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AI IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INFRASTRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS

Key Enablers of AI Strategies

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Introduction

Higher education institutions are complex organizations. Teaching and learning are presumed to be their core purpose, and yet, their operational and administrative functions have wide-ranging responsibilities for strategic planning, meeting regulatory requirements, fundraising, managing data and information technology, marketing, enrollment management, communications, and more. AI tools are being used across operational functions and infrastructures are being configured to support them. It is here that leadership determines how AI fits within the overall mission and culture of the institution and sets guidelines for responsible use, particularly concerning data infrastructure, privacy, and security issues. Each of these topics is covered in this report, which consists of three main sections: mission and culture, vision and leadership, processes and infrastructure. To support policymakers and leaders as they navigate AI, there are call-out boxes throughout the report that highlight institutional challenge and decision points.

This report is part of CHEPP's AI in higher education research series [*How AI is Reshaping Higher Education: Learner-Centered Insights for Policymakers and Practitioners*](#). The series also includes [*AI in Higher Education: A Primer for Policymakers and Leaders*](#) and [*AI in Higher Education: Teaching and Learning – Applying a Learner-Centered Lens to AI Integration*](#). The primer provides a detailed overview of AI, how it operates, and what its capabilities are as of the writing of this series. The report on teaching and learning provides a detailed overview of how AI is being thoughtfully integrated into teaching and learning in higher education and how universities and colleges must play a critical role in that process.

Mission and Culture

At a time when AI is influencing on how people work, live, and learn, the role of higher education leaders has never been more important. Currently, leaders have mixed views about the growing impact of AI on higher education. A recent survey of college presidents found that 36% of respondents were very or somewhat concerned about it, while 53% were very or somewhat optimistic (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2026). Chancellors, presidents, provosts, and their “cabinets” have a critical role to play in how AI is adopted, deployed, and managed throughout their institutions. They need to determine how the use of AI at their institution will align with the institution's academic mission and culture, regardless of how (or even whether) AI is deployed in teaching, learning, student support, or general operational or administrative areas.

- **Use case: AI training for faculty and staff.** Some institutional leaders have invested in developing and deploying AI fluency training to shape the internal culture on AI use. These trainings are also used to educate the campus community about opportunities, applications, innovations, and potential efficiencies, but also about risks, costs, and challenges. This is not widespread, with only 31% of college presidents saying that AI literacy is common across key groups on their campus (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2026). Institutional examples include:
 - **Dallas College.** In addition to encouraging broad AI exploration and use, the college has invested in training for AI fluency and related ethical considerations for faculty. With an initial cohort of 100 faculty, the college provided a semester-long embedded learning experience while also encouraging open dialogue about the impact of AI in the classroom. The goal is for all faculty to experience this training, as well as provide a “train-the-trainer” component so that in the next phase, faculty will train students.
 - **Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU).** The university has provided a workshop series on basic AI literacy for its employees, which has helped more faculty, staff, and leaders feel comfortable with AI tools. For selected teams, the university has provided more specific training on prompt engineering. SNHU also offers microcredentials to students who would like to gain AI fluency.

Institutional Challenge and Decision Points: Faculty and Staff Training

As leaders make decisions about their AI strategy, it is important that those decisions are communicated across the institution and that faculty, staff, and administrators are appropriately prepared to support that strategy. Institutions should:

- Ensure staff and faculty understand various use cases for AI within higher education, as well as what is considered to be acceptable and responsible use at the institution.
- Ensure staff and faculty understand the institution’s overall AI strategy and supporting rationale.
- Ensure staff and faculty understand the risks and costs of AI tools, including data privacy concerns, environmental impacts, algorithmic bias, and accuracy concerns.

Vision and Leadership

Institutional leaders are responsible for determining the overall AI strategy, including which AI tools are used, for which purposes, and the guidelines for responsible use. To achieve this, many leaders have realized that they themselves need to understand AI better, and that part of understanding AI means engaging with it as part of the learning process.

