CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CEO Tenure & Retention Study

10th Update–ResearchEd Addendum

Rachel Rush-Marlowe, Perrine Monnet, Gabriel Calza-Everett

February 2023

COMMUNITY
COLLEGE LEAGUE
OF CALIFORNIA

ResearchEd

INTRODUCTION

The California Community College (CCC) system is the largest higher education system* in the United States. With 73 districts and 116 colleges, the CCC system educates over 1.8 million students per year. The CCC system is also one of the most diverse education systems in the nation, with more than 69 percent of enrollees from minority backgrounds, and it serves as a vital resource to economically insecure students. The CCC system is not only an easily accessible and affordable entry to postsecondary education at the community college level but is also a frequently overlooked pipeline to all public higher education in the state, as 51 percent of CSU and 29 percent of UC graduates start postsecondary education at a CCC[1]. The CCCs open the door to educational opportunities for millions of Californians, but due to instability in the system caused by leadership turnover, this door is at risk of closing.

Chief executive officer (CEO) retention in the CCC system has been in decline for several decades in California; however, turnover has recently increased at an alarming rate. Since 2020, approximately 12 percent of CCC CEOs have retired. An even greater number of positions have opened in CCC leadership due to internal churn, early dismissals, and non-renewed contracts. The impact of college leadership on an institution's health cannot be overlooked. The recent acceleration in turnover creates devastating losses in institutional knowledge, prevents institutions from implementing strategic plans, and impedes the development of positive campus cultures. Most concerning is how the decline in CEO retention has occurred in lockstep with recent declines in CCC student enrollment. Effectively addressing declining enrollment, a topic of heightened concern not just in California but also nationwide, requires consistency in leadership.

While COVID-19 certainly played a role in this acceleration, it is clear there are multiple factors contributing to this decline. This report examines a number of those factors and highlights key support mechanisms. Some of these are context-specific factors unique to California due to legislative barriers or system-wide mandates that make it uniquely difficult to be a CCC CEO, while other identified factors are more universal. Despite the lack of a singular cause for poor rates of CEO retention, this research study and literature in the field suggest CCC Board of Trustees and CEO relations are especially important, with some previous studies suggesting this relationship is the single most reliable predictive factor of CEO success.[2]

---

* California community colleges possess a bilateral governance structure with locally-elected and controlled boards, a statewide Board of Governors, and a state chancellor overseeing the state agency of the California Community College Chancellor's Office. California's 72 geographically-located and 115 community colleges is often described as a confederation of locally-governed districts. Calbright, the all online district is recognized in statute as the 73rd district.

[1] California Community College Chancellor's Office

[2] McNaughton, 2018; Harris & Ellis, 2018; Buckley, 2018; Davis, 2018

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the factors accelerating CEO turnover in California and the ways in which this might be prevented in the future, ResearchEd collaborated with the Community College League of California (CCLC) to conduct one-on-one interviews, distribute surveys to CCC CEOs and Board of Trustee members, and conducted focus groups with these stakeholders from January to March 2022.

ResearchEd conducted one-on-one interviews with 29 CCC CEOs and Trustees to learn more about the experiences of individuals working in both roles in the system. A survey with questions regarding the challenges and supporting factors for CCC CEOs and Trustees was also distributed, with the trustee survey garnering a response rate of approximately 12 percent and the CEO survey producing a response rate of 35 percent.[3] Survey responses included a representative sample regarding respondent demographics and tenure from single and multi-college districts. There was likely a bias in the surveys towards those who are already likely to be otherwise more engaged than their less-involved peers, as most respondents reported participating in regular professional development programs offered by the CCLC or other organizations. Finally, ResearchEd conducted two focus groups: one of CEOs and one of Trustees.

Throughout this research, the most significant challenges raised were understanding roles and relationships among CEOs and trustees, increased CEO workloads, a perceived lack of civility, and a variety of legislative barriers.

Despite the ever-increasing challenges of the role, CEOs consistently shared their commitments to serving their institutions and were eager to share the resources they found most supportive of their efforts. CEOs frequently attributed their successes to positive relationships with colleagues, informal spaces to connect with other CEOs, and opportunities for professional development and mentorship.

