



Revolution Without Precedent

California Community College CEOs on Leading in the Age of AI

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) is rapidly reshaping the economy and major industries in ways that community colleges—and the rest of higher education—cannot ignore. Its implications extend well beyond the classroom, touching teaching and learning, student support, institutional operations, and the labor market that colleges prepare students to enter.¹ For California Community Colleges (CCCs), which serve more than two million students and represent one of the state’s most important engines of educational opportunity and economic mobility, the stakes are particularly high. AI is changing not only the skills students will need but also the ways colleges themselves can deliver on their educational missions. At the same time, the students who are most vulnerable to AI-driven labor market disruption are the very students whom community colleges were created to serve,² raising the stakes on questions of access, adoption, and equity.

Much of the conversation about AI in higher education has focused on its implications for teaching, learning, academic integrity, or the future of work. Far less attention has been given to what AI requires of the leaders responsible for guiding institutions through this period of rapid change. As the capabilities of AI continually evolve, college presidents and chancellors are making strategic decisions about technologies whose applications, limitations, and long-term implications are themselves changing quickly. Leaders must navigate competing expectations from faculty, governing boards, students, employers, policymakers, and technology providers while working through governance structures and institutional processes that were not designed for this pace of change—all while steering institutions that are often unprepared for AI’s broader impact and the resources its adoption will require.

Across the interviews and survey research that informed this brief, CCC CEOs consistently returned to this: While AI is the catalyst, they see the fundamental challenge as one of leadership rather than technology.

TOPLINES

- > California community college CEOs named artificial intelligence (AI) as their number-one professional development need and described navigating it largely on their own.
- > CEOs span a wide range of AI readiness, personally and institutionally, and they share a common challenge as AI developments move faster than the governance structures and faculty cultures that they are responsible for leading.
- > Faculty reluctance to use AI is real but not universal, with some faculty champions proving to be among the most powerful forces for change.
- > AI is already transforming what is possible in teaching, student services, and operations, but realizing that potential requires institutional redesign.
- > The students most at risk of being left behind by the AI shift are the same students community colleges were primarily built to serve, and how institutions act now will determine on which side of that divide their students land.
- > CEOs say what they need most now is to build acumen alongside their peers, get hands-on practice with AI tools, and develop an institutional plan they can take back and build from.

No matter where they and their institutions fell on the continuum of AI readiness, leaders described the need to develop enough fluency to ask better questions, engage meaningfully with technical experts, lead change through shared governance, and help their institutions adapt while remaining grounded in the community college mission. This brief examines how CEOs are making sense of that challenge, where they perceive the greatest opportunities and obstacles, and what kinds of leadership they believe this moment demands of them.

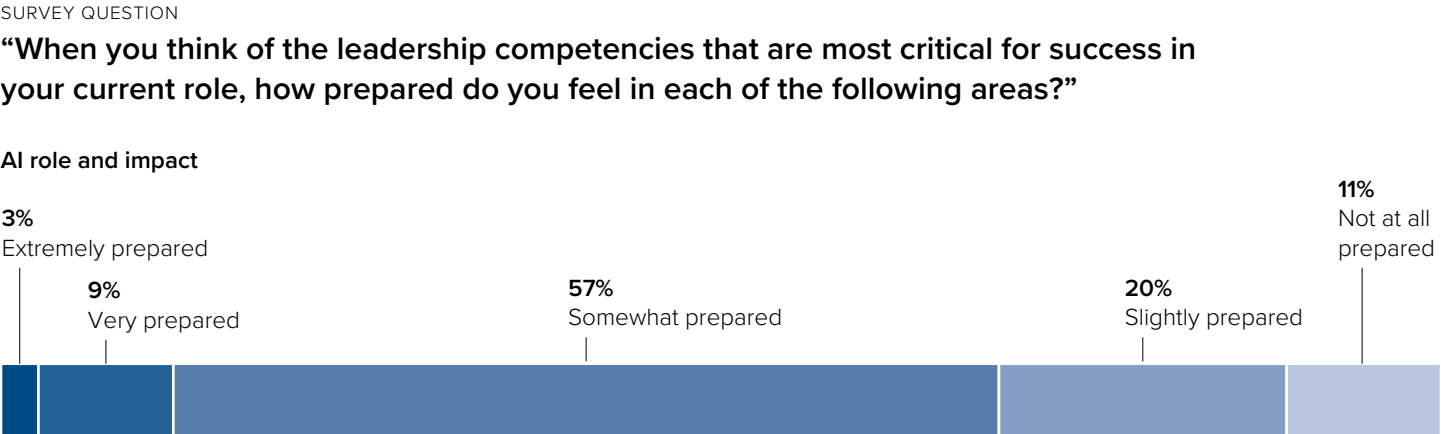
“This is no longer, in my mind, about AI. This is about leadership and leadership’s ability to steer the ship, if you will, into a new reality. ... AI just happens to be the vehicle we’re using for that conversation.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN AND SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

