



# Wheelhouse

The Center for  
Community College  
Leadership and  
Research

## Research Brief

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# Talk to Me

## What California Community College Trustees Want from their CEOs

**STRONG AND FOCUSED LEADERSHIP** in the California Community Colleges, on the part of both elected trustees and the CEOs they are responsible for hiring, has never been needed more than now. Given the colleges' place at the center of economic development and opportunity in California, and renewed focus on institutional effectiveness for student success, the colleges need elected and executive leaders who are aligned and operating in finely tuned partnership.

In colleges and college districts where trust and good communication flourish, strong board-CEO relationships foster cultures in which change can take place, initiatives can be sustained and growth can occur. Where trust breaks down and CEO tenures are short, which is the case in too many California institutions<sup>1</sup>, instability undermines performance and progress.

Following an earlier statewide survey of California community college CEOs, in which responding executives cited conflict with trustees and other constituencies as the driver behind many early departures<sup>2</sup>, Wheelhouse partnered with the Community College League of California (CCLC) to gauge trustee opinions on some of the same questions:

- Why do CEOs leave their positions?
- What skills and leadership traits do trustees value most in a college chancellor or president?
- What are trustees' top priorities for the colleges they serve, and their biggest challenges as elected leaders?

This brief summarizes the survey results.

### DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this brief, the term **trustee** refers to an elected member of a local or regional community college governing board. Boards consist of either five or seven trustees.

The term **CEO** refers to community college district chancellors, single-college district superintendent-presidents, and college campus presidents operating within multi-college districts. There are 137 such CEO positions across the California Community Colleges.

### TOPLINES

> Trustees seek CEOs with integrity, strong interpersonal communication, foresight about decision-making consequences and the ability to manage complexity.

> There is a significant disconnect between trustees' expectations for CEO longevity and the reality of high rates of CEO turnover in California. Trustees want leadership tenures that significantly exceed the statewide median and believe that such longevity is key to efficacy.

> Many trustees are keenly focused on student success and the financial stability of their colleges, while seeking the right balance between a high level of involvement and avoiding "micromanagement"<sup>3</sup> of college administration.

“Establishing and maintaining appropriate and effective communication with the CEO is something which must be worked on continuously.”

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### What makes a successful CEO?

