



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ahead of the Curve

Navigating 10 Key Imperatives for Community Colleges Across the Next Decade



Higher education is in the midst of a pivotal transformation, caused by changing perceptions of the value of college, shifting talent markets, emerging technologies, and a rapidly changing economy. Over the next decade, these changes will impact our business processes, program offerings, staffing strategies, and how we connect with learners.

Community colleges are well positioned to respond to these new demands, but it can be difficult to narrow down which imperatives could have the greatest impact on your college. Synthesizing both national trends and EAB research, we've compiled a list of 10 key imperatives for community colleges to focus on in the coming decade, helping leaders proactively prepare for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Readers may find that some of these items have greater relevance to their college than others, or they may find that their college is already addressing some of these incoming changes. We encourage you to spend time on the areas that are most useful to you, and if you aren't sure where to start, please see the [diagnostic](#) at the end of this brief.

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- 6 Future-proof your talent strategies.
- 7 Showcase your ROI—answering the “is college worth it?” question.
- 8 Embrace AI and work smarter, not harder.

Imperatives in the next 7–10 years

- 9 Become leading experts on the future of work.
- 10 Establish your community college as the designated training arm for employer partners.

0–3 years: Addressing Post-Pandemic Student Needs—In the near term, community colleges may experience the most urgency in responding to influences caused by the pandemic. This could include increased demands for basic needs, mental health, and academic preparedness supports. These imperatives directly correlate with student well-being and persistence.

4–6 years: Recalibrating Our Value Proposition—These imperatives invite colleges to shift their perspective on how business processes are completed and what it means to work at a community college. This includes reflecting on what value community colleges offer to both students and talent.

7–10 years: Responding to the Future of Work—These future imperatives ask community colleges to consider their larger role in relation to the workforce, society, and employers. This includes how community colleges can potentially position themselves as thought leaders in the future of “work.”

Imperatives in the next 0–3 years

- 1 Create stronger career- and technical-focused dual enrollment pathways.
- 2 Prioritize stronger mental health and well-being safety nets.
- 3 Scale basic needs interventions.
- 4 Prepare for students facing math barriers.
- 5 Build an intuitive, digital-first infrastructure.

1. Create stronger career- and technical-focused dual enrollment pathways.

Currently, [20 percent of all community college students](#) in the US are dual-enrolled high school students, making these connection points one of the most powerful inroads for building relationships with prospective students. In the past, many dual-enrolled students focused on highly transferable courses without a clear picture of how those courses could be intentionally mapped to their future career goals.

Now, as students are becoming more motivated by their [career goals](#), community colleges must ensure students' dual-enrollment offerings provide an early—and clear—start to a college program that can improve their economic mobility. Without a direct connection to future career prospects, it may become harder to transition dual-enrollment students to credential programs.



How to prepare:

A new approach designed by the Community College Research Center recommends Dual Enrollment Equity ([DEEP](#)), which involves community colleges and K-12 schools partnering in four practice areas to:

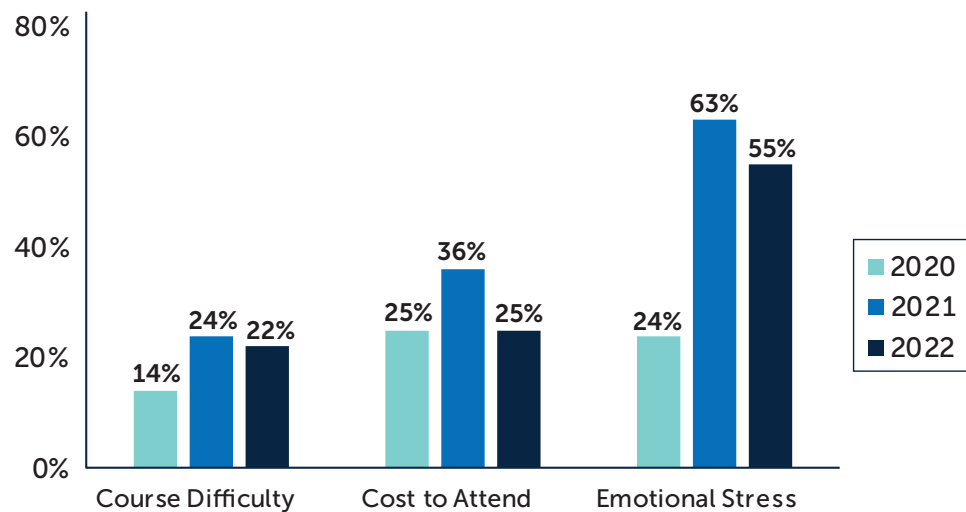
- » Provide outreach to underserved students and families to encourage their participation in dual enrollment.
- » Align dual-enrollment course offerings to career-technical, associate, and bachelor's degree programs in high-opportunity fields.
- » Advise students in the exploration of their interests and the development of post-high school education and career path plans.
- » Support students by delivering high-quality instruction to build their confidence as college learners.

