

From Transactions to Transformations:

How AI is Redefining Student Engagement as an Institutional Strategy



Hosting Organizations

Community College Think Tank and Strategic Solutions (CCTSS)

CCTSS is a bold, future-focused catalyst for innovation in higher education leadership. Working directly with community college CEOs, CCTSS delivers cutting-edge, high-impact insights and strategies tailored to the complex realities of today's executive leadership. Through immersive Think Tanks, CCTSS facilitates deep, creative problem-solving and breakthrough solutions for the sector's most pressing challenges.



Element451 delivers AI products purpose-built for higher education. Bolt is the AI Agent Engine for higher education, deploying specialized agents across every stage of the student lifecycle to drive outcomes for institutions and students alike. Element is the AI-native CRM for higher education, connecting data, workflows, and AI agents across every team and every stage of the student journey. Element451 supports more than 350 institutions in powering over 60 million student journeys. This includes connecting academic, wellbeing, and engagement signals so advisors and support staff can identify students who need help earlier and act on it faster.

LIFT, Leadership Institute for Tomorrow

Housed at CSU Fullerton, the Leadership Institute for Tomorrow (LIFT) is a one-of-a-kind leadership development initiative advancing diverse higher education leaders through immersive institutes, mentoring, research, and custom-designed programs. At the forefront of technology and innovation, LIFT equips professionals at all levels to drive transformational change, advance student success, and strengthen institutions nationwide.



The American Association of Community Colleges

AACC is the primary advocacy organization for the nation's community colleges. The association represents more than 1,000 2-year, associate degree-granting institutions and nearly 12 million students. AACC strives to:

- Provide a national voice and advocacy for the community college mission.
- Serve as a national information resource.
- Create opportunities for peer networking and interaction at all levels, professional initiatives, dialogue, and community-building.
- Facilitate collaboration among AACC staff and stakeholders.
- Encourage a shared commitment to the community college movement.
- Offer leadership and career development opportunities.

Setting the Stage

Student engagement is no longer just a service function. It is a strategic differentiator. As AI reshapes communication and personalization, community colleges can move beyond transactional outreach to create authentic, data-informed relationships at scale. The central question facing college leaders today is not whether AI will redefine student engagement. It already has. The question is whether institutions will lead that transformation or have it happen to them.

On April 12, 2026, community college CEOs and senior executive leaders gathered at the AACC Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington for a CEO Think Tank sponsored by Element451 and hosted by CC Think Tank & Strategic Solutions and LIFT. Moderated by Dr. Ding-Jo Currie and Dr. Pam Walker, the session was designed around a structured divergent-ideation process challenging participants to generate bold ideas without limits or filters, then synthesize and converge on the most promising strategies for short-term implementation, long-term vision, and creative campus exploration.

Element451's leadership team including Brendan Henkel (Vice President of Solutions Engineering), Kelly Sinacola (Vice President of Customer Strategy & Technology), and Dr. JC Bonilla (Strategic Advisor) framed the landscape of agentic AI before the group turned its collective intelligence to the central question: How can community colleges move from transactional engagement to genuine, AI-enabled transformation?

“AI is already here. The question is whether you're ready.”

Element451, 2026⁴

350+

institutions served by
Element451 since 2018¹

80%

AI initiatives with no published
institutional AI policy²

86%

Students using AI daily vs. 14% of
instructors who feel confident
using it³

The Landscape: What CEOs NEED to Know

The 2026 Think Tank opened with a foundational briefing on the current state of AI in higher education. Element451's team drew a decisive distinction: the AI of 2023–24 were 'Talkers', reactive, single-task tools that waited for instructions. The AI of 2025–26 are 'Doers', proactive agents that maintain context, pursue complex objectives, and increasingly feel less like software and more like colleagues.

DID YOU KNOW? #1

Not setting an AI policy is still a decision. Without one, each office adopts its own version of the same kind of tool, and the institution ends up running five or six disconnected systems with no shared rules. 80% of institutions have AI initiatives underway, but only 1 in 5 has a published, formal AI policy². The gap isn't the technology. It's the space around it.

