, where direct responsibility was much less common (21% and 10% respectively).

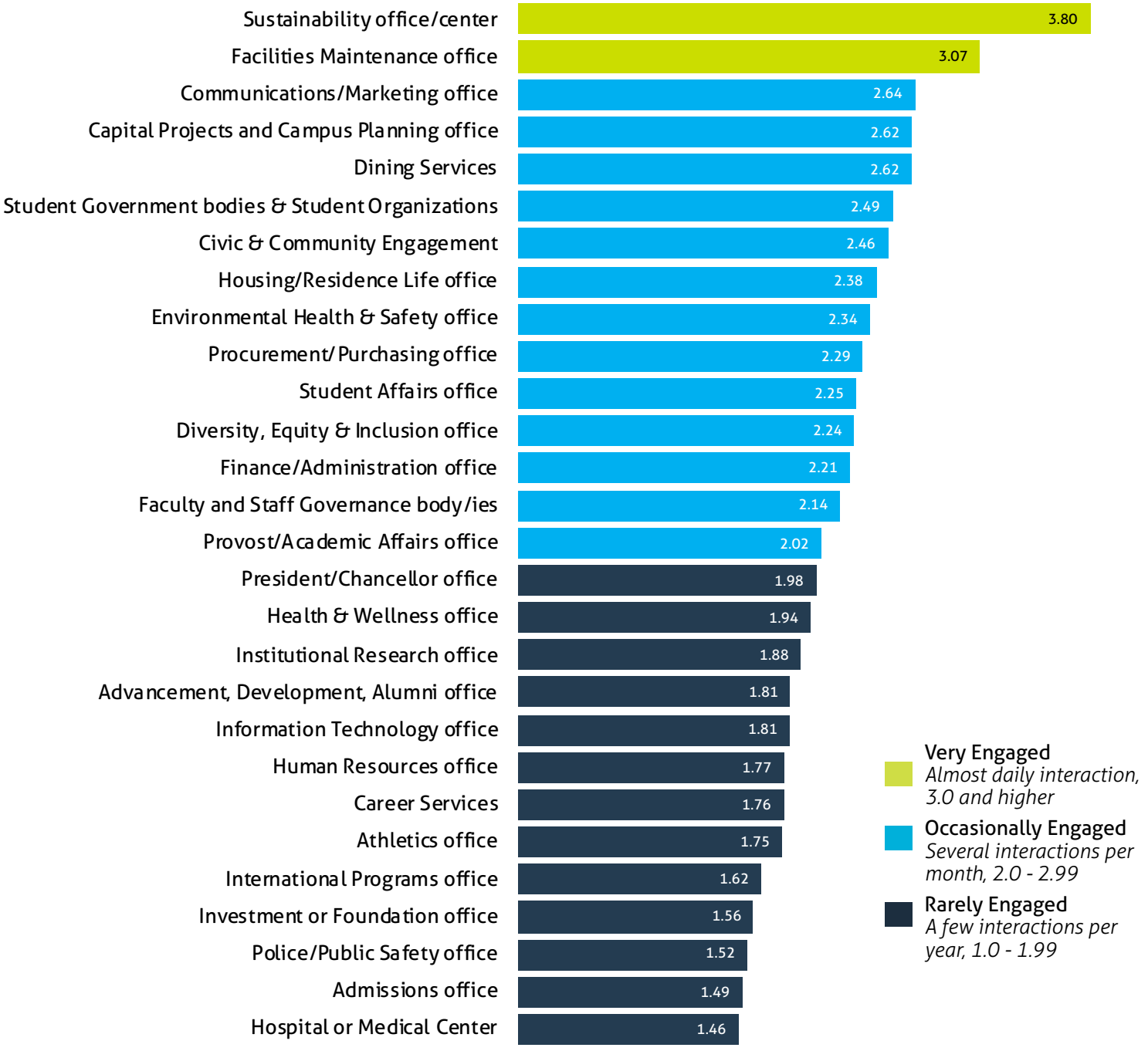
Level of Responsibility | N=410



Level of Campus Engagement

The level of engagement that sustainability positions had with other offices and departments varied extensively and in ways that largely matched past results. Regular engagement with sustainability and facilities offices was cited most frequently. Areas with the least amount of engagement included Hospitals/medical centers, Admissions, and Police/Public Safety. Direct comparison with past results is not possible since weighting options for this question changed in 2023. However, engagement with Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) and similar offices appears to be on the rise, with a 38% of respondents frequently engaging with representatives from such offices in 2023 (about 16% in 2020).

Level of Engagement across Campus, Weighted Average | N=410

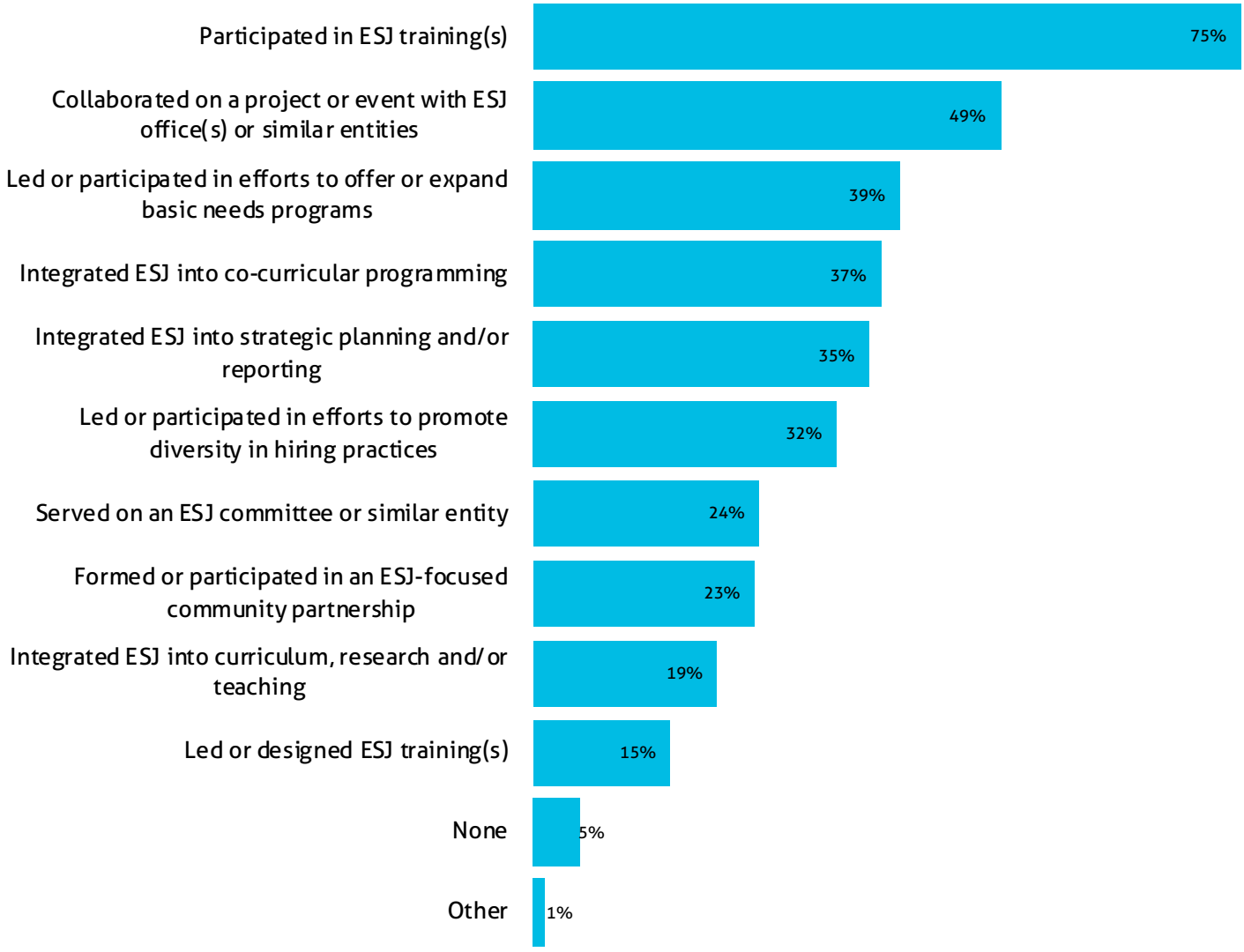


Advancing Equity & Social Justice

A new question asked respondents to indicate how diversity, equity and social justice (RESJ) efforts were incorporated in their sustainability roles in the last three years. Respondents could select one or multiple efforts. These efforts were key themes identified in the 2020 survey, which asked a similar question in a free response format. 2020 and 2023 results are not comparable due to these format changes.

Participation in RESJ training was the most common effort identified by respondents (75%), followed by collaboration with an RESJ or similar office (nearly 50%). Thirty-nine percent of respondents led or participated in efforts to expand basic needs programs, and 37% worked on integrating ESJ into co-curricular programming. About 5% of respondents did not participate in ESJ efforts.

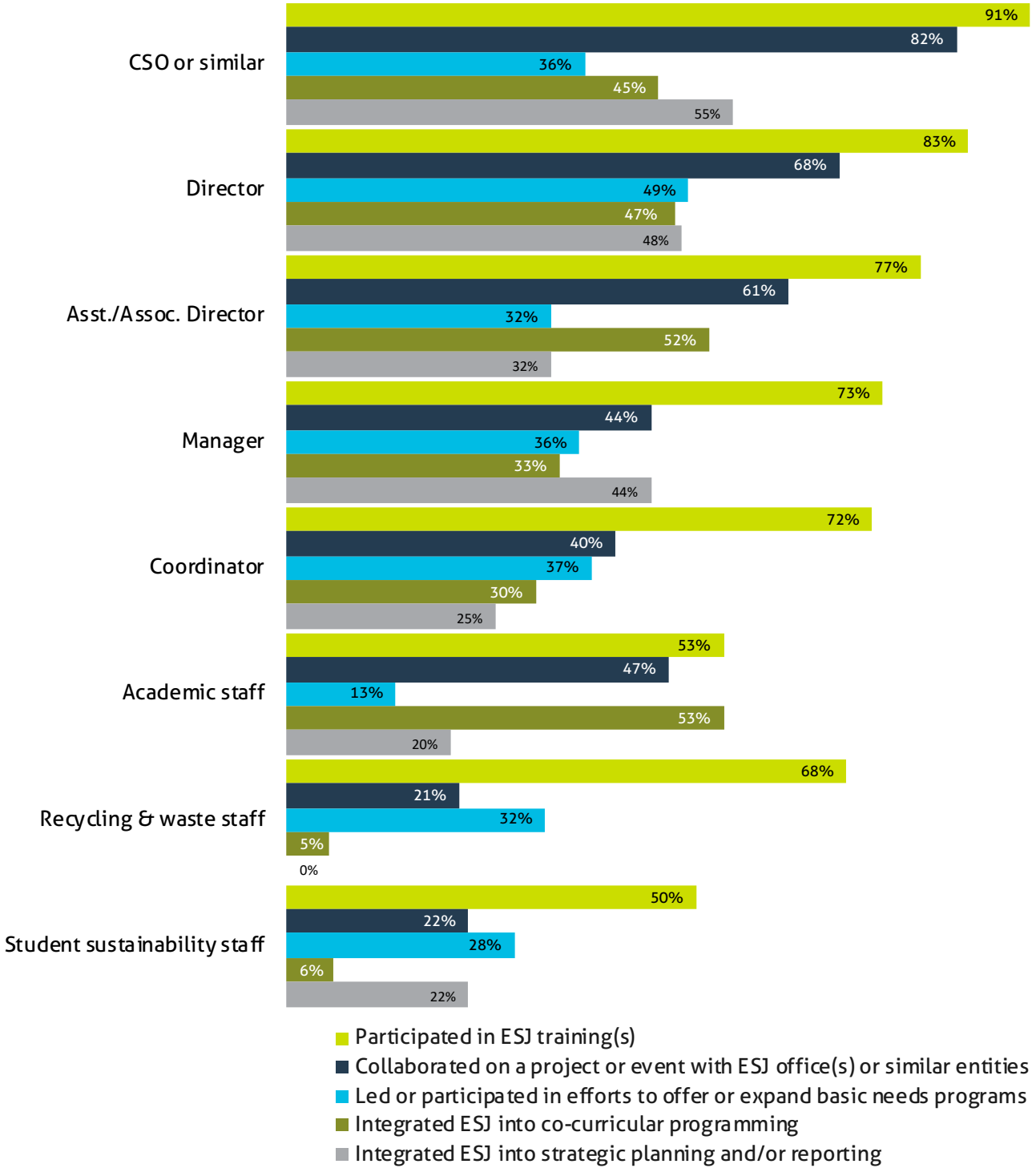
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Efforts | N=406



Advancing Equity & Social Justice

For the 5 most common RESJ efforts, responses were analyzed by position type. RESJ training was more prevalent among sustainability staff positions compared to academic staff, recycling & waste staff, and student sustainability staff. Integrating RESJ into strategic planning was particularly prevalent among CSO positions (55%) and Director positions (48%).

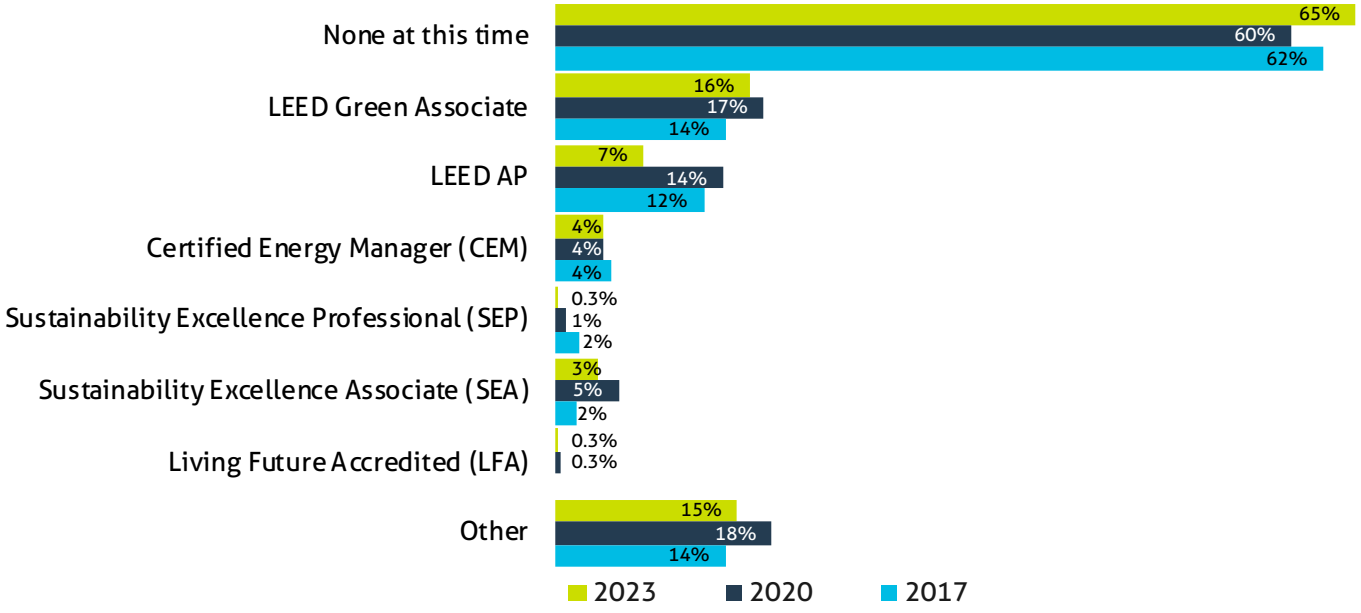
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Efforts by Position Type| N=391



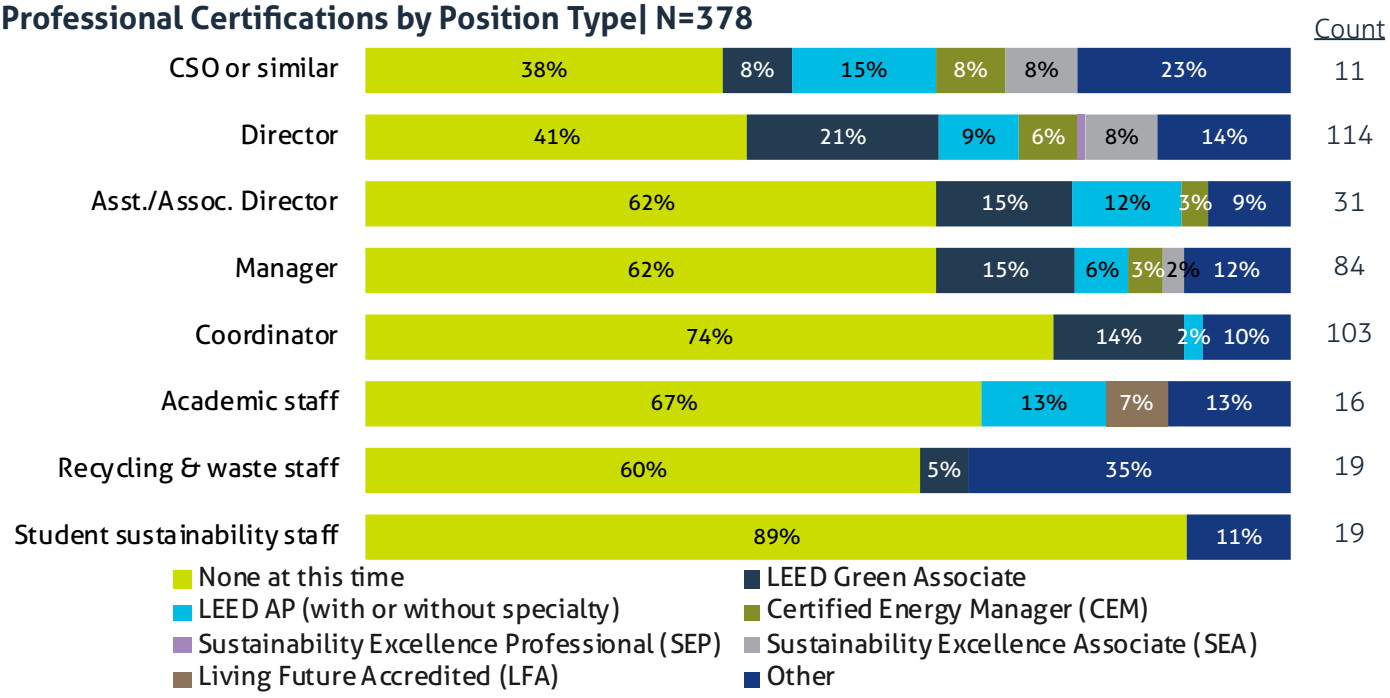
Professional Certifications

Respondents were asked which accreditations or certifications they held, and could select from a list of more common certifications or identify others. The majority of respondents did not have any certifications, and the rate of respondents with certifications was lower for most certifications than in past years. By position type, CSOs, Sustainability Directors, and recycling & waste staff were most likely to hold a certification. Common responses for "other certifications" included TRUE Zero Waste certification, American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), and Professional Engineer (PE).

