



# Wheelhouse

The Center for  
Community College  
Leadership and  
Research

## Research Brief

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# Who's On Line 1?

## The Delicate Juggling Act of Community College CEOs

By Susanna Cooper and Mitchel Benson

**IF YOU ARE THE CEO** of a California community college or college district, a typical moment in a typical afternoon might look and feel something like this:

Your assistant lets you know that the president of the faculty association is holding on line 1, and, keep it short, because you are late for an interview across campus with a local television reporter. The chair of your board of trustees is on line 2, your finance and facilities chiefs need to speak to you before the close of business, the president of your student government organization is in the lobby, and you don't yet know what news awaits you via multiple unheard voicemails on your cell phone.

Whom do you attend to first, whom can you put on hold, and what do you simply put off—with all the diplomacy you can muster? How do you make those decisions without insulting or overly inflating any of these important constituents?

This exercise in priorities triage isn't a far-fetched scenario. According to the results of the latest Wheelhouse survey of California community college leaders, it's just a day in the life of leaders who, in the words of one, endeavor to "prioritize workload, know what is mission critical and what can wait, balance objectives and stay focused on what's strategically important to the institution."

Respondents to this survey, who include more than half of campus presidents, superintendent-presidents and district chancellors (CEOs) statewide, identified the ability to manage multiple challenges simultaneously, and communication

*The most challenging part of being a CEO?*  
"The ever-changing diversity of tasks that happen constantly. The ability to adapt and shift gears, and do it well. Always having a polished and calm public presence, even when there is adversity. Lastly, all the myriad of regulations, especially changing dynamics, such as the new funding formula."