This report analyzes the challenges CCC CEOs face and the supports they report to be most useful. This report also closes with a set of recommendations designed to mitigate many obstacles CEOs report and strengthen existing supports to foster a stronger CCC system in which CEOs are retained and can thrive.

---

[3] For research of this kind, anticipated response rate is typically between 10-30%.

SUPPORTS

Positive Relationships with Colleagues

A major factor in general employee retention is positive work relationships. Various studies point to social support (through satisfactory relationships with colleagues) as a determining factor of retention.[4] The research shows support and satisfaction with colleague relationships contribute equally to employee retention and turnover. The CCCs are no exception to this trend. At institutions with high turnover rates, CEOs stated they felt they lacked a strong and supportive team and reported feeling isolated in their roles with little to no internal support.

Across interviews, the importance of having a strong team and cabinet was noted as essential for CEOs to be able to perform their jobs successfully. Approximately a quarter of survey respondents said a strong cabinet or team was the most important support they had during their tenures. Multiple interviewees noted having a strong team they trusted allowed them to better delegate and focus their time on issues they viewed as important. More importantly, strong relationships with their cabinets allowed CEOs to better handle relational or political issues with their boards of trustees. In some instances, support from the cabinet team was cited as a reason to remain, despite a contentious board relationship. This is critical, because while there is no single factor contributing to high CEO turnover, national research shows the relationship among trustees and CEOs has an outsized impact on determining CEO tenure.[5] Positive CCC CEO-Trustee relationships are therefore critical to improving CEO tenure, but lacking that, a strong cabinet can help mitigate potentially challenging relationships among CEOs and trustees.

These relationships appear differently in multi-college districts. Several interviewees noted they felt presidents of multi-college districts have more support. Likewise, presidents of multi-college districts often cited their gratitude for the support they received from their chancellors. This perception was equally shared among interviewees from single-college districts and multi-college districts. Interviewees cited two primary benefits of the multi-college district: one being presidents have some peers within the district, whereas presidents in single-college districts reported feeling more isolated, and the second being the chancellor handles board relations. Interestingly, despite the perception of higher levels of support, the CCLC dashboard data does not indicate this support leads to greater retention. In fact, the dashboard indicates the tenure of presidents and superintendents at multi-college districts is nearly half the length of their counterparts in single-college districts.[6]

---

[4] Alexander et al., 1998; Pitts et al., 2011; Jasper 2007

[5] Tekniepe 2014

[6] Community College League of California, 2021

SUPPORTS

Informal Spaces to Connect

As an alternative to structured mentor-mentee programs, many CEOs expressed interest in, and felt greater satisfaction with, events that allowed them informal opportunities to network with other CEOs. These occasions allowed for the spontaneous formation of some mentor-mentee relationships in a relaxed setting. CEOs cited CCLC events, such as the Vineyard Symposium and CEO Symposium, specifically as spaces that facilitated these types of interactions. More than half (59 percent) of survey respondents noted connecting with fellow CEO colleagues was the most helpful form of support during their tenures. In studies looking at employee retention, mechanisms that promote informal social interactions among colleagues are found to promote work satisfaction and promote longer tenure.[7] While most CEOs surveyed agreed lack of time was a major barrier to participating in these types of events, they still cited these opportunities as critical for promoting CEO retention and satisfaction. It is important for CEOs to be able to find time to attend these events, and it is important for organizations supporting CEOs to continue to host them.

Professional Development

Another mechanism to increase support for CEOs is through professional development and training. While this was frequently recommended in interviews with CEOs, only 8 percent of CEO survey respondents mentioned professional development as a helpful support. This may indicate a need for increased or improved professional development and training. Interview, focus group, and survey data indicated CEOs seek a wide variety of professional development opportunities, including technical training, soft skills development, and structured sessions designed to help them communicate more effectively with different constituency groups. Regardless of the type of training requested, CEOs agreed they would like to see additional opportunities for continuing professional development, noting that many current offerings were geared toward CEOs new to the role and that little was available for CEOs with more experience.

