

ASIAN AMERICAN EMPLOYER INSIGHTS ON WORKFORCE READINESS

A DELPHI STUDY OF ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES
ON WORKFORCE READINESS, AI ADOPTION, AND THE FUTURE OF
COMMUNITY COLLEGE TALENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



JULY 2026

POWERED BY



California
Community
Colleges

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I. Executive Summary

The Greater Los Angeles area is home to one of the most dynamic and diverse regional economies in the United States, and its community colleges sit at the center of the pipeline that supplies that economy with talent. This study seeks to answer a simple but consequential question: *what do the business leaders who make hiring decisions believe community colleges should do to prepare students for the workforce that is now taking shape?*

Asian Professional Exchange (APEX), in collaboration with the Los Angeles Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research (LA COE), conducted a two-round Delphi study among Asian American business leaders across Greater Los Angeles. Round 1 gathered detailed input from 39 leaders spanning 11 industries. Round 2 returned the aggregated findings to a panel of 32 leaders and asked them to indicate where they agreed and where they did not, allowing areas of consensus to be distinguished from areas of disagreement.

Key Findings

1. AI is an accelerating trend, but leaders agree it should support workers rather than replace them.

AI was the single most-cited labor market trend in Round 1 (85% of respondents), and it remained a clear consensus in Round 2 (78% agreement). Yet the strongest consensus in the entire study, with 97% agreement and not a single dissent, was that AI is a tool to augment human work rather than replace it, and that graduates who lean on AI without developing critical thinking will be at a disadvantage.

2. Employers see soft skills, not technical training, as the biggest gap in graduates.

Soft skills, including communication, leadership, and professionalism, were named the single biggest gap among community college graduates by 59% of Round 1 respondents, far ahead of specific technical certifications at 15%.

3. Hiring weakened over the last year but is potentially steady. It is not booming and not collapsing.

44% of leaders reported decreased hiring versus a year earlier, while 51% expect to simply maintain headcount over the coming year. The dominant posture is cautious stability rather than expansion or retrenchment.

4. There is real employer interest in community college graduates, but few structured pipelines exist to connect them.

Only 5% of organizations hire community college graduates frequently and 38% currently require four-year degrees for most roles. But 23% say they are actively interested in developing a community college pipeline, and another 21% already hire from these schools occasionally. Many employers are open to hiring community college graduates, but most lack an established relationship or recruiting channel with these schools, so that interest rarely translates into actual hires.

5. There is strong agreement on what community colleges should prioritize: applied AI skills and structured internship or apprenticeship programs.

81% of Round 2 respondents want community colleges to develop applied AI proficiency in students, and 62% identified structured internship and apprenticeship pipelines as the single most valuable new initiative a community college could launch.

Taken together, these findings point toward a clear and encouraging agenda. The leaders in this study are not asking community colleges to chase every new technical tool. They are asking for graduates who can think critically, communicate well, use AI fluently and judiciously across multiple platforms, and step into real work through employer-connected experiences. Each of those is squarely within the community college mission, and each is reinforced by the detailed findings, recommendations, and supporting data presented in the remainder of this report.

Summary of Key Recommendations

1. **Teach AI in critically-evaluated applications across every discipline.** Integrate AI fluency into existing courses rather than isolating it, and frame it around judgment and evaluation, not tool mechanics.
2. **Expose students to multiple AI platforms rather than standardizing on one.** Build familiarity with the foundation models in addition to introducing industry-specific tools with real-world applications.
3. **Build structured internship and apprenticeship pipelines connecting students directly to employers.** Begin with the industries and employers who have already signaled interest.
4. **Develop professional skills through real-world, employer-partnered project work rather than standalone courses.**
5. **Pair soft-skills development with applied domain experience, not isolated instruction.**

II. Introduction and Study Rationale

Purpose of the Study

This report was produced by Asian Professional Exchange (APEX), in collaboration with the Los Angeles Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research (LA COE), as a qualitative labor market intelligence study drawing on the professional expertise of Asian American business leaders in the Greater Los Angeles metro area. The purpose was to complement the quantitative datasets that typically inform community college planning, such as those from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the California Employment Development Department, and job-posting analytics, with something those datasets cannot easily capture: the real-time judgment of the leaders who actively participating in the hiring process.

Traditional labor market data is essential, but it is also backward-looking and aggregated. It can show what happened to employment last quarter; it is less able to reveal what a hiring manager in aerospace manufacturing or orthodontics or municipal government believes about the skills a graduate will need three years from now. This study was designed to surface exactly that kind of forward-looking, experience-based judgment, and to do so in a structured way that distinguishes consensus from individual opinion.

The Asian American business community is a significant and growing part of the Los Angeles regional economy, spanning a multitude of different industries. Capturing the perspective of leaders in this community offers a cross-sectoral, cross-cultural lens whose lessons apply to students of every background.

Research Objectives

1. Identify the most critical skill gaps community college graduates face when entering the workforce, as perceived by decision-makers involved in the hiring process.
2. Assess the current and projected impact of artificial intelligence and automation on hiring, job functions, and workforce composition.
3. Gauge the economic and hiring sentiment of Asian American business leaders in Greater Los Angeles for 2026 and 2027.
4. Surface actionable recommendations for community college curriculum, career services, and industry partnership development.
5. Identify areas of consensus and areas of disagreement among business leaders on the future of the Southern California labor market.

III. Experimental Design and Methodology

Study Design: A Modified Delphi Method

This study uses the Delphi method, an iterative, multi-round research approach developed at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s to build structured consensus among experts on complex, forward-looking questions. Rather than convening a single meeting (where the loudest or most senior voice may potentially dominate) the Delphi method collects judgments individually, feeds aggregated results back to the group, and invites participants to reconsider their positions in light of what their peers think.

The Delphi approach is particularly well suited to this study for several reasons. Labor market forecasting does not always lend itself to precise analytical solution and can benefit from informed collective judgment. The relevant experts, senior leaders across very different industries, are dispersed and not in regular contact with one another. This study deployed a structured, asynchronous, two-round survey.

Alignment with Classical Delphi Characteristics

A classical Delphi study exhibits five defining characteristics. The table below maps this study against each, including one point of divergence relating to the stability of panelists between rounds.

Characteristic	How This Study Meets or Diverges
Anonymity	Responses were collected individually and are reported only in aggregate; no participant is identifiable in any output.
Iteration	The study ran in two structured rounds, allowing positions to be reconsidered in light of group results.
Controlled feedback	Aggregated Round 1 findings were presented to participants in Round 2 before they responded.
Statistical group response	Results are expressed as group-level frequencies and agreement percentages, not individual positions.
Stability between rounds	Assessed by comparing Round 1 findings with Round 2 agreement (Section VI). Note one divergence from a classical closed-panel Delphi. Round 2 was open to participants who had not necessarily completed Round 1, so it is a repeated cross-section, and stability must be interpreted accordingly.

Panel of Expertise in the Asian American Business Community

Following Delphi convention, participants were selected purposively for their expertise rather than as a statistically representative random sample. Since the credibility of a Delphi study rests on the quality and relevance of its panel rather than on sample size, the panel here was deliberately composed of people with direct participation in the hiring process at their respective organizations.

- **Target population.** Asian American business leaders in Greater Los Angeles with direct involvement in hiring and talent decisions.
- **Recruitment channels.** The APEX member network of more than 5,000 professionals, outreach through partner organizations, and a branded recruitment flyer distributed by email and at APEX events. Reach was extended through referral within the network.
- **Eligibility.** A mid-level to senior role (C-suite, partner, VP, director, manager, or equivalent); based in or managing teams in Greater Los Angeles; and direct experience making or influencing hiring decisions.
- **Establishing expertise.** Respondent role, industry, company size, and number of direct reports were captured in Round 1 to document the panel's standing and hiring authority, as summarized in Exhibit 1.

Instruments

Round 1 instrument

The Round 1 questionnaire contained 18 questions administered via Google Forms in April 2026. It combined multiple-choice items (7), multi-select “check all that apply” items (4), an ordinal frequency item (1), open-ended free-response items (5), and demographic profile questions. The questions were organized across five domains: respondent profile; community college hiring and skill gaps; labor market trends and AI adoption; hiring sentiment and workforce outlook; and industry-specific insights. Prior to full distribution the instrument was reviewed for question content, wording, response format, and sequence, with minor revisions made to improve clarity and ensure the survey was feasible for busy senior respondents to complete in the stated 5 to 10 minutes.

