AI IS CHANGING THE CLASSROOM...
IT CAN ALSO IMPROVE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.

From the Office of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness
Cuyahoga Community College

The overlooked AI opportunity is not another tool, but a more coherent student experience.

AI is already changing the classroom. Faculty are rethinking assignments, academic integrity policies, writing expectations, assessment practices, and the role of AI in helping students study, draft, code, summarize, translate, and test ideas. If colleges fail to help students use AI ethically and intelligently, they risk weakening learning at the same time employers are beginning to expect graduates to have practical AI fluency.

But the classroom is not the only place where AI raises important questions for community colleges. Students also experience the college through advising, registration, financial aid, tutoring, scheduling, career planning, placement, communication, and the many handoffs that determine whether they can move from interest to enrollment, from enrollment to momentum, and from momentum to completion. If AI is changing how students learn, it should also push colleges to ask how students are supported.

That is the larger and less discussed opportunity. Much of the AI conversation in higher education has focused on cheating, writing, classroom policy, assessment, and workforce preparation. Those are important topics. But they do not exhaust the significance of AI for colleges. The student experience is shaped not only by what happens in courses, but also by how well the institution works around the student. AI can become another set of disconnected projects, or it can become a reason to redesign that experience.

Community colleges are under pressure to respond quickly, and much of that pressure is reasonable. Students are already using AI tools in coursework, job searches, writing, coding, translation, research, and everyday problem-solving. Employers are beginning to treat AI literacy as part of basic career readiness. Faculty are trying to decide what kinds of AI use support learning and what kinds weaken it. Staff are wondering whether AI can help them answer routine questions, extend service hours, summarize information, or reduce the administrative burden that too often consumes time better spent with students.

The danger is that colleges will respond to this pressure by creating more projects than strategy. One office pilots a chatbot. Another experiments with an advising assistant. A few faculty redesign assignments. A workforce program adds an AI module. A committee drafts academic-integrity language. Each effort may be useful on its own, but together they can leave the institution's deeper design untouched. The student still moves through disconnected offices. The handoffs remain unclear. The same confusing forms, deadlines, holds, course

sequences, and service boundaries remain in place. The college appears to be adopting AI, while the student experience remains fragmented.

That distinction matters. AI will not create much value for community colleges if it is simply added to old processes. Its larger promise lies in forcing a more basic question: how should the college's work be redesigned so that students receive clearer guidance, faster response, better feedback, and more coherent support from entry through completion and into work?

This is where the AI conversation becomes a student success conversation. Students do not experience institutional strategy as a technology roadmap. They experience it as a series of moments in which the college either becomes easier to navigate or harder to understand. A student trying to register after a long shift does not care whether the college has an AI strategy. The student cares whether the system explains what is missing, whether the answer is accurate, whether the next step is clear, and whether someone with authority can resolve the issue before the student loses momentum. A student struggling in week three of a course does not benefit from a late alert in week seven if the available response cannot change what happens next. A student choosing a program does not need a generic list of options as much as a clear connection among interests, costs, schedules, transfer possibilities, credentials, and the kinds of work those choices make possible.

AI can help with some of this, but only if the college redesigns the work around the student. Otherwise, AI becomes another layer placed on top of institutional complexity. It may answer questions faster without making the underlying process clearer. It may generate more information without creating responsibility for action. It may make individual tasks more efficient while leaving the student to coordinate the institution on their own.

Students experience the college beyond the classroom

Community colleges often describe themselves through programs, departments, divisions, campuses, services, and initiatives. Students, however, experience college as a set of questions. They experience whether the college works.

Does the college website contain sufficient information? Does a college email give explicit directions? Do advising, financial aid, registration, and academic departments seem to be working from the same understanding? Does a course make expectations visible early enough to adjust? Is career information connected to program choice or is it left for later. Does the college notice confusion while there is still time to prevent withdrawal, nonpayment, failure, or stop-out?

This is why AI should be understood as part of the operating model of student success. It can help students find information, summarize requirements, compare options, practice skills, receive feedback, and prepare for jobs. It can also help faculty and staff identify patterns, reduce repetitive work, and respond with better information. Yet none of those benefits

happen automatically. AI has to be connected to decisions, authority, workflow, and human judgment.

A student support chatbot, for example, may answer hundreds of questions accurately. That is helpful, but the deeper design question is what happens when the student's question reveals a problem that requires institutional action. If the student asks why a hold is blocking registration, does the system merely explain holds in general, or does it identify the specific issue, connect the student to the right resolution path, and alert the responsible office if the deadline is near? If the student says they are thinking about dropping a course, does the interaction simply provide the withdrawal deadline, or does it connect the student to tutoring, advising, financial aid implications, and a realistic recovery plan before withdrawal becomes the default option?

AI can make a weak process faster, but speed alone is not the same as coherence.

The student success value of AI depends on what the institution designs around it. AI can make a weak process faster, but speed alone is not the same as coherence. If the process is confusing, fragmented, or disconnected from authority, AI may simply help students move through confusion more quickly.