Professional Certifications | N=392



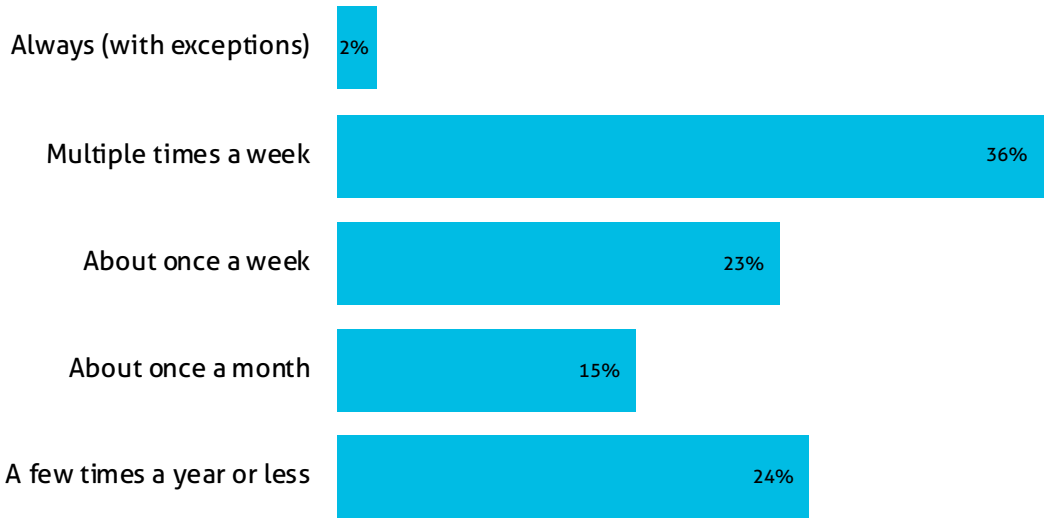
Professional Certifications by Position Type| N=378



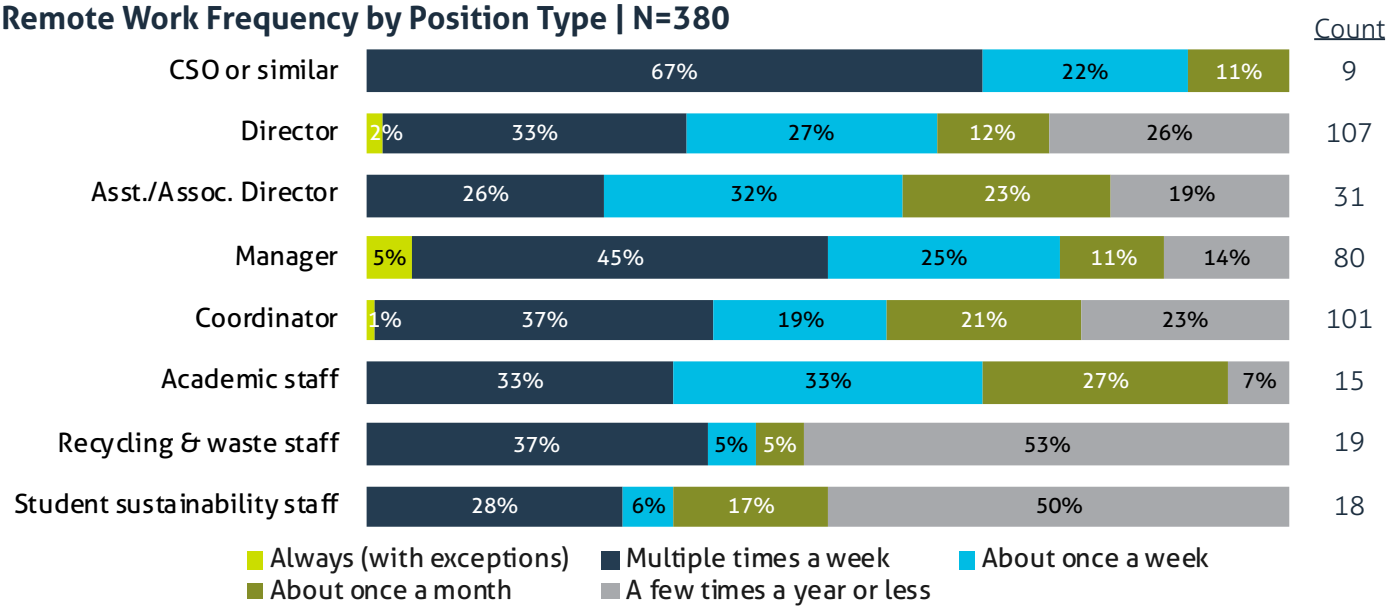
Remote Work

A new question was asked in 2023: "How frequently do you work remotely (e.g., from a home office)?". While only two percent of respondents almost always work remotely, the most common response was "Working remotely multiple times per week" (36%). Nearly a quarter of respondents indicated that they work remotely "a few times a year or less". By position type, CSO respondents seemed to have the most flexibility to work remotely, with two-thirds working remotely a few times per week. Fifty-three percent of recycling & waste staff and 50% of student sustainability workers worked almost exclusively on-site.

Remote Work Frequency | N=394



Remote Work Frequency by Position Type | N=380



Salary & Benefits

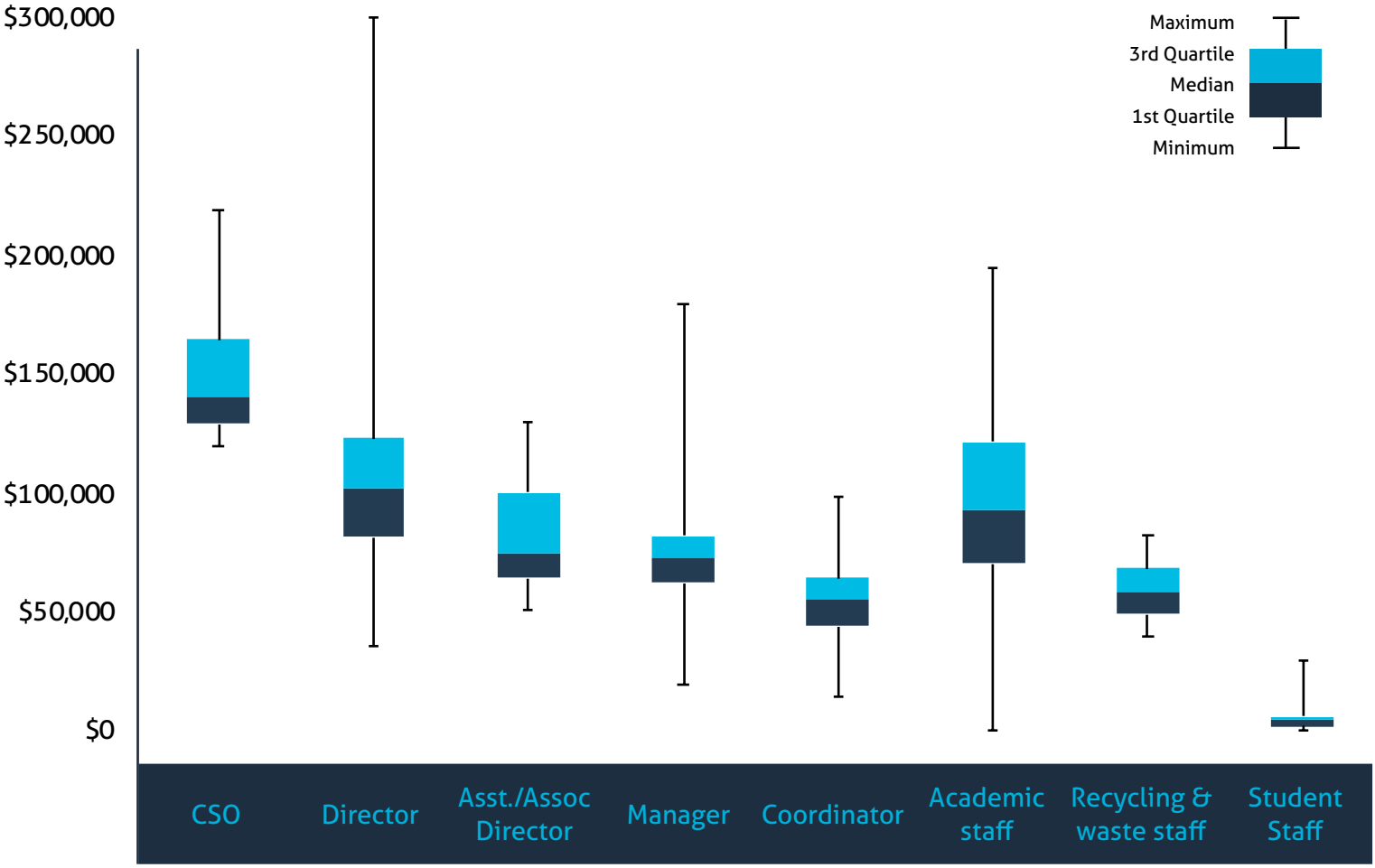


Arizona State University staff from the Zero Waste department, Environmental Health and Safety, and University Sustainability Practices gather under the shade of the Power Parasol solar array.
Photo credit: Emmanuel Padilla

Salary Data

The box and whisker plot below summarizes the salary range and salary quartiles for each position type, while the table below provides details. As expected, CSO positions had the highest median salary ($141,000) while student sustainability staff, which are typically employed part-time, had the lowest median salary ($5,500). Low outliers represent part-time salaries - part-time & hourly workers were asked to enter the amount they would earn annually based on the number of hours they were working.

Salary Range & Percentiles by Position Type | N=394

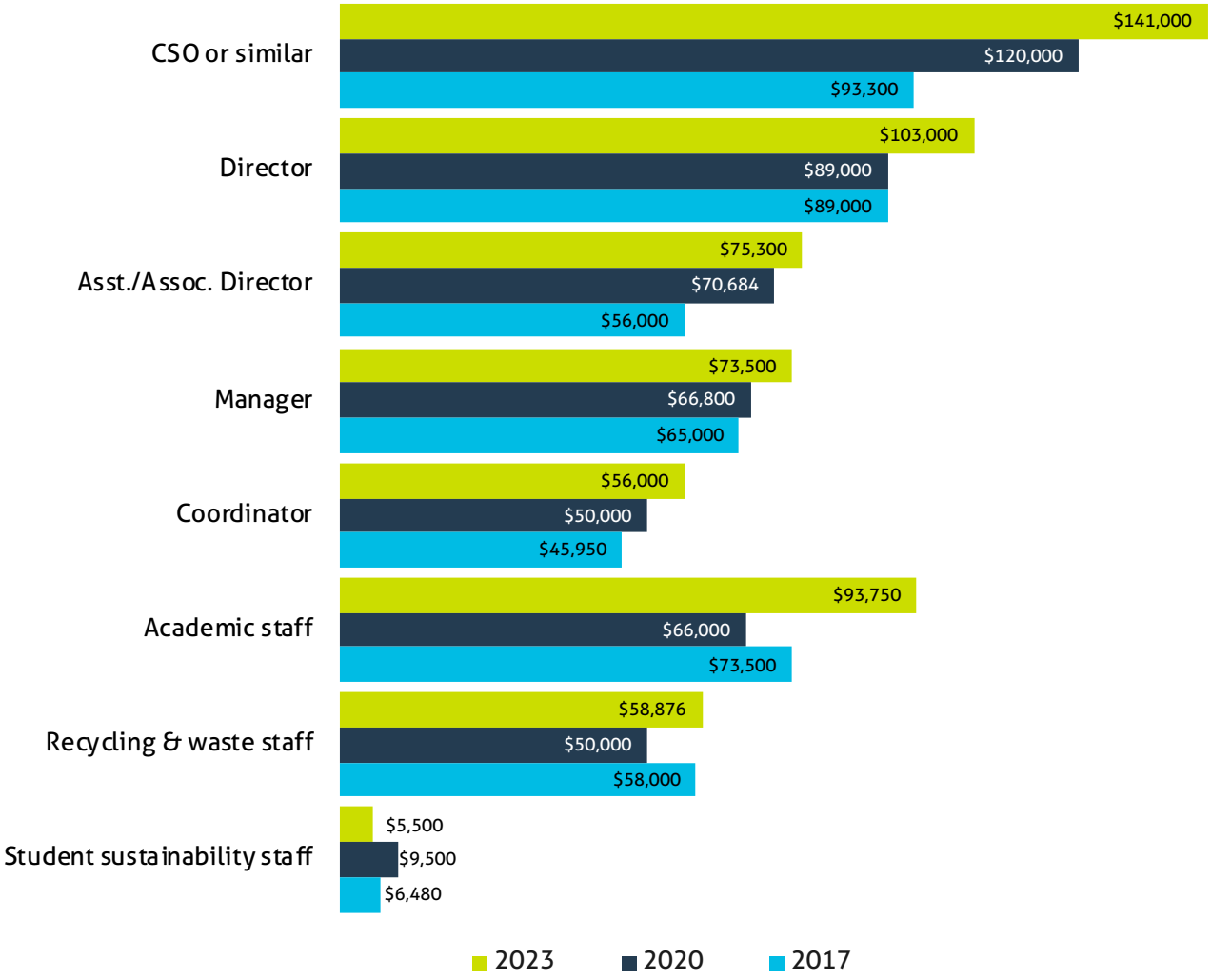


	CSO	Director	Asst./Assoc Director	Manager	Coordinator	Academic staff	Recycling & waste staff	Student Staff
Count	10	114	31	84	103	16	19	17
Minimum	$120,000	$36,000	$51,500	$20,000	$15,000	$1,200	$40,298	$1,362
1st Quartile	$129,775	$82,000	$65,150	$62,926	$44,537	$71,000	$49,810	$2,610
Median	$141,000	$103,000	$75,300	$73,500	$56,000	$93,750	$58,876	$5,500
3rd Quartile	$165,324	$123,488	$101,000	$82,625	$65,000	$122,114	$69,000	$6,825
Maximum	$219,000	$300,000	$130,000	$180,000	$99,420	$195,000	$82,500	$30,000

Salaries across Multiple Surveys

Comparison of 2023 salary data with 2020 and 2017 salary data shows an incremental increase in median salaries overall and across virtually all position types. On average across all positions, salaries increased by 14.5% since 2020 and by 24% since 2017. This increase may in part be the result of rising inflation and cost of living. Because this is not a longitudinal survey, comparisons over time for certain positions should be interpreted cautiously.

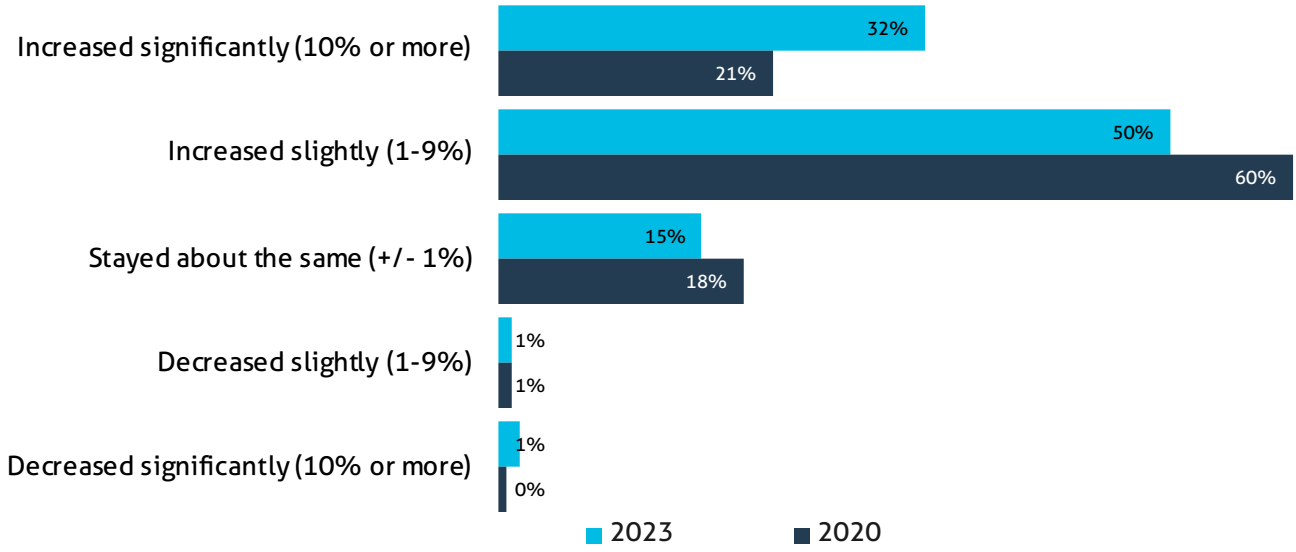
Median Salaries across Multiple Surveys | N=394



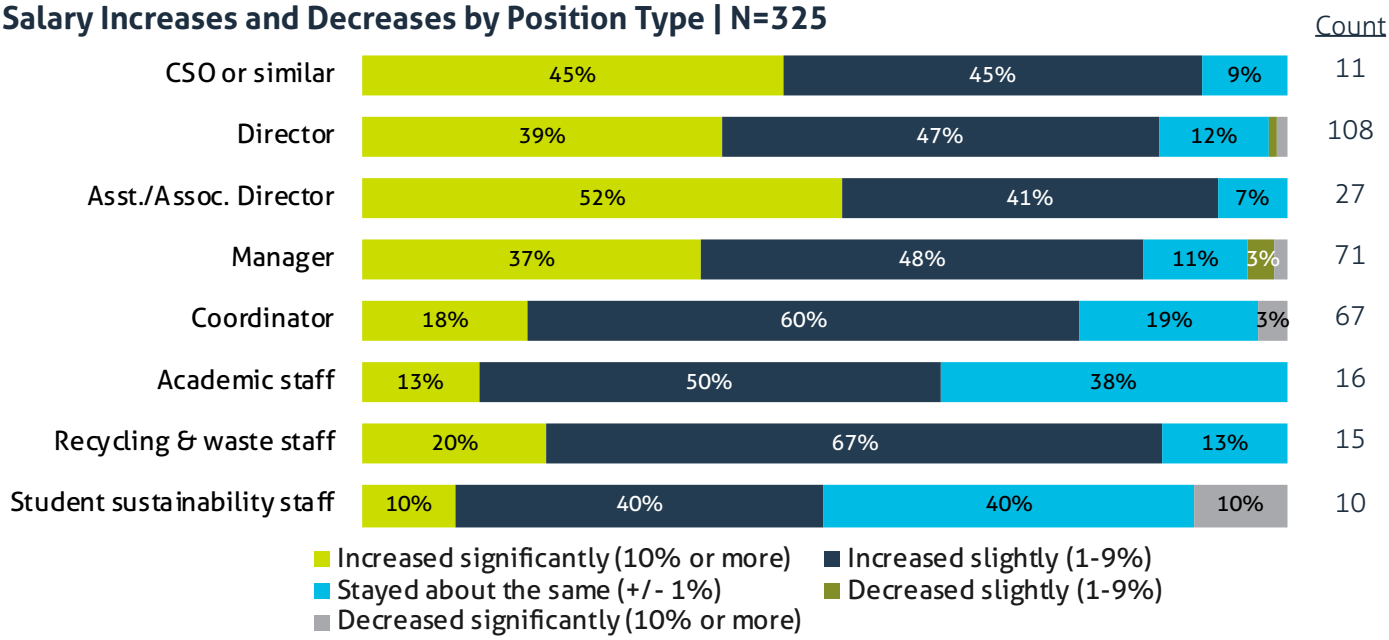
Salary Change in Last 3 Years

A question introduced in the 2020 survey asked respondents to indicate whether their salaries increased, decreased, or stayed the same since the previous staffing survey three years prior. Eighty-two percent of respondents indicated that their salary increased slightly or significantly over the last three years, while 15% indicated that there was minimal change. In comparison to 2020 results, "significant" increases were 11% more prevalent. For about two percent of respondents, salaries decreased slightly or significantly. Reasons for salary decreases included switching to different positions or adjustments due to budget cuts. Reasons for salary increases included merit increases, cost of living increases, and promotions. Changes in salary over time varied by position type. Positions where salary increases were more prevalent included those of CSO or similar, Assistant or Associate Director, and recycling/waste staff. Academic staff and student sustainability staff positions most frequently experienced salary decreases.