Round 2 instrument

The Round 2 questionnaire contained 9 substantive questions administered via Google Forms in June 2026, preceded by brief profile fields (name, gender, industry). The first five questions were Likert-scale agreement items, each presenting an aggregated Round 1 finding and asking the respondent to indicate agreement on a five-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The remaining four were forward-looking multiple-choice questions on industry trajectory, the level of AI proficiency colleges should develop, the most valuable new program a college could offer, and the best way to address early-career skill gaps. The final two questions offered an “Other” write-in option. To reduce anchoring bias, the survey explicitly encouraged respondents to answer based on their own experience and professional judgment even where their view differed from the reported majority.

Consensus Threshold and Justification

Consensus was defined as 70% or more of Round 2 respondents selecting “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” on a given statement. A 70% threshold is a deliberately demanding bar that requires broad agreement before a finding is treated as settled, while still allowing for the natural variation of opinion across very different industries. Importantly, items that fell below 70% are still reported as

non-consensus findings because the absence of agreement is itself meaningful information about where the business community diverges in opinion.

Analytical Approach

- **Quantitative.** Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations by industry and company size.
- **Qualitative.** Thematic coding of open-ended responses to identify recurring themes, with illustrative quotations attributed by industry.
- **Consensus and stability across rounds.** Percentage agreement measured against the 70% threshold, together with a Round 1 to Round 2 stability comparison for the findings tested in both rounds.

Ethical Considerations

- **Voluntary participation.** Respondents opted in and could decline any question or withdraw before submission.
- **Privacy and confidentiality.** Only the minimum personal data needed was collected. All results are anonymized and reported in aggregate.
- **Non-commercial use.** Data is used solely for this labor market research and not for any commercial or marketing purpose.
- **Low risk.** Participants are professional adults responding within their area of expertise; no vulnerable populations are involved.

IV. Round 1 Results

Round 1 drew 39 complete responses from senior leaders across 11 industries. This section presents the demographic profile of the panel followed by findings in four areas: community college hiring and the skills gap; labor market trends; AI adoption; and hiring sentiment. It closes with a thematic analysis of the open-ended responses.

Who Responded

The panel was roughly evenly split by gender (20 male, 19 female) and weighted toward the leaders of smaller organizations, though large employers were also well represented. Just under half (49%) came from organizations of 1 to 50 employees, 28% from organizations of 501 or more, and 23% from mid-sized organizations of 51 to 500. Two-thirds (67%) personally managed between 1 and 10 employees.

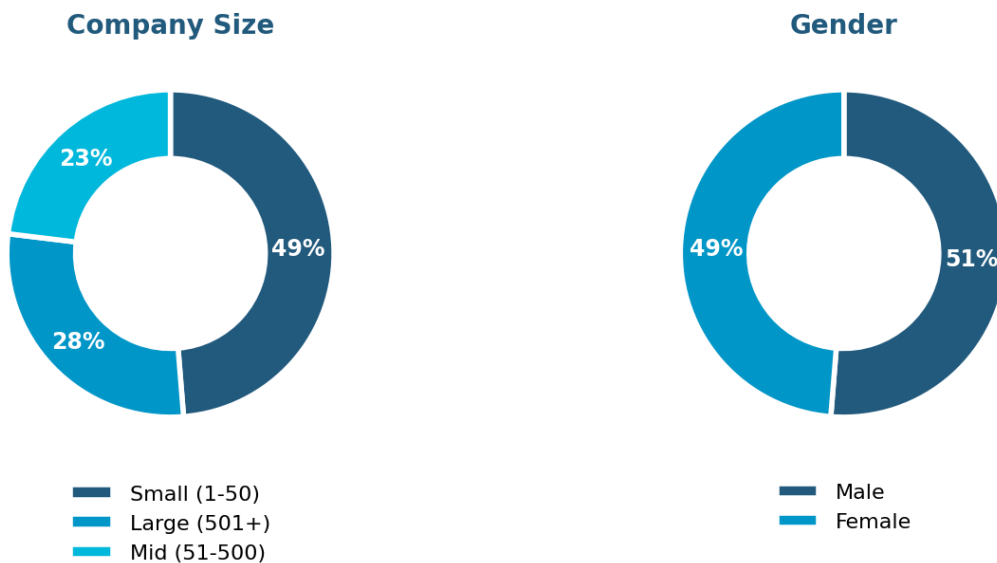


Exhibit 1. Respondent demographics: company size and gender (Round 1, N = 39).

Industry representation was broad. Government and non-profit and professional, scientific, and technical services were the largest groups (7 each), followed by arts and entertainment and healthcare (6 each) and information and technology (5). Manufacturing and real estate contributed 2 each, with finance and insurance, hospitality, architecture and construction, and trading each represented by a single leader. This distribution is shown in Exhibit 2.

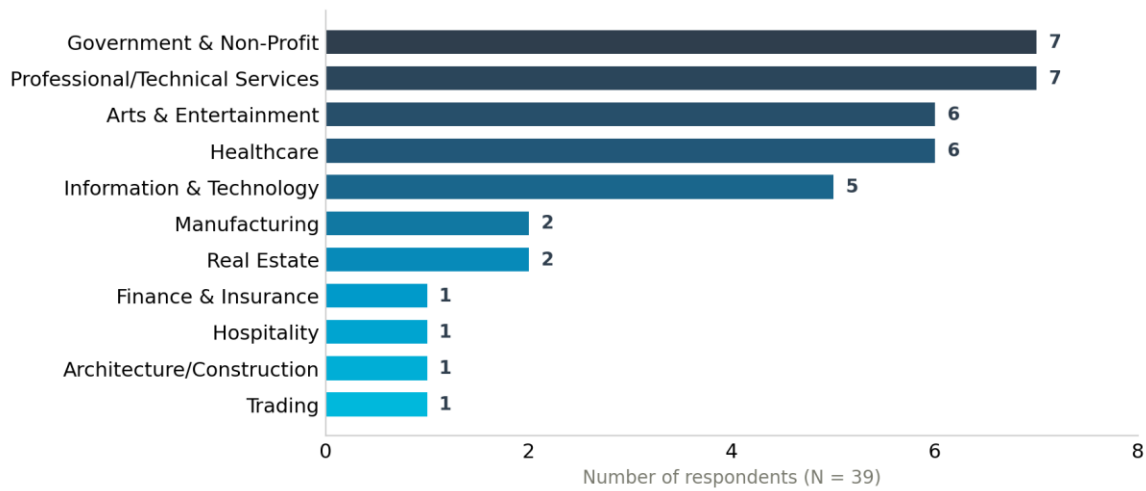


Exhibit 2. Industry distribution of respondents (Round 1, N = 39). Architecture/Construction and Trading were write-in industries.

Section A: Community College Hiring and the Skills Gap

Respondents were asked whether their organization currently hires graduates from California Community Colleges. The results, shown in Exhibit 3, reveal both a challenge and an opportunity. The largest single group (38%) requires four-year degrees for most roles, and only 5% hire community college graduates frequently. At the same time, 23% say they are interested in developing a pipeline, and another 21% already hire from community colleges occasionally. Adding the leaders who already hire from these schools to those who want to begin, nearly half of the panel (49%) is open to community college talent.

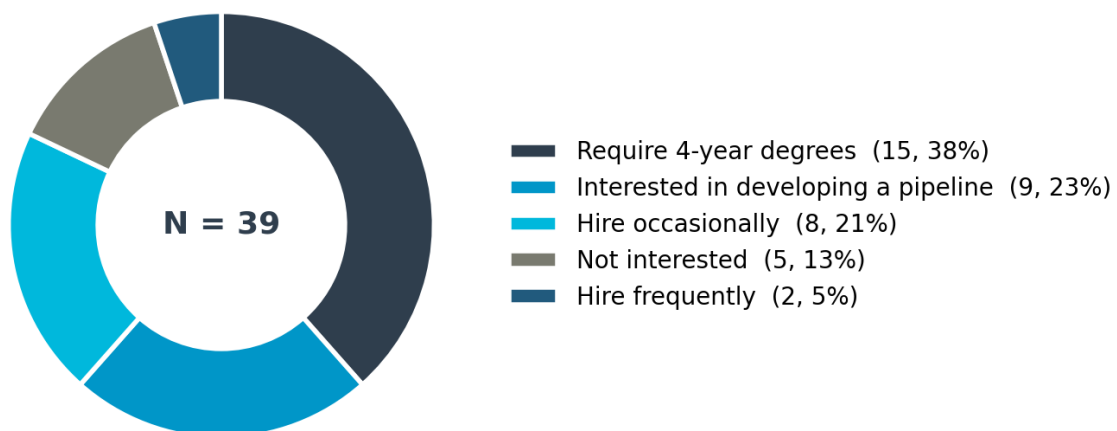


Exhibit 3. Does your organization currently hire graduates from California Community Colleges? (Round 1, N = 39).

