

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES IN THEIR OWN WORDS

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM THE
ACCT-CSCC SURVEY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES



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ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

Dr. Susan Kater is an assistant professor in Higher Education Leadership at Idaho State University, a project consultant with the League for Innovation in the Community College, and a former community college administrator in the Maricopa Community College District system. She is the editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Community Colleges* and secretary for the Center for the Study of Community Colleges. Her primary research interests center around community college faculty and shared governance in the community college.

Dr. Regina Garza Mitchell is a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology at Western Michigan University. Her research interests include critical arts-based qualitative methodologies and community college leadership and governance. She is a proud community college graduate, former community college administrator, and a past president of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges. Her work has been funded by the National Science Foundation's Advanced Technological Education and Improving Undergraduate STEM Education programs.

Dr. Carrie B. Kisker is managing director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges and president of Kisker Education Consulting. With funding from the Gates, Walter S. Johnson, Spencer, Hewlett, and Kettering foundations, Dr. Kisker has led the Center in conducting several national studies about community colleges and their students, faculty, and leaders.

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Center for the Study of Community Colleges

The Center for the Study of Community Colleges is a non-profit 501(c)(3) research and policy organization based in Los Angeles, California. The Center's mission is to improve community college effectiveness and student success by engaging in and supporting research related to community college leadership, practice, and policy. For more information, visit centerforcommunitycolleges.org.



INTRODUCTION

Community colleges educate almost 40% of all undergraduate students in the United States and play key roles in local and national workforce and economic development. They provide access to educational opportunities to students from a wide variety of backgrounds, enabling them to succeed in their careers and thrive throughout their lives. Underpinning these contributions are trustees and governing boards who are the fiduciary stewards of their institutions, guide institutional mission and strategy, monitor operations, and ensure that colleges and their students flourish.

This report shares findings from interviews and open-ended survey questions which were part of the 2024-2025 groundbreaking national study of community college trustees, conducted jointly by the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC). Intended as a companion report to “Community College Trusteeship in 2025: A Commitment to Serve,” this analysis considers open-ended survey responses from over 1,800 community college trustees who participated in the ACCT-CSCC Survey of Community College Trustees with data from 40 interviews with trustees. Appendix A provides a list of all interview questions.

Between fall 2024 and spring 2025, CSCC researchers contacted a random sample of survey respondents who indicated interest in participating in a follow-up interview. We conducted one-on-one interviews with a diverse sample of 40 trustees representing rural, urban, and metropolitan community colleges across the U.S. The participants comprised a cross-section of trustees who responded to the survey, representing the broad geographies and institutional sizes and types of the community colleges they serve. This report contains expert analysis by researchers who engaged in thematic analysis augmented by AI to validate themes within and across sections of the data.

We are grateful to the more than 2,000 community college trustees who responded to the ACCT-CSCC Survey of Community College Trustees and, especially, to the 40 trustees who participated in qualitative interviews.

PART I: HOW DO TRUSTEES MAKE SENSE OF THEIR WORK AND THE ORGANIZATIONS THEY SERVE?

MOTIVATIONS TO SERVE

We began our interviews by asking participants **why they chose to become a community college trustee**. Frequently, responses were related to the ideas of **legacy**, **connection**, and **advocacy**. Trustees spoke of:

- Longstanding **traditions of service**, often as part of a family legacy and/or wanting to give back in the local area.
- **Personal connections to education**, often as a former educator or entrepreneur, or as a beneficiary of a community college education.
- Passion for **access** and **combating inequality**. Many also described the importance of advocacy for marginalized students.

Trustees described a passion for the work community colleges do, and many shared their own desire to give back to and help develop their local communities, often noting their expertise as business leaders or entrepreneurs. Because funding was consistently identified as a significant challenge, **trustees' role in fiduciary oversight** was prominent and many trustees recognized the community colleges' value in providing public and private returns on investments.

Integrating trustees' motivation to serve with how they describe their work adds another layer of insight. When asked how they would describe their work to others outside of their college, trustees talked about:

- **Overseeing the direction of the college from a high level**, setting policies and focusing on fiscal management, student success, and institutional sustainability.
- The need to **balance stakeholder interests**, which include students, faculty, taxpayers, policymakers, and the community at large. During the timeframe of our study diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives had become a point of contention, particularly where national debates intersected with local perspectives. Trustees also talked about balancing faculty autonomy with institutional governance, an example of the political issues many states are grappling with.
- **Supporting institutional leadership** was another commonality across the interviews. Trustees highlighted the need for a solid working relationship with their CEO, as well as the need to protect their CEO. For example, *"Most of my responsibility is just keeping a barricade around the president and allowing him to do his job."* However, many trustees also noted the need to hold leaders accountable for achieving the institution's goals.