Leaders benefit from multiple perspectives when developing an overall AI strategy. Institutional leaders can benefit from cross-institutional teams or taskforces to help guide decisions on policy, practice, and infrastructure needs. Between 2024 and 2026, the percentage of institutions that had established an institution-wide AI taskforce or strategy had grown from 18% to 71% (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2026).

Institutional AI strategies call for curiosity as a leadership value. Interviewees for this report noted that leaders need not be AI experts, but they do need to educate themselves enough about AI to know what questions to ask, what potential it presents for both learning and operational efficiencies, what training is needed, and what risks are involved for learners, faculty, and the institution. A knowledge base about AI is necessary in order to establish a strategic way forward.

Presidents, chancellors, and cabinet-level officers can also benefit from AI's capabilities for enhancing or improving scenario planning or risk assessment. And yet, Carnegie reports that even when presidents and chancellors are fully supportive of AI integration at their institutions for teaching, learning, and administrative activities, it is presidents and chancellors who are the least likely to have adopted AI in carrying out their own job-specific responsibilities (Carnegie Higher Education, n.d. (a)).

Leadership on AI often means managing change through exploration and discovery. At this early stage in AI adoption and deployment, AI institutional strategies are emerging at many institutions as a process of exploration, discovery, and learning. For some leaders, initial strategic moves involve opening the door to limited or managed experimentation with AI to test its ability to enhance learning or achieve operational efficiencies. As part of this strategic discovery process, some institutions are also prioritizing the education of faculty, staff, and learners on AI capabilities and risks. Taking this approach may also be a useful change management strategy, building consensus and trust among faculty and staff at a time of uncertainty.

- **Use case: Institutions create safe spaces for AI innovation and exploration.** Several institutions have created “closed box” or “walled garden” systems in which faculty, staff, and learners can work directly with the latest AI tools and agents to learn how and when to use them, where they can go wrong, and to experiment with new or innovative applications of AI. Institutional examples include:
 - **Dallas College.** The college provides faculty, staff, and learners access to the full range of generative AI tools through the BoodleBox platform, in which users can safely explore the tools in a closed “walled garden” environment. The platform offers a coaching feature that allows the user to understand the data architecture behind the models, which has helped users determine which tools are better for certain tasks than others. Exposure to these tools and their structures has provided instructors with tactical ways to guide learners on ethical use and has given the college deeper insights into how AI will affect various jobs and career pathways.

- **Arizona State University (ASU).** Knowing that learners would need to be literate in AI for their future careers, ASU established a partnership with OpenAI and created the AI Innovation Challenge. The Innovation Challenge invited faculty to submit proposals for how they wanted to pilot AI in their classes, with the added stipulation that they would also need to gather data to calculate the impact of AI. Faculty with winning proposals received 50 ChatGPT licenses for six months. To date, there have been more than 700 projects testing innovations, and in the process, ASU has built a culture of pioneering AI use cases.
- **SNHU.** The university has offered grants to faculty to support innovative projects that integrate AI into the classroom and into professional work in academic years 2025 and 2026. Recipients in 2026 included faculty in the humanities, aviation, business administration, and management and information systems.
- **Use case: Institution-wide policies on responsible AI use.** In addition to the red light, yellow light, and green light classroom AI use policies mentioned in [the teaching and learning report in this research series](#), where instructors can indicate the degree to which AI is permitted for specific assignments, some institutions are adopting AI policies that include responsible and ethical uses. Institutional examples include:
 - **SNHU.** In an effort to maintain flexibility for continued innovation and exploration, SNHU has provided some early guidelines through an *AI Data Stewardship Playbook*, which is designed to help the SNHU community assess the level of data security risk for specific AI use cases. The institution has also provided guidelines for faculty and learners on AI uses in the classroom and is working to develop a broader AI ethics statement.
 - **North Carolina State University.** NC State has established a campus-wide advisory group of faculty and staff who collectively develop recommendations and guidelines for AI use. Sub-groups include those for education, research, and business use of AI. The advisory group has established a website to serve as the “one-stop shop” for guidance, training, or events around AI at the university.
 - **California State University – Fullerton.** The institution’s AI strategy offers a framework of guiding principles for responsible AI use across the organization, with a strong focus on ethical considerations such as AI bias and transparency around AI use (Stone, 2025).
 - **State University of New York.** SUNY introduced a system-wide policy that outlines a framework for scaling AI use across the system’s 64 campuses, requires training in responsible AI use, embeds AI literacy into the curriculum, and gives examples of student access to research and learning opportunities. The policy also includes steps for evaluating AI tools for bias and strengthening data privacy and oversight (Bay, 2026).

