



# Strategic Compass 2035

CATALYST \* CONVENER \* COMMUNITY



SPRING 2026

**By 2035, America’s community colleges will function as interconnected civic and workforce ecosystems—equitable, innovative, and resilient by design—anchored by five enduring directions that guide AACC’s collective work.**

## INTRODUCTION

### From Truman to Tomorrow: A Navigation System for a Transforming Nation

In 1947, the President’s Commission on Higher Education—known as the Truman Commission—advanced a radical proposition for its time: that higher education was not a privilege, but a public right and a national responsibility. The Commission envisioned institutions that would strengthen democracy, expand opportunity, and fuel economic mobility. From that vision, America’s community colleges emerged as the most accessible, adaptable, and community-rooted institutions in the nation.

Nearly 80 years later, the country faces a moment as consequential as the postwar period that gave rise to the Truman Commission. The pace, scale, and complexity of change have accelerated dramatically:

- ▶ Artificial intelligence and automation are reshaping work and skills at unprecedented speed.
- ▶ Employers face persistent talent shortages across critical industries.

- ▶ Demographic shifts are altering who colleges serve and how.
- ▶ Economic and geographic inequality threaten community stability.
- ▶ Civic trust and social cohesion are under strain.
- ▶ Learning has become lifelong, continuous, and deeply connected to work.

The Truman Commission called for access.

This moment calls for ecosystem transformation.

Community colleges are no longer simply educational institutions; they are civic and workforce infrastructure—anchors of regional economies, democratic participation, and social mobility. To lead in this environment, the association that represents them must also evolve.

The AACC Strategic Compass 2035 is not a traditional strategic plan. It is a navigation system—a long-horizon framework that provides clarity of direction while preserving adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

### Resilient by Design

The Strategic Compass is grounded in the principle of Resilient by Design. Resilience is not accidental; it is architected. Organizations that thrive in volatility are those that intentionally build the capacity to anticipate change, learn continuously, adapt quickly, and act with coherence and purpose.

For AACC and its members, resilience requires:

- ▶ Smart data and foresight
- ▶ Adaptive governance and decision-making
- ▶ Leadership prepared for complexity and moral responsibility
- ▶ Innovation capacity across institutions of all sizes
- ▶ Deep partnerships across sectors
- ▶ A renewed commitment to civic vitality and equity

The Compass translates these principles into action over the next decade.

### AACC’s Theory of Change:

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AACC’s strategy is anchored in three reinforcing roles:

#### CATALYST

AACC sparks innovation, accelerates policy, mobilizes resources, and builds the conditions for transformation.

#### CONVENER

AACC brings together presidents, practitioners, employers, policymakers, philanthropy, and civic partners to design solutions and align action.

#### COMMUNITY

AACC strengthens professional community across the field and advances the civic mission of community colleges as anchors of democracy, belonging, and resilience.

Together, these roles shape the Compass and guide the work ahead.

## NORTH STAR PURPOSE

AACC strengthens and mobilizes America’s community colleges as engines of equitable opportunity, economic mobility, and civic vitality. This purpose is the gravitational grounding of the Compass.



**THE FIVE DIRECTIONAL ANCHORS:**

A durable navigation system for a decade of leadership.

**1. Data Insights & Adaptive Governance (Center)**

AACC becomes the learning and foresight engine for the field—anticipating disruption, informing strategy, and shaping policy.

**2. Ecosystem Orchestration (North)**

Community colleges lead regional civic and workforce ecosystems integrating education, industry, government, and community partners.