Salary Increases and Decreases | N=341



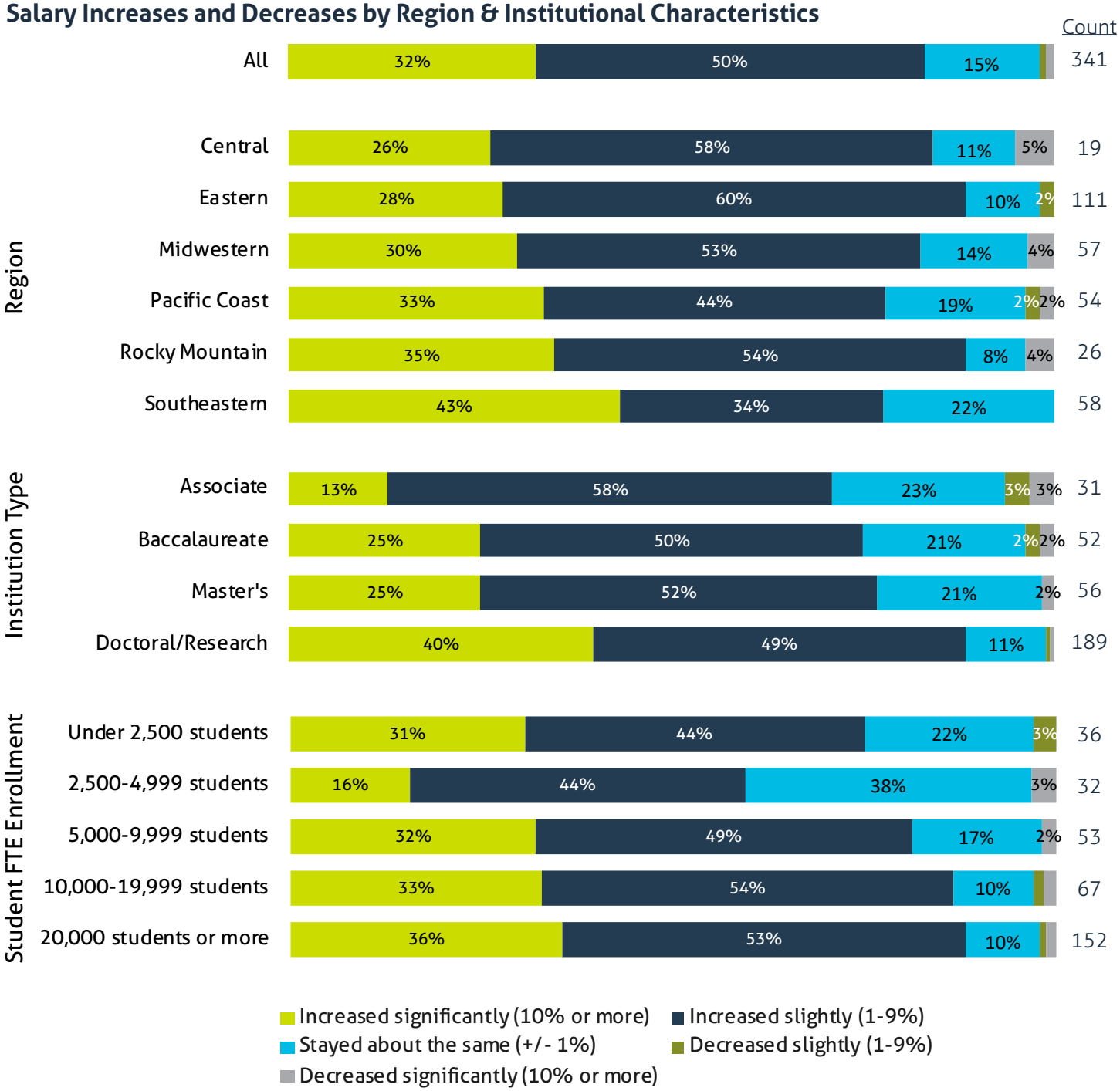
Salary Increases and Decreases by Position Type | N=325



Salary Change in Last 3 Years

Salary changes based on characteristics such as region, institution type and enrollment size were also analyzed. Significant increases in salary were more common for respondents in the Southeastern region (43%), among Doctoral/research institutions (40%), and amonginstitutions with 20K students or more (36%). Significant increases were least common at associate institutions and those with 2,500-4999 student FTE.

Salary Increases and Decreases by Region & Institutional Characteristics

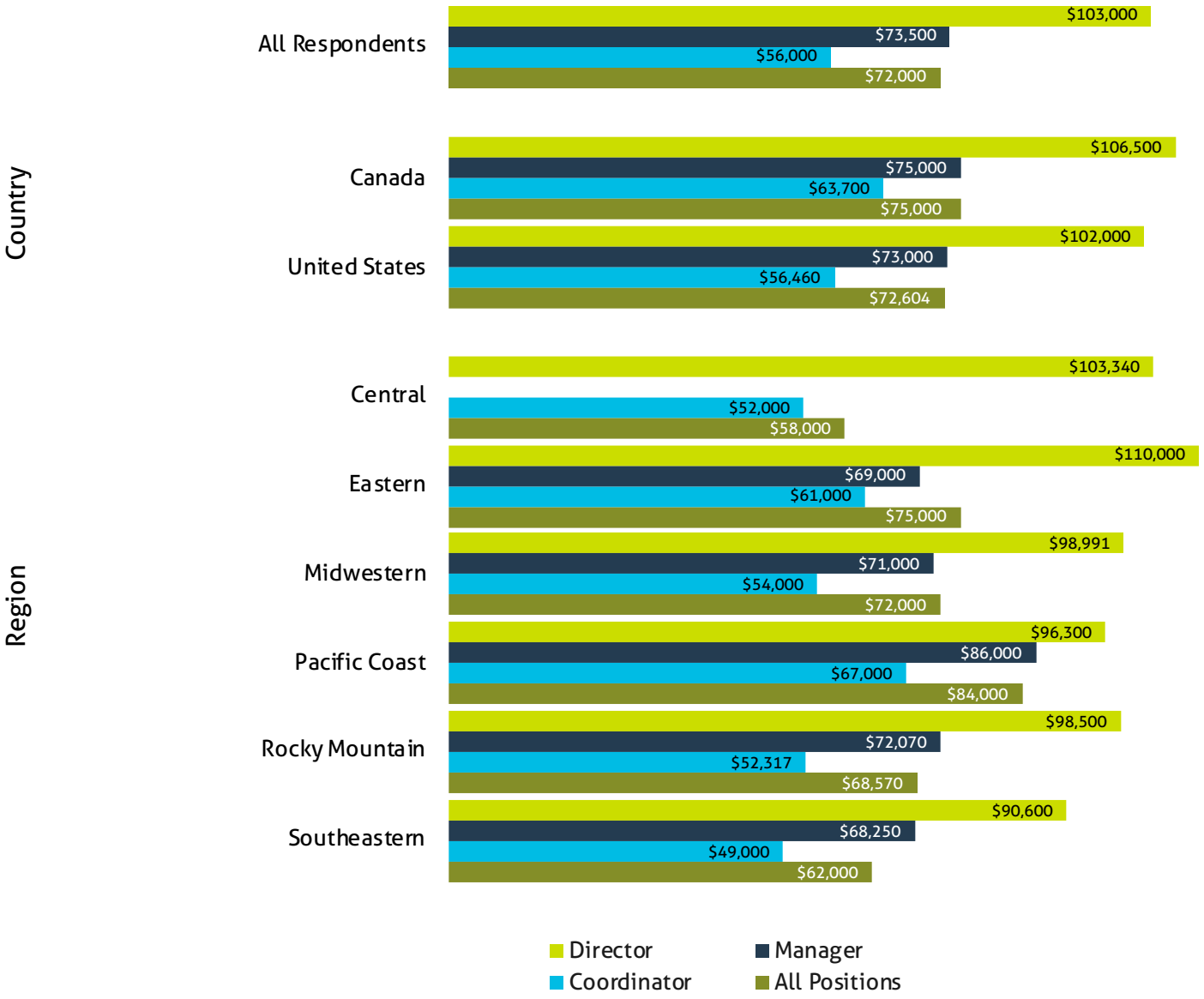


Salary by Institutional Characteristics

Median salaries were analyzed based on institutional characteristics, including country where institution is located, North American region, institution type and institution size. The table below includes salaries for the more common position types (Sustainability Director, Sustainability Manager, Sustainability Coordinator) as well as for All Positions. Due to low response rates, results are not included for respondents outside of the U.S. and Canada, respondents working at institutional system offices, and those representing multiple institution types (e.g., higher education sustainability consultants).

Salaries were slightly higher among Canadian respondents than US respondents, and were notably lower among respondents in the Central and Southeast regions.

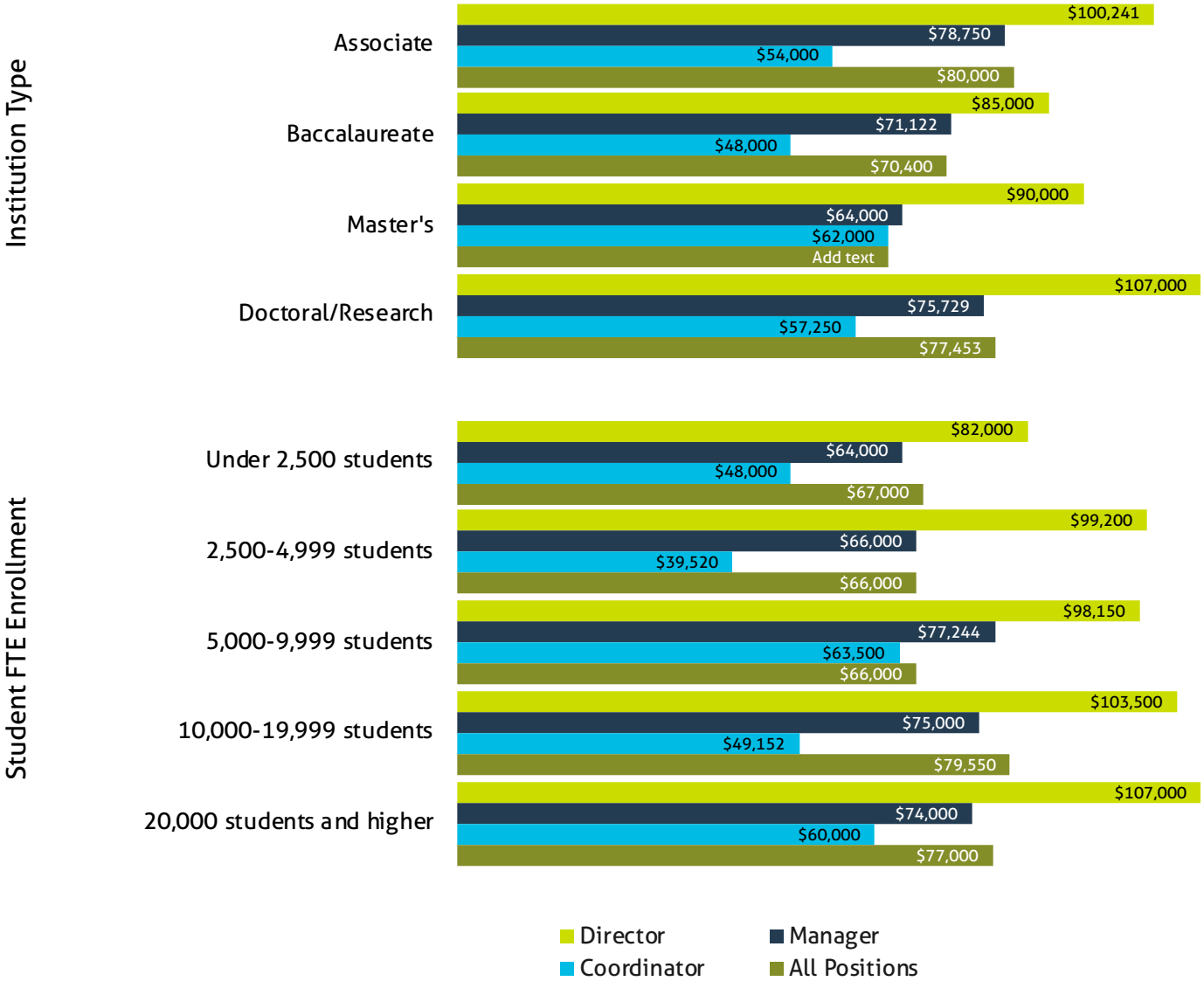
Median Salaries by Institutional Characteristics | N=412



Salary by Institutional Characteristics

Salaries were higher for positions at Doctoral and Associate institutions, and somewhat lower at Baccalaureate and Master's institutions (similar trends were found in the 2020 analysis). Salaries were higher for larger institutions, particularly those with 10,000 or more enrolled students.

Median Salaries by Institutional Characteristics | N=412

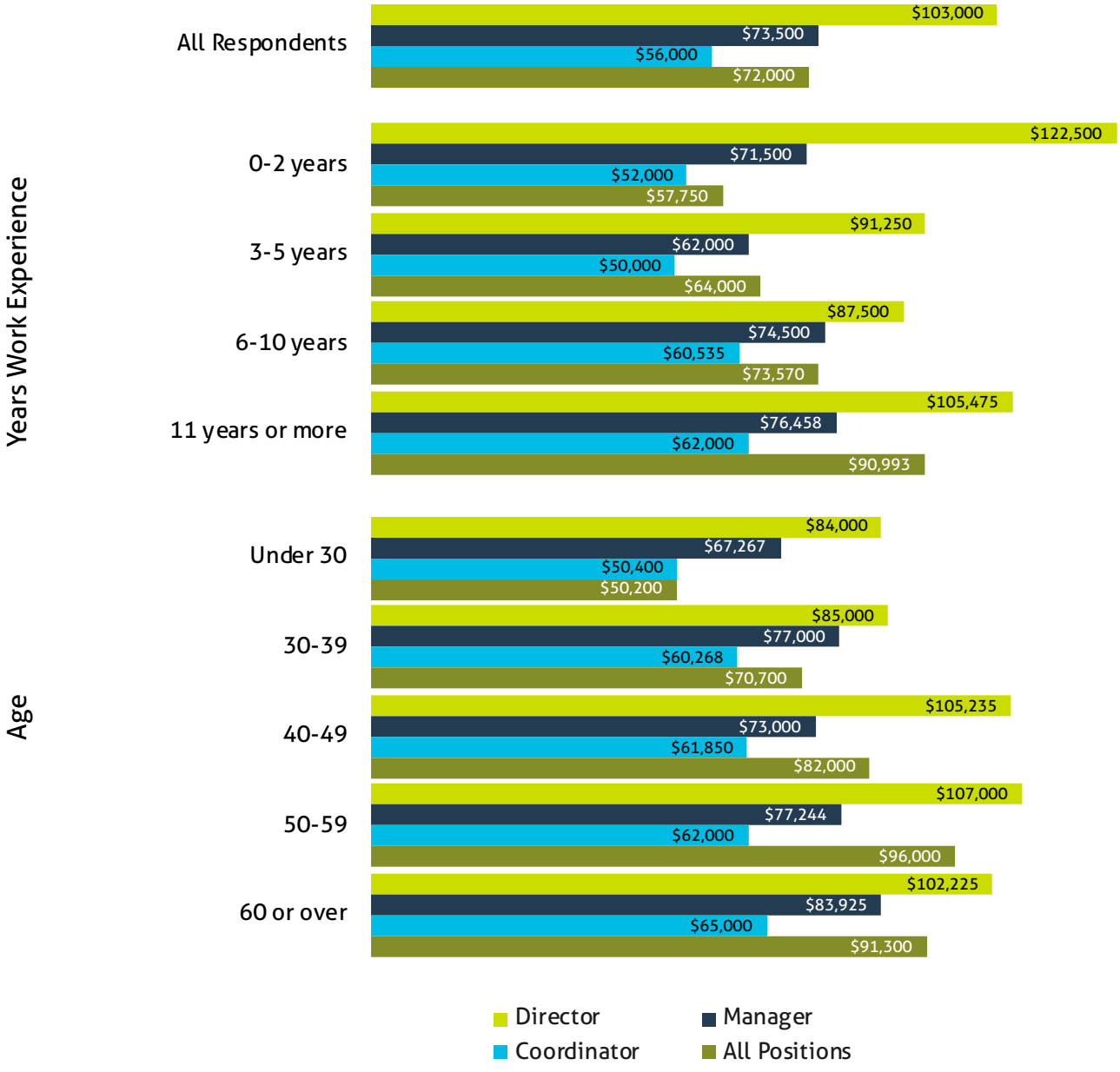


Salary by Individual Characteristics

Median salaries were analyzed based on individual characteristics, including years worked in higher education sustainability, age category, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, and education level. The charts below includes salaries for the more common position types (Sustainability Director, Sustainability Manager, Sustainability Coordinator) as well as for All Positions. Responses for gender identities other than male/female, and for most racial/ethnic categories were too low for independent analysis. Other gender identities were excluded, and races/ethnicities other than White were reported in aggregate.

Median salaries increased with years worked, though there was a surprisingly high median salary for Directors with less than two years of higher education sustainability experience. Median salaries by age also tended to trend upward, peaking at the 50-59 age category.

