



POLICY BRIEFING

Anticipatory Governance for Community College Boards

What It Is, Why It Matters, and How Boards Can Begin

Overview

Every board decision rests on implicit assumptions about the future—about what students will need, what conditions will hold, what will change. Most of the time those assumptions go unexamined. In a stable environment, that was workable. In today's environment, it is not. Technology, competition, demographic shifts, and workforce demands are all in motion at once. Governing as if one expected future is certain, without examining that assumption, carries real and growing risk.

Anticipatory governance is a response to that reality. It is an approach to board leadership that makes the future an explicit, active part of how boards deliberate and decide—replacing a single assumed path with a more intentional engagement with the range of futures the institution may need to navigate.

Key Definition

Anticipatory governance is a way of operating in which boards regularly and explicitly engage multiple possible futures—not to predict what will happen, but to govern more wisely in the face of genuine uncertainty. It is not a single activity. It is a way of leading.

The Foundation: Strategic Foresight

Anticipatory governance is built on strategic foresight—a structured approach to exploring how the future might unfold. Rather than assuming a single path, it invites boards to consider multiple possible futures and what they mean for the institution. When this becomes part of how a board operates, decisions are evaluated across a range of conditions, not just against an expected baseline. Uncertainty becomes something to work with, not something to resolve before acting.

This shifts the questions boards ask. Instead of 'Will this work?' the question becomes 'How will this hold up if conditions change?' Instead of treating assumptions as background, they become visible. Instead of monitoring for problems, boards begin scanning for early signals of how futures are beginning to take shape.

What Changes

Traditional Governance	→	Anticipatory Governance
Reacting to the future	→	Engaging the future intentionally
Assumptions stay hidden	→	Assumptions become visible
One expected future	→	Multiple possible futures



What Boards Do Differently

Anticipatory governance shows up in four concrete practices:

Develop Scenarios

Build a small set of plausible, distinct futures annually—not predictions, but stress tests for strategy and assumptions.

Test Decisions Against Them

When something is proposed, ask how it holds up across those scenarios, not just under expected conditions.

Surface Assumptions

Make visible the beliefs about students, demand, and funding that underlie every decision—so they can be examined and updated.

Watch for Signals

Look intentionally for early indicators of change—shifts in behavior, new models, emerging patterns—and bring them into regular conversation.

Why This Matters for Community Colleges

The drivers reshaping community colleges are accelerating. AI is changing how students learn and how employers define competence. Competition is intensifying from online providers, employers, and new credentialing models. Demographic and funding pressures are compressing the margin for error. Boards that govern from unexamined assumptions are not just taking a risk—they are governing blind. Those that develop anticipatory practices make more resilient decisions, recognize earlier when strategy needs revisiting, and build a culture where the future is woven into how the board leads.

Questions for Boards to Start With

1. What assumptions are embedded in our current strategy—and are they still valid given how conditions have shifted?
2. How would our major decisions hold up if enrollment, funding, or workforce demand shifted substantially?
3. What signals are we paying attention to—and what might we be missing?
4. What would it look like to make the future a regular, structured part of how we govern?

Anticipatory governance does not require certainty. It requires a willingness to engage the future explicitly—surfacing assumptions, exploring possibilities, and deciding with awareness of the conditions those choices may face. For community college boards, that kind of governance is not optional. It is the work.