



POLICY BRIEFING

Three Scenarios for the Future of Community Colleges

Provocations for Rethinking the Purpose and Structure of the Institution

Overview

Across the community college sector, institutions are responding to a common set of pressures—enrollment volatility, rising skepticism about the value of degrees, accelerating technological change, and growing expectations that colleges contribute more directly to economic and social outcomes. Most strategies adapt within the existing model: expanding programs, redesigning student supports, integrating new technologies.

This work matters. But it assumes something that often goes unexamined—that the underlying structure of the college will remain largely intact. If we step outside that assumption, a different question emerges. Not *how do we improve the current model*, but *what entirely different forms might the community college take if the model itself begins to give way*.

Key Definition

Scenarios are not predictions, and they are not plans. They are provocations—structured descriptions of plausible futures that surface what does not fit within today's institutional logic. Their purpose is to make the question of the college's identity and purpose visible, so leaders can engage it directly rather than answer it by default.

Scenario One: The Learning Ledger

In this future, the college no longer delivers education. That function has largely dissolved as learning expands across employers, digital platforms, industry networks, and self-directed pathways—making courses, semesters, and seat time increasingly irrelevant as organizing structures. The college relinquishes the role of provider entirely and becomes a broker of education, helping students navigate a wide field of opportunities. Faculty become mentors who assess and validate what students have learned. Credentials are no longer tied to time, sequence, or institutional control, but to verified capability—anchored in an institution whose authority rests on its ability to make credible distinctions.

Scenario Two: The Living College

Here the central challenge is not access to knowledge or opportunity, but how individuals remain grounded in a world that no longer provides stable pathways, clear authority, or shared meaning. Life feels increasingly untethered, and intelligence is no longer exclusively human—AI systems shape decisions, communication, and judgment in ways that are often invisible. The college emerges in response: a place of security, not protection from change, but a space where people can regain orientation within it. Learning is organized around sensemaking, judgment, and self-understanding. Students are not simply acquiring knowledge; they are practicing how to remain thoughtful, deliberate, and accountable in systems that do not resolve neatly.

Scenario Three: The Commons College

In this future, the college is no longer primarily defined by what it delivers to students, but by its role in holding and strengthening the social fabric of the place it serves. As other institutions weaken or fragment, the college becomes one of the few remaining spaces where people gather across differences to work through shared challenges and rebuild

collective life. The college becomes the infrastructure for community building, convening and sustaining relationships across sectors, generations, and identities. Students participate in problem-solving, coordination, and collective decision-making rather than preparing for it. Faculty roles expand into facilitation, partnership, and stewardship. The college becomes a civic anchor whose primary purpose is to make community possible again.

How the Scenarios Differ

Scenario	Core Function	Source of Authority
The Learning Ledger	Brokering and validating learning	Credible distinctions about capability
The Living College	Cultivating judgment and orientation	Trusted space for sensemaking
The Commons College	Holding and rebuilding civic life	Stewardship of community relationships

What Each Scenario Asks of the Institution

<p>Authority Without Delivery</p> <p>If the college no longer delivers instruction, what is the basis of its authority? The Learning Ledger asks whether value can rest on validation rather than provision.</p>	<p>Formation, Not Just Training</p> <p>If learners need orientation more than content, what does the college become? The Living College asks whether formation of judgment is the institution's central work.</p>	<p>Civic Anchor, Not Provider</p> <p>If community itself is fraying, what role can the college play? The Commons College asks whether the institution's mission is to hold civic life rather than serve it.</p>
---	--	--

Why This Matters for Community College Leaders

These scenarios do not describe a single trajectory. They describe fundamentally different answers to the question of what a college *is*—and in doing so, they make visible how much of the institution's future remains open rather than predetermined. Used well, they shift the conversation from *how to improve the current model* to *what the institution is becoming through the choices it is already making*. They create space for leaders to engage questions of identity and purpose, not just efficiency and adaptation. Colleges are already changing. The question is whether those changes will be shaped intentionally, or whether they will emerge by default.

Questions for Leaders to Start With

1. Are we seeing early signs of any of these futures emerging around us?
2. Is there anything in any of these futures that we find compelling or worth moving toward?
3. What feels uncomfortable or misaligned in each of these scenarios—and why?

These scenarios are not forecasts; they are mirrors. They reflect back the assumptions embedded in today's choices and surface the futures those choices may quietly be producing. For community college leaders, engaging them is not a planning exercise. It is the work of governing the institution into what comes next.