Data and Methods

This brief draws primarily on a series of interviews and small-group conversations with eight CCC CEOs, including college presidents, chancellors, and superintendents/presidents from multi-college and single college districts in rural, suburban, and urban regions. The findings of this brief are supplemented with findings from a statewide survey of CCC CEOs. The survey (see [Leading Through Disruption: How California Community College CEOs Are Navigating Political Volatility, Artificial Intelligence, and the Demands of the Role](#)) was conducted in November 2025 among CEOs across the state, with a 66% response rate. The survey asked CEOs about their leadership development needs and preparedness across a range of competencies, including addressing the role and impact of AI. Among CEOs, only 12% said they felt *extremely* or *very prepared* for addressing the role and impact of AI on their institution (Figure 1). Given that AI emerged as both a top priority and the area of lowest preparedness in the survey, the interviews and small-group conversations were designed to gather more direct evidence on what CEOs are experiencing and what kind of support around AI would help them feel more prepared to address it.

Figure 1. California Community College CEOs’ Self-Reported Preparedness for the Role and Impact of AI (N = 75)



Among those interviewed were CEOs who were self-reported early adopters already redesigning their institutional infrastructure around AI, leaders who described feeling behind, and those who had made meaningful strides in integrating AI across specific areas of their institutions. Transcripts were coded for the leadership dimensions of AI adoption, which included readiness, leadership mindset and ownership, faculty and governance dynamics, equity implications, institutional transformation, and professional development needs. While the findings reflect the perspectives of a select group of CCC CEOs, the diversity of our sample allowed us to capture a meaningful spectrum of perspectives on the AI challenges, opportunities, and leadership needs that this moment demands.

Where Leaders and Institutions Actually Are

Reflecting on their use of AI both personally and institutionally, leaders described a wide range of experiences. Leaders shared how they are using AI, ranging from occasional use of ChatGPT to daily reliance on Claude as a primary research and communications tool. One CEO described using Claude to identify research, a task that used to take an hour but now takes just a few seconds. Another CEO shared that they used Claude as a tool to identify how different audiences may respond to public communication on a sensitive topic and identify “the trigger points for controversy.” Reflecting on the use of AI within leadership teams, one CEO noted that their team was still finding their footing, sharing: “We have had conversations about identifying when you use AI and when you don’t use AI. We don’t yet have ... a perfect tool, but we know it’s something that needs to happen systematically.” Some colleges and districts have launched agentic student support tools and automated operational functions, while others are still working on their board and participatory governance processes on the institution’s first AI policy.

This variation of AI adoption and readiness reflects the genuine complexity of leading AI integration in institutions with significant governance constraints, resource limitations, competing priorities, and internal resistance, with one CEO sharing: “In our [college/district], it’s a very complicated thing. We have an extremely vocal minority that would encourage us to act like AI doesn’t exist.” Variation within institutions is also common. This same CEO described parts of their institution being “in very different places,” with some eager to adopt agentic student support tools because of staffing constraints in these areas while others were more resistant, and their leaders were “trying to manage what [AI is] doing internally and the kind of fractures and relationships that it’s caused in some areas.”

Regardless of where they fell on the spectrum of AI use, several CEOs highlighted challenges emerging at an unprecedented pace. One CEO shared that prior technology revolutions, including the internet and home computing, were significant, but they moved slowly enough that institutions could find their footing; they recognized that AI is not developing in that way. Leaders described addressing the issue of AI with a sense of urgency and a challenge that is pedagogical, operational, ethical, and strategic all at once—and that keeps shifting before any one piece can be resolved. One CEO named the stakes directly, sharing:

My question that I’m burning with is are we going to be able to go as fast as the AI is going to go? Systematically, can colleges change? Can they adopt the technology? Because at this point, ... we know that every corporation in America is fully leveraging AI.