DID YOU KNOW? #2

86% of students already use AI in their studies, while 42% of instructors prohibit it outright⁴, often simply because no campus guidance exists yet. The distance between them isn't resistance. It's a sign that policy hasn't caught up to practice, and that's a gap leadership is positioned to close.

DID YOU KNOW? #3

71% of faculty say AI decisions at their institution happen with little input from the classroom⁵. What faculty are flagging holds true for the whole campus: a policy is carried by the people who use it, not the people who write it. The more of the campus that helps shape the policy, the more of the campus that adopts it, and adoption is what makes it succeed.

DID YOU KNOW? #4

49% of Gen Z say AI has already reduced the value of their degree⁶. 40% of employers plan to cut roles where AI can automate the work⁷, and 300 million jobs worldwide are exposed to AI disruption⁸. The advantage goes to colleges that align their programs, degrees, and certificates to the skills today's market actually rewards. That alignment is what keeps a credential worth earning.

Decide how AI fits your mission before the default decides for you.

Agentic AI systems that reason using a brain, adapt using context and goals, and act using skills are already operating in higher education. The portability breakthrough matters enormously for community colleges: unlike earlier proprietary platforms, today's AI skills are human-readable, vendor-neutral, and buildable without engineering resources. An institution that builds an AI skill today is not locked in tomorrow.

Against this backdrop, participants were asked to engage not as skeptics or enthusiasts, but as strategic leaders: if AI is already redefining how students experience your institution, what is the design decision you will make and what happens if you make no decision at all?

THEME 1 • EXPERIENCE: Frictionless by Design

Redesigning Structure, Systems, and Pathways Around Student Flow

The Think Tank's most energized early conversation centered on a provocative premise: community college structures, such as semesters, credit hours, departmental silos, and sequential enrollment processes were designed for institutional management, not student success. What if the default design principle were reversed?

Participants challenged the assumption that 'frictionless' means easy or superficial. The group drew a line between two kinds of friction. Negative friction shows up as bureaucratic barriers, disconnected systems, and repeated requests for the same information. Positive friction keeps students productively engaged through timely alerts, personalized course recommendations, human connection, and meaningful course design. The goal is not to remove all resistance from the student journey, but to remove the friction that discourages, delays, or disengages students while preserving the friction that develops creativity, engagement, and learning.

This led to a structural re-imagining that several groups pursued independently: replacing the architecture of semesters and credit hours with a competency-based model anchored in a living, portable learning record. Rather than asking 'How many credits has a student earned?' the institution would ask: 'What can this student demonstrate, and how do we build on that?'

Key Ideas Emerged

- **Competency-based frictionless framework:** Remove traditional structural legacies; semesters, credit hours, and rigid classroom boundaries, in favor of demonstrable competencies connected to a centralized, agency-integrated portal.
- **Full ecosystem integration:** Envision colleges fully integrated with regional community, state, federal, and city agencies creating a seamless pathway from education to employment and civic life.
- **Positive friction as a design principle:** Distinguish between friction that discourages (administrative barriers, disconnected systems) and friction that develops (early alerts, engagement prompts, personalized nudges). Design intentionally for the latter.
- **AI handles administration; humans handle development:** Target AI to absorb approximately 80% of routine administrative tasks, freeing faculty and advisors for the 20% that requires human connection, mentorship, coaching, and moral support.
- **Learning record as a lifelong asset:** Build a learning record that follows individuals across institutions, career stages, and life transitions analogous to a medical record that travels with the patient rather than residing in a single clinic.
- **Student-led course and policy co-design:** Allow students to edit their profiles, define engagement preferences, set guardrails, and co-design syllabi by shifting from prohibition of AI to ethical, student-led integration.



Imagine the institution operates like air: everywhere, essential, but unseen. How would it be structured?

What if students couldn't tell where the institution ends and their life begins?

Take every point of friction that exists today. What assumption creates each one, and how might you remove it?

What if the college itself is the biggest friction to student success, and only networks, AI, and experiences move them forward?

How might we design engagement where the student decides when, how, and why the college shows up in their life?



Big Idea!

