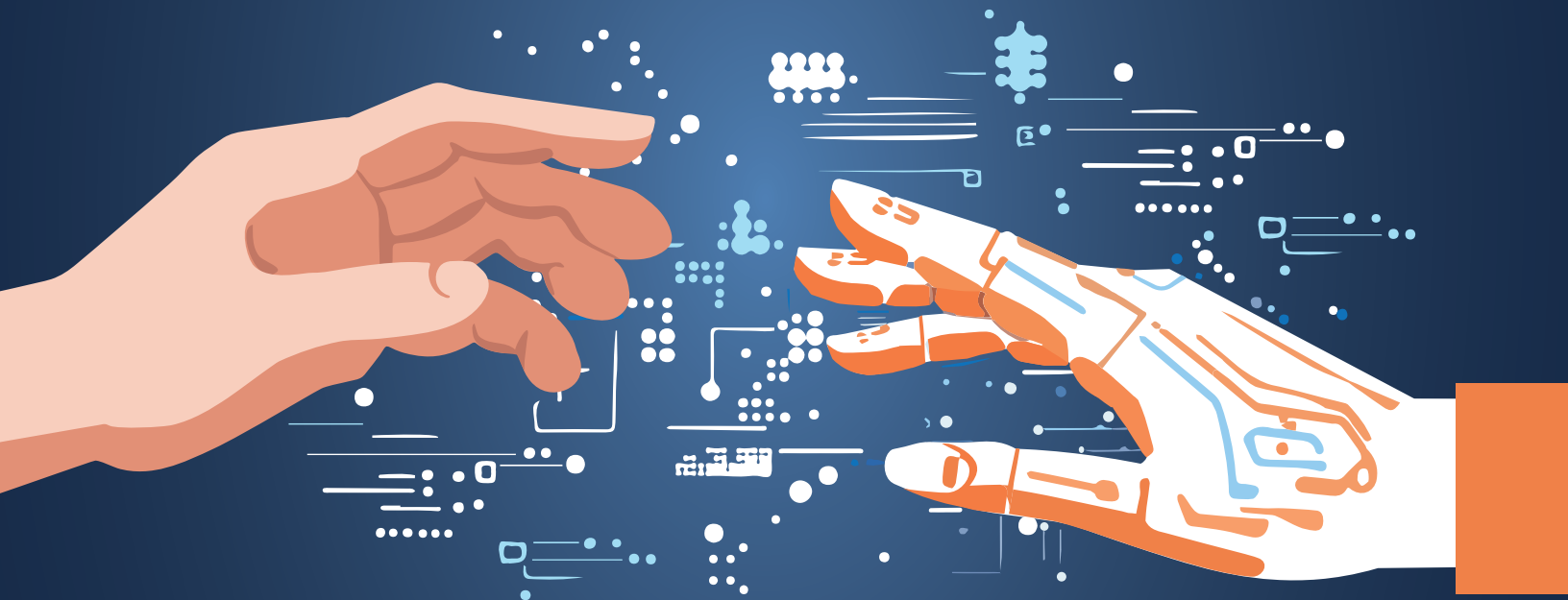


Collaborative Workforce Development in the Age of AI and Automation: A Trustee's Perspective

An experienced trustee and doctoral candidate explains why workforce preparation must move ahead of AI and automation — and how community colleges, labor, and industry can do it together.

by Vivian Malauulu



AI and automation are not temporary trends. They represent structural shifts in how work is organized and performed. New technologies frequently alter job tasks faster than credentialing systems can respond, leaving workers vulnerable and employers frustrated by skill mismatches. The pace of change requires institutions to think beyond reactive solutions.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE confronting a defining challenge: how to prepare students and incumbent workers for an economy increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. While technological innovation promises gains in efficiency, productivity, and economic growth, it also raises urgent questions about job displacement, skill gaps, and equity — particularly for working adults whose livelihoods depend on industries undergoing rapid transformation.

Community colleges sit at the center of this moment. More than any other sector of higher education, they are positioned to respond quickly to labor market shifts while remaining deeply connected to the communities they serve. Yet responding effectively to AI-driven change requires more than launching new programs or updating equipment. It demands intentional collaboration among education, industry, labor, and public-sector partners, guided by thoughtful governance and informed policy leadership.

Highly automated sectors such as maritime logistics often illustrate these dynamics clearly, but similar transformations are underway across advanced manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, warehousing, energy, and public sector services. In each of these sectors, employers are adopting new technologies faster than traditional training systems can adapt. Workers face uncertainty. Institutions face pressure to move quickly. Regions risk falling behind if systems are not aligned. The lessons emerging in one industry are increasingly applicable across regional economies nationwide.