“For me, it’s been leading in the midst of ambiguity... this is probably one of the things I’ve had the most lack of clarity about, not necessarily ethically, but maybe both pedagogically and operationally, as well as the rapid change and trying to understand all the different iterations of AI and what that means for the institution, what that means for my students, what that means for teaching and learning. It’s just a whole aspect of leadership that is, to me, feeling a little chaotic. And I haven’t felt that way about leadership before ... not even in COVID.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“I think that [the] pace is going to be a challenge to keep up with for ... our institutions, the helping everybody to understand you’re going to need to understand how AI is going to impact your program, your work ... while also making sure that we’re doing it ethically, because there ... certainly are some challenges around it. ”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

The Leadership This Moment Is Calling For

Across the focus group conversations, it was clear that the challenge AI poses for community college leaders is not primarily technical but rather about mindset, ownership, and the courage to lead through something new. Ready or not, this moment is calling for leaders who see AI not as a technology problem to be handed off but as a leadership challenge to be owned.

Across conversations, it became clear what that ownership looks like, which included leaders being able to engage in conversations around AI and ask better questions. Drawing from Paul Leonardi's work on the digital mindset,³ one CEO shared:

Part of the challenge, especially for CEOs, is you're telling me I have to be a technologist. And what the digital mindset is saying, no, you don't have to be a technologist. You only need to be fluent enough to understand the conversations.

Several CEOs engaged in practices that demonstrate what building this fluency may look like and included reflecting on where their institution was going, who needed to be at the table, and their role in steering the conversations about and implementation of AI. One CEO gave an example of a leadership shift they experienced with their chief technology officer, from meeting with them occasionally to inviting them to be a part of their cabinet, sharing: "I don't even know what I'm asking. I just know the pieces I can communicate, and they put it together." The traditional pattern of delegating AI to IT was named and challenged directly. As one CEO put it:

You cannot just sit back and wait for that to happen passively. There has to be some steering and some supporting and helping along the way, and not merely deference to 10 plus 1 when we have important work to do that will impact our students' future.

This CEO also shared that there may be moments where leadership means taking a position on charged issues, such as AI detection and plagiarism, and pushing back on campus constituents who may disagree with leadership approaches: "That's the kind of leadership that I think we need around AI, and it's risky. But this is a risky time. So, you may as well take some risks and get out in front of something."

Despite the challenges, one CEO viewed this moment as a rare opportunity, describing AI as one of those pivot points when leaders get to do what they "love to do and do best, which is make change and lead." They shared that the COVID-19 pandemic was one of those opportunities, when leaders found genuine meaning in the urgency, the problem-solving, and the opportunity to make people feel supported through something hard, even if AI's urgency is not yet visible to some in the same way. Yet what is at stake, especially for students, is just as real, and one CEO framed that urgency in more personal terms. While they were not sure how to help their college become an AI-assisted institution, they were aware of the cost of getting it "wrong" and the harm that could have for the tens of thousands of people their college serves.

"A lot of the CEOs don't realize, and what I've been promoting is, you have to be the navigator. You have to take ownership of this. Many of them do not see themselves doing that. They believe, oh, let me hire an AI person, let me have my CTO lead this. It's like, no, you have to be the navigator."

CEO FROM AN URBAN AND SUBURBAN
INSTITUTION

"[I'm] not trying to say we need to be futurists, but we need to have some ability to think with foresight and draw from ... that foresight thinking to gain insights and move to an action frame ... and a lot of CEOs aren't trained to think this way, and I think more and more, we're going to have to get there."

CEO FROM AN URBAN AND SUBURBAN
INSTITUTION

"We're being forced to lead change whether we want to or not ... and how do we lead through the resistance, the early adopters, and so on to have effective change here?"

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

Leading Change Through Resistance and Shared Governance

Faculty and governance structures emerged from these conversations as the most concrete dimension of the AI leadership challenge, where leaders face the most resistance, where champions are making the greatest difference, and where leading change requires working through governance structures that were not built for this moment.