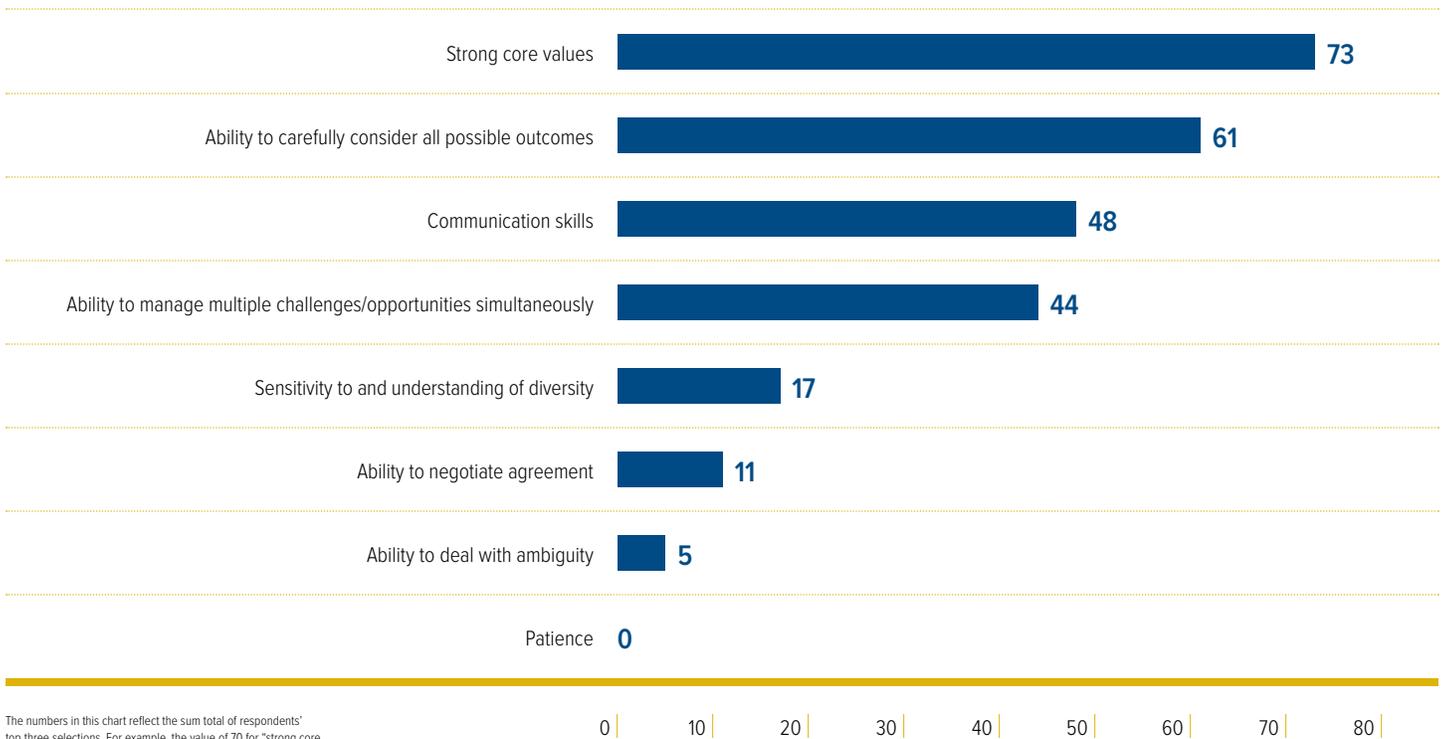
We asked trustees to opine separately about three aspects of ideal CEO leadership: leadership attributes, professional skills and experiences, and key responsibilities. These three questions provide slightly different lenses through which to view the most coveted characteristics of CEOs, but one aspect rises to or near the top throughout: communication.

#### Leadership attributes (Chart 1)

Asked to pick from a list of *attributes* they most value in a district or college leader, responding trustees showed a clear preference for core values (defined as “integrity, honesty and trustworthiness”), strong foresight or anticipatory acumen, communication skills and the ability to manage complexity. Patience may be a virtue, but it doesn’t compete on the list of attributes that trustees want from CEOs.

Chart 1

Top 3 Leadership Attributes (N=94)