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- Many trustees serve because of their strong belief in the mission of community colleges, and they described how this manifests in their work by representing the college in the community and bringing community needs back to the college. As ambassadors or liaisons between the college and the community, trustees stressed their role in ensuring that their college's programs and services align with the community's needs. A trustee explained: *"We're also ambassadors. We're elected officials, and we're the eyes and ears out in the community. And it's my role to be aware of what the data is, what the trends are. I'm really pushing our board right now to look at where there's a need with some of our jobs. And you know, I think it's our role to provide that training. It's not always easy to set up the programs. But if there's a need and nobody else is addressing that need, we really need to take a look at it."*

ACKNOWLEDGING INCREASED COMPLEXITY

Trustees acknowledged that **their roles have become more complex**, with increasing attention to broader (state, national) issues at the same time as a need to respond to local challenges and opportunities. The primary roles identified in interviews included governance and policy setting, fiduciary oversight, providing support for institutional leadership, community representation and advocacy, all while balancing the interests of various stakeholders.

The cumulative effect of more stakeholders, with environmental and external influences cutting across all areas of the college, impacts trustees' work. The complexity of this work is compounded by the fact that community colleges are vertically stretching to grow dual enrollment and baccalaureate degree programs, while at the same time maintaining certificate and associate programs for students immediately entering the workforce.

Despite the complexity of their roles, trustees see their colleges as *"the catalyst for changing our students and communities"* and identify a need to update programs to meet continuously changing workforce needs.

BALANCING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE VALUES

Given the increasing influence of the external environment on community college operations, we wanted to dig deeper into **how trustees balance the interests of various stakeholders with their own values, as well as the public values mission of the community college**. One trustee articulated this balance by reflecting, *“Do you represent the community, the majority voice in the community? Do you represent your own moral values? How do you trade off among those things?”*

At the time we conducted interviews with trustees, changing federal and state policies regarding DEI programs and other student supports were chaotic, which made these questions very real. Internal conflicts were frequent and not limited to political or ideological lines. To balance competing values, trustees often:

- **Prioritize fiduciary duty and institutional mission**, often noting their first obligation is to the college—to students, fiduciary responsibility, and institutional stability—even when their private values differ. *“My role actually is a dual role in that I represent the college in making it a better place, but I also represent the taxpayers that support the college. So, I’m of the belief that it’s important that those two responsibilities are by design kind of in tension with one another.”*
- **Use policy and processes as a buffer**. Trustees lean on policies, bylaws, and procedural norms as neutral guidelines to prevent private values from overriding institutional obligations.
- **Reframe controversial topics**. For example, anchoring contested values (i.e., DEI initiatives) in student-focused services and measurable metrics such as retention, graduation, and utilization of academic and support services.

Our findings suggest that trustees serve as **boundary managers**, balancing public expectations, legal constraints, and institutional capacity. **Formalized governance structures** can help align private values and the wide range of stakeholder perspectives with the shared public missions of the college. Many trustees spoke highly of **ongoing professional development training on governance** in helping them balance competing values, while expressing the need for continually evolving orientation and training sessions.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE COLLEGE MISSION

We also wanted to know what trustees see as the mission of the community college, or put another way, **what should their colleges be doing?** Trustees' responses, in order of frequency, include:

1. Economic development and workforce training.

Trustees consistently spoke of the role of community colleges in preparing students for the workforce, including upskilling, reskilling, and ensuring economic stability: *"Community college are the mechanism for moving a community and enhancing our workforce."* While the workforce mission is fully ingrained in the work of community colleges, we saw evidence of a shift to a more holistic community development mission throughout the interviews. As one trustee noted, *"We are diverging from the technical mission and placing the college at the center of the community."*

2. Providing access to higher education for anyone willing to pursue it, regardless of background or socioeconomic status.

Discussions of the colleges' access mission were tightly coupled with an emphasis on student success: *"We're a resource for prosperity."* The emphasis on open-door policies, serving non-traditional students, and giving individuals a second chance at higher education were oft-mentioned themes. Indeed, trustees are tracking the evolving needs of students and feel accountable for helping students successfully complete their educational goals. Trustees often spoke about the importance of supporting the whole student, not just academically but in terms of their overall well-being. The need for affordable housing, mental health support, childcare, and transportation were noted as key challenges for students and colleges. In addition, trustees support their colleges' work in providing affordable and streamlined transfer pathways as ways to operationalize this part of the colleges' access mission.

