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Leading Through Disruption

How California Community College CEOs Are Navigating Political Volatility, Artificial Intelligence, and the Demands of the Role

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP has always demanded resilience and adaptability. But today's CEOs are leading through a crucible unlike any in recent memory. In just a few years, they have guided their institutions through a global pandemic, a national reckoning over race and equity, heightened political scrutiny of higher education, shifting federal priorities, fiscal uncertainty, and the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). Together, these forces are reshaping not only how colleges operate but also what leadership itself requires.¹

This convergence of challenges has become a defining test for community college CEOs. Beyond managing institutions, today's leaders must also lead through political complexity, technological disruption, competing public expectations, and increasing demands on their own time and well-being—all while maintaining momentum on student success and institutional change. At the same time, leadership turnover, political and fiscal pressures, and growing public scrutiny are raising important questions about how today's CEOs are prepared, supported, and sustained.² Perhaps more than ever before, successful CEOs must navigate complexity, ambiguity, and political resistance—especially toward equity-related change efforts—as they strive to improve student outcomes through meaningful institutional change.³

To better understand how California community college CEOs are experiencing this moment, and to inform the next generation of leadership development, Wheelhouse surveyed California campus and district leaders statewide in fall 2025. Their responses offer a snapshot of the community college presidency at a pivotal moment, revealing leaders who are deeply committed to their students and communities yet are confronting new challenges that demand new forms of leadership and new sources of support to sustain their tenures and success.

TOPLINES

- > Community college CEOs are leading through a crucible of political volatility, financial uncertainty, and rapid technological change that is reshaping and redefining the CEOship itself.
- > While CEOs report feeling well prepared in many core relational and strategic competencies, including faculty relations, board engagement, and advancing institutional priorities, they identify the political climate and artificial intelligence (AI) as areas where additional support and development would strengthen their leadership. Explore our [companion brief](#) on AI challenges and opportunities for a deeper look.
- > Leadership sustainability is a growing concern, with CEOs citing stress, burnout, and the emotional demands of supporting campus communities through prolonged uncertainty while remaining deeply committed to their students, institutions, and communities.
- > Findings underscore the importance of leadership development and networks, emphasizing the need for ongoing, peer-based learning focused on AI, resource development, political navigation, campus climate, and sustaining leaders themselves.



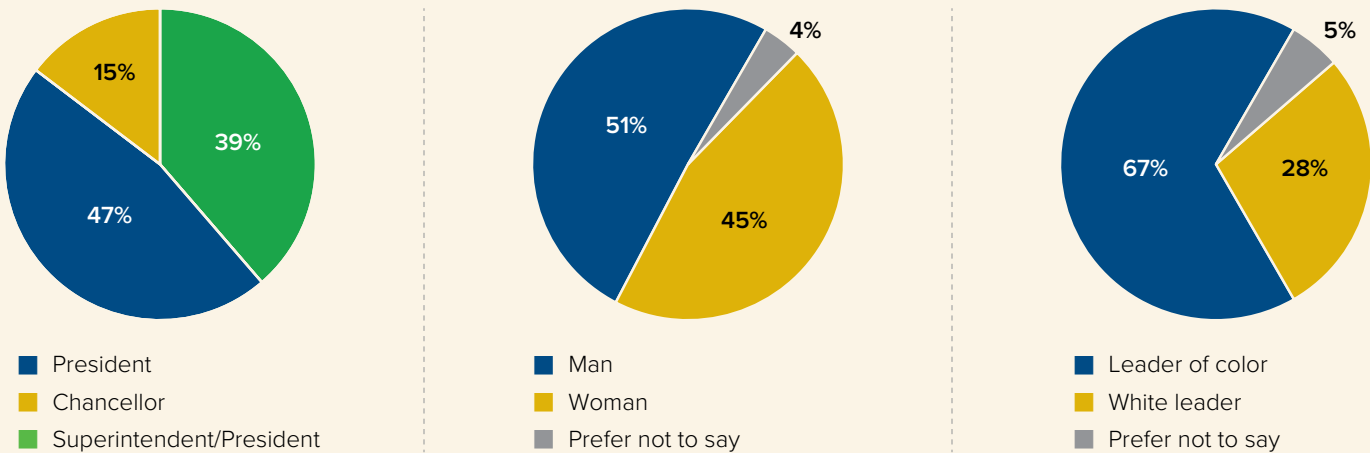
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Who We Heard From