---

[7] Kossivi et al., 2016 and; Kundu and Lata 2017

CHALLENGES

Workload

The data collected showed 96 percent of CEOs interviewed mentioned their workloads as one of the largest barriers they face. Most CEOs that were interviewed and surveyed reported they were hard-pressed to balance their responsibilities as a CCC CEO with the interests and demands of community college groups and local organizations. For example, while nearly all surveyed CEOs expressed a desire to continue to learn and grow in their roles, more than half of the CEOs surveyed and the majority interviewed noted they lacked time to attend trainings, seminars, and network with community college and local groups. Narratives of overburdened CEOs have become increasingly common due to gradual increases in CEOs' responsibilities, crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the expansion of student support systems. While these support systems are important for student retention, they represent additional responsibilities for CEOs and are particularly challenging due to ever present budget constraints and required additional oversights —all clearly within the CEOs' purviews.
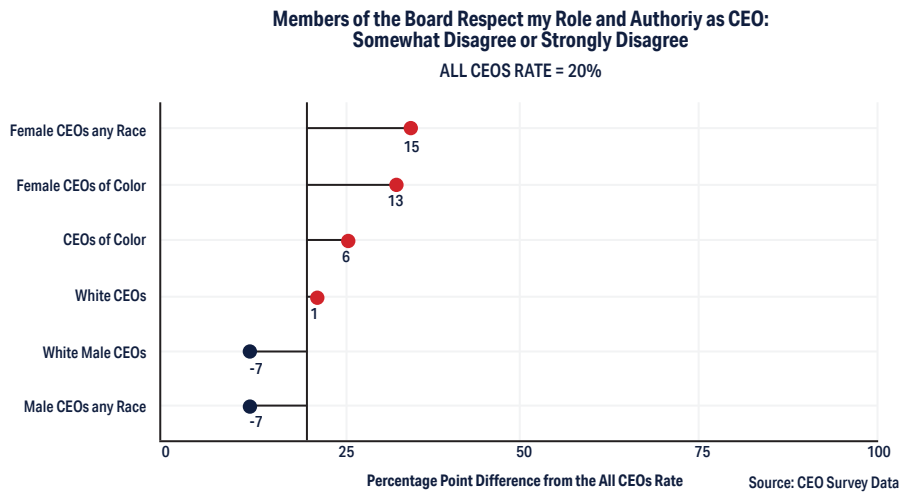
The incredible workload shouldered by CEOs was also discussed as the main challenge to building a strong pipeline of aspiring CEOs. Most community college CEOs come from previous positions in community college administration, but current CCC CEOs reported they found their colleagues in other administration positions were discouraged from pursuing the position because of the perceived workload. CEOs also expressed frustration, because their workloads were so significant. As a result, they did not have the bandwidth to mentor or train their colleagues who may have aspirations of college leadership, thereby preventing current CEOs from helping to build the pipeline of future candidates.

Lack of Civility

CEOs and trustees discussed the increasingly unsatisfactory level of respect and civility among actors and organizations invested in the wellbeing of the community college. This is partly attributable to COVID-19, where the proliferation of digital communication methods has led to a rise in what one CEO described as "keyboard courage" and an antagonistic and disrespectful means of expressing frustration that seemed to increase as communication went digital. However, this lack of civility predates COVID-19 and is targeted against specific groups. Many CEOs interviewed noted their ability to conduct their duties was impacted by racial and/or misogynistic actions from faculty, trustees, and local community groups. Even CEOs who did not mention specific instances or discrimination reported feeling the need to navigate identity politics carefully. Women or CEOs of color comprised 89 percent of the CEOs who mentioned lack of civility from their boards of trustees during interviews. Survey data provided further information on what this lack of civility looks like in practice. Figure 1 shows the response to a survey question that asked to what extent respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, "Members of the board respect my role and authority as CEO." On average, only 20 percent of CEOs disagreed with this statement, which indicates most CEOs find board members to be respectful of their roles and authority. However, there is significant variation along racial and gender lines. Data shows 35 percent of female CEOs (of any race) reported somewhat or strong disagreement with the statement, which is 15 percent higher than the average. Similarly, 33 percent of female CEOs of color reported disagreeing with the statement. In contrast, only 13 percent of male CEOs disagreed with the statement.
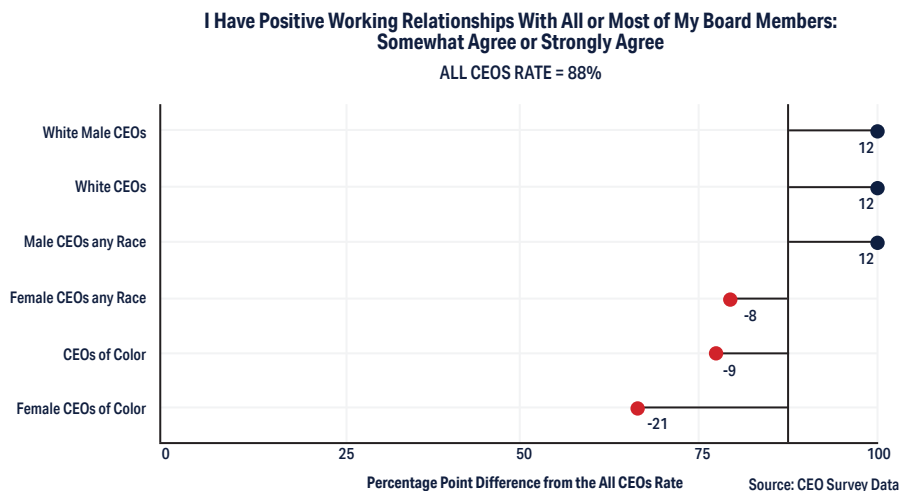
CHALLENGES

