



CHAPTER 3

Planning Process & Insights



PROJECT KICKOFF AND LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

In February 2023, Santa Monica College retained Kennedy & Company Education Strategies LLC to serve as its consultant in the development of the Master Plan for Education (MPE).

Kennedy & Company's role encompassed four major areas of work: (1) organizing the project and gathering institutional data; (2) conducting market and demographic analysis to assess internal and external drivers of change; (3) forecasting long-range enrollment trends and conducting a space needs and instructional program analysis; and (4) synthesizing these findings into a comprehensive final report. The firm also facilitated multiple stakeholder interviews and campus engagements, including virtual interviews with senior administrators and in-person small-group sessions with functional units during fall 2023.

CAMPUSWIDE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

As a key part of the development of Santa Monica College's Master Plan for Education 2025–2030, a Collaborative Design Workshop was held on March 28, 2025. The purpose of this campuswide workshop was to engage faculty, staff, and administrators in structured dialogue and idea generation to help shape the future direction of the college's programs, services, and strategic priorities. The Collaborative Design Workshop built upon the findings of a prior All-Campus Ideation Workshop and survey conducted during the fall 2024 semester, which identified key institutional strengths, challenges, and opportunities.

Guided by these earlier engagement efforts, the Master Plan for Education Workgroup curated nine priority focus areas to serve as the foundation for the spring workshop. Participants were invited to reflect on these topics — ranging from student support services to enrollment, equity, and academic innovation — and to propose actionable strategies in response to thoughtfully crafted prompts. The Collaborative Design Workshop offered an inclusive space for diverse stakeholders to work together to identify promising ideas that will inform the Master Plan for Education's strategic framework.

A summary of the common themes that emerged across the nine topic areas is presented below. These themes reflect the collective voice of the Santa Monica College community and provide direction for the planning work ahead.

1. Investing in Workforce and Economic Development

Workshop Prompt: To support student college-to-career trajectories and meet evolving labor market demands, Santa Monica College can prioritize workforce training by strengthening industry partnerships, expanding experiential learning opportunities, and enhancing marketing of Career Education programs. This includes regularly updating existing programs and developing new programs to align with emerging labor market trends in technology, sustainability, healthcare, and other high-demand fields, ensuring students gain the skills needed for career success. Santa Monica College should ensure racially equitable outcomes in a way that aligns with students' desire for economic and social mobility. It is crucial that SMC alumni secure living wages for themselves and their families, considering the significantly higher cost of living in Los Angeles County compared to other regions across the country.

- Offer workshops to the campus community during flex days and at other times to gain more understanding of student college-to-career trajectories, career education programs, and workforce trends.

- Continue to invest in industry partnerships so that students can benefit from a variety of work-based learning experiences to prepare them for their careers.
- Continue to invest and prioritize in faculty and staff efforts to improve existing programs and develop new programs that provide living wages or higher for our students in alignment with local labor market needs.
- Invest in marketing efforts and campaigns to showcase student success stories and career pathways to raise program visibility.

2. Student Support Services Enhancement

Workshop Prompt: Santa Monica College faces increasing demand for student support services. To address this, the college should enhance its approach to assessing and addressing student needs. This assessment should include academic support, as well as essential services related to mental health, childcare, and basic needs such as food and housing security. Additionally, to accommodate diverse student schedules and circumstances, these vital services should be available online and at various times and days throughout the week to allow access to all students. Furthermore, improving the coordination of services will enhance students' access to necessary resources, including tutoring, counseling, and financial aid assistance. A well organized system for identifying student needs and connecting students to resources promptly will lead to better outcomes and a more supportive educational environment.

- Improve visibility and access to student services through drop-in childcare, app-based pop-ups, TikTok-style explainer videos, and stronger social media outreach.
- Foster employee engagement and awareness by incentivizing faculty to use SMC's Gateway to Persistence and Success (GPS), organizing departmental "train-the-trainer" connections, and integrating service awareness into onboarding and Flex Day activities.
- Adopt a student-centered approach to service delivery, including scheduling services at times that fit student needs, and embedding service touchpoints into class activities.
- Leverage AI and data tools to proactively identify and address student needs through regular assessments and targeted outreach.
- Increase coordination and continuous evaluation of support services to streamline delivery and improve effectiveness across departments.

