

# COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE CONNECTIONS

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

### The Clock Is Ticking: Deepening the Bench for Tomorrow's Community College Leaders

*By Richard G. Rhoda, Director, ETSU Center for Community College Leadership*



*Dr. Richard G. Rhoda, Director, ETSU  
Center for Community College  
Leadership*

I spent more than 40 years in Tennessee higher education, a good portion of it watching the leadership pipeline from the vantage point of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. I can tell you plainly that the challenge of preparing the next generation of community college leaders is not on its way. It is already here.

Most of us in this field have watched the retirement wave building for years. Back in 2015, scholars were already noting that a large share of sitting community college presidents planned to leave within a few years (McNair, 2015). That wave has not crested. If anything, the disruptions of the pandemic, the pressures of enrollment shifts, and the sheer complexity of running a modern community college have moved the timeline up. Presidents, vice presidents, deans, and directors are leaving at a pace that institutions cannot absorb casually.

I had a firsthand look at that reality during my recent service as interim vice president of academic affairs at Volunteer State Community College. Walking back into an active leadership role reminded me how much is asked of the people who hold these positions, and how thin the margin for error becomes when an institution operates without experienced leadership in place.

The question is not whether community colleges will face leadership vacancies. They will. The question is whether we have done the work to fill those vacancies with people who are ready.

### **A Changing Leadership Landscape**

The context in which community college leaders work has shifted a great deal over the past decade, and it will keep shifting. The job now calls for comfort with data-driven decision-making, the ability to manage workforce development and transfer pathways at the same time, genuine fluency in access-minded practice, and the political skill to build coalitions across faculty, staff, governing boards, and community stakeholders. As Eddy and Boggs (2023) have observed, community college leadership today demands a multidimensional approach to leading change, one that reaches well beyond the administrative competencies that may have been enough in an earlier era.

These demands will only intensify. Community colleges are increasingly the hinge institutions of American higher education, connecting people to credentials, careers, and the chance at a better life. They will be expected to lead on workforce retraining as automation reshapes regional economies. They will be asked to serve more first-generation students, more adult learners, and more students navigating real economic hardship. The leaders who guide these institutions will need to be adaptive, culturally aware, and deeply committed to the mission, not simply competent administrators. That is a tall order, and it does not produce itself.

### **Deepening the Bench**

The phrase “deepening the bench” comes from coaching, and it fits here. You cannot win a season, let alone a decade, if your only strength is in the starting lineup. The institutions that are thriving five and ten years from now will be the ones that cultivated leaders at every level long before a vacancy appeared.

This is not a new argument. Eddy (2023) has traced the importance of leadership development across the history of community colleges, and the research literature consistently points to the need for structured, intentional preparation rather than hoping talented people will figure it out on their own. Forthun and Freeman (2017) documented the range of preparation approaches, from graduate degree programs to nondegree professional development, and the evidence is clear that both formal preparation and ongoing development matter. Good intentions alone do not fill a pipeline.

At the ETSU Center for Community College Leadership, this is the heart of what we do. Our graduate certificate was designed from the start for people who are already inside community colleges, the faculty members and mid-level administrators who have the talent and the interest but may not have had a clear pathway to leadership preparation. We built the program around the AACC core leadership competencies because those competencies represent the field's own articulation of what effective leadership requires (Smith, Fox, and Harbour, 2020). We are not guessing about what tomorrow's leaders need to know. The field has told us.

Formal programs are only part of the answer. As Artis and Bartel (2021) found in their study of Illinois community college presidents, ongoing professional development matters throughout a leadership career, not just at the entry point. The bench deepens when institutions invest in mentoring, when experienced leaders make room for emerging leaders to stretch, and when the culture treats leadership development as a standing priority rather than a one-time event.

## What I Am Watching

A few things keep me up at night, and a few give me real hope. On the challenging side, I am watching the demographics of community college leadership and noticing that the pipeline is not yet as diverse as the students these institutions serve. The research on Latina leaders (Elenes, 2020) and women of color (Keeton, Currie, and Pizano, 2021) makes clear that intentional effort is required to reach and support the full range of talented people who are ready to lead. The field cannot afford to develop only the candidates who resemble the leaders who came before.