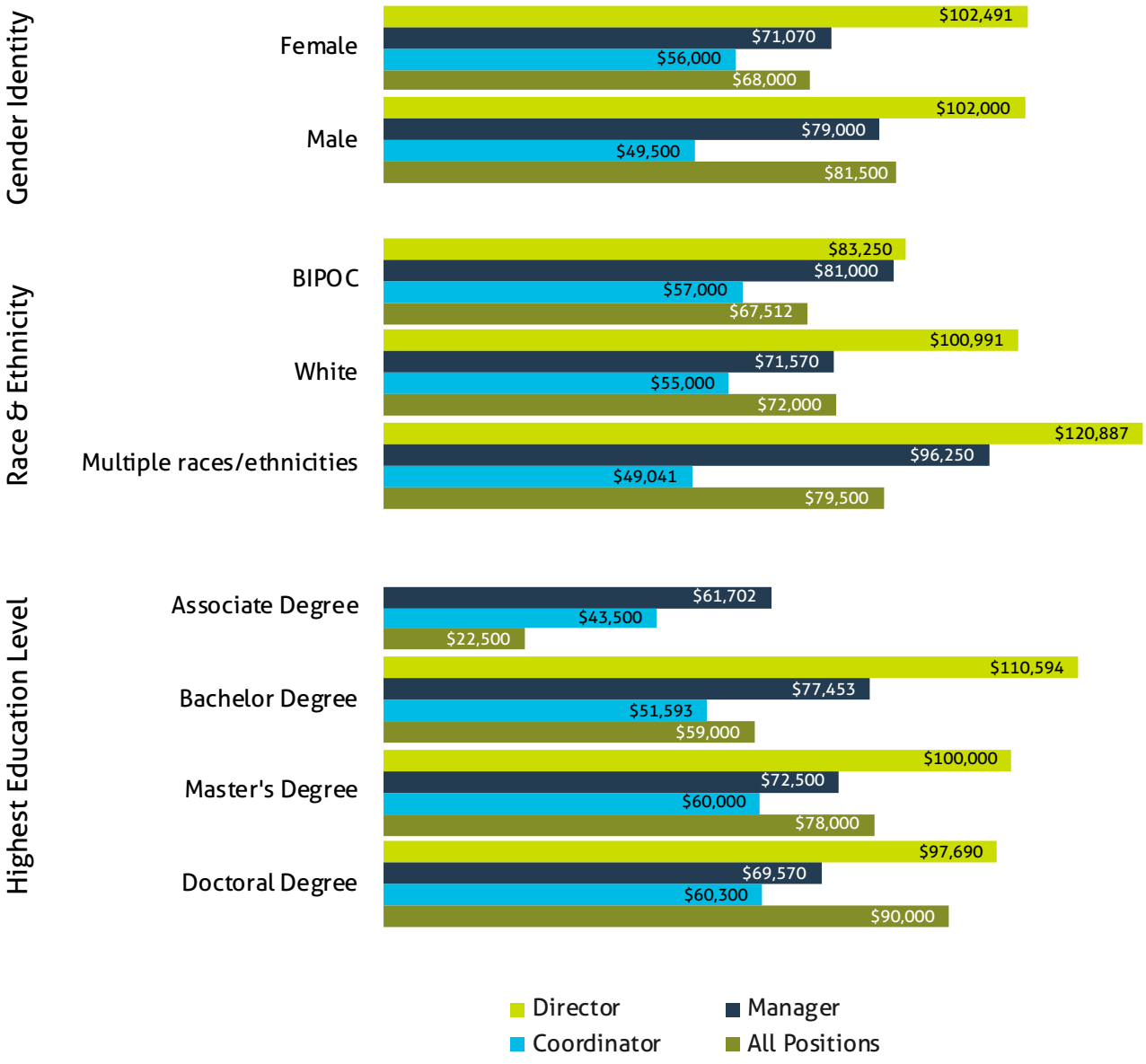
Median Salaries by Individual Characteristics | N=412



Salary by Individual Characteristics

By gender identity, salaries across all positions were higher for those identifying as male, with females earning 83 cents to the dollar compared to male counterparts. However, in Director and Coordinator roles, respondents identifying as female earned more than their male counterparts. This is the first time that females earned more than males at the Director level. In terms of race and ethnicity, results varied by position type, with respondents of multiple races/ethnicities earning highest across all positions. BIPOC respondents earned more than other respondents at the Coordinator level, but they earned less than other respondents at the Director level. In terms of education level, respondents earning at least a Bachelor degree had higher average salaries than those earning an Associate degree. There was less differentiation for respondents earning Master degrees or PhDs.

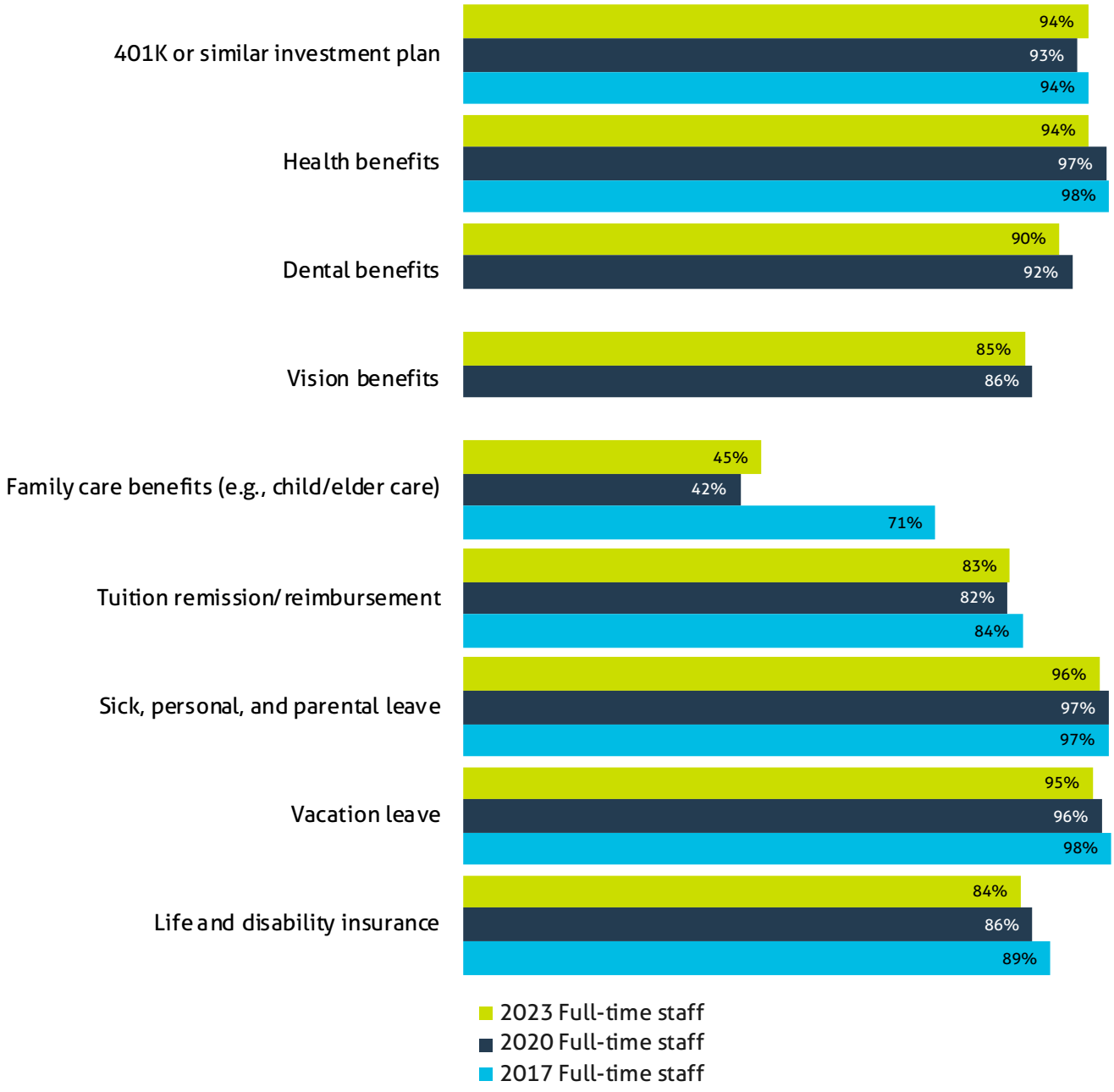
Median Salaries by Individual Characteristics | N=412



Employee Benefits

The 2023 staffing survey asked about the types of employee benefits that respondents receive through their sustainability positions. Dental and vision benefits were added in 2020. Responses varied significantly based on full-time versus part-time status and are presented separately. The vast majority of full-time respondents (over 90%) receive retirement, health insurance, dental insurance, sick leave, and vacation benefits. Fewer than half of full-time respondents received family care benefits.

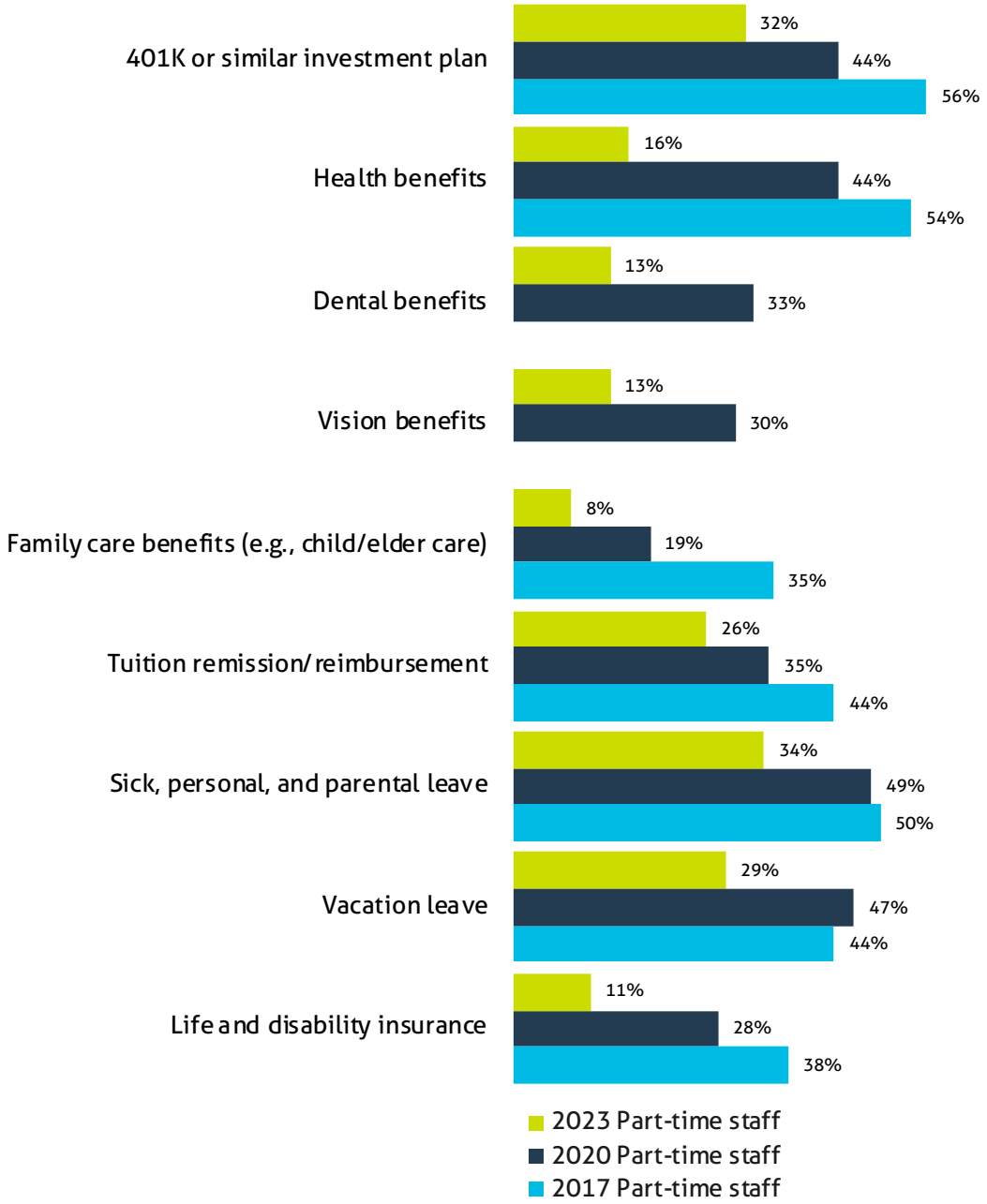
Full-time Employee Benefits | N=378



Employee Benefits

For part-time respondents, benefits were offered to fewer than half of respondents across all categories. While the relatively small sample size for part-time respondents should be noted, the apparent significant drop in overall benefits between 2023 and 2020 is concerning, especially considering healthcare impacts due to COVID since 2020.

Part-time Employee Benefits | N=38



Budgets & Funding

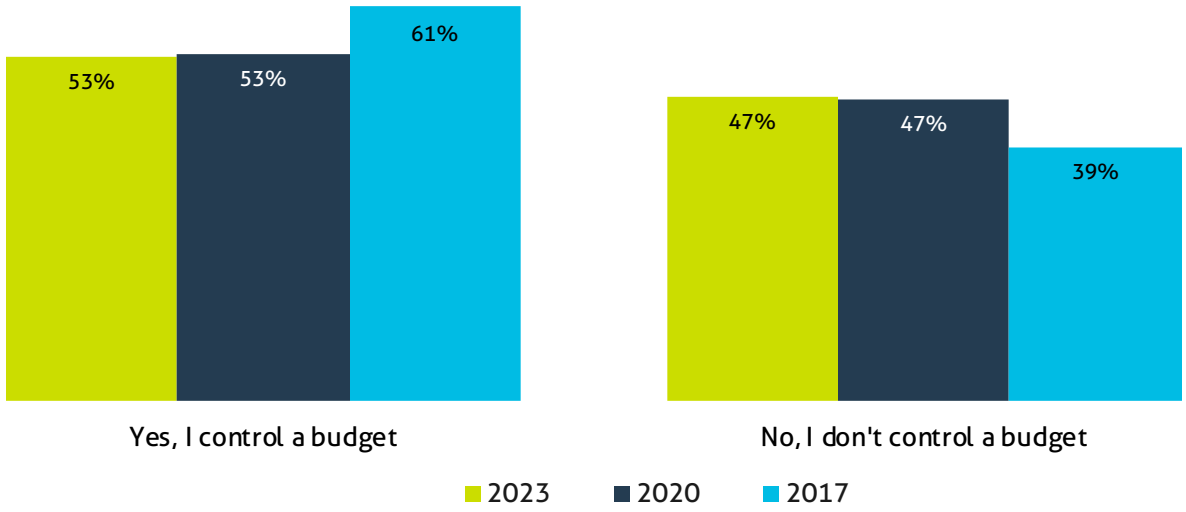


University of Southern California student interns and Office of Sustainability staff members celebrate the end of the school year at the USC Peace Garden. Photo credit: University of Southern California

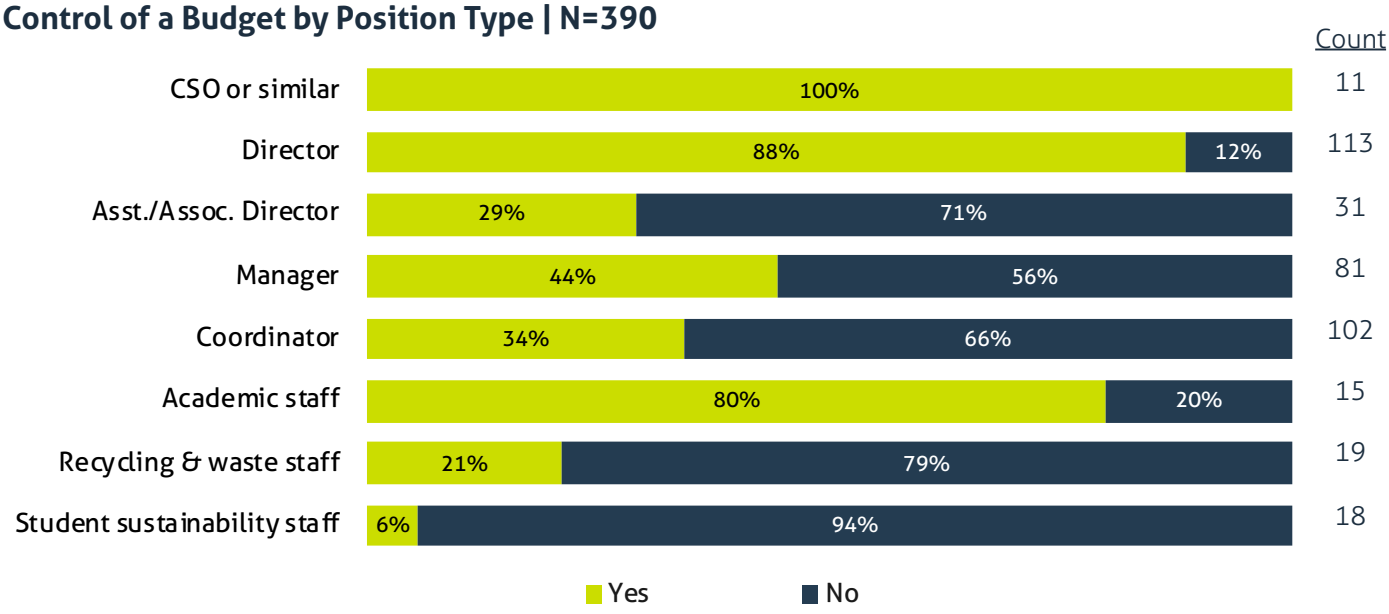
Control of a Budget

Similar to 2020 responses, 53% of respondents indicated that they personally control a budget in their sustainability positions. CSOs were most likely to control a budget (100%), followed by Sustainability Directors (88%), and academic staff (80%).

Control of a Budget | N=405



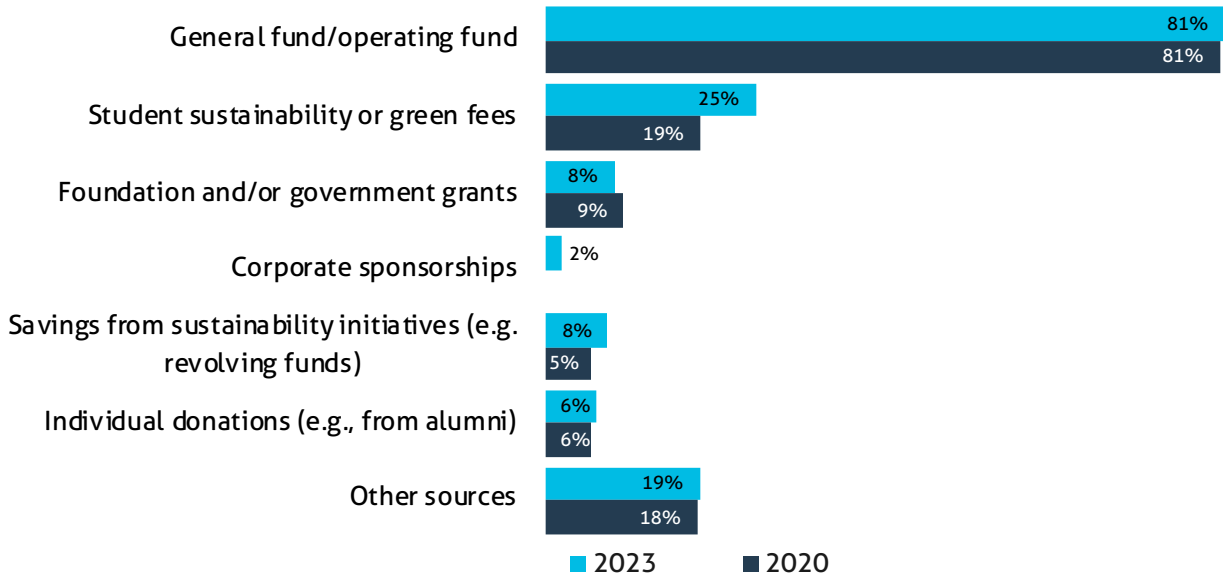
Control of a Budget by Position Type | N=390



Sources of Funding

Respondents indicating "Yes" to personally controlling a budget were asked a series of follow-up questions related to their budgets. One of these questions asked, about the percentage of TOTAL annual operating budget from various sources, and listed six potential fund source categories. This question was revised in 2020, and a new answer option ("corporate sponsorship") was added in 2023. The majority of funding came from institutions' general/operating funds. Funding from student fees increased from 19% in 2020 to 25% in 2023.

