Piloting Student-Centered AI Engagement Across California's Community Colleges

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California Community Colleges

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OVERVIEW

This report presents the key insights and outcomes of a pilot initiative supported by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and funded by Salesforce as part of an early investment in surfacing student-centered AI insights. Through distinct contributions, Ourmedia helped make visible the opportunities, concerns, and creative thinking students at the California Community Colleges are engaging in as they navigate AI's role in their futures. It marks an early step in ensuring that students' lived experiences, aspirations, and concerns shape how the community college system adopts AI technologies in alignment with statewide goals.

Our work at AI Ready Edu delivered on three key goals:

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Pilot Ourmedia's model for shaping AI strategy in California's community college system through scalable, student-facing workshops

Share insights from student-centered sessions with educators and stakeholders

Bring Career Readiness to the forefront of conversations about AI and Gen Z

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- This pilot initiative surfaced critical insights for scaling student-centered AI and career readiness programming across the California Community College system. The AI Ready Edu event offered a meaningful testbed to prototype Ourmedia's train-the-trainer workshop model, grounded in the lived experiences of California Community College students.

- Faculty across sessions expressed strong interest in Ourmedia's listening-first, experiential learning model, noting a need for more opportunities to explore AI's career implications with their students. As one professor remarked, "I don't even know if this career stuff is on my students' radar. I would love to see this put in front of them."

- Students responded enthusiastically to the workshops, interviews, and panels, sharing that these engagements helped them connect AI to their own educational and career pathways—many for the first time. Their input reinforces the need for continued co-design with student and faculty leaders to refine and expand this model across the system.

- Ourmedia's Student Voices Panel gave faculty and administrators a rare chance to hear directly from young leaders about how AI is shaping their learning, creativity, and career goals—filling a gap that is too often overlooked in systemwide decision-making.

FUTURE FOCUS: STUDENT WORKSHOP ON AI & CAREER READINESS

"I KNOW AI IS THE FUTURE, BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR A THEATER ARTS MAJOR?"

As the anchor session of Ourmedia's pilot, this workshop set the foundation for surfacing how California Community College students think about and experience AI across learning, job search, and early career transitions. This session was designed as an interactive, insight-gathering workshop that catalyzed critical thinking about how AI's impacts by presenting concrete scenarios that enabled students to explore the following questions:

1. What role do you want AI to play in your learning—and what support do you need to use it well?
2. What new skills or strategies do you need to stand out in an AI-driven job market?
3. What mindset or skills will help you work effectively with AI in your first 90 days on the job?

Workshop participants expressed strong desire for:

- Clear guidance on how to use AI ethically and effectively in their future careers
- Opportunities to build trust in AI through hands-on practice
- Critical thinking skills to stay in control when AI is present in educational and professional settings

TESTIMONIAL INSIGHTS

Fears about AI in the Classroom

"That it will increase cheating. It stops the creative flow"

"Students falling behind because teachers were afraid to use AI"

"There are unknown ways that it went 'boom'"

"Difficult to evaluate AI answers"

"My voice will be stolen"

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Interest in developing new skills to stay resilient in the workforce as AI automates simpler tasks

"Understanding how to write concise, specific questions."

"Hands-on learning and testing of any custom AI tools & learning from it."

"Understanding the mission of an org, program, or product you are trying to serve."

Consideration of what it looks like to be a "Good Teammate" to an AI bot in the workplace

"Taking accountability"

"You + AI can manage diverse cultural sensitivity"

"Chat with people ≠ Chat with AI – must be different"

This session affirmed the need for expanded, well-facilitated student workshops with more time and structure for deep reflection.

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AI Ready Edu served as a pilot of our student workshop model, surfacing valuable insights on data, content, and facilitation needs. This session helped lay the foundation for a scalable, train-the-trainer model that can be prototyped and refined for local delivery by faculty and staff across the community college system.