There is real employer interest in community college graduates, but few structured pipelines exist to connect them.

The 23% of leaders who want to build a community college pipeline but have not yet done so represent the most actionable audience in the entire study. Their interest in this talent pool is clear, but without an established relationship or recruiting channel with these schools, that interest rarely translates into actual hires.

Asked to identify the biggest skill gap community college students face when entering their industry, respondents pointed overwhelmingly to soft skills. As Exhibit 4 shows, 59% named communication, leadership, and professionalism, and 41% cited a lack of understanding of real-world industry applications. Specific technical certifications, by contrast, were named by only 15%. (10 respondents, or 26%, selected “not applicable” because their organization does not hire community college graduates.)

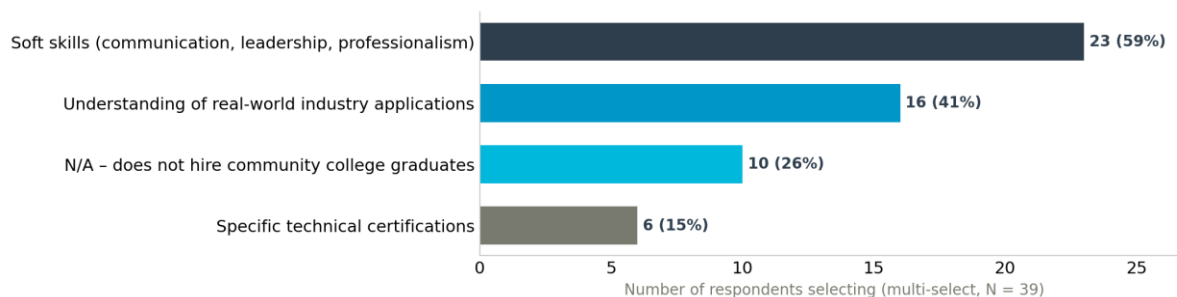


Exhibit 4. *Biggest skill gap community college students face, multi-select (Round 1, N = 39).*

The open-ended responses gave some additional context on this topic. One information and technology leader wrote that professional communication is a must while common technical certifications are “table stakes.” A professional services leader observed that students increasingly arrive with resumes that oversell their in-person and client-facing abilities, and called for structured leadership training “beyond just textbook learning.” The implication for community colleges is that technical training, while necessary, is not where these employers see the gap. The gap is in professional readiness.

Section B: Labor Market Trends

When asked which labor market trend will most significantly affect community college graduates over the next three to five years, respondents were nearly unanimous: 85% selected the rise of AI and digital automation in entry-level roles. No other trend came close. A shift toward skills-based hiring over four-year degrees and macro-economic pressure tied at 44% each, and a shift toward blue-collar work was named by 33%. Exhibit 5 presents the full distribution.

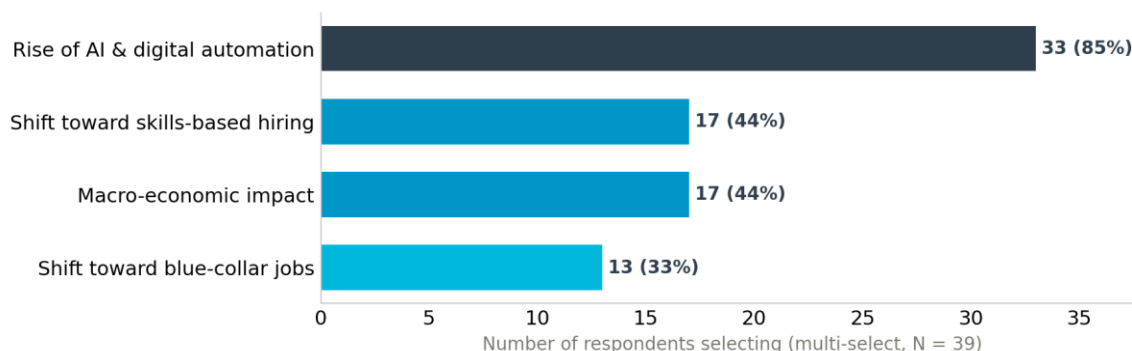


Exhibit 5. Labor market trend expected to most affect community college graduates, multi-select (Round 1, N = 39).

The tie between skills-based hiring and macro-economic pressure suggests that leaders perceive two distinct forces operating at once: a structural change in how talent is evaluated (with credentials mattering less and demonstrated skills more), and a cyclical headwind of high costs, tight funding, and policy uncertainty.

Section C: AI Adoption and Workforce Impact

Given how strongly respondents flagged AI as a trend, the survey also measured how deeply AI has already penetrated their industries. The pace of adoption, as shown in Exhibit 6, is broad but uneven. Combining the top two categories, 44% report that AI tools are used frequently or most of the time in their industry. Extending to those who use it at least some of the time brings the figure to 62%. At the same time, 38% report only limited or rare use, indicating that adoption, while widespread, is far from universal.

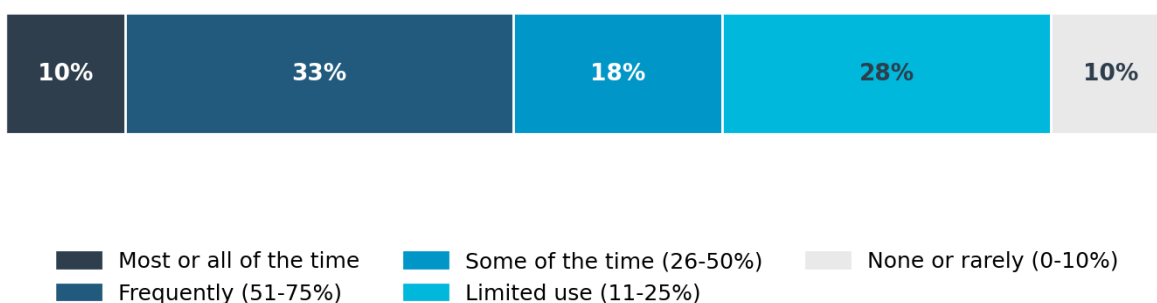


Exhibit 6. How frequently are AI-powered tools used in your industry? (Round 1, N = 39).

The survey also asked which specific AI tools are in use. As Exhibit 7 shows, the three leading general-purpose assistants were used at near-parity: ChatGPT (64%), Gemini (59%), and Claude (56%). Industry-specific AI tools were used by 31%, other large language models such as Perplexity and DeepSeek by 26%, and Microsoft Copilot, which appeared entirely through write-in responses, by roughly 15%. Two respondents reported that AI use was not permitted or required authorization at their organization.

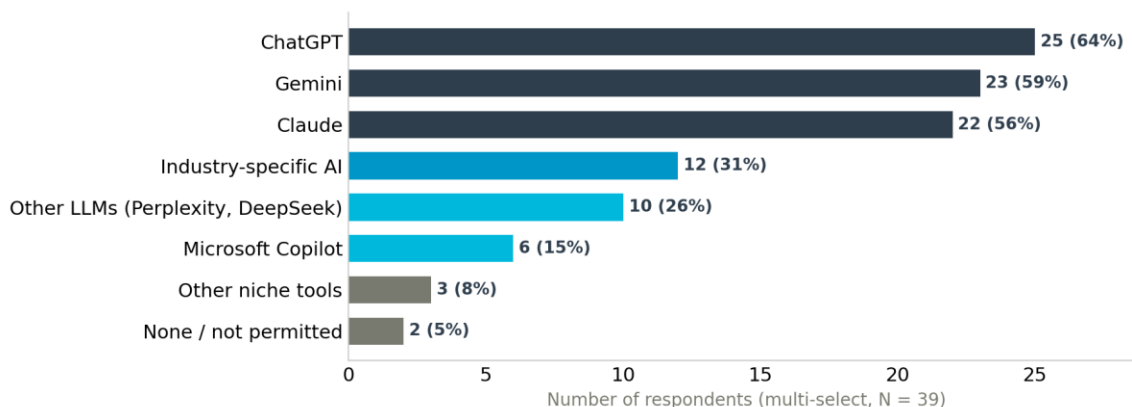


Exhibit 7. AI tools used in respondents' industries, multi-select with write-ins bucketed (Round 1, N = 39).