3. Serving the community and civic engagement.

Trustees see their colleges as hubs in their communities, offering social programs, leadership training, and economic development opportunities. They also noted the colleges' roles in fostering civic responsibility and providing education for public service, as well as careers that strengthen and support local communities. *"We provide training to people who serve the community—nurses, police officers, firefighters, for example."*

4. Innovation and responsiveness to changing needs.

Trustees are aware of their responsibility to ensure that colleges continue to be innovative, nimble, and responsive to the changing needs of the workforce and their communities.

“Whatever physical structure, infrastructure, and cultural structure that is being created for the future needs to have flexibility as one of its major considerations because we don’t know where anything is going and community colleges need to be able to continue to be as nimble as possible.”

The expansion of baccalaureate and dual enrollment programs are notable examples of how trustees believe that their institutions should shift to accommodate new student populations, but many trustees also note that high school and baccalaureate-seeking students may require different levels of support than colleges may have been offering.

What wasn’t mentioned in conversations about college mission? Although the traditional missions of the community college and current nuances are worth examining, some aspects of the mission were rarely, if ever, mentioned by trustees in interviews. **Developmental education, adult basic education, and non-credit courses or programs** were not present enough across all trustee responses to rise to the level of reporting. This finding aligns with results of a write-in question on the survey in which trustees were asked about the purposes of the community college. Responses to this question were overwhelmingly related to transfer and workforce development.

Overall, trustees confirmed that their **colleges are enacting the traditional missions** of the community college, while noting a potential shift in being more focused on building communities. This is an interesting finding at a time when many community colleges are dropping “community” from their names, often as they begin to offer baccalaureate degrees. They worry about funding and enrollment and their colleges being able to support students in and outside of the classroom.

Trustees make decisions based on diverse perspectives from students, business and industry, legislators, local policymakers, faculty, and staff, and are focused on staying true to the mission of their institutions while managing their fiduciary roles. They also attempt to balance increasingly complex partisan issues amidst shifting local and federal policies. Many wish more of their colleagues would take advantage of professional development opportunities around governance. They have a deep passion for the mission and values of community colleges and have great hope for their future.

PART 2: TRUSTEE PRIORITIES AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

WHAT TRUSTEES WOULD CHANGE IMMEDIATELY

In the ACCT-CSCC Community College Trustee Survey, trustees were asked to share one-line responses to the following question: “If you could immediately change 3 things about your college/district, what would they be?” The top three responses were:

1. **Increased funding** – more state and local funding for infrastructure, faculty and staff salaries, scholarships, and student support services.
2. **Increased enrollment and completion** – enhanced efforts to boost enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.
3. **Improved facilities** – upgrading outdated buildings, adding student housing, modernizing classrooms, and expanding facilities for high-demand programs.¹

As these survey responses indicate—and as trustees reiterated over and over again in interviews—funding is the most salient topic on trustees’ minds. In interviews, trustees spoke frequently about the need for **increased funding** to support greater compensation for employees, provide more student success support, enable workforce/career and technical education (CTE) and strategic program growth, and upgrade or add new facilities or infrastructure. Many trustees described the need to **expand state and local funding** and to **develop new funding models** that would more effectively address institutional challenges.

Trustees also spoke often about the need to increase enrollment and enhance support services—especially for underrepresented males and dually enrolled students—acknowledging that **student support is critical to institutional efforts to increase retention and completion**. Student support topics most often mentioned related to advising, mental health, and basic needs support such as food, housing, childcare, and transportation.

A third common theme in survey responses and in interviews was the need to **invest in facility upgrades and maintenance**. Many trustees expressed a desire for updated infrastructure—including in technology and online learning resources—as well as new construction, renovations, and ongoing maintenance and repairs. In particular, several trustees noted the need to upgrade and maintain structures that were built between the 1960s and 1980s. Specifics such as more **eco-friendly buildings**; upgrades to classrooms, gyms, dorms, and parking; and **accessibility options** were often highlighted. Given the ubiquitous nature of online learning, trustees’ **emphasis on brick-and-mortar upgrades and repair** indicated an expectation that in-person learning will remain a priority at most community colleges.

¹ The top ten response categories are listed in Appendix C.