CALIFORNIA CEO

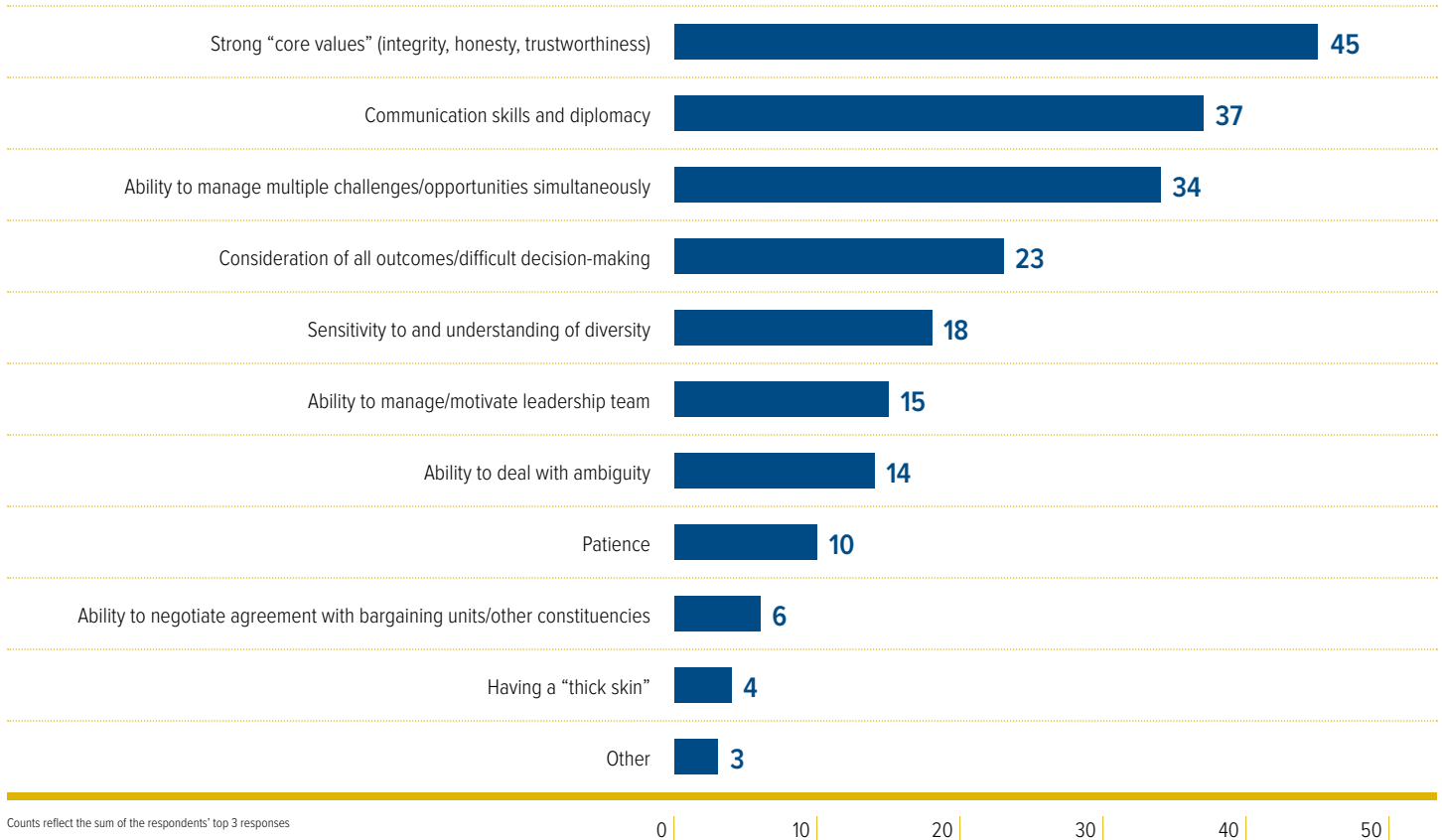
### TOPLINES

- > CEOs are evenly split in their level of support for the rapid **pace of change** across the California Community College system.
- > They continue to identify **integrity** as the single most important attribute of a successful CEO, and **conflict** with trustees and college constituencies as the chief reasons why many leave their positions.
- > If they could **make one change** to increase student success, most CEOs chose "guided" or simplified pathways, with student support/counseling and increased financial aid not far behind.
- > Many are frustrated by what they perceive as **too many state mandates** and policy shifts.

skills and diplomacy, as two of the three leadership attributes they need to succeed. The most important attribute of all? Core values, such as integrity and trustworthiness (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Select the 3 most important leadership attributes for a CEO to be successful. (n=66)



Indeed, one CEO noted the key to success is figuring out "how to address the needs of all the constituent groups without giving the impression that one deserves more attention than another."

In recent years, CEOs have grappled with the counter-intuitive fiscal challenges that community colleges face whenever the economy is strong or improving. While a near-full-employment economy translates to higher tax revenues for the state and more state support for community colleges, it also typically means declines or stagnation in student enrollment as current or potential students forgo schooling for the job market. As enrollment shrinks, so, eventually, do state budget allocations to community colleges.

### **New challenges, new opportunities**

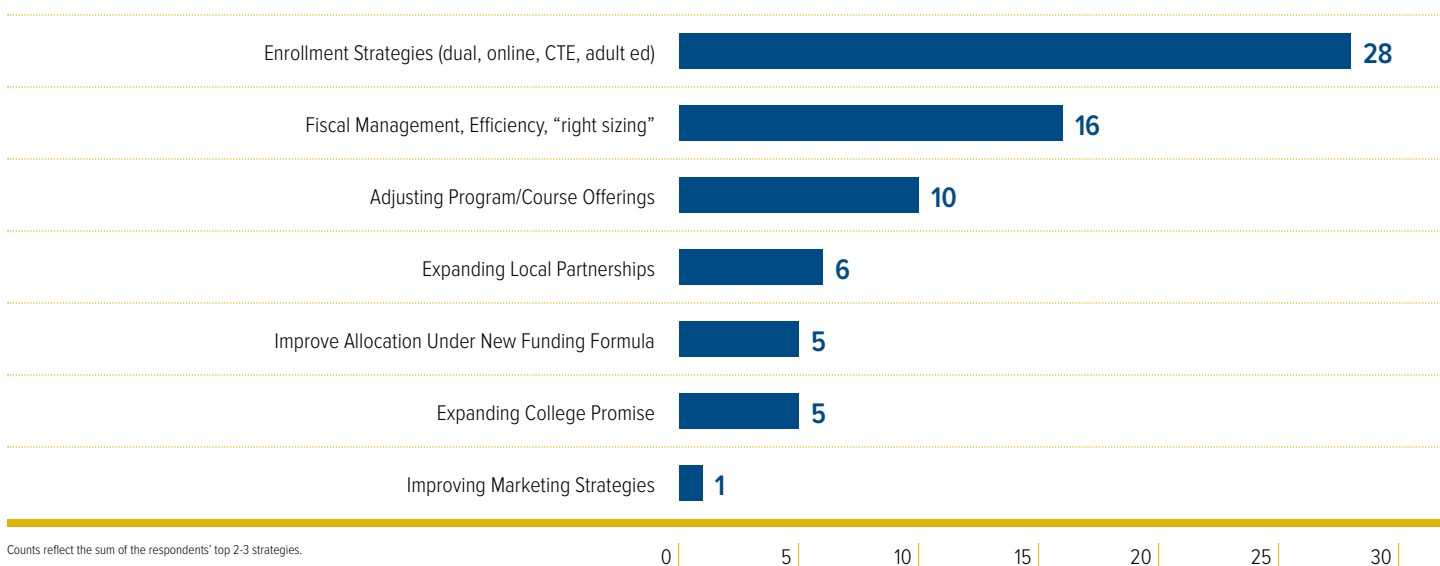
Recent legislative and regulatory changes have added new challenges, as well as opportunities, in college fiscal management. A new state funding formula devotes additional dollars to student needs and student performance. Not surprisingly,