Through this proactive linkage to career outcomes, family relationship building, and commitment to extending guided pathways principles to dual-enrolled students, community colleges can generate increased buy-in from younger students.

2. Prioritize stronger mental health and well-being safety nets.

Community college students and high schoolers have both reported increased mental health concerns and stress. A [recent Gallup study](#) shows that emotional stress plays a significant role in why a student in an associate’s degree program might stop out. Since 2020, the number of students citing emotional stress as a factor that could derail their completion has more than doubled.

Top reasons cited by associate’s degree seeking students



Looking even further into the future, the most recent Youth Risk Surveillance report from the CDC shows youth mental health markers trending in the wrong direction. In 2021, 42% of students reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness, up 28% from 2011; and 22% reported seriously considering suicide, up from 16% a decade earlier.

Institutions need to prepare for an influx of students who have identified mental health needs as well as those whose needs haven’t yet been addressed. Without proper preparation, student distress could worsen, threatening the well-being of students, student economic mobility, and overall enrollment.

The Percentage of High School Students Who:	2011 TOTAL	2013 TOTAL	2015 TOTAL	2017 TOTAL	2019 TOTAL	2021 TOTAL	Trend
Experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness	28	30	30	31	37	42	●
Experienced poor mental health	–	–	–	–	–	29	–
Seriously considered attempting suicide	16	17	18	17	19	22	●
Made a suicide plan	13	14	15	14	16	18	●
Attempted suicide	8	8	9	7	9	10	●
Were injured in a suicide attempt that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse	2	3	3	2	3	3	◆

● In wrong direction ◆ No change ▾ In right direction

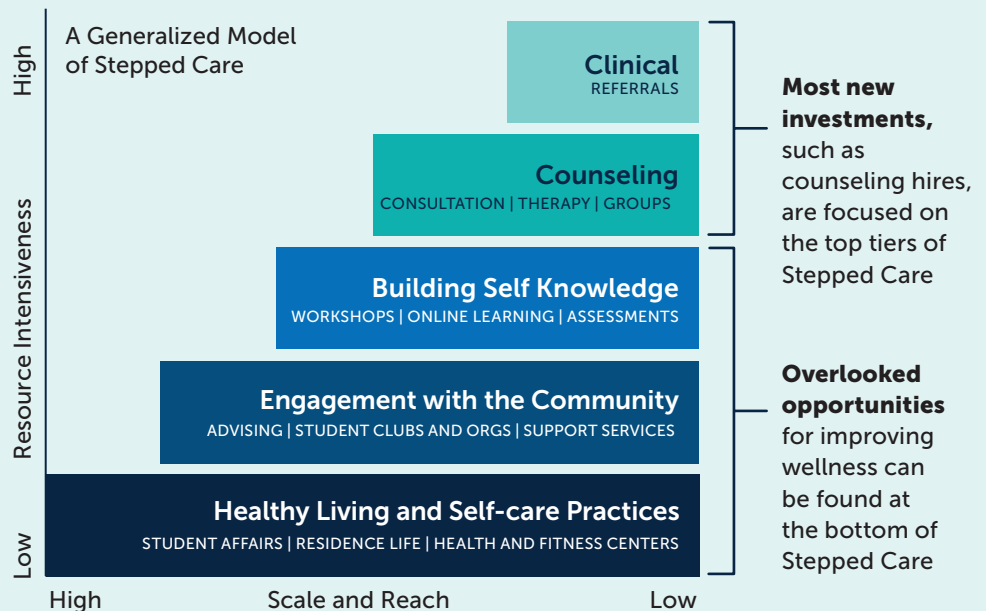
Stressed Out and Stopping Out: The Mental Health Crisis in Higher Education (2023)

