

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT WORKSHOP

The Future, Reexamined

Community College League of California · January 2026

In January 2026, fifteen CEOs and trustees from California community colleges convened for a Strategic Foresight Workshop. Strategic foresight is a structured practice for thinking systematically about the future—not to predict what will happen, but to expand the range of futures leaders are prepared to act in.

Participants surfaced assumptions, mapped key drivers of change, built four distinct scenarios, and shaped a preferred future for the California Community College system. This briefing summarizes the workshop's findings across four sections: assumptions worth reexamining, drivers shaping the future, four scenarios for a 10–15 year horizon, and a preferred vision.

Workshop Participants

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Assumptions Worth Reexamining

Long-held beliefs that shape how the CCC system currently operates—and that may be limiting its capacity to evolve.

Learning & Educational Structure

- Seat time is a valid measure of learning and competence.
- The traditional course-based model remains fit for purpose.
- Being educated means acquiring formal academic knowledge.

Students & Institutional Responsibility

- Students arrive deficient and must be fixed by the institution.
- Current faculty qualifications and pedagogical norms are sufficient.

Workforce, Governance & System Design

- The jobs students prepare for today will still exist tomorrow.
- FTES and seat-time funding models serve students well.
- Local governance structures are agile enough to drive rapid change.
- California needs 116 colleges in their current form.
- Collective bargaining agreements define the limits of transformation.

These assumptions are not necessarily wrong, but they are no longer self-evident. Naming them is the first step in determining which still serve the system, and which must be rethought as conditions change.

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Drivers Shaping the Future

Forces Already Reshaping Community Colleges · The STEEP Framework

Using the STEEP framework, participants identified the forces already reshaping community colleges. These are not predictions—they are signals of change already underway that will compound over the next decade.

Framing

STEEP organizes drivers across five dimensions—Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political—so that the full landscape of change is in view, not just the forces in any one domain.

Social

- Widening wealth inequality and declining social mobility.
- Demographic shifts: declining enrollment pipelines and aging communities.
- Rising student mental health challenges straining institutional capacity.
- Social media–driven polarization weakening civic trust and shared narratives.
- Changing definitions of literacy, intelligence, and academic merit.

Economic

- Gigification of work destabilizing traditional career and credential pipelines.
- Loss of middle-skill, middle-wage jobs intensifying reskilling pressure.
- Economic anxiety and displacement reshaping learner motivations and program demand.
- Chronic state underinvestment constraining institutional agility.
- Volatility from rapid federal policy swings injecting uncertainty into planning.

Political

- Deepening polarization destabilizing long-term policy continuity.
- Education funding becoming more volatile, politicized, and contingent.
- Federal role in education increasingly uncertain, reshaping accreditation.

Technological

- Artificial intelligence disrupting instruction, assessment, and administration.
- Accelerating pace of change outpacing institutional adaptation.
- Persistent digital divide reinforcing geographic and socioeconomic inequity.

Environmental

- Climate instability disrupting operations and displacing students and staff.
- Climate-driven migration creating enrollment volatility across communities.
- Emerging green careers creating new workforce demand colleges must address.
- Cross-sector climate collaboration redefining the college's community role.

No single driver determines the future of the system. What matters is how these forces interact and compound—reshaping the conditions in which every institutional decision is made.

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Four Scenarios

Plausible Futures for the CCC System · 10–15 Year Horizon

Participants developed four scenarios representing plausible futures for the CCC system. These are strategic tools for stress-testing assumptions—not predictions of what will happen.

Framing

Scenarios are not forecasts. They are deliberately distinct futures, each internally consistent, used to test how institutional decisions hold up under different conditions.