AI projects are not the same as student-experience redesign

The early stage of AI adoption in higher education has understandably been uneven. Colleges are experimenting with tutoring tools, writing supports, advising chatbots, predictive models, classroom policies, faculty workshops, and administrative assistants. Some of these efforts are thoughtful and promising. Some are cautious because the risks are real. Privacy, academic integrity, bias, accuracy, accessibility, and the preservation of human judgment all deserve serious attention.

The problem is not experimentation itself. Colleges need controlled pilots, faculty-led inquiry, technology testing, and practical learning from real use cases. The problem arises when experimentation substitutes for institutional design. A college can have many AI pilots and still lack a coherent answer to how AI will improve the student experience, strengthen learning, increase timely support, or prepare students for work. Without that answer, AI activity can become a new version of an old pattern in higher education: many localized improvements that do not add up to institutional change.

This is especially important for community colleges because students often encounter the institution through a chain of tightly connected steps. Application, placement, financial aid, advising, registration, payment, course attendance, academic support, career planning, transfer preparation, and credential completion are not separate experiences from the student's point of view. They are one experience. A breakdown in any one part can slow momentum everywhere else.

A student who cannot understand a financial aid requirement may delay registration. A student who registers late may get a less workable schedule. A poor schedule may reduce attendance. Lower attendance may weaken course performance. Weak course performance may trigger an alert after the student has already fallen behind. By the time the institution sees the problem clearly, the student may already have concluded that college is not possible right now.

An AI project aimed at one step in that chain may help, but it will not solve the larger problem if the chain itself remains poorly designed. A chatbot that explains financial aid requirements is useful. It is more useful if the requirements are written clearly, the data are current, the student's actual status is visible, the next action is unambiguous, and the person or office responsible for resolution can act before the student misses a deadline. The technology matters, but the surrounding process determines whether the student is actually helped.

AI readiness is now part of student success

The technology matters, but the surrounding process determines whether the student is actually helped.

The student success implications extend beyond advising and support. AI is also changing what it means to prepare students for work. Recent reporting on higher education and the AI workforce describes a widening gap between employer expectations and institutional response. AI literacy is becoming a baseline employment expectation, while many institutions remain more focused on policing AI use than helping students learn how to use it ethically and productively.

For community colleges, this is not a peripheral issue. It goes directly to mission. Community colleges serve students who often choose programs because they want a better job, a more stable income, a pathway into a profession, or a credential that allows them to support themselves and their families. If AI is changing how work is organized, how entry-level employees are evaluated, and how routine tasks are performed, then AI literacy becomes part of economic mobility.

This does not mean every student needs to become a programmer, data scientist, or machine-learning specialist. The more practical question is what students in different fields need to understand and demonstrate. A nursing student may need to understand how AI affects documentation, patient communication, scheduling, clinical decision support, and ethical judgment. A business student may need to use AI to analyze market information, draft communications, test assumptions, and evaluate outputs for accuracy. A student in advanced manufacturing may need to understand how automation, diagnostics, predictive maintenance, and human-machine interaction affect the shop floor. A liberal arts student may need to use AI as a research and writing partner while preserving evidence, interpretation, voice, and judgment.

The common thread is not technical mastery. It is disciplined use. Students need to know how to ask better questions, judge the quality of an answer, recognize when a tool is inventing or

oversimplifying, protect private information, cite and disclose appropriately, and use AI to extend their thinking rather than avoid it. Those habits are closely related to the durable skills community colleges already value: communication, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, ethical judgment, and problem-solving.

This is why AI readiness cannot be treated as an isolated module added to a few programs. It has to be connected to learning outcomes, program design, employer engagement, general education, career services, and faculty development. Otherwise, students will receive uneven preparation based largely on which instructors they happen to encounter.

The common thread is not technical mastery. It is disciplined use.

The operating model is where student experience lives

The most useful insight from the business world is that AI value depends less on adopting tools than on redesigning the way work happens. In one widely discussed example, an employment-verification process that once required many human touchpoints was redesigned into one integrated interaction through an AI-enabled system. The lesson is not that every process should be automated. The lesson is that AI created value because the process was redesigned end to end.

Community colleges have many equivalent processes, even if they are less visible. A student may need to interact with admissions, financial aid, advising, registration, academic departments, tutoring, disability services, career services, and the bursar before a single term is successfully underway. Each office may be working hard. Each may be following its own rules. Each may be using its own system or workflow. But the student experiences the combined effect.

If AI is introduced into that environment without redesign, it may improve isolated tasks while preserving the burden placed on the student. The student still has to know which office owns which problem. The student still has to interpret institutional language. The student still has to move information from one place to another. The student still has to figure out whether a requirement is academic, financial, technical, or procedural. In that case, AI may make the college more responsive at the surface while leaving the underlying design unchanged.