Sidebox 1. Carnegie Higher Education AI Readiness Assessment

Carnegie Higher Education carried out extensive research on the ways in which AI can be deployed at various levels of a higher education institution and across its various cabinet-led administrative units. The organization offers an AI readiness assessment that measures the institution’s maturity level for adopting and deploying AI effectively across four dimensions: strategy, governance, data infrastructure, and institutional culture. Data on AI use at other institutions provides benchmarked results on institutional AI readiness (Carnegie Higher Education, n.d. (b)).

Institutional Challenge and Decision Points: Understanding Opportunities, Risks, and Setting Guidelines on Responsible Use

Whether or not AI is a valuable resource that allows human beings to focus on true creativity, innovation, and durable skills or a potential shortcut that stunts human cognitive development and intellect is a hotly debated question, and a question of intent and planning for leaders. Understanding the key risks and opportunities presented by AI tools is critical to better understanding their potential and how policies and regulations can help safeguard against safety concerns, with careful and intentional planning. These risks, concerns, opportunities, and benefits are summarized below for consideration by leadership.

Table 1. Opportunities, Benefits, Risks, and Concerns Associated with Artificial Intelligence

Opportunities and Benefits	Risks and Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personalized assistance, tutoring, and information to people regardless of income level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data privacy and intellectual property.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More accessible resources for people with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental impacts and rising energy costs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased productivity and reduction of rote tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hallucinations, deep fakes, and lack of trustworthiness of output.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The opportunity to more rapidly advance scientific and academic research through more complex and comprehensive analyses and decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elimination of human jobs in roles where human relationships are fundamental.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ability to learn faster through more personalized and supportive information and feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of human connection in everyday interactions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The opportunity to access and analyze massive amounts of data that could not previously be comprehended. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion or misunderstanding of appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risks to mental health through misuse or a lack of safeguards on AI.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction of cognitive friction, epistemic agency (e.g., critical thinking skills in human beings).

Source: Interviews with 20+ subject matter experts across multiple institutions in the United States and focus groups with learners from five different colleges and universities.

Processes and Infrastructure

There are numerous ways in which AI is used in higher education operations and administration to help improve internal processes, create new efficiencies, and inform decision-making on complex issues. Importantly, higher education leaders also need to consider how internal staffing and data infrastructure are designed to support the overall AI strategy.

AI Use Cases in Operations and Administration

Just as in other industry sectors, higher education institutions use AI for a variety of operational and administrative needs: conversational AI (i.e., chatbots) for routine inquiries and staff support; generative AI for drafting or improving written materials, computer codes, graphics, and videos; AI tools for aiding with resource planning to meet predicted learner demand; and AI for assessing risks and planning for future challenges (Kilgore, 2025).

Similar to the experimentation and learning that is occurring in teaching and learning, there has been a range of experimentation and application of AI in operations and infrastructure. Some of the work is beginning to impress administrators as they seek to achieve administrative efficiencies, improve communications, expand support service access, integrate affordable accessibility solutions, and improve decision-making and policy formation. And yet, use may not yet be fully widespread. In a 2025 survey of college administrators conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AI could help make academic operations more efficient and improve outcomes; however, 75% of respondents were not currently using AI in their work (Kilgore, 2025). Both the 2025 AACRAO survey and a 2024 survey by Ellucian found that the lack of use by some higher education administrators can be attributed to a lack of resources, uncertainty about how to use AI with existing processes, concerns about data privacy, concerns about accuracy, and institutional policy barriers (Kilgore, 2025; Ellucian, 2024).