2. Prioritize stronger mental health and well-being safety nets.



How to prepare:

- » The stepped care model allows institutions to map campus support services and mental health resources to students' levels of need and risk so they can be matched with the right degree of care, ranging from self-guidance tools to an off-campus referral.
- » [Leverage technology](#) to deploy welcome surveys and quick polls to understand the type of services students need in real time.
- » Empowering students to opt into receiving outreach after submitting a survey normalizes help-seeking behaviors.



Watch one of our [top-viewed webinars](#) to learn more about how to promote student well-being

3. Scale basic needs interventions.

A recent study by the [Community College Center for Student Engagement](#) shows that 29 percent of community college students are food insecure, 14 percent are housing insecure, and 27 percent have had trouble paying their rent or mortgage. All these scenarios put students at an increased risk of not completing their credential.

The same study shows that students facing these barriers are often highly engaged on campus, and many are turning to their college for support. Of food-insecure students, 44 percent reported receiving support from their college, and 21 percent of housing-insecure students reported their college helped them obtain housing. **In short, students are turning to colleges as a first line of defense when trying to meet their basic needs, and institutions must be prepared to meet that call.** Otherwise, the students who stand to benefit the most from post-secondary education may struggle to reach completion.



How to prepare:

- » Identify a person or team that serves as a designated point of contact to help students connect with supports both inside and outside of the college. At [College of Lake County \(CLC\)](#), a Community Resource Advisor is available to help students navigate housing, food options, and other supports that can increase their overall stability.
- » Build strong networks of external community resources to help address needs that go beyond what the college can accommodate.
- » Create internal workflows that track the usage, frequency, and impact of basic needs interventions on persistence.