3. Technology Integration/Learning Environment Flexibility

Workshop Prompt: COVID-19 opened possibilities when it came to course delivery and a learning environment's flexibility. In addition, innovations in educational technology have revolutionized what learning and work looks like in the 21st century. SMC will harness this progress to create workplace and learning spaces that are flexible and engaging, while equipping colleagues and students to succeed in this adaptive, innovative learning/work environment, including exploring technological and/or digital aspects of all areas.

- Admission/enrollment fraud needs to be addressed to ensure that students are able to enroll in classes and be part of an authentic learning community. (The larger sentiment expressed was that "actual" students who need classes cannot enroll because the spots are taken up by

“fake” students, who could be students who do not intend to do the classwork, or could be bots. The hope was that the college would use measures to limit this type of fraud.)

- To foster an adaptive tech-savvy environment for the SMC community, an increase in tech support should be provided for all constituencies, including, but not limited to, on-campus and virtual tech trainings, tutorials for new technologies that can effectively engage students, and more embedded Canvas support.
- Because this is an age where a learning/work environment has simultaneous virtual and in-person parties, innovations are needed to make this a more collective and fluid experience.
- SMC should ensure that campus constituents are informed about innovative practices and invest in technologies, tools, and methods that enhance online teaching, learning, and work.

4. Enrollment Strategies Through Retention and Outreach

Workshop Prompt: The fiscal stability of the college depends on enrollment growth in all sectors. Enrollment began to decline prior to the pandemic, and dropped precipitously with the COVID-19 disruption. Additionally, high school graduates are projected to decline for the next 15 years by nearly 30% in California. Traditional outreach will no longer suffice to increase enrollment at SMC. It is imperative that SMC develop a strong marketing plan to attract working adults in addition to students of more traditional ages. The college must increase the overall student retention rate (which is less than 50% at the time this document was prepared), must employ course scheduling that is responsive to student needs, and must meet students’ ever-growing needs for student services and support.

- Broaden outreach to nontraditional students by offering targeted support such as childcare, parent affinity groups, and tailored workshops and webpages — particularly to attract working adults and students who are parents.
- Implement student-centered scheduling that aligns course offerings with student graduation needs and preferences, using data analytics and cross-departmental collaboration.
- Strengthen student retention efforts through personalized outreach, such as case management and the use of tools like GPS and surveys to understand and address why students disengage.
- Modernize and expand marketing efforts by promoting industry partnerships, reaching working adults through rebranding campaigns, and leveraging AI to guide students into credit-bearing pathways aligned with workforce needs.
- Develop responsive curriculum pathways that include stackable certificates, credit-bearing transitions from noncredit courses, and expanded internship/apprenticeship or “learn and earn” models.

5. Campus Communication and Collaboration Strategies Through Retention and Outreach

Workshop Prompt: In an environment that creates communication fatigue, the campus community has expressed a desire for improved campus communication clarity, transparency, and efficiency to build a more connected campus community. SMC needs to create more spaces to build teamwork by dismantling silos, fostering collaboration, and opening up dialogue across all these constituencies.

- Upgrade professional development activities and events.
- At the morning session, have college vice presidents speak about what is happening in their area; have the college president provide the introduction to the day; hold professional development activities on different campuses.
- Set-up cross-disciplinary meetings for deans/manager/chairs to share what is happening across different areas/departments of the college.
- Provide coffee/lunch from a familiar place or local business.
- Emails/bullets/campus-wide announcements of activities and events.
- Offer communication training.
- Provide categories and uniformity in subject lines for filtering.
- Improve availability of contact information.
- Create a monthly newsletter with department summaries — what is being worked on, accomplishments, issues being raised or addressed — and offer drop-in hours with time for questions.
- Improve SMC's communication and collaborative culture.

6. Facilities and Infrastructure Upgrades

Workshop Prompt: As expectations for the student learning experience shift, and the college faces evolving challenges in the post-pandemic era, there is a critical need to reimagine academic facilities and spaces to support dynamic, technology-enabled learning environments that accommodate both on-campus and online ("remote") students. SMC's facilities must be flexible, engaging, sustainable, and designed to meet the needs of a diverse student body, as well as new academic programs developed in response to labor market demands.