Members of the Board Respect my Role and Authoriy as CEO:
Somewhat Disagree or Strongly Disagree

ALL CEOS RATE = 20%

Percentage Point Difference from the All CEOs Rate   Source: CEO Survey Data

In Figure 2, CEOs surveyed were asked to what extent they agree with the statement, "I have positive working relationships with all or most of my board members." On average, 88 percent of CEOs agreed with this statement. Once again, responses varied significantly and followed the trends of Figure 1. The data shows 100 percent of white male CEOs, white CEOs of any gender, and male CEOs of any race reported they somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, compared with only 67 percent of female CEOs of color.

Figure 2

I Have Positive Working Relationships With All or Most of My Board Members:
Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree

ALL CEOS RATE = 88%

Percentage Point Difference from the All CEOs Rate   Source: CEO Survey Data

These findings suggest challenges arising from lack of civility that may strain relationships among CEOs and boards are not experienced in the same way by all CEOs, and the race and gender identity of a CEO has a significant impact on these experiences.

---

[8] Note that two subgroups, white female CEOs and male CEOs of color, are not displayed in Figures 1-3, as the size of both groups was too small for analysis. However, responses of white female CEOs and male CEOs of color are both included in the calculation of the average.

CHALLENGES

Roles & Relationships among CEOs and Trustees

The relationship between a CEO and the board of trustees is instrumental to the success of a community college. Studies indicate while there are several factors that impact CEO retention and tenure, CEO-Trustee relations are a "singularly influential marker for predictive success of a CEO."[9]

When surveying CCC CEOs, 83 percent mentioned working with boards as one of the most challenging aspects of the role. CEOs and trustees reported struggling with the political nature of the relationship. In one emblematic response, a trustee noted, "I had a president that said to me, 'I don't play games,' and I said, 'Well, if you don't play the game, you're going to lose.'" CEOs cited a variety of challenges in working with their boards, including a lack of understanding of roles, a lack of engagement, and overstepping from their boards.

Many CEOs reported feeling as though their boards treat them solely as employees of the board, rather than leaders of the institution, and frequently do not respect their opinions, expertise, or visions This has been exacerbated by the perception that some trustees are not interested in engaging with the college, and seek these positions as a stepping stone to other elected positions. There is a clear sentiment among trustees and CEOs alike that many trustees approach their positions as a political means to an end. While it is possible to be an engaged and committed board member and have higher political aspirations, some CEOs voiced frustration at the behavior and potential impact of some of their politically motivated board members. One CEO said, "I have trustees who I know never visit campus, and they're winning elections. So, these people are winning who've never talked or engaged with students before, and they're making these decisions on policy and for those students." This CEO's experience is not unique, many CEOs that were interviewed voiced similar challenges, and 44 percent of surveyed trustees stated they know other board members who plan to run for other political positions.

