



A FORESIGHT TOOLKIT RESOURCE

How to Run an Assumption Audit

A practical, ninety-minute exercise your leadership team can run on its own — no budget, no consultant — to surface the hidden predictions buried inside your strategic plan.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Every strategic plan contains assumptions about the future. Assumptions about what students will want, about the value of degrees, about the regional economy, about technology, about how people will learn. Most of the time those assumptions stay invisible, because they feel like common sense. An assumption audit makes them visible — so your team can decide whether it actually believes them, before circumstances decide for you.

What you'll need

- Your current strategic plan, on hand.
- Ninety minutes and your cabinet or leadership team — ideally five to ten people.
- A whiteboard, large paper, or a shared screen everyone can see.
- Markers or sticky notes in three colors: green, yellow, and red.

The Four Steps

1

Pick one goal

Choose a single goal from your current strategic plan. Just one. Do not try to audit the whole plan in one sitting — pick the goal that matters most, or the one that has been

quietly worrying you. Common choices: increasing student retention, closing an equity or achievement gap, growing dual enrollment, launching a new workforce program.

Time: about 5 minutes.

2 List the assumptions

Ask the group one question: **"For this goal to succeed over the next five years, what would have to be true about the world?"** Then write down every answer, out loud, where everyone can see it. Push for assumptions about students, the local economy, funding, technology, workforce demand, community conditions, and student behavior. Most groups surface fifteen to twenty assumptions in about twenty minutes — and are startled by how many there are.

Time: about 20–25 minutes.

3 Color-code each one

Go through the list and sort every assumption into one of three categories. Be honest — the value of the exercise depends on it.

RATING	MEANING
GREEN	We are genuinely confident this will hold true.
YELLOW	We are not sure. It could go either way.
RED	This feels genuinely shaky — or we quietly suspect it may already be wrong.

Time: about 20 minutes.

4 Stress-test the reds

This is the step that changes the conversation. Look only at the red assumptions. For each one, ask: **"If this turns out to be false, what happens to our goal? Does the plan bend — or does it break?"** If your most important goal depends on three red assumptions, you do not yet have a plan. You have a prediction. And you have just discovered that in ninety minutes — before reality discovered it for you.

Time: about 25–30 minutes.

What to do with what you find

An assumption audit is not meant to abandon a goal — it is meant to build the plan differently, with its fragile conditions in full view. After the exercise, consider:

- **Watch the reds.** Assign someone to monitor each red assumption for early signs of change. A red assumption is a signal worth scanning for.
- **Build in flexibility.** Where a goal depends on a shaky assumption, ask what a "Plan B" would look like if that assumption failed — and what it would cost to keep that option open.
- **Revisit the yellows.** Yellow assumptions are research questions. What could you learn in the next quarter that would move a yellow to green or red?
- **Make it routine.** Run a short assumption audit at the start of each major planning conversation. Over time, surfacing assumptions becomes simply how your institution thinks.

ONE QUESTION TO KEEP

Long after the exercise, one question carries the practice forward. The next time your team is about to make a real strategic decision — a hire, an investment, a new program, a facilities choice — pause and ask: **"What future are we assuming this decision will work in?"** Just that. Then watch the conversation change.

This resource is part of the Community College Futures Lab foresight toolkit. For facilitated assumption audits, foresight workshops, and foresight-informed strategic planning, visit ccfutureslab.com or write to hello@ccfutureslab.com.