I am also watching whether institutions will invest in their own people. Grow-your-own leadership development, building pathways for current employees to rise into leadership roles, holds real promise (Snyder, 2015). It takes sustained commitment and resources, but the payoff is leaders who know their institutions and communities deeply. On the hopeful side, I see more intentionality in the field than I did ten years ago. Institutions are taking succession planning seriously. Programs like ours are producing graduates who are moving into consequential roles. The research base is growing.

## A Personal Note

My career took me from a graduate student on the Tennessee Board of Regents staff in 1973 through the chancellorship, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, interim presidencies, and now back to a campus in a role I never expected. What I have learned is that leadership is not a destination. It is a practice, and it asks for preparation, mentoring, reflection, and honest feedback at every stage.

The work of this Center matters because the stakes are high. Community colleges serve the students who have the most to gain and, often, the fewest options if we fail them. Those students deserve institutions led by people who have been prepared to lead well. We have work to do. Let's get on with it.

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PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

## EdWorks Builds Regional Pathways for Credentials of Value



*Dr. Paul Garton, Assistant Professor,  
Educational Leadership and Policy  
Analysis, ETSU*

EdWorks, a P20 collaborative based in Northeast Tennessee, brings educators, scholars, school districts, postsecondary institutions, business leaders, and community partners together around a shared goal: helping students move more smoothly from one level of education to the next and into meaningful careers. Connected to East Tennessee State University's broader education and workforce development work, EdWorks focuses on strengthening pathways from preschool through postsecondary education and into the workforce, serving nine Northeast Tennessee counties: Carter, Greene, Hamblen, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington.

A central focus of its current work is the idea of credentials of value. These are non-degree credentials, often earned before high school graduation, that help students demonstrate industry-relevant skills and enter postsecondary education or the workforce with stronger preparation. The effort connects closely with Tennessee's Future Ready initiative, organized around four pillars: Credentials of Value, Seamless Transitions, Individualized Advising, and Work-Based Learning.

Through this partnership, EdWorks is helping regional partners think carefully about what makes a credential truly valuable. The answer is not always simple. Some definitions emphasize labor market demand, wages, cost, and employment outcomes, and those measures matter, especially for students and families weighing decisions about time, tuition, and future earnings. But EdWorks also recognizes that value cannot be reduced to wages alone. Some occupations that are essential to communities, including human services and childcare, may not be highly compensated even though they are deeply needed. That reality raises real questions about how education leaders, policymakers, and the public interpret rankings and data sources such as U.S. News & World Report, College Scorecard, student debt measures, unemployment rates, and average earnings.

EdWorks asks a more nuanced question: valuable for whom, and valuable in what context? A credential may be valuable because it leads to higher wages, but it may also be valuable because it meets a regional workforce need, supports entrepreneurship, fills a critical community role, or helps a student take the next step toward a postsecondary credential. That regional lens matters in East Tennessee, where workforce needs, rural access, local industries, and community well-being all have to be weighed together.

As part of this work, EdWorks has been developing a toolkit to help districts, postsecondary partners, and regional leaders evaluate credentials of value more thoughtfully. The project gives particular attention to member districts and to high school personal finance courses as spaces where students can come to understand the cost, return, purpose, and long-term implications of credential pathways.

*“The goal is not simply to count credentials, but to understand whether those credentials create real opportunity for students, families, employers, and communities. In Northeast Tennessee, that means looking at wages and workforce demand, but it also means asking how credentials support regional vitality, student mobility, and meaningful work.”*

**— Dr. Paul Garton, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, ETSU**

Through this work, EdWorks is helping East Tennessee move beyond a narrow view of education-to-career pathways and toward a more practical, regional, and student-centered understanding of opportunity.

#### PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

## EdWorks Credit Mobility Project Strengthens Transfer Pathways in Northeast Tennessee

EdWorks of Northeast Tennessee has concluded an important regional project focused on one of the most practical challenges students face: making sure the credits they have already earned continue to count as they move among schools, colleges, training programs, and universities.

The project, supported through a Holistic Credit Mobility grant led by Ithaka S+R and Complete College America with funding from Ascendium, brought EdWorks into a national learning cohort focused on improving how institutions recognize student learning across settings. Through this work, EdWorks examined transfer credits, articulation agreements, dual enrollment, military credits, credit for prior learning, work experience, apprenticeships, certificates, and other forms of validated learning.