While some may enter their roles with higher political aspirations, trustees represent a diverse background of personal experiences. Many trustees reported being motivated by a passion to give back to the community. In addition, many trustees that were interviewed were former community college students or employees themselves. Other trustees were unaffiliated with the college but were longstanding community members that felt strongly about the positive impact their local colleges had on their communities and wanted to be involved. Many trustees felt they are a more permanent fixture in the college story than the presidents, who are not always community members and are prone to leave within a few years. Many trustees expressed frustration with how CEOs treat them, and felt their ideas and opinions are too often brushed aside as uninformed, irrelevant, or even detrimental to the college.

---

[9] McNaughtan, 2018; Harris & Ellis, 2018; Buckley, 2018; Davis, 2018

CHALLENGES

In a focus group, trustees voiced frustration that they often receive two messages: support your CEO, and do not "get in the weeds." However, trustees are not given clarity concerning how to turn these messages into actions. In focus groups with CEOs, they were asked to describe how trustees could embody these messages, and CEOs shared some concrete steps they believed could help. These steps included asking board members to communicate with the CEO exclusively about any concerns with the college, bringing concerns directly to the CEO before addressing them in an open forum. CEOs added that trustees need to attend continuous professional development to maintain and deepen their knowledge and understandings of the extent and limitations of their roles.

Interviewees who cited strong relationships and support from their boards of trustees were reportedly able to be more effective leaders and focus on important tasks for the college, rather than on managing relationships with board members. In instances of poor CEO-trustee relationships, it is clear both groups are often working to strengthen the relationship, but this often takes away from their abilities to pursue tasks of greater importance and benefit to the school and its students. It is important for the Board and CEO to have a strong working relationship for accreditation purposes as well. If boards are not in compliance with accreditation standards, it will appear on accreditation reports and can cause further harm to the college. Facilitating CEO-trustee relationships can help CEO retention and can positively affect the greater well-being of the college.

This indicates focusing on CEO ability alone will not be an effective strategy to promote retention. It is the abilities of the community colleges' trustees to support one another, work together, and most importantly, support their CEOs, that can improve retention.

Regulatory Challenges in the California Context

All states have rules governing board and college leadership conduct, but many of the circumstances in California lead to a uniquely legislated system that poses additional challenges for CCC CEOs and trustees. The survey results indicated that nearly all CEOs and trustees personally felt comfortable with their understandings of the Brown Act, 10+1, participatory governance, and the role of the faculty senate. However, the survey results and interviews indicated those questioned felt that *others* did not fully understand these measures. This could suggest a cognitive bias, indicating these respondents are not entirely certain of the stipulations of these measures either but are uncomfortable or unwilling to address their own unfamiliarity with these measures.

Figure 3, following page, shows the results from the trustee survey in the top two bars and the CEO survey in the lower bar. This shows while 96 percent of board members reported they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, only 79 percent reported believing other members had the same understanding. In addition, even fewer (61 percent) of CEOs agreed board members had a clear understanding of the role of a board member. Similarly, in Figure 4 the top two bars are from the trustee survey, and the lower bar is from the CEO survey. However, this time, the question asked how well respondents understand the role of CEO or believe others understand the role of the CEO. For those who reported on either, their perceptions of what others understand regarding the various rules and regulations governing the CCC system (i.e., the Brown Act, 10+1, etc.) followed a similar trend to Figure 3 in the numbers.

