

COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEESHIP IN 2025

A COMMITMENT TO SERVE





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Association of Community College Trustees

The Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) is a non-profit educational organization of governing boards representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees who govern over 1,000 community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond. For more information, go to www.acct.org.

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

Educating nearly 40% of all undergraduate students in the United States, community colleges play a pivotal role in local and national workforce and economic development and provide access to educational opportunities that enable students from a wide variety of backgrounds to succeed in their careers and thrive throughout their lives. Underpinning these contributions are community college governing boards made up of individual trustees who volunteer their time to act as fiduciary stewards of their institutions, guide institutional mission and strategy, monitor operations, and ensure that colleges and their students flourish.

This groundbreaking study, conducted jointly by the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC), provides the most comprehensive analysis to date of community college trustees: who they are, why they serve, and what they perceive to be the most critical priorities and challenges for their institutions and the sector at large. Building on previous surveys conducted in 1997¹ and 2018² and integrating qualitative interviews, findings from this study provide information about the beliefs and values that influence community college trustees' decision making, generate ideas and opportunities for future trustee development, and shed light on the professional development that may be necessary to assist trustees in supporting their colleges through innovative and transformational changes.

ACCT and CSCC are grateful to the more than 2,000 community college trustees who responded to the survey and 40 trustees who participated in qualitative interviews. Quantitative and qualitative data are presented together throughout this report to provide multiple perspectives on key issues; when applicable, comparisons are drawn to data from previous trustee surveys. Additional details about the study methodology are included in Appendix B.

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

2 Association of Community College Trustees. (2018). *Citizen trustee survey: Selected results and analysis*.

PART 1: ABOUT TRUSTEES

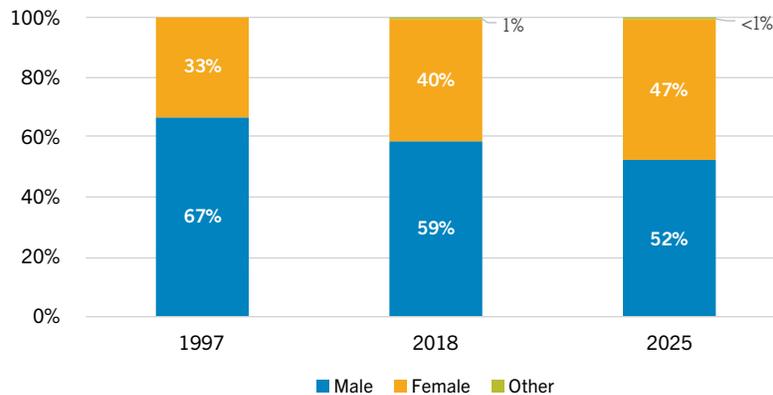
WHO ARE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES?

While institutional strategies and focus areas vary across the country, a core mission of community colleges is to serve as a springboard to further education, workforce and career success, and socioeconomic mobility for students from a wide array of backgrounds. Our study found that trustees' demographics, experiences, and career trajectories indicate increased alignment with this mission, which may support enhanced student outcomes.

Community college boards are becoming more representative of the nation as a whole.

Across the country, trustees' gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds are becoming more representative of the U.S. population. In terms of gender, the **proportion of women serving on community college boards has increased over time**, from 33% in 1997 to 47% in 2025 (see Figure 1). Half of this gain in women's representation on boards has occurred over the past seven years, and in 2025 the percentage of female community college trustees was similar to the percentage of U.S. adults who are female (51%).³ Four of the 1,512 (0.3%) trustees who responded to this survey question in 2025 indicated that they identified as non-binary or transgender.

Figure 1: Gender, 1997, 2018, 2025

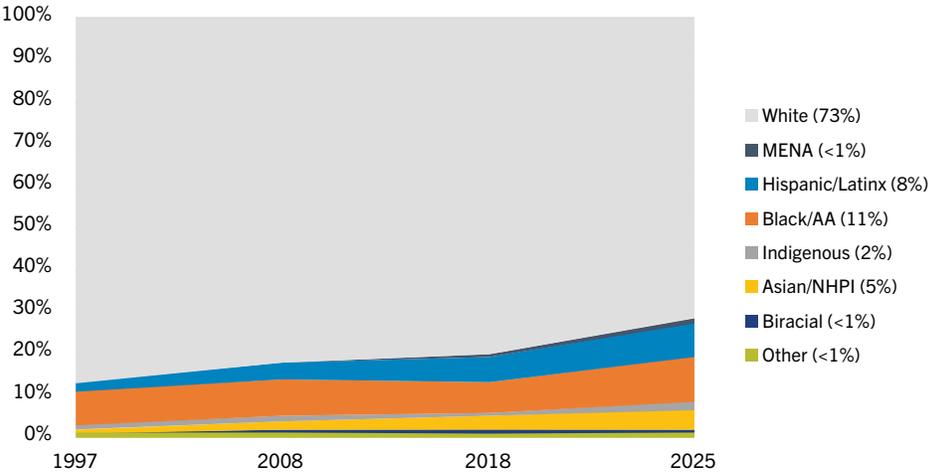


3 U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). American community survey, 5-year estimates. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>



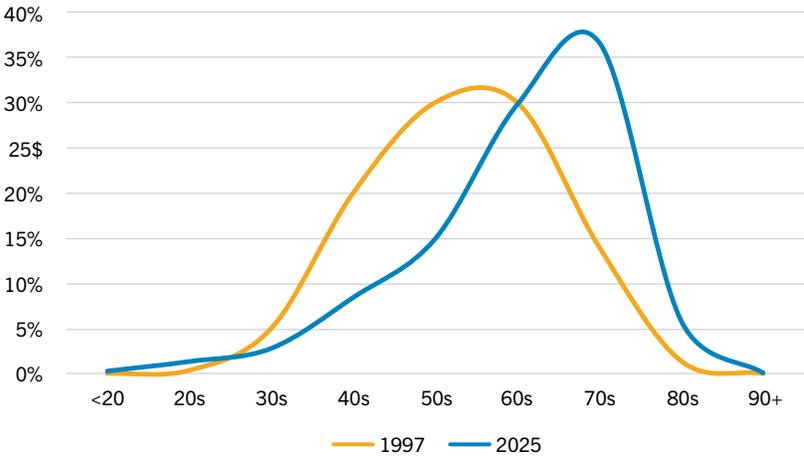
Community college boards have also become **more racially and ethnically diverse**, although White trustees remain the majority (73%). The percentage of trustees who are People of Color more than doubled between 1997 and 2025, reaching 27% in the latter year (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Race/Ethnicity, 1997 - 2025



Reflecting broader trends toward an aging U.S. population, community college **trustees have gotten older** over time. The average trustee in 1997 was 58 years old. Today, the average trustee is 65. In 1997, the most common age of a community college trustee was 52; today it is 70 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Age, 1997 and 2025

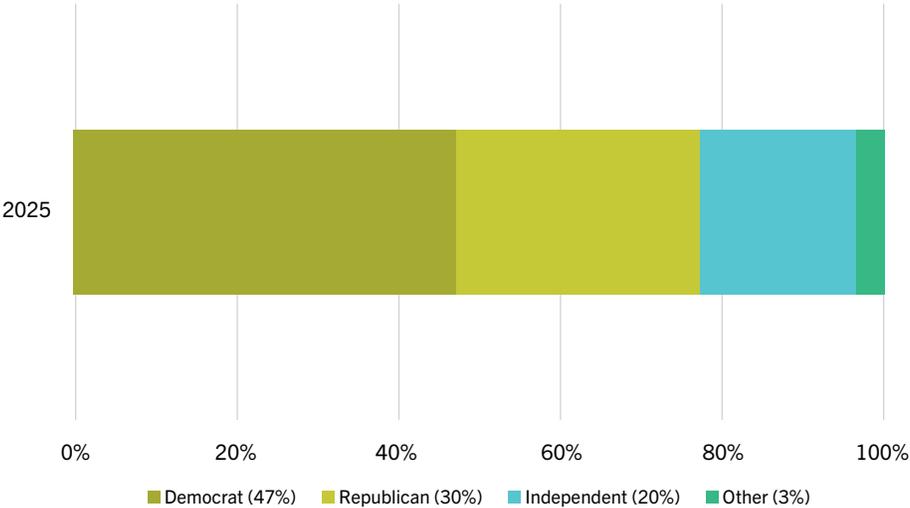


4 Note: MENA stands for Middle Eastern or North African. NHPI stands for Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.



As in the U.S. population as a whole, a **range of political views** are represented among community college trustees. Forty-seven percent of survey respondents indicated that they identify as Democrat, 30% as Republican, 20% as Independent, and 3% as “Other” (qualitative responses in this category included Libertarian, moderate, bipartisan, unaffiliated, and “depends on the issue”).

Figure 4: Political Affiliation, 2025



Qualitative interviews revealed that **trustees’ political affiliations rarely affect their board service**. While some acknowledged that board members may hold differing political views, many noted their personal commitment to keeping politics out of the board room, and their board’s overall ability to do so:

We don’t get into tussles; we get into discussions. They are not political. I know some probably are more conservative, some are more liberal, but that really never comes into play. It’s all about the college.

My job is to vote on policy, to discuss policy. If somebody wants to voice their personal political opinions that I do not agree with, I let them because I don’t feel like my personal political opinions really belong there.