CEOs believe that faculty resistance to AI is driven by fear of irrelevance, attachment to existing pedagogy, and fixation on academic integrity, which vary across disciplines and tenure. English and humanities faculty tend toward resistance while computer science and career education faculty are more often early adopters. Faculty who have been at their institutions the longest are also often among the most resistant. In response to this resistance to AI, one CEO described the importance of not only providing professional development opportunities for faculty but also recalibrating their messaging:

I've had to change the way I talk about it to make it clear that this truly is voluntary. We want to support people that are early adopters and thinking about it and to be able to explore and use it. But we're not asking anybody to do it if they're not comfortable with it.

CEOs employed various tactics to address the faculty's concerns and resistance, including hosting summits that led with peer use cases rather than outside experts, bringing in K-12 leaders to demonstrate the AI fluency students were already arriving at college with, and making their own AI use visible by having their leadership teams demonstrate it publicly to reiterate that "this is not something we're asking you to think about and do. This is something we're all doing in our lives." One CEO also described reframing the academic integrity conversation directly, making the case to faculty that students are not trying to deceive their instructors but reaching for AI out of inexperience rather than dishonesty, which seemed to land with faculty who were passively resistant.

Yet across these same institutions, CEOs highlighted the critical role and need of faculty champions "to really push the needle" in navigating this moment. This included identifying faculty who were early adopters, providing them with visible platforms, and building faculty-led governance task forces. One CEO shared: "Our Academic Senate leader is a champion for AI, which makes a big, big difference. So almost every meeting, they're talking about the various uses of it and how you can incorporate it in your classroom." Another CEO emphasized that cultivating champions had to be paired with ongoing sensemaking, creating consistent opportunities for faculty to ask what AI means for their work, their students, and their disciplines, and drawing a direct parallel to how institutions have approached equity and minority-serving work: "We do that in other places [with our minority-serving groups]. We just need to remember this is one of those things too, for leadership that you're going to have to approach that way."

That same practice of sustained engagement applies beyond faculty. One CEO described board members encountering AI primarily through the concerns of resistant faculty and recognized the importance of professional development

"We haven't been able to move our faculty from the 'let's build all the guardrails we can so nobody's cheating and everybody's truly learning from me because I'm so amazing' to 'how can we use this amazing tool to facilitate and accelerate the learning for students and to ... truly meet them where they are.'"

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

"But part of that is building structures and making sure that we are leveraging the use of leaders, particularly in the faculty ranks to champion this work. ... Frankly, just thinking about culture and moving forward with this work ... I also need to have my board members on board because we have the naysayer faculty going to the board members ... so I've been ... working with my board members ... to ... elevate their understanding as well."

CEO FROM AN URBAN AND SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

for their board members. Another CEO shared feeling “primed in terms of culture to forge ahead” yet highlighted the importance of deliberately designing structures to support the board and classified staff with taking the next steps. In the statewide survey, one CEO framed this need as a systemwide priority, sharing that top of mind for them was understanding “how we could effectively elevate professional learning for all employees and board members relative to AI ... and related to this, how we could develop streamlined pathways from the K–12 to CC to 4-year universities to industry, relative to the needed competencies relative to AI.”

Building those structures, however, requires navigating a governance environment that was not designed for the pace of this moment. One CEO described leaning heavily on faculty champions and district-level leaders, not just to shift culture but also to move governance work forward, including establishing districtwide guidelines:

We purposefully didn't go so far as to call it a policy because the faculty are like, oh, policy, what do you mean? So we have these ... guidelines focused on the ethical use of AI, and actually, even the guidelines took a long time to develop and get approved.

Other CEOs described being in various stages of that same process. One was finalizing board policies and administrative procedures that had been in development for 2 years, while others were already building out districtwide handbooks and template syllabus language that had helped reduce academic-integrity concerns by bringing clarity to when and how AI could be used. However, there was also the acknowledgment that AI governance is not a static document but an ongoing process, with one CEO sharing:

There's not going to be a straight answer. This isn't the last board policy we're going to pass on AI. You need to get one in place and then you need to automatically have a process to keep looking at it.