Results are based on responses from 75 CEOs across the state (66% response rate) who have participated in Wheelhouse leadership development institutes during the past decade. Respondents include campus presidents, superintendents/presidents, and chancellors representing diverse backgrounds and contexts statewide (Figure 1). Most respondents (61%) serve in multi-college districts as presidents or chancellors while 39% lead single-college districts as superintendents/presidents. Respondents are also evenly distributed across rural, urban, and suburban regions, with approximately one third in each context, and reflect diversity in leadership backgrounds and identities. Forty-five percent are women CEOs, which closely aligns with statewide gender representation of CEOs.⁴ Two thirds of respondents (67%) identify as leaders of color.

Figure 1. Profile of Survey Respondents (N = 75)

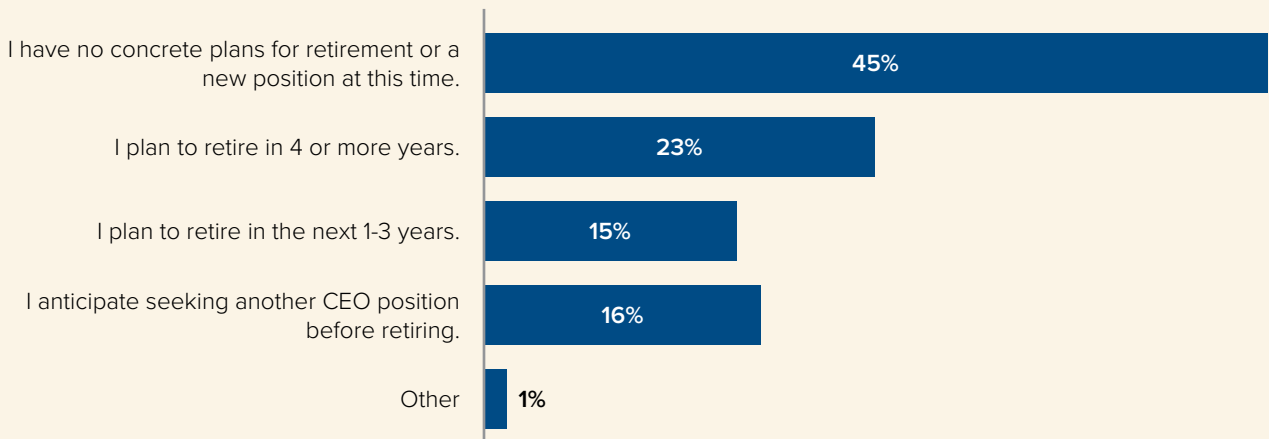


Note. Data may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Respondents reflect a range of tenure in their CEO roles, with more than half (57%) serving between 3 and 7 years, 16% with more than a decade of experience, and 12% with 2 years' experience or less.

When asked about their CEO transition plans (Figure 2), 45% of respondents shared that they did not have any concrete plans to retire or pursue a new position at this time while 16% anticipated seeking another CEO role before retiring.

Figure 2. CEO Transition Plans



Navigating Political and External Pressures

In candid, open-ended survey responses, CEOs described having to operate within an increasingly volatile political and policy environment that shapes institutional priorities, constraints, and risks while they are also determined to stay focused on students and mission. This includes navigating shifting federal and state priorities, pushback on “how to support DEIA [diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility] in a time when national leaders are making it ‘illegal’ to do so,” and immigration policy as well as uncertainty from the current administration, which have all affected institutional direction and constrained local decision-making. For some leaders, these dynamics affect board relationships, campus climate, decision-making under increasing political pressure, and the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. One CEO shared the need for crisis management and board development given that “boards often flip from Democrats to Republican or MAGA individuals ... [which] requires much political savviness to manage a board who comes with this political background.” Another CEO shared that the “current political environment [puts] pressure on our people. They bring that stress and tension into the workplace.” Political dynamics have also required some leaders to grapple with the importance of protecting their students and institutional values while maintaining neutrality and facilitating difficult conversations on campus.