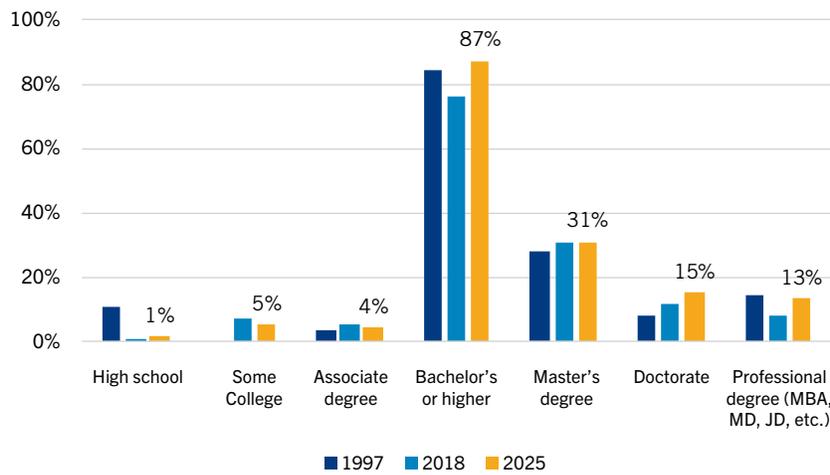
I’ve been on the board 30 years, and we have not had anybody come in as a board member and advocate that we all we need to do things the Democratic way or Republican way, and we have a split board politically... We break bread together before the meeting, and that has allowed us to get to know each other and become friends. So we spend an hour before the meeting, and we talk about farming, our health, the other issues in the community, but nothing about the business of the college and nothing about politics. It’s a great way to build a relationship, a respectful relationship among the board members, and so that we can trust each other in the board meetings.

Community college trustees are highly accomplished.

As a group, community college trustees are **highly educated**; 86% hold a bachelor’s or higher degree (up from 84% in 1997). Fifty-nine percent hold a master’s, professional, or doctoral degree (up from 50% in 1997; see Figure 5).

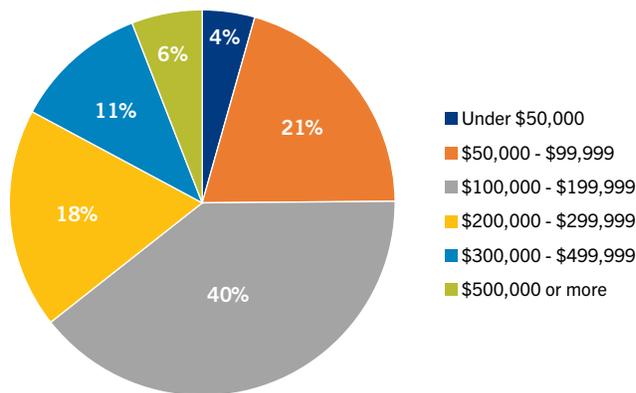
As some respondents shared in interviews, many trustees are also lifelong learners. One trustee who recently graduated with an associate degree shared: *“It took me 42 years, but I did finish... magna cum laude... I’m very proud of myself.”* Another said, *“I have a love for higher education. I was a non-traditional college student. I went back to school with three kids in tow and got my bachelor’s and my master’s, and it’s just something that I believe in.”*

Figure 5: Educational Attainment, 1997, 2018, 2025



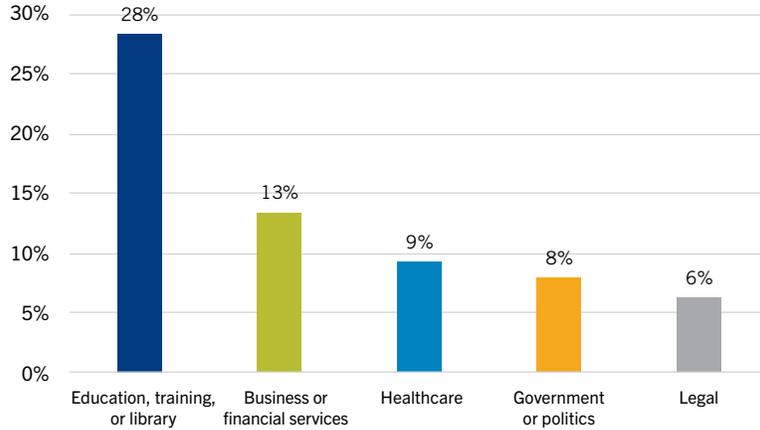
When it comes to their **careers and earnings**, three-quarters of community college trustees report incomes of \$100,000 or more annually; 35% make at least \$200,000 (see Figure 6). The relative wealth of community college trustees has remained consistent. In 1997, nearly 77% of trustees earned more than \$55,000 per year (roughly \$110,000 in 2025 dollars). Similarly, the 36% of trustees earning at least \$100,000 in 1997 corresponds almost exactly to the 35% who made the inflation-adjusted equivalent (\$200,000) in 2025.

Figure 6: Annual Income, 2025



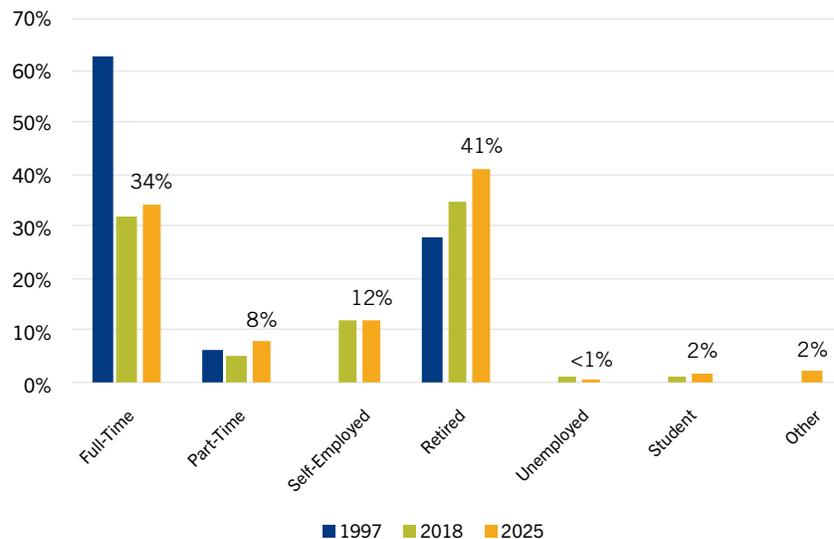
The top five **occupational fields** in which community college trustees are or were employed have shifted over time, although Education, Training, or Library remains the most common field (36% in 1997 and 28% in both 2018 and 2025). The percentage of trustees in Business or Financial Services and Healthcare has increased slightly, although the share employed in Government or Politics has dropped from 12% in 2018 to 8% in 2025. For the first time, the Legal profession entered the top five occupational fields in 2025, with 6% of trustees employed in this area (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Top Five Occupational Fields, 2025



Reflecting the increases in the average age of community college trustees noted previously, 41% of current trustees are retired, compared to 28% in 1997. Similarly, while nearly two-thirds of trustees were working full-time in 1997, only 34% work full-time today, although an additional 8% work part-time. Another 12% are self-employed (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Occupational Status, 1997, 2018, 2025





In interviews, trustees recognized that their experience and age provide opportunities to give back to their college and communities, but a number also highlighted the importance of succession planning given the average age of current trustees:

I've benefited so much personally from folks who volunteered their time and work. When I was growing up, it became instilled in me to want to serve the community... The impact of the college is even more than what I thought or anticipated. It's really a joy for me in my retirement years to be able to contribute to the community and to make a difference.

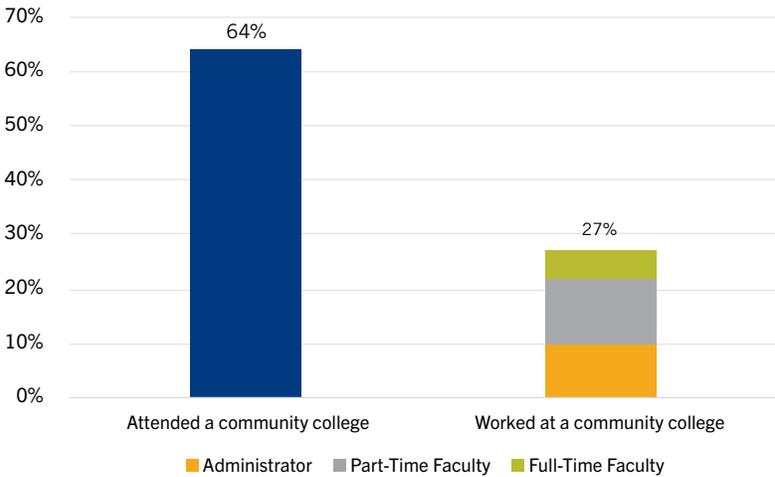
I've been to the conferences, it skews...silver haired. And you know, my hair is starting to go gray as well, but [age and diversity] are something that I'm always mindful of... You should be developing people to come in after you.

First-generation college students and community college alumni are well represented on boards.

Mirroring the community college student population, a substantial proportion of trustees — nearly two in five — were first in their families to attend college.

An even greater proportion of trustees have **personal experience in community colleges**. Nearly two-thirds of trustees attended a community college as a student, and 27% have worked at one (10% as administrators, 12% as part-time instructors, and 5% as full-time faculty; see Figure 9). These numbers have risen since 1997, when 51% of trustees had been community college students, 18% taught part-time, and 4% had been full-time community college faculty.

Figure 9: Prior Community College Experience

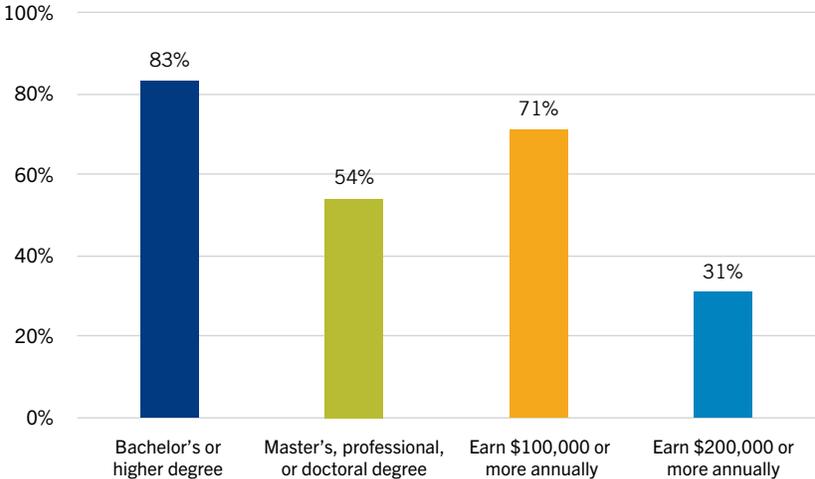




Trustees’ educational attainment and earnings illustrate the power of a community college degree.

