

# Thinking Differently, Acting Differently The California Higher Education Foresight Map

## Future Ready Decisions and Innovations for Institutional, Learner, and Economic Development

This map highlights the interaction of policy, economics, demography, technology, workforce development, and learner needs with special emphasis on community college education. The map seeks to shape new thinking and approaches to complex issues and dilemmas. It reveals insights that can lead to innovation and action.

### How To Use This Map

The objective of the map is to help public and private sector organizations better understand and prepare for emerging challenges and opportunities. The map presents major themes that demonstrate challenges, complexities, and wildcards. With each theme are sub-themes to help further define and understand the story behind each theme. Contained within each sub-theme is data and information that serve as signals or indicators of change and direction. The tension or dilemma revealed in each theme emphasizes the need for leadership that goes beyond traditional thinking and approaches.

### Unequal Levels Of K12 Preparedness For Higher Ed

#### Global & National Performance Gaps

- U.S. international ranking: 13th in reading, 18th in science, 37th in math
- CA NAEP scores behind large states, U.S. avg
- **Equity & Variation in Outcomes**
- K12 proficiency varies by race, income, region
- **Assessment & Measurement Challenges**
- State Board changes complicate measurement

- More students opt-out from state testing
- Lack of consistent, early, personal counseling and career guidance
- **Student Readiness & Foundational Skills**
- Workforce and employers need secondary education competencies
- **Teacher Workforce Issues**
- Challenges with teacher contracts and compensation

*K12 and community college partnerships improve career awareness and college readiness*



### Understanding And Supporting Underrepresented, Underserved Students

#### Barriers To Access & Participation

- Transportation, tech access, scheduling
- Physical, emotional, policy, cultural barriers

#### Equity & Representation Gaps

- Underrepresentation in credit-bearing courses
- Equity gaps not tracked to drive improvement
- **Support Structures & Outreach**
- Priority students lack structured support

- Gaps in outreach, mentorship, emotional support
- **Social Capital & Belonging**
- First-gen, minority, low-income students lack social capital
- Underserved students experience imposter syndrome

*Cosumnes River College, Sacramento State University partner to provide on-site student support*



### Industry, Government Investment And Alignment To Meet Labor Needs

#### Education-Employer Alignment & Partnering

- K12/College/Employer consortia share resources,
- Employer councils for curriculum alignment, skills reviews, capstones
- Bureaucracy, lack of clear roles limit partnership
- Drive for CTE Advisory Board effectiveness

#### Work-Based & Applied Learning

- Micro-internships and real-world employer projects
- Apprenticeship demand reshaping pathways
- Authentic project-based, oral defense skills assessment
- Credit/noncredit bridges and stackable pathways

#### Workforce Demand & Skills Gaps

- Gaps between academic programs and employer expectations
- Healthcare, mid-level engineering, computing, AI upskilling shortages
- New requirements in IT and trades changing entry-level roles
- Employer demands for current and future skills requirements
- Need for 35,000 more high-quality jobs in Northern California
- Shifts to learner and employer needs drives enrollment

#### Funding & Policy Support for California Community Colleges

- FY26 CA budget is largest ever for community colleges
- Workforce grant programs for training and reskilling
- Short-term credential eligibility
- Grants emphasizing orientation, placement, wage growth

#### Program Design & Instructional Shifts

- Hybrid learning -- In-person and online
- Instructor upskilling via train-the-trainer externships
- Changes in tools, processes demand instructor upskilling

#### Market Forces & Competition

- For-profit institutions attracting investors

*CA Jobs First and 13 regional coalitions of business, labor, community, education, local government*



### 'One Size Fits All' Doesn't Fit All

#### Equity & Inclusion

- One-size-fits-all models exclude adult learners, first-gen students, students of color
- **Alternative Credentials & Pathways**
- Skills badges, micro-credentials, stackable pathways
- Credit for Prior Learning