The following are examples of some of the use cases for AI in higher education operations and administration.

- **Use case: Improved communications.** Generative AI can provide communications assistance for workers in any number of industries, and so it is no surprise that higher education administrators also see ways to use such tools, particularly for aiding communication with learners. AI tools can be used to quickly generate social media content, personalize communications with learners, create tailored learner onboarding content, and check standard communications for clarity, tone, accessibility, and word choice (Brady, 2024). Institutional examples include:
 - **SNHU.** Some of the AI use in communications is aimed at simplifying messages or translating text into image-based resources. At SNHU, for example, one administrator reported they were examining some of the most common policy questions to determine whether an AI-produced one-page fact sheet and infographic could be a way to give learners more self-service capabilities.
 - **St. Louis University.** St. Louis University offers an “Ask SLU” feature that provides answers to over 800 university-specific questions as well as limited support for several learner services (Brady, 2024).

- **Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).** AI can be used to help manage incoming communications from learners as well. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), for example, launched a text messaging platform called Climated in 2018 that was intended to “check the temperature” of VCU learners on various issues. Notably, the platform was instrumental in providing VCU administration with information to aid campus decisions during Covid-19 (VCU, 2024). With AI assistance, the university can more quickly process data from this platform and understand the range of learner opinions on various topics (Brady, 2024).
- **Use case: Greater efficiency and optimization.** AI can also be used by administrators to achieve efficiencies in the work they are currently doing. If AI can be used to manage repetitive or time-consuming tasks, then existing staff can tackle more strategic lines of work. Many use cases exist across organizations, such as automating learner services appointment scheduling or optimizing course scheduling and faculty workloads (Brady, 2024). Moreover, campus security can enlist AI-enabled cameras to monitor parking lots, dorm entrances, and crowd activities during campus events (Stone, 2025). Institutional examples include:
 - **ASU.** Higher education IT offices have a number of AI use cases, from user assistance to staff training to system monitoring. At ASU, the cybersecurity team created an AI agent to help with the data classification process. Rather than having an IT staff member work one-on-one with an administrator to evaluate the risk assessment for the data classification, the AI agent does that work, leading the user through an AI-generated conversation to reach a data classification determination.
 - **Oregon State University.** Oregon State University’s cybersecurity office uses AI to support the onboarding of part-time student workers (Stone, 2025).
 - **Dartmouth College.** Dartmouth College is using an AI agent for “self-healing,” where the agent proactively monitors and tests the IT network, providing an early alert to IT staff about potential issues needing attention (Slagg, 2025). Self-healing systems can also be designed to remediate issues as they arise, eliminating the need for human interventions.

- **Use case: Predictive modeling.** As noted earlier in this report, AI can enhance predictive modeling in higher education by serving as an early warning system to support learners who are beginning to struggle academically. Traditional models have largely relied on structured signals – academic progress, engagement, enrollment, and operational data – to predict outcomes such as persistence, course success, and time-to-completion. New hybrid models that combine AI with data science extend this capability by incorporating qualitative signals, including student feedback, course evaluations, and interaction data from calls, emails, and other communications. By identifying indicators of student intent and concern, these models offer clearer insight into *why* a learner may be at risk – not just *whether* they are at risk – enabling operational teams to take targeted, timely action at the individual student level rather than relying on broad interventions that often fail to benefit all or most learners. More importantly, AI improves how insights from predictive models are translated into decisions. When designed responsibly, these hybrid approaches surface the factors most strongly associated with success within a given context, informing more precise advising, personalized supports, and smarter resource allocation. Used judiciously, AI-enabled predictive models allow institutions to scale impact, improve outcomes, and deliver a more intentional, student-centered experience.
- **Use case: Tackling complex policy and accreditation issues.** With respect to institutional policymaking, generative AI can be employed to review existing student affairs or other policies to identify ways to improve them, make them more consistent, address any gaps or barriers, or generally align them with known best practices (Brady, 2024). In addition, as noted earlier, there are several administrative functions within higher education that are subject to complex legal, financial, regulatory, or accreditation constraints. Several colleges are using AI to help administrators determine whether planned programs, policies, or processes meet all relevant requirements across a range of policy considerations. In these cases, due to concerns about AI “hallucinations” as well as data privacy, institutions use something known as “grounding,” which means that they limit the AI task to a narrow set of documents as the knowledge source. AI can use only those documents and not the wider internet or a “best guess” prediction. Institutional examples include:

 - **SNHU.** SNHU’s AI specialists, for example, have created an “Academic Requirements Oracle” that contains all of the institution’s various guiding documents, including accreditor policies, faculty collective bargaining agreements, governance agreements for the various learning modalities the institution offers, and so on. When an administrator needs guidance on a new policy, or how these existing policies interact for a particular scenario, the team can query the Oracle to provide a response or create infographics or diagrams reflecting the important details. SNHU sees a lot of value in this approach for the purposes of meeting accreditation guidelines. For certain majors like cybersecurity, there are multiple accrediting bodies whose requirements need to be satisfied. Mapping course outcomes to the range of policy and accreditor requirements is typically a time-consuming process that enlists an entire team of people working behind the scenes, including faculty, curriculum designers, and consultants. AI has the potential to do the work of this team in a fraction of that time, with humans needed primarily for developing the right set of prompts and for final review of the AI-generated outcomes.

- **ASU.** ASU shared that it is using a similar approach for when administrators need to ensure that planned actions meet the requirements of a range of state and federal laws and regulations. AI tools give ASU the power to check hundreds of laws and regulations in a much shorter period of time than would normally be needed to cross-reference these policy documents manually.
- **Use case: Simplifying and strengthening financial aid processes.** Financial aid offices have a number of AI use cases, including chatbots to help learners understand the financial aid award process or AI agents that complete forms by submission deadlines. Institutions may also benefit from AI agents that can help optimize financial aid packages for learners. Institutional examples include:
 - **SNHU.** At SNHU, AI is being used to identify possible financial aid fraud. Normally a task that requires specialized expertise and data analysis, AI-driven fraud detection is possible by training AI in forensic capability, accounting, and common fraud patterns.

Sidebox 2. Substituting AI for a Team of Experts

Operations for higher education institutions are complex because administrators manage a range of requirements, from accreditation to federal and state policy. Strategic decision-making often requires teams of administrators that represent different departments (e.g., financial aid, student services, registrar, faculty) or significant administrative time to sift through many layers of policy guidance – or both. SNHU is using AI to reduce the time required for decision-making processes. For example, when giving a set of AI agents instructions for a complex task, each AI agent can be trained to grade itself before passing work to the next agent. At each layer of the task, therefore, an institution can evaluate AI’s work and decision-making, thereby creating higher levels of confidence in the quality of the output. With a set of human-performed tasks, this kind of incremental evaluation and traceability of the decision-making process may not always be possible.

Another potential benefit is that AI can be instructed to take into account a wide range of perspectives from different parts of the institution without relying on human teams whose social dynamics often play a role in how decisions are made. AI has the potential to mitigate against “group think and analysis paralysis,” or deferring to the highest-ranking person in the room. In contrast, AI allows rapid experimentation in decision-making and predictions about how different decisions will lead to changes in priorities, incentive structures, or regulatory guidelines.

Infrastructure – Particularly Data Infrastructure

An institution's AI strategy must be supported by the appropriate infrastructure. At some institutions, this means having a team dedicated to leveraging AI to realize new operational efficiencies, explore how AI can be employed to enhance teaching and learning, and identify or mitigate AI-related risks to the learner or the institution. For example, SNHU has a team of AI specialists tasked with developing AI innovations that support teams across the university.