A combined analysis of the data on trustees’ educational attainment, earnings, and alumni status provide evidence that community colleges are indeed fulfilling their mission to **serve as a springboard** to further education and career success. Among trustees who were once community college students, 83% hold a bachelor’s or higher degree, and 54% have a master’s, professional, or doctoral degree. Furthermore, 71% of these former community college students make at least \$100,000 per year, and 31% make upwards of \$200,000 (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Educational Attainment and Earnings Among Trustees Who Attended a Community College



In interviews, many trustees highlighted their **personal connections and lifelong ties to community colleges**, underscoring their intrinsic understanding of the community college mission and ability to relate to current students’ needs from a first-hand perspective:

I often talk about how working in community colleges is a passion of mine because I'm a first-generation college graduate. But beyond that, I grew up on a community college campus. My mother was an adult learner who earned her associate [degree] later in life. My brother and I would have to go to night classes with her because we didn't have childcare.

I actually am an alum of [X] Community College and it allowed me to [continue on to a] university to get my education at a reasonable cost and also to improve my life and my business.

WHY TRUSTEES SERVE

Trustees are dedicated to their colleges and their role.

Trustees' commitment to the community college mission and recognition of the importance of the board's role was evident throughout qualitative interviews — in both their tone and their clear enthusiasm as they talked about their work:

I really appreciate the mission of community colleges and what we do, and how we provide opportunity to students to really take them as far as their dreams, ambitions, and abilities...want to go.

I think it's just serving an organization with a mission that positively transforms lives. We are transformative and impactful. And we see it every day.

Community service and a commitment to education are primary motivators for trustees.

As previous ACCT surveys have shown, trustees frequently want to **give back to their communities**, and their service is often influenced by their own experiences or their family's background in education:

It really is service. I mean, it's cliché, but I truly believe in people giving back to their community in whatever way they can.

It's my way of contributing back to my own community.

Education has been my family's story since my parents were elementary school teachers.

Trustees also expressed a **deep passion for education**, whether through their personal academic journeys, careers in education, or experience witnessing college enrich the lives of individuals and their communities:

First and foremost, it's my love of education. I believe that everybody has a right to it; it's not just a privilege. So, my second reason is my love of community and [the college's] role in our community; it's that inclusivity, students that are the first [in their] generation to attend college. Like other community colleges we [also] have older students — it's lifelong learning, people that upskill in their careers, or maybe they go into another field.

I am motivated to do this work because I actually think that our community colleges in the United States are incredibly democratic and justice-oriented institutions. They are without fanfare every day going about working towards solutions to a lot of the things that are ailing our country right now.

Still other trustees joined a board to **share their professional and personal experiences**, particularly business acumen related to institutional and fiscal accountability:

I come from the business side, so I believe colleges are also businesses, and they have budgets and they have to abide by those budgets. I look at a college as needing to be run as a business as well as a college.

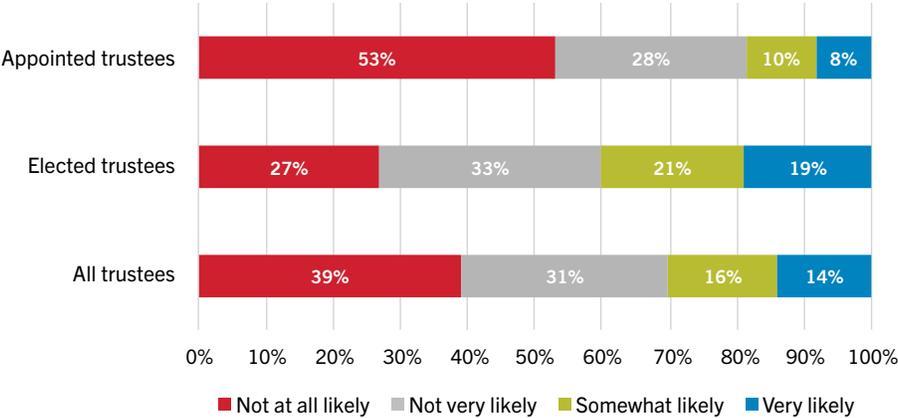
I think you have to have expectations in a business...of your profitability and you're responsible for that, doing what you're planning, your long-range planning and short-range planning and all your operational costs. I don't see any difference with the college ... I think they should be run like a business, but I think everything should be run like a business. I think a church should be run like a business in a way; you still have the same thing going on as far as meeting what you need to do in your budget and leadership. And taking care of your customers.



For some trustees, board service is a component of broader political engagement.

Serving on a community college board has often been described as a launching point for higher political office, and indeed, 30% of all community college trustees indicate that they are somewhat or very likely to run for political office after their term has expired (see Figure 11). This percentage is substantially higher among elected trustees (40%) than among those who were appointed (18%).

Figure 11: Likelihood of Running for Political Office



In qualitative interviews, some trustees noted their interest and involvement in politics in relation to their board service:

I was in the education space and... involved in politics...[however,] I knew I didn't want to be in the K-12 school board because I didn't want people shouting at me.

TRUSTEE DEVELOPMENT

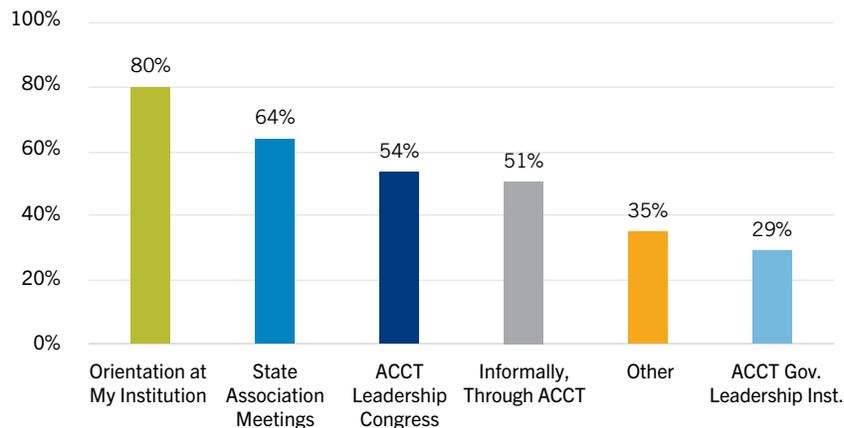
Community college trustees pursue a variety of training and leadership development opportunities.

Most community college trustees have engaged in at least some professional or leadership development training. A substantial majority (80%) have completed **trustee orientations** at their own institutions (see Figure 13). Reflecting recent trends nationwide toward state-level requirements for new trustee training, such orientation sessions are increasingly mandatory rather than voluntary. In comparison to 1997, far more community college boards today require a new trustee to participate in orientation (51%, compared to 14%), while the percentage with voluntary orientations has decreased substantially (from 69% down to 32% today; see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Percentage of Colleges or Districts Providing Formal Orientations for New Trustees



Figure 13: Participation in Professional Development



GO-TO PUBLICATIONS FOR BOARD MEMBERS

acctorg.my.site.com/members/s/shop

- ***Trusteeship in Community Colleges: A Guide for Effective Governance, Second Edition*** Edited by Jacqueline King, Ph.D. and David Conner
- ***The Trustee's Role in Effective Advocacy: General Guidelines for Building Relationships with Policymakers*** by Jennifer Stiddard
- ***The Effective Board Chair: First Among Equals*** by Pamela J. Fisher, Ed.D.
- ***Essentials of Good Board/CEO Relations*** by Vaughn A. Sherman
- ***Trustee Quarterly*** – ACCT's membership magazine

Beyond initial onboarding, 64% of trustees have participated in **state association meetings**; 67% have engaged in various **ACCT leadership development experiences**, including a Leadership Congress (54%), a Governance Leadership Institute (29%), or informally through ACCT resources (51%). Just over one-third (35%) of responding trustees have obtained trustee development through other organizations.

In interviews, trustees affirmed that professional development is crucial for navigating board dynamics and effective governance strategies, managing the interpersonal and political dynamics of board service, supporting healthy discourse, and developing a strategic focus. Some indicated that professional development may be even more crucial for older trustees who, as noted previously, comprise a substantial proportion of the trustee population:

No matter what your background or how skilled you think you are at being a board member for some other organization, or if you've been in education yourself, when you become a trustee, you say, 'oh my goodness, I had no idea' [what level of professionalism is required to be a trustee].

We didn't get our degrees in institutional management... I wish every trustee would come to conferences or even online webinars and learn.

It's hard to ignore that... these are unpaid roles in [my state]. And so inherently, it feels like [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.

Trustees are eager for additional leadership development opportunities.

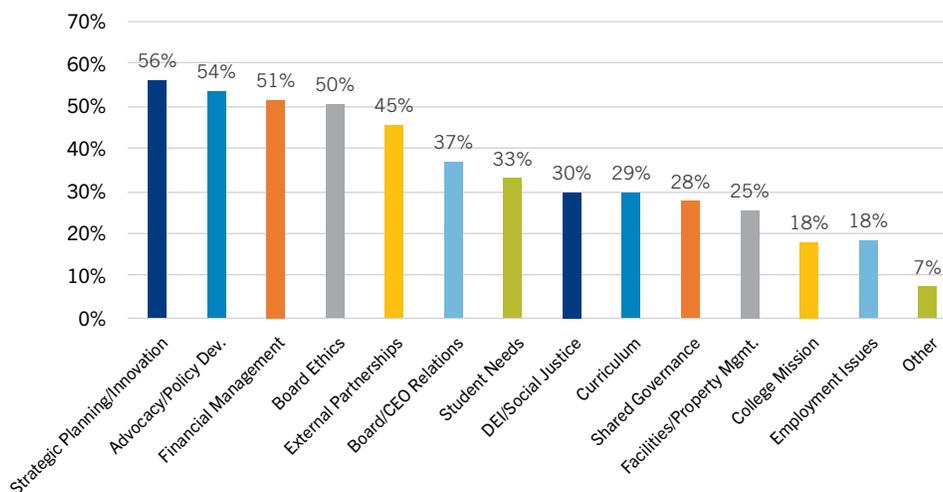
Perhaps reflecting the value of the professional development programs they have already engaged in, community college trustees expressed keen interest in further training and leadership development opportunities. Key areas of need center on core board responsibilities: at least half of trustees indicated a desire for training in **strategic planning** (56%), **budget management** (51%), and **board ethics** (50%; see Figure 14). A substantial proportion of trustees would also like training in the area of **board/CEO relations** (37%).