Participating postsecondary institutions included East Tennessee State University, King University, Milligan University, Tusculum University, Northeast State Community College, Walters State Community College, TCAT Elizabethton, and TCAT Morristown. Together, they represent a strong cross-sector partnership among public universities, private universities, community colleges, and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology across the region.

A major outcome was the EdWorks Guiding Principles for Holistic Credit Mobility, a shared set of recommendations intended to help member institutions strengthen transfer and articulation practices. The principles were developed through listening sessions with college leaders and advisors, interviews with transfer students, and regional conversations about what students need most when navigating multiple institutions. They were revised and approved by EdWorks members, giving the region a shared framework for future collaboration.

The principles emphasize communication, clear pathways, articulation agreements, credit for prior learning, cross-sector collaboration, finances, student assistance, data, and technology. At the heart of the work is a simple but important idea: students should not lose time, money, or momentum because learning completed in one setting is hard to recognize in another. The principles encourage institutions to make transfer information clearer, review articulation agreements regularly, maximize degree-applicable credit, reduce unnecessary repetition of coursework, and provide coordinated advising and support.



*“Credit mobility is about more than moving courses from one transcript to another. It is about honoring the learning students have already completed and creating clearer, more efficient pathways toward credentials, degrees, and meaningful work in the region.”*

— Dr. Paul Garton, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, ETSU

This work fits closely with the broader mission of EdWorks, which promotes educational attainment from preschool through college, supports pathways from classroom to career, advances regional workforce development, and fosters collaboration among educational institutions, business and industry, communities, and local governments. It also reflects the expertise of ETSU's Center for Community College Leadership, which supports research, leadership development, and regional collaboration to strengthen educational pathways. The guiding principles leave member institutions with a shared regional language for transfer, articulation, and prior learning credit, helping East Tennessee continue building smoother, more student-centered pathways across sectors.

## GRADUATE SPOTLIGHT

### Ines Gibson



Dean Ines Gibson, Pellissippi State Community College. Community College Leadership Graduate Certificate Alumna. Dean, School of Communication, Arts, and Media Technologies.

When Ines Gibson stepped into her role as Dean of the English Department at Pellissippi State Community College, she wanted to do more than figure it out as she went. She wanted to learn. That instinct led her to ETSU's Community College Leadership Graduate Certificate, and this spring she crossed the finish line.

The timing turned out to matter. Midway through the program, Pellissippi State reorganized, and Gibson's responsibilities grew. She now leads the School of Communication, Arts, and Media Technologies, overseeing multiple departments. What began as professional development for a new role became something she needed even more than she had anticipated.

The CCL certificate is built specifically for community college leaders, and Gibson found that focus genuinely useful. She points to her first course, ELPA 6454: Policy, Politics, and Power, as one that reframed how she thinks about her work. The course introduced a policy matrix that examined how local, state, and federal policies are shaped by public values and agendas. For Gibson, it was not just academic. It gave her a way to explain the meaning behind policy initiatives to her own faculty.

*“When I applied for the program, I had recently taken on the role of Dean of the English Department, and I felt I needed professional development to be successful. In the middle of my program, my role expanded to where I now have three departments to lead. The program became even more important after the reorganization.”*

**— Ines Gibson, Dean, School of Communication, Arts, and Media Technologies, Pellissippi State Community College**

One of her more unexpected moments came during a supervision course assignment that sent her to interview an HR professional at Vols Online, the University of Tennessee's online education arm. The conversation opened her eyes to how differently a flagship research university and a community college can approach online learning, accountability, and business practices. She came away with insight into how a four-year flagship views online education compared with how community colleges weigh those same elements.

Gibson also came away with something she did not expect. She arrived ready to sharpen her skills for tough conversations. Instead, the course started with culture. She learned to expand culture building and make it intentionally positive, a shift in thinking she has carried back to her school.

Ask her whether the certificate is worth it, and she does not hesitate. She calls it absolutely worth the time and effort. She credits the program with giving her a fuller picture of Tennessee's higher education system, from administrative structures to the intermediary organizations and boards that community college leaders increasingly need to understand. And then there are the people. The in-person seminars, held once each semester on different campuses, became her favorite part of every term, and she still texts and emails with her former classmates.