Sources of Funding by Average Percentage | N=201





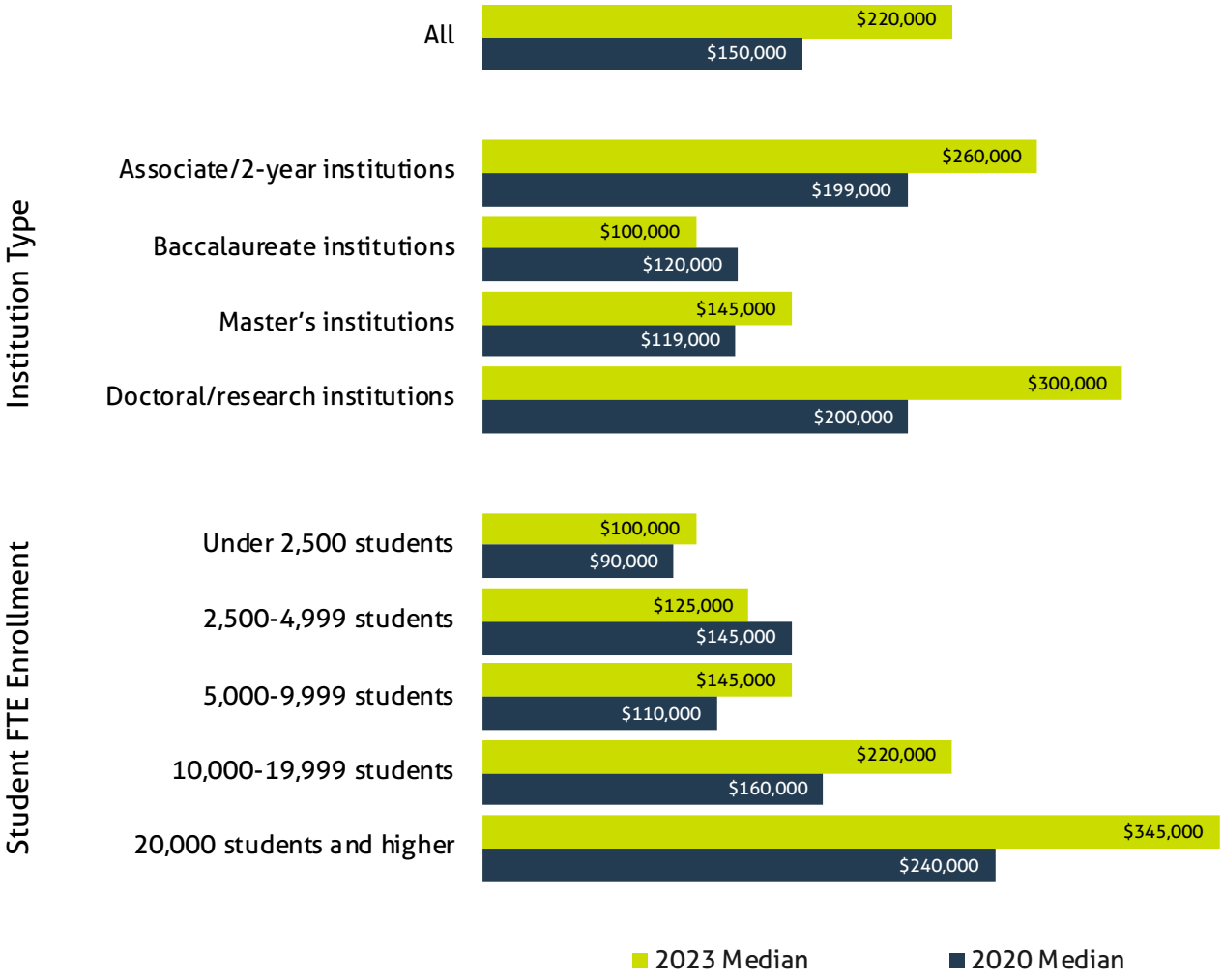
The Central Michigan University Sustainability team participated in a Peace Flag raising in Spring 2023. Photo credit: Central Michigan University

Sustainability Budgets

Respondents indicating that they controlled a budget were asked a series of questions related to the size of their total annual budgets and the breakdown for staffing, programming, discretionary expenses, and training. These questions were reformatted in 2020, so 2023 results are comparable to that year only.

Findings were most informative when filtered by all respondents, institution type and student enrollment size. For total annual budgets, median responses are presented below (average results were higher as a result of some outliers). Overall, median sustainability budgets increased across most institution categories as compared to 2020, and rose significantly among 2-year, doctoral institutions, and institutions with 10,000 student FTE or more.

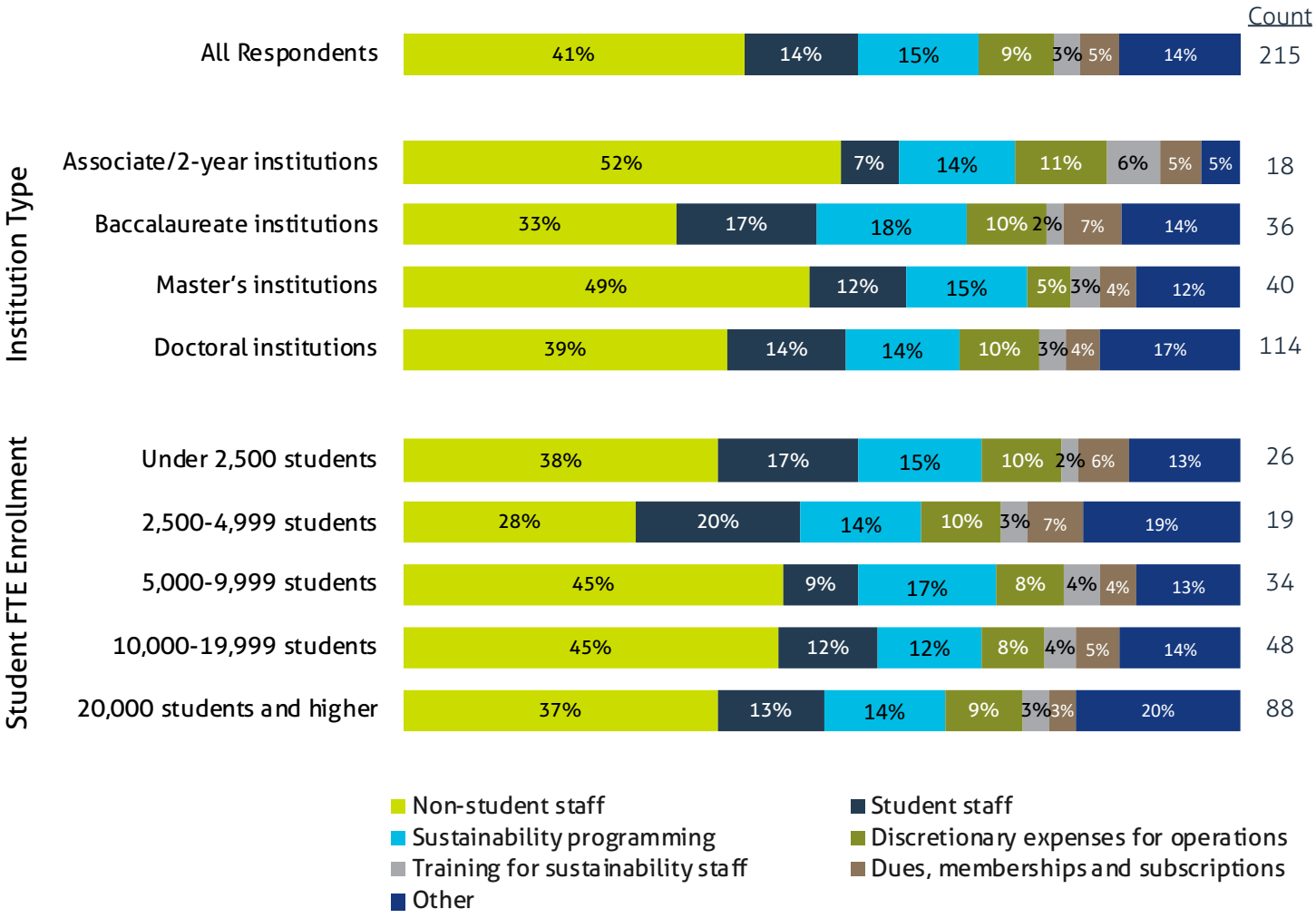
Median Total Annual Budget by Institution Type | N=241



Sustainability Budgets

The question on operating budget allocation percentages is presented based on averages, as it was not subject to significant data outliers. Budget allocation varied based on institution type and enrollment size. Budgets for student staff covered a somewhat greater proportion among smaller institutions (less than 5,000 student FTE) and baccalaureate institutions.

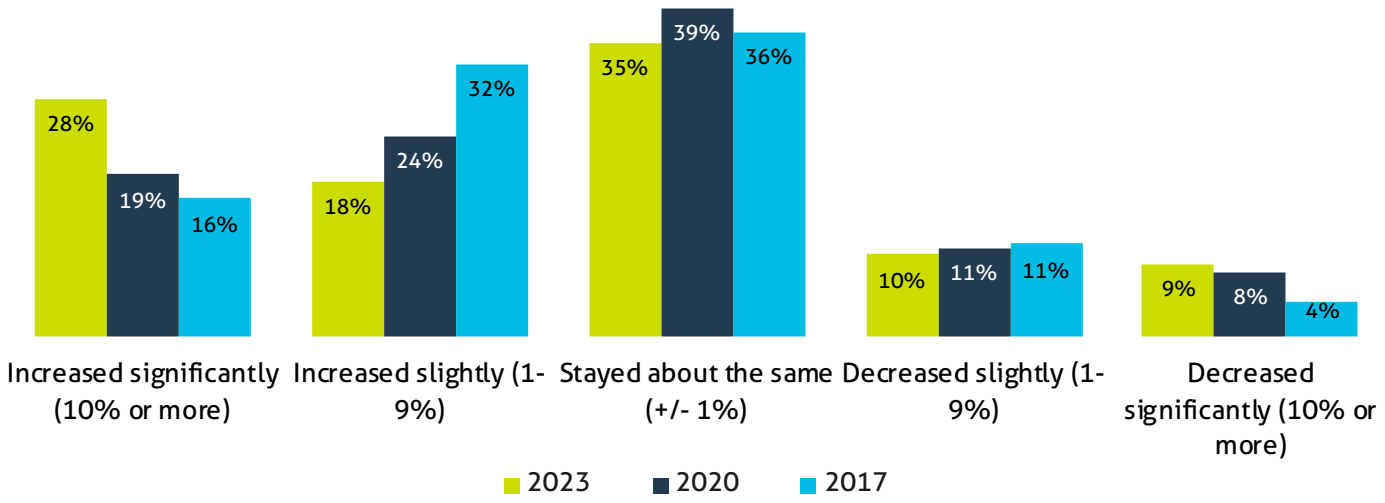
Average Budget Allocation by Institution Type and Student Enrollment | N=215



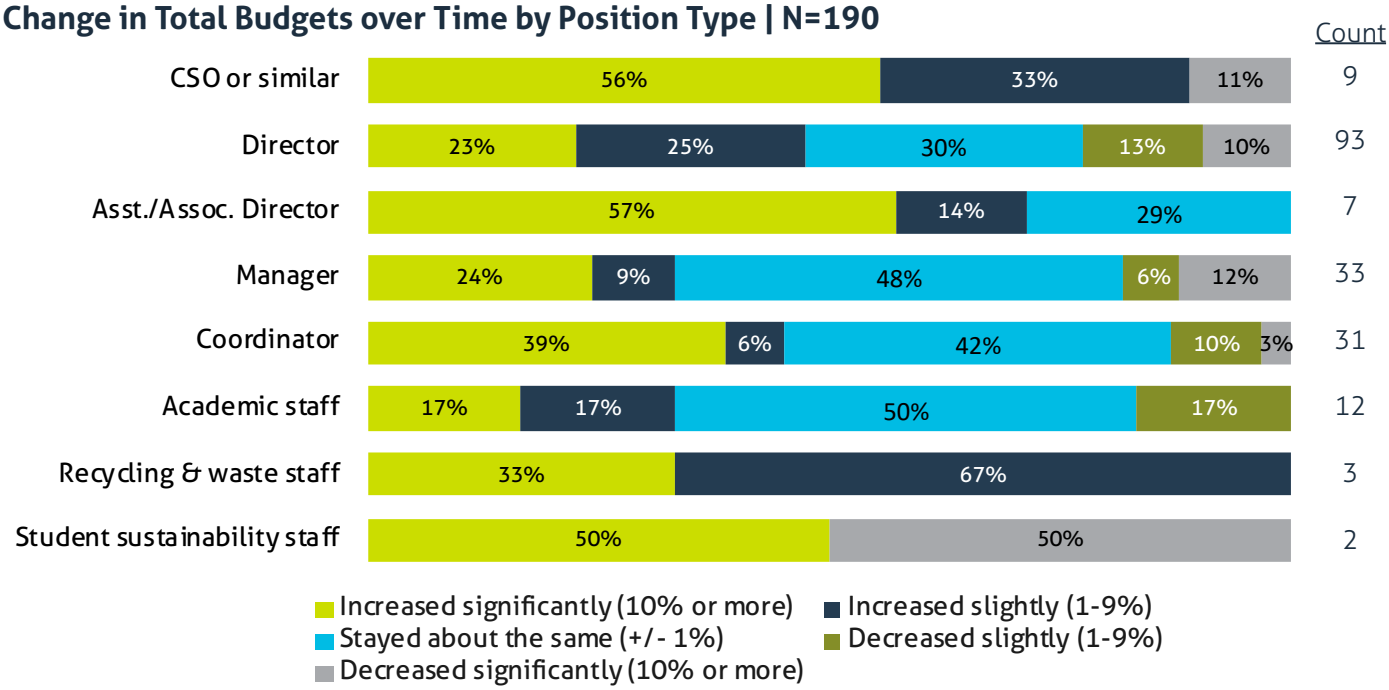
Changes in Budget over Time

Since 2017, fund managers have been asked about changes in funding. The 2023 survey asked, "Over the last three years (since the February 2020 staffing survey), how has your TOTAL annual budget changed? Choices included "Increased significantly (10% or more)", "Increased slightly (1-9%)", "Stayed the same (+/- 1%)", "Decreased slightly (1-9%)" and "Decreased significantly (10% or more)". Forty-eight percent of respondents indicated that total annual budgets increased slightly or significantly, an increase compared to 2020 respondents (43%). By position type, the positions with the greatest likelihood for significant budget increases were Assistant and Associate Directors (57%) and CSOs (56%). The positions with the greatest likelihood for budget decreases were Directors (23%), Managers (18%) and academic staff (17%).

Change in Total Budgets over Time | N=205



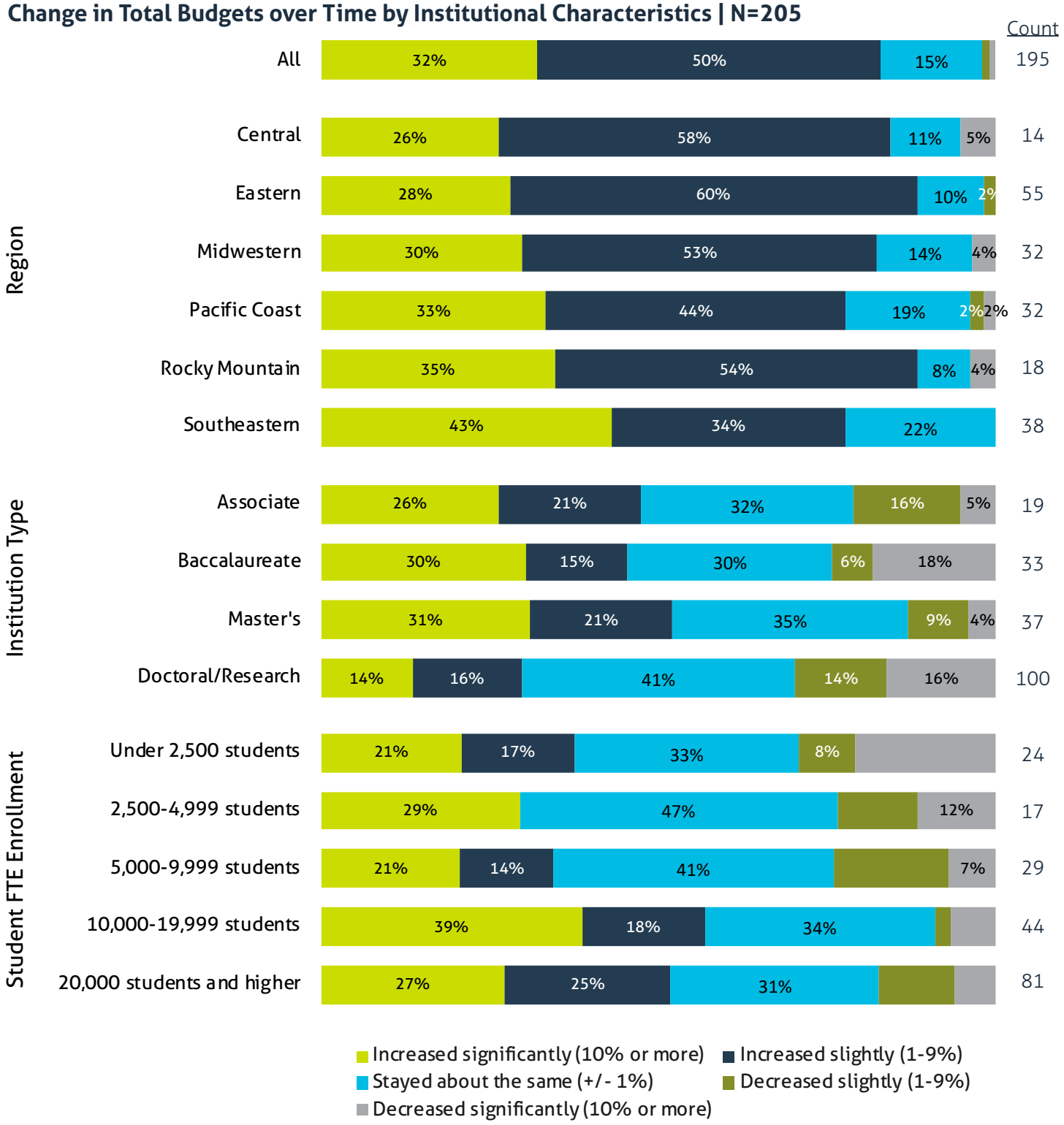
Change in Total Budgets over Time by Position Type | N=190



Changes in Budget over Time

By region, institution type and enrollment size, significant increases were most common among respondents in the Southeast (43%) Budget decreases were most common among Doctoral/research and very small (under 2,500 student FTE) institutions.