**3. Student Agency & Lifelong Learning (South)**

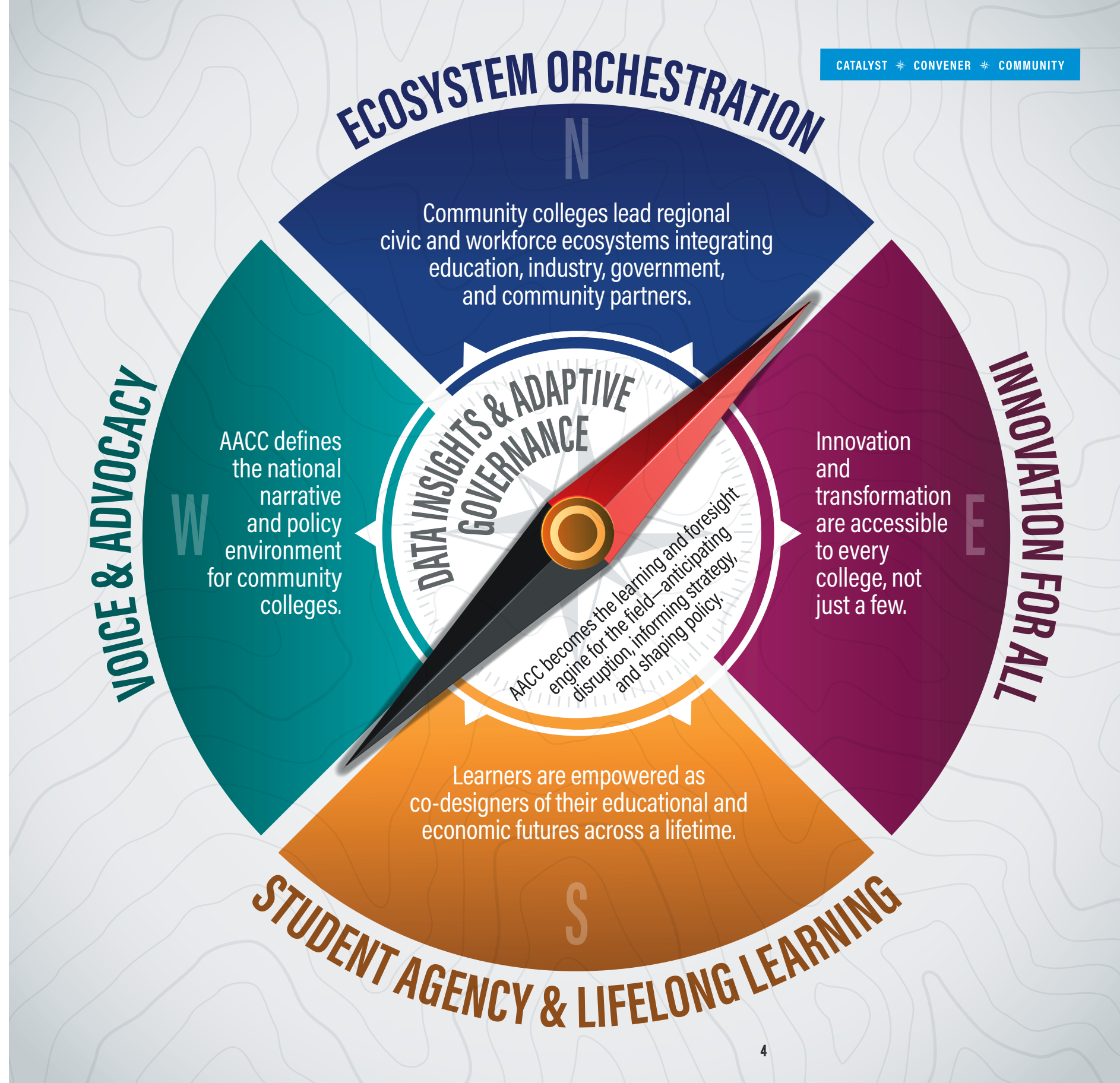
Learners are empowered as co-designers of their educational and economic futures across a lifetime.

**4. Innovation for All (East)**

Innovation and transformation are accessible to every college, not just a few.

**5. Voice & Advocacy (West)**

AACC defines the national narrative and policy environment for community colleges.



## STRATEGIC BETS: SIX FIELD-SHAPING COMMITMENTS

### Bold, durable bets that shape the field for a decade

Strategic Bets are not initiatives. They are long-term, high-stakes commitments that concentrate attention, resources, and leadership. Each bet absorbs multiple lines of work and remains relevant even as tactics evolve.

#### STRATEGIC BET 1

### BUILD NATIONAL DATA, FORESIGHT, & ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE ENGINE

AACC becomes the national intelligence and foresight engine for community colleges—integrating data, member insight, and horizon scanning to guide institutional strategy, governance, and public policy. This bet ensures the field is proactive rather than reactive in the face of disruption.

#### ACTION 1

##### Launch the Community College Futures Lab

Create a permanent foresight capability inside AACC.

#### CORE FUNCTIONS:

- Horizon scanning (AI, labor markets, demographics)
- Scenario planning for presidents and boards
- Rapid response briefs for emerging disruptions
- Strategic intelligence dashboards for members

#### OUTPUTS:

- Annual Community College Futures Report
- Regional workforce and demographic outlooks
- Board-level and senior leadership foresight toolkits
- Community College Profile

#### IMPACT:

AACC becomes the strategic intelligence center of the field.

#### ACTION 2

##### Establish the National Governance & Strategy Institute

Provide governance and strategy guidance to presidents and trustees navigating complexity.

#### FOCUS AREAS:

- AI and institutional strategy
- Adaptive governance models
- Risk and crisis leadership
- Financial sustainability
- Ecosystem partnerships
- Organizational efficiency and effectiveness

#### OUTPUTS:

- Governance playbooks
- Trustee briefings
- Strategy design labs
- Presidential Compensation Survey
- Community College President's Survey

#### IMPACT:

Community colleges become strategically governed institutions, not just operational ones—ensuring the field is proactive rather than reactive in the face of disruption.