This session built on past engagements Ourmedia has hosted with IDEO, Jobs For the Future, JVS, and UC Santa Barbara to center Gen Z student voices in exploring the future of AI.
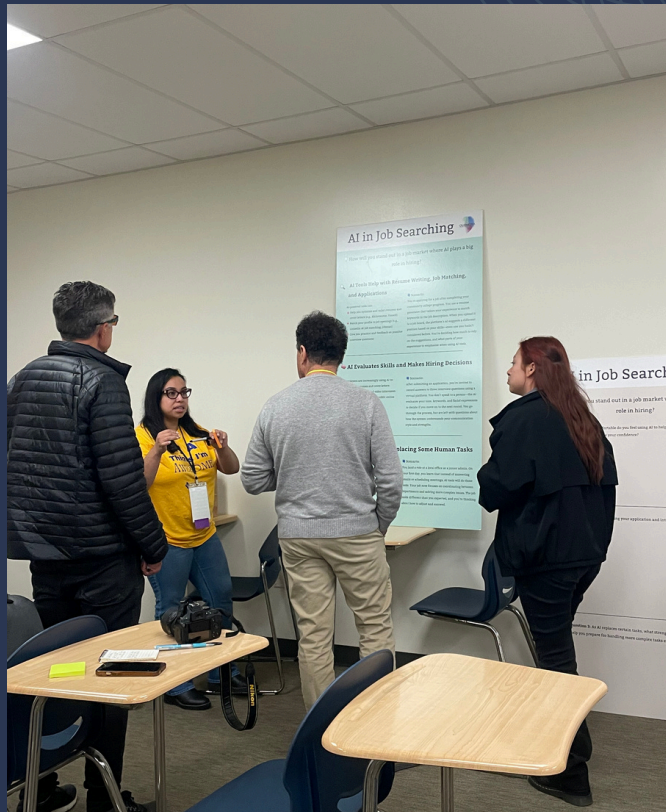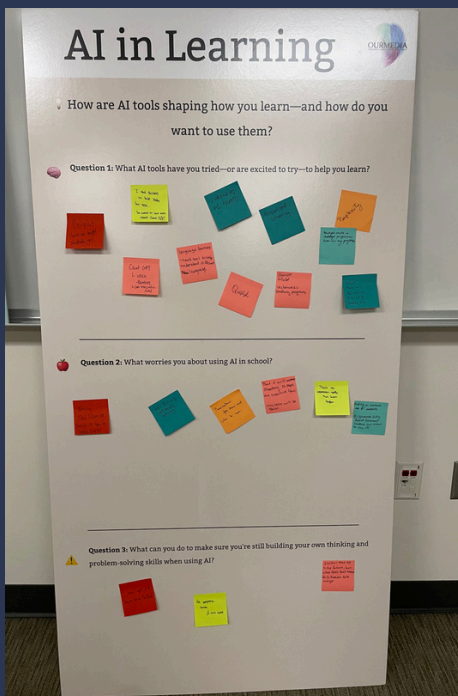
UNDERSTANDING AI THROUGH STUDENT PERSPECTIVES - EDUCATOR WORKSHOP

This session brought together 30 faculty and administrators to explore AI's impact on learning from the student perspective, using insights from the 'Future Focus' workshop. Grounded in student testimonials and key themes, the discussion surfaced actionable recommendations and sparked strong interest in bringing similar workshops to their campuses.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recognition that students often misunderstand AI as "all-knowing" and may use it inappropriately without guidance.
- Faculty want support in integrating AI ethically—including tools, policies, and strategies that promote critical engagement.
- There's growing interest in redesigning curriculum to include AI-related activities such as red-teaming, reflective writing, and student-led AI tool testing.

After discussing student insights, faculty identified four core areas of their teaching that should adapt in response to AI:

01 **Make research and summary work more active**

Shift from passive assignments to opinion and project-based or critical thinking tasks.