WHAT WOULD TRUSTEES DO WITH A HYPOTHETICAL INFUSION OF CASH?

In the ACCT-CSCC Community College Trustee Survey, trustees were also asked to share one-line responses to the following question: “**How would you use a one-time monetary infusion equal to 10% of your annual budget?**” The top three responses were:

1. **Student support and scholarships** - including tuition support, scholarships, grants, financial assistance, and emergency aid.
2. **Facility maintenance and upgrades** – renovation, repairs, new construction, and upgrading infrastructure.
3. **Workforce development and occupational programs** - expansion of CTE, allied health, and workforce training.²

As these responses indicate, supporting student success through additional grants, scholarships, and emergency aid is a top priority for trustees. In write-in responses, many trustees also spoke of their interest in using a hypothetical infusion of funding to **invest in affordable housing, residence halls, and other on-campus living options**. Investments in these areas, along with facilities maintenance and upgrades, new construction, and upgraded infrastructure, emerged as a top priority for trustees.

Finally, in both write-in questions on the survey and in interviews, trustees repeatedly discussed the importance of **workforce development efforts** and the expansion of occupational pathways, particularly in healthcare, baccalaureate programs, and new models for credentialing and competency-based programming. One trustee described *the “silver tsunami”* of impending retirements among a generation of individuals in the trades: *“We’re trying to get our building trades program up and running more like it needs to because there is a dearth of individuals left in the skilled trades. There’s this silver tsunami that’s happening. And when your plumber is 56 years old and says, ‘I’m not going to be doing this much longer’...you got to have the next group of people coming behind you.”*

Similarly, when asked what their colleges need to be doing now to prepare for the future, trustees emphasized the important role their colleges play in economic development initiatives. Many also discussed how community colleges can act as hubs for **strengthening communities, offering social programs, providing leadership training, and fostering civic responsibility**.

² The top ten response categories are listed in Appendix C.



Ultimately, trustees envision **future-ready institutions** which:

- ✓ Are better funded, with competitive pay for faculty and staff.
- ✓ Provide robust student supports to address basic needs and mental health.
- ✓ Have the latest facilities and technology.
- ✓ Expand workforce-aligned programs and partnerships.
- ✓ Have governance stability and internal leadership pipelines.
- ✓ Improve enrollment, retention, and completion outcomes.
- ✓ Reinforce equity, access, and community relevance.

In discussing what needs to occur for their institutions to thrive in the future, trustees don't just talk about the importance of access and equity, they **support actions that will lead to greater access and equity for students**, including more funding, better facilities, compensation for excellence in teaching and learning, additional student services staff, and enhanced basic needs support. This attention to the operational details related to student success signals a consensus among trustees that financial investments in people and equitable, student-centered strategies provide the foundation for institutional resilience and long-term success.

PART 3: TRUSTEE PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP AND EFFECTIVE CEOS

Part of planning for the future is effective leadership. We asked trustees what they would be looking for if they were hiring a new CEO and what they would expect candidates to focus on. They consistently prioritized a blend of personal leadership qualities, strategic capabilities, and values alignment, reflecting the complexity of the CEO role and the diverse expectations of trustees.

Trustees described a successful candidate as being able to balance strategic thinking with authentic leadership, community representation, and operational expertise. Given their concerns about funding in planning for the future, it was no surprise that the need for business acumen was frequently noted: *“You’re hiring the head of a college, but it’s still the corporate head.”*

Consistent with feeling that community colleges need to be the hub of their communities, trustees often mentioned the CEO should fit the local community, understand its specific needs, and ensure the college contributes meaningfully to regional growth and opportunity. Many emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity, workforce alignment, and data-driven decision-making, along with an unshakable focus on student outcomes.

Ultimately, trustees want CEOs with a range of skills and strengths, headlined by the following:

1. **Leadership and Vision.** Trustees seek CEOs who demonstrate strong, confident leadership, can handle crises, and bring a clear strategic vision to the college. This includes:
 - Proven leadership experience—including the ability to manage crises, drive institutional change, and lead with authority.
 - Visionary and strategic thinking—someone who can both set long-term goals and execute them effectively: *“We want someone visionary yet strategic—someone who can see where we need to be and then develop the plan to get us there.”*
 - Courage and decisiveness—someone who is willing to make tough decisions when needed.
2. **Relationship Building and Communication.** Trustees spoke of valuing leaders who are approachable, communicative, and able to build relationships across all levels of the college and community, including the ability, *“to work collaboratively with competitors.”* They would like CEOs to:
 - Be a strong communicator with the ability to engage faculty, staff, students, trustees, legislators, and the public.
 - Be deeply engaged with the local community and represent the college as its public face. *“We needed someone who had strong external focus—legislative advocacy, fundraising, and the ability to tell the college’s story.”*
 - Demonstrate an open, authentic leadership style, including being visible and transparent, with an ability to build trust across campus. *“I was looking for somebody that could relate to not only their vice presidents, but also the janitors.”*