Despite these pressures, CEOs described a sector that is resilient, relevant, and ready. When asked how they see the role and perception of community colleges evolving within the national dialogue about higher education, one CEO identified community colleges as “the only bipartisan part of higher ed.” For a number of CEOs, this moment also represented an opportunity to step forward and define the sector’s role more boldly on its own terms, highlighting their strong community ties and a workforce mission that resonates across political lines as reasons for confidence in a sector that, as one CEO put it, is “more relevant than ever now ... [and whose] role as the primary provider of career education will become more important in the coming years.”

“[I am] trying to navigate the significant cuts to the MSI [minority-serving institution] programs to prevent layoffs and maintain the important equity work, how to resist the fascism currently occurring in our country, how to protect my students and campus community from ICE [Immigrations and Customs Enforcement] and the political violence occurring.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

“[I am] managing and surviving the current political [environment] so we can stay mission-focused and driven in a way that affirms our students, elevates the economic and workforce viability of our service area and investing in post-graduation success of our students.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“Top of mind for me is leading with clarity and integrity amid national and federal instability, shifting policies, and growing fiscal and enrollment pressures. This includes aligning local decision-making with statewide priorities while modeling ethical, values-based leadership and sustaining institutional trust, equity, and student success.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“There is the national move toward being value neutral and shying away from a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. For us to truly serve all of our students, the college and the workforce partners, we need to focus on outcomes, equity gaps, student success data, economic impact.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

Managing Financial Uncertainty and Institutional Risk

Financial instability also emerged as a major concern for CEOs in the current moment. Some of the fiscal pressures that CEOs noted include declining enrollment, limited funding, and sustaining their institutional impact with constrained resources. One CEO shared the difficulty of navigating “declining state funding and decrease of enrollment while [being] expected to continually address emerging priorities.” For some of these leaders, these financial pressures represent an institutional risk, particularly considering financial viability and long-term sustainability.

Several CEOs reflected on these challenges with a determination to rethink traditional funding approaches and expand their capacity in areas such as fundraising, advocacy, and strategic partnerships. One CEO shared: “As my community is poised for significant growth, I must diversify resources to grow our programs and facilities to respond to community needs.” In addition to diversifying revenue streams, this means exploring alternative strategies and funding sources to sustain institutional priorities, including engaging more with foundations, industry partners, and other external stakeholders as well as systems and frameworks that could support more effective collaboration with foundations to strengthen institutional advancement efforts.

Leading in an Environment of Constant Change and Competing Demands

CEOs also described leadership as increasingly defined by the need to navigate constant change across political, economic, and technological domains, all while responding to multiple competing demands. One CEO shared: “The pace of change has accelerated. Navigating through this reality will become an increasing challenge for us all. This reality will show up as climate issues, faculty dynamics, resource allocation, etc.” Within this context, leaders described competing institutional priorities, including the importance of focusing on student success while managing external demands such as shifting workforce needs, compliance requirements, and resource constraints.

These competing demands are further shaped by internal governance structures and organizational dynamics. Some leaders described having to navigate complex relationships with faculty, unions, boards, and district leadership, which could both support and constrain institutional progress. One CEO shared the difficulty of “providing effective leadership in an environment that is overly influenced by collective bargaining units and is hamstrung by a lack of fiscal resources.” Others highlighted the challenge of leading in multi-college districts, including the need to “manage up” when district-level decisions are perceived as misaligned with college needs.