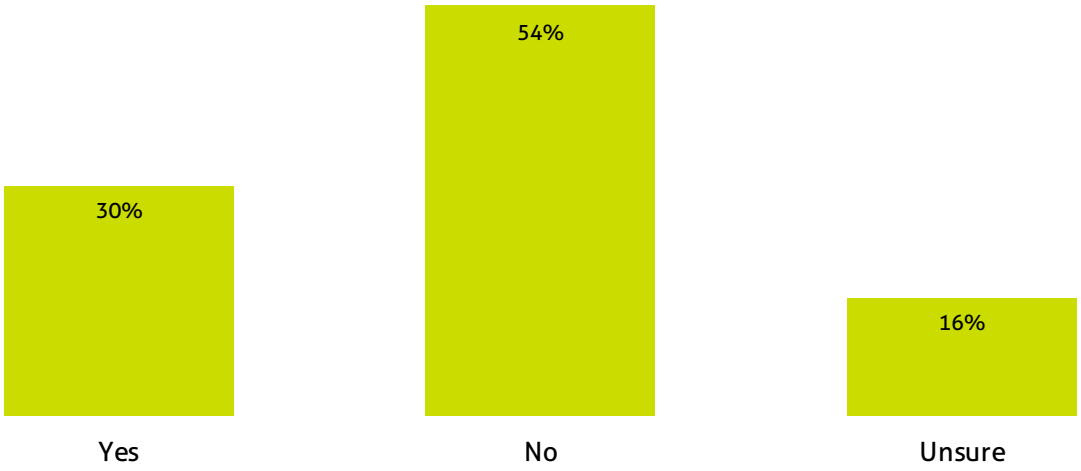
Change in Total Budgets over Time by Institutional Characteristics | N=205



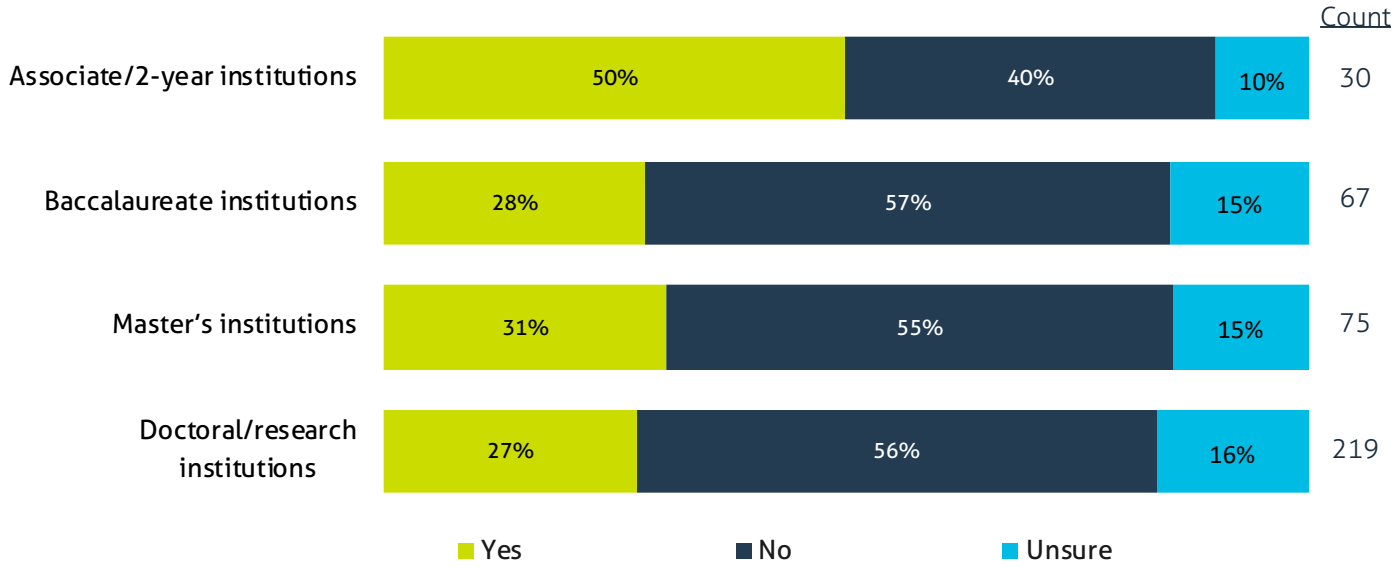
Sustainability Revenue

A new question was asked in 2023: "Does your organization generate revenue through sustainability-related activities?" Respondents could answer Yes, No or Unsure, and optional comments were encouraged to describe the types of sustainability-related activities that generate revenue. The majority of respondents (54%) reported no revenue generation. By institution type, revenue generation was highest among associate and 2-year institutions.

Revenue Generation | N=405



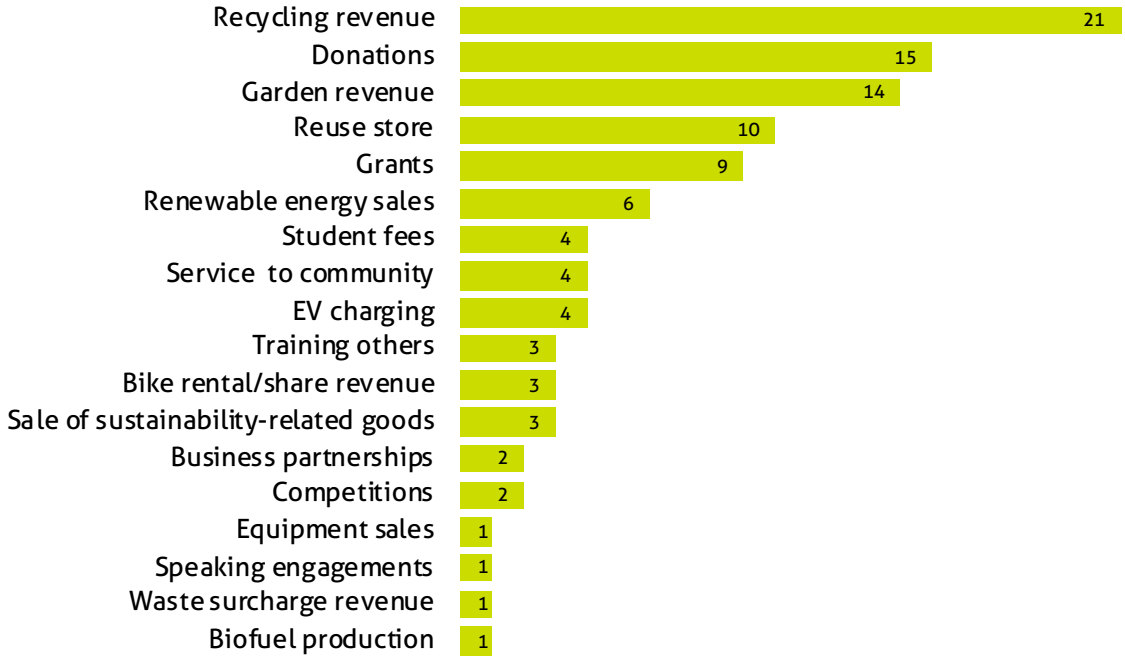
Revenue Generation by Institution Type | N=391



Sustainability Revenue

Top sustainability revenue themes identified in the free response question included revenue from consumer and industrial recycling, used goods donations, garden revenue, and revenue from move-out and other re-use collections. Some responses (e.g., student fees, grants) could be considered independent revenue sources rather than results of sustainability operations.

Revenue Generation Free Response Themes





Sustainability Staff at CSU Channel Islands welcoming students to Clean Air Day event
Photo credit: Andrew Graves

Supervision



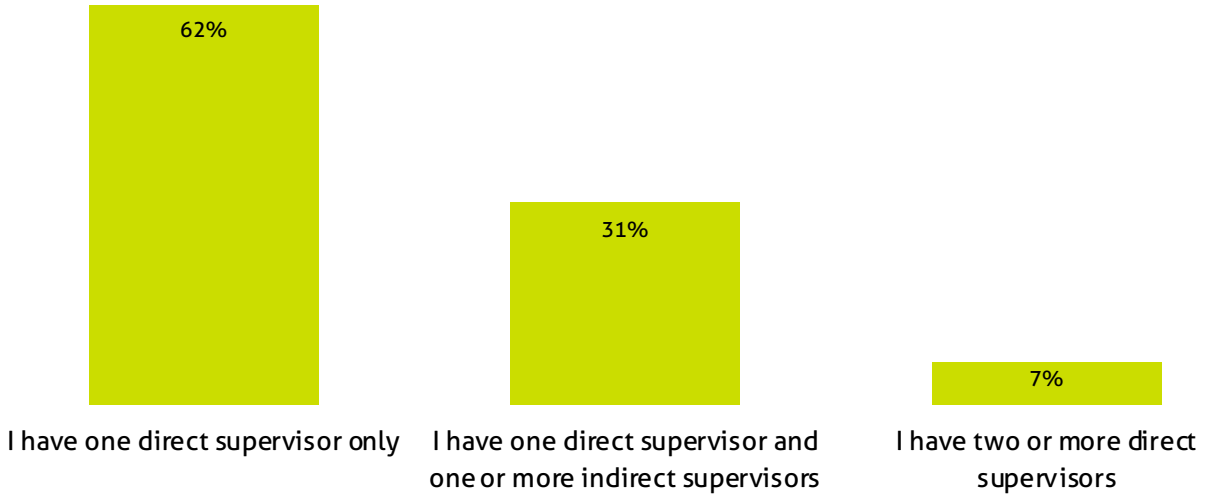
Cleveland State University Sustainability Student Intern and the CSU Director of Sustainability pose during CSU's EarthFest 2023. Photo credit: Brian Hart Photography

Direct and Indirect Supervision

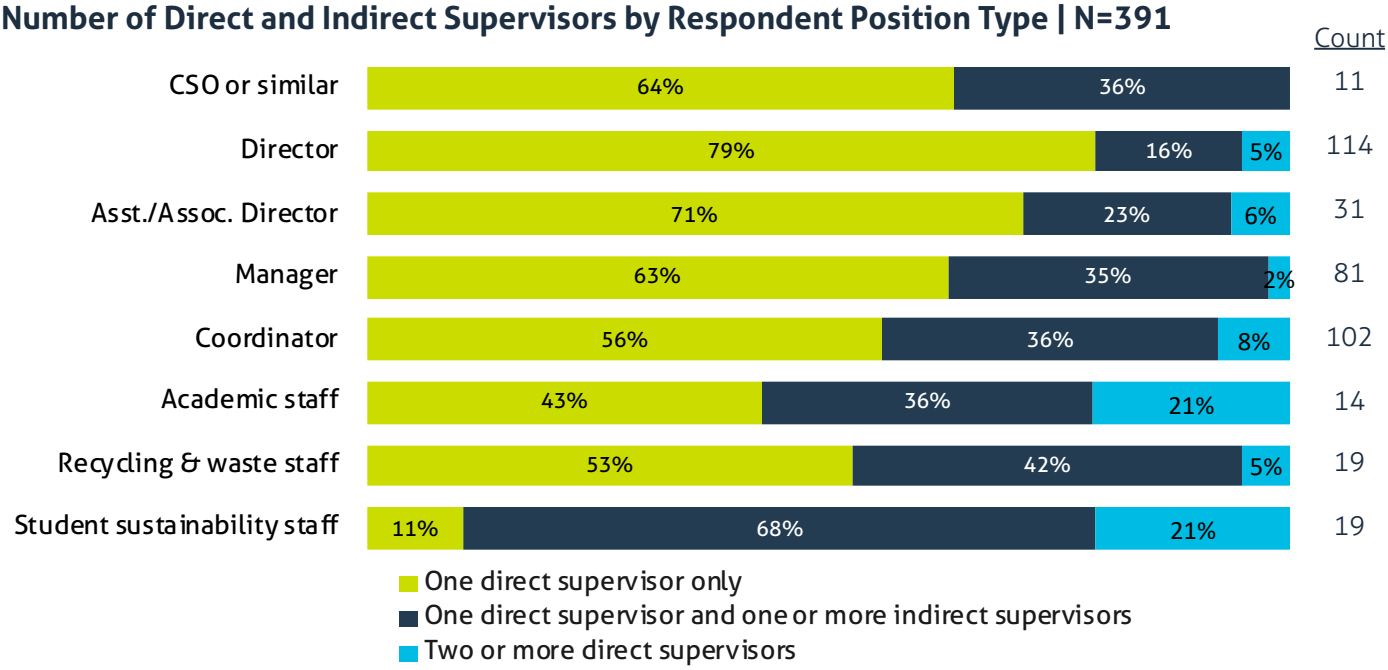
Questions related to respondent supervisors were reformatted in 2023 to better capture direct and indirect supervision for supervisors with varied roles. Respondents were first asked about the number of direct and indirect supervisors, and were given follow-up questions based on responses to this question.

Over one-third of respondents (38%) have a direct or indirect supervisor in addition to their primary supervisor, likely reflecting the broad scope of responsibilities assigned to sustainability staff. Position types likely to have more than one supervisor include student sustainability staff, academic staff, recycling & waste staff, and Sustainability Coordinators.

Number of Direct and Indirect Supervisors | N=406



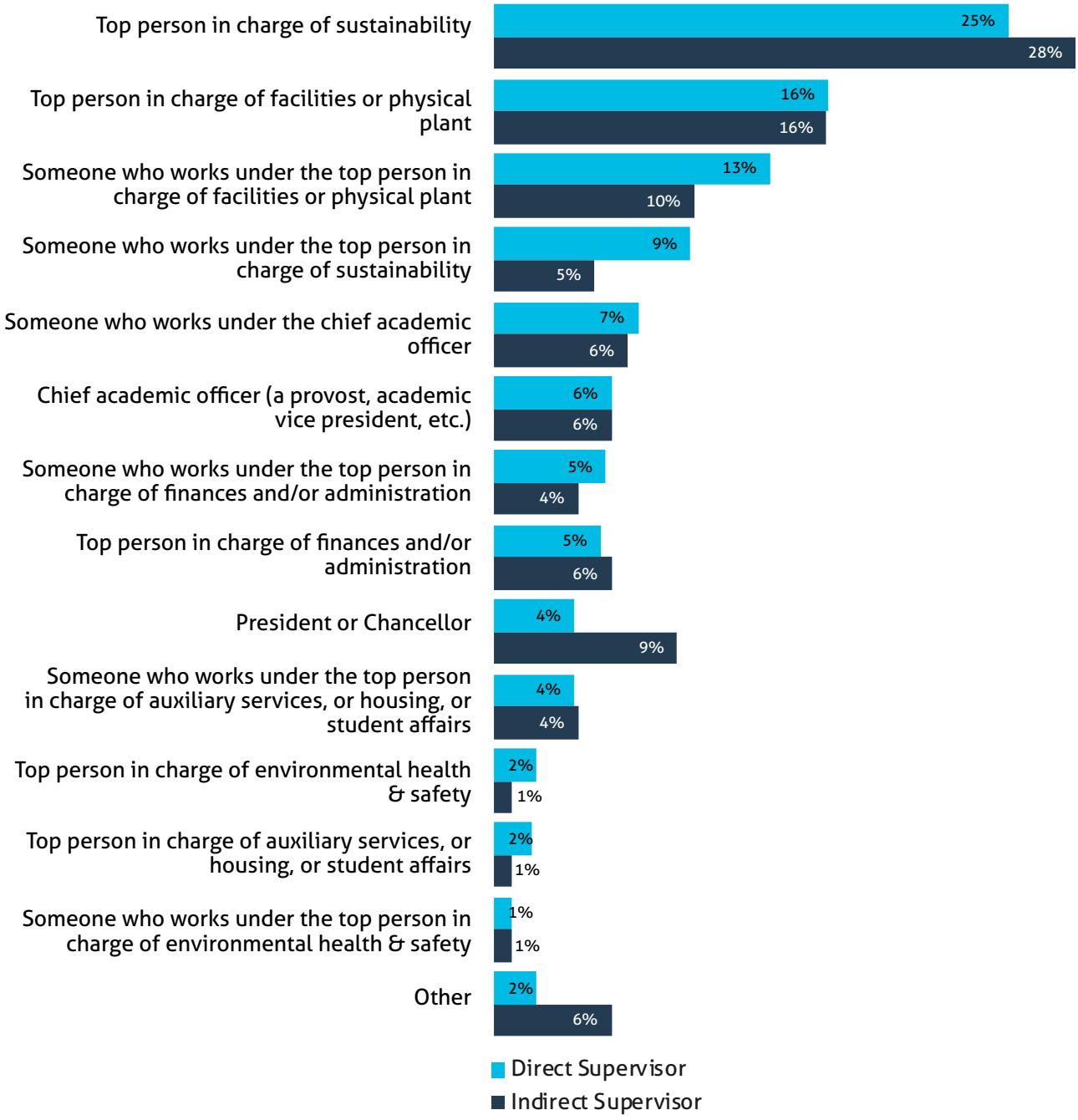
Number of Direct and Indirect Supervisors by Respondent Position Type | N=391



To Whom Position Reports

Respondents were asked to indicate areas of work for direct supervisors and indirect supervisors. The areas most commonly referenced (whether directly or indirectly) include reporting to the top sustainability officer, followed by reporting to the top person in facilities. For respondents reporting to a president or chancellor, a greater proportion report indirectly rather than directly. Because this question was reformatted this year, comparisons to past surveys is not possible.