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3. **Student-Centered and Equity-Focused.** A student-first mindset is essential. Trustees look for CEOs who are visible advocates for student success and demonstrate leadership in equity, inclusion, and belongingness. They want their CEO to:
 - Exhibit a student-first mentality—Trustees want CEOs who genuinely connect with students and advocate for their success. *“We want somebody who takes every student aside, wants to know everybody on campus, and means it.”*
 - Promote equity and inclusion—Trustees want leaders with clear commitments to equity, inclusion, and access, as well as tangible experience leading related programs. *“The only way we’re going to survive is by making everyone feel welcome on campus... we need someone who understands equity because we’re open access.”*
 4. **Cultural Fit and Institutional Climate.** Trustees are attuned to the importance of organizational culture and want a CEO who can unify the college and nurture a healthy, collaborative environment. They want:
 - A cultural change agent—someone capable of mending toxic or fragmented climates and promoting collaboration and shared governance. *“Changing this culture is a multi-year process... you don’t architect a culture, you nurture it.”*
 - A CEO who is personable and empathetic—leading with compassion and emotional intelligence helps to build healthy, inclusive institutional cultures.
 5. **Operational and Business Acumen.** Effective CEOs must be financially literate, understand workforce trends, and run a complex institution like a business while understanding the human side of the college, relating to the external community, and engaging key stakeholders. *“They have to run a good-sized business... They need enough business acumen to assist in finance, HR, and mission alignment.”* Trustees believe CEOs must have:
 - Financial literacy—understanding complex budgets, financial planning, and sustainable resource use.
 - Experience in higher education governance—including navigating state systems, politics, and regulatory environments.
 - A track record with innovation and workforce development—especially important in adapting to changing regional labor markets.
 6. **Integrity and Character.** Trustees emphasize ethics, authenticity, and character in leadership. As one trustee said, *“[The current president] always says that we let him be his authentic self. He has compassion and caring, and that has to be evident in a leader.”* Trustees want a CEO who has:
 - High integrity and authenticity—someone who acts ethically and consistently, with a deep commitment to the college’s mission.
 - A respected presence—someone who can “sell the college” and inspire confidence from the board and community alike.



7. **Internal Team Development.** According to trustees, a great CEO not only leads but builds future leaders and empowers their team. To trustees, effective CEOs are:

- Talent developers—capable of mentoring future leaders and building strong leadership teams. *“A leader has to know their superpower—and what they’re not so good at—and hire strong people to fill those gaps.”*
- Collaborative and empowering—not micromanagers but facilitators of others' success. *“If you’re not able to develop the next leader of the system, then something is wrong.”*

In summary, trustees are looking for their CEOs to have it all: business acumen combined with empathy and empowerment; the ability to be both strategic yet operational; a laser-like focus on students and student success combined with a desire to empower individuals at all levels of their institutions. One trustee summed it up this way:

“This is a huge job, not for the meek, and there are daunting challenges. There always are. This is our life, as the leader of any organization, but especially now, and especially going into these next years. So, I think that you have to really look at character and strengths...it’s grit, it’s perseverance, it’s tenacity. It’s, of course, first and foremost, passion for the mission.

PART 4: ALSO ON TRUSTEES' MINDS

The final question in each of our interviews was whether there was something that we didn't ask but that trustees would like to discuss (spoiler alert: there were, and they did). The most common topics introduced by trustees included:

THE NEED FOR ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many trustees wanted to highlight the value of ongoing learning, including how much they value participation in ACCT and other organizations' professional development, as well as a concern that such programs are underutilized by fellow trustees. *"Most people think that just tenure on their board gives them the perspective that they need to have. And I would say that's a little short-sighted."*

Another trustee noted, *"for trustee roles, you get an older crowd that may be further removed from the experience of today's students, and that's why I feel like training is even that much more critical."*

THE REALITIES OF BOARD COMPOSITION AND SUCCESSION PLANNING

Trustees consistently mentioned a lack of diversity (gender, age, race) on boards and concerns about aging trustees staying on too long, leading to succession problems and a loss of innovation.