That sense of connection is exactly what the CCL program aims to build, and Gibson is proof that it works. She came in as a new dean looking for a framework. She leaves a stronger, more strategic leader with a network to match.

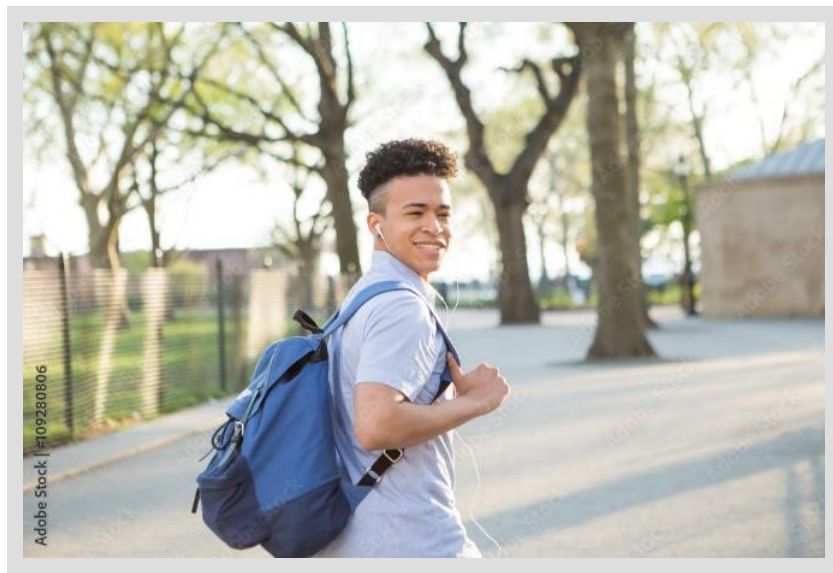
***Congratulations, Dean Gibson, on completing your Community College Leadership Graduate Certificate. Pellissippi State is fortunate to have you.***

## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

## Belonging, Validation, and Persistence for Black and Hispanic Male Students in Community Colleges

Research affiliated with ETSU's Center for Community College Leadership continues to contribute to national conversations about access, student success, and institutional responsibility. A recent study by Jill Channing, Jean Swindle, James Lampley, Mildred Perreault, Oluwatomilayo Adeniji, Francis Okeke, and Jocelyn Vernet examines how Black and Hispanic male students make meaning of success, identity, and belonging in community college settings.

The study, titled "[A Home Away from Home: Navigating Success and Identity for Black and Hispanic Males in Community Colleges](#)," was published in *Education Leadership Review* through the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership.



The study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the lived experiences of 27 Black and Hispanic male-identifying students at four community colleges in the southeastern United States. Rather than beginning with deficit-based assumptions about why students may struggle, the research centers students' own voices and asks what helps them persist, succeed, and feel seen. It is grounded in Harper's Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, Wood and Harris's community college model of persistence, and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth framework.

Four major themes emerged: sense of belonging, culturally responsive support and communication, family and kinship capital, and mentoring as a persistence engine. The study found that students often persisted not simply through individual determination, but because of relationships, family support, mentoring, and identity-affirming spaces that helped them feel recognized academically, personally, and culturally.

One of the study's important contributions is the concept of strategic filtering. The idea reframes what institutions sometimes misread as disengagement. Students in the study often made intentional choices about where to invest their limited time and attention while balancing coursework,



employment, family obligations, and other responsibilities. They engaged most deeply with the people, places, and messages they viewed as trustworthy, culturally relevant, and directly useful.

*“Community colleges cannot assume that access alone is enough. Students need structures of belonging, culturally responsive communication, and mentors who recognize their lived experiences as strengths. The work of access is not simply bringing students into the institution. It is redesigning the institution so that their success is expected and supported.”*

— Dr. Jean Swindle

The findings carry direct implications for community college leadership. The study calls for colleges to invest in mentoring programs, multicultural centers, bilingual communication, men-of-color initiatives, proactive advising, and training that helps faculty and staff serve as validating institutional agents. It also challenges colleges to measure access not only through enrollment and completion numbers, but through the quality of support, belonging, and culturally responsive engagement students actually experience.