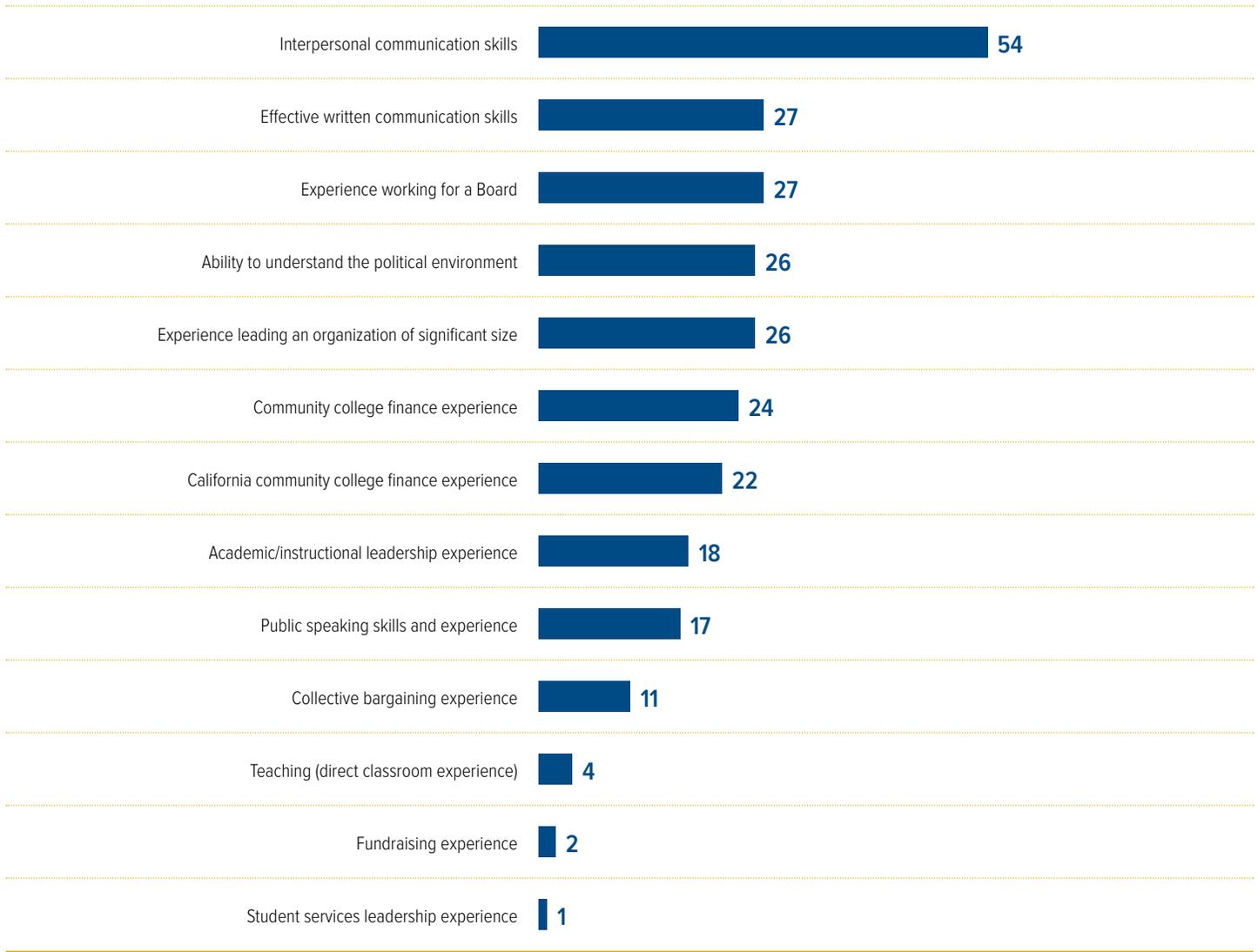
The numbers in this chart reflect the sum total of respondents' top three selections. For example, the value of 70 for "strong core values" indicates that 70 respondents rated that attribute either a first, second or third priority.

### CEO professional skills and experiences (Chart 2)

When asked about the highest value *experience and skills* for CEOs, trustees cited interpersonal communication more than twofold over the next most commonly identified skills and experiences, which were board experience, strong written communication, leadership of an organization of significant size, and political acumen.

#### Chart 2

Top 3 Professional Skills/Experiences (N=95)



The numbers in this chart reflect the sum total of respondents' top three selections. For example, the value of 54 for "interpersonal communication skills" indicates that 54 respondents rated that skill either a first, second or third priority.

0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 | 80 |

“The high level of decision-making requires trust in one’s CEO... and a clear understanding of the key elements of what is being decided.”