Example: Have students write reflective essays on AI-generated content rather than regurgitate summaries

02 **Creative integration of AI tools into the classroom**

Encourage students to use AI for brainstorming, art, or poetry—then teach them to refine and critique flawed outputs.

AI should serve as a creative springboard, not a finished product

03 **Curriculum redesign to include AI literacy emphasis**

Embed AI literacy through purposeful prompting and hands-on activities.

Example: Red-teaming exercises where students try to "break" or challenge AI systems.

04 **Emphasize critical skill-building and hands-on learning**

Focus on teaching students how to generate original ideas, ask better questions, and think critically. Educators also emphasized the need to move beyond lectures toward more interactive, student-led formats.

Avoid reliance on AI by helping students develop robust intellectual habits.

FACULTY ALSO SHARED THEIR VIEWS ON BARRIERS TO AI INTEGRATION IN THE CLASSROOM, POINTING OUT THE FOLLOWING ISSUES:

- Overreliance on AI and overconfidence in its accuracy
- Rapidly evolving tools make it hard for faculty to keep up
- Widespread lack of AI literacy among both students and instructors
- Difficulty applying AI meaningfully across different disciplines and tasks
- Uncertainty about how students are using AI and to what extent
- Low faculty confidence in designing effective, AI-integrated assignments
- Time constraints limit instructors' ability to explore new tools
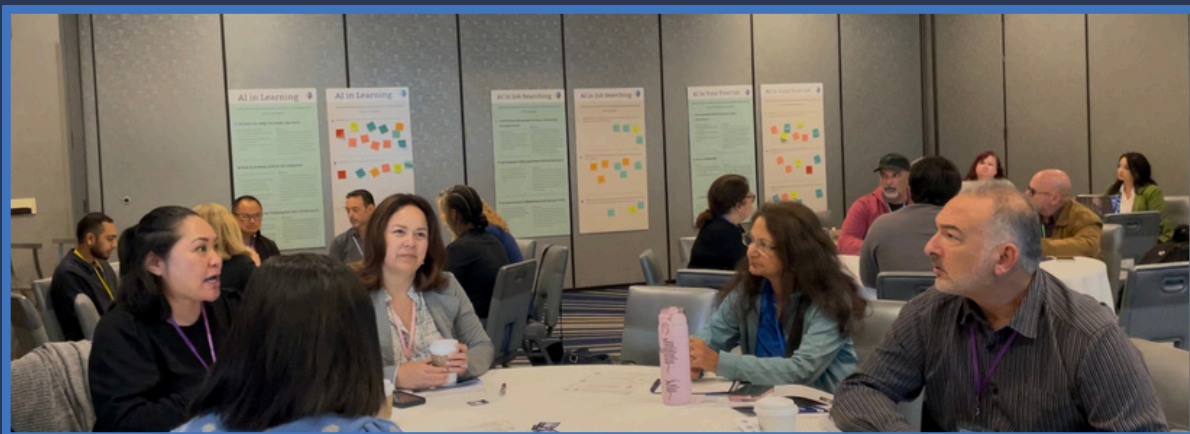
SPOTLIGHT: STUDENT VOICES PANEL

Ourmedia convened a panel of four student speakers from various California Community Colleges in the region to share how they view AI's role in education, creativity, and the future of work at the May 2025 AI Ready Edu Conference. The panel served as a critical anchor in the conference's programming; each of the student representatives offered nuanced insights into AI's impacts on their learning, and shared specific use cases that helped faculty better understand AI's value as a tool for learning, efficiency, and collaboration.

STUDENT LEADERS

Aditya Jadhav (Irvine Valley College) - Applied Learner with High Workload & Club Leadership

- **How he uses AI:** Actively tests emerging tools (e.g., Notion, ChatGPT, NotebookLM) to manage tasks, research, and personal productivity while leading the campus AI Club.

- What AI enabled: A strong sense of independence and confidence—especially when using AI to fix errors and break down difficult concepts.