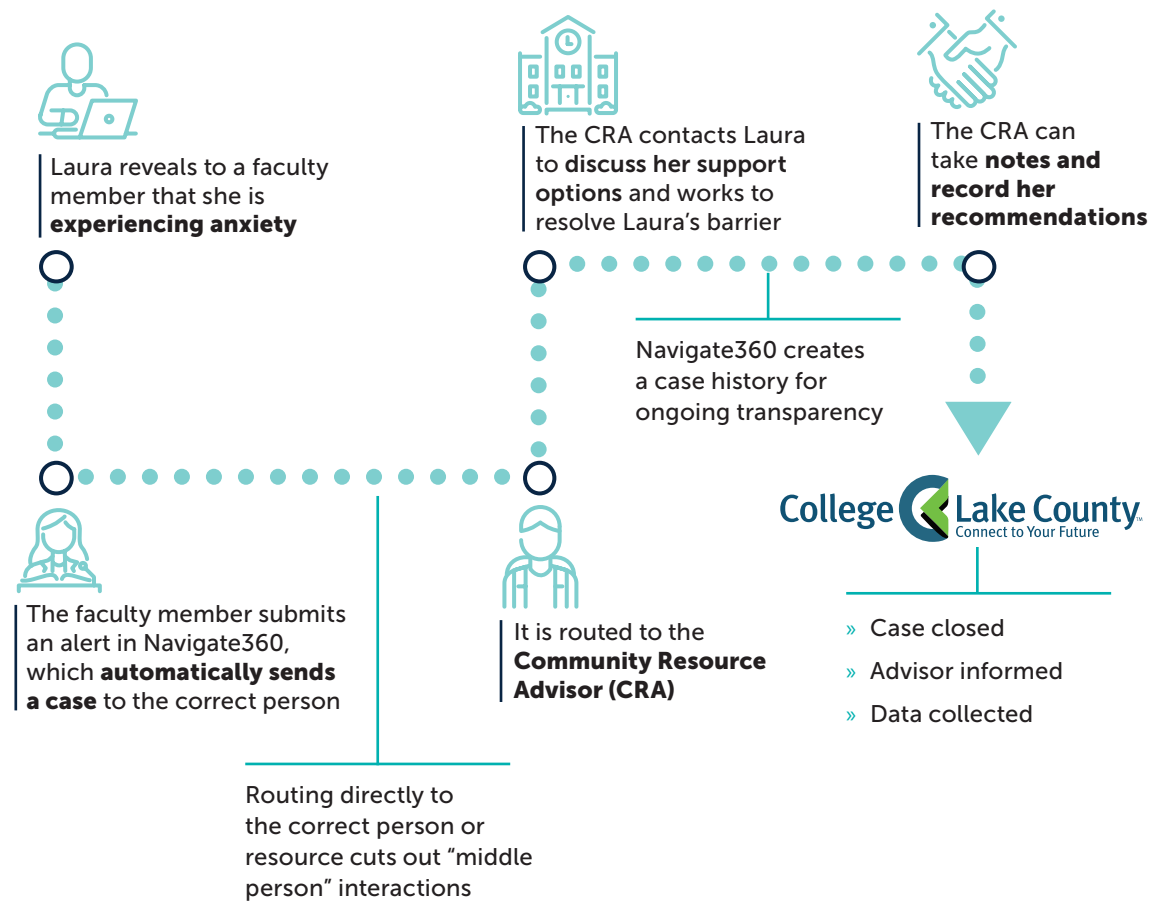


See how [CLC scaled student resources](#) through needs assessments, student focus groups, early alerts, and improving internal workflows. You can also explore their tech-enabled Community Resource Advisor workflow on the next page.

3. Scale basic needs interventions.

Case Study in Brief: College of Lake County's Tech-Enabled Community Resource Advisor Workflow

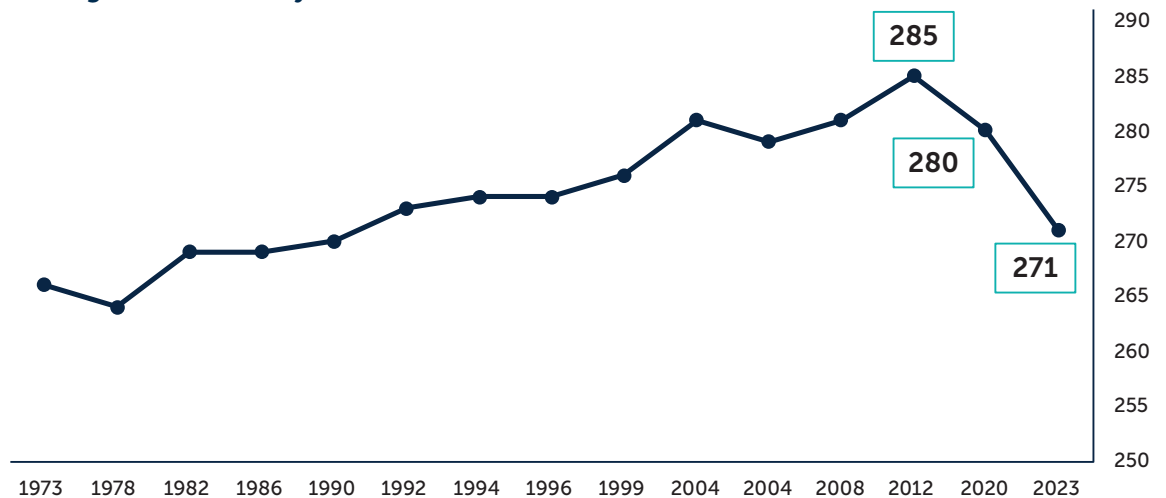
Community Resource Advisor Alert at College of Lake County



4. Prepare for students who are under-prepared in math.

Recently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP](#)) released their [first insight](#) into what degree the pandemic may have disrupted learning and impacted math scores among 13-year-olds. Average scores fell to levels not seen since the 1990s, with declines observed across almost all geographies, socio-economic groups, and achievement levels, including the higher-scoring students most likely to go to college.