The Frictionless College: Where Structure Serves Students, Not Institutions

The highest-energy idea from this theme was a fundamental inversion of how colleges are architected. Rather than asking students to navigate institutional structures, the frictionless college navigates on behalf of the student. AI absorbs routine administration. Competency replaces credit hours as the currency of learning. A living record follows the student for life. The human beings in the institution, staff, faculty, advisors, and coaches, are freed to do what no AI can replicate: build relationships, develop judgment, and guide transformation. This is not a technology upgrade. It is a governance and design revolution.

THE RISK	THE MITIGATION
Traditional semesters and credit hours block flexible, accelerated, or non-linear pathways	Pilot competency-based credentialing in 2-3 programs; compare outcomes to traditional tracks
Disconnected systems create repeated friction for students, especially first-generation learners	Map the student journey as experienced, not designed; cut the top three friction points in 90 days
AI integration without institutional design defaults to inconsistent, ungoverned use	Form an AI Integration Task Force of faculty, IT, student services, and students to co-design the framework.
Removing all friction risks removing developmental challenge from the educational experience	Define positive friction explicitly; build early-alert systems that prompt human interaction, not replace it.
Faculty role ambiguity in an AI-augmented model can generate resistance or disengagement	Engage faculty as architects of the 20% human-touch model; name them mentors, coaches, and experience designers.

FIRST MOVE: DO THIS IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS

Map your institution's student journey from inquiry to completion not as currently designed, but as experienced by a first-generation student with no family history in higher education. Identify the three interactions with highest friction and name the system, process, or governance structure that creates each one. That is your frictionless redesign roadmap.

THEME 2 • THE AI NAVIGATOR: Lifelong Growth

Using AI to Guide Whole–Person Growth Across an Entire Lifetime

No idea generated more sustained discussion or more votes than what participants called the 'AI Life Navigator': a personal, AI-driven companion assigned to an individual as early as age six that guides educational choices, career transitions, and personal growth milestones through an entire life. This was not described as a chatbot or a scheduling tool. It was envisioned as a relationship, an intelligent, context-rich system that knows the individual's history, learning style, strengths, and aspirations, and uses that knowledge not to provide answers, but to facilitate human connections.

The navigator concept emerged from a shared frustration with the narrowness of career readiness as the organizing frame for community college education. Participants pushed toward a larger question: What if the goal were not just employment, but self-actualization, the development of the whole person? What role could AI play in helping institutions pursue that goal at scale without losing the human touch that makes it meaningful?

The Dream Team's 'Living Engaging Companion' model drew a compelling analogy: AI that functions like a sophisticated recommendation engine, not just suggesting what a student has already shown interest in but intentionally broadening their world. Rather than reinforcing existing patterns, the navigator would introduce students to peers with similar interests, mentors in adjacent fields, and experiences they would not have sought on their own. The goal is not personalization for efficiency. It is personalization for growth.

Key Ideas Emerged

- **AI Life Navigator from age 6 through career:** A personal AI companion that coordinates educational, career, and personal growth milestones across an individual's entire life, staying with the person across institutions and employers.
- **Faculty as coach, not content deliverer:** Reframe the faculty role as coach, mentor, employer connector, and life guide, with AI handling content delivery and administrative load so the human relationship becomes the value proposition.
- **Whole person development as the organizing goal:** Move beyond career readiness to a framework that includes wellbeing, civic engagement, ethical reasoning, creativity, and self-actualization as measurable dimensions of student development.
- **Lifelong learning record portable across institutions:** A single, student-controlled learning record that travels across institutions, employers, and career stages, giving every institution a full picture of the individual.
- **AI facilitates human connection:** Rather than replacing human interaction, the navigator identifies peers with shared interests, potential mentors, career connections, and community opportunities using AI to expand the student's relational world.
- **Human-centered AI the counter to dehumanization:** The central design commitment is that AI should make education more human, not less. Technology handles complexity; humans handle meaning.



What if every student had an AI twin that spots where they need help before they ask?

What if your college became a lifelong partner, moving with a person from before 18 to after 60?

How might engagement follow a person's growth and changing goals, rather than starting and stopping with each course or degree?

What if AI caught the early alert, and a human always followed-up to build a relationship?

What if the college helped each student explore many future selves, then guided them toward one?



Big Idea!

