



A FORESIGHT TOOLKIT RESOURCE

# Scenarios for Reflection

Two provocative futures for community colleges — designed not to predict what will happen, but to surface the assumptions your institution is quietly carrying into the years ahead.

## HOW TO USE THIS

A scenario is not a forecast. It is a structured provocation — a plausible future world built to stretch thinking. Read each scenario with your cabinet, your board, or your department. Then work through the study questions together. The goal is not to decide whether the scenario is "right." It is to notice what your reactions reveal about the assumptions, hopes, and fears your institution holds about its own future. Pay attention to which futures feel exciting, which feel uncomfortable, and which feel difficult to imagine at all — those reactions are where the real conversation begins.

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## Scenario One

### A PROVOCATION, NOT A PREDICTION

# The College as a Place for Meaning

Imagine a future roughly ten years from now. Artificial intelligence has not just made information inexpensive — it has reshaped the labor market itself. Whole categories of work have thinned out. Many more jobs have transitioned into something workers do not recognize and did not train for. The pace of that change has not slowed, and so the very idea of training once for a stable, lasting career has quietly stopped making sense to a great many people.

At the same time, something else has happened. People are lonelier than they have ever been — more isolated, more mediated through screens, more disconnected from place and from one another.

In this future, the historic core of the community college mission — preparing people for jobs — comes under real pressure. Not because workforce development stops mattering, but because the relationship between training and a stable livelihood has become far less certain. And so a hard question surfaces: **if people are no longer coming primarily for job training, why are they coming at all?**

One answer — the uncomfortable one — is that they come for meaning. They come because the college is one of the last places in their community where a person can work out what to do with a life that no longer has an obvious shape. They come for direction, for purpose, for human guidance through transition, for a sense of belonging and contribution. In this future, the community college becomes less a workforce pipeline and more a civic institution for meaning-making in a destabilized world.

For a rural college, this shift may cut especially deep. In many rural regions the community college is not one institution among many — it is *the* institution: the largest shared civic space, the convener, sometimes the largest employer, the place the community still trusts. If work itself becomes unstable, a rural college may discover that its truest role was never only economic. It was holding the community together.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is your first reaction to this scenario — and what does that reaction reveal about what you believe a community college is fundamentally for?
2. If you noticed yourself wanting to push back — "no, workforce training is what we do, that is how we justify our funding" — sit with that. What assumption is underneath that response, and how confident are you that it will hold?
3. If fewer students came to your college primarily for job training, what would they come for instead? Name the things honestly.
4. Which of those things is your institution already good at — but does not talk about, measure, or build its strategy around?
5. Which of those things is your current operating model *not* structured to provide?
6. How would you explain a "meaning-making" mission to a skeptical board member or state legislator? What language would you need? What evidence?

7. What is one small step your college could take in the next year to strengthen its role as a place of belonging and direction — without abandoning its workforce role?

## Scenario Two

A PROVOCATION, NOT A PREDICTION

# The Unbundled Student

Imagine a different future, the same ten years out. In this world, students no longer think of themselves as attending a single institution in a linear way. Learning happens continuously, across many spaces, throughout their lives: colleges, employers, AI-guided platforms, online communities, peer networks, industry credentials, and local organizations. Students move fluidly between these systems depending on need, cost, life circumstance, and career transition — rather than progressing through one clearly bounded educational pathway.

In this future, community colleges still matter deeply — but their role has changed. They are no longer the gatekeepers of knowledge or the sole organizers of someone's learning. They function more as navigators, validators, mentors, and relationship-centered learning hubs within much broader learning ecosystems. Their value comes less from owning content and more from helping students make meaning, direction, and trust inside an increasingly complex landscape.

For a rural student, that navigator role may matter more, not less. A student in a well-resourced metro area has a dozen institutions, employers, and networks within easy reach. A rural student often does not. If learning is scattered across many providers and platforms, the rural college may be the one trusted, local, human anchor that helps a student assemble something coherent out of the pieces.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Today, what does your college assume about how a "typical" student moves through their education? How linear is that assumed pathway?
2. In a world of unbundled learning, what is the single hardest part of your college's current operating model to defend?

3. If your institution's value came from navigation and validation rather than content delivery, what would you need to do differently — in advising, in credentialing, in how you measure success?
4. What does your college offer that students genuinely could not get from an employer, an AI platform, or an online network?
5. How might your relationships with local employers and organizations change if you saw them as partners in a shared learning ecosystem rather than as separate from the college?
6. What would it mean to design your college as a place students return to many times across a lifetime, rather than attend once?

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## Working With Both Scenarios

Once your group has discussed both futures, consider these final questions together:

- Neither scenario is a prediction. But your **current strategic plan quietly assumes a particular future**. Based on these two provocations, what future does your plan appear to assume — and would you actually bet on it?
- What do both scenarios have in common? What might that shared ground be telling you?
- What is one assumption about your college's future that this exercise has made you less certain about than you were an hour ago?

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This resource is part of the Community College Futures Lab foresight toolkit. To go further — foresight workshops, board sessions, and foresight-informed strategic planning — visit [ccfutureslab.com](https://ccfutureslab.com) or write to [hello@ccfutureslab.com](mailto:hello@ccfutureslab.com).