“Finding a path forward for public higher education in a time where our federal administration is defunding critical educational programs and research ... how can we shift to funding opportunities, such as private foundations, that could help sustain our programs and services while we restructure our institutions?”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

“The fiscal challenges keep me up at night and are the greatest risk to my district/college. The implications of shuttering an institution is catastrophic for students and community. Our district/college is making every effort to adapt. ... We have a small runway to increase revenue through enrollment and other innovative activities. We’re being bold and touching every political rail. My area of growth is diversifying funding streams, while remaining laser focused on student success and educational equity for all.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

The advancement of AI provides a clear example of how new and rapidly evolving issues are being layered onto an already complex leadership environment. Because responding CEOs were so focused on the new demands of the AI landscape, we authored a separate companion brief that takes a deeper look at AI leadership in the California Community Colleges; see [*Revolution Without Precedent: California Community College CEOs on Leading in the Age of AI*](#). Several CEOs described AI as both a source of opportunity and concern, particularly regarding its implications for teaching and learning, the workforce, and institutional operations. One CEO candidly shared: “AI is a black box for me. I really need to enhance my understanding of how it can be used effectively to address issues inside and outside of the classroom.” Similarly, other CEOs highlighted the need to ensure that their faculty, staff, and students are prepared to engage with AI responsibly and ethically. At the same time, one CEO expressed concerns about their system and district “not hav[ing] enough flexibility to respond appropriately to AI while keeping our autonomy, values, and stewardship of academic integrity, curriculum, and the planet intact.” Yet alongside these concerns, some CEOs highlighted community colleges’ adaptability, nimbleness, and responsiveness as strengths in response to AI, describing community colleges as “built for moments like this” with “a clear advantage in adapting quickly, forming new partnerships, and creating programs that blend technology with ethics and human understanding.”

Leadership Sustainability and Emotional Demands

Several CEOs described the personal and emotional demands of the role as increasingly present. In addition to navigating institutional priorities, some CEOs shared concerns related to campus climate, morale, and well-being, pointing to increased strain among faculty, staff, and students, particularly in the current political climate. One shared that “morale across the campus is understandably fragile” while others noted the difficulty of maintaining cohesion and trust across campus constituencies amid ongoing change. In this context, leaders emphasized the growing responsibility of supporting the well-being of others while continuing to lead the institution. One CEO shared: “The greatest challenge I have right now is guiding folks on campus to maintain well-being. ... I’m sure it’s the national backdrop that’s contributing to it. Navigating through it myself is difficult, but feeling the expectation that I will guide the college and its personnel and students through it only adds to the difficulty.” Yet even within these demands, some

“Navigating the evolving landscape of higher education amid the rapid advancements in artificial intelligence presents both opportunities and challenges. Ensuring that our faculty, staff, and students are prepared to leverage AI responsibly and effectively requires ongoing professional development, strategic planning, and careful consideration of ethical implications.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

“Higher education is experiencing a massive disruption. I am looking for support on how to position my college for maximum student success when living wage outcomes and rapidly shifting industries make our current thinking/models quickly dated.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN/SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“I have placed greater emphasis on humanizing the roles of executive leaders in our [college/district], giving time and space in executive meetings to discuss how we can better support each other in an environment where our humanity is not recognized, and openly discussing the personal demands of leadership.

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

leaders described taking deliberate steps to cultivate care and belonging on their campuses, including prioritizing a culture in which faculty, staff, and administrators feel seen, supported, and united around a shared commitment to students; creating intentional spaces within their leadership teams to acknowledge and discuss the personal demands of the role; finding ways to keep all campus constituencies engaged and connected to the institution's mission despite external pressures; and spotlighting the collaborative successes and cross-departmental partnerships already happening on their campuses as a way of demonstrating what is possible and building momentum even when morale feels fragile and trust is still taking root.

A few CEOs also reflected on the personal toll to be paid, describing challenges related to burnout, stress, and maintaining their own well-being. One leader raised questions about how to build capacity amid complex and constant demands, sharing: "Leadership changes are becoming more complex and overwhelming. How do we develop the necessary coping skills and do more than reacting?" Within these reflections, some also shared a forward-looking orientation, highlighting the need to find "time for self-reflection, leading by transformation; less on reactive, crisis-oriented leadership" and the need for "collective/systemic approaches that support us and our longevity."