In qualitative interviews, trustees also expressed a desire for additional professional development related to board dynamics and effective governance strategies:

I'd like to hear more about the issues other colleges have faced at the trustee level. I've heard stories of trustee boards that don't get along and have all these problems, and why are they not getting along? We're getting along great. So, what are we doing right?

Beyond immediate board issues, high percentages of survey respondents also indicated interest in training on **legislative advocacy** (51%), **external partnerships** (45%), and **student needs** (33%). In addition, in interviews and in open-ended survey responses, numerous trustees indicated a desire to learn more about **artificial intelligence (AI)** and how colleges should use and/or regulate it.

Figure 14: Desired Leadership Development Topics



ACCT'S EDUCATIONAL AND LEADERSHIP EVENTS

acct.org/events

ACCT Leadership Congress — The largest annual gathering of community college leaders, this event brings together over 1,500 community college trustees and presidents, as well as leaders from philanthropic organizations, government agencies, and national non-profits. It provides a platform to exchange initiatives, successes, and concerns crucial to leading community colleges with an emphasis on governance education.

Community College National Legislative Summit — Held each February in Washington, D.C., the NLS brings community

college board members, CEOs, government-relations, student, and other leaders to the nation's capital to advocate in the interests of two-year institutions and their students.

Governance Leadership Institutes — Convened at least twice annually, these events focus on in-depth governance education and team building.

Online Events — Webinars on community college advocacy, governance leadership, and special topics keep ACCT members informed and aware of what they need to know to excel.

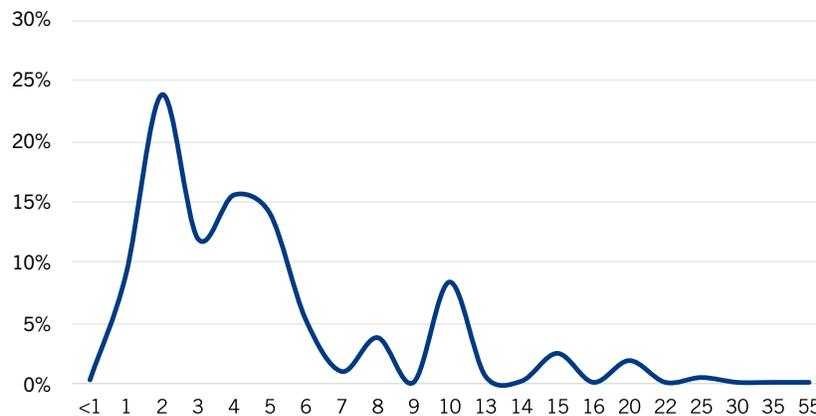
PART 2: BOARD OPERATIONS

BOARD FUNCTIONING

For most trustees, the time commitment required for board work is fairly modest.

The average trustee spends **five hours per week** on board activities, although the most common response to this question was two hours per week. These numbers are nearly identical to those in the 1997 survey. In 2025, half of respondents reported spending fewer than four hours on board activities per week, while the other half spent more than four, with a very small number dedicating 20 or more hours each week (see Figure 15).

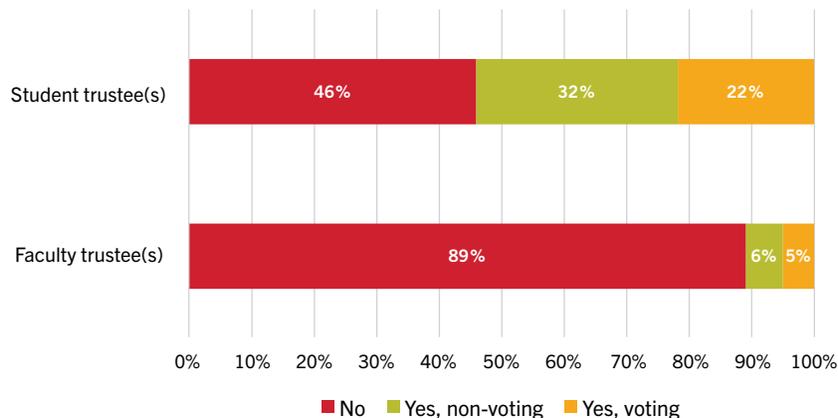
Figure 15: Hours Spent on Board Activities per Week



The student voice matters in institutional decision making.

Over half (54%) of survey respondents indicated that their board includes a **student trustee** (see Figure 16). On boards with student representation, 41% grant voting rights to student members. **Faculty representation** on boards is comparatively rare; only 11% of respondents indicated that their board included a faculty trustee (and these were nearly evenly split between those with voting rights and those without). However, this percentage has increased substantially; in 1997 only 2% of boards included faculty trustees, and none had voting privileges.

Figure 16: Percent of Boards with Student or Faculty Trustee(s)



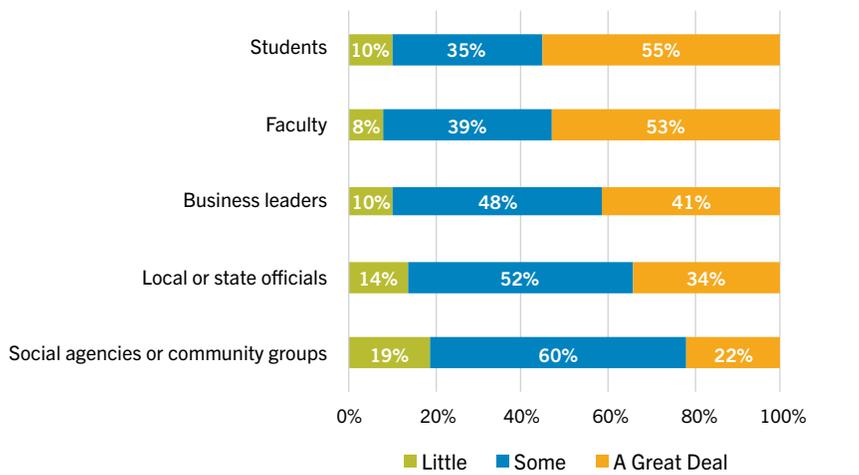


In interviews, numerous trustees underscored the importance of having a student representative on the board. For example, one trustee noted that speaking directly with the student trustee helped them understand “*the life-changing impact, especially for minority students,*” first-generation students, and working parents. Another stated:

I think the student trustee has a unique position because people listen to them. They’re living it... I went to community college almost 50 years ago, but they’re living it [now]. And when they speak up on an issue... that’s where I think the value is.

Whether or not their boards include student members, trustees place the **student voice front and center** in institutional decision making, giving student opinions more weight than those of any other stakeholder group included in the survey. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that their board gave student opinions at least *some* weight in institutional decision making, and over half (55%) stated that student opinions were given a *great deal* of weight (see Figure 17). The opinions of faculty are also weighed heavily, as are those of business leaders, local or state officials, and social agencies or community groups, although trustees are more likely to give the opinions of these stakeholders *some* weight, as opposed to a *great deal*.

Figure 17: Weight Given to the Opinions of Various Groups



RESOURCES FOR STUDENT TRUSTEES

[acct.org/about/acct-governance/student-trustee-advisory-committee](https://www.acct.org/about/acct-governance/student-trustee-advisory-committee)

Most student trustees are the only student member of their board. ACCT’s Student Trustee Advisory Committee is a nationwide peer-to-peer learning and networking group that helps student trustees to gain a broader perspective on their roles and responsibilities as board members, to educate them about how to be the best possible advocates for their institutions and how to govern effectively, and to build lasting relationships with other student trustees from throughout the country. Student trustees also can connect throughout the year through the ACCT Connect online learning and networking platform.

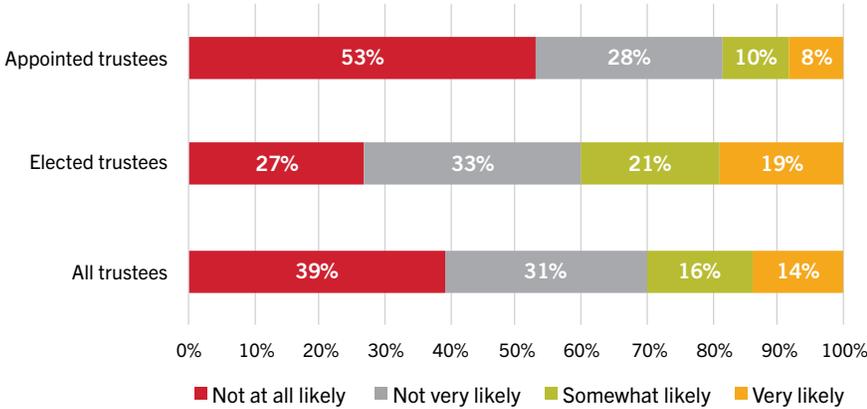
In 2025, ACCT published *The Student Trustee Handbook: What Every Student Trustee Needs to Know to Lead with Confidence*, authored by Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society President and CEO Lynn Tincher-Ladner and former student trustee Amanda Karpinski-Gorman.



Most boards center institutional needs over special interests.