#### Work-Based & Flexible Learning

- Apprenticeship enrollment up in education, public service, IT
- Micro-internships and short, paid tasks (remote/on-site)
- **Upskilling & Workforce Readiness**
- Short-burst, incumbent worker upskilling

*Humboldt County Career Guidance Technician Project*



### Holistic Support Throughout The College Experience

#### Access & Pathways

- Dual enrollment popular with variances in quality, career alignment
- Personalized learner pathways
- Complex transfer system, lack of data sharing
- Students choose easy paths due to confusion

#### Technology Tools And Access

- Internet speed, access for rural learners

- Access guarantees for devices, connectivity, accounts
- **Guidance from entry to completion**
- Needed financial aid navigation
- Case management tools for intake
- College readiness modules starting at orientation
- Gaps in belonging, security after entry
- Overcoming barriers to enrollment, dropout rates, non-completion

#### Structured mental and emotional support

- Younger generations expect support
- Influence on minority student success
- Post-high school ed positively impacts mental health, community relations, pro-social behavior

#### Institutional Structures & Policies

- Outdated structures and policies
- Delays in launching new career programs
- Four-year schools see communication gaps across departments

#### Enrollment, Relevance, Completion, Placement

- Course availability and relevance influence enrollment, completion
- Up to 85% of students switch majors
- Skills-based placement based on readiness diagnostic



*Lake Tahoe CC ADVANCE Personalized Pathways Program*

*Campus Mind mobile AI platform tracks wellness behaviors, service participation, and resource use*



### Pressure On Schools To Adapt, Compete, Survive

#### Faculty & Instructional Capacity

- Shortage of faculty and qualified instructors
- **Community & Workforce Demands**
- ESL growth shows pressing labor force needs
- **Funding Strain, Institutional Sustainability**
- Struggle to sustain services, budgets, salaries
- Consolidating, eliminating academic programs
- UCs, CSUs facing volatile state funding trends

#### Diminished Trust In Higher Education

- 37% of public have "not much" to "no" trust in American public colleges and universities
- 45% of registered voters: 'Higher education in the U.S. is on the wrong track.'

*One college closing per week in 2024*



### Responding To Demographic Changes

#### Shrinking Traditional College-Age Population

- Declining U.S. birth rate since 2009
- Demographic cliff: Fewer 18-year-olds in 2026
- Demographic cliff: 20% fewer 18-year-olds in Western U.S. by 2041

#### Aging Population & Shifts in Age Distribution

- U.S. median age getting older
- CA population peaks at ages 14-24 and 30-44

- NoCal counties population to see swings of +22% to -15% by 2050
- **Changing Student Demographics**
- Multiracial student population to increase 68% by 2041

*Latino students to be 50% of CC and CSU enrollment by 2035*



### Youth And Adult Learners, Employers' Perceptions Of Higher Ed

#### Motivated By Perceived Value, Perceived Income Increase

- Perceptions influence enrollment, persistence
- Majority see at least one credential as valuable
- Noncredit completers see 34% increase in median wages

#### Community College Seen As Desirable

- Most un-enrolled adults likely to seek certification
- Community College the most popular post-HS choice in California

- **Value Of An Educated Populous**
- Most agree education drives prosperity, innovation, civic engagement

#### Enrollment Barriers

- 50% of working adults say more education not needed for their job
- Gen Z: "Degrees are a waste of money"
- 33% of Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X: "Degrees take too long"

*42 million adult learners with some credits but no college credential*



### Politicized Federal Decision Making, Funding Cuts

#### Education In The Crosshairs

- White House proposes \$330B cut from education
- Taxation on university endowments
- Pell Grant cuts impact 24% of CC students
- **Student Health, Hunger, Development Impact**
- Medicaid cuts -- 4th largest funder of K12
- Reductions in K12 schools' health, counseling, speech pathology staffing

- About half of public school students eat free breakfast and/or lunch
- **International & Economic Policy Impacts Education**
- Tariffs increase costs for students and institutions