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#### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

## Communication as Community College Leadership During Crisis

A study connected to ETSU's Center for Community College Leadership focuses on one of the most important leadership lessons to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic: communication is not simply the delivery of information. It is a central practice of trust-building, sensemaking, and organizational leadership.

In [“Just Communicate, Communicate, Communicate: Communication and Community College Leadership During Crisis,”](#) Dr. Jill Channing examines how community college administrators described and interpreted their communication practices during the pandemic. The article was published in *Education Sciences*.

The qualitative study drew on interviews with 12 community college administrators from across the United States, including presidents, vice presidents, and senior-level directors. Guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model, it explores how leaders designed messages, responded to audience needs, built trust, and communicated through prolonged uncertainty.

Five themes emerged: communication breakdowns between employee groups, tailored messaging for specific constituencies, preferences for in-person and interactive communication, trust-building through transparency, and reliance on collaborative communication structures. Together, these findings show that leaders had to move beyond one-size-fits-all communication. They needed to repeat messages, adjust tone and format for different audiences, create opportunities for dialogue, and lean on structures such as committees, councils, forums, and leadership teams to keep communication flowing.

The study is especially relevant for community colleges because these institutions serve complex constituencies. Their leaders communicate with students, faculty, staff, trustees, state systems, local

communities, employers, and external partners. During the pandemic, that work grew even harder as people faced information overload, emotional strain, shifting public health guidance, political pressure, and uncertainty about institutional operations.

*“Community college leaders learned during the pandemic that communication cannot be treated as an announcement after decisions are made. Communication is leadership. It is how leaders build trust, reduce confusion, invite participation, and help people make sense of change.”*

— Dr. Jill Channing

One notable finding is that leaders often believed they had communicated clearly while employees still felt uninformed. Participants described how messages could become diluted as they moved through organizational layers, with the cascade leaking at every level, and emphasized that repetition was not unnecessary redundancy but a core part of effective crisis communication. The study also highlights the value of relational communication. Even when digital tools were necessary, interactive formats such as Zoom forums and open question-and-answer sessions proved more effective than one-way email alone. Transparency, consistency, leader credibility, and opportunities for dialogue became essential to sustaining trust.

For community college leadership, the message is clear. Effective communication requires planning, repetition, audience awareness, transparency, and humility. The research offers useful guidance not only for crises, but for everyday leadership in complex institutions, and it reflects the Center's commitment to scholarship that helps leaders navigate real organizational challenges with clarity, care, and evidence-informed practice.

#### CENTER RESEARCH & PARTICIPATION

## Center Research Examines Leadership Development Needs in Community Colleges

The Center for Community College Leadership has launched research to better understand the professional development needs of community college administrators. The Community College Leadership Development Needs Survey is designed to identify the leadership capacity-building needs of current and emerging leaders and to guide future professional development offered through the Center. The survey asks administrators to reflect on their leadership roles, years of experience, institutional context, and the areas where additional support would help them lead more effectively.

The timing is deliberate. Community college leaders are navigating rapid changes in enrollment, workforce demands, public policy, technology, accreditation, dual enrollment, student needs, and political expectations. The survey recognizes that leadership development cannot be one-size-fits-all. A president or chancellor may have different development needs than a dean, director, coordinator, or emerging leader, and leaders in rural, suburban, urban, and multi-campus institutions face different pressures.

The survey focuses on five areas of leadership development: foundational leadership capacity; leading people and organizations; contextual and external leadership challenges; operational and strategic leadership skills; and innovation, technology, and the future of leadership. Topics include ethical decision-making, conflict management, emotional intelligence, building leadership teams, leading

across silos, belonging-oriented workplace cultures, political and policy shifts, crisis leadership, enrollment management, data-informed decision-making, accreditation, AI, microcredentials, and institutional innovation. It also asks respondents which professional development formats they find most valuable, from short workshops and multi-session leadership institutes to micro-credentials, peer learning communities, executive coaching, cross-institutional networking, and applied case-based leadership labs. The Center's aim is to listen first, so that programming is grounded in what leaders actually need and remains accessible and relevant to busy practitioners.