Overall, four out of five survey respondents indicated that members of their board **never or rarely put their own special interests or values above the needs of the institution**. This percentage is even higher among boards where trustees are appointed (87%; see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Frequency of Trustees Putting Special Interests or Values above the Needs of the Institution



In qualitative interviews, trustees spoke to the importance of **representing the college and balancing responsibilities** to taxpayers and the community. Reflecting the variations in survey data between elected and appointed trustees, some board members suggested that maintaining the appropriate balance may be more challenging for the former than the latter:

My role 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... It's important that those two responsibilities are by design in tension with one another.

We're elected by individuals whose tax dollars — and in some ways tuition dollars — support the institution that we are serving, and we do have a role as a liaison between the community's values and the institution. But we're human beings in the community, and we have a set of values. So, we're part of our own constituency.

Boards that are elected have... more challenges in terms of getting along as trustees and doing your job of supporting the college and supporting the president.

Trustees also reiterated a collective focus on students and their experiences — highlighted in the previous section — as a guiding principle of good governance:

Try not to let the political climate shift the direction that you go as a college... Politics, they come and go, and you have to understand what they're about. But at the end of the day, the ship that you're sailing, you're governing the college.... You've got to keep the students in mind, keep the college in mind, protect that at all costs. And know for whom you're working.

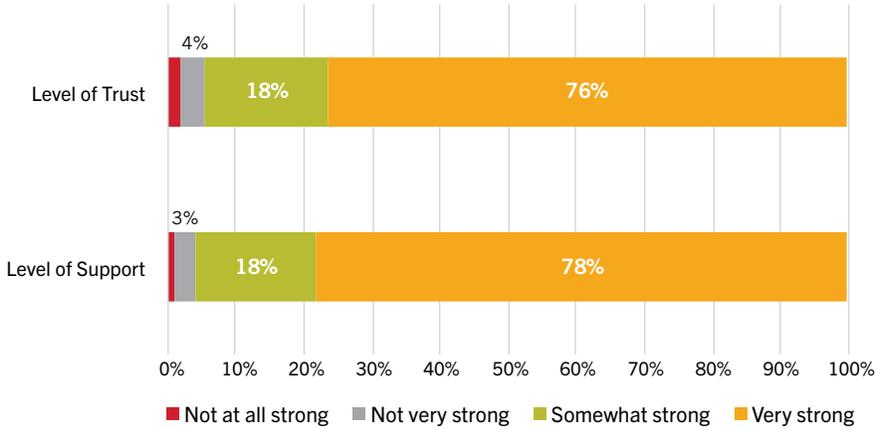


THE BOARD/CEO RELATIONSHIP

There is a high level of trust and support between trustees and their CEOs.

Ninety-four percent of survey respondents indicated that there is a *somewhat* or *very strong* **level of trust** between their CEO and board, and 96% reported a *somewhat* or *very strong* **level of support** (see Figure 19). Indeed, between 76% and 79% of trustees indicated that the level of support and trust between their board and CEO was *very strong*. These high levels of trust and support are almost exactly the same as in the 1997 survey.

Figure 19: Levels of Trust and Support between Boards and their CEOs



Trustees’ comments in interviews reflect the high level of trust and support indicated in the survey data, as well as an understanding of **hiring and appropriately supporting the college leader** as fundamental board responsibilities:

The demands [on] a college president are huge and [it's a] difficult job, which is one reason [that] when you get somebody, you've got to support them. You hire somebody and then you get out of their way and let them do what you hired them to do. That is so important.

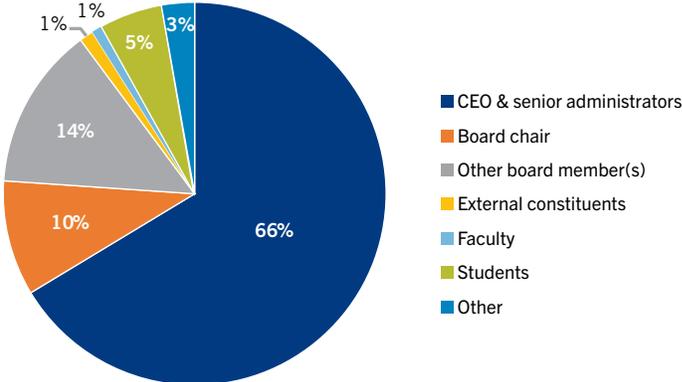
Our current president, we hired six, almost seven years ago, and it's a privilege to help shape the direction of the college. It's important to hire a good leader and then just support him or her, and I think we've done a pretty good job of that.

I love being a trustee. It's great, and really what I've learned after... three years now is most of my responsibility is just keeping a barricade around the president and allowing him to do his job. And we've got a phenomenal president — our president's the best in the state.



In another measure of the strength of board/CEO relationships, two-thirds of survey respondents indicated that among key college constituents, the **CEO and senior administrators have the greatest influence on the board and its decisions**. Another 10% stated that the board chair has the greatest influence, and 14% indicated that other board member(s) are the primary driver(s) of board decisions (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Greatest Influence on Board Decisions

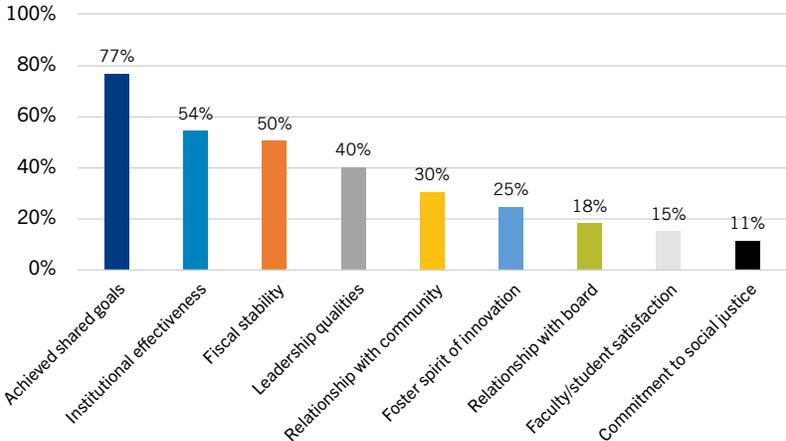


Trustees hold their CEO accountable for shared goals.

For more than three-quarters of responding trustees, the extent to which **institutional goals** set by the board and/or CEO have been achieved is a primary criterion used to evaluate the CEO (see Figure 21). **Institutional effectiveness** and **student progress data** are also commonly used to evaluate CEO effectiveness (54%), as are the fiscal stability of the institution and/or the CEO’s fundraising accomplishments (50%).

To a lesser extent, community college trustees take into account the CEO’s leadership qualities (40%), relationships with community leaders and/or government officials (30%), and their ability to manage systemic change processes and/or foster a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation on campus (25%).

Figure 21: Top Criteria for Evaluating the CEO



PART 3: PRIORITIES AND PLANNING

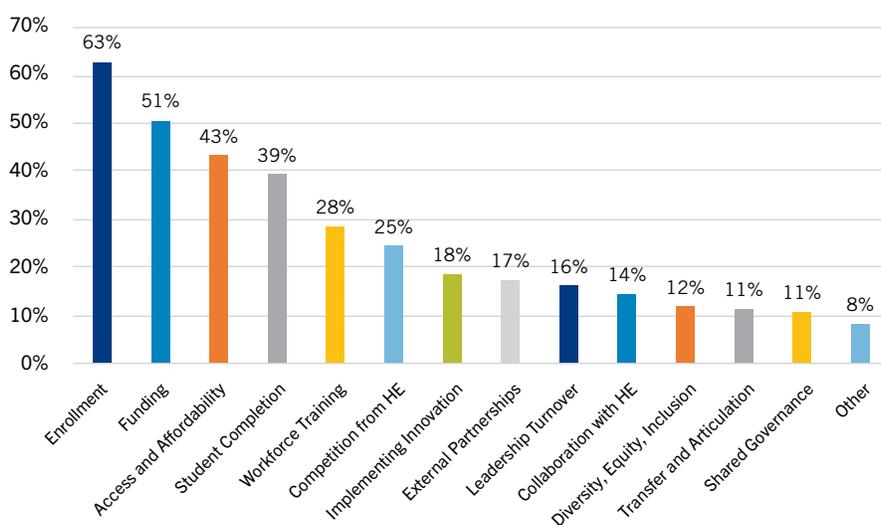
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Trustees perceive enrollment and funding to be the greatest challenges their institutions face.

Over half of trustees believe that **enrollment (63%) and funding (51%) issues are the top challenges their institutions face** (see Figure 22). A substantial portion of respondents also indicated that access and affordability for students (43%), student progress and completion (39%), occupational training and workforce development (28%), and competition with other higher education institutions (25%) are among the top challenges for their institutions.

Although concerns about enrollment are relatively new, likely stemming from the fact that most states have begun to experience the anticipated enrollment cliff,⁵ other challenges have remained consistent over time. For example, funding was the top issue community college trustees identified in 1997, and in 2018 funding, access, and affordability were identified as top challenges.

Figure 22: Trustees' Perceptions of the Greatest Challenges their Institutions Face



Trustees noted in interviews that **enrollment and funding challenges are closely linked**, given that a significant portion of college revenue is enrollment-driven:

We're all focusing on [the] challenge of the enrollment cliff... I think we are up from last year in our enrollment numbers, but we can't lose sight of how we attract and retain and move these folks on to jobs.

5 Lane, P., Falkenstern, C., & Bransberger, P. (2024). *Knocking at the college door: Projections of high school graduates*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.