In addition to staffing infrastructure, institutional leaders also need to determine which AI tools become part of their overall tech stack. And they need to consider how their overall data systems are structured to align with the institution's AI strategy. This is often overlooked in higher education AI strategies: in a recent survey, only 55% of college presidents reported that their institution has strong data governance structures to support the responsible and effective use of AI (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2026).

Models for Incorporating AI Tools into the Tech Stack

Although free versions of many generative AI tools are available for anyone to use, entities using AI for business or educational purposes know that these free versions have lower levels of capabilities and offer less data security than the enterprise versions. To ensure the highest quality outcomes and to prepare learners for the tools that they will actually be using in the workplace, higher education leaders need to secure enterprise-level versions for internal use. Yet, there is no single way in which institutions have done this. Models identified in the interviews and literature review conducted for this research paper include the following:

- **Single vendor institutions.** Some institutions, as noted in the introduction to this report, partner with a single generative AI provider like OpenAI, Anthropic, or Google and then essentially become a "OpenAI School" or a "Claude School" or a "Google School."
- **Multi-tool “walled garden” institutions.** Others, like Dallas College, have signed on to platforms like BoodleBox that provide their communities a secure “walled garden” where they can safely engage with AI tools from a range of companies. In addition to providing a level of data security, this approach allows users to familiarize themselves with the pros, cons, and uses of different AI products that they may encounter in their future workplaces.
- **Custom “walled garden” institutions.** ASU initially started out with a single vendor partnership but then evolved to create its own “walled garden” platform, CreateAI, that provides access to more than 40 large language model tools. This approach allows the institution to continuously add new tools as they are released, while giving the institution full control of required levels of data privacy.
- **Limited AI deployment.** Other colleges have – at least as their first step in AI exploration – managed a smaller and more limited deployment of AI, such as Morehouse College's partnership with Victory XR, where the college introduced AI teaching assistants into five individual courses (Complete College America, 2025). Taking a slower approach with a narrower set of AI products can allow an institution the time to evaluate and adopt tools that best meet the institution's needs.

Ensuring responsible use of and by AI technologies. Higher education leaders need to ensure that the AI tools being used in classrooms and by administrators are safe and not causing harm to learners or the institution. This of course means establishing policies on responsible AI use, but it also means being proactive and taking extra steps to ensure that learner and institutional data is properly protected, and that campus data analysts and researchers also understand some of the unique data risks with AI. For example, before AI, securing learner data for research or analysis, or sharing with research partners, meant masking the data, which means removing personally identifiable information (PII) like name, address, email address, date of birth, social security number, etc. But with AI, large language models can combine information from different parts of the internet to identify individuals using other parts of their data profiles – a phenomenon called deanonymization (Johnson, 2026). An institution will also need to understand the neural networks and algorithms that are underlying AI tools, using a process called mechanistic interpretability, to mitigate against potential bias in the logic that may shape AI-based processes (Intuition Labs, 2026).

Exercising caution with vendor-designed solutions. There are a number of postsecondary vendors who have developed AI-powered products and services designed to help institutions with student enrollment, retention, academic support, content generation, campus operations, and detection of AI-generated plagiarism. The challenge for higher education is that many vendor-designed solutions are created without input from higher education experts or learning specialists. In addition, institutions typically have limited insight into what kind of AI is used in vendor-designed products, how AI has been trained, and whether it provides sufficient safeguards for data security and against bias. SNHU has designed a proof-of-concept process for vetting and evaluating the adoption of AI vendors and platforms against university priorities, needs, and policies.

Sidebox 3. How Institutions of Higher Education Are Contributing to AI Research and Development

Institutions of higher education are contributing to the research and development of AI tools in different ways. Some are choosing to invest in their own in-house custom versions of generative AI tools to test out applications (e.g., learner chatbots that help answer questions about admissions, enrollment, and academic advising or customized AI tools that streamline transfer credit approval). Other institutions are offering off-the-shelf tools from vendors with guidance about how they can be implemented or utilized. There are also vendors who are customizing tools for institutions. All of these applications are contributing, either formally or informally, to the research and development of AI tools in higher education. The question of whether vendors or institutions should own and control the data used in these endeavors, or whether vendors should be developing learning solutions without input from higher education experts, are central to many institutional decisions regarding whether to build tools in-house or to partner with vendors.