*"The Center's work has always been about strengthening community colleges by strengthening the people who lead them. This project gives us a clearer picture of how we can support leaders at every stage of their careers."*

— Dr. Richard G. Rhoda, Director, ETSU Center for Community College Leadership

### We Need Your Input

Are you a community college administrator, a faculty member in a leadership role, or an emerging leader? We invite you to take part in the Community College Leadership Development Needs Survey. Your responses will directly shape the Center's future programming and contribute to scholarship on leadership development in community colleges.

Please also consider referring colleagues who currently serve, or aspire to serve, in community college leadership roles. The more voices we hear, the more useful this research will be.

**Contact Dr. Jill Channing to access the survey. [Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)**

Questions? Contact Dr. Jill Channing at ETSU's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis ([Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)). ETSU Institutional Review Board Phone: 423-439-6054 Email: [IRB@etsu.edu](mailto:IRB@etsu.edu)

## CENTER RESEARCH & PARTICIPATION

### New Mixed Methods Study Explores AI Across U.S. Higher Education

A current research project connected to the Center examines how artificial intelligence is reshaping higher education across institution types. The study, Artificial Intelligence Across U.S. Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study of Student, Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Perceptions, Practices, and Institutional Responses, is led by Dr. Jill Channing in ETSU's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis.

The project responds to a fast-moving challenge. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators are already using AI tools, but many institutions are still working to develop clear policies, training, and ethical guidance. Much existing research has focused on single institutions, student-only samples, or large universities, leaving real gaps in what is known about community colleges, public four-year universities, private institutions, and the experiences of faculty, staff, and administrators.

The study uses a mixed-methods design. The first phase includes an online survey of students, faculty, staff, and administrators at U.S. community colleges, public four-year universities, and private colleges and universities. The second phase includes semi-structured interviews with selected survey

participants. The goal is to understand not only how often people use AI, but what they believe about its benefits, risks, ethical concerns, institutional policies, and future role in higher education. The work treats AI as a teaching issue, a student success issue, a workforce issue, an ethics issue, and a leadership issue, all at once.

The study matters for community colleges in particular because these institutions serve large numbers of first-generation, working, low-income, adult, and historically underserved students, and because they are deeply connected to workforce development. That makes AI literacy and ethical AI use increasingly relevant to both academic and career preparation. The study includes community colleges as a central institutional type rather than treating them as an afterthought. By comparing perspectives across roles and institution types, the project will help identify where institutions are aligned and where they are not, and what training, communication, policy development, and ethical safeguards may be needed as AI becomes more embedded in teaching, learning, administration, and workforce preparation.

*“Community colleges have always responded to change in ways that are practical, student-centered, and connected to the needs of their communities. Research like this helps ensure that AI adoption is guided by mission, access, and evidence rather than by pressure or uncertainty.”*

— Dr. Richard G. Rhoda, Director, ETSU Center for Community College Leadership

## Participate in This Study

We are seeking students, faculty, staff, and administrators at community colleges, public four-year universities, and private colleges and universities to take part in the survey phase of this study. You must be 18 or over and present in the U.S.A. Your perspective matters, regardless of how much or how little experience you have with AI tools.

Please share this invitation with colleagues across your institution. Broad participation across roles and institution types will strengthen both the research and the recommendations that follow.

**Contact Dr. Jill Channing to access the survey. [Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)**

Questions? Contact Dr. Jill Channing at ETSU's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis ([Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)). ETSU Institutional Review Board Phone: 423-439-6054 Email: [IRB@etsu.edu](mailto:IRB@etsu.edu)

## Center-Affiliated Research Looks at AI Across K-12 School Roles

A related project extends the Center's interest in educational leadership, workforce change, and institutional communication into the K-12 setting. The study examines how artificial intelligence is showing up in schools for employees across many roles, not only teachers and principals. The interview protocol is designed to understand participants' experiences in their own words, whether they use AI regularly, have never used it, or feel uncertain about its relevance to their work.

The project is important because conversations about AI in education often focus narrowly on classroom instruction, student writing, cheating, or teacher productivity. Yet schools depend on many employees whose work may also be affected by AI, including support staff, office personnel, counselors, administrators, technology staff, instructional assistants, and others. The study asks participants to describe their current roles, how AI has appeared in their work, what they see as possible benefits or concerns, and whether their school or district has provided training or guidance.