- Revamp the Master Facilities planning process to include priorities identified in the Master Plan for Education in the areas of program development and student engagement.
- Bring an energy specialist on board to produce a Master Energy Plan and ensure buildings run optimally and meet Institutional Sustainability goals.
- Innovate in the area of strategic partnerships to raise funds and brand awareness by leveraging facilities.
- Perform regular assessments of space usage for efficiency, and the viability of much needed, data-driven modification and modernization projects.

7. Promotion of Equity and Inclusion

Workshop Prompt: SMC has a longstanding commitment to advancing racial equity. The college is dedicated to fostering a racially equitable learning environment where students feel a sense of belonging and care while achieving their self-defined goals. Despite ongoing efforts, racial equity gaps persist, particularly among first-time college students who are Black and Latinx, who are disproportionately impacted. The demand for transformational change continues to grow even

as challenges to the work have appeared at the federal level, and significant improvements are required to promote equity, inclusion, and belonging for those experiencing the greatest racial equity gaps.

- Conduct research and focus groups to identify what fosters a sense of belonging among students, particularly within programs like Black Collegians, MOCAN, and Adelante, and expand on what is working well.
- Regularly assess the effectiveness of existing student equity initiatives and explore innovative student support features — such as reinstating the “Food Bell” in the SMC GO App — to address basic needs and promote equity.
- Designate an entire Fall or Spring Flex Day to equity-focused professional development with a consistent, multi-year theme, and identify barriers to broader staff engagement in equity training.
- Integrate equity-focused components into onboarding processes, especially for part-time (adjunct) faculty, to promote institution-wide participation in equity efforts.

8. Streamlining Pathways to Graduation

Workshop Prompt: It is widely known that community college pathways often include hurdles such as misaligned course offerings, complicated degree requirements, and lengthy timelines to completion. With the implementation of initiatives like Guided Pathways, Cal-GETC, and AB 1705, there is an opportunity to create clearer, shorter, and more equitable pathways that reduce time to graduation, while aligning academic programs with high-demand careers. However, challenges such as balancing general education requirements, maintaining transfer alignment, and ensuring course section availability call for innovating solutions to meet students’ needs.

- Increase student engagement and guidance by enhancing faculty-student interactions, recognizing milestone achievements, and improving communication throughout the student journey.
- Expand summer bridge programs to support early onboarding and accelerate progress toward degree completion.
- Leverage technology and data tools (e.g., Precision Campus, GradLeaders) to help students discover and navigate academic pathways more effectively.
- Proactively audit transcripts to identify students eligible for certificates or degrees, reducing barriers to completion and increasing credential attainment.

9. Enriching Student Life and Community Connections

Workshop Prompt: Santa Monica College offers a range of cultural events and activities aimed at fostering inclusivity, yet data indicates that many students — particularly Black and Latinx populations — still report a lack of belonging and connection to the campus community. Existing campus spaces are often underutilized or not designed to support the diverse needs of the student body, limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement. SMC must strengthen initiatives that promote a sense of belonging and strengthen connections between students, the college, and the surrounding community, while also redesigning campus spaces to foster inclusive engagement, community-building, and social interaction.

- Repurpose underutilized campus spaces to create inclusive gathering areas, outdoor hangouts, and wellness-oriented environments such as edible gardens and seating zones with access to power outlets.
- Improve and promote existing student spaces like the SMC Library, Cayton Center, and sustainability zones to ensure they are accessible, welcoming, and reflective of student needs.
- Explore the development of a new Student Union — an on-campus space or building for student activities that foster a sense of community — and increase accessibility to collaborative innovation spaces such as the campus makerspace.
- Utilize the Canvas dashboard as a centralized platform to promote events, student services, and opportunities in one easily accessible location.
- Install digital signage across campus and coordinate cross-departmental scheduling to prevent event overlap and improve student turnout.
- Conduct regular student surveys to gather input on engagement preferences and evaluate the effectiveness of current spaces and programs.
- Study models from local community colleges and community centers to adopt successful strategies that promote student engagement and belonging.
- Modernize or revise campus policies and tap into available funding to bring promising student life initiatives across the finish line.
- Support sustainability efforts in student engagement by incorporating recycling, upcycling, and resource-sharing practices into student events and club activities.