- Vision for AI in learning: Deep personalization to fit student needs in large classes where faculty can't support everyone directly.

- Advice for schools: Set clear ethical guidelines, provide examples of proper use, and offer clubs, guest speakers, and workshops to support exploration.

Christian Lopez (Fullerton College) - Creative Technologist and Systems Thinker

- How he uses AI: Built an autonomous underwater vehicle and uses AI to break down complex goals into actionable tasks and develop self-guided lesson plans for him in his coursework (e.g., image recognition, sensor integration).

- What AI enabled: Ownership over learning through tools like AI-generated study plans; AI acted as a mentor and thought partner.

- Vision for AI in learning: Transform education into adaptive, student-driven experiences with tools that respond to curiosity and thinking styles.

- Advice for schools: Teach prompt design, critical evaluation, and bias awareness; provide access to infrastructure and mentorship; position AI as a scaffold, not a shortcut.

Amari Mascarinas (Cypress College) - Creativity-Oriented and Equity-Minded

- How he uses AI: Leverages AI to handle formatting and grammar so he can focus on creative substance in writing.

- What AI enabled: Less perfectionism, more creative risk-taking—AI reduces barriers and frees time and mental space.

- Vision for AI in learning: A tool to expand possibility and help students, especially those with nontraditional ideas, express themselves more freely.

- Advice for schools: Show students both the power and limitations of AI; avoid strict bans and instead model appropriate, ethical use in action.

Vittorio Hua (Cypress College) - Self-Led Learner and Technical Builder

- How he uses AI: Learned Power Automate via AI to build a QR code system for a campus center—an applied, technical project that had real community impact.

- What AI enabled: Increased confidence, independence, and belief in his ability to solve technical challenges without waiting for instruction.

- Vision for AI in learning: Personalized, conversational learning support that adapts to different learning needs.

- Advice for schools: Move away from warnings; instead, provide hands-on guidance through workshops, ethical framing, and opportunities to apply AI responsibly in real assignments.

KEY THEMES FROM STUDENT INTERVIEWS

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Ourmedia conducted on-site interviews with 15 students at Cypress College to supplement findings from workshops hosted at AI Ready Edu. Student uses of AI ranged widely, from never engaging with AI tools to developing AI agents that create study guides and tailored lesson plans.

Many students view AI as a powerful educational tool, especially for tasks like research, writing, and accessibility—but nearly all expressed a need for cautious, ethical, and guided use. Many also pointed to the risk of overreliance on AI tools that could lead to a lack of critical thinking skills, and reported seeing this widely among their peers.

When prompted about how AI would impact their career readiness, many students interviewed reported feeling uncertain about their futures and felt that there was a lack of clear guidance from their educators on how to develop the skills needed to stay resilient in an AI-Driven Workforce.

INTERVIEW VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS LINKED HERE

Discipline-Specific Individual Reflections:

- Aerospace Engineering: Sees AI as helpful in technical work but wants more structured instruction on effective use.
- Law: Believes AI will enhance future legal work; strongly supports integration into curriculum.
- Film & Art Students: Express concern that AI could erode creativity and originality in the arts.
- Music Tech & Human Services: Use AI creatively and for study support but want ethical training and career-focused support.
- Psychology: Concerned about declining student habits and misuse without clear guardrails.
- General Group: Appreciate AI's benefits for learning but fear job displacement and dependency.

"AI SHOULD SUPPORT—NOT REPLACE—OUR LEARNING. WE WANT HELP, NOT SHORTCUTS."

What They Want from Schools:

1. Courses or modules on AI literacy and ethics
2. More hands-on practice with AI tools across disciplines
3. Guidance on AI's career relevance and responsible use

EDTECH & AI CAREER READINESS PANEL

This panel featured short talks and tool demos from two AI-focused edtech companies: GoEducate and ClimbTogether. Participants then engaged in small group discussions using prompts centered around their students' needs and the broader systemic supports required for meaningful adoption.