The protocol also asks participants to reflect on whether AI experiences vary across school roles. That question matters because AI adoption can create uneven effects inside an organization. Some employees may receive training and support, while others encounter AI through software systems or workplace changes with little explanation. The study explores concerns about job security, privacy, student data, public versus private school contexts, and the kinds of professional development that would help employees feel more confident and supported.

Although the study focuses on K-12 employees, it connects closely to community college leadership because many of the same questions are emerging across education sectors. Leaders at every level are trying to determine how to communicate about AI, how to provide training, how to protect privacy, how to support employees, and how to make decisions that are both ethical and practical. Community college leadership does not exist in isolation. These colleges are part of larger educational ecosystems, and research that spans K-12 and postsecondary education helps leaders better understand transitions, workforce preparation, and the leadership challenges shared across sectors. By including voices that are sometimes left out of AI conversations, the research can help educational leaders design more inclusive communication, training, and policy responses.

### **Participate or Refer a Participant**

This study is seeking K-12 school employees for brief interviews, including teachers, principals, counselors, support staff, office personnel, administrators, instructional assistants, and technology staff. All roles and all levels of AI experience are welcome. Participants must be 18 years or older and present in the U.S.A.

If you work in a K-12 school, or know someone who does, we would love to hear from you.

To participate or refer a participant, please reach out to Dr. Jill Channing ([Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)) at ETSU's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. ETSU Institutional Review Board Phone: 423-439-6054 Email: [IRB@etsu.edu](mailto:IRB@etsu.edu)



## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

## Motlow State Survey Supports AI Workforce Training and Microcredential Development

A project connected to the Center's broader interest in workforce development and institutional innovation focuses on industry needs for AI, data, and automation training in Tennessee. The Motlow State Community College Industry AI Training Needs Survey gathers input from industry partners as Motlow develops short-term credentials and micro-credentials to prepare Tennessee's workforce for roles that increasingly require artificial intelligence, data, and automation skills.

The survey asks employers to identify current and future workforce needs, including AI awareness, prompting and human-AI interaction, machine learning fundamentals, coding, robotics, industrial automation, data analytics, mechatronics, logistics optimization, cloud computing, cybersecurity for AI-enabled systems, and responsible AI. Employers rate the importance of these skills today and their expected importance in three years.

The project also gauges interest in specific short-term credentials, including AI Foundations, Prompt Engineering for Business and Industry, AI for Logistics and Supply Chain Optimization, Automation and Robotics in Manufacturing, AI-Enhanced Data Analytics, Mechatronics and Smart Systems, Cybersecurity for AI Applications, Coding for AI, Cloud and Advanced Computing for Industry, and Human-AI Collaboration, Ethics, and Governance. Employers are asked about preferred credential length, delivery format, credentialing model, and willingness to take part in a Motlow-led AI training initiative.

*“Community colleges are at their best when they listen carefully to the communities and industries they serve. AI workforce training should not be designed in isolation. It should be shaped by real employer needs, worker experiences, and regional economic priorities.”*

— **Dr. Michael Torrence, President, Motlow State Community College**

The survey also asks companies to name barriers to participation, such as cost, time, scheduling, awareness, unclear return on investment, or limited facilities. That attention to implementation matters. Even when employers recognize the need for AI-related training, the design of credentials must fit the realities of working adults, industry schedules, and regional workforce needs. Short-term credentials and microcredentials are becoming increasingly important tools for workforce development, and community colleges are well positioned to help workers and employers adapt to technological change in ways that are accessible, affordable, and responsive to local economies.

By gathering direct input from Tennessee employers, the survey can help shape programs that prepare workers not only to use AI tools, but to understand them responsibly, apply them in real workplace settings, and adapt as technology continues to evolve.

### **A Note to Tennessee Employers**

Is your company hiring workers who need AI, data, or automation skills? Motlow State Community College is developing training programs to meet that need, and they want to hear from you first. The Industry AI Training Needs Survey takes only a few minutes and will directly influence the credentials Motlow builds for Tennessee's workforce.

Please also consider sharing this survey with other employers and industry partners in your network.

**Contact Dr. Jill Channing to access the survey. [Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)**

Questions? Contact Dr. Jill Channing at ETSU's Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis ([Channing@etsu.edu](mailto:Channing@etsu.edu)).

### **ETSU Center for Community College Leadership**

East Tennessee State University | Johnson City, Tennessee

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