Trends in NAEP long-term trend mathematics average scores for 13-year-old students (2023)



Additionally, the non-profit Northwest Evaluation Association has [longitudinally tracked](#) the rate of recovery for cohorts of students. They estimate that the current cohort, who will graduate high school in 2027, will take more than five years to recover to pre-pandemic levels, surpassing interventions that the K-12 system may be able to offer. Given that [one in five](#) community college students are a high school student, the impacts of these attainment declines will likely be felt by the two-year sector in as soon as two to three years.

Without intervention, students may also struggle to pass gatekeeper English and math courses. This not only slows their degree progress, but it can also deplete their financial aid if they are required to repeat courses.

4. Prepare for students facing math barriers.



How to prepare:

- » Mine data to understand where your students stand on math; for colleges with strong dual-enrollment partnerships, utilize data-sharing agreements to help you understand how incoming students are performing.
- » Swap placement testing-only processes for [multiple-measure assessments](#) that provide a more well-rounded perspective on math ability.
- » Invest in co-curricular instruction that runs parallel to gatekeeping math courses.
- » Offer non-credit bootcamps to help students prepare for college-level math.
- » Evaluate your math requirements to ensure required math courses are the best fit for a student's specific major. This customization may help students see connections between their math requirements and their future career.



Learn more about the [lurking threats of unfinished learning](#) and how having access to early course success data can help your institution address them early.

5. Build an intuitive, digital-first infrastructure.

Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha are digital natives who have always had technology-powered access to services and processes. Digital-first services, or resources students can access remotely from their phone or computer, are critical because these students do not experience the world through pencil and paper. In fact, [90 percent of high school district leaders](#) said they were providing a device for every middle and high school student, and 84 percent said they were doing the same for elementary school students.

Even though we know student expectations regarding technology are increasing, many colleges still fall short of meeting those needs. When asked, [69 percent of students](#) said their college's online portal was less than user-friendly, and a recent nationwide [EAB survey](#) of community college staff demonstrated that technology shortfalls can be severe enough to cause students to abandon the college.

If we don't act, more students will walk away from our low-tech or confusing processes in frustration, causing lasting impacts on enrollment and retention. Additionally, staff will continue to be buried under manual processes that take time away from working directly with students and helping them achieve their goals.



How to prepare:

- » Complete a technology audit to understand which tasks students can complete remotely and which still require paper or in-person interactions.
- » Build technology goals into your strategic planning activities to increase institutional accountability for modernizing your college.
- » Deploy "[secret shopper](#)" initiatives that encourage the college to experience its processes from the student perspective to identify gaps in student services technology.



See how [other community colleges](#) are shortening onboarding times, increasing retention, improving applicant conversion rates, and saving staff hours with Navigate360, higher ed's leading CRM.

Imperatives in the next 4–6 years

- 6 Future-proof your talent strategies.
- 7 Showcase your ROI—answering the “is college worth it?” question.
- 8 Embrace AI and work smarter, not harder.