#1 Voted Idea: The AI Life Navigator, A Companion for the Whole Journey

The concept that received the most votes across all groups was the AI Life Navigator, an intelligent companion that begins with a child and never fully departs. Participants envisioned a future where no student ever has to navigate institutional systems alone, where no advisor ever loses track of a student between semesters, and where the institution's knowledge of an individual is not reset every time they transfer, stop out, or re-enroll. The navigator holds the thread. The humans in the institution hold the relationship. Together, they hold the student.

THE RISK	THE MITIGATION
Lifelong data collection raises profound privacy and consent concerns	Design navigator with full student data ownership and control; consent is layered, revisable, and portable across institutions
First-generation students may have less capacity to engage with AI systems, deepening inequity	Co-design navigator engagement with equity as the default; assume variable agency and build multiple on-ramps for students with different levels of digital access and literacy
Faculty resistance to role redefinition can undermine the human-touch model	Engage faculty as co-architects; define the 20% human role explicitly, fund it, and measure its impact on student outcomes
AI recommendations may reinforce existing patterns rather than broaden student horizons	Build algorithmic diversity into the navigator; audit recommendations for expansion vs. reinforcement bias annually
Whole person development lacks clear metrics, making institutional accountability difficult	Develop a whole-person outcomes dashboard alongside career placement data; include wellbeing, civic engagement, and self-reported growth measures

FIRST MOVE: DO THIS IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS

Identify three students who stopped out in the past year. Map every touchpoint the institution had with each in their final 60 days, including the ones it missed. That gap is the navigator's first job, and what an AI early-alert and connection system would have done differently is your design brief.

THEME 3 · EQUITY, AGENCY, & TRUST: Ethical Architecture of AI Engagement

Designing AI Engagement With Equity as the First Filter

The Think Tank's most philosophically substantive thread was also its most practically urgent. Participants recognized from the outset that the same AI capabilities that make personalized student engagement possible also carry the risk of encoding and scaling the biases, inequities, and assumptions that community colleges exist to dismantle. Designing AI-driven engagement without equity as the primary filter is not neutral, it is a choice to replicate the past.

The group surfaced a critical tension: assumptions of equal student agency can themselves be instruments of inequity. A first-generation student who has never been told that higher education is for them brings different needs, different fears, and different navigation capacity to an AI-enabled institution than a continuing-generation student with a robust family support network. A navigator designed for the latter will fail the former, unless equity is designed in from the start, not added as an afterthought.

Participants also challenged the binary of 'prohibit AI' vs. 'allow AI' in classroom policy arguing that neither posture is adequate. The question is not whether students use AI, but who gets to shape how AI is used, and whose values govern its application. Student-led, faculty-guided, and institutionally anchored co-design of AI use was offered as the model most likely to produce both ethical outcomes and durable adoption.

Transparency emerged as the operational definition of trust. An institution that publishes how its AI works, audits its tools for differential impact, and empowers students to understand and challenge data-driven decisions about their futures is an institution students will choose. In a marketplace where AI makes deception easier, the college that makes integrity its differentiator becomes the institution of choice.

Key Ideas Emerged

- **Equity-by-design, not equity as an afterthought:** Every AI tool touching student outcomes must be evaluated for differential impact across race, income, first-generation status, and disability before and after deployment.
- **Do not assume equal agency:** Design AI engagement systems that recognize and accommodate variable levels of student agency, digital literacy, and institutional navigation capacity, especially for first-generation and historically underserved students.
- **Student data ownership and transparency:** Students should understand how their data is used, be able to challenge algorithmic decisions that affect them, and experience data collection as empowering rather than extractive or surveilling.
- **AI classroom policy as co-design, not prohibition:** Move from blanket prohibition or blanket permission to faculty-student co-designed AI use guidelines that are course-specific, transparent, and grounded in learning outcomes.
- **Transparency as competitive advantage:** Institutions that publish AI governance policies, conduct bias audits, and create public accountability dashboards will differentiate themselves as the colleges students, families, and employers trust most.
- **Start early to avoid forced assimilation:** Engaging individuals in college-going culture from early childhood, rather than waiting until enrollment, builds agency and familiarity that reduces the equity gap at the point of entry.



What if students designed the engagement systems meant to support them, moving from recipients to architects?

If we removed top-down control over how AI is used, how would we keep coherence, quality, and trust?