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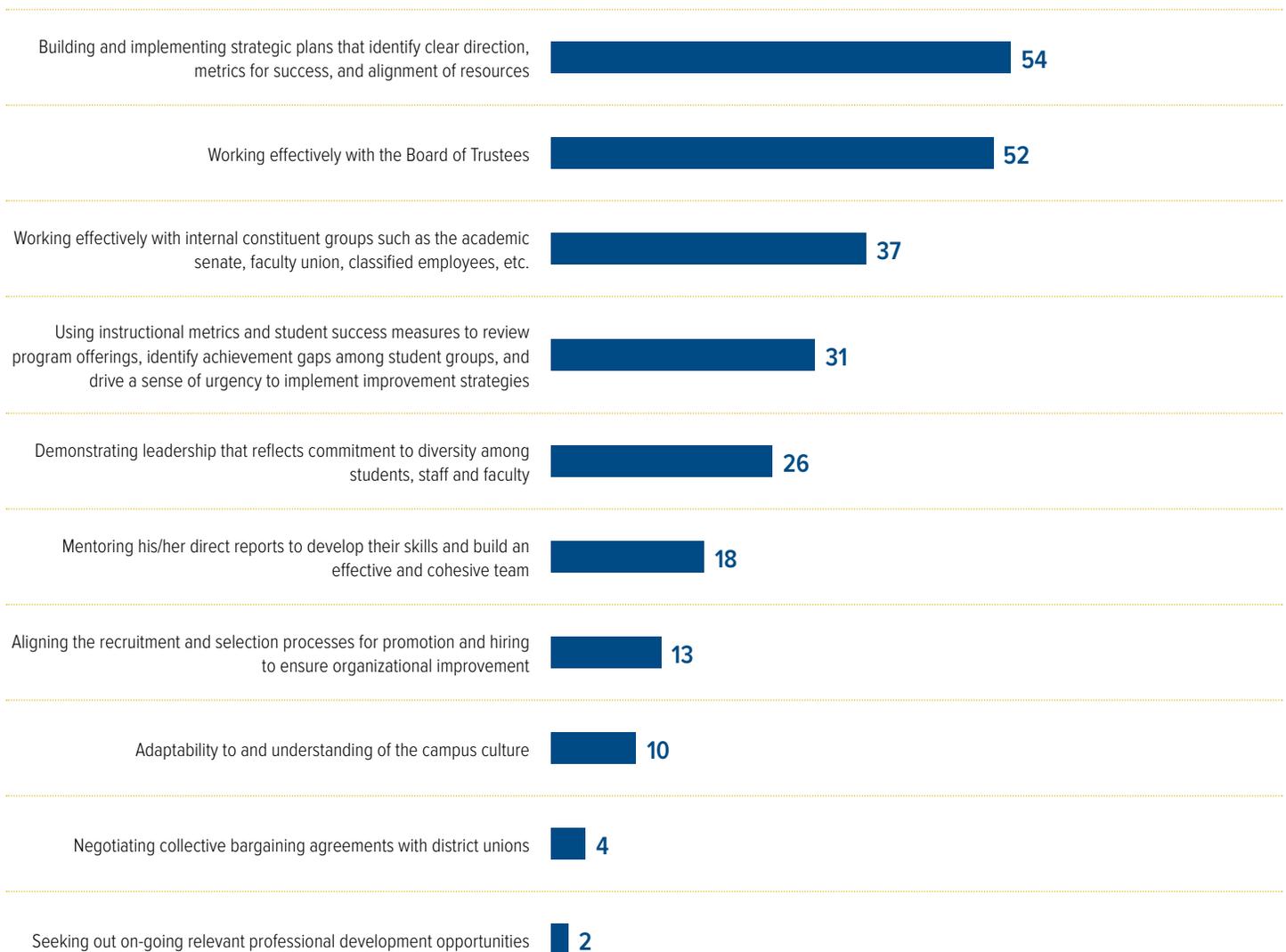
### CEO Responsibilities (Chart 3)

When asked about CEO *responsibilities*, responding trustees prioritized the following:

1. Building/implementing strategic plans.
2. Working effectively with the board of trustees.
3. Working effectively with internal constituents.

### Chart 3

Top 3 CEO Responsibilities (N=95)



The numbers in this chart reflect the sum total of respondents' top three selections. For example, the value of 52 for "working effectively with the Board of Trustees" indicates that 52 respondents rated that responsibility either a first, second or third priority.

0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 | 80

### Prior Experience Sought

In terms of prior professional experience, trustees primarily seek CEOs with resumes that include the following, in order of preference:

1. Experienced college CEOs who have reported to elected boards.
2. Experienced high-level college administrators including vice chancellors, vice presidents and academic deans.
3. College presidents not reporting to boards.

Survey respondents expressed significantly less interest in hiring candidates from outside the community college arena.