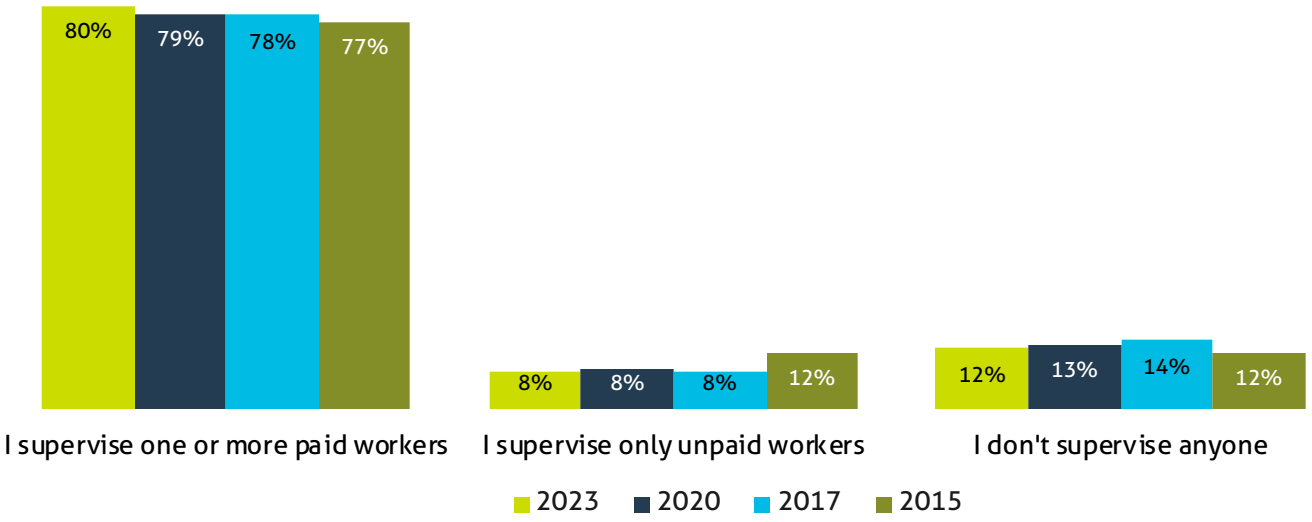
Area(s) of Direct and Indirect Supervision | N=406



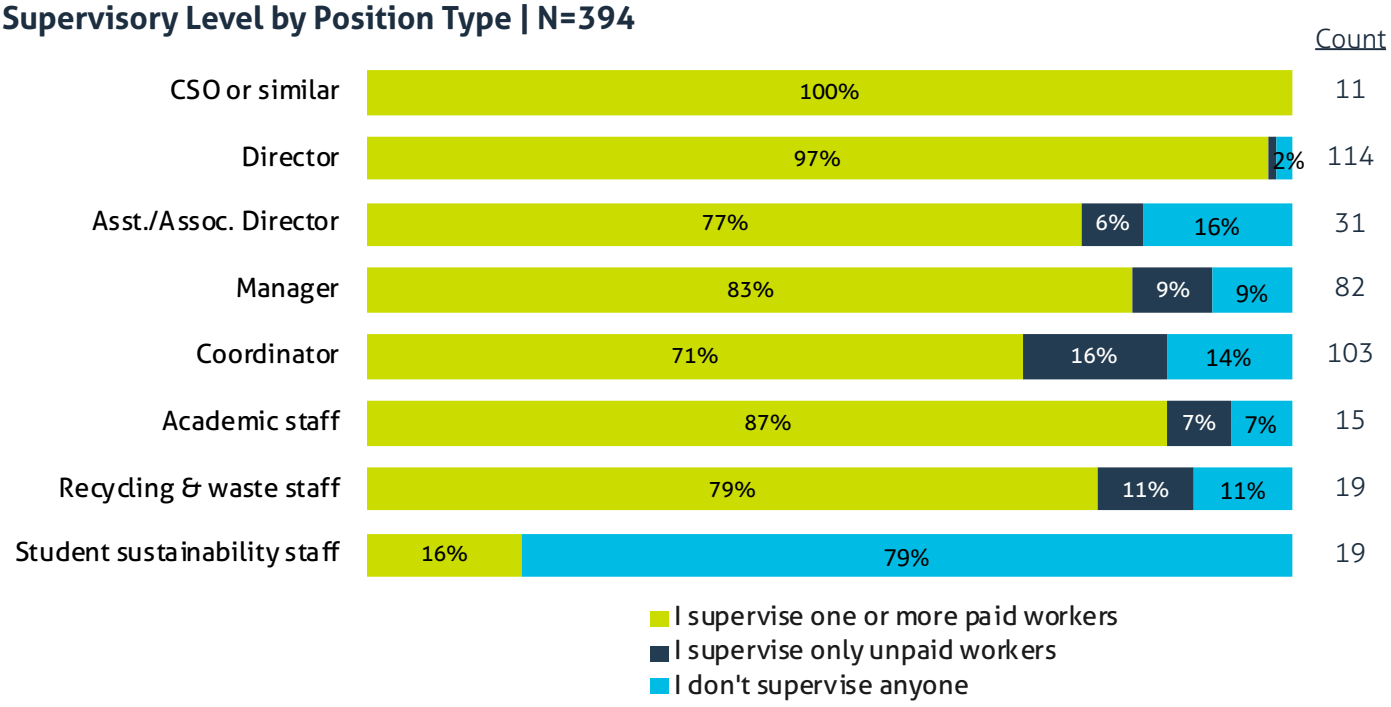
Staff Supervision

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they supervise paid or unpaid workers. Eighty percent of respondents indicated that they supervise at least one paid non-student or student worker, with the proportion having gradually increased since 2015. By position type, CSOs had the largest percentage of respondents who supervised paid and unpaid staff (100%), followed by Sustainability Directors (96%).

Supervisory Level | N=409



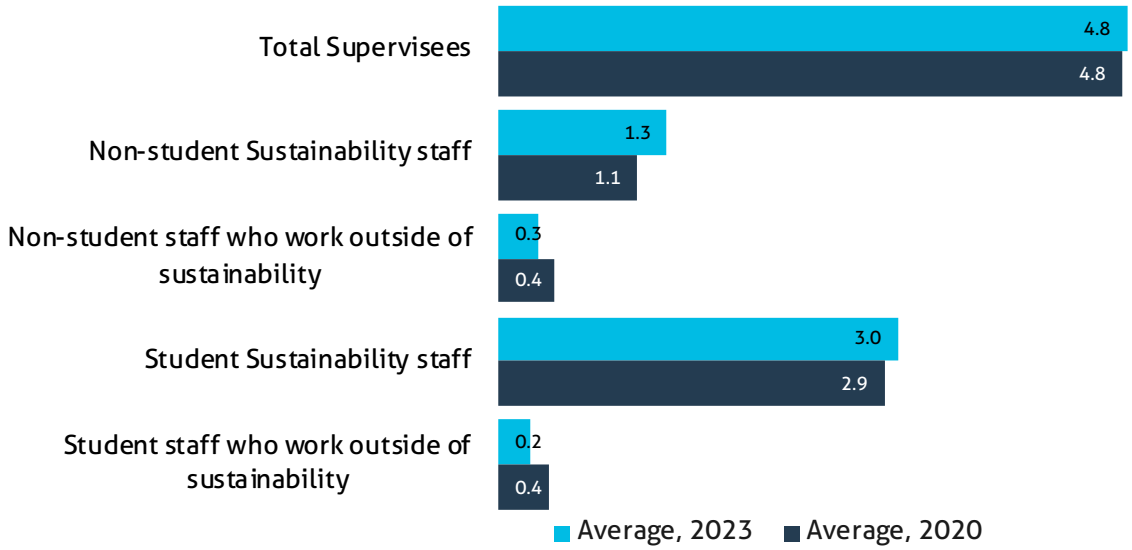
Supervisory Level by Position Type | N=394



Number of Paid Staff Supervised

Respondents indicating that they supervise paid workers were asked to indicate the number of staff that they supervise. The question was reformatted in 2020 so responses can be compared with that year only. Results are presented as average responses overall and by position type (there was little variation when analyzed by median responses and many median responses were zero). On average, a greater number of supervised workers were reported in 2023 than in 2020. Respondents were more likely to supervise sustainability staff versus staff working outside of sustainability. It was more common to supervise student staff rather than non-student staff.

Average Number of Paid Non-student and Student Staff Supervised | N=328



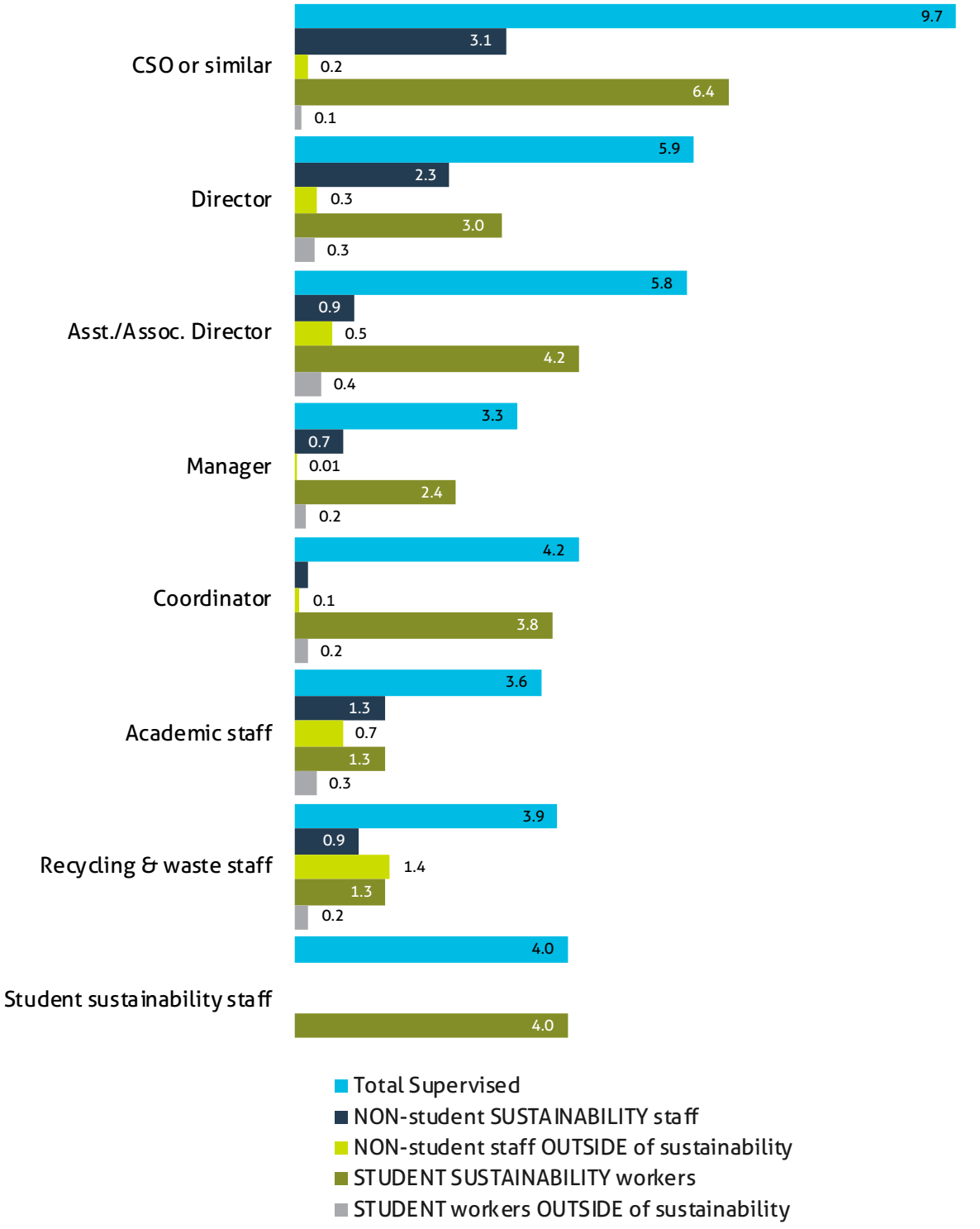


The University of Sydney Sustainability Team in 2022. Photo credit: Laura Minchella

Number of Paid Staff Supervised

By position type, CSOs, Sustainability Directors and Assistant or Associate Directors were most likely to supervise non-student and student sustainability staff.

Average Number of Paid Non-student and Student Staff Supervised by Position Type| N=318



Employee Perspectives

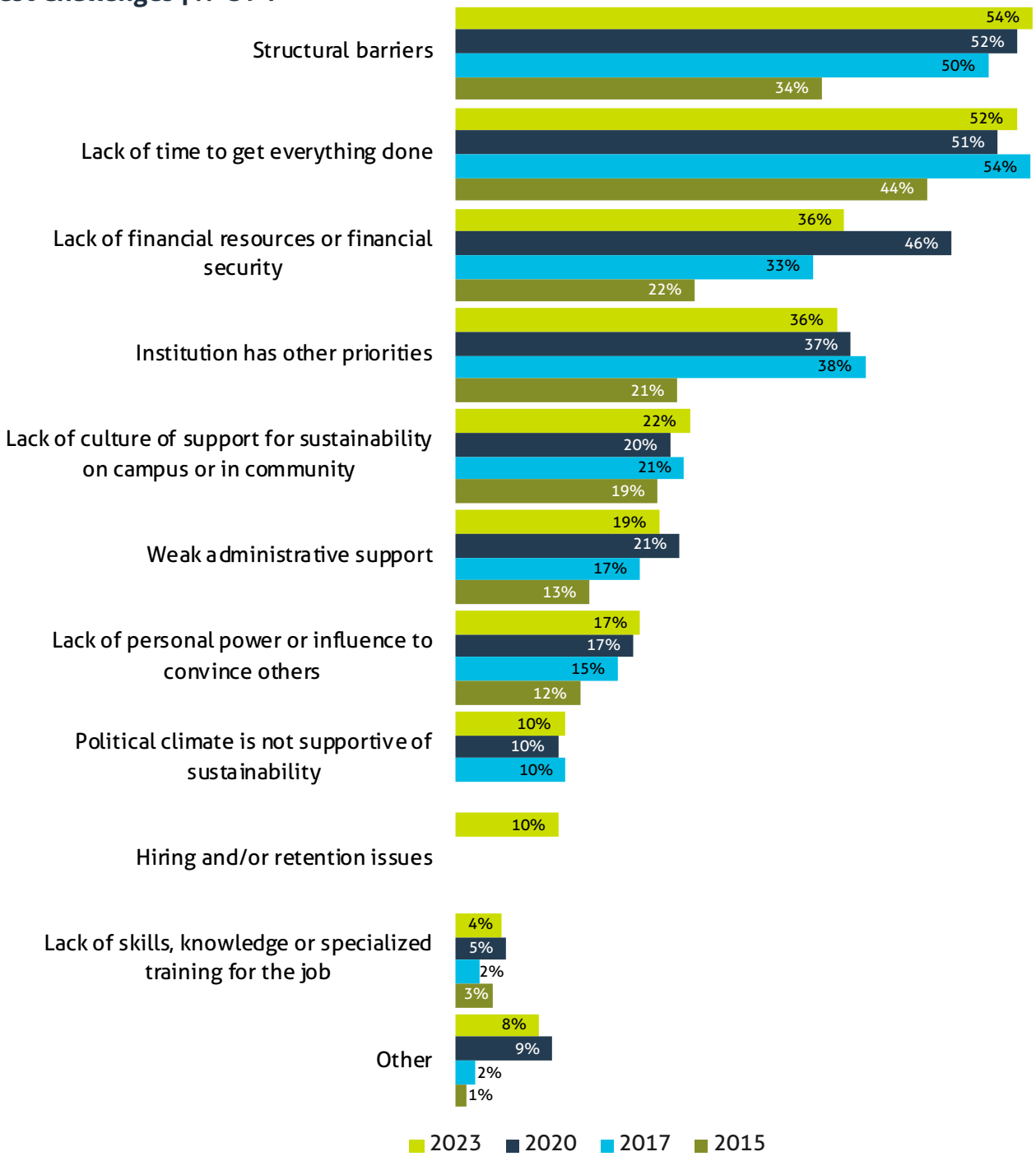


Maria Gutierrez, Yale University's Sustainability Engagement Manager, leads a tour at Yale Farm to learn about sustainable food production and urban agriculture, as part of Celebrate Sustainability Week. Photo credit: Dan Corcoran

Biggest Challenges

Respondents were asked to indicate the biggest challenges they face in their positions, and were allowed to select up to three options. A new response option for "Hiring and/or retention issues " was added. "Structural barriers (administrative silos, policies, obstructionist individuals/offices, etc)" was again cited as the top issue in 2023, and "lack of time to get everything done" was once more the second greatest challenge. There was a substantial reduction in respondents citing "lack of financial resources" as a top barrier.

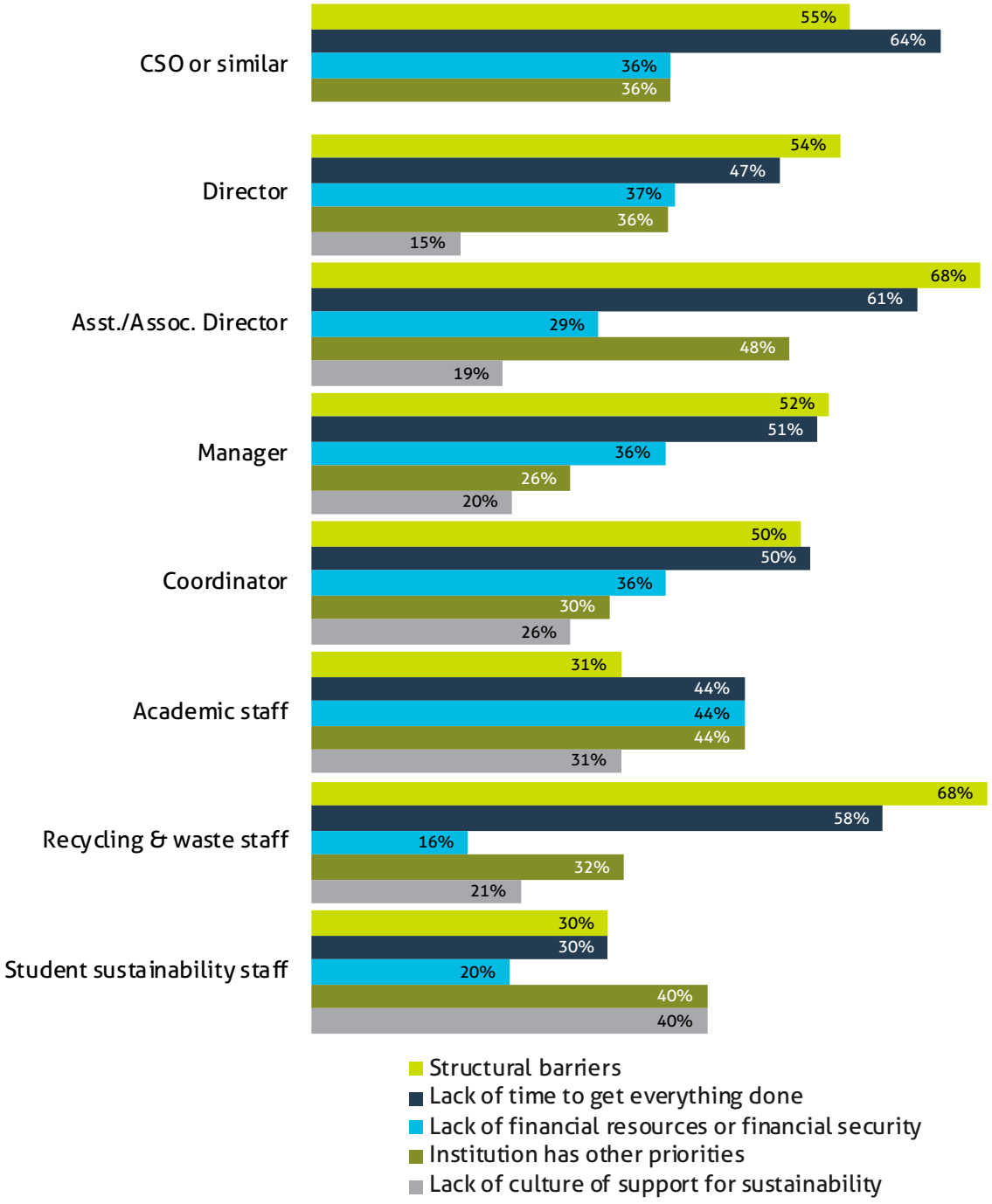
Biggest Challenges | N=394



Biggest Challenges

Results by position type are presented for the top five challenges only. "Lack of time to get everything done" was found to be the top challenge among 64% of CSOs, while "structural barriers" were challenges for 55% of CSOs. Structural barriers were significant challenges among nearly 70 percent of recycling & waste staff and for Assistant/Associate Sustainability Directors.