CEOs identified fiscal/enrollment management as the highest priority and responsibility, followed closely by leadership/vision setting, student success and, to a lesser degree, community engagement.

Compounding the fiscal complexity experienced by respondents, a significant plurality reported that their district enrollment is declining (42%). Another 35% reported stable enrollment and 18% reported growth (5% chose not to respond). Those facing declining enrollment named a variety of strategies to address the accompanying fiscal challenges, with dual enrollment for high school students and other new enrollment strategies at the top of the list (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

If you are in declining enrollment, what are your top 2-3 strategies for managing the accompanying fiscal challenges? (n= 33)



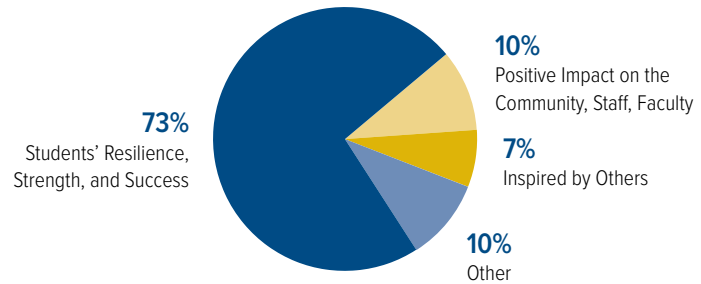
### Finding inspiration

Despite complexities and challenges, CEOs responded openly about the inspiration they draw from seeing students succeed in the face of serious obstacles. Nearly three in four cited their students' resilience, strength and success as a chief motivating factor in their work. One noted that students' "humility, authenticity and resilience continue to inspire and humble me daily" (Figure 3).

A few shared a sense of cynicism and expressed doubt about the likelihood of breaking down barriers to systemic change (i.e. "education could change a great deal in the next few years—but probably won't.") A more common sentiment, however, was general devotion to the mission of open access institutions that are the first rung for many on the ladder of opportunity, as embodied in a comment about "an innate sense of duty and a passion for the core purpose of community colleges."