The Transformation AI Makes Possible

Understanding this moment not as a disruption but as an opportunity clarifies what becomes possible for students, for teaching, and for institutions that have long been constrained by what they could do with the resources they had. Several CEOs saw AI as a way to handle the more routine parts of instruction, giving faculty space to focus on critical thinking and the human side of teaching. One CEO described what this looked like at their college:

I have an English faculty member who now has [a] one-on-one with everybody in their freshman composition class. They're all getting to talk about their work and their writing and what they like about the writing and what they struggle with, and they have made time for that by automating some of the other corrective work that they normally would be doing.

“I would say we have gotten immersed and submersed in working with faculty on the policies and how that will apply in the classroom, and we have been woefully oblivious to anything else. And now I’m feeling like we are far behind ... [regarding] faculty and the kind of employees that we’re going to hire and even how to use it for institutional efficiency and effectiveness. We just got laser-focused on the Academic Senate and policies about academic integrity and use in the classroom, and before I knew it, we were left behind.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“AI does some of the tasks that many of us don’t really enjoy very much, and it gives us an opportunity to be more human. So how do we explore what that looks like for the counselor, who can now or, in the future, [who] will be able to do [education] mapping for all of the transfer colleges and all of the majors that a student wants to explore, and now talk to the student about where their passions lie, and what they struggle with, and what goes into that decision?”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

Looking ahead, CEOs described a range of emerging possibilities for how AI could transform the learning experience, including Socratic AI tutors that guide students through problems outside classroom hours without feeding them answers, immersive learning environments where students simulate real-world experiences to gain work experience, and 24-7 learning tools that extend support into the times when students actually need it. Realizing this vision, however, will require significant institutional work, including revising learning outcomes that have not kept pace with what students need and rethinking what teaching load and classroom flexibility look like in an AI-assisted environment.

In student services, some AI applications are already in place, including fraud detection and agentic student support tools that operate outside institutional hours when no staff member is available. One CEO described working toward the next stage: getting financial planning to students at the point of contact alongside educational planning, with the goal of using AI to give students the full financial and academic picture of their educational journey from the start, so students are not making decisions without the information they need. Another CEO described a longer term vision:

In 5 years in student services, the pathway into the institution, the ... bot or avatar, whatever it is that will be their coach and their guide from interest to enrollment, that will be seamless. What I don't know if we will get drilled down is how to meet them from that point and get them to completion with that same seamless efficiency.

AI is also opening up new operational possibilities, with one CEO describing the questions they hope AI will help them answer:

With AI, I think we should be able to answer the question that my deans have a very difficult time answering, and that is, can our students finish a 2-year degree in 2 years? ... And then the second question would be, can our students take the class they need when they need to take it? Because what you see in our schedules ... is a lot of online courses ... and so my question is, [is] the reason because of demand or are the students taking it because they cannot take the class that they need when they need to take it?

This CEO further described the possibility of using AI to reduce the time to get curriculum approval from a process that currently takes a year and a half down to a few months.

Along with these transformations and everything AI makes possible comes a harder conversation: one about what this shift means for the people currently doing the work that AI is beginning to do—both inside institutions and in the labor market students are preparing to enter. This in itself is a leadership challenge that CEOs are navigating without shared frameworks or adequate peer support. One CEO described their thoughts on this issue: “People shouldn’t fear losing their jobs. They should fear individuals who have adopted AI and who have this knowledge base to have an upper hand on future employment.” Another CEO described the baseline assurance that makes this honest conversation possible:

“I think there’s a lot of upside to AI. I think it can totally redesign how we operate, how we teach, how we go even deeper in our learning. Because I do think AI covers a lot of the basic-level rudimentary knowledge ... and now you can go straight to ... analyzing the total picture because you can literally get all the information that you need.”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

“Community colleges are at a unique moment in time. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how we operate, streamlining administrative work, tutoring, data analysis, and even instruction. It’s pushing all of us to reconsider which programs and positions will remain essential in the years ahead. Yet, the real strength of community colleges has always been our adaptability and our focus on hands-on, human-centered learning. That’s something AI can’t replicate.”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

None of us want to think about AI as changing the workforce of our own colleges. It will, but the piece of that that I think will let us start to explore these changes is the baseline assurance that we're not planning on laying people off, but of course, there are positions we will not be rehiring.

