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Short Tenures, Lasting Damage: How the State Center Community College District's Turnover Squandered Fresno City College's Cultural Resources

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges in California operate in a climate of volatility: financial pressures, shifting administrative priorities, and declining enrollment. These pressures converge most acutely in institutions with specialized cultural resources, where even small administrative decisions can have outsized effects. The 2024 closure of Fresno City College's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeological Curation Facility illustrates how fragile such resources become under leadership instability and short planning horizons. Using Fresno City College and the State Center Community College District as a case study, this article examines how rapid executive turnover and weakened institutional continuity can undermine long-standing academic and community-serving programs. This is contrasted with the more stable stewardship demonstrated at El Camino College.

To mitigate structural risks from short leadership tenures, districts should implement:

Incentive Structures. Recalibrate executive contracts to reward longevity through retention-linked bonuses, sabbatical eligibility, and deferred compensation released only after long-term service.

Governance Reforms. Require senior administrators to engage directly in the instructional mission by teaching courses or participating in seminars alongside faculty.

Transparency and Accountability Measures. Establish a "mobility index" and comprehensive tenure datasets to help hiring committees identify "serial movers" and assess leadership continuity.

BACKGROUND

California's public higher education system was formalized under the 1960 California Master Plan (Donahoe Higher Education Act), which established a three-tier structure consisting of the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC). The unified CCC system emerged in 1967 and today includes 73 districts and 116 colleges (Douglass, 2000, 2007; Johnson et al., 2019).

Early community colleges were founded on student-centered, locally responsive models (Brint & Karabel, 1989). These missions shifted markedly after the late 1970s, particularly following Proposition 13, which reduced property tax revenues and accelerated a turn toward market-oriented governance and performance metrics (Douglass, 2007; Pusser,

2012). While CCCs today rely more heavily on public appropriations than tuition, funding is increasingly tied to enrollment levels. Declining enrollment, rising compensation costs, and pressure to expand dual enrollment and online offerings have intensified administrative focus on growth metrics, often in tension with faculty concerns over workload, instructional quality, and mission drift (Baum et al., 2024).

Leadership structures in CCCs have also changed over the last forty years. Faculty-administrators, who early on filled leadership roles, gave way to full-time professional managers. These new leaders often had business or education doctorates, deepening the disconnect from teaching and learning (Douglass, 2000; Gerber, 2014; Ginsberg, 2011). As higher education shifted to corporate models, the question of executive tenure gained relevance. Some argue long-serving leaders provide continuity, vision,

and institutional memory (Bess & Dee, 2007; Birnbaum, 1992), while others contend shorter tenures promote innovation, adaptability, and responsiveness to change (Cook, 2012; Eddy, 2005; Padilla, 2005). While the debate is not new in business circles, in academia where long-term planning, shared governance, and community relationships matter, the stakes are different (Newfield, 2016). The discussion is ongoing (e.g. Ayers, 2023; Nevarez & Woods, 2020; Sandoval et al., 2025).

This volatility is not just a leadership issue; it can contribute to the loss of irreplaceable institutional resources and the erosion of organizational culture (Bess & Dee, 2007; Kezar, 2018). This is best illustrated by force of example.

Fresno City College (FCC), founded in 1910, is California's oldest community college. Until 2024, it was also one of only two community colleges in the state to operate an anthropology museum. El Camino College in Torrance, California is the other one. In 2024, FCC moved to close its Museum of Anthropology and Archaeological Curation Facility (MOAACF) despite opposition from archaeology faculty at

the time, removing rare educational and community resources from a campus serving a large minority student population.

The closure occurred amid heightened legislative scrutiny of Native American collections following the passage of Assembly Bill 389 (October 2023), which prohibits the use of Native American cultural items for teaching or research purposes within the CSU system. The law followed public outrage over a San José State University faculty incident and a subsequent state audit reporting that CSU campuses collectively held nearly 700,000 Native American ancestors and cultural items, with only 6 percent repatriated despite federal mandates from the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA 1990) and the state's counterpart, CalNAGPRA (2001) obligations. CSU campuses were thereafter required to appoint repatriation coordinators by July 2025. While AB 389 does not apply to community colleges (yet), FCC's longstanding curricular and transfer relationship with CSU Fresno coincided with the museum's closure, despite the fact that the MOAACF could have remained compliant and open with minimal administrative support.