Where Leaders Feel Prepared and Where They Do Not

Despite growing demands, many CEOs report feeling well prepared in several leadership competencies that are critical to their role and success (Figure 3). Overall, leaders feel the most prepared in their ability to build and sustain positive faculty relations, advance progress on priority initiatives, and work with the board of trustees or chancellor.

Leaders reported more mixed levels of preparedness in areas requiring navigation of complex interpersonal and organizational dynamics, including addressing campus climate issues, managing crisis response and communications, and responding to community politics and external pressures. Similar patterns were seen in leaders' ability to understand and navigate governance and legislative ecosystems and to raise adequate resources to support the institution.

CEOs felt less prepared in their ability to navigate the current political environment and find a healthy balance between work and other important aspects of their life. Overall, they felt the least prepared to address the role and impact of AI on the institution, highlighting this area as a critical focus for professional development.

"With the shifting political climate and the rapid progress of AI, it's difficult to maintain a healthy campus climate that is focused on strategic, student-focused initiatives. Many areas of the campus feel defeated by federal-level politics and many areas feel fearful of being replaced by AI. It is difficult to lead grounded innovation in this climate that is foundational and enduring. I would love to engage in further professional development on this."

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

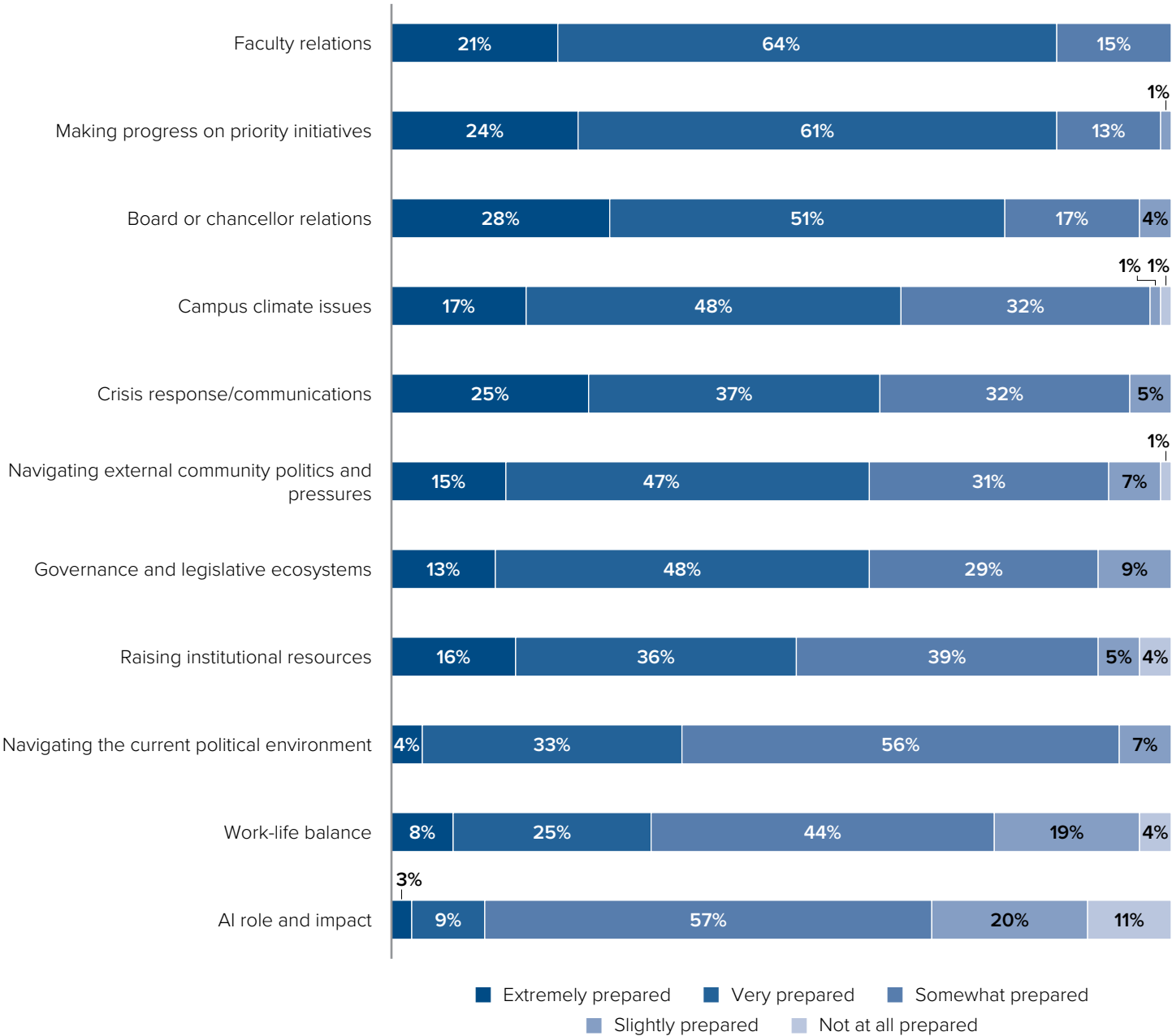
"How to avoid burnout is at the top of my list. In a culture where everyone chooses to argue and fight rather than come together to work on issues, it is very difficult to maintain hope and optimism. It is impacting my mental health and honestly makes me question if I want to continue in a leadership role."