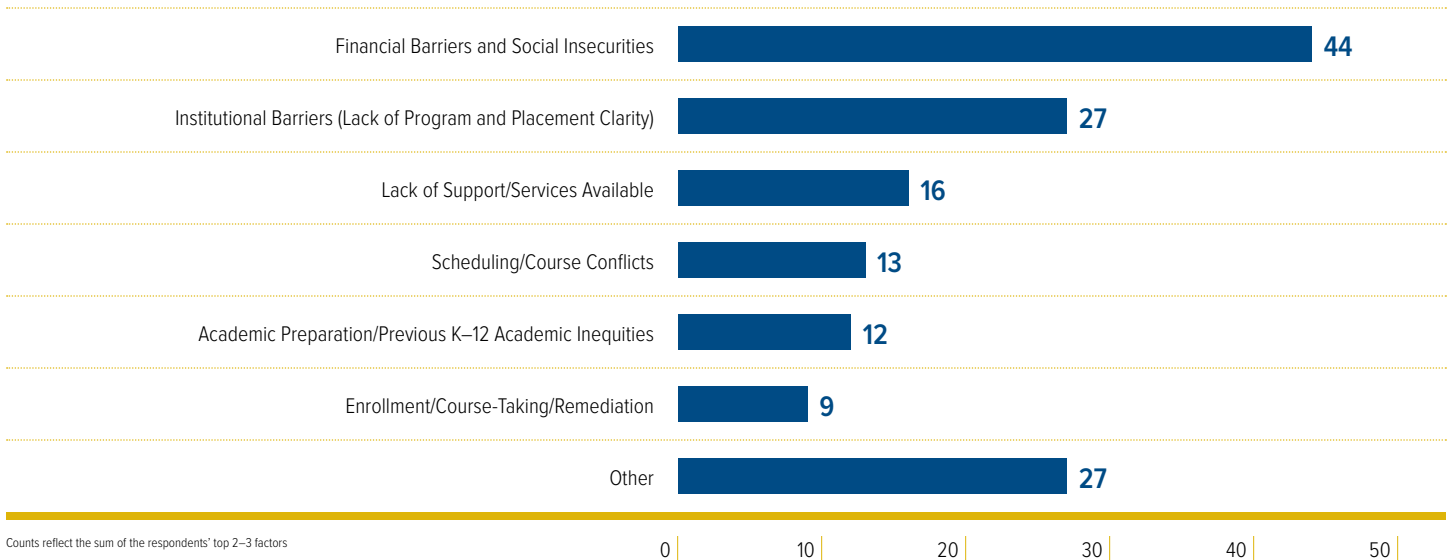
"I'm inspired by our students' resilience in pursuing their education despite challenges they face. I'm motivated by the idea that change is possible, that institutions can shift their cultures and processes for improvement of the student experience, increasing student success."

**Figure 3**  
What most inspires or motivates you in your leadership position? (n=71)



CEOs also largely agree about the hurdles that can stand between students and degree or certificate completion: Nearly half cited financial barriers and social insecurities, followed by institutional barriers and lack of support and services available (Figure 4). In open-ended responses, several cited the lack of counselors, the challenges of navigating the college processes and lack of clear career goals. “College,” said one, “is too often a confusing maze.”

**Figure 4**  
What, in your opinion, are the top 2-3 factors contributing to students' difficulty in completing their degrees/certificates at your institution? (n=64)