METHODS

To assess leadership turnover, I reviewed publicly available data and filed California Public Records Act (CPRA) requests with SCCC, Los Rios Community College District (LRCCD), and El Camino Community College District (ECCCD) because there is a lack of centralized data sets. Despite repeated CPRA requests, SCCC did not provide the requested records at the time of writing this article. Their data was reconstructed from news coverage and administrators' self-reported career histories on public platforms. In contrast, LRCCD and ECCCD provided twenty years of administrative data in a prompt and professional manner.

These three districts were selected because only FCC and ECC maintain anthropology museums,

while LRCCD serves as a comparable peer to SCCC in size and demographics (Table 1).

RESULTS

According to the 11th CEO Tenure & Retention Report, the average tenure (time of service) of a California community college CEO is now 4.3 years, with a median of 3.1 years, down dramatically from 8.5 years in 2006 (CEO Tenure, 2024, pp. 5, 12). Only 8 of 139 current CEOs have served ten years or more. High turnover is also reported across multiple administrative tiers (Christianson, 2020; Tarker, 2019).

For this study, executive positions were categorized into five groups for comparability: Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, College President,

Vice President, and Dean (Table 2). SCCC showed the shortest average tenure in four of the five categories. The only exception was the dean level where SCCC's tenure was slightly longer than LRCC's. Both multi-college districts (SCCC and LRCC) trailed behind ECC which demonstrated the longest tenures overall (Figure 1).

Shorter tenures are shaped by many factors, including race/ethnicity, gender, contract structures, and internal political pressures - some public, others less visible (Cook, 2012; Eddy, 2005, 2010). However, across districts, a consistent pattern emerges longer-tenured leadership correlates with clearer priorities, better resource protection, and greater institutional stability.

A Tale of Two Administrations Cultures

The following two cases show that the consequences of short tenures are not abstract. Both institutions began with similar models for campus anthropology museums. Yet over time, ECC has sustained its museum through stable vision and consistent engagement, while FCC has allowed its own museum's role to wither amid persistent administrative churn and ignored expertise from faculty input.

Case 1 - Fresno City College: A Museum Shuttered by Neglect

Established in the 1970s by Donal Wren, FCC's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) served as both a public exhibit space and an instructional resource. The associated Archaeological Curation Facility (ACF) retains original collections, field notes, and site reports from Central Valley excavations. These are materials necessary for regulatory compliance in cultural resource management (King, 2013; McManamon, 2018). Without access to these collections, regulatory compliance might be compromised.

In the mid-2010s, the combined MOAACF closed temporarily to meet overdue NAGPRA and CalNAGPRA requirements. The COVID-19 shutdown prolonged its closure. From 2021–

2024, archaeology faculty attempted to reopen the facility, but it remains closed (Cisneros, 2025; Herrera, 2024). During this period, relatively modest infrastructure requests such as shelving upgrades, installation of non-heat-emitting lighting, and basic digitization initiatives were denied or deferred, reflecting a pattern of administrative inaction and ignoring of designated faculty's expertise. The decline of the museum, therefore, is not attributable to extraordinary constraints but to sustained institutional neglect and missed opportunities for reinvestment.

Since 2020, SCCC has cycled through multiple interim or short-term top leaders, including three FCC presidents between 2021 and 2025; for the same period the college's Social Science Division went through three-four deans. Frequent leadership changes - often filled through internal promotions or temporary appointments - leave little time to understand and support unique institutional assets. In such environments, decisions are easily deferred, faculty input sidelined, and opportunities are lost.

By 2025, this pattern of neglect at the programmatic level was impossible to ignore and paralleled a broader dysfunction in SCCC's overall governance, led by [poor] example by the Chancellor. Both the State Center Community College District Academic Senate and the State Center Federation of Teachers union issued votes of no confidence in the Chancellor citing a toxic and retaliatory administrative culture; both called for the Chancellor's removal (Rangel, 2025; Ruland, 2025; Zhong, 2025); the FCC faculty voted by a 90% to 3% margin for no confidence (n = 269, with 17 abstentions, Insiders, 2026), while the union's vote was unanimously one of no confidence. The chancellor dismissed these actions as nonbinding bargaining tactics by the union, even though they aligned with similar complaints across the district (Price, 2025). Nevertheless, on Nov 14, 2025, less than a week before the union's vote became public, the Chancellor announced her retirement having

served the position since Jan 2022 (Colon, 2025).