6. Future-proof your talent strategies.

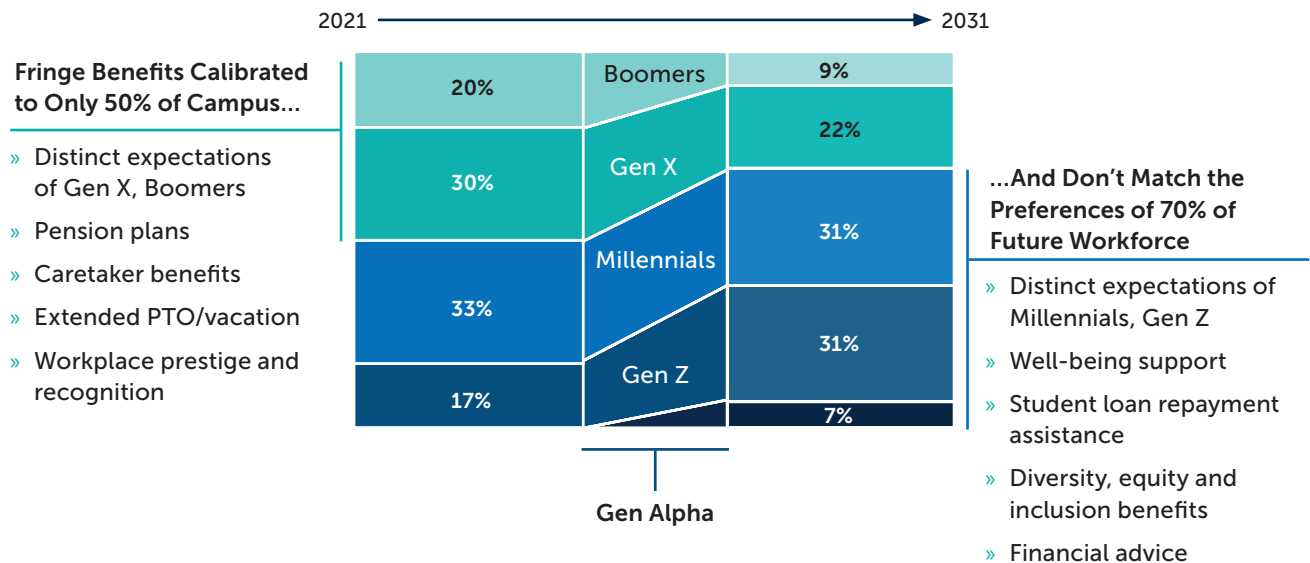
Since 2020, employees have left higher education in droves, with community colleges [losing 13 percent of their workforce](#) at their peak. The most recent [CUPA-HR survey](#) results show that 33 percent of higher education staff said they were “very likely” or “likely” to look for new employment opportunities in the next year, further complicating talent management needs.

Professionals who left higher education cited stifled upward mobility, pay, and lack of flexibility as reasons why—all areas where the private sector tends to outpace higher education. This is important because by 2028, it’s anticipated that there will be a 6-million-person worker shortage in the US. All industries, not just community colleges, will be competing for a smaller talent pool.

Given that the private sector is outpacing community colleges on what matters most to prospective employees, especially Gen Zers who will make up [30 percent of the workforce by 2030](#), community colleges need to examine their talent strategies to avoid continued talent loss over the next decade.

Outside of Table-Stakes Benefits, Preferences Diverge by Generation

Current and Projected Higher Ed Workforce Composition by Generation, 2021–2031



6. Future-proof your talent strategies.



How to prepare:

Community colleges can become better partners to employers by:

- » Expanding remote and flexible work options.
- » Highlighting unique employee benefits, like helping to pay off existing student loans, 401k contributions, and mental health support options.
- » Reevaluating job descriptions to demonstrate why the college is a great place to work, versus displaying a laundry list of candidate expectations.
- » Recruiting outside of traditional higher education talent pools to find employees that have business, IT, and customer service skills that are transferable to a college setting.



Safeguard your talent investment. [Explore 105 tactics to improve employee engagement.](#)

7. Showcase your ROI—answering the “is college worth it?”

Recent research shows that [51 percent of former community college students](#) who were motivated by a specific career or personal goal did not reach that goal. This gap in expectation versus outcome is going to become more unsustainable as [20 percent of high school students](#) who opted out of college did so because they aren't convinced of higher education's ROI, and as the American public overall is becoming more skeptical of post-secondary education.