STRATEGIC TRENDS & INSIGHTS

The strategic insights presented here synthesize key findings from Santa Monica College’s environmental scan, Kennedy & Company’s market analyses, and the college’s academic department profiles and future trends. Together, these insights provide a data-informed understanding of the shifting internal and external landscape that will shape SMC’s next five years. They highlight enrollment and demographic patterns, labor market demands, programmatic opportunities, and facilities needs, offering a foundation for strategic decision-making that aligns institutional capacity with student success, equity, and workforce relevance.

- **Shifting FTES Patterns**

Credit FTES are down by one-quarter over the last seven years, while Noncredit FTES are up 15 percent. Resident credit FTES fell 25.2% — from 22,257 to 16,642 — while noncredit FTES rose 14.6% in the same span, led by a 46% jump in Career-Development & College-Preparation FTES.

- **Aging Student Population**

Since 2017–18, enrollment among students under age 25 has fallen sharply while older student groups have grown: Enrollment of students ages 30-39 has increased by 14%, those 40-49 by 10%, and students age 50+ have nearly rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, showing a 21% increase in the past three years.

- **New Award Growth**

Workforce certificates have significantly expanded — especially short-term credit certificates (+308%) and noncredit awards (+932%).

- **Transfer Prowess**

Santa Monica College continues as California’s #1 source of UC transfers (983 in 2023-24) and the California leader in African American and Latinx transfers to the University of California.

- **Retention and Persistence Indicators**

Full-time course load is the strongest predictor of student persistence. While 85% of students taking 12+ units each fall re-enroll in spring, persistence sharply declines to below 50% for students in 5.5 units or fewer, and to roughly 43% for noncredit learners.

- **Enrollment Challenges Ahead**

Key feeder-district high-school enrollments are projected to drop roughly one-quarter in the next decade, with SMMUSD projecting a 24% decline, and LAUSD following with a 19% drop in its much larger student population.

Labor Market & Academic Program Indicators

- **Health Sciences and Healthcare Professions**
Healthcare continues to show significant job growth in the region, with substantial projected increases in Registered Nursing (35% projected growth), Respiratory Therapy (19%), and Medical Administration (18%).
- **STEM and Technology**
STEM fields remain robust, with particularly strong growth projected in areas like Computer Science (13%), General Engineering (7%), and emerging areas such as Systems Science and Theory, Aerospace Engineering, and Biomathematics/Bioinformatics.
- **Social Sciences and Human Services**
Significant projected growth in Social Work (20%) and Psychology (16%) reflects the increasing regional demand for professionals in social and mental health services.
- **Business, Economics, and Management**
Though Business Administration remains among the largest programs, opportunities exist to diversify into high-demand areas such as Econometrics and Quantitative Economics, E-Commerce/Electronic Commerce, and Actuarial Science.
- **Technical Trades and Creative Industries**
Cosmetology (32% growth), Film Production (13%), and Nutrition (17%) programs exhibit both strong enrollment and significant employment demand. Additionally, adding and expanding creative arts programs such as digital humanities and fashion design would align with strong employment opportunities in creative and technical trade sectors.

Facilities Planning Insights

- **Modernizing Aging Facilities**
Replacement of critically deteriorated buildings such as Drescher Hall, the Business Building, the Cayton/Student Health & Activities Center, Faculty Village, and modular structures is essential to align facilities with programmatic and student success goals.
- **Advanced Program Facilities**
Emerging and growing programs in STEM (Engineering, Earth Sciences), Health (Nursing), Creative Arts (Art, Design, Media, Theater, Music), and new areas like Aquaculture will require flexible laboratories, studios, and hybrid instructional spaces to support interdisciplinary learning and workforce readiness.
- **Campus Presentation and Identity Improvements**
Development and activation of Pico Boulevard and Pearl Street through new construction, landscaping, signage, and open spaces (e.g., amphitheater, quads, plazas) will strengthen the college's connection to the Santa Monica community, and improve the experience of students arriving at the campus.

- **Sustainability and Climate Goals**

To align with system-wide climate and sustainability goals, facilities planning should emphasize water conservation (purple pipe reclaimed water), shade and cooling strategies, EV infrastructure, and native plant landscaping.

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