Other issues raised frequently by interviewees were the **housing crisis** in many communities as well as **leadership pipeline challenges** — including, as one trustee noted, the importance of cultivating future leaders who “look more like our students:”

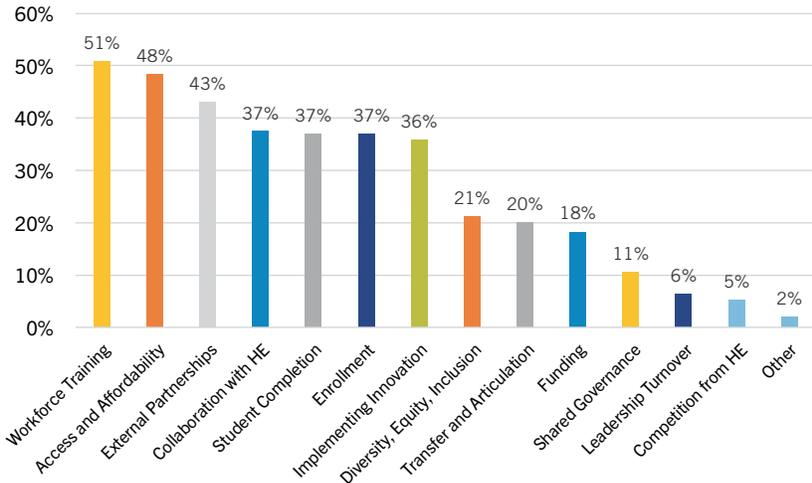
[Students] are coming from all over the country, because [we have] programs that are not offered at very many institutions... but there’s no rental [housing] market. Some towns have zero rentals available.... I would consider that our biggest issue.

[The] leadership issue is a national problem. There [are] interim [CEO]s everywhere.

Trustees see opportunities in the areas of workforce training, access and affordability, and external partnerships.

Just over half of trustees view **occupational training and workforce development** as a key area of opportunity for their college or district (see Figure 23). Nearly half (48%) perceive an opportunity to improve access and affordability for students, and another 43% view external partnerships as one of the greatest areas of opportunity. Other common opportunities identified by trustees include collaboration with other institutions of higher education (37%), student progress and completion (37%), enrollment (37%), and implementing entrepreneurial or innovative programs and practices (36%).

Figure 23: Trustees’ Perceptions of the Greatest Opportunities for their Institutions



In interviews, trustees emphasized **partnerships with secondary schools and four-year institutions** as presenting key opportunities:

We’re working very hard to explore all the ways we can partner with four-year institutions. We’re all competing for a smaller pool of enrollees.

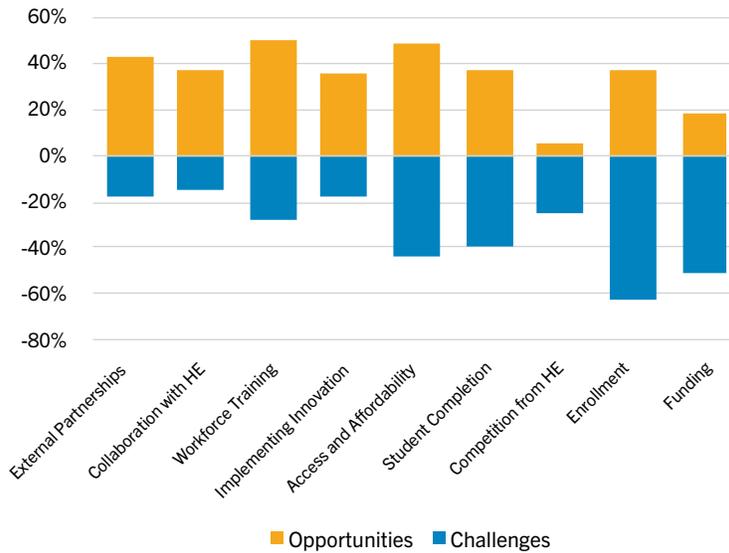
The walls are coming down between a K-12 education and a community college education, and I think we need to stay ahead of that and make it seem like a seamless transition. We’ve made great progress, but I think we need to keep that going strong.



Many of the issues community colleges face present both challenges and opportunities.

Nearly all of the major issues community colleges face can be perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge (see Figure 24). Some, including external partnerships, collaboration with other higher education institutions, workforce training, and implementing entrepreneurial or innovative programs and practices, are more often viewed as opportunities, while others — such as competition from other institutions of higher education, enrollment, and funding — are more frequently identified as challenges. However, trustees perceive access and affordability for students, as well as student progress and completion, equally as opportunities and challenges.

Figure 24: Comparison of Major Opportunities and Challenges faced by Community Colleges



In interviews, numerous trustees elaborated on how the various challenges their colleges are facing provide **opportunities for growth and greater fiscal sustainability**:

Partnership building is so important right now, with basically a lack of funds available from the state. We have to build partnerships to [do] all the work that the state wants us to do but they're not funding. They want [us] to give that whole-person support, but there's no money behind it.

The projected demographics show a decline in traditional-age students. We also have a low participation rate in advanced education beyond high school in our area. With fewer... traditional students coming, we're going to have to do better at raising the percentage of the students who pursue postsecondary educational opportunities. And it may mean that our dual-credit programs, our career technical center programs that go into the secondary school, are feeders for our associate degree programs.

Most broadly, trustees commented on the challenges and opportunities inherent in **changing workforce needs and rapidly evolving technologies**, particularly AI:

The change in the workforce, that's huge... How do we ensure that what we're doing meets the needs of the little communities as well as the larger communities that we serve? And not just deciding what's right for them, but having them at the table to say [what they are facing and what they need].

Our opportunities are somewhat infinite in that we are in a moment in our economy, globally and nationally, where there are so many new kinds of jobs. We still have farming, and we still have manufacturing. But we have new tech that goes along with farming now, and that we have advanced manufacturing. And yes, we have AI.

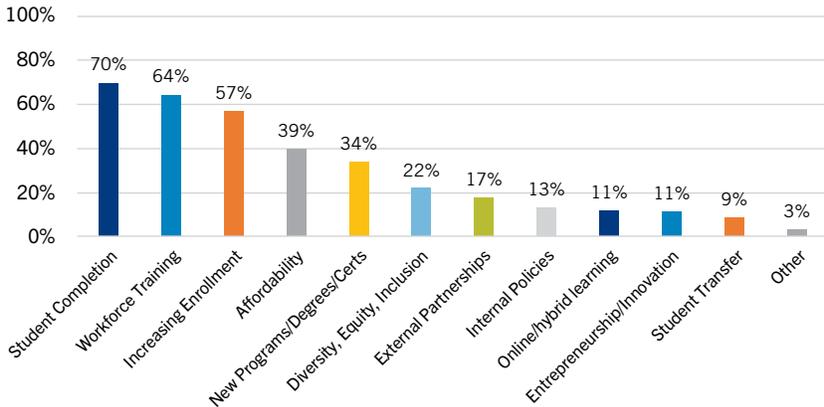
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND CHANGEMAKING

Strategic priorities reflect the challenges and opportunities trustees believe their institutions face.

Given a list of 12 priorities, trustees were asked to select what they believed to be their institution's top three. Results reflected a number of the challenges and opportunities described in the previous section. In particular, over half of respondents indicated that student completion and attainment (70%), workforce training and/or economic development (64%), and increasing enrollment (57%) were among the top three priorities at their college (see Figure 25). College affordability (39%) and the development of new programs, degrees, or certificates (34%) were identified by just over one-third of respondents as top priorities.

Although only 3% of respondents wrote in other priorities, these included a diverse range of topics, including “student success, which doesn't always mean attainment of a degree or credential,” student wellness and wellbeing, updating facilities, “meeting the changing needs of the community,” development of bachelor's degrees, and “communicating the value of the community college to the broader community.”

Figure 25: Top Three Institutional Priorities Perceived by Trustees





In interviews, trustees elaborated on their institutions’ top priorities, which similarly mirrored data about key institutional challenges reported in the previous section. For instance, many trustees noted the importance of **basic needs support for students**, including housing, food, and childcare, as these contribute to program completion and student success:

Our number one priority is student success and completion. It’s one thing to be in college, but it’s our job to make sure these students are given the tools and the resources [they need] because we want [them] to complete. I don’t care if it’s a certificate, I don’t care if it’s a degree — I want them to complete.

We just put a food pantry on campus. Our foundation is now offering funds [to help] if a student’s car breaks down, things like that. To me... [it’s important to] take care of the whole student.

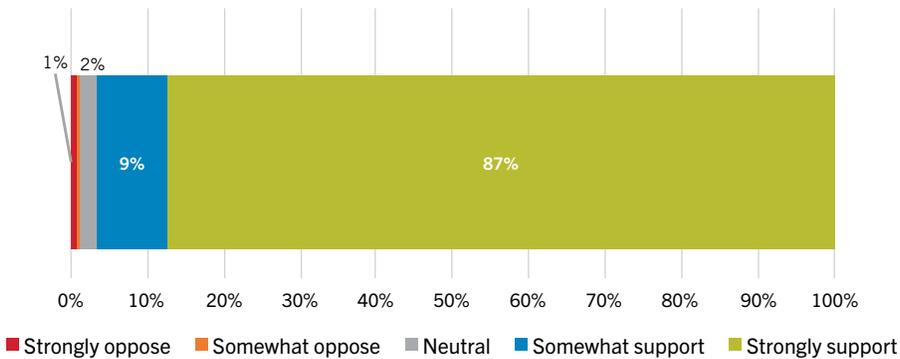
We really believe our students deserve better than having to sleep in their cars in the parking lot. Instead, why don’t you [the legislature] fund us to build student housing so that we could house these students... that’s really what we want.

The vast majority of trustees strongly support their institution’s top priorities (regardless of what they are).

Nearly nine in ten (87%) trustees *strongly support* their institution’s top three priorities, and an additional 9% support them *somewhat*. Only about 2% of responding trustees hold a *neutral* view about their college’s priorities, and a mere 1% *strongly* or *somewhat oppose* what they perceive to be their institution’s top priorities (see Figure 26).

Interestingly, these patterns hold regardless of what trustees believe to be their college’s top three priorities. For example, 97% of those who indicated that workforce training and economic development is a top priority at their institution *somewhat* or *strongly supported* that goal but so did 94% of trustees who did not perceive workforce development to be a top institutional priority.

Figure 26: Level of Support for Institution’s Top Three Priorities



One reason why trustees may be so supportive of their institution’s top three priorities is that they are heavily involved in developing the strategic plan or annual budgets:

Each year we do a retreat, and our retreat covers the strategic plan and [making] sure that we are in fact providing a budget that matches the student plan and matches the strategic plan. We’ve got a goal for students: it’s getting them in and out — recruited, retained, and graduated.