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

"Top of mind for me is how to lead with urgency and humanity at the same time—delivering measurable improvements in student outcomes while cultivating trust, belonging, and shared ownership across the district."

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

Figure 3. CEO Preparedness Across Key Leadership Competencies

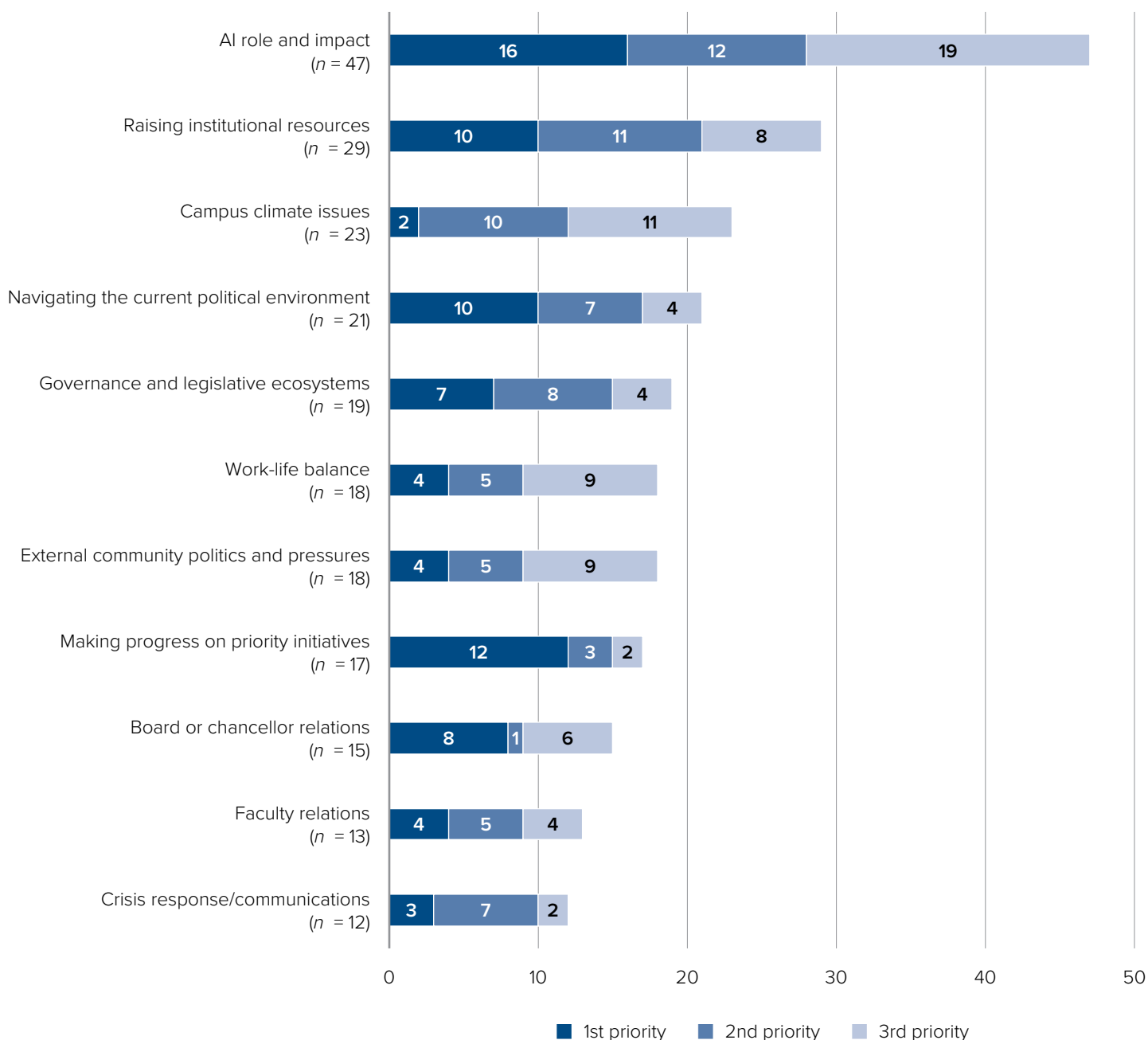


Note. Data may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Priority Areas for Support and Development

When asked about their priorities for their own leadership development and support, CEOs ranked the role and impact of AI as the most urgent need (Figure 4), mirroring their identification of AI as the area where they feel least prepared. Two thirds of respondents ($n = 47$) called it a top priority, ranking it in their top three areas of professional development. Raising institutional resources emerged as another priority, which aligns with recurring themes CEOs reported regarding financial pressures and sustainability. CEOs also identified campus climate issues ($n = 23$) and navigating the current political environment ($n = 21$) as key areas for support.

Figure 4. Distribution of Ranked Professional Development and Support Priorities



While work-life balance was one area where leaders reported feeling least prepared, it was not among the most frequently selected issues as a priority for support. This may suggest that while CEOs recognize this challenge, they are prioritizing institutional demands over personal needs.

When asked what additional resources, programming, or support would be most valuable moving forward, CEOs pointed to the following priorities:

- **Advanced, applied leadership development**
 - Deeper training in governance, board relations, and navigating political and legislative environments
 - Practical skill building in fundraising, foundation work, and external resource development
 - Scenario-based learning and case studies focused on real-world challenges (e.g., crisis leadership, labor relations, legal risk)
- **Ongoing and stage-specific learning opportunities**
 - Continued education beyond one-time institutes, including periodic webinars and refresher sessions
 - Programming tailored to different stages of leadership, including experienced CEOs and those transitioning into system-level roles