Business leaders use multiple platforms and expect new hires to quickly adopt industry-specific tools

The near-parity among ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude, together with substantial use of industry-specific tools, signals that no single platform dominates. Several leaders explicitly noted the importance of industry-specific AI. As one finance leader put it, new hires “need to learn industry-specific AI tools, not just the foundation language models.”

Section D: Hiring Sentiment and Workforce Outlook

To gauge economic sentiment, the survey asked how hiring activity had changed over the past 12 months and what respondents expected over the next 12. 44% reported decreased hiring (23% significantly, 21% somewhat), one-third held steady, and only 23% increased hiring.

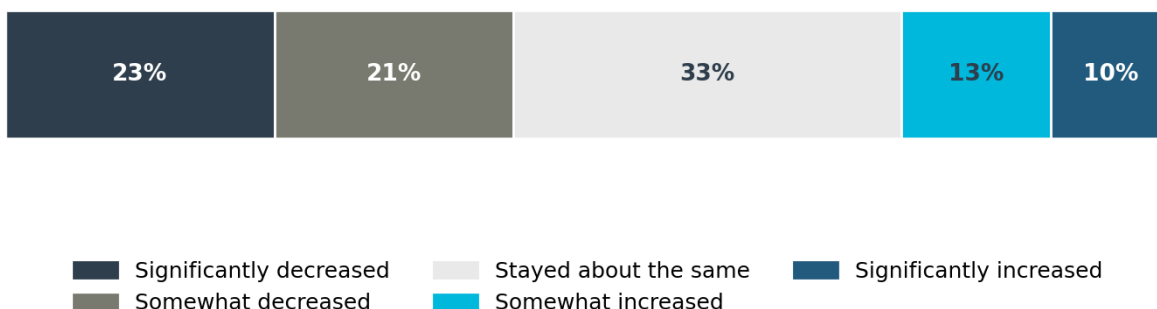


Exhibit 8. Hiring activity compared to 12 months ago (Round 1, N = 39).

The forward-looking view, in Exhibit 9, is more stable than negative. A majority (51%) expect to maintain roughly the same headcount over the next year. Only about a quarter (26%) expect any growth, and a similar quarter (24%) expect any reduction.

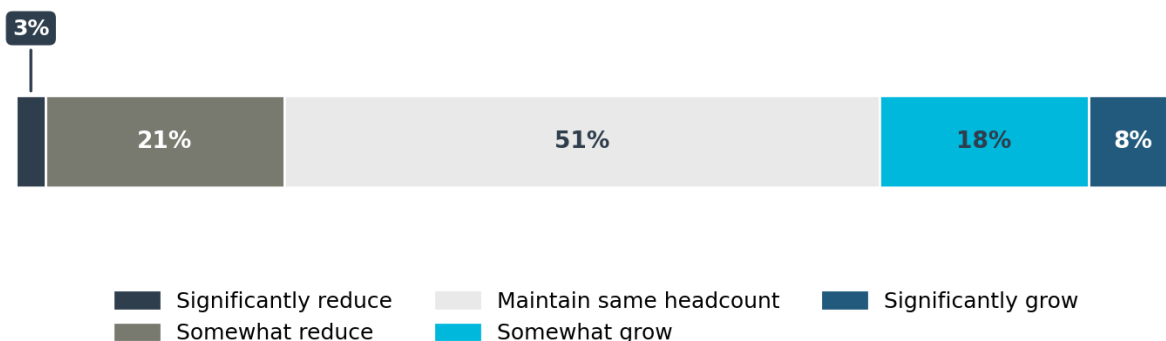


Exhibit 9. Expected workforce change over the next 12 months (Round 1, N = 39).

Exhibit 10 cross-tabulates the two questions to show how leaders' recent hiring experience relates to their expectations for the year ahead. The heaviest concentration falls in the “maintain” column. Notably, several organizations that cut significantly over the past year now expect to hold steady rather than cut further, which is consistent with a bottoming-out rather than a continuing decline.

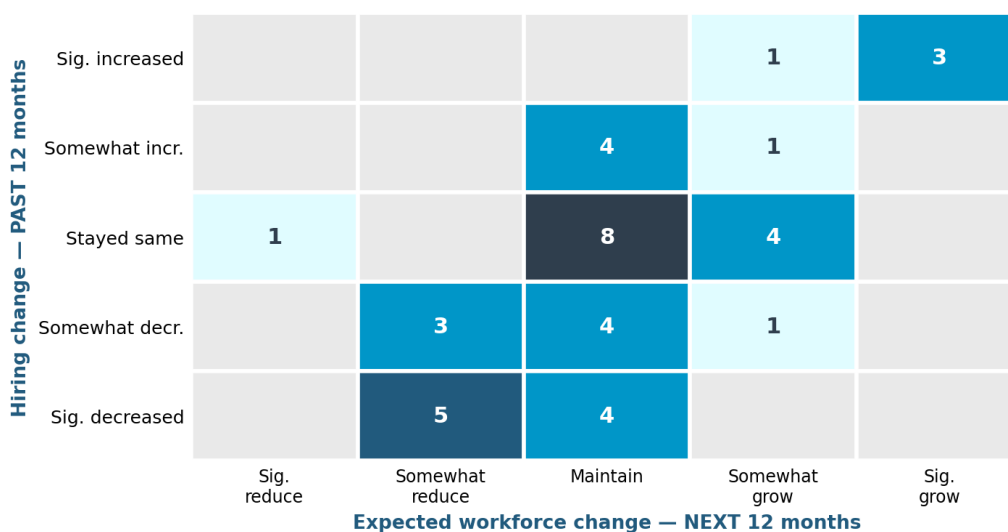


Exhibit 10. Hiring sentiment shift matrix: past 12 months (rows) against next 12 months (columns), cell counts (Round 1, N = 39).

Open-ended explanations for hiring changes reinforced the cautious mood. Several pointed to government policy and funding uncertainty, with one government leader noting simply “no funding for hiring” and another citing “budget cuts.” Others tied changes to AI directly. An information and technology leader attributed reduced hiring to “AI reducing need for early entry level roles,” and a healthcare leader noted reduced demand for marketing staff because the organization had begun using AI for marketing materials. On the positive side, leaders cited business growth, new financing, acquisitions, and added locations.

Section E: Open-Ended Insights

Three open-ended questions asked respondents to name the biggest opportunity for growth in their industry, the biggest challenge, and the trends they would most want community college educators to know about. Coding the responses across all three questions produced a thematic hierarchy, summarized in Exhibit 11 and visualized in Exhibit 12.

Exhibit 11. *Thematic coding summary of open-ended responses (Round 1, N = 39).*

Theme	Mentions	Illustrative voice (by industry)
AI adoption and tools	~28	"Learning to use AI tools to grow ideas and efficiency." (Information & Technology)
Critical thinking and human judgment	~11	"Young people too reliant on AI but lack critical thinking skills." (Professional Services)
Government policy and funding	~10	"Unstable federal government direction and funding." (Government & Non-Profit)
Professional and communication skills	~9	"Professional communication skills are a must." (Information & Technology)
Economic pressure (costs, rates, tariffs)	~8	"High cost and interest rate." (Real Estate)
Skilled-labor shortage	~7	"Shortage of skilled labor that is also able to think critically." (Architecture/Construction)
Industry-specific AI	~6	"New hires need to learn industry-specific AI tools." (Finance & Insurance)
Healthcare and senior-care demand	~5	"Need more people in senior care and healthcare." (Healthcare)

The thematic frequencies are shown graphically in Exhibit 12. AI dominates the conversation, but it often appears alongside a desire for employees to express critical thinking. Leaders are asking for employees who can operate AI well, but also with the judgment to evaluate its output.