- *"We've got guys that are 80 and 90 still sitting on their boards who have served 45 years. It's like, come on folks."*
- *"When I got on my board it was six old White guys and one old White woman. And I said my first meeting...We don't represent our college. We don't represent our student population."*
- *"There's also the dynamic of the representative kind of nature of trusteeship and the students that are being served. I am the only Latino student or the Latino trustee...But there is something that's powerful and having kind of representation that reflects you and I see when Latino faculty and staff reach out to me in a way that is much more meaningful than they reach out to others."*

These comments shine a light on a reality that has been documented as an issue for trustees since at least the 1997 book *Community College Trustees: Leading on Behalf of Their Communities*. In that book, the authors wrote that trustees, "feel that governing boards should reflect the composition of the communities and student populations the college serves in terms of female and minority representation on the board. A review of the demographic characteristics of current trustees nationwide indicates that the board composition considered ideal by the trustees interviewed is a long way from reality."³ The same could be (and was) said by trustees interviewed as part of this study.

³ Vaughan, G.B., & Weisman, I. M. (1997). *Community college trustees: Leading on behalf of their communities*. Association of Community College Trustees.



In particular, more intentional development of diverse pools of trustees should be a priority for colleges and trustee organizations. We asked a random sample of interviewees what their institutions were doing about succession planning and there was no common thread across the interviews. However, the challenges identified included finding individuals with a passion for the community college, the ability to take time off work (for trustees with external employment), and a lack of term limits, which keeps some trustees in their roles for decades. Trustees proposed recruiting from foundations, Chambers of Commerce, community organizations, and from a pool of retired school board members as ways of finding potential candidates:

- *“It’s a hard one [finding candidates], even though a lot of people in our community have gone to community college, as you know, they identify more with their bachelor’s or graduate institutions, and it’s really hard to get someone passionate as I am, or you are, about community colleges.”*
- *“They may have the opportunity every now and then to take like board meeting off, but can they go to a ribbon cutting? Can they go to a community event? Can they go to a luncheon for a nonprofit that we are a partner with? Like, those are a little bit more challenging for them [younger, working professionals].”*
- *“They could do a better job of cultivating, but with it being an election you take who, whoever’s been elected and that the two don’t always go together... Who can be a successful politician and who can be a successful regional trustee that... doesn’t necessarily mean that they can be a successful trustee.”*

Calls for greater diversity among trustees, or among pools of people recruited for election or appointment to boards, often go beyond aspects of demographic diversity (age, race, ethnicity) and include representation from rural or urban locales, as well as support from local, regional, or state interest groups. In 2013 Gillett-Karam pointed out that the “cultural heritage of representatives makes a difference when confronting community issues.”⁴ More recent scholarly work⁵ calls for boards to be more intentional and accountable in their work to ensure equitable student outcomes.

ISSUES OF BOARD CULTURE AND INTERNAL DYNAMICS

Some trustees discussed difficulties in raising dissenting opinions within their boards. DEI and political tensions at the time interviews were conducted meant that some trustees wanted to discuss political and ideological pressures, particularly around DEI initiatives and legislation, with some trustees strongly supportive and others opposed. Many trustees also expressed appreciation for boards that foster open, respectful discussions and prioritize student success. Communication issues raised in interviews included transparency, open meeting laws, and the impact of social media on board transparency. As a trustee noted, *“Open meeting laws were made before any kind of social media... they didn’t anticipate text messages and emails.”*

⁴ Gillett-Karam, R. (2013). The future-shaping function of the governing board. The future of the urban community college: Shaping the pathways to a multiracial democracy. *New Directions for Community Colleges* (162, pp. 37–44). Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Rall, R. M., Morgan, D. L., & Commodore, F. (2020). Higher education governance and decision-making toward culturally sustaining governance in higher education: Best practices of theory, research, and practice. *Journal of Education Human Resources*, 38(1), 139–164; Dominguez, V. G., & Rall, R. M. (2026). The equity-minded board? Leadership, accountability, and the future of community college governance. *New Directions for Community Colleges* (pp. 1–9). Jossey-Bass.