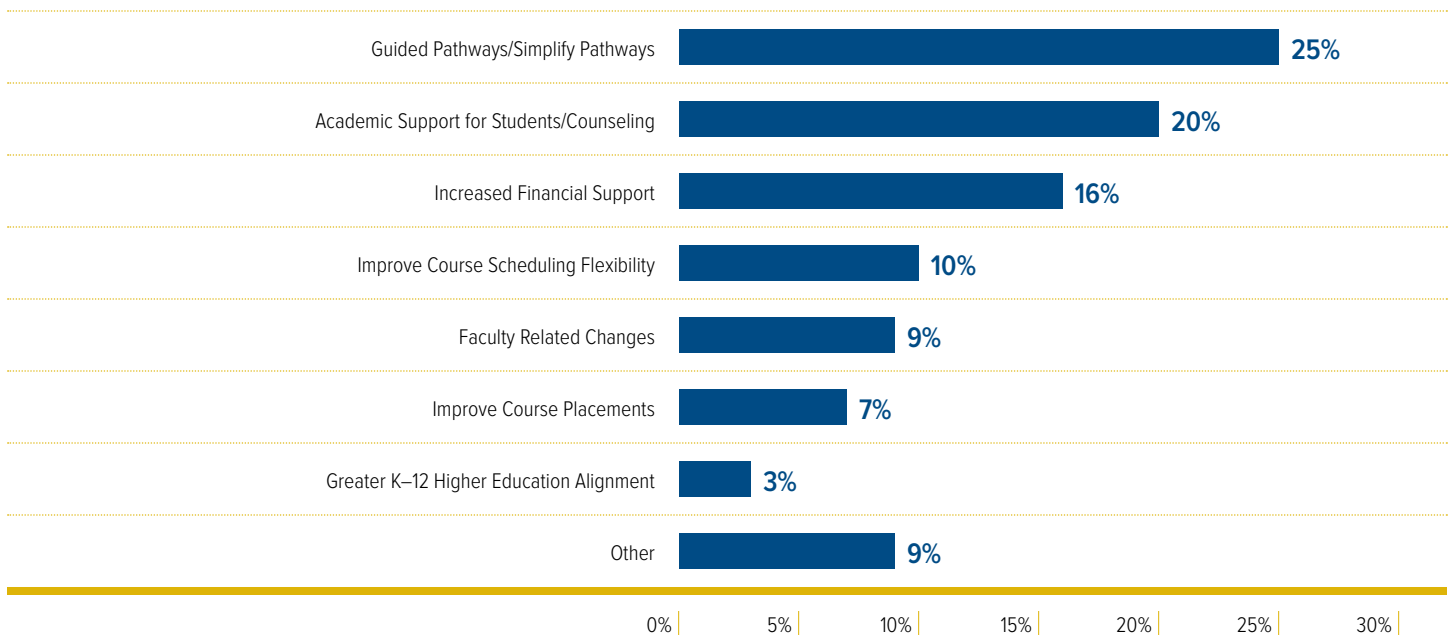


**Wave a magic wand?**

Asked what single thing they would do to improve student completion rates, a quarter of respondents said they would simplify paths to completion or increase their college's or district's approach to guiding students toward degrees and certificates, known in the field as “Guided Pathways.” By smaller percentages, CEOs said they would increase academic support and counseling, increase financial support for students, improve course scheduling and make faculty-related changes (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

If you could make one change to improve completion rates at your institution, what would it be? (n=67)

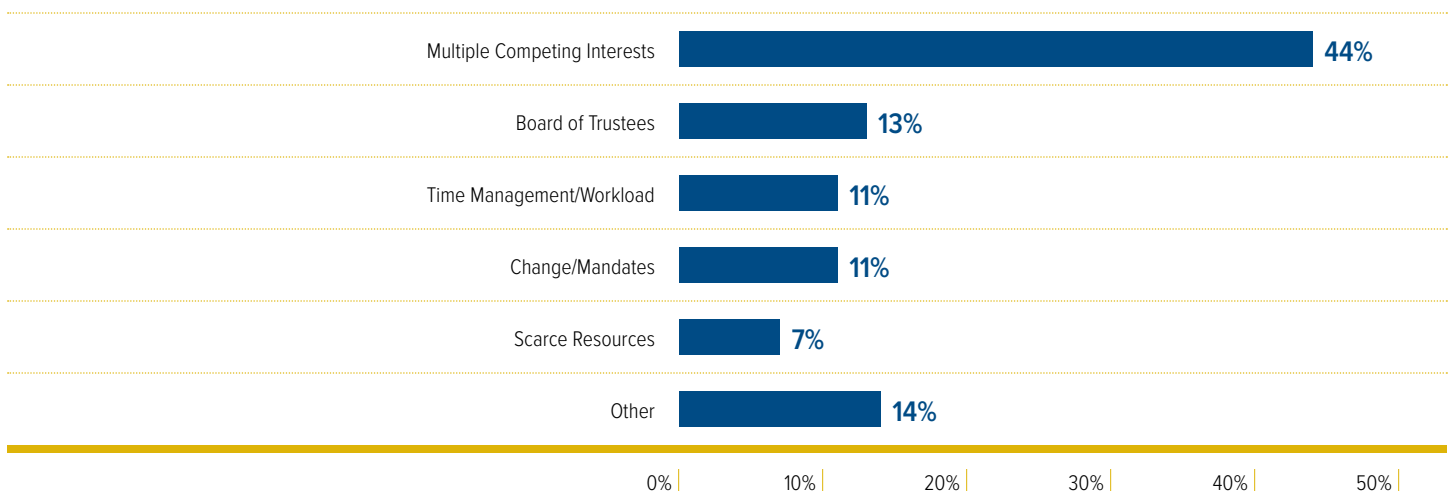


**The hardest part?**

Respondents pointed to several aspects as the most difficult part of their jobs. A significant plurality (44%) identified “multiple competing interests” as the biggest challenge of the job, trailed by interaction with their boards of trustees (13%), time management and workload, and policy changes/state mandates and scarce resources (Figure 6). The “other” category in Figure 6 represents a catch-all that included comments about “maintaining leadership aura,” functioning effectively in a “loosely confederated system,” “making HR decisions that affect people’s lives,” “loneliness,” “negative voices” and “the buck stops here.”

**Figure 6**

What, in your opinion, is the most challenging/difficult part of serving as a CEO? (n=71)



“Believe it or not, I’m an optimist. There is a lot of earnest good work going on in community colleges, but the larger environment is going to ‘disrupt’ us. Performance-based funding and the new state online college are harbingers of the future.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

<sup>1</sup> The League's CEO Tenure and Retention Dashboard shows that, when interim CEOs are removed from the calculation, median tenure over the past decade is 4.2 years (4.5 for male and 4.0 for female CEOs). When interim CEOs are included, median tenure drops to 3.8 years for male and 3.4 years for female CEOs. The dashboard shows the median tenure for interim CEOs as .7 years. See: <https://www.ccleague.org/CEOTenure>.