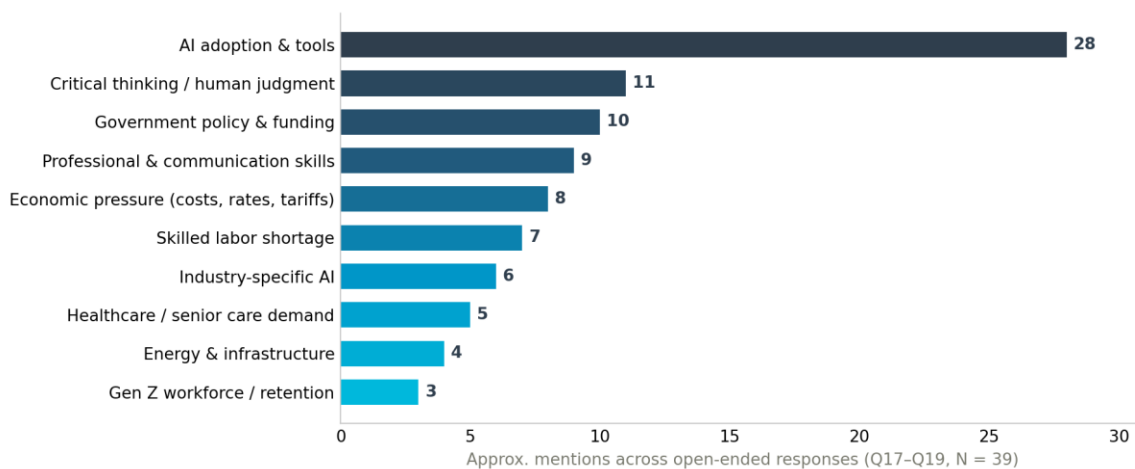


Exhibit 12. *Thematic frequency across open-ended responses Q17-Q19 (Round 1, N = 39).*

Biggest opportunity for growth

Responses clustered around AI as a growth enabler for the emergence of AI-native roles (an arts leader anticipated the rise of the “AI artist/filmmaker”); infrastructure and energy, including data center buildouts and power generation; healthcare driven by an aging population; and broad market expansion. A real estate leader saw opportunity in improving “efficiency in development, financing, and approvals” to increase affordable housing supply.

Biggest challenge

The most common challenge was government policy, funding, and regulatory uncertainty, cited across government, professional services, and other sectors. AI disruption and adaptation followed closely, along with economic headwinds (interest rates, costs, tariffs, minimum-wage pressure) and shortages of skilled, critical-thinking labor. One government leader flagged the difficulty of “attracting and retaining Gen Z or younger workforce,” noting that turnover is high.

What community college educators should know

The message to educators centered on several key themes. The first is that AI literacy has become a baseline expectation, with one leader noting that students must be proficient in using AI in their day-to-day work. Several respondents added that this proficiency should extend to industry-specific AI tools rather than the foundation models alone. A second theme is that critical thinking is what sets strong candidates apart. An architecture leader offered a memorable caution on this point, observing that AI-generated design tends to look very “cookie cutter” and is often unbuildable without significant human expertise. Finally, a professional services leader reminded educators that manufacturing and blue-collar work remains important and can be a rewarding career for those who are able to interpret engineering data and use it to build quality products.

V. Round 2 Results and Stability Between Rounds

Round 2 returned the aggregated Round 1 findings to a panel of 32 leaders, balanced by gender (16 male, 16 female) and spanning all 11 industry groups. The first five questions tested agreement with the headline Round 1 findings; the next four looked forward to what community colleges should do.

Consensus Findings

The five agreement items produced a clear hierarchy, as shown in Exhibit 13 and detailed in the table that follows. Three items reached the 70% consensus threshold; two did not, and those near-misses are among the most informative results in the study.

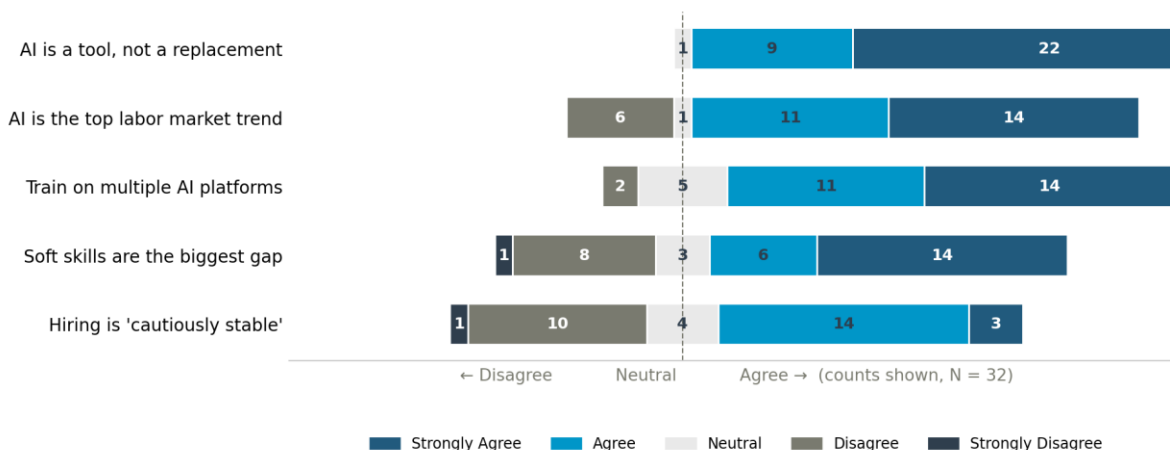


Exhibit 13. Round 2 agreement with five consensus statements, counts (N = 32). Statements ordered by strength of agreement.

Round 2 statement	Agree+	Neutral	Disagree+	Consensus
AI is a tool, not a replacement; over-reliance without critical thinking is a disadvantage	97%	3%	0%	Yes
AI/automation is the most significant labor market trend for community college graduates	78%	3%	19%	Yes
Community colleges should train students on multiple AI platforms, not just one	78%	16%	6%	Yes
Soft skills are the single most critical skill gap (above technical certifications)	62%	9%	28%	No
The current hiring environment is best described as "cautiously stable"	53%	12%	34%	No

Where the panel agreed

The standout result is the near-universal agreement, 97% with not a single dissenting voice, that AI should be understood as a tool to augment human work rather than replace it, and that students who rely on it without developing critical thinking will be disadvantaged. Twenty-two of 32 respondents selected "Strongly Agree." In a study focused on qualitative nuance, this is the

closest thing to a unifying principle and it provides the firmest possible foundation for future curriculum design.

Agreement that AI is the top labor market trend held at 78%, confirming the dominant Round 1 finding, though the 19% who disagreed are a reminder that a minority of leaders see other forces as more decisive in their own industries. Agreement that colleges should teach across multiple AI platforms also reached 78%, validating the platform-agnostic usage pattern observed in Round 1.

Where the panel did not agree

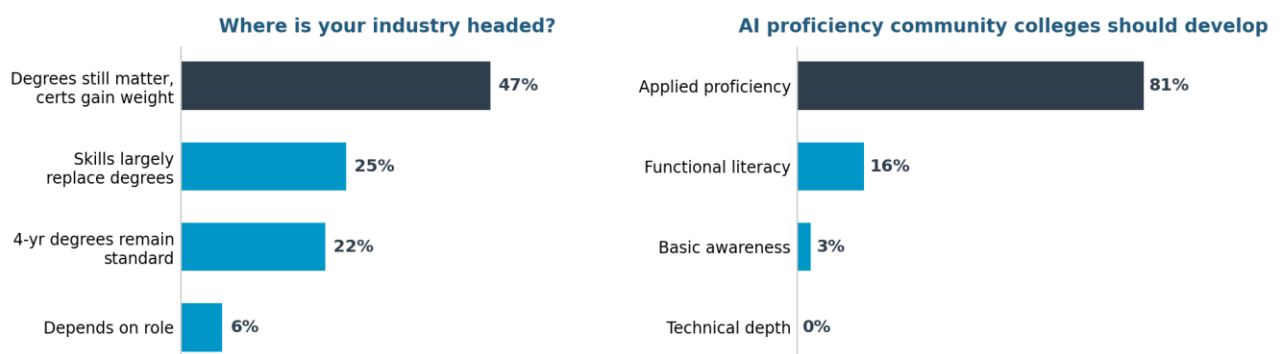
Two statements fell below the consensus threshold.

The claim that soft skills are the single most critical gap reached only 62% agreement, with 28% of respondents actively disagreeing. The most plausible explanation is that soft skills are broadly valued but are not universally seen as the single most important gap, since leaders in technically deep fields tend to weigh real-world applications and domain knowledge just as heavily. What the results point to, in other words, is a need for both soft skills and applied experience rather than soft skills on their own.