Media coverage consistently reinforced this interpretation of systemic dysfunction. Reporting by KVPR documented unanimous faculty opposition and sharply declining morale (Rangel, 2025), while other news-outlets emphasized that the votes reflected structural grievances rather than short-term negotiation strategy as the Chancellor had suggested (Morano, 2025). Whistleblower accounts further suggest that these concerns were not isolated incidents but part of an escalating pattern of internal dissent and administrative breakdown (Insiders, 2025a, 2025b, 2026).

Taken together, these developments situate the closure of the MOAACF within a larger pattern of institutional incompetence, one in which administrative priorities, governance conflict, and organizational culture converged to produce both high-level crises and ground-level programmatic decline.

Case 2 - El Camino College: A Museum Sustained by Vision

In contrast, the Anthropology Museum at El Camino College in Torrance, tells a story of resilience and intentional stewardship. Founded in the 1960s by Walter Foster, the Anthropology Museum at ECC remains open and active. Its modest but curated holdings in archaeology, ethnography, folk art, and donated ceramics support hands-on, inclusive learning. Exhibits meet most professional standards, and the museum maintains a clear mission emphasizing community-oriented and culturally informed programming. It even has a digital presence and has functioned as an ongoing educational resource, with artifacts directly tied to classroom instruction across anthropology courses (Jimenez, 2024).

ECC's Anthropology Museum benefits from stable leadership, consistent faculty-

administration communication, and a shared institutional understanding of its relevance to both academic and community life. Its longevity reflects an institutional commitment sustained across decades and is continued importance to the college was further affirmed by its inclusion in the college's recent campus modernization effort. The new Arts Complex was designed as an interdisciplinary cultural hub, and the Anthropology Museum's director described the combined presence of the museum and art gallery as constituting a "cultural center and an art center" for the campus (Suazo, 2023). The museum relocated to the Arts Complex in fall 2023 (Gochez, 2025), signaling active institutional investment rather than neglect or contraction. The relocation process itself was structured as a student learning opportunity with paid positions offered to help catalog and transfer the collection (Lipari, 2022).

This stability is reflected in broader institutional conditions under President Brenda Thames. Reporting in campus and regional outlets emphasizes programmatic expansion and active efforts to rebuild full-time faculty ranks amid post-pandemic enrollment recovery (Camacho, 2023). Even where tensions between administration and faculty surface, they are framed within a context of managed growth and negotiation rather than institutional breakdown (Camacho, 2023). In contrast to the adversarial framing evident in coverage of FCC, ECC is characterized by coordinated expansion and coherent administrative leadership, conditions that directly support the museum's operational continuity.

DISCUSSION

While neither museum is perfect, the contrast between FCC and ECC is stark (Table 3, see Loffler, 2025 for additional museum discussion). Juxtaposing the closure of FCC's Museum of Anthropology with the thriving of ECC's Anthropology Museum offers a telling contrast in how administrative leadership shapes the long-term viability of cultural and academic infrastructure, resources, and opportunities.

While correlation is not causation, the broader pattern is difficult to ignore: districts with longer-tenured leadership appear better positioned to protect and sustain institutional resources. This appears to be implied by the data despite the sample size being small ($n=2$), limited by the nature of the data as only two community colleges in all of California have had Museums of Anthropology. Their comparison is not perfect either, as it is complicated by structural differences between districts. SCCC, for example, is larger than ECC, which introduces additional factors - bureaucratic, administrative complexity, budgetary,

enrollment scale, etc. - which are likely to shape both leadership tenure and leadership practice. These differences cannot be fully controlled though they are partially mitigated through comparison with the more demographically and institutionally comparable LRCC (Figure 1). With the suggestive LRCC data supporting the pattern, the decline of FCC's MOA is not simply an isolated institutional failure; it reflects a broader structural vulnerability characteristic of districts marked by persistent leadership turnover.

It is curious to note that the average tenure of academic deans and other high-level administrators in some districts hovers around three years, roughly the same threshold used by the California Public Employees' Retirement System for calculating retirement benefits (CalPERS, 2024). At a glance, the parallel may be interpreted as careerist incentives favoring short-term gains over institutional health.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

At the district level, SCCC's persistent executive turnover runs counter to the California Community College League's own recommendations emphasizing leadership stability as a prerequisite for institutional effectiveness (CEO Tenure, 2024). Given the scale of public investment and the cumulative nature of educational and cultural infrastructure, a district-wide governance assessment appears overdue; one that evaluates not only executive tenure length, but also hiring practices, incentive structures, and patterns of administrative mobility across campuses.