THE IMPORTANCE OF EXTERNAL ADVOCACY AND HAVING A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Many trustees identified a growing need for external advocacy, and a global perspective was noted as important to understand educational trends beyond local or national boundaries. *"It's become more vital for trustees to have a global perspective, not just what's happening in their community."*

FACILITIES UTILIZATION

A few trustees raised the issue of facilities utilization, as some colleges have a surplus of unused physical space due to the growth in online learning. Some mentioned opportunities to explore creative partnerships with businesses and community organizations to maximize facility usage. *"Our board chair has put together a committee to look at how we can maximize our facilities and is there a way that we could partner with business entities or other public entities to get people on campus, which has all kinds of other benefits."*

MISSION AND PURPOSES OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Finally, many trustees wanted to talk more about the mission and purposes of community colleges. Trustees consistently affirmed the mission of open access and opportunity for all students and reiterated strong support for career and technical education programs that meet workforce needs. Several expressed concern that higher education is losing its broad civic and liberal arts purpose, but they remained passionate and committed to their work and the institutions and students they serve.

CONCLUSION

Community colleges across the country remain beacons of innovation while doing the hard work of educating students, strengthening communities, and responding to societal changes. Trustees lead colleges amidst constantly changing organizational contexts—described by Peter Vaill in the mid-1990s as “permanent white water.”⁶ Social unrest, funding declines, the enrollment cliff, a flood of dual enrollment students (now making up more than one-fifth of all community college enrollments⁷), the community college baccalaureate, housing costs, the dismantling of DEI, and a plethora of political issues making the headlines have made governance work thorny. **The simple statement that trustees are advocates for their colleges with fiduciary oversight is still accurate, but the underlying operationalization of their role is far more complex.**

The trustees who gave generously of their time to participate in an interview brought unique perspectives and an unwavering commitment to the mission of the college and the success of the students they serve. In the midst of polarizing times, we found unity in the issues trustees felt were important and inspiration in the way they described their institutions and their students. **Trustees want their colleges to be the center of their communities in new and innovative ways. They want to serve and enhance their communities by improving programs for students and ensuring that they align with local and regional needs.** Equitable access and student success are key, no matter the state in which their college is located or whether they serve in rural, urban, or metropolitan institutions. Trustees are universally concerned about funding shortfalls and inequitable state financing structures.

Above all, trustees care about their students. *“You know, they’re [the students] coming out and they’re making decent wages and they’re self-fulfilled and even the ones that have underlying issues that you know, I’ve never had to deal with, they’re getting jobs. The pride and being able to accomplish that and to be able to go out and get a job and become a member of the community, and a thriving member of the community... You can’t express how important and how wonderful it is when you’re involved.”*

We are grateful to the trustees who devote time every day to serve community colleges and their students, and in particular to those who participated in the ACCT-CSCC Survey of Community College Trustees and accompanying interviews. Community colleges are governed by elected and appointed public servants who dedicate significant time, care, energy, experience, and insights to the wellbeing of the critical institutions they serve and the success of the students who attend.

⁶ Vaill, P. B. (1996). *Learning as a way of being: Strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*. Jossey-Bass.

⁷ Fink, J. (2025, September 30). High school enrollment grows to 2.8 million. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/high-school-dual-enrollment-grows.html>.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What motivates you to do trustee work?
2. How would you describe the mission or purpose of community colleges? Which aspect of the community college mission most resonates with you?
3. What aspects of your college or district's strategic plan do you feel are most important? Are there issues not included in the strategic plan that you feel should be included or emphasized more strongly?
4. We're also interested in research on public versus private values in community college governance. To what extent do you feel that your personal values and beliefs are congruent with your college's mission and strategic focus? Are there ever times when your work as a trustee comes into conflict with your personal beliefs or values? How do you navigate those situations?
5. What are the major challenges and opportunities your college is facing?
6. What does your college need to be doing now in order to meet current challenges and take advantage of future opportunities?
7. If you were to hire a new CEO, what are you looking for in terms of leadership of your college/district? What would you be expecting the CEO to be focusing on?
8. What have we not discussed that you feel is important that we know?

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

Findings in this report showcase qualitative data from a mixed-methods study, jointly undertaken by the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC), to investigate the characteristics, beliefs, and values of today's community college trustees and to identify if and how these traits have changed since Vaughan and Weisman conducted their groundbreaking survey of community college trustees, presidents, and board chairs nearly 30 years ago. This study was undertaken with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both Idaho State University and Western Michigan University.

Between fall 2024 and spring 2025, CSCC researchers contacted a random sample of survey respondents who had indicated an interest in participating in follow-up interviews. Over a nine-month period, CSCC conducted 40 one-on-one interviews with a diverse sample of trustees representing rural, urban, and metropolitan community colleges. The participants appeared to roughly reflect the demographic diversity of trustees who responded to the survey.