Positionality and Perspective

My perspective on collaborative workforce development is shaped by service across multiple intersecting roles. I have served three terms on the Long Beach Community College District Board of Trustees in Southern California, where workforce preparation, regional economic alignment, and accountability to students and employers are central governance responsibilities. At the national level, I have served two terms on the ACCT Board of Directors, including service on every standing committee.

In parallel, I am a career educator, longshore worker, union official, and doctoral researcher focused on skilled workforce

development in the age of AI and automation. This multi-sector intersecting experience — spanning governance, labor, and scholarship as practitioner, policymaker, and researcher — allows me to examine how board-level decisions, public policy frameworks, labor dynamics, and instructional practice converge in real time. Trustees are not abstract actors in this work. Decisions about program investment, industry partnerships, labor engagement, and institutional priorities directly shape how colleges respond to technological change on the ground.

In 2020, during the height of the public health crisis, I led the effort to establish the LBCC Labor Center with the explicit goal of creating opportunities for education, labor, industry, and government to better serve students by functioning as a regional hub for innovation, learning, and workforce training. The Labor Center was designed not merely as a program, but as a convening space — one that models how cross-sector collaboration can strengthen workforce ecosystems and ensure that technological change benefits workers rather than marginalizes them. That experience has further informed my research and reinforced the importance of structured collaboration as a governance priority. The Labor Center also played a role in supporting small businesses as they navigated the post-pandemic recovery, demonstrating how community colleges can serve not only students and workers, but also entire regional economies through intentional, collaborative skilled workforce development strategies.

Why Collaboration Matters Now

AI and automation are not temporary trends. They represent structural shifts in how work is organized and performed. New technologies frequently alter job tasks faster than credentialing systems can respond, leaving workers vulnerable and employers frustrated by skill mismatches. The pace of change requires institutions to think beyond reactive solutions.

In this environment, community colleges cannot operate in isolation, nor can industry or labor shoulder the responsibility alone. Collaborative workforce development recognizes that sustainable solutions emerge when stakeholders share responsibility.

Industry brings insight into emerging technologies and

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productivity demands. Labor contributes on-the-ground knowledge of work processes and worker needs. Community colleges translate these insights into curriculum, credentials, and instructional pathways. Public agencies and policymakers create the regulatory and funding environments that allow collaboration to flourish.

For trustees, this means expanding the lens beyond individual programs to consider how governance structures support — or inhibit — cross-sector alignment. It requires asking strategic questions:

- Are our partnerships transactional or truly collaborative?
- Do our workforce initiatives serve both entry-level students and incumbent workers?
- Are we preparing learners not only for immediate placement, but also for long-term adaptability in evolving industries?

Bridging Governance and Instruction

As an educator, I see how rapidly evolving skill demands affect curriculum design, faculty professional development, and student confidence in career pathways. As a trustee, I see how policy decisions translate into institutional capacity — or constraints. When governance and instruction are misaligned, even well-intentioned workforce initiatives can struggle to deliver meaningful outcomes.

Effective workforce development in the age of AI and automation requires trustees to engage deeply with questions of adaptability, equity, and long-term regional impact. This includes supporting stackable and flexible credentials, investing in faculty training, strengthening data-informed decision-making, and fostering partnerships that reflect real labor market conditions rather than aspirational projections.

It also requires recognizing workers as lifelong learners whose success depends on systems designed for continuous upskilling and reskilling. Community colleges are uniquely positioned to lead in this space, but leadership must be intentional and coordinated.

Toward a Collaborative Framework

The research informing this work is grounded in the belief that community colleges can lead collaborative workforce strategies when governance, instruction, labor, industry, and public policy are

intentionally aligned. Rather than reacting to technological change after displacement occurs, colleges can help anticipate shifts, design responsive pathways, and support workers through transitions.

Such an approach does not prescribe a single model. Instead, it emphasizes principles adaptable across regions and industries: shared decision-making, mutual accountability, sustained partnership, and a commitment to equity as technologies reshape work.

For trustees, embracing this framework means viewing workforce development not as a peripheral function of the college, but as a central expression of its mission and public responsibility.

Conclusion

AI and automation will continue to transform the nature of work. The question for community colleges — and for trustees in particular — is how intentionally we choose to engage with that transformation.

By fostering collaborative workforce development grounded in governance leadership, instructional alignment, and regional partnership, community colleges can help ensure that technological innovation expands opportunity rather than deepens inequality.

In this period of rapid change, trustees have a critical role to play — not only in overseeing institutional responses, but also in shaping the broader ecosystems that determine whether workers, students, and communities thrive in the future of work.



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