GoEducate: Demonstrated an AI-enhanced pathway tool that connects coursework, skills, and job openings in real time.

ClimbTogether: Shared a model for building social capital and improving career access through AI-driven coaching.

Our goal with this panel was to bring specific tools into focus as a way to ground the AI conversation in tangible solutions. We see this work as part of an effort to catalyze reflection on the types of tools and technologies that will best support students in an AI-transformed workforce. In the long term, we aim to help foster an ecosystem marketplace—a space where educators and workforce leaders can collaboratively explore, evaluate, and implement aligned AI and EdTech solutions.

CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

Our time at AI Ready Edu highlighted key challenges that today's students and educators are navigating—offering signals to be addressed during prototyping. These moments revealed opportunities to refine our model in response to the realities of learning in the age of AI.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Ourmedia's team spoke to a few students at the event who expressed desire for more of their Gen Z peers to be in attendance in future events. Faculty in attendance benefitted from hearing student insights through the student voices panel and Ourmedia's insight sharing.

Ken Shelton, afternoon keynote, remarked that the Student Voices Panel was an invaluable opportunity to center the voices of students, something he sees at less than 5% of the conferences he visits.

RAPID PACE OF AI DEVELOPMENT

The rapid pace of AI's evolution poses serious challenges to the development of frameworks, resources, and career pathways to support the next generation of learners and workforce.

FACULTY CO-DESIGN

The challenges associated with transformation of curriculum and learning pathways point to the need for involving faculty from the community colleges as co-designers of the workshop model.

While faculty at AI Ready Edu expressed interest in actively exploring AI, addressing the needs of the broader set of educators across the college system who have historically shied away from AI is another area to consider.

INDUSTRY PARTICIPATION

Industry participation is a crucial area to further explore and amplify in discussions about the evolving impact of AI in learning and career readiness.

In future efforts to collaborate with students, bringing industry voices in to mentor to student leadership and assist community college leaders in career and skills pathway development will be valuable.

ALIGNMENT WITH VISION 2030 AND HUMANS PRINCIPLES

This initiative supports the Vision 2030 goals of equitable access, success, and support by…

- Piloting models that give students hands-on opportunities to explore the ethical, academic, and career implications of AI
- Supporting faculty professional development through workshop facilitation and student insight sharing
- Generating scalable insights that can inform systemwide strategies and practices

It also reflects the HUMANS principles by:

- Centering human voice and agency in AI implementation
- Addressing equity and privacy concerns raised by students
- Encouraging transparency and co-design through student-faculty dialogue

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Students are curious but cautious
They want to explore AI but need structured support.

Faculty are willing but underprepared.
Many seek resources, training, and confidence.

Career readiness through AI is underdeveloped.
There's a critical need for programs that make this real.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

1. Fund student-centered AI workshops with a career-readiness lens
2. Support faculty through train-the-trainer models and continuous learning
3. Continue gathering and sharing student insight data to inform systems change
4. Prioritize ethical AI literacy as part of general education

CONCLUSION

This pilot initiative served as an important opportunity for the California Community Colleges to test Ourmedia's student-centered approach to exploring the impacts of AI on learning and career development.

The work surfaced key insights into how California's Community College students are navigating AI's role in their futures and laid the groundwork for a scalable, train-the-trainer workshop model. These findings offer a practical framework for amplifying student perspectives and advancing AI literacy and career readiness across the system—aligned with the Chancellor's Office Vision 2030 goals and HUMANS principles.

By capturing data and practices, we illuminated both enthusiasm and uncertainty: California Community College students are eager to use AI creatively and practically, but they lack the ethical guidance, contextual support, and confidence-building experiences to do so effectively.

Ourmedia is committed to developing a scalable, student-centered model that supports California Community College students and educators at the intersections of AI literacy and career readiness. By centering the voices of the students, we can lead a movement for human-first AI—rooted in equity, driven by real needs, and ready for what's next.

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