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol consisting of eight open-ended questions related to trustees' motivations to serve, their perspectives on the mission of community colleges, how they describe their institution's current priorities and major challenges and opportunities, and what they believe should be done to address those challenges and opportunities (see Appendix A). Additionally, trustees were asked to reflect on how they balance their private values with the public values of the community college and what experiences they would look for if their institution was hiring a new CEO. Interviews were conducted in-person or via videoconference and ranged in length from 30 to over 90 minutes, with the average interview lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Although each interview was conducted by the same researcher to ensure consistency, two qualitative researchers engaged in analyses of interviews and open-ended survey questions, meeting frequently to discuss the process and emergent findings and to ensure consistency and trustworthiness of the data. The researchers began by using an in vivo coding process in which trustees' own words and phrases were used as codes to analyze data. This method emphasized the interview participants' perspectives and voices, which were then clustered by thematic elements and by CSCC researchers' conceptual frameworks.

Subsequently, CSCC researchers engaged in focused coding supported by ChatGPT. This process relied on identifying the most frequent or significant codes from the in vivo coding process across the transcripts of all 40 interviews, crystalizing them into salient categories. CSCC researchers then compared ChatGPT's findings to manual analyses of random transcripts to ensure reliability and validity of findings. For example, in analyzing trustees' responses to questions about what their institutions need to be doing now to plan for the future, what they would immediately change if they could, and how they would use an infusion of one-time monies to their budget, after manually coding the interviews, we used AI to double check for themes across the questions. AI analyses found that trustees expressed consistent concerns regarding funding shortfalls and inequitable state financing structures in the interviews, which validated our findings from manual coding of the data.

For the purposes of this report, CSCC researchers also engaged in inductive coding of questions pertaining to various quantitative findings, including trustees' perspectives about leadership development, board functioning, strategic priorities and changemaking, and major contemporary challenges and opportunities.

APPENDIX C: TOP TEN RESPONSE CATEGORIES FOR WRITE-IN SURVEY QUESTIONS

The ACCT-CSCC Community College Trustee Survey gave trustees the option to provide single-line responses to the following questions:

- If you could immediately change 3 things about your college/district, what would they be?
- How would you use a one-time monetary infusion equal to 10% of your annual budget?

In rank order, the most frequent **things trustees would change about their college/district** were:

1. **Increased funding** – more state and local funding for infrastructure, faculty and staff salaries, scholarships, and student support services.
2. **Increased enrollment and completion** – enhanced efforts to boost enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.
3. **Improved facilities** – upgrading outdated buildings, adding student housing, modernizing classrooms, and expanding facilities for high-demand programs.
4. **Greater compensation** – addressing salary compression, increasing pay for staff and faculty.
5. **Stronger workforce development programs** – expanding CTE programs, more partnerships with business and industry, offer more apprenticeships and internships.
6. **More scholarships and financial aid awareness** – increase accessibility and affordability for students.
7. **Enhanced governance and leadership** – improved trustee engagement, leadership stability, and governance restructuring.
8. **More online and flexible course offerings** – expand distance education options and make courses more accessible.
9. **Increased community engagement** – strengthen partnerships with local businesses, schools, and community organizations.
10. **More support for students' well-being** – expand mental health services, address food insecurity, childcare, and transportation needs of students.



Similarly, in rank order, the most frequent ways in which trustees would **use a monetary infusion equal to 10% of their annual budget** were:

1. **Student support and scholarships** - including tuition support, scholarships, grants, financial assistance, and emergency aid.
2. **Facility maintenance and upgrades** – renovation, repairs, new construction, and upgrading infrastructure.
3. **Workforce development and occupational programs** - expansion of CTE, allied health, and workforce training.
4. **Faculty and staff compensation** - salary increases, retention bonuses, and professional development.
5. **Student housing** - investing in affordable housing, residence halls, on-campus living options.
6. **Marketing and enrollment growth** - recruitment, advertising, and outreach to potential students.
7. **Technology and digital upgrades** - upgrading digital infrastructure, zero-cost textbooks, improving online learning resources.
8. **Program development and expansion** - adding new degree programs, curriculum revisions, and supporting emerging fields.
9. **Capital projects and long-term investments** - establishing endowments, investment accounts, and capital funds.
10. **Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives** - hiring diverse faculty, empowerment programs, and community outreach.



9544 Cresta Drive | Los Angeles, CA 90035
centerforcommunitycolleges.org