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“[I want] an administration that values the trustees and doesn’t just try to ‘manage’ them. Trustees need to be trusted and encouraged to work on behalf of the college.”

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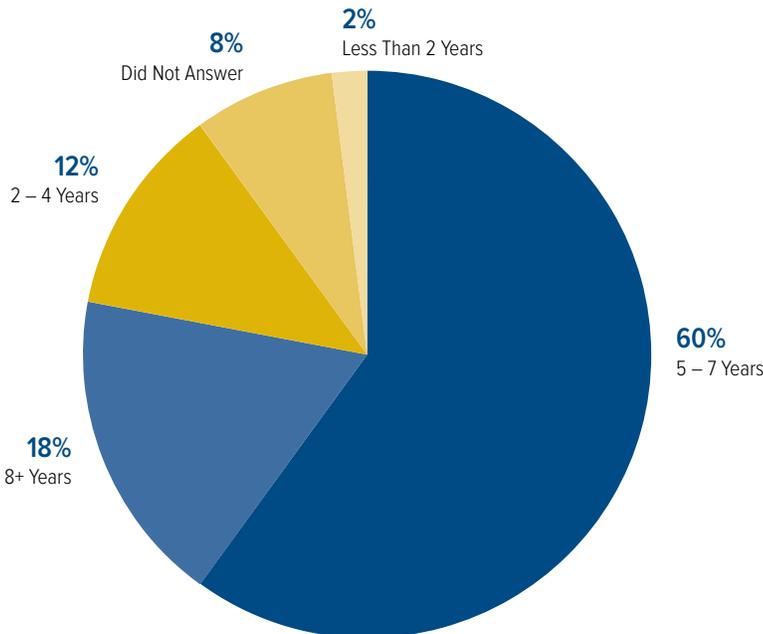
### Seeking Stability

In addition to the leadership traits and skills identified, trustees want longevity in their CEOs. Yet, the survey reveals a substantial disconnect between trustee expectations for executive stability and the reality of high rates of CEO turnover in CA.

Trustees want leadership tenures that significantly exceed the statewide average and believe that such longevity is key to efficacy. Four out of five respondents identify 5 years or more as the minimum tenure for an effective CEO. Almost two out of five cite minimum tenures of 8 years or more (Chart 4).

Chart 4

Minimum Desired Tenure for Effective CEO (N=88)

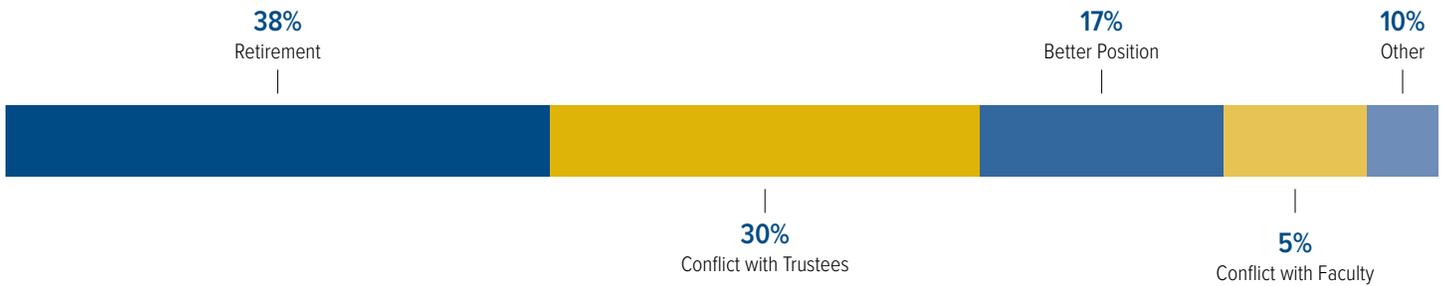


### Why do CEOs leave?

From respondents' perspective, departing CEOs most commonly leave their posts for retirement. A close second, however, is conflict, primarily with governing boards (cited by 30%) but also with faculty (5%). Another 17% cited CEO departures for more favorable jobs (Chart 6).