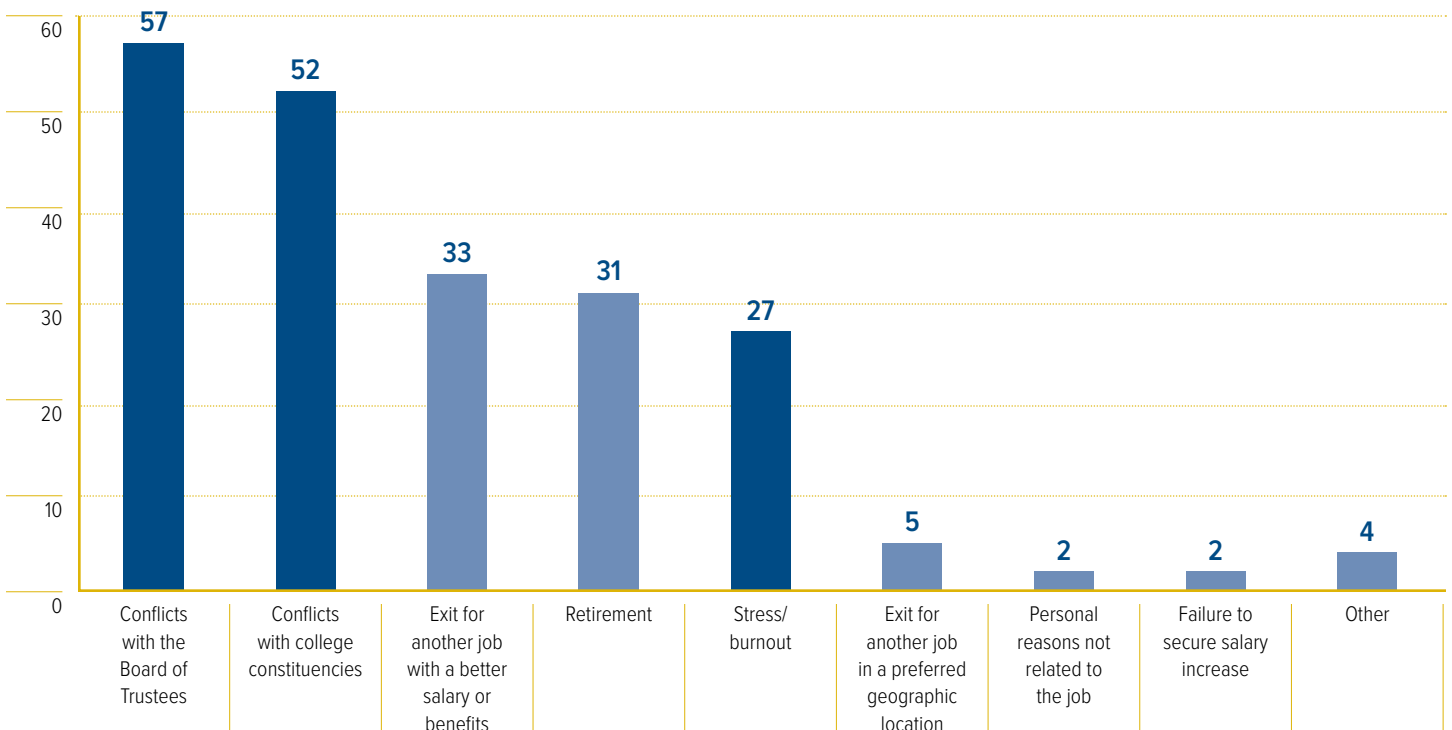
Invited to share more detail about challenges, one CEO captured a sentiment expressed by several in citing a mismatch between “the level of responsibility assigned to the position, stacked against the low level of authority given to the position.” A criticism of policymaking from the top down or feeling hamstrung by regulation was a current that ran through open-ended responses to several survey questions. Other CEOs cited the time-consuming nature of their responsibility, in a system where participatory governance is an established principle, to consult with multiple groups in order to make decisions or shift direction (in the words of one, “a system where so many constituents believe they need to participate in every decision.”)