The statement that hiring is best described as “cautiously stable” was the most contested in the study, reaching only 53% agreement with 34% disagreeing. This split is largely attributable to industries moving in different directions, with some contracting and others expanding.

Forward-Looking Findings

The four multiple-choice questions asked the panel to move from identifying problems to recommending solutions. Exhibit 14 as shown below and on the following page presents all four.



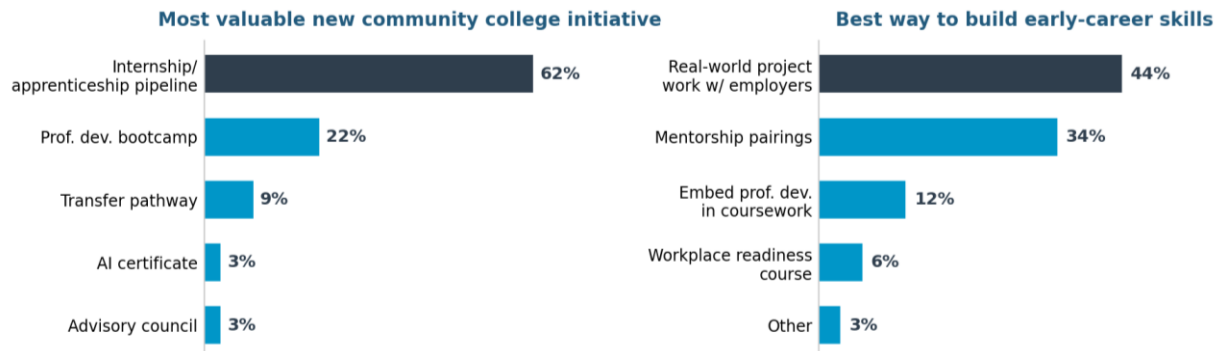


Exhibit 14. Round 2 forward-looking questions: industry trajectory, AI proficiency, ideal new initiative, and addressing early-career gaps (N = 32).

Degrees versus skills

A plurality of 47% expects a hybrid future in which degrees still matter but certifications and demonstrated skills carry more weight than they do today. A further 25% believes skills and experience will largely replace degree requirements for most entry- and mid-level roles, while 22% expect four-year degrees to remain the standard. This marks a shift in importance toward skills, but few expect degrees to disappear.

What level of AI proficiency

This question produced one of the sharpest signals in the study. A commanding 81% said community colleges should develop *applied proficiency*: the ability to select the right AI tool for a task, evaluate its output critically, and integrate it into professional workflows. Only 16% favored mere functional literacy and just 3% basic awareness. Tellingly, not a single respondent selected the deepest technical option, building or fine-tuning AI models. This indicates that these leaders want skilled, discerning users of AI, not builders of it.

The most valuable new initiative

When asked what single new program would be most valuable, 62% chose a structured internship or apprenticeship pipeline connecting students directly to employers, more than all other options combined. A professional development bootcamp in communication and leadership followed at 22%. This result aligns tightly with the pipeline gap identified in Round 1: leaders want a structured connection to talent.

Addressing early-career skill gaps

Finally, to address the time-management, initiative, and communication gaps that several Round 1 respondents had flagged in younger workers, 44% favored more real-world project work through employer partnerships and 34% favored mentorship pairings with working professionals. Classroom-based solutions (embedding professional development in coursework, or a standalone readiness course) trailed well behind. One leader offered a write-in worth quoting: students must sometimes “be allowed to fail in a safe environment so that they can learn.”

Stability Between Rounds

Stability, one of the key Delphi Method characteristics, asks how consistent the panel's views remained from Round 1 to Round 2. For the three findings tested in both rounds, the picture is mixed, as shown in Exhibit 15.

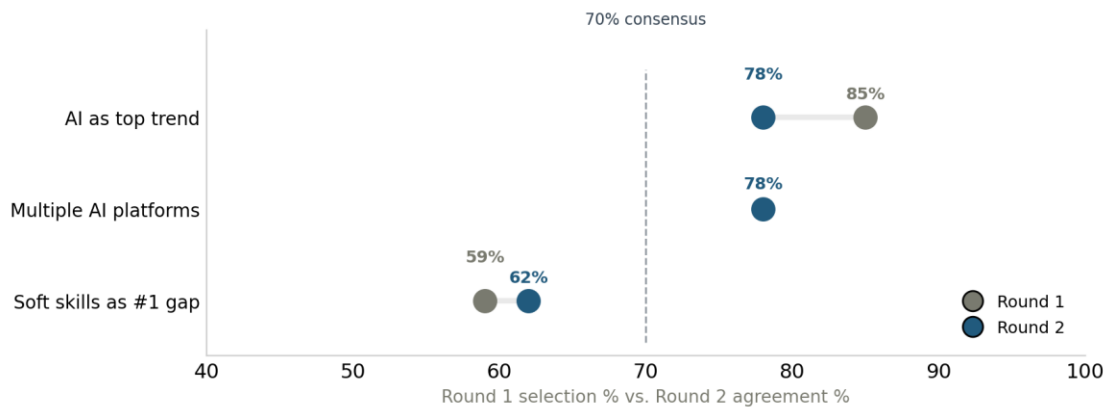


Exhibit 15. Stability of key findings: Round 1 selection rate versus Round 2 agreement rate. The dashed line marks the 70% consensus threshold.

- **Stable and reinforced.** AI as the top trend held firmly (85% selection in Round 1 to 78% agreement in Round 2), as did the case for teaching multiple AI platforms (78% agreement in Round 2, consistent with the near-parity of tool usage in Round 1).
- **A meaningful shift.** The soft-skills finding softened from a clear Round 1 lead (59% versus 15% for technical certifications) to sub-threshold agreement in Round 2 (62%). On reflection, and when asked the sharper question of whether soft skills are the single most critical gap of all, the panel proved more divided than the raw Round 1 counts implied.
- **Interpretation.** Because Round 2 was a repeated cross-section rather than a strictly closed panel, these comparisons describe the stability of group opinion rather than change at the level of individuals.

VI. Discussion of Findings

The study points to four main themes about what the Los Angeles business community needs from community college graduates.

AI and Human Judgment

In Round 1, 85% of respondents identified AI as the leading trend, which might suggest a simple need for more AI tool instruction. The broader data suggests that AI supports human judgment rather than replacing it. The strongest forward-looking result, at 81%, shows that leaders expect students to reach applied proficiency rather than basic familiarity, and no respondents favored training students to build AI models. The findings indicate that students should be able to use AI effectively while applying enough critical judgment to catch its errors. The respondents expressed the view that this may be best achieved by integrating AI across all disciplines rather than confining it to a standalone course.

The Soft Skills Paradox

Soft skills led Round 1 decisively, yet the claim that they are the single most critical gap could not sustain consensus in Round 2. Communication, professionalism, and the ability to work with people remain the most frequently cited gap overall. At the same time, a significant minority of leaders, particularly those in technical fields, give equal weight to real-world application and domain knowledge. These results suggest that soft skills are most effective when developed through applied work rather than taught in isolation, an approach the Round 2 panel supported through employer-partnered projects (44%) and mentorship (34%).

The Community College Pipeline Gap

This theme represents the most concrete opportunity in the study. Only 5% of leaders hire community college graduates frequently and 38% require four-year degrees, yet 23% expressed interest in developing a community college pipeline and another 21% already hire from these schools occasionally. When asked in Round 2 which single initiative would be most valuable, 62% identified a structured internship or apprenticeship pipeline. The results point to a problem of connection and visibility rather than talent quality, one that can be addressed by building the pathways that employers say they want but have not established on their own.

Degrees, Skills, and a Future of Gradual Change

The panel views the credential landscape as changing gradually rather than all at once. A plurality expects a hybrid model in which degrees still matter while skills and certifications gain weight, and only a minority expects degrees to be displaced entirely. This distribution mirrors the divided sentiment on hiring stability and argues against one-size-fits-all messaging. Instead, respondents expressed a desire to see more industry-specific employer-partnered projects and real-world applications of concepts taught in class.

VII. Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the data, with priority given to the findings that reached consensus in Round 2. Each recommendation is paired with the evidence that supports it.