CHALLENGES

Figure 3
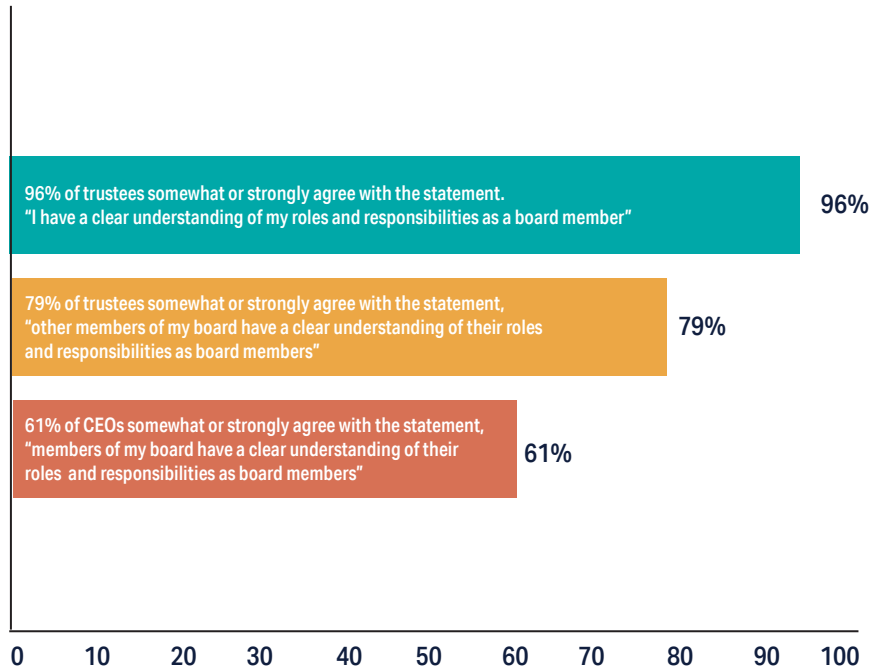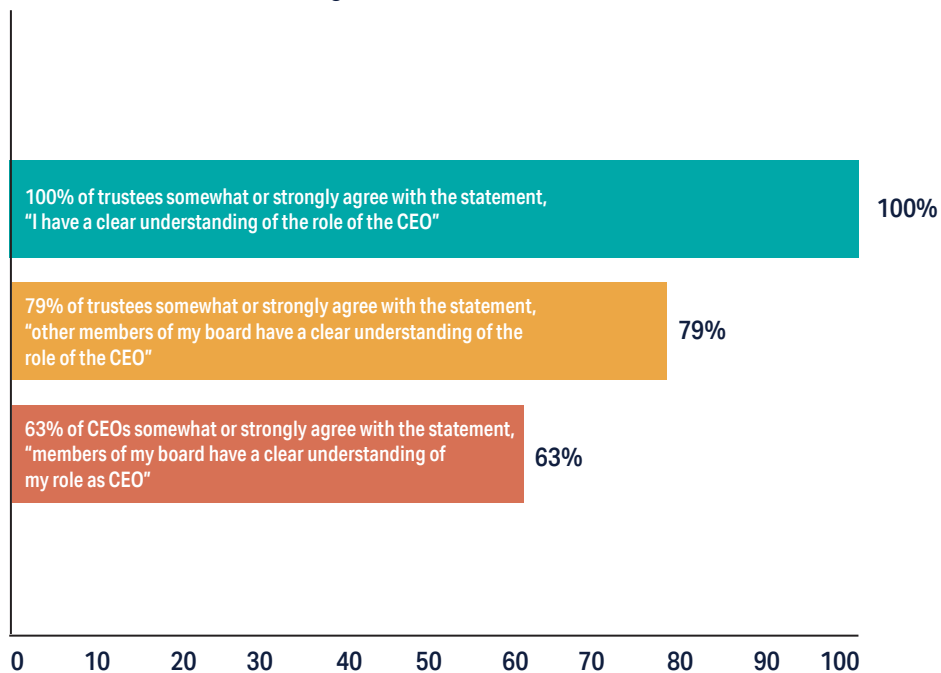
Understanding the role of a board member

96% of trustees somewhat or strongly agree with the statement.
"I have a clear understanding of my roles and responsibilities as a board member"
96%

79% of trustees somewhat or strongly agree with the statement,
"other members of my board have a clear understanding of their roles
and responsibilities as board members"
79%

61% of CEOs somewhat or strongly agree with the statement,
"members of my board have a clear understanding of their
roles and responsibilities as board members"
61%

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

Figure 4

Understanding the role of a CEO

100% of trustees somewhat or strongly agree with the statement,
"I have a clear understanding of the role of the CEO"
100%

79% of trustees somewhat or strongly agree with the statement,
"other members of my board have a clear understanding of the
role of the CEO"
79%

63% of CEOs somewhat or strongly agree with the statement,
"members of my board have a clear understanding of
my role as CEO"
63%

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100

CHALLENGES

One CEO noted, "My Senate was really confused about 10 + 1. They thought plus one meant everything, and it was really helpful to have the CCLC come in to help them understand, but I, myself, also could have used that earlier on. That training, for me, would've been really valuable." CEOs also cited frustration about their perceptions of their boards' lack of understanding of participatory governance. In conversations with trustees, there was a tendency to use the terms "shared governance" and "participatory governance" interchangeably, despite the very different meanings of each, suggesting there may be a need for additional training in this area.