This CEO, however, recognized the importance of being realistic and acknowledging that there will be labor implications:

We're not going to have transcript evaluators 5 years from now. ... None of those people are going to be laid off. We're going to find new work that they can do. But we have to be honest. That's a job that's not going to exist a few years from now.

Reflecting on the implications for students, one CEO argued that AI must be understood as infrastructure integrated into everything and capable of changing what is possible for students who cannot access traditional pathways to work, describing what that complete redesign could look like:

What if we turn the entire campus infrastructure into a living learning lab, where the infrastructure is the textbook, and students who aren't successful in getting internships, or who aren't successful in getting those work-based learning experiences, can still get a near real-time work experience using our facilities, our technology, and our operational data to solve the same kinds of problems they will encounter in the workplace.

Centering Equity in the AI Transformation

Recognizing that not every student will have equal access to what AI makes possible, several CEOs named equity as one of the most urgent dimensions of this moment, pointing to a digital divide that has never fully closed and the risk that AI may widen those gaps. How intentionally institutions work to bring their most vulnerable students into this shift will determine whether AI becomes a tool for equity or another mechanism for leaving people behind. In the broader CEO survey, one leader named the stakes directly:

It is essential to prepare students and communities to navigate and benefit from AI-driven opportunities, while addressing the potential divide that these technologies may exacerbate, so that higher education continues to serve as a pathway for equity and upward mobility.

CEOs in our interviews and small-group conversations shared what that divide looks like in practice. One CEO identified the structural dimensions of AI access, where the advantages compound for those who already have them and the barriers compound for those who do not—barriers such as understanding what AI is, knowing how to prompt, affording a paid subscription, and having the time to develop real fluency. This has real implications for students who are already stretched thin, for whom each barrier to AI fluency is one more thing competing for time and resources they do not have, as one CEO described:

“If we just ... opt out and follow that most extreme version of ‘just ... try to ignore [AI],’ this is going to evolve without the input of our most diverse communities. And so we’re going to increasingly see AI in a very limited Western European tradition, and it will lack that equity that we would be able to bring to the conversation.”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

“AI absolutely has the potential to create a level playing field, but only if everyone has access to it early on.”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

“We are running out of time to get people caught up. There’s a whole privileged class that’s being created that is just gonna dominate. And the people who are just gonna be too far behind to catch up are just gonna be lost. And I don’t even know what that looks like.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

People who are trying to manage kids and pay the bills and ride the bus, they do not have the hours to learn how to use this tool effectively. Even if we wanted [AI] to be a facilitator and enhancer of teaching and learning in the classroom, some of our students don't have the time to learn how to do that on their own.

What is at stake is not just access to a tool but access to economic opportunity, as one CEO shared: “There is a very real fiscal equity problem here. AI is not going to take jobs. It’s the people who know how to use AI that are going to take jobs from the people who don’t.” Another CEO described steps they are taking to address the access gap and build AI fluency into new student orientation by creating a dedicated section that introduces students to AI tools, ethical considerations, and effective use.

What Leaders Said They Actually Need

The leaders in these conversations are already navigating the complexity of what this moment is asking of them, yet they are doing so largely without the frameworks, shared language, and peer support they say they need. The CEOs we interviewed said that, to lead effectively in this moment, they need structured peer learning, an opportunity to build fluency enough to engage key technical aspects with staff and potential vendors, and time and space to develop plans for their institutions.

What CEOs Want to Learn

Several CEOs named a desire to engage hands-on in how to use AI to work through real-world problems. One CEO shared: “I don’t think we all know the full potential of what AI can do. ... Just having a workshop on all the tools that’s out there and available and how to use them.” Others identified the importance of having “a technical piece in a community of leadership practice group” where they learned not only what AI can do but also how other leaders are using it personally and operationally. These priorities were also highlighted in the broader CEO survey, with CEOs emphasizing the need to learn how to “integrat[e] AI into campus culture and workflows ... beyond the classroom with classified professionals” and called for “focused institutes on emerging issues [in] AI in education.” CEOs shared that developing AI fluency should be grounded in real institutional problems, including case studies on handling conversations around academic integrity and understanding how to communicate the impact of AI, as well as a desire to leave with emerging best practices and tools for board policies, syllabus language, and student-conduct processes that could immediately start a conversation back on campus. Beyond the need to learn how to use AI, CEOs named change management as essential content, but it should be calibrated to the specific context of AI. One CEO described needing help navigating “the politicization of [AI] that has happened in the last 24 months, the key personalities that are involved and how that shapes people’s feelings about it.” This included communicating at scale as a skill that needs revisiting.