FACILITATED BOARD SERVICES

acct.org/governance-services

ACCT is the only national association that exists exclusively to meet the needs of community college boards. ACCT Governance Services support boards of trustees and campus leaders in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities, advancing the institutional mission, and facilitating student success.

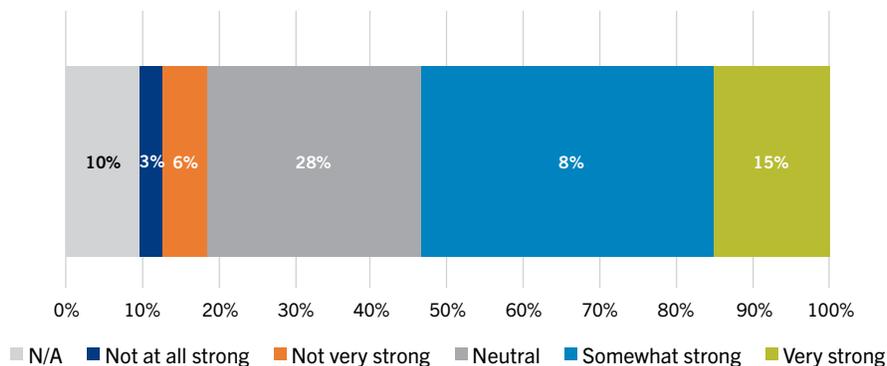
Available services include:

- Board Self-Assessments
- Board Retreats & Workshops
- Executive Evaluations
- Executive Search Services
- Governance Consulting

Trustees perceive a robust appetite for systemic change among fellow board members, but that support varies depending on the types of challenges colleges are facing.

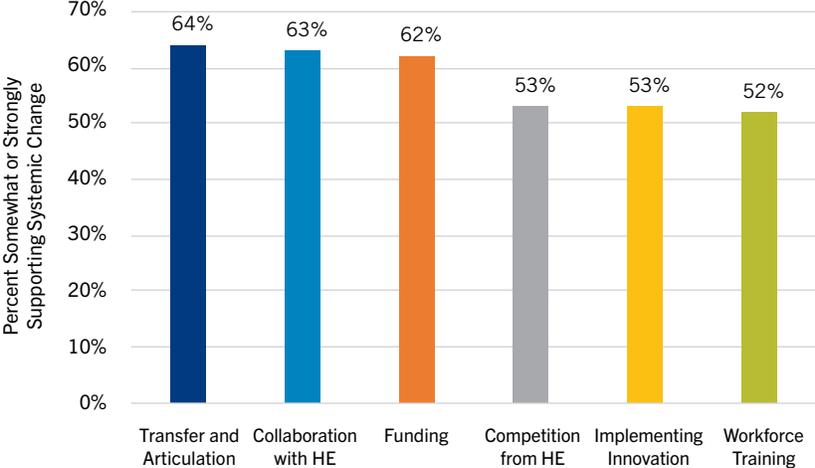
Trustees were asked how they would categorize their board’s appetite for systemic change. Ten percent of respondents indicated that the question was not applicable because “systemic change is currently not needed at my institution.” However, the vast majority of trustees stated that their board has a *somewhat* (38%) or *very strong* (15%) appetite for systemic change, while 28% indicated a *neutral* response to the question (see Figure 27). Only 9% of trustees stated that their board’s appetite for systemic change was *not at all strong* (3%) or *not very strong* (6%).

Figure 27: Board’s Appetite for Systemic Change



Interestingly, the perceived **level of support for systemic change varies based on the types of challenges** trustees believe their institution is facing. For example, among trustees at institutions where transfer and articulation, collaboration with other institutions of higher education, and funding are major challenges, nearly two-thirds of trustees (62% to 64%) indicate that their board’s appetite for systemic change is *somewhat* or *very strong* (see Figure 28). However, at institutions where competition from other institutions of higher education, implementing innovative programs and practices, and occupational training and workforce development are among the top challenges, only about half (52% to 53%) of trustees indicate a *somewhat* or *very strong* appetite for systemic change among fellow board members (similar to the overall average).

Figure 28: Institutional Challenges Where Support for Systemic Change is Greatest or Least



CONCLUSION

WHY STUDY COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES?

Community colleges play a critical role in ensuring the economic success and social vibrancy of communities across the United States. They serve as affordable and accessible onramps to postsecondary education for all students, including those who are educationally or economically disadvantaged. They provide crucial workforce training for many of the fastest-growing professions in every region of the U.S. They offer essential ‘upskilling’ opportunities for mid- and late-career professionals; and each year millions of high school students get a head start on college through dual enrollment courses offered by their local community college.⁶

These critical institutions are governed by elected and appointed public servants who dedicate significant time, care, energy, experiences, and insights to the wellbeing of their institutions and the success of their students. Community college trustees have a fiduciary duty to secure the fiscal and operational sustainability of their institutions, but as the preceding pages illustrate, their role extends far beyond, often encompassing a deeply personal desire to ensure that their institutions provide a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all students, remain responsive to community needs, and are equipped to address the challenges and opportunities born of rapidly shifting social, economic, and policy landscapes.

In highlighting the characteristics, beliefs, actions, and values of community college trustees, this report both celebrates the oft-unseen work of these board members and provides critical insights into how they can be better supported in governing the institutions that educate around four in 10 of all undergraduates in America. Findings from this report and future research will inform professional development opportunities for trustees and current and future CEOs, as well as trustee recruitment and development processes.

Results from this study also address a substantial void in the scholarly literature, improving our understanding of the vital role trustees play in shaping the future of community colleges, including how they support or hinder efforts to create more equitable, inclusive, and innovative institutions. Further analyses of survey data will shed light on trends in community college governance, as well as ways that local communities and trustee-appointing authorities can more intentionally develop diverse and effective pools of trustee candidates for election or appointment.

Community colleges receive far less media and scholarly attention than their four-year university counterparts, but they are no less important to the economic health and vibrancy of communities across America. Furthermore, as institutions committed to open access and opportunities for flexible education and training, community colleges arguably do more to ensure social mobility for marginalized groups than any other institution in America.⁷ Sustained, rigorous attention to community college governance and the characteristics, beliefs, and values of individual trustees is thus critical to ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of these important institutions.

6 Fink, J. (2024, Aug. 26). *How many students are taking dual enrollment courses in high school? New national, state, and college-level data*. Community College Research Center, Teacher’s College, Columbia University. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-many-students-are-taking-dual-enrollment-courses-in-high-school-new-national-state-and-college-level-data.html>

7 Kisker, C.B., Cohen, A.M., & Brawer, F.B. (2023). *The American community college* (7th ed). Jossey-Bass.



DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This national survey of community college trustees, in which roughly one-third of all ACCT members participated, is the largest and most comprehensive examination of the individuals who govern our nation's community colleges to date. This report provides insights into who contemporary trustees are and what they care about through descriptive analyses of survey results and select quotes from 40 qualitative interviews, but far more research — both quantitative and qualitative — is needed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the beliefs and values that influence community college trustees' decision making and the innovative and transformational changes they believe are necessary for institutions and students to thrive in the coming years.

A critical next step in leveraging data from the 2025 ACCT/CSCC Community College Trustee Survey is to analyze survey results by geographic regions. Such analyses could shed light on the extent to which community college boards are representative of student and local community populations and identify avenues to cultivate diverse pools of future elected and/or appointed trustees. Regional analyses of survey data would also help to identify trends in board composition, functioning, and desired training that could be built into statewide or regional leadership development opportunities.

Additional avenues for future research on current survey data include deeper exploration of the experience and influence of student trustees; in-depth analyses of trustees' understanding of and appetite for strategic change in various aspects of college operations; and predictive analyses that would not only contribute to scholarly research on community college trustees but also provide guidance to state officials and trustee appointing authorities about the characteristics, beliefs, and values associated with effective college governance.

Further interviews and focus groups will also deepen our understanding of survey results. In particular, extending the qualitative aspects of this study will shed light on the ways in which individual trustees' private values intersect with their understanding of the missions of public community colleges, their identification of key challenges and opportunities, and their support for systemic change related to institutional policies or practices.

In addition to future research on existing survey data, it is important to note that a comprehensive survey of community college trustees of the type presented in this paper should be repeated every three to five years to keep up with ever-changing community demographics; student populations; federal, state, and local regulations; and other developments that affect community college governance, leadership, and operations.

Regular and more frequent iterations of this research will reveal patterns that will be useful in predicting future needs for professional development and institutional support. For example, trustees perceive funding to be one of the greatest challenges their community colleges face. Future surveys and interviews with community college trustees and CEOs might investigate current and emerging funding models, trends, and alternative business models, ultimately seeking to discover and share innovative approaches to helping community colleges and their students thrive.

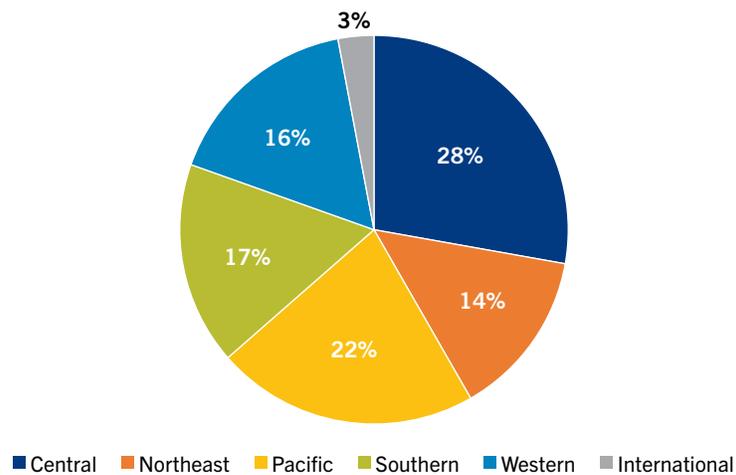
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: WHO RESPONDED TO THIS SURVEY?