A better approach would begin with the student journey and ask where AI could support a redesigned flow of work. Where do students get stuck? Where do they receive too much information and too little direction? Where do offices depend on handoffs that are slow or unclear? Where does the college detect problems too late? Where does a staff member see a problem but lack the authority or information to resolve it? Where do faculty see early signs of academic struggle but lack a simple way to connect those signs to timely support? Where do students make program choices without enough connection to cost, schedule, transfer, employment, and long-term goals?

These are operating-model questions. AI can help answer them, but only if the college is willing to redesign the work itself.

Mission first, technology second

A community college AI strategy should not begin with products. It should begin with mission. AI is already present in classrooms, advising centers, and students' lives, but students are experiencing it unevenly. In one course it may be encouraged, in another it may be treated as misconduct, and in support services it may not yet be used where it could extend timely help.

That unevenness is more than a policy problem. It is a student equity problem. Students who already have confidence with technology, access to better tools, and informal guidance from family, peers, or employers will learn how to use AI more quickly. Students without those advantages may be left with uncertainty, fear of violating rules, or shallow use that does not build judgment. For institutions built around access and economic mobility, that is a serious concern.

A community college AI strategy should not begin with products. It should begin with mission.

A mission-first AI strategy would ask how the college wants AI to advance learning, completion, transfer, employment, and community impact. It would also ask how to preserve trust. Students need to know when AI is being used, what it can and cannot do, how their data are protected, when a human being is involved, and how to challenge or correct an answer. Faculty and staff need guidance that is clear enough to support consistent practice, while still respecting professional judgment and disciplinary differences.

This requires cross-functional leadership. AI touches academic affairs, student services, workforce programs, continuing education, institutional research, information technology, legal compliance, human resources, finance, and communications. A college does not necessarily need to centralize all AI decisions in one office, but it does need a structure that connects the work. Without that structure, AI adoption will follow the existing shape of the institution, which often means separate projects, uneven practices, and unclear accountability.

What leaders should see differently

The practical implication for community college leaders is not that every process should be automated or that every student interaction should be mediated by AI. The implication is that AI gives colleges a new reason to examine how the student experience actually works.

A college does not need to begin by asking which AI products to buy. It can begin by asking where students lose momentum because the institution is hard to navigate. Where do students receive information but not direction? Where do they encounter a policy but not a clear next step? Where do they wait for a response while a deadline approaches? Where do faculty or staff see a problem but lack the authority, time, or information to act? Where does

the college know something important about a student's risk, intent, progress, or confusion but fail to convert that knowledge into timely support?

This is where AI strategy becomes institutional design. Leaders do not have to know every technical detail to ask better questions about purpose, workflow, ownership, and evidence. They do have to resist the temptation to treat AI adoption as proof of transformation. The more important question is whether AI helps the college reduce friction, clarify responsibility, shorten feedback loops, and make the next right step more visible to students.

That is a different kind of leadership challenge. It requires attention to technology, but also to process, culture, governance, staffing, data, policy, and trust. It asks leaders to look not only at what AI can do, but at what the college must redesign to properly utilize it.

The test is whether the college becomes easier to navigate

A useful test for community college AI strategy is whether students experience the institution as more coherent because of AI. Do students receive clearer answers? Do they understand their next steps? Are they better able to plan around work, family, money, time, and academic expectations? Are faculty and staff better able to respond early? Are program choices more clearly connected to employment and transfer outcomes? Are routine administrative burdens reduced so human attention can move toward judgment, encouragement, teaching, and problem-solving?

AI should not be judged by the number of pilots launched, the number of tools licensed, or the number of committees formed. Those may be necessary early activities, but they are not the measure of institutional value. The more important measure is whether AI helps the college become easier to navigate, faster to respond, more transparent in its expectations, and more effective in helping students build the capabilities they came to college to gain.

For community colleges, that is the real promise of AI. It is not that machines will replace the human work of education. It is that AI may force colleges to see the student experience more clearly. Too much of that experience has depended on students finding their own way through institutional complexity, carrying information across offices, interpreting unclear requirements, and knowing when to ask for help before the college knows they need it.

Used well, AI can help colleges redesign that experience so that information, guidance, learning, and support are more connected. It can help make the institution more legible to students and more responsive to the moments when momentum is gained or lost.

Used poorly, it will become another disconnected layer in an already complicated system. That is the choice before community colleges. The future will not be shaped by whether a college has AI projects. It will be shaped by whether the institution uses AI as an opportunity to redesign the college experience for students.

Sources

The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2026). *Preparing students for the AI workforce: What employers want colleges to know, and what students need to succeed.* https://scholars.unh.edu/reference/18/

The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2025). *Will AI reshape the value proposition of higher ed?* https://www.chronicle.com/article/will-ai-reshape-the-value-proposition-of-higher-ed

Siddiqi, M. (2026, May 4). Strategy before technology. *Community College Daily* https://www.ccdaily.com/2026/05/strategy-before-technology/

The Wall Street Journal. (2026). *IBM CEO says AI triggers need for new operating models.* https://www.wsj.com/articles/ibm-ceo-ai-operating-models