- **Peer connection, mentoring, and coaching**
 - Expanded cohort-based learning and structured peer networks
 - Executive coaching and mentoring for both sitting and aspiring CEOs
 - Opportunities for candid dialogue and shared problem-solving across institutions
- **Affinity-based and identity-centered spaces**
 - Continued and expanded affinity group convenings (e.g., women leaders, leaders of color, rural or underrepresented leaders)
 - Spaces that support connection, validation, and shared experience in what can be an isolating role
- **System-level collaboration and policy engagement**
 - Opportunities to engage in statewide problem-solving and cross-college collaboration
 - Support for navigating legislative processes and building advocacy capacity
 - Greater coordination across organizations providing leadership development
- **Practical support in emerging and high-priority areas**
 - Guidance on integrating AI into institutional practice
 - Support for digital transformation and operational efficiency
 - Resources related to workforce development and aligning programs with regional and state needs
- **Tools for organizational leadership and effectiveness**
 - Training in change management, strategic planning, and data-informed decision-making
 - Support for managing personnel, collective bargaining, and organizational culture
 - Frameworks for evaluating program effectiveness and communicating return on investment
- **Support for leadership sustainability and well-being**
 - Resources focused on work-life balance, self-development, and resilience
 - Opportunities for reflection and renewal, including smaller, facilitated learning spaces

Strengthening the Leadership Pipeline

Several CEOs spoke directly about the importance of their role in supporting the development of the next generation of leaders. This emphasis comes at a time when leadership tenure across the state remains relatively short and many new CEOs have been entering the role in recent years.⁵ One shared the importance of “building and growing the next level of leadership in the system and at our campuses” while another viewed their “role as developing the next generation of leaders, ensuring that the institution is not only strong during my tenure, but sustainably positioned for the future.”