Chart 5

In Your Opinion, Why Did Departing CEO(s) Leave? (N=75)



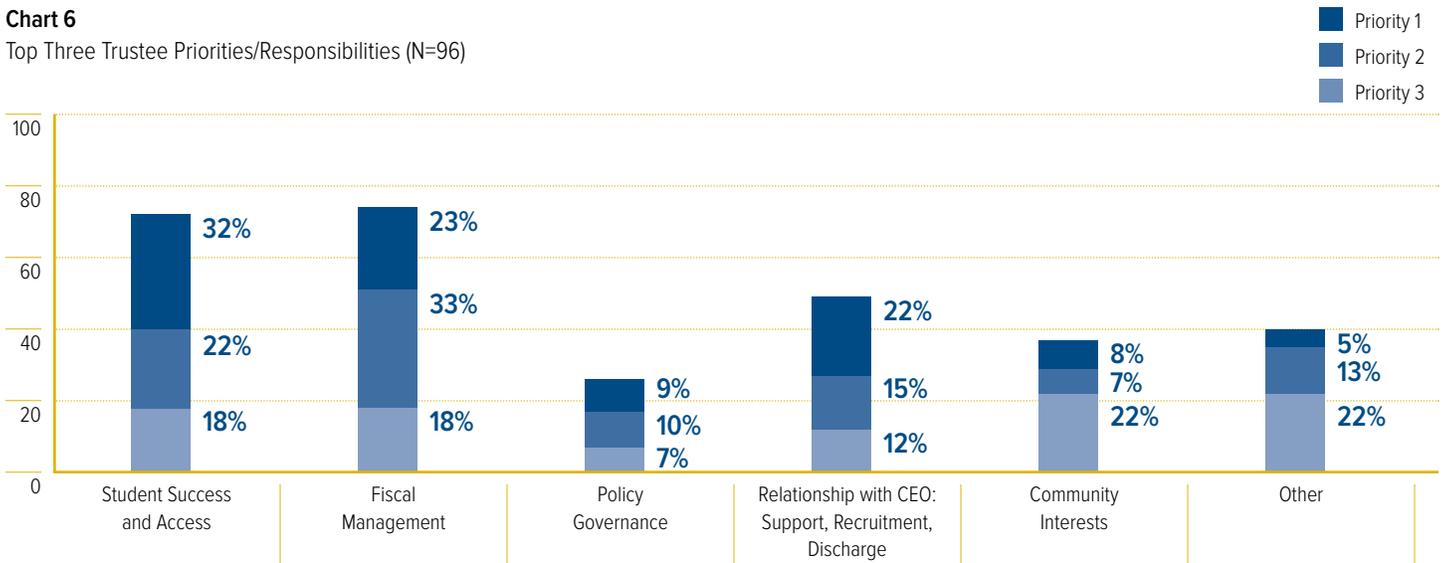
Percentages do not add up to 100 because 5% of respondents did not answer this question (reflecting a subset of respondents who said they had served during the departure of a CEO).

### Trustees' primary responsibilities

Asked to name their top three responsibilities as trustees, respondents coalesced primarily around student success and fiscal oversight of their colleges and districts (Chart 6). In open-ended responses, a number of trustees voiced concern for students, one in particular noting the difficulty of “watching them fall short of completion because of personal and external forces on their lives.”

Chart 6

Top Three Trustee Priorities/Responsibilities (N=96)



Percentages exceed 100 due to rounding.

### The hardest part?

Asked an open-ended question about the most difficult aspect of their trustee service, respondents cited a range of challenges, most prominently fiscal management (Chart 7). Several specifically cited the difficulty of managing finances for institutions whose “revenues are dependent on the vagaries of the state budget, and yet, all expenses are determined locally.” One spoke for many in calling out the challenge of “not being able to be the master of our own financial issues.”