Thirty-one percent of ACCT’s member trustees responded to this survey, representing the diversity and scope of community college boards.

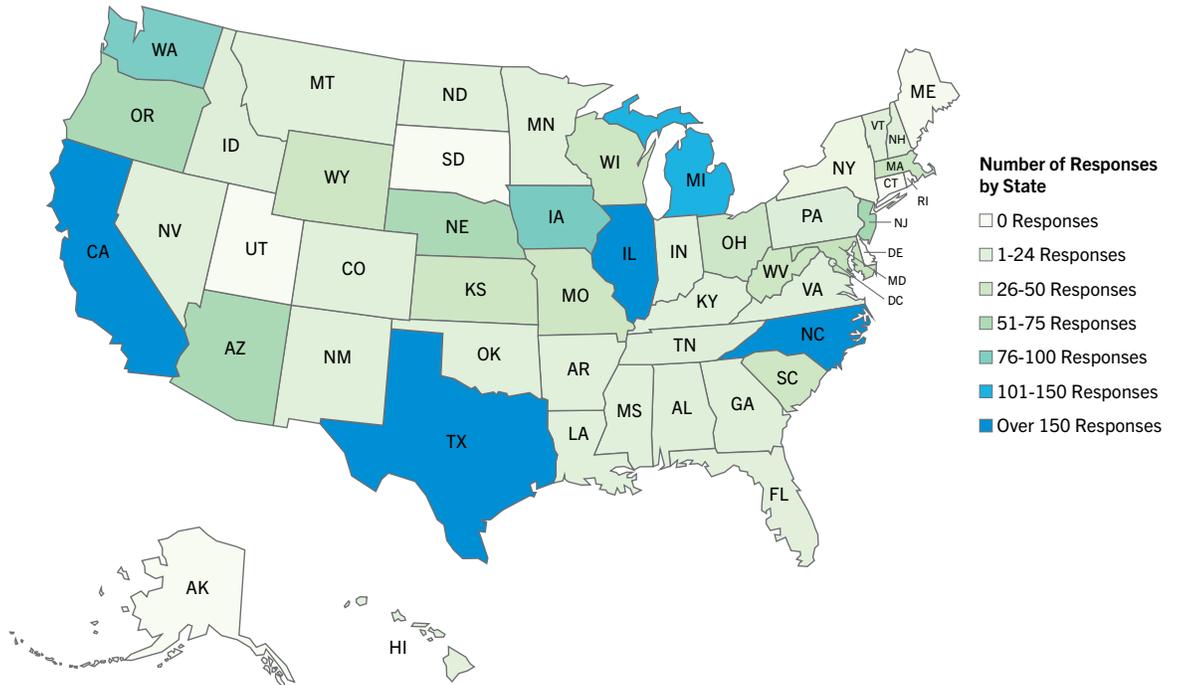
Over 2,000 trustees responded to the ACCT/CSCC Community College Trustee Survey, resulting in 1,857 usable responses⁸ representing all five ACCT regions, 43 of 50 U.S. states, and six additional countries, republics, or territories with ACCT member institutions (see Figures A.1 and A.2). Except for the first survey question, which asked respondents to report the state or territory in which their college is located, no survey questions were required. As a result, the number of responses to each question ranged from 1,181 to 1,857. Most questions received at least 1,500 responses.

Figure A.1: Survey Responses by ACCT Region



⁸ Surveys were deemed unusable when respondents answered only the first (required) question and no other questions.

Figure A.2: Frequency of Survey Responses by State



Respondents represented large, medium, and small colleges, Minority-Serving Institutions, and baccalaureate-granting community colleges (see Figures A.3 and A.4).

Figure A.3: Survey Responses by Institutional Size

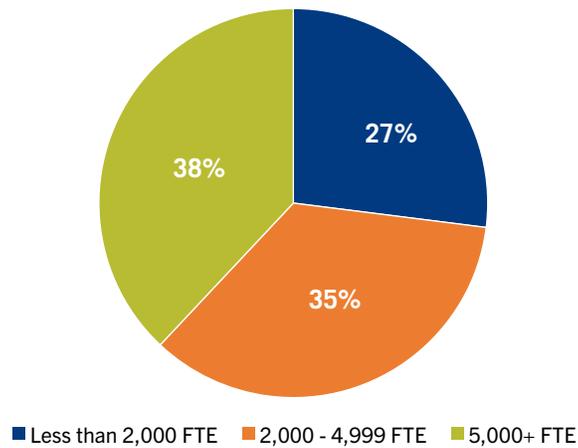
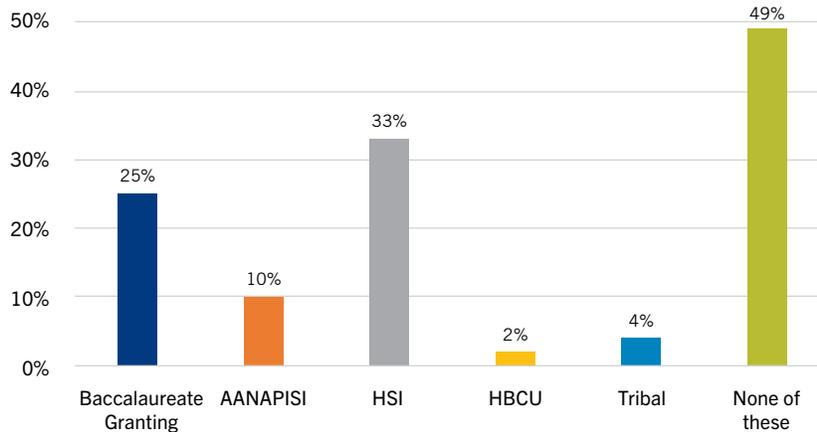


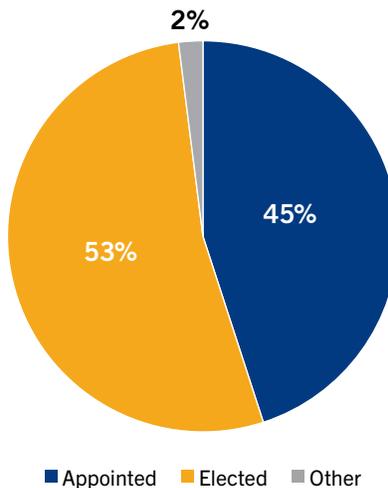


Figure A.4: Survey Responses by Institutional Type



Community college trustees who responded to the survey are nearly evenly split between those who are appointed (45%) and those who are elected (53%). An additional 2% of respondents indicated Other, most often to specify that they were initially appointed and subsequently elected, or that they were a student or faculty trustee (see Figure A.5).

Figure A. 5: How Trustees are Selected to Serve



APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

Findings in this report showcase data from a mixed-methods study, jointly undertaken by 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 Dr. Iris Weisman conducted her groundbreaking survey of community college trustees, presidents, and board chairs nearly 30 years ago.⁹ This study was undertaken with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both Idaho State University and Western Michigan University.

QUANTITATIVE METHODS

Quantitative data in this report are from a 34-question online survey administered by ACCT and CSCC in fall 2024 and winter 2025. Survey questions were adapted with permission from Weisman's 1997 instrument¹⁰ and updated to reflect contemporary challenges and opportunities, as well as modern demographic information and institutional type classifications.¹¹ CSCC researchers initially piloted the survey in 2022, recruiting trustees through state trustee organizations, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and internet searches for public board-related trustee emails. The pilot was accessed by 367 trustees, resulting in a total of 287 usable responses from trustees in 29 states.¹² Responses were analyzed for reliability, clarity, and ease of completion, and CSCC researchers engaged nine respondents in follow-up one-on-one interviews.

In spring 2024, CSCC researchers collaborated with ACCT to shorten the pilot survey from 75 to 34 questions and prepare for widespread administration to the universe of roughly 6,000 community college trustees whose institutions are ACCT members. Trustees received invitations to participate in the online survey via ACCT newsletters and emails, and those attending ACCT's 2024 Leadership Congress and 2025 Community College National Legislative Summit were also able to take the survey in person. "A total of 1,857 trustees submitted usable responses (including the 287 who responded to the pilot), for a 31% response rate.

The ACCT/CSCC Community College Trustee Survey was organized into five sections containing a mixture of Likert-type, rank-order, and multiple-choice questions. Sections included: 1) general information about trustees' institutions, roles, and composition of their boards; 2) trustees' experiences; 3) trustees' perceptions of their board and its functioning; 4) trustees' perceptions of community college priorities, challenges, and opportunities; 5) and trustees' individual demographic characteristics. In addition, a sixth section asked trustees

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

10 Weisman, I. M. (1997). *How different are the differences? The relationship between demographic diversity and viewpoint diversity among community college trustees* (Publication No. 9737675). [Doctoral dissertation, North Carolina State University.] ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

11 Hardy, D. E., & Katsinas, S. G. (2006). Using community college classifications in research: From conceptual model to useful tool. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 30(4), 339-358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920500442125>

12 Kater, S. T., Garza Mitchell, R., & Kisker, C. B. (2023). *Community college trustees: Mission, values, and decision-making in uncertain times*. Research paper presented at the 64th annual meeting of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Chicago, IL.



to answer two short, open-ended questions and provided an option for respondents to opt into an interview or focus group to delve further into issues addressed in the survey by providing their name and email address. CSCC researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze survey data, including frequencies, crosstab analyses, and tests of statistical significance. Where applicable, survey results were compared to similar measures from Weisman’s survey¹³ and ACCT’s 2018 Citizen Trustee survey.¹⁴

QUALITATIVE METHODS

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. 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ CSCC researchers then compared ChatGPT’s findings to manual analyses of random transcripts to ensure reliability and validity of findings. 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.

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

14 Association of Community College Trustees. (2018). *Citizen trustee survey: Selected results and analysis*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED605127>

15 Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

16 Ibid.



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