1. **Teach AI in critically-evaluated applications across every discipline.** Integrate AI fluency into existing courses rather than isolating it, and frame it around judgment and evaluation, not tool mechanics. *(Anchored to: 97% consensus that AI is a tool requiring critical thinking; 81% endorsing applied proficiency.)*
2. **Expose students to multiple AI platforms rather than standardizing on one.** Build familiarity with foundation models as well as introduce industry-specific tools with real-world applications. *(Anchored to: 78% consensus; near-parity of tool usage in Round 1, emphasis on the importance of industry-specific tools.)*
3. **Build structured internship and apprenticeship pipelines connecting students directly to employers.** Begin with the employers who have already signaled interest. *(Anchored to: 62% naming this the single most valuable initiative; 23% of organizations actively seeking a pipeline.)*
4. **Develop professional skills through real-world, employer-partnered project work rather than standalone courses.** Pair it with mentorship from working professionals. *(Anchored to: 44% favoring project work and 34% favoring mentorship for early-career gaps.)*
5. **Pair soft-skills development with applied domain experience, not isolated instruction.** *(Anchored to: 59% soft-skills gap in Round 1, tempered by the Round 2 finding that 41% also flag real-world application and that soft-skills-alone fell below consensus.)*

VIII. Strengths and Limitations to this Analysis

Strengths

- A cross-sector expert panel: 39 senior leaders across 11 industries in Round 1; 32 leaders in Round 2
- Seniority and hiring authority: respondents include founders, managing partners, team leads, directors, and managers who personally make or influence hiring decisions.
- Near-perfect gender balance in both rounds (Round 1: 20 male, 19 female; Round 2: 16 each), strengthening the representativeness of the panel's perspective.
- A mixed-methods design that pairs quantitative frequencies with qualitative details, allowing the numbers to be interpreted in the leaders' own words.
- A two-round Delphi with anchoring safeguards: respondents were invited to answer independently, and the surfacing of below-threshold items shows the consensus measure was not simply confirmation bias surrounding the results of Round 1.
- Methodological transparency: the study documents its panel-of-expertise rationale, instrument pre-testing, a clearly defined consensus threshold, an explicit stability analysis, and ethical safeguards.

Limitations

- Sample size (39 then 32) is appropriate for a Delphi study but limits statistical generalization; results should be read as expert consensus, not population-level estimates.
- Convenience and referral sampling through the APEX network may bias the panel toward professionals who are already civically and community engaged.
- Round 2 respondents were largely the same individuals as Round 1, but there is not 100% overlap. Because this is a repeated cross-section rather than a closed panel, stability comparisons should be read accordingly.
- The study captures a single point in time in a fast-moving economy; hiring sentiment in particular may shift quickly with macro conditions.
- Industry representation is uneven. Government and non-profit, professional services, arts, and healthcare are well represented, while finance, hospitality, trading, and construction are represented by only one or two leaders each, so industry-specific readings should be treated as illustrative.
- Self-reported data is subject to response bias; respondents may, for example, overstate AI adoption or their awareness of skill gaps.
- The geographic focus on Greater Los Angeles may limit applicability to other regions of California.

IX. Conclusion

The central message from these business leaders is not that AI will replace workers, but that it increases the value of distinctly human capabilities. The single strongest point of agreement in the entire study, shared by 97% of the Round 2 panel without dissent, is that students who lean on AI without developing critical thinking will be at a disadvantage. The leaders want graduates who can use powerful tools with judgment, communicate clearly, and apply their knowledge to real-world problems.

While Round 1 suggested that soft skills were the most critical gap, Round 2 refined the picture into something more actionable. The need among business and government leaders is for a combination of judgment, communication, and applied experience, delivered through employer-connected work rather than classroom instruction alone. On credentials, leaders anticipate a gradual shift toward skills without the elimination of degrees, a context in which community colleges are well positioned.

The most concrete finding concerns hiring pipelines. A meaningful share of Los Angeles employers are open to community college talent and want to build structured pipelines to it but have lacked the means to do so. Community colleges, working with organizations such as APEX, are equipped to address this gap. The requirement is not to demonstrate the value of community college graduates to employers, but to build the connections that allow employers who already recognize that value to act on it.

APEX is grateful to the business leaders who contributed their time and judgment, and to the Los Angeles Center of Excellence for Labor Market Research for its collaboration in bringing these voices to the table. Periodic repetition of this study is recommended to track how these views evolve as AI adoption matures and economic conditions change.

X. Appendices

Appendix A: Round 1 Survey Instrument

The Round 1 “Strategic Workforce Outlook Survey” contained 18 items administered via Google Forms (required items marked with an asterisk in the original). The table below summarizes what each item captured and its response format.

Item	What it measures	Format
1–3. Respondent identity *	Name, professional title, and email, used to confirm eligibility and, where permitted, to follow up about the panel and Round 2. Reported only in aggregate.	Short answer
4. Gender *	Captured to assess the gender balance of the panel and support representativeness.	Male / Female / Other or Prefer not to say
5. Primary industry *	Identifies the respondent's sector so findings can be cross-tabulated by industry. Thirteen sector options were offered, plus a write-in.	13 options plus Other
6. Company size *	Establishes organizational scale, used to weigh perspectives and cross-tabulate results by employer size.	Small (1–50) / Mid-sized (51–500) / Large (501+)
7. Management responsibility *	Confirms the respondent's hiring and people-management authority by counting direct reports.	None / 1–10 / 11–20 / 21–100 / 100+
8. Hiring of community college graduates *	Measures current openness to community college talent, from frequent hiring to active disinterest, including those interested in building a pipeline.	Five options from “Yes, frequently” to “No, and not interested”
9. Biggest skill gap *	Identifies where graduates fall short on entry, distinguishing soft skills from technical certifications and real-world application. Multi-select with write-in.	Select all; 4 options plus Other
10. Most impactful labor market trend *	Asks which force will most shape community college graduates over the next 3–5 years (AI, skills-based hiring, blue-collar shift, macro-economic pressure). Multi-select.	Select all; 4 options plus Other
11. AI usage frequency *	Gauges how deeply AI tools have penetrated the respondent's industry, on a five-band frequency scale.	Most/all through None or rarely (5 bands)
12. AI tools in use *	Catalogs which specific AI tools and platforms are used in the industry, including general LLMs and industry-specific tools. Multi-select with write-in.	Select all; named tools plus Other
13. Hiring activity vs. 12 months ago *	Captures the direction and magnitude of recent hiring change as a retrospective sentiment measure.	5-point scale, significantly decreased to significantly increased
14. Reason for hiring change	Optional open response explaining the driver behind any reported change (e.g., growth, funding, AI).	Short answer
15. Expected workforce change (12 months) *	Forward-looking expectation for headcount over the coming year, paired with item 13 for the sentiment-shift matrix.	5-point scale, significantly reduce to significantly grow
16. Biggest growth opportunity *	Open response on where the respondent sees the greatest opportunity in their industry.	Short answer
17. Biggest challenge *	Open response on the most pressing challenge facing the respondent's industry.	Short answer

Item	What it measures	Format
18. Trends for community college educators *	Open response inviting direct guidance to community college educators on industry-specific trends.	Short answer

Appendix B: Round 2 Survey Instrument

The Round 2 “APEX Workforce Outlook Study – Follow Up” presented aggregated Round 1 findings, then asked the items below. Items 1–5 measured agreement on a five-point scale (Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree); items 6–9 were forward-looking multiple choice.