How might we earn students' trust around data and privacy, so collection feels empowering rather than extractive?

Who else shares the design table with students: faculty, employers, retired professionals? And whose values govern how AI is used?

What would it mean for your institution to be known for graduates of deeply grounded character and integrity, not just credentials?



Big Idea!

Integrity as Institutional Strategy: The College Students Trust Most Wins

Participants converged on a powerful reframe: in an environment where AI makes it trivially easy to manipulate, deceive, and exploit, the institution that makes integrity its north star will differentiate itself powerfully. The community college that publishes its AI governance policies, audits its tools for differential impact, empowers students with data transparency, and develops faculty as trusted guides through the AI era does not just avoid risk, it becomes the institution of choice. This is not idealism. It is a strategic positioning argument for the decade ahead.

THE RISK	THE MITIGATION
AI systems may encode and scale historical bias, particularly affecting historically underserved student populations	Require bias audits before any student-facing AI deployment; mandate disaggregated outcome reporting by race, income, and first-generation status
Assuming equal student agency in AI-enabled systems can deepen existing inequities	Design variable on-ramps for AI engagement; train advisors to recognize when a student needs more human support, not less
Classroom AI prohibition drives use underground without building ethical literacy	Implement faculty-student co-designed AI use frameworks; treat AI policy as a learning outcome, not a compliance exercise
No published AI governance policy leaves institutions legally and reputationally exposed	Draft and publish an AI governance policy within 90 days. Even an imperfect published draft is governance.
Student data practices that feel extractive rather than empowering erode trust	Establish a student data transparency protocol; communicate clearly how institutional data is used, protected, and controlled by the student

FIRST MOVE: DO THIS IN THE NEXT 30 DAYS

Commission a Shadow AI Audit: identify every AI tool currently in use at your institution; sanctioned and unsanctioned. You cannot govern what you have not mapped. Then convene a one-hour conversation with three faculty members and three students to ask: 'When does AI feel like it is working for you, and when does it feel like it is working on you?' The answers will tell you where to start.

Next Steps: From Ideas to Action

The Seattle Think Tank generated bold, interconnected ideas across three themes. These themes are not independent, they compound each other. An institution that redesigns for frictionless student flow without addressing equity will replicate the inequities of the system it is replacing. A navigator that lacks a data governance and transparency framework will erode the trust it was designed to build. An AI engagement strategy that excludes faculty co-design will generate the resistance that undermines it.

Participants identified the following priority actions to carry momentum from ideas to institutional change:

1. Map your Student Journey as Experienced, not as Designed

- a. Find the three moments of highest friction in the first 60 days of enrollment for a first-generation student. Name the system, process, or governance structure that creates each one. That is your frictionless redesign roadmap.

2. Conduct a Navigator Readiness Assessment

- a. Identify the data assets your institution has about each student and the gaps. What would an AI navigator need to know to genuinely support a student's whole-person development? Build the data architecture before the AI tool.

3. Commission a Shadow AI Audit

- a. Map every AI tool in use at your institution, sanctioned and unsanctioned. You cannot govern what you have not mapped. Use the audit to launch your AI governance policy development within 90 days.

4. Establish an Equity-by-Design Review for every Student-Facing AI Tool

- a. Require disaggregated outcome reporting by race, income, and first-generation status before and after any AI deployment. Make differential impact reporting a standing agenda item for your executive cabinet.

5. Pilot One Frictionless Pathway

- a. Select one high-demand workforce program and design it from the ground up with the frictionless framework: competency-based progression, AI-supported administration, faculty as coaches, and a student-controlled learning record. Measure and publish the outcomes.

6. Schedule a Futures Literacy Cabinet Session

- a. One question: In 24 months, what will agentic AI do to three functions at our institution; advising, enrollment, and one academic department? Build the habit of asking before disruption arrives.

"The future of community college education is not something that happens to students. It is something student-centered institutions build, intentionally, equitably, and together."

CC Think Tank | Element451 | LIFT | AACC

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Thank You

To sponsor or participate in future CEO Think Tanks, please contact Dr. Ding-Jo Currie at dingjo@ccthinktank.org

We want to thank and recognize these organizations for their support, partnership, and belief in professional development for community college leaders.



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