The problem likely extends beyond SCCC. Therefore, to mitigate the structural risks posed by short leadership tenures, threefold reforms merit consideration.

Incentive Structures

First, executive compensation and evaluation frameworks should be recalibrated to reward long-term institutional commitment rather than short-term administrative mobility. Retention-linked contracts could tie bonuses, sabbatical eligibility, or enhanced retirement benefits to service beyond baseline terms, thereby discouraging rapid turnover and incentivizing leaders to invest in projects with long maturation timelines. Similarly, deferred compensation mechanisms, in which portions of executive pay are released only after eight to ten years of service, could align administrative incentives with the temporal realities of educational planning, accreditation cycles, and community trust-building.

Governance Reforms

Second, governance structures should more explicitly reconnect executive leadership with the instructional mission of community colleges. Teaching or instructional engagement requirements, such as requiring senior administrators to teach one course per year or per semester or to participate in team-taught seminars, would anchor executives in the lived realities of students and faculty. Beyond

symbolic value, such engagement can enhance responsiveness to faculty concerns, foster pedagogical empathy, and counteract the managerial detachment that often accompanies rapid administrative ascent.

Transparency and Accountability Measures

Third, greater transparency is needed to address patterns of administrative mobility. A mobility index could be developed to track administrators with frequent position changes across districts or states, identifying patterns of “serial administrative movers.” Such an index would not serve as a punitive tool, but rather as an informational resource for hiring committees seeking to assess leadership continuity and institutional fit.

In parallel, system-wide data transparency initiatives should be expanded beyond CEO roles to include vice presidents, deans, and other senior administrators. Statewide, or even national, datasets documenting tenure length, turnover rates, and exit patterns would allow districts, faculty, and governing boards to make evidence-based hiring decisions. Labor unions and faculty senates could play a collaborative role in developing publicly accessible platforms; something akin to a “rate my administrator” model, which could aggregate verified data and qualitative assessments while maintaining professional standards.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on higher-education governance by linking executive tenure patterns to the long-term viability of community college cultural and educational resources. The FCC case demonstrates how short-term executive leadership can actively undermine the maximization of institutional assets, particularly those that require sustained vision, trust-building, and incremental investment. In this context, administrative instability does not merely delay progress; it can erode student access, weaken community partnerships, and jeopardize decades of accumulated cultural capital.

Leadership matters. Stability matters. When public institutions lose sight of these principles, the consequences ripple outward from students and faculty to communities whose cultural and educational resources depend on long-term stewardship. The case of FCC’s MOAACF is not merely an isolated institutional failure; it is a cautionary example of how administrative instability can dismantle decades of community investment, undermining the very public mission community colleges are meant to serve. Administrators should do better.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Broad demographic comparison between SCCC, LRCC, and ECCCD

Feature/District	SCCC	LRCC	ECCCD
Number of Colleges	4 Clovis, Fresno City Madera Reedley	4 American River Cosumnes River Folsom Lake Sacramento City	1 El Camino College
Serving ~ # Students	~57,000	~73,000	~20,000
Demographic Comp. (~%).			
- Hispanic/Latino	~61%	~31%	~50%
- White	~21%	~33%	~17%
- Asian	~9%	~15%	~18%
- Black/African American	~4%	~8%	~7%
- Other/Multiracial	~5%	~4%	~5%
- Other (includes unknown or declined, American Indian/Alaskan, Pacific Islander)	< 0.5%	~8%	~3%
HSI Designation	Yes - Fresno City College	Yes - Sacramento City College	Yes - El Camino College