Many noted the particular challenge of balancing active engagement in providing direction and oversight of their districts and colleges while avoiding micromanagement or the perception of micromanagement. Others stated they would like more information from their CEOs in order to have greater confidence in the decisions and initiatives they are asked to support. In the words of one respondent: “We are given full presentations by administrators, but not enough information to more than rubber stamp the positions advocated by administrators. I’m not saying [administrators] are wrong, but trustees need to make decisions grounded in evidence and thorough examination.”

Another reflected on the complexity of the trustee role, and of the challenge of being informed enough to be in the position to ask “the pertinent questions that keep us on target so that the public we serve and the faculty and staff know that students and their chances for success are our primary commitment.”

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“Trustees walk a fine line between policy setting and implementation. Knowing how to effect policy changes without interfering in implementation is important ... How do we exercise our role without offending faculty, staff and administrators?”

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### Chart 7

What Is the Most Challenging Part of Serving as a Trustee? (N=94)



Percentages do not add up to 100 because 5% of respondents did not answer this question.

## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This survey was conducted electronically in Spring 2017 by Wheelhouse Postdoctoral Scholar Elizabeth Friedmann of the University of California, Davis, School of Education. On behalf of Wheelhouse, the Community College League of California sent emails requesting survey participation to its email list of currently serving elected college trustees statewide, with follow-up emails to encourage online survey completion. Just under 100 Trustees participated for a response rate of 25%. It is important to note that the responses may not be representative of those trustees who did not participate. Any conclusions drawn are representative only of those individuals who responded to the survey. Among respondents, 48% were age 65 or older and 49% were female. Respondents were evenly distributed across the trustee tenure spectrum. Two-thirds reported their ethnicity as white/non-Hispanic; 12% Hispanic; 4% African American; 3% East Asian; and 14% declined to state. Two-thirds serve in urban/suburban as opposed to rural districts, and half serve in single rather than multiple-college districts. A strong majority reported having earned advanced degrees.

## Conclusion

This brief, and the survey on which it is based, attempts to shed light on key leadership dynamics in one of California's most important public institutions. There is cause for optimism here, in the student-focused responses offered by many trustees who responded to the survey. Many offer healthy self-reflection about finding the “sweet spot” of appropriate oversight that doesn't stray into micromanagement. And there are some doses of practical advice for CEOs, specifically a plea that CEOs not manage their trustees so assertively that they are overly selective in providing information for decision making. Trustees also express some significant concerns over the lack of tenure of CEOs and the overriding necessity to focus on the finances of the colleges. Within these responses are many reminders that trustees, just like the CEOs they hire, face complexity, competing priorities, and, at times, delicate politics. The challenge for elected and appointed leaders alike is to build the trusting relationships that allow them work in partnership to meet the needs of the students they all serve.

*This brief was prepared by Susanna Cooper, Managing Director of Wheelhouse, with helpful input from Wheelhouse advisors Manuel Baca, Larry Galizio, and Brice W. Harris and graduate student researchers Ambar Hernandez and Jackson Yan of the UC Davis School of Education.*

*The analysis in this brief is that of the author alone and does not necessarily represent the opinions of Wheelhouse funders or its board of advisors.*

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the Community College League of California has identified the median job tenure of California community college presidents as just three and a half years—half that of their counterparts at the state's four-year institutions. Community College League of California, *Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Tenure and Retention Study*, 2013-14.

<sup>2</sup> Wheelhouse, *Tough Job if You Can Keep It*, 2016. [education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ucdavis\\_wheelhouse\\_tough\\_job\\_research\\_brief.pdf](http://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ucdavis_wheelhouse_tough_job_research_brief.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster defines “to micromanage” as “to manage especially with excessive control or attention to details.”

**Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research** was established in 2016 to support California community college leaders through annual professional learning institutes and independent, actionable research on relevant topics and trends. Wheelhouse is supported by the University of California, Davis, the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative, the James Irvine Foundation, the Hearst Foundations, the Foundation for California Community Colleges, the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences. Housed at the UC Davis School of Education, the Wheelhouse Institute on Leadership welcomed its first annual cohort of Fellows—20 sitting and aspiring community college CEOs—in 2017.