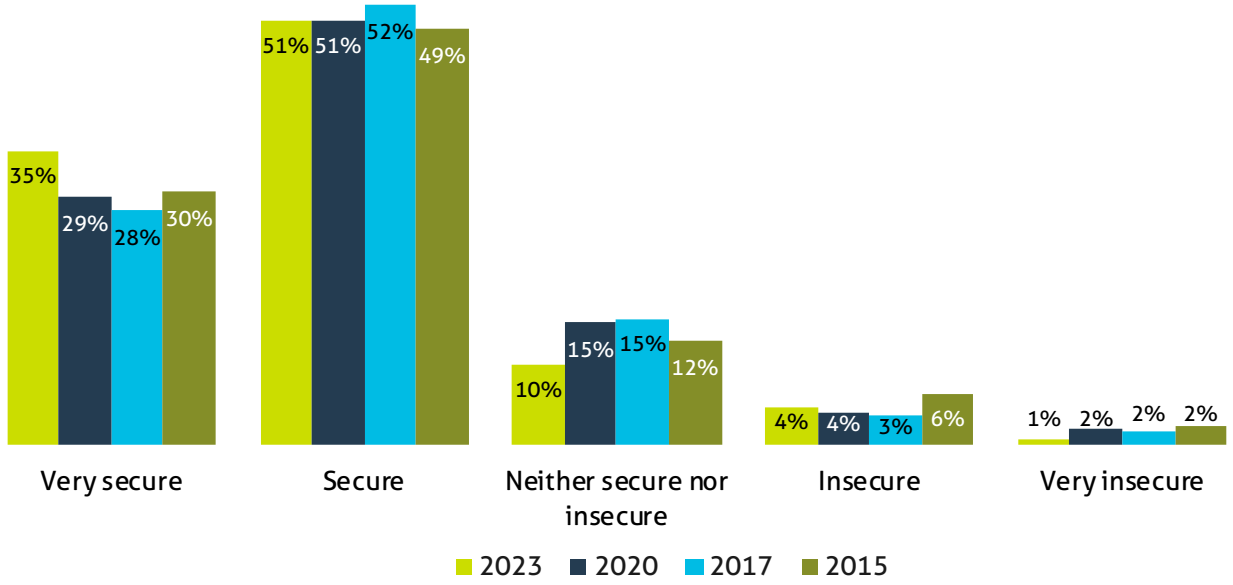
Biggest Challenges by Position Type | N=380



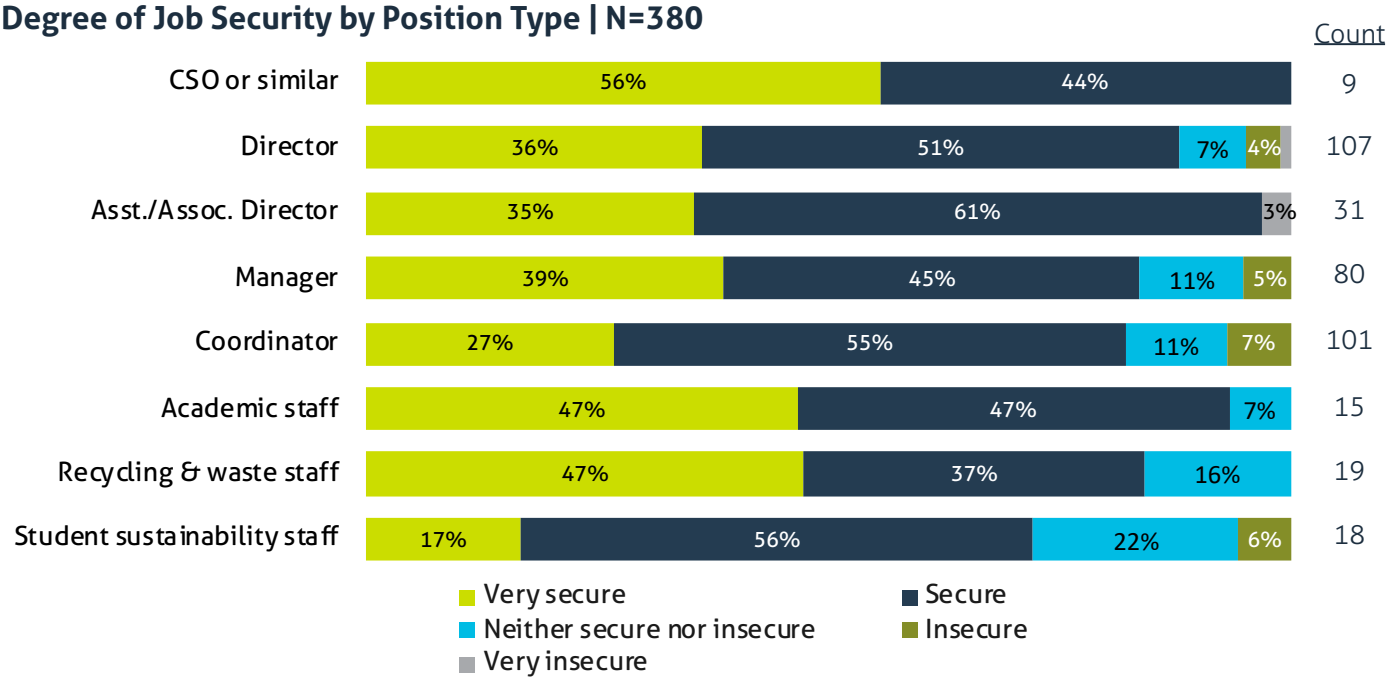
Job Security

Three years into the COVID pandemic, job security appears to be on the rise. When 2023 respondents were asked "How would you rate your degree of job security?", responses of "very secure" were up 5 percent as compared to 2020. Over 85% of respondents were either "secure" or "very secure" in their positions in 2023, compared to just under 80% in 2020. By position type, job security was highest among CSOs, Assistant/Associate Directors, academic staff, and Directors.

Degree of Job Security | N=394



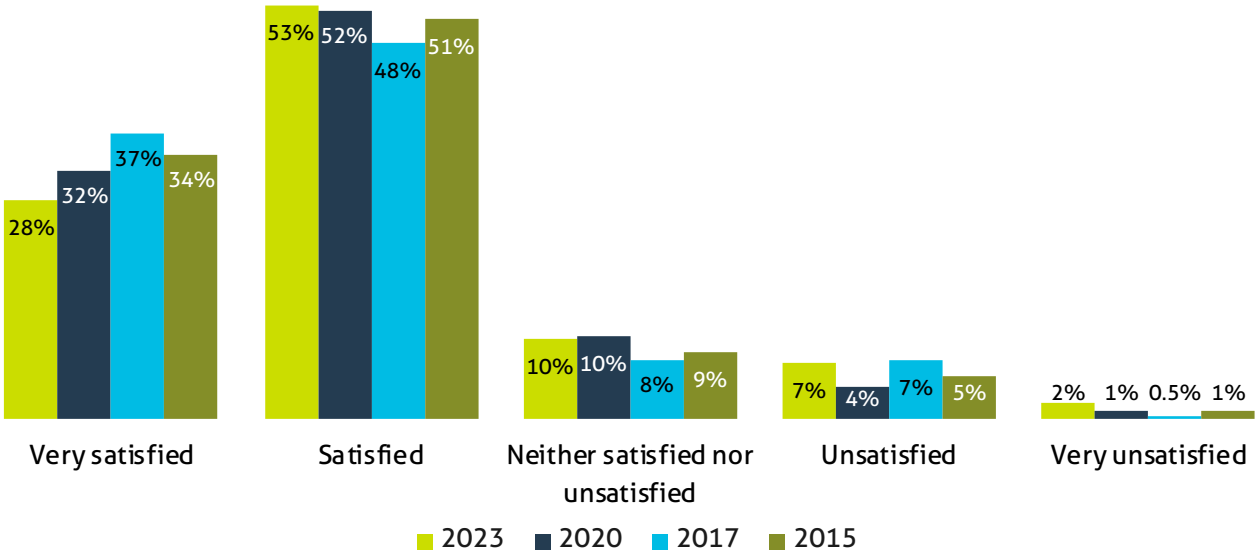
Degree of Job Security by Position Type | N=380



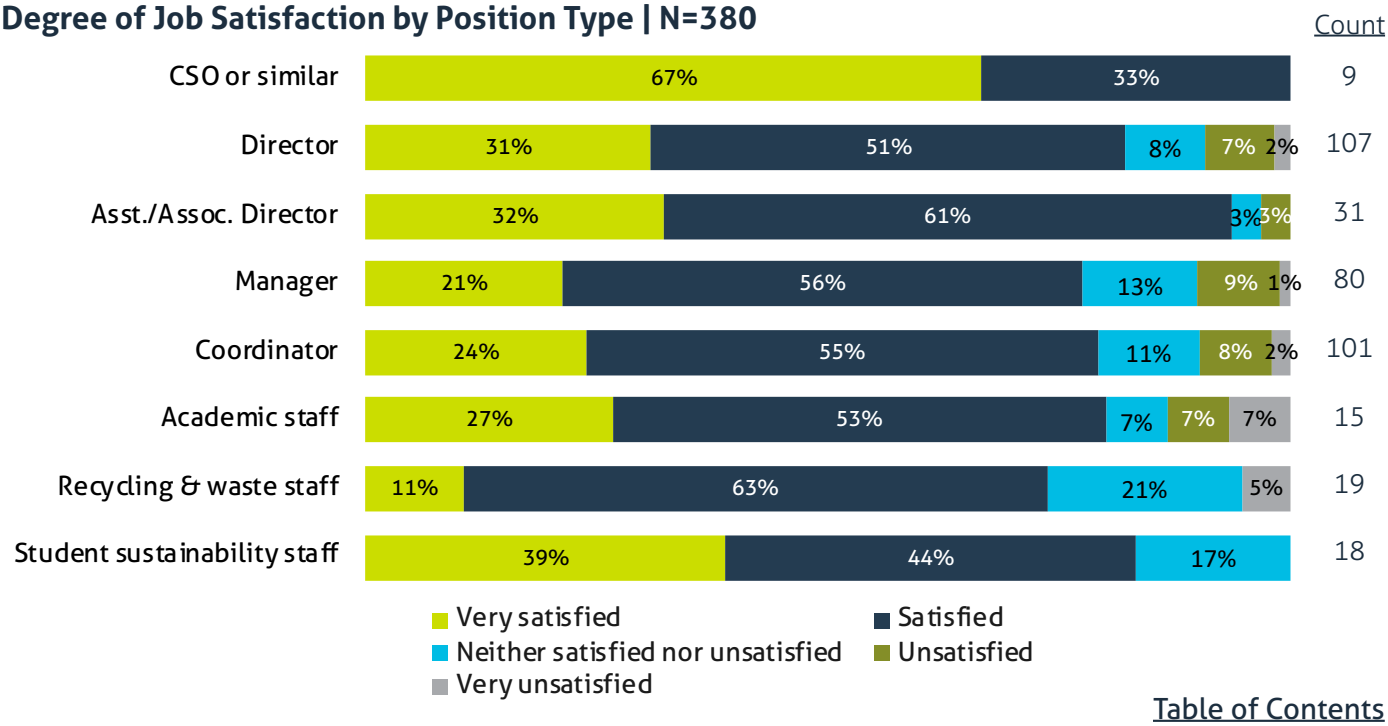
Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction for sustainability staff seems to have declined in comparison to past responses. Respondents indicating "very satisfied" dropped from 32% in 2020 to 28% in 2023. Approximately 81% of respondents were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" in their positions in 2023, compared to 84% in 2020, which was similar to past years' amounts. Transitions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may in part explain a loss of satisfaction. Results varied by position type, with CSO and Assistant/Associate Directors having the greatest levels of satisfaction. Dissatisfaction was highest among academic staff at 14 percent.

Degree of Job Satisfaction | N=439



Degree of Job Satisfaction by Position Type | N=380



Changes as a result of COVID

A new, optional free-response question was asked: "How has your sustainability work changed as a result of COVID-19?" Over 200 responses were reviewed and coded for key themes. The theme most frequently mentioned involved the change in work habits due to the challenges and opportunities of remote/ hybrid working and reliance on virtual rather than in-person meetings. Another common theme involved the lower engagement among students and staff as a result of COVID, and the challenges and work inefficiencies this presents. A decline in institutional prioritization for sustainability, revenue reductions and cost increases, and challenges in handling increased waste as a result of the pandemic were also frequently mentioned, as well as the sentiment that not much has changed.

Feedback on Changes as a Result of COVID | N=227



Key Findings



Office of Sustainability staff and campus partners at University of Florida lead volunteers in invasive species removal efforts as part of Earth Week events. Photo Credit: Naiyla Durand

Key Findings

The 2023 survey results show that campus sustainability positions continue to grow and evolve. Highlights from this year's report include the following:

Positions & Demographics

- There was an increase in responses from CSOs and Sustainability Directors, with a corresponding decrease in Coordinators, which may be an indicator of maturing of the field.
- Respondents identifying as female continued to trend upward. For the first time, the Sustainability Director position skewed female (59%), while respondents identifying as male accounted for 51% in 2020.
- Racial and ethnic identity continued to trend toward greater representation among BIPOC individuals, although higher education sustainability positions continue to be predominantly white.

Nature of Position & Supervision

- A significant proportion of 2023 respondents were new to higher education sustainability (0-2 years) as compared to 2020 responses, which may coincide with COVID-19-related job transitions.
- We continue to see a trend toward more sustainability offices over time, with 73% of respondents indicating that their position was housed in an office or unit with sustainability in its name, compared to 68% in 2020.
- Average number of sustainability staff employees increased from 2.8 paid non-student sustainability staff in 2020 to 3.6 in 2023, and from 3.8 paid student staff in 2020 to 4.4 in 2023.
- There was a 2% increase in the proportion of positions housed in the Office of the President or Chancellor as compared to 2020 results.
- 38 percent of respondents reported being "regularly engaged" with representatives from Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) and similar offices, compared to about 16% in 2020.
- A new question on remote work found that 38% of respondents work remotely multiple times per week.
- 80% of respondents indicated that they supervise at least one paid non-student or student worker, with the proportion having gradually increased since 2015.

Salary & Benefits

- There has been an incremental increase in median salaries overall and across virtually all position types (salaries increased by 14.5% since 2020 and by 24% since 2017).
- Eighty-two percent of respondents indicated that their salary increased slightly or significantly over the last three years
- By gender identity, salaries across all positions were higher for those identifying as male, with females earning 83 cents to the dollar compared to male counterparts. However, female respondents in Director roles earned more than their male counterparts for the first time.
- BIPOC respondents earned less overall across all positions than white respondents ($67,500 versus $72,000).
- A significant drop in benefits for part-time respondents was identified in comparison to 2020, which is concerning given the healthcare impacts as a result of COVID-19.

Key Findings

Budgets & Funding

- The proportion of total funding from student fees increased from 19% in 2020 to 25% in 2023.
- Median sustainability budgets increased across most institution categories as compared to 2020, and rose significantly among 2-year, doctoral institutions, and institutions with 10,000 student FTE or more.
- 48% of respondents indicated that total annual sustainability budgets increased slightly or significantly in the prior three years, compared to 43% indicating as much in 2020.

Employee Perspectives

- Perhaps surprisingly, job security appears to be on the rise for sustainability staff. Over 85% of respondents felt either "secure" or "very secure" in their positions in 2023, compared to just under 80% in 2020.
- On the other hand, overall job satisfaction for sustainability staff seems to have declined slightly. Approximately 81% of respondents were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" in their positions in 2023, compared to 84% in 2020.

We look forward to revisiting these findings in future surveys and hope that the information provided in this report proves useful in establishing and growing sustainability offices and positions. For questions or comments about the survey or methodology, please email resources@aashe.org.



Arizona State University staff use the Bike Valet to safely store their bikes while on campus.
Photo credit: Emmanuel Padilla

Methodology

AASHE disseminated and publicized a survey with approximately 55 questions for a four-week period in February and March 2023. Responses from 526 individuals were collected, and 411 were included for analysis in this report. Consistent with previous years, partially completed surveys and respondents working in sustainability less than 25% of the time were excluded from the analysis. While the number of overall survey respondents was higher in 2023 than ever before (526 in 2023 versus 517 in 2020), the number of incomplete or excluded surveys was noticeably higher as well. This resulted in fewer total responses included for analysis (411 in 2023 versus 475 in 2020).

Most 2023 survey questions were also asked in previous reports, and year-by-year comparisons have been included when possible. For readability, graph data labels were rounded to the nearest percent throughout this report, and data labels of 1 percent or less were excluded.

The information found in this report is based on a sampling of higher education sustainability professionals. These results provide a comprehensive view of higher education sustainability for U.S. and Canadian audiences, but less so for professionals outside of the U.S. and Canada. Though efforts were made to disseminate the survey widely, due to the voluntary nature of the survey, we cannot definitively claim to have captured representative samples for any position type. The staffing survey is not longitudinal in nature, so differences between survey years should be interpreted with caution.



Aquinas College Zero Waste Crew at Move-In. Photo credit: Josh Weiland

About AASHE

AASHE empowers higher education administrators, faculty, staff and students to be effective change agents and drivers of sustainability innovation. AASHE enables members to translate information into action by offering essential resources and professional development to a diverse, engaged community of sustainability leaders. We work with and for higher education to ensure that our world's future leaders are motivated and equipped to solve sustainability challenges. For more information, visit www.aashe.org.

Thank You!

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Salaries & Status of Sustainability Professionals in Higher Education

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE)

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Material Associate Alyssa Mannigel operates a fork truck to collect corrugated cardboard at OSU. Photo credit: Oregon State University.