#### STRATEGIC BET 2

### SHAPE TALENT & WORK ECOSYSTEMS OF THE FUTURE

Community colleges become the backbone of America's talent system through aligned credentials, work-based learning, employer partnerships, and policy coordination. This bet integrates future-of-work readiness, work-based learning, and workforce mobility into a coherent national talent strategy.

#### ACTION 1

##### Convene the National Talent Alignment Council

Bring together major employers, workforce agencies, and college leaders to align talent strategy.

#### PARTICIPANTS COULD INCLUDE:

- Healthcare systems
- Manufacturing coalitions
- Technology companies
- Logistics and infrastructure industries
- Workforce Intermediaries
- Government Entities

#### GOALS:

- Signal national skill demand
- Shape credential frameworks
- Coordinate workforce investments
- Amplify best practices and models

#### IMPACT:

Community colleges become the center of the national talent system.

#### ACTION 2

##### Launch the Workforce Mobility Accelerator

Identify and scale the most effective workforce programs in the country.

#### EACH YEAR AACC WOULD:

- Select 10 high-impact workforce models
- Document their design
- Build replication toolkits
- Support colleges adopting them

#### IMPACT:

Moves the sector from innovation pockets to national scaling.



**STRATEGIC BET 3**

**AMPLIFY REGIONAL CIVIC & WORKFORCE ECOSYSTEM DEMONSTRATIONS**

AACC proves—and scales—the ecosystem model through regional demonstrations that integrate education, workforce development, and civic vitality. Demonstration replaces abstraction, creating replicable models that inform policy and practice nationwide.

**ACTION 1**  
Fund and Launch 6-8 National Ecosystem Demonstration Regions

Select regions where community colleges coordinate full civic and workforce ecosystems.

- PARTICIPANTS:**
- Colleges
  - Workforce boards
  - Employers
  - Local governments
  - Philanthropy

- FOCUS:**
- Integrated workforce pipelines
  - Adult learner re-entry
  - Regional economic resilience
  - Strengthen communities

**IMPACT:**  
Provides proof-of-concept for the ecosystem model described in the Compass.

**ACTION 2**  
Publish the National Ecosystem Playbook

Document lessons from demonstration regions and translate them into scalable models.

- OUTPUTS:**
- Ecosystem design framework
  - Partnership governance models
  - Regional funding strategies
  - Implementation roadmaps

**IMPACT:**  
Turns the ecosystem concept into replicable national infrastructure.



**STRATEGIC BET 4**

**REFRAME LEADERSHIP FORMATION FOR A RESILIENT DEMOCRACY**

AACC redesigns leadership formation so presidents and senior teams are prepared to lead complex institutions, steward civic responsibility, and navigate sustained disruption. This bet reframes leadership development as professional formation, not just skill acquisition.

**ACTION 1**  
Launch the Community College Leadership Formation Institute

AACC creates the premier leadership formation program for presidents, senior teams, and various leadership roles within the organization.

- FORMATION INCLUDES:**
- Democratic stewardship
  - Institutional transformation
  - Political navigation
  - Crisis leadership
  - Moral and civic responsibility

- STRUCTURE:**
- Cohort-based
  - Multi-year experience
  - Residential and virtual components

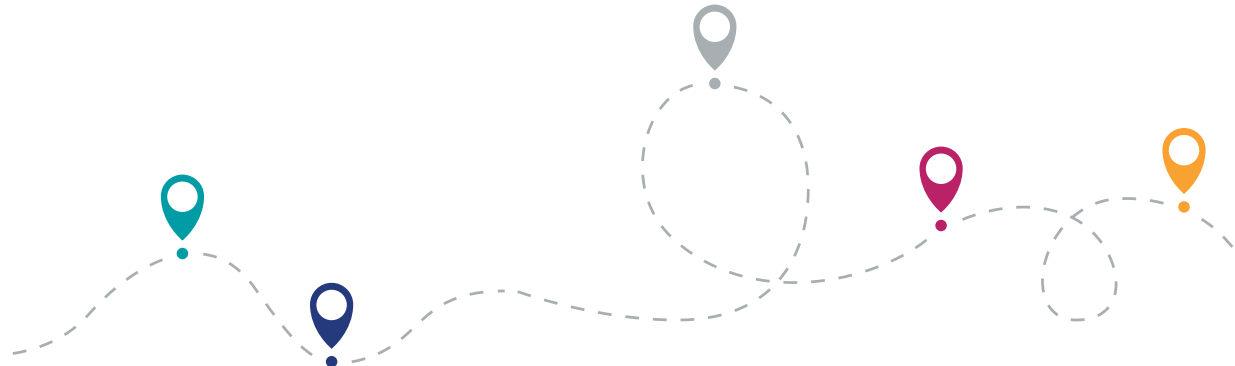
**IMPACT:**  
Builds the next generation of community college presidents and leadership teams.

