



POLICY BRIEFING

Planning Beyond Assumptions

Ten "What Ifs" for Community Colleges

Overview

What if the future doesn't unfold in the ways we are currently planning for? The signals in this brief are not forecasts. They are prompts—designed to stretch our thinking beyond familiar patterns and surface possibilities that are easy to overlook.

By engaging with these "what ifs," we create space to question what we take for granted and consider how different conditions might call for different choices.

How to Use This Brief

These ten provocations are not predictions or strategies. They are prompts for leaders to test the assumptions embedded in current plans, surface what might otherwise be overlooked, and consider how different conditions could call for different choices.

Ten Provocations

1. What if autonomous systems eliminate the need for campus parking—and commuting as a constraint?

Self-driving vehicles allow students to learn while in motion, live farther from campus, or rarely come at all. Large parking lots sit empty or are repurposed for housing, retail, or community use, fundamentally changing the physical footprint of the college.

If proximity is no longer a barrier, how does location shape your strategy?

2. What if the economy no longer guarantees stable, continuous work?

Careers become fragmented—people move in and out of work, combine income streams, or rely partially on automated systems. Periods of learning, earning, and adapting blur together rather than following a predictable sequence.

If work is no longer a stable endpoint, how do you define what students are preparing for?

3. What if campuses are valued more for connection than instruction?

Students come for relationships, networks, identity, and a sense of belonging, while most content is accessed online or through AI tools. Physical space becomes a hub for community rather than the primary site of learning.

If connection becomes the primary draw, how do you intentionally design for it?

4. What if colleges only get paid when students get jobs?

Funding models shift so that tuition is deferred until graduates reach defined employment or income outcomes. Institutions carry more financial risk and must track student success long after completion.

| *If your revenue depends on long-term outcomes, how does that reshape what—and who—you serve?*

5. What if everyone has access to a free, high-quality AI tutor for life?

A publicly available AI system supports learning from early education through adulthood—answering questions, explaining concepts, and guiding skill development at any time. Students rely on it as a constant companion in their learning.

| *If expert guidance is always available at no cost, where do you add unique value?*

6. What if students can use their financial aid across multiple providers at once?

Learners enroll simultaneously in a college, an online platform, and an employer-based program—drawing from the same pool of funding. Education becomes a mix of experiences rather than a single institutional pathway.

| *If students are building their education across multiple places, how do you remain central to their journey?*

7. What if disciplines are replaced by problem-based learning?

Instead of enrolling in majors like biology or business, students join problem-focused programs—climate adaptation, rural healthcare access, AI ethics—drawing on multiple fields at once. Learning is organized around solving real-world challenges rather than completing departmental sequences.

| *If fields no longer define the structure, how do you organize expertise and ownership?*

8. What if students form their own micro-colleges?

Small cohorts of learners design their own educational experiences—pooling resources, hiring instructors, selecting content, and moving through customized pathways together. Some partner with institutions for credentials; others operate largely outside them.

| *If students can assemble their own experience, what role do you play in shaping or supporting it?*

9. What if a significant portion of learning is verified without courses or credits?

Advances in AI and simulation allow students to demonstrate what they know through real-time problem solving, portfolios, and performance data—without progressing through traditional coursework.

| *If learning can be validated instantly, what role do courses and credits play?*

10. What if colleges are expected to take on a broader role in community stability?

As economic and social systems become more volatile, colleges are increasingly asked to coordinate workforce transitions, support local resilience, and serve as anchors in times of disruption.

| *If the college becomes essential infrastructure for its community, how should it be funded and governed?*

These "what ifs" are not forecasts. They are mirrors—reflecting back the assumptions embedded in today's choices and surfacing the futures those choices may quietly be producing. For community college leaders, engaging them is not a planning exercise. It is the work of governing the institution into what comes next.