“Just like we are making plans for basic needs and those kinds of things, I think finding some sort of a way to identify some tools and then make them accessible to all students for free is going to be important ... ’cause if they can’t access them, they can’t use them, they can’t explore them.”

CEO FROM A RURAL-SERVING INSTITUTION

“I would need to leave with a plan. Right now, I’m playing whack-a-mole. ... I’ve been to a couple of seminars where we were supposed to get a plan. And I just left there with ... some flimsy booklet handout with fill-in-the-blanks and overwhelmed with a bunch of show-and-tell about stuff that halfway through, the professional expert they had up there lost me ... so I just really need a practical approach to developing an institutional plan to those two tracks, the personal professional development as a CEO and an institutional plan.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

The Conditions and Design That Make That Learning Possible

A CEO observed that formal peer settings make honest engagement difficult, sharing: “In classic CEO form, nobody would want to say that they’re not engaged [in using AI].” Being able to provide a space where CEOs feel safe enough to be vulnerable about where they actually stand must come first to have the conversations that lead somewhere: “If we can get folks to that point of vulnerability, now we can talk about that mindset shift. But if I want to throw the digital mindset at you first, no, you can’t start there.” Part of designing that experience well is figuring out where leaders actually are on the continuum before the room comes together and recognizing that a self-reported growth mindset is not the same as a digital-growth mindset: “You could have the growth mindset, you just are not locked into the digital piece.” Knowing who is ready for the more transformative conversation and who among them are the natural peer teachers for everyone else shapes what becomes possible in the room.

“We have to be thinking in these trainings about how to help CEOs help other people see the positive in AI’s embrace. Not as a way of just allaying their fear, but a higher bar.”

CEO FROM A SUBURBAN INSTITUTION

“I think revisiting how we engage interpersonally when so much can be done digitally. And I’ve heard it said a lot of times without any specificity of, well, ... an AI tool can take care of the transactional aspects so we can focus more on the human interaction, but what is that human interaction that we should be doing and how do we do it well as executive leaders?”

CEO FROM AN URBAN INSTITUTION

Looking Ahead

The CEO candor documented in this brief suggests that AI is introducing more than a new set of technologies into higher education. It is testing how community colleges make decisions, evolve and respond as institutions, and fulfill their mission in an environment characterized by accelerating complexity and expectations. Across interviews, CEOs repeatedly described navigating uncertainty for which few feel adequately prepared—not because they question the importance of AI but because existing leadership development, governance structures, and institutional routines were built for a different kind and pace of change.

At the same time, our interviews and survey responses reveal considerable optimism about what AI could make possible. CEOs described opportunities to redesign teaching and learning, strengthen student support, improve institutional effectiveness, and expand educational opportunity in ways that were difficult to imagine only a few years ago. They also recognized that realizing this potential will depend less on the technology itself than on the capacity of institutional leaders to cultivate trust, engage shared governance effectively, support faculty and staff learning, bring critical discernment to vendor engagements, and ensure that considerations of equity remain central as AI adoption accelerates. CEOs also pointed to operational efficiency as an area where AI could make a difference, citing examples such as AI-assisted fraud detection and shorter curriculum-approval timelines.

If AI continues to reshape higher education as rapidly as expected, some technical knowledge will be necessary—but that alone will not be sufficient as a leadership capacity. Community college leaders will need opportunities to build strategic fluency, learn alongside peers, develop practical institutional approaches, and strengthen their capacity to lead multiple constituencies through continual change. The institutions most likely to thrive may not be those that adopt new technologies first but those that develop the leadership capacity to learn, adapt, and make thoughtful decisions as technologies evolve. Building that capacity will be a defining leadership challenge facing community colleges now and in the years ahead.

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Author Biographies and Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

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