### Dealing with conflict

The issue of challenges and conflicts with trustees is a recurring theme for responding CEOs, a significant plurality of whom cite “conflicts with the board” as the most common reason top college executives leave their positions (similar to our finding in 2016). A majority also cite “conflicts with college constituencies” as the second most common reason for leaving. The identification of conflict and stress may help explain why CEO turnover in the colleges is as high as it is (Figure 7). Recent research by the Community College League of California reported a slight decrease in turnover among California CEOs over the last decade, and assigned the reasons for CEO departure as retirement or death (47%), moving to another position (33%), being “released” from their post (18%) and leaving the state (2%).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 7

What are the 3 most common reasons that CEOs leave their posts? (n=71)



## Turnover and succession

In terms of their own expected tenure, 40% of responding CEOs said they planned to stay at their current post for three or fewer additional years, while 46% indicated four to six additional years, and 13% seven or more years. While a few respondents noted that change at the top can bring positive disruption and new energy to an institution, most pointed to the loss of momentum that can accompany the transition. As one put it: “It can take a year for a search, then two years for the ‘new’ person to get people to buy into their approach and priorities, and another 2 years to see if their priorities are making a difference. I think it was about 4-5 years into my presidency when I started to think to myself, ‘I am seeing some changes I want finally take root.’”

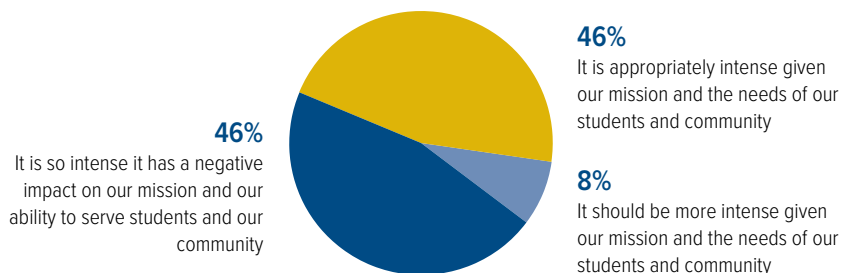
More than two-thirds of CEOs said they had no succession plan in place, though they noted that the nature of community college executive searches, which are open postings managed by boards of trustees, can make methodical succession planning difficult. One CEO wrote: “As a public agency the positions are open to all applicants so no one can pick their successor. Do I mentor VPs to succeed me if I leave? Yes.”

## Pace of change

CEOs are evenly split in their views on the swift pace of change across the CCC system in the past decade, which has brought not only a new funding formula and Guided Pathways, but the advent of a statewide online community college, legislative requirements to accelerate students out of remedial coursework and create student equity plans, a baccalaureate degree pilot, a Student Success and Support Program, and a fee-waiver expansion, among other changes. An identical proportion of CEOs – nearly half – say that the pace of policy change and new initiatives “is so intense it has a negative impact on our mission and our ability to serve students and our community,” and say “it is appropriately intense given our mission and the needs of our students and community.” The balance – 8% – say the pace “should be more intense.” (Figure 8)

**Figure 8**

Which of these sentiments about the pace of change and new initiatives in CCCs aligns most closely with your views? (n=69)



## Communicating with the board

We posed separate questions about trustee communications to chancellors and superintendent-presidents, who report directly to boards, and campus presidents, who typically do not. The strong majority of chancellors and superintendent-presidents (65%) report spending less than a fifth of their time in communication with their boards. A smaller number of respondents (24%) reported spending 20-50% of time on

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“A strong unified leadership team can make massive improvements for students, faculty, staff, communities, and administrators. Churn hurts colleges by the loss of forward momentum and often changes in vision and agendas.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

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“This is not only a social justice crisis, it is an economic crisis for our state and we are not moving fast enough to help our students and communities.”

CALIFORNIA CEO

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“With Guided Pathways, we have an opportunity to dive deeply into a mechanism for colleges to truly impact student success, completion, and next-level success. What is vital in this is to not abandon this effort after the stated five years. The initiative fatigue evidenced in most California community colleges is that one initiative blurs into another (or three or four).”

CALIFORNIA CEO

## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This survey was conducted electronically in the Summer of 2018 by Elizabeth Friedmann, research fellow, and Ambar Hernandez, graduate student researcher, both of the University of California, Davis, School of Education. Emails requesting responses were sent to 136 sitting district chancellors, superintendent-presidents, and college presidents, with follow up emails to encourage survey completion. Seventy-four CEOs participated for a response rate of 54%. Among respondents, 38% were campus presidents, 35% were superintendent-presidents and 19% were chancellors (8% did not categorize themselves).