Interviewees also discussed difficulties and misconceptions associated with the Brown Act[10]. The Act is frequently seen as prohibitive to open discussions. Many CEOs felt their communication was hamstrung by the Brown Act, leaving them unable to communicate effectively with their boards and resolve issues outside of the public eye. During interviews, several CEOs reported public board meetings as sources of frustration and cited occasions when they felt undermined by their boards. This occurred to the point that some trustees have felt the need to intervene to protect their CEOs from other trustees. In some cases, accusations and information aired in public board meetings has necessitated the hiring of legal counsel. Other CEOs and trustees —often with more experience— discussed how the Brown Act was certainly a complicating factor, but they felt there is enough leniency with the Act's implementation that CEOs and trustees can still maintain an open dialogue as needed. They believed some CEOs are either scared of violations or use the Act as an excuse to distance themselves from board members. Many CEOs, who reported positive working relationships with their boards and felt less impacted by the Brown Act, mentioned strategies, such as the importance of getting to know board members as individuals, providing weekly updates to the board, and allowing space for board members to ask questions for clarification ahead of public meetings. others understand the role of the CEO. For those who reported on either, their perceptions of what others understand regarding the various rules and regulations governing the CCC system (i.e., the Brown Act, 10+1, etc.) followed a similar trend to Figure 3 in the numbers.

---

[10] Passed by the California Legislature in 1953, the Brown Act facilitates greater transparency
of local legislative bodies through guaranteeing the right of access to the public.

CONCLUSION

To some degree, the factors stated in this report are unavoidable aspects of a CEO's role. The role of CEO is incredibly complex by nature. With the changes caused by COVID-19 and an increased emphasis on supporting student basic needs, this complexity is only increasing. When looking at the consistent decline in CEO tenure during the past two decades and the acceleration of that decline during the past two years, it becomes clear there are shifts that have occurred that not only make the position more complex but also make succeeding in the position increasingly difficult. There is no singular reason for declining retention. However, the factors identified in this report have created an increasingly challenging —in some cases, even hostile— work environment that hampers many new CEOs' abilities to retain their positions, regardless of competency. To change this trend, it is critical that challenges related to distinctions of roles and responsibilities among boards and CEOs, and the relationships among CEOs and boards, be addressed. While there is no quick solution to addressing this, there is great potential to move the needle, as both groups believe, overwhelmingly, that they have more to learn about being effective in their respective roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While each factor impacting retention is influential in its own right, the research and literature review in this report suggest early departure is rarely because of a singular reason. Rather, it is the result of a combination of reasons. It is best to understand these factors as entwined, unique in how they contribute in specific contexts to increasingly challenging and even hostile workplace culture; in turn, increasing the likelihood of early departure. As the cause of increased CEO turnover is multifaceted, there can be no simple or singular solution. Nevertheless, CEOs and trustees suggested several current practices that should be continued and expanded, as well as new ideas that could be implemented to improve the situation. These practices include:

- **Creation of a skills-based directory** - this would allow CEOs who felt they had competencies in certain areas to share this information with other CEOs looking to develop their skills in particular areas.

- **Continued opportunities for CEOs and trustees to connect informally** - CEOs shared the importance of opportunities to connect in an informal setting with other CEOs without other staff or board members present. These types of events are equally important for trustees, such as board retreats for teambuilding and to establish positive relationships with one another amongst the board.

- **Additional mandatory, professional development** - Trustees and CEOs both expressed interest in regular and continuous professional development opportunities that extend beyond just acclimating those new to the respective roles. Other specific areas of interest in professional development included trainings specifically targeted at affinity groups, trainings in soft or communication skills, practical or technical trainings, and additional professional development to better understand the unique context of CCCs.

- **Strengthen formal mentorship programs, and include recently retired CEOs**- Many CEOs who were close to or planning retirement expressed interest in staying involved in a mentorship role for current CEOs and expressed how this might also help mitigate some of the confidentiality concerns expressed by sitting CEOs as they navigated mentor-mentee arrangements. Many also expressed interest in the development of mentorship programs specifically targeting different affinity groups.