Adding more complexity to the ROI puzzle is that emerging generations of workers measure ROI by more than just wages. Benefits, time off, parental leave, and mental health supports all top the list of [Gen Z and Gen Alpha concerns](#). Knowing this, community colleges need to generate pathways not only to better wages, but also to jobs and employers that are going to meet students' quality of life expectations. Without a clear ROI message, community colleges may struggle to attract new students as well as mid-career adults who are looking for ways to advance in their current role or switch fields completely.



How to prepare:

- » Early conversations with students should center on their goals, skills, and career expectations, rather than a quick question of “what major do you want?”. Moving career conversations to the beginning of a student's journey, rather than the end, helps ensure students are in the best-fit program and tracking toward their goals.
- » Additionally, community colleges should be prepared to transparently show salaries and outcomes for specific programs, as well as who their strongest employer partners are, as part of the recruitment process. Demonstrating that the college and employers are concurrently trying to build a relationship with the student before they even start their program is the assurance prospective students need to trust that they will receive a return on their investment.



[Explore more strategies](#) for integrating career success across the student lifecycle.

8. Embrace AI and work smarter, not harder.

AI promises to revolutionize nearly every aspect of our lives, from the way we learn and accomplish tasks at work to how we seek entertainment. Beyond our day-to-day activities, AI has the potential to reshape entire industries, from agriculture and health care to climate change and space exploration.

Higher education isn't exempt from the impacts of AI, and upcoming cohorts of students will be raised with AI as part of their K-12 system and home life. It's imperative that community colleges investigate how AI can make college processes easier for staff and how it can be used to enhance the classroom. Some faculty and staff may feel resistance to AI, and even fear that it's a threat, when in fact it stands to make their jobs more efficient, so they can spend more time with students and less time on repetitive, time-consuming tasks. Without attention to AI, community colleges will fall behind other industries, miss opportunities to build efficiency, and leave students at a disadvantage.



How to prepare:

- » Consider how AI can be used to personalize learning through adapting content to meet a student's unique needs.
- » Explore how AI can build efficiency through automating common tasks, assisting with building faculty course schedules, or grading short quizzes.
- » Explore how AI can help with budget projections, space utilization analysis, and tasks that can build a more fiscally informed culture.
- » Consider how your [current data infrastructure is connected](#) and what gaps might exist between point solutions, which could impact your ability to fully leverage AI.
- » Invest in hiring professionals with AI experience to serve as leads for developing your AI strategy.



Learn more about innovative ways to embrace (and demystify) [AI in higher education](#).

Imperatives in the next 7–10 years

9 Become leading experts on the future of work.

10 Establish your community college as the designated training arm for employer partners.

9. Become leading experts on the future of work.

As employers continue to embrace future-facing initiatives in areas such as AI, clean energy, big data, and advanced manufacturing, community colleges should be ready to develop curricula that prepare students for careers completely different from those of the past (or even the present).

The [World Economic Forum](#) notes that most of the fastest, growing roles are technology-related. AI and Machine Learning Specialists top the list of fast-growing jobs, followed by Sustainability Specialists, Business Intelligence Analysts, and Information Security Analysts. As economies shift toward renewable energy, Renewable Energy Engineers and Solar Energy Installation and System Engineers are also growing roles. The same report shows analytical and creative thinking as the top skill employees need to be successful in our new economy, so even as colleges are still learning what technical skills students need, there is an opportunity to emphasize the cognitive skills that are going to be more in demand.

This is a place where community colleges can show leadership not only by connecting with employers to learn about their emerging needs, but also by positioning themselves as experts on the future of work. In a recent [survey published by Harvard Business School in partnership with AACC](#) more than 50 percent of business leaders surveyed were unable to assert that they knew which skills they were hiring for, and 30 percent admitted that they did not know which skills they were looking for in new hires. The risk of both institutions and employers being out of touch with the future of work could be disastrous for local economies and employees, but it does represent a place where community colleges can emerge as thought leaders.