BASELINE Drift and Decline

The system continues under current rules and incentives. Enrollment declines unevenly—one-third of colleges shrink significantly, one-third stagnate, one-third survive by capturing niche markets. Market share erodes to private providers and ed-tech platforms. AI shrinks the institutional workforce. State funding declines in real terms; access for vulnerable populations narrows. *The CCC system still exists—but diminished, fragmented, and politically fragile.*

EQUILIBRIUM Managed Contraction

After prolonged volatility, the system stabilizes at a lower but more predictable level of funding and enrollment. Colleges narrow their missions to preserve solvency, streamline programs, and adopt AI to control costs. Credentialing becomes more modular and workforce-aligned. Governance grows more pragmatic and risk-averse. *The system avoids collapse—but permanently sacrifices growth, innovation, and civic breadth.*

COLLAPSE Systemic Rupture

A major fiscal shock—compounded by natural disaster and federal funding contraction—triggers rapid breakdown. Districts declare bankruptcy, campuses close, and a 50%+ system-wide budget cut is imposed. Massive layoffs follow. Program offerings collapse to narrow workforce training, transfer pathways disappear, and for-profit providers fill the vacuum. *The CCC system survives in name only—with dramatically reduced reach and civic purpose.*

TRANSFORMATION New Architecture

The rules of learning are rewritten entirely. Seat time is abolished and the academic calendar disappears. Education becomes modular, lifelong, and learner-sovereign. Learners build living portfolios in place of degrees, defended before faculty councils. AI guides personalized pathways while faculty become mentors and learning architects. Campuses evolve into open civic intelligence hubs. *This is a civilizational reboot—not a policy reform.*

Each scenario reveals different pressures, vulnerabilities, and choices. Together, they create a strategic frame in which today's decisions can be tested against the futures they help create.

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Preferred Vision

A System in Motion · Repositioning Community Colleges as Civic and Economic Hubs

Community colleges are repositioned through federal and state policy as regional civic and economic hubs. Renewed public investment enables expanded pathways including applied bachelor's degrees, micro-credentials, apprenticeships, and competency-based recognition of prior learning. Financial aid is redesigned for short-term and workforce-aligned programs, and colleges formally serve as

training centers for local businesses. Faculty roles shift toward program design and validation alongside industry experts, supported by AI, robotics, AR, and VR. Campuses are rebuilt as shared community spaces with embedded partners delivering social supports. Accountability and funding align with workforce impact, student mobility, and public outcomes rather than institutional outputs.

The System Is Shifting

FROM	TO
Primarily instructional institutions	→ Community hubs that organize learning, connection, and opportunity
Serving mostly time-bound students	→ Serving learners across all stages of life, with open entry, exit, and re-entry
Academic calendars and term-based progression	→ Flexible learning structures where students can enter, pause, and return without penalty
Seat time, credits, and grades	→ Competencies, skills, and demonstrated capability
Courses as the core unit	→ Portfolios and demonstrated work as the primary way learning is assessed
Marginal recognition of prior learning	→ Systematic validation of lived experience and prior learning
A single dominant pathway	→ Multiple pathways including micro-credentials, certificates, transfer, and applied degrees
Modality neutrality	→ Actively helping learners determine whether in-person, online, or hybrid works best
Faculty-as-lecturers	→ Faculty-as-guides, validators, and assessors, with human coaching as a core function
Advising as a support service	→ Mentoring and coaching as central to the learning experience
AI as a pilot or tool	→ AI embedded across learning, advising, and assessment
Administrative burden dominating human work	→ AI reducing administration so humans focus on higher-value engagement
Colleges delivering all services internally	→ Community partnerships as core infrastructure, with non-academic supports through partners
Campuses as places to attend class	→ Campuses as welcoming, social, community-oriented spaces
Implicit workforce alignment	→ Explicit preparation for career mobility, with clearer signals of competence for employers
Colleges as endpoints	→ Colleges as gateways to further education
Output-based funding	→ Funding aligned with broader public purpose
Institutional success defined by throughput	→ Success defined by learner progress toward individual goals
Fixed institutional design	→ Flexibility and personalization as the organizing principles of learning and the institution itself