While respondents noted the importance of the technical aspects of the CEO role, including building competency in budgeting, human resources, and institutional operations, they emphasized that critical preparation develops leaders who can navigate complexity, build relationships, and lead in highly political environments.

A consistent theme was the importance of developing and expanding political acumen and mastery of governance. CEOs highlighted the necessity of understanding how to work effectively with boards of trustees, navigate political dynamics, and manage relationships with unions and other key stakeholders. CEOs also highlighted the value of moving from management to leading people and shaping institutional direction, underscoring the need to develop and strengthen emotional intelligence, authenticity, and the ability to build trust.

One CEO shared: “Future CEOs must be prepared to communicate transparently, manage competing stakeholder expectations, and balance short-term demands with long-term institutional strategy.” Another underscored the importance of developing their vision for the institution, given that leaders who are not CEOs “tend to be very focused on the here and now and not ready for looking up and around the corner at what’s about to happen.”

CEOs emphasized the importance of mentorship and hands-on experience. Some CEOs suggested providing opportunities for aspiring leaders to engage directly in CEO-level responsibilities, including board relations, crisis management, and community engagement. CEOs also acknowledged the increasing pressures of the CEO role and the personal impact that these pressures could have, including burnout, isolation, and heightened expectations. One CEO noted that “the burnout is real,” emphasizing how critical it is to find a work-life balance in this role. These realities have contributed to concerns about the strength of the leadership pipeline, with at least one CEO observing that fewer people are interested in moving into CEO roles, underscoring the need for intentional efforts to both prepare and inspire future leaders.

What We Know About What Helps

The responses from CEOs reflecting on their own professional development experiences offer some important evidence about what effective support actually looks like in practice. The most consistently valued resource was the opportunity and space to be with and learn from other leaders, with many pointing to the ongoing relationships built through Wheelhouse and other professional leadership cohort experiences as their most enduring and practical source of support. As one CEO put it, “I call members of my cohort when I need a trusted thought partner.”

CEOs also pointed to the value of spaces that integrate research, reflection, and practice. Some leaders described how leadership frameworks and ways of thinking they encountered through professional development continued to shape their decision-making and leadership years later, including giving them greater confidence, stronger self-awareness, more effective engagement of their leadership teams in collective problem solving, and an improved ability to navigate complex faculty dynamics and board relationships with greater clarity and perspective. For a smaller number of CEOs, identity-centered and

“We are contending with increasing political pressures and policy shifts from the current administration, which impact funding, compliance, and institutional priorities. Balancing these external demands while maintaining our commitment to student success, equity, and academic excellence is a key area of focus for my professional development and leadership growth.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

“Equipping prospective CEOs, particularly those from marginalized communities, is inspiring others to see themselves in these roles and destigmatize some of the beliefs that have been instilled over the years, to create the kind of mindset that reinforces the belief and passion to enter these roles in the first place.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“I believe the next generation of aspiring CEOs needs ... development that goes beyond management skills and dives into how to influence others, build trust, and lead through complexity. That means understanding the whole picture, both the micro and macro environments that shape decision-making in our institutions.”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

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affinity-based spaces were noted as uniquely valuable and central to their ability to lead with confidence and authenticity. This suggests that investing in and building cohort-based opportunities for reflective, adaptive leadership is now more critical than ever.

Strengthening effective leadership amid volatility requires continued investment in applied learning, peer connection, mentorship and coaching, affinity-based leadership spaces, and sustained networks that acknowledge and support the realities of a singular and important role. As one CEO reflected, such resources can help “ensure that California’s community college leaders are not only prepared to meet current demands, but are also supported in leading with resilience, courage, and long-term impact.”

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