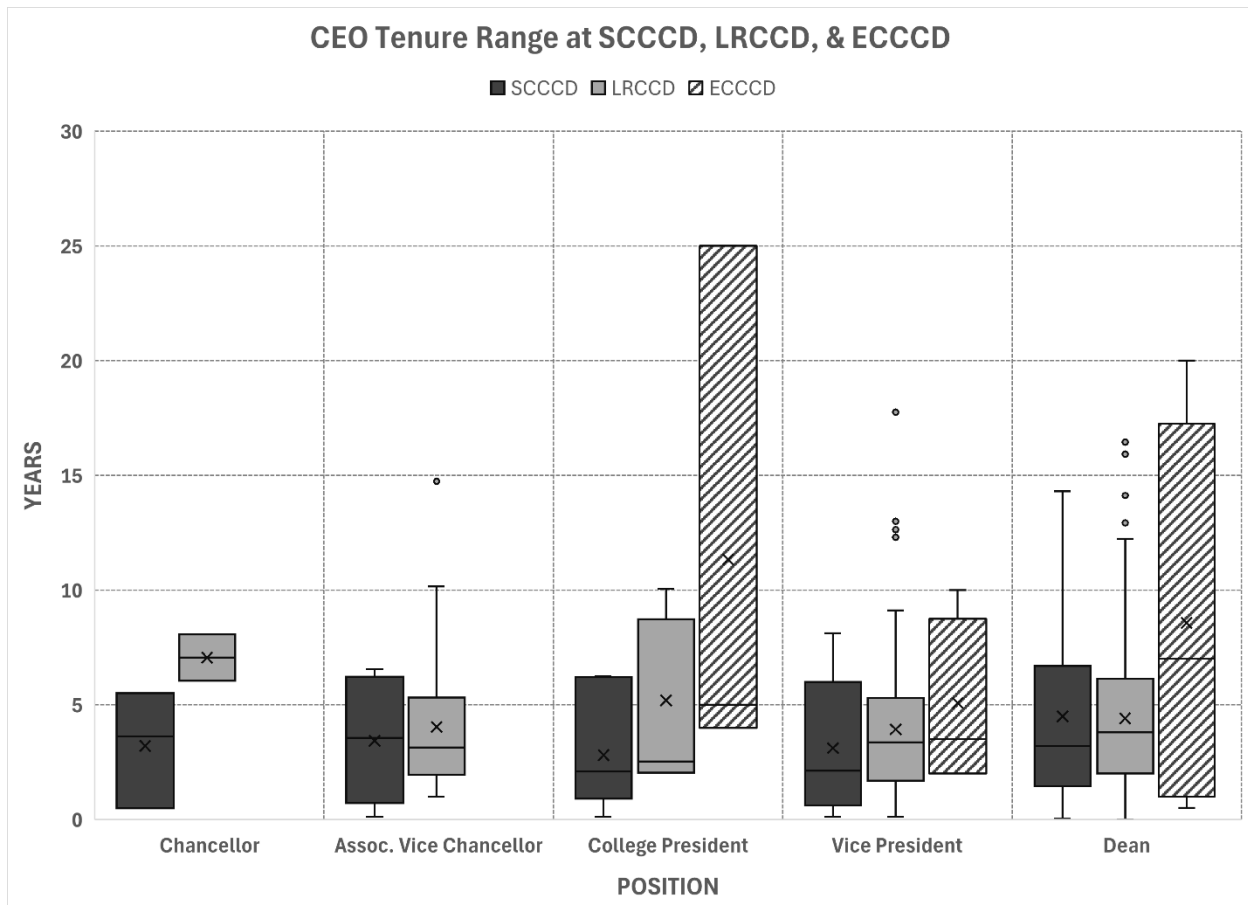
Table 2. Comparative average (mean) administrative turnover between SCCC, LRCC, and ECCCD

Common Title	Job Rank	SCCC (current & previous post)	LRCC (2005 – present)	ECCCD (2005 – present)
Chancellor	Deputy Chancellor/Exec. VC	3.21 years, (n=3)	7.08 years, (n=2)	n/a
Asso. Vice-Chancellor	Chancellor's Staff	3.45 years (n =10)	4.05 years, (n=37)	n/a
College President	VC/College Pres./Chief Counsel	2.81 years, (n=7)	5.21 years, (n=7)	11.33 years, (n=3)
Vice President	Director/Manager I/VP	3.11 years, (n=20)	3.88 years, (n=53)	5.08 years, (n=12)
Asso. Vice-President	Director/Manager II/Assoc. VP	3.43 years, (n=10)	4.01 years, (n=42)	n/a
Deans	Director/Manager III/Dean	4.50 years, (n=32)	4.43 years, (n=187)	8.57 years, (n=14)

Table 3. Museums of FCC and ECC juxtaposed.

Aspect	FCC's MOAACF	ECC's Anthropology Museum
Leadership stability	High turnover	Stable
Facility status	Closed since mid-2010s	Open & active
Student role	Limited/none	Active in curation/exhibits
Funding support	Rejected grant proposals	Sustained modest funding

Figure 1. CEO Tenure range for the last 20 years at SCCCD, LRCCD, and ECCCD



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