How to prepare:

- » Invest in workforce development scans, research, and data that can help you project which technical and soft skills are in growing demand. The results of your research can also be shared with workforce partners to solidify your expertise and preparedness to tackle the future of work.
- » Invest in teaching universal skills that are in growing demand. The [World Economic Forum](#) tracks emerging skills, including analytical thinking and resilience, that can provide your college with direction.
- » Connect with local, state, and national advisory boards that monitor workforce trends to understand the macro-level changes occurring in our economy that can be applied to program development. (Example: [AIM certificate](#))

10. Establish your community college as the designated training arm for employer partners.

Community colleges have always played a strong role in working alongside employers to build programs that educate new generations of employees. As technology rapidly evolves, employers increasingly face challenges in training incumbent employees quickly and at scale. Some are referring to this as the “[training treadmill](#),” fueled by high levels of turnover and the need to upskill current employees.

Additionally, the most recent [World Economic Forum Report](#) estimates that 60 percent of workers will require training before 2027, but only half of workers have access to adequate training opportunities today. The same report shows organizations identify skills gaps and an inability to attract talent as the key barriers preventing industry transformation.

Without a properly trained workforce, innovation and productivity can slow and employees can become confined to their roles. Without attention to these skills gaps, our workforce stands to fall behind, limiting innovation and stalling economic mobility for our communities.



How to prepare:



- » Regional employers are important partners, but some community colleges have had success in building partnerships with national and global organizations to offer training.
 - » Nine community colleges are partnered with [Tesla](#) to train service technicians. Students are paid during their training internship and are eligible for benefits.
 - » [Amazon’s Career Choice Program](#) works with institutions, like Tallahassee Community College, to provide training to incumbent employees.
- » Create an incumbent worker subcommittee or task force within your existing workforce advisory board that’s focused on understanding the skills needed to strengthen your existing local talent pool.

If your institution is ready to prepare for the next decade, make sure you have the right technology and higher education experts in your corner to support you. EAB's Navigate360 CRM makes it simple to connect recruitment, retention, and career empowerment for all student types across the entire lifecycle. With connective tools for students, staff, and faculty leveraged by 850+ institutions, you can position your college to better support the long-term education and career outcomes of each student and achieve your enrollment goals.



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Our Solutions for Community Colleges	Institutional Strategy	Recruitment and Enrollment	Student Success	Data Management and Analytics
NAVIGATE360 Higher ed's leading student CRM to recruit, retain, and empower students in college and beyond				
EDIFY A higher ed-specific and vendor-agnostic data warehouse, infrastructure, and analytics hub				
STRATEGIC ADVISORY SERVICES Consultative access to EAB's best practice research, toolkits, diagnostics, and expert direction on community colleges' most pressing challenges				
RAPID INSIGHT Access, prepare, and explore your data in a code-free, drag-and-drop workspace				
MOON SHOT FOR EQUITY A comprehensive initiative to eliminate equity gaps at your institution by the year 2030				
ENROLL360 VIRTUAL TOURS Immersive virtual tour platform creating a digital experience that generates higher inquiries and activates your recruitment team				
APPILY An expansive college search network that connects colleges with right-fit students				
INTERSECT A recruitment solution powered by Naviance, the leading college and career readiness platform used by 40% of US high school students				

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Community College Key Imperative Diagnostic

Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

This diagnostic is designed to help your institution narrow down which initiatives could help you prepare for shifts in the community college landscape over the next decade. Indicate to what degree your college has started initiatives related to each imperative, and to what degree each imperative aligns with your institutional goals. Initiatives that have already been started and align with your goals could represent the easiest places to begin when considering the most strategic ways to future-proof your institution.

Imperative:	Our college has started this initiative:			This initiative aligns with our college goals:		
	No	Somewhat	Yes	No	Somewhat	Yes
Create stronger career- and technical-focused dual enrollment pathways.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prioritize stronger mental health and well-being safety nets.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scale basic needs interventions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prepare for students facing math barriers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Build an intuitive, digital-first infrastructure.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Future-proof your talent strategies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Showcase your ROI—answering the “is college worth it?” question.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Embrace AI and work smarter, not harder.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Become leading experts on the future of work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Establish your community college as the designated training arm for employer partners.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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