Item	What it measures	Format
Profile	Name, gender, and industry, collected to characterize the Round 2 panel.	Short answer
1. AI as the top trend	Tests agreement with the Round 1 finding that AI and automation is the most significant labor market trend (R1: 85%).	5-point agreement
2. Soft skills as the biggest gap	Tests whether soft skills are seen as the single biggest gap, above technical certifications (R1: 59% vs. 15%).	5-point agreement
3. Multiple AI platforms	Tests agreement that colleges should train students across several AI platforms rather than one (grounded in R1 tool usage).	5-point agreement
4. Cautiously stable hiring	Tests whether the current hiring environment is best described as cautiously stable (R1: 44% decreased, 51% maintaining).	5-point agreement
5. AI as a tool, not a replacement	Tests agreement that AI augments rather than replaces human work, and that reliance without critical thinking is a disadvantage.	5-point agreement
6. Degrees versus skills trajectory	Asks where the respondent's industry is headed on the balance between degrees and demonstrated skills.	4 options (degrees standard / hybrid / skills replace degrees / depends on role)
7. Target AI proficiency for colleges	Asks how deep a level of AI capability community colleges should build in graduates, from awareness to model-building.	Basic awareness / Functional literacy / Applied proficiency / Technical depth
8. Most valuable new initiative	Asks which single new program would most help, from AI certificates to internship pipelines. Includes write-in.	5 named options plus Other
9. Best fix for early-career gaps	Asks the most effective way to address younger-worker gaps in time management, initiative, and communication. Includes write-in.	4 named options plus Other

Appendix C: Respondent Profile Detail

Appendix C-1. Industry by company size (Round 1, N = 39)

Industry	Small	Mid	Large	Total
Government & Non-Profit	2	1	4	7
Professional/Technical Services	3	2	2	7
Arts & Entertainment	5	1	0	6
Healthcare	3	1	2	6
Information & Technology	1	1	3	5
Manufacturing	1	1	0	2
Real Estate	2	0	0	2
Finance & Insurance	1	0	0	1
Hospitality	0	1	0	1
Architecture/Construction	0	1	0	1
Trading	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	19	9	11	39

Appendix C-2. Management responsibility (Round 1, N = 39)

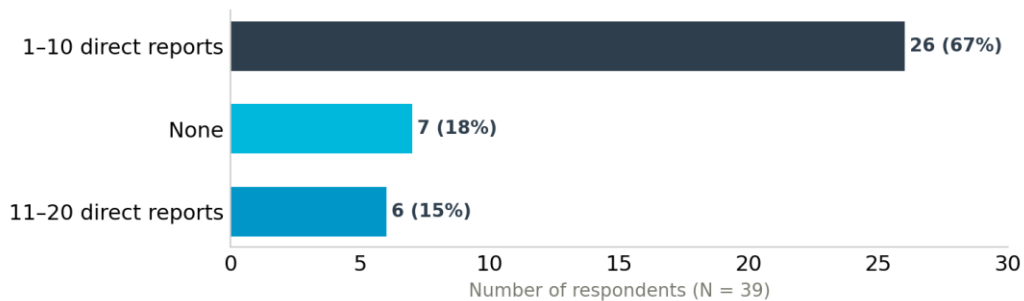


Exhibit C-2. Number of employees personally managed by respondents (Round 1, N = 39).

Appendix D: Round 1 Data Tables

Frequency counts and percentages for all closed-ended Round 1 questions (N = 39).

Hiring of community college graduates (Q8)

Response	Count	%
Require 4-year degrees for most roles	15	38%
Interested in developing a pipeline	9	23%
Hire occasionally	8	21%
Not interested	5	13%
Hire frequently	2	5%

Biggest skill gap, multi-select (Q9)

Response	Count	%
Soft skills (communication, leadership, professionalism)	23	59%
Understanding of real-world industry applications	16	41%
N/A – does not hire community college graduates	10	26%
Specific technical certifications	6	15%

Labor market trend, multi-select (Q10)

Response	Count	%
Rise of AI and digital automation	33	85%
Shift toward skills-based hiring	17	44%
Macro-economic impact	17	44%
Shift toward blue-collar jobs	13	33%

AI tool usage frequency (Q11)

Response	Count	%
Frequently (51–75%)	13	33%
Limited use (11–25%)	11	28%
Some of the time (26–50%)	7	18%
Most or all of the time (76–100%)	4	10%
None or rarely (0–10%)	4	10%

AI tools used, multi-select with write-ins bucketed (Q12)

Response	Count	%
ChatGPT	25	64%
Gemini	23	59%

Response	Count	%
Claude	22	56%
Industry-specific AI tools	12	31%
Other LLMs (Perplexity, DeepSeek, etc.)	10	26%
Microsoft Copilot (write-ins)	6	15%
Other niche tools (Seedance, Cursor, etc.)	3	8%
None / not permitted	2	5%

Hiring change vs. 12 months ago (Q13) and outlook (Q15)

Hiring change (past)	Count	Outlook (next 12 mo.)	Count
Significantly decreased	9	Significantly grow	3
Somewhat decreased	8	Somewhat grow	7
Stayed about the same	13	Maintain headcount	20
Somewhat increased	5	Somewhat reduce	8
Significantly increased	4	Significantly reduce	1

Appendix E: Round 2 Data Tables

Full response distributions for all Round 2 questions (N = 32).

Consensus items (Q1–Q5): full Likert distribution

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
AI is a tool, not a replacement	0	0	1	9	22
AI is the top labor market trend	0	6	1	11	14
Train on multiple AI platforms	0	2	5	11	14
Soft skills are the biggest gap	1	8	3	6	14
Hiring is “cautiously stable”	1	10	4	14	3

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

Industry trajectory (Q6)

Response	Count	%
Degrees still matter, but certs/skills gain weight	15	47%
Skills largely replace degrees	8	25%
4-year degrees remain the standard	7	22%
Depends entirely on the role	2	6%

AI proficiency community colleges should develop (Q7)

Response	Count	%
Applied proficiency	26	81%
Functional literacy	5	16%
Basic awareness	1	3%
Technical depth	0	0%

Most valuable new initiative (Q8)

Response	Count	%
Internship / apprenticeship pipeline	20	62%
Professional development bootcamp	7	22%
Transfer pathway program	3	9%
Short-term AI certificate	1	3%
Industry advisory council	1	3%

Best way to address early-career skill gaps (Q9)

Response	Count	%
Real-world project work with employers	14	44%
Mentorship pairings with professionals	11	34%
Embed professional development in coursework	4	12%
Standalone workplace-readiness course	2	6%
Other (write-in)	1	3%

Round 2 panel composition by industry (N = 32)

Industry	Count	Industry	Count
Professional/Technical Services	6	Manufacturing	2
Information & Technology	5	Real Estate	2
Healthcare	4	Trading	1
Government & Non-Profit	4	Architecture/Construction	1
Finance & Insurance	3	Hospitality	1
Arts & Entertainment	3		

Appendix F: Complete Exhibit Index

Exhibit	Title	Type	Source
1	Respondent demographics (org size and gender)	Donut charts	R1 Q4, Q6
2	Industry distribution of respondents	Bar chart	R1 Q5
3	Community college graduate hiring	Donut chart	R1 Q8
4	Biggest skill gaps	Bar chart	R1 Q9
5	Labor market trends for community college graduates	Bar chart	R1 Q10
6	AI tool usage frequency	Stacked bar	R1 Q11
7	AI tools used by industry	Bar chart	R1 Q12
8	Hiring activity change (past 12 months)	Stacked bar	R1 Q13
9	Workforce outlook (next 12 months)	Stacked bar	R1 Q15
10	Hiring sentiment shift matrix	Heatmap	R1 Q13×Q15
11	Thematic coding summary	Table	R1 Q16–Q18
12	Open-ended response themes	Bar chart	R1 Q16–Q18
13	Round 2 consensus results	Diverging bar	R2 Q1–Q5
14	Round 2 forward-looking results	Bar panel	R2 Q6–Q9
15	Stability (R1 vs. R2)	Dumbbell plot	R1 + R2
C-2	Management responsibility distribution	Bar chart	R1 Q7

Appendix G: About APEX

Asian Professional Exchange (APEX) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan, community-based organization dedicated to the professional and personal development of Asian Pacific Americans in Southern California. Established in 1993, APEX serves as a bridge between the corporate and community sectors, fostering growth through multifaceted programs that are charitable, cultural, and educational in nature.

Over the past three decades, APEX has grown from a grassroots initiative into a community of more than 5,000 professionals. The organization is built on the pillars of excellence in professional development, community service, and cultural awareness. Its programming includes professional development workshops, its mentorship program, various educational programs providing mentorship and academic guidance to the next generation, and various community service initiatives that support local causes across Southern California.

Through this extensive network, APEX maintains direct access to a broad roster of Asian business leaders across diverse industries, from finance and technology to logistics and healthcare. These leaders hold unique, on-the-ground insight into local labor market trends and the evolving skills the next generation of the workforce will need. This study reflects that mission in action. By convening Asian American business and government leaders and translating their collective judgment into actionable insight, APEX aims to strengthen the connection between the region's employers and the institutions that prepare its future workforce. APEX is grateful to the leaders who lent their time and expertise to this research.

Important Disclaimer: All representations and analyses included in this report have been produced from primary research and/or secondary review of publicly and/or privately available data and/or research reports. Efforts have been made to qualify and validate the accuracy of the data and the reported findings; however, neither Asian Professional Exchange, the Centers of Excellence, COE host District, nor California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office are responsible for applications or decisions made based upon components or recommendations contained in this study.



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