**ACTION 2**  
Create the Presidential Strategy Network

Small peer networks of presidents working together on strategic challenges.

- FEATURES:**
- Facilitated strategy dialogues
  - Confidential problem-solving and rapid response
  - Cross-institution collaboration
  - Policy interpretation
  - Senior team development

**IMPACT:**  
Creates a national brain trust for presidential leadership.



**STRATEGIC BET 5**

**EMPOWER STUDENT AGENCY & LIFELONG LEARNING SYSTEMS**

All learners gain agency across a lifetime through flexible pathways, modern credentials, and co-designed learning ecosystems that adapt to changing economic and personal circumstances. This bet emphasizes the field’s focus on student success and student agency.

**ACTION 1**

**Convene the National Commission on Lifelong Learning Pathways**

Develop a new framework and design labs for lifelong learning in the community college system.

**FOCUS AREAS:**

- Stackable credentials
- Skills-based hiring
- Adult re-entry pathways
- Digital and hybrid learning ecosystems

**OUTPUTS:**

- National pathway framework
- Policy guidance
- Employer alignment

**IMPACT:**

Repositions community colleges as lifelong learning institutions.

**ACTION 2**

**Launch the Student Agency Innovation Network**

Support colleges experimenting with models that give learners greater control.

**EXAMPLES:**

- Flexible credential pathways
- Competency-based learning
- Student co-design of learning plans
- Digital learning portfolios
- Student advisory panels

**IMPACT:**

Positions the field to focus on both student success and student agency.

**STRATEGIC BET 6**

**SHOWCASE COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

Community colleges are recognized, supported, and resourced as essential civic institutions—strengthening democracy, belonging, and social cohesion. This bet elevates civic vitality as a core outcome alongside workforce and economic mobility.

**ACTION 1**

**Release the “Civic Impact of Community Colleges” National Report**

Document the civic role of community colleges.

**MEASURES COULD INCLUDE:**

- Civic participation
- Local leadership development
- Community problem-solving
- Democratic dialogue initiatives

**IMPACT:**

Reframes community colleges as pillars of democratic infrastructure.

**ACTION 2**

**Launch the Civic College Network**

Support institutions strengthening democracy and social cohesion.

**ACTIVITIES:**

- Civic leadership programs
- Community dialogue initiatives
- Democracy education
- Local policy partnerships

**IMPACT:**

Elevates the sector’s civic mission nationally.



## ENABLING COMMITMENTS

Strategic Bets shape the field. Enabling Commitments ensure AACC can deliver.

### Membership Experience & Value

AACC will deliver a membership experience that is responsive, personalized, and indispensable. Membership is not a service line—it is the association’s relational core and legitimacy engine.

AACC will:

- ▶ Provide role-based engagement pathways
- ▶ Deliver intelligent insights and advocacy
- ▶ Offer purposeful convenings
- ▶ Scale innovation across institutions
- ▶ Clearly demonstrate institutional return on investment

In a decade of disruption, membership must be transformational—not transactional.

### AACC as a Relevant and Contemporary Association

AACC will modernize its governance, digital systems, staffing model, and operating cadence to reflect the agility and data fluency required for the next decade.

### Financial Sustainability & Strategic Partnerships

AACC will diversify revenue, deepen philanthropic and employer partnerships, and align investment to strategic priorities.

## GOVERNANCE RHYTHM

The Compass is activated through a disciplined governance cadence:

- ▶ Annual Compass Review
- ▶ Quarterly Strategy Cycles
- ▶ Monthly Signal Board
- ▶ Strategic Portfolio Oversight
- ▶ Annual Budget Alignment

This rhythm ensures alignment, accountability, and adaptability.

## 10-YEAR STRATEGIC ARC & OPERATIONAL PLANS

### Phase 1 (2026–2029): Design & Demonstrate

Build foundational systems, launch pilots, and modernize AACC.

### Phase 2 (2029–2032): Adopt & Expand

Scale what works, align policy and partnerships, and deepen field capacity.

### Phase 3 (2032–2035): Embed & Transform

Institutionalize ecosystem models and prepare for the post-2035 horizon.

*Two-year operational plans translate each phase into executable priorities aligned to the six Strategic Bets.*

## CONCLUSION

The AACC Strategic Compass 2035 is a declaration of confidence in the power of community colleges—and a commitment to lead with clarity in a time of uncertainty.

Rooted in the promise of the Truman Commission, guided by Resilient by Design, and activated through Catalyst, Convener, and Community, the Compass charts a decade of transformation.

By 2035, community colleges will not merely respond to change.

They will anchor democracy, power mobility, and strengthen the communities they serve.

*This is our direction.*

*This is our discipline.*

*This is our decade to lead.*







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