Respondents reported their personal characteristics and education levels as follows:

### Gender

- 57% male
- 36% female
- 7% did not specify

### Race/Ethnicity\*

- 51% White, non-Hispanic
- 12% Black or African American
- 11% Hispanic/Latino
- 7% East Asian
- 4% Middle Eastern/  
Indian Subcontinent
- 1% Native Hawaiian or  
Pacific Islander
- 7% "other"<sup>2</sup>

### Age

- 9% 45 or younger
- 28% 46–55
- 38% 56–65
- 25% 66 or older

### Experience as CEO\*

- 45% 0–4 years
- 25% 5–8 years
- 14% 9–12 years
- 7% 13 years or more

### Highest academic degree\*

- 41% PhD
- 35% EdD
- 9% MA
- 7% JD

It is important to note that the responses may not be representative of those CEOs who did not participate. Any conclusions drawn from the responses are representative only of those individuals who responded to the survey.

\*Percentages do not add up to 100 because a small number of respondents did not answer these questions.

board communications, and 11% reported spending more than half of their time in communication with trustees. These findings are worth noting for their relationship to what many board members say they need from their CEOs: strong and regular communication. (See: [Talk to Me: What Community College Trustees Want from Their CEOs](#), Wheelhouse, 2017)

It may also be that as campus presidents, who don't typically report directly to boards, prepare to take on board-reporting roles as chancellors and superintendents-presidents, they don't necessarily have adequate opportunities to hone their skills in trustee communication. In this survey, a minority of college presidents in multi-college districts (38%) reported that they had the opportunity to interact with their district boards "often," with the rest reporting "sometimes" (34%) or "very little" (28%).

Indeed, the survey revealed mixed findings in terms of how adequately CEOs feel they were prepared to take on the varied aspects of their roles. The great majority reported they felt "very well prepared" or "well prepared" for handling diversity/gender/cultural dynamics (90%), working with faculty (89%), managing academic affairs (83%), student services (82%), enrollment management (79%) and finance (71%). Significantly fewer respondents felt they were "very well prepared" or "well prepared" to handle public/media relations (58%), digital learning (58%), government/system relations (50%) and, notably, working with trustees (42%).

## Conclusion

Our survey findings bring campus- and district-level leadership challenges' into sharp relief by design; we asked CEOs specifically to share the rewards and difficulties of an extraordinarily important and demanding job. What also comes through clearly in their candor is their commitment to their work and the inspiration they find in doing it. Within a challenging environment, many succeed in finding a critical balance and flow in the "exhilarating, exhausting and rewarding" tasks at hand. Numerous respondents cited their need for better preparation and ongoing professional and peer support to maximize their capacity, especially in the early years of their leadership position. As one respondent eloquently put it, he or she is devoted to the work "so that I can, in my own way and with the skills I possess, make a difference in the future of our society by providing a solid educational experience for students who otherwise may not have access to such an education." For all who understand the essential place the colleges occupy in California's infrastructure of economic opportunity, the success of these CEOs is critically important.

*Susanna Cooper is Managing Director of Wheelhouse and Mitchel Benson is a freelance writer. The analysis of the survey is that of the authors alone and does not necessarily represent the opinions of Wheelhouse funders or its board of advisors. Wheelhouse and the authors are grateful to the College Futures Foundation for its support of the survey and this brief.*

<sup>2</sup> The ethnic makeup of survey respondents aligns closely with statewide CEO demographics reported by the Community College League of California in 2018. [The CEO Tenure & Retention Study, 8th Update](#), reported that CEOs were 59% white, 13% Latinx, 13% Black or African American, 9% Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 7% "other/unknown." The League reports that 39% of CEOs were female in 2018.

**Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research** was founded in 2016 to support leadership and practice in the California Community Colleges, the nation's largest system of higher education. Wheelhouse is supported by the University of California, Davis, the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative of the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the Irvine Foundation, the College Futures Foundation, and the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through grants R305E150006 and R305A180227 to the Regents of the University of California - Davis. Housed at the UC Davis School for Education, the Wheelhouse Institute on Leadership welcomes its third cohort of current and aspiring CEO fellows in March 2019.