#### Targeted Fields & Terminology Creates Local Impacts

- Health, STEM, green industry, semiconductor industry targeted
- DOGE eliminates research, positions, access
- Institutions struggling to survive

#### Citizenship Enforcement, International Student Policies

- Marginalized, poorer students less likely to enroll
- Stifled international student enrollment
- Policy, deportation threats suppress immigrant enrollment

#### Academic Freedom & Campus Climate

- Monitoring faculty, researchers, students, curriculum
- Free speech restrictions, forced ideology in classrooms

#### Broader Political Agenda

- "One Big, Beautiful Bill" shredding the poverty, hunger safety net
- Higher education, public schools cast as "the enemy"

*We Prosper Together uniting community colleges, eight counties near Sacramento, and local economies for a stronger regional economy*



### Attracting, Access, Fit For All Californians And Priority Populations

#### Equity & Access For Underserved Populations

- Outreach targeted to underserved learners
- Outreach based on priority interests, skills
- Removing barriers to enrollment
- **Community-School Partnerships**
- Ambassadors from community-based organizations and library-led sessions

#### Infrastructure & Resources

- Facilities, equipment upgrades (labs, devices, rural resources)
- Mobile labs, offline modes for rural/underserved areas

#### Flexible Learning Models

- Scheduling options (weekends, evenings, self-paced)

*Noncredit tutoring, basic skills courses give underrepresented students higher success rates in more challenging courses*



### Affording Higher Education, California Cost Of Living

#### Basic Needs & Cost Of Living Pressures

- CA housing costs outpacing wage growth
- 1 in 8 CA households can't meet food needs
- 1 in 7 U.S. children in poverty
- Constrained economic mobility

#### Financial Barriers & Debt Burden

- College debt over \$1.7T; avg. \$30k/per student
- Books and supplies avg. \$1,370/full year

- Debt pressure from new loan limits, borrowing caps, end of SAVE
- Cal Grant reforms, Middle-Class Scholarship cuts

#### Work, Life, And Time Constraints

- Work conflicts, child care, financial aid challenges affect enrollment
- Stopped-out, prospective students seek education that fits their lives
- Finances, work demands extend completion time for 57% of students

*Zero Textbook Cost classes at Ventura College, the Los Rios Community College District, San Joaquin Delta College, Saddleback College, Moorpark College, Modesto Junior College and more.*



### AI Shaping Learning, Equity, Infrastructure, Expectations, Job Options

#### Workplace Applications

- AI-enabled workflows in office and dev tools
- ML Ops and data capabilities, roles emerge
- Applied AI in small and mid-sized businesses
- **Equity & Access**
- Rural, underserved remote tool access
- AI tools assist learner accessibility

#### Upskilling & Workforce Development

- Short-burst upskilling for incumbents
- Grant programs for AI training, reskilling
- Faculty and staff upskilling
- Remote apprenticeships

#### Infrastructure, Governance Changes

- GPU labs and cloud posture
- Policy for AI curricula, access, tools, infrastructure
- AI safety and guidance

#### Learning Pathways & Credentials

- New types of credentials, role-based certifications
- AI-literacy micro-credentials
- K12/CC AI literacy mandates for elective pathways

#### Teaching & Learning Methods

- AI-assisted instruction
- Project-based labs and real-world data, challenges
- AI study skills and ethics for responsible use
- Bias-aware curricula

*aiEDU AI Readiness Framework*



## BIG STORIES

The major forces shaping the present and future education landscape. These factors influence social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical aspects of the future of education in our state, country, and world.

## DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Big forces, trends, and drivers that have been, are or will be shaping the ecosystem into something new. Some are new or recent, and some may have been visible for decades and will continue to impact our future.

## SIGNALS

Signals are data points, and can be small or local events, changes, or innovations with the potential to grow in scale and geographic distribution.

## What local success stories, use cases, and innovations are missing?

What local innovations are you aware of that can be scaled for regional and national impact?

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