Sidebox 4. AI Inequalities in Higher Education: Partly Resources, Partly Choice

Resource inequalities are not a new issue in higher education, and so it should come as no surprise that availability of funding can play a role in institutional AI strategies and decision-making as well. Shifts in technology also create added costs to institutions, including license fees for enterprise-level tools, training for AI literacy and ethics, the time of faculty or learning specialists to experiment, or the time of AI/data specialists to evaluate data safety or bias built into the adopted models. Covering all of these bases is an expensive undertaking that not every institution will have the resources to do well, and so funding disparities may be an important factor in how and whether learners across higher education are engaging with AI. One interviewee noted, however, that even resource-challenged institutions can start to build an internal framework, navigate discussions with their cabinet, and start to think about the early stages of an AI strategy for the institution.

But differences in how institutions deploy AI tools may also be driven by other factors like size, learning modalities, or institutional culture. As one interviewee noted, a small college with 750 students has different incentives with respect to AI, compared to a large online institution. The degree of AI adoption in teaching and learning may also depend on the role of faculty in decision-making and their views on the value of AI.

Investing in a New Data Infrastructure

One of the benefits of AI is the power it can give an organization to make connections between and among a range of different data sources. Higher education institutions have an enormous amount of data about their operations and their learners. And yet, at most institutions, data is siloed into many different systems that may not “talk” to each other: one interviewee knew of an Ivy League institution, for example, that had 17 different systems that the average learner will engage with during their academic journey. In order for institutions to use AI’s capabilities to understand the lifecycle of a learner, or to identify real-time solutions or interventions to improve learning outcomes, a different data architecture is needed. AI requires data architecture that connects data across enrollment, admissions, learner success, academic, and other systems. Some experts suggest that the way forward is to build an “integrated, interoperable system – a data architecture that allows for data to flow securely and in standard formats across the entire institution. When this happens, the full learner journey comes into view, and AI tools can help faculty, advisors, and learners make sense of it in powerful new ways” (Gamby et al., 2025).

Institutional Challenge and Decision Points: Processes, Data Security, Data Infrastructure, and Responsible Use

The challenges associated with using AI for administrative or operational purposes are similar to challenges with respect to teaching and learning activities. There are concerns about accuracy, data privacy, and the potential loss in human connection. In addition, as suggested by the survey data discussed above, administrators may also be unclear about what is permitted AI use, and they may also not be fully aware of how AI can help them become more efficient or effective in carrying out operational or administrative tasks. Many of these issues stem from insufficient internal leadership or the lack of a institution-wide strategy for AI.

Institutional leaders are also responsible for AI resource management, which is another critical component of an institution's overall AI strategy. These responsibilities include:

- Determining what enterprise-level AI tools are available for different institutional users, including learners, faculty, and staff.
- Ensuring selected tools can be used responsibly in higher education settings.
- Providing support and space for staff to explore, experiment, and test innovative applications of AI for administrative and operational purposes.
- Ensuring vendors of learning programs or administrative services are not introducing irresponsible AI use (like data security threats or biased algorithms) via their platforms.
- Planning for, and investing in, data infrastructure that will enable strategic long-term AI use cases across teaching, learning, and operations.

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Contributors

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The SNHU experts interviewed include:

- **Jennifer Batchelor**, Executive Vice President and University Provost, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Kristen Fitzgerald**, Associate General Counsel, Southern New Hampshire University
- **David Humphreys**, Senior Director, AI Integration, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Jon Kamyck**, Senior Associate Dean, STEM, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Paul LeBlanc**, President Emeritus, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Lundy Lewis**, Professor, Computer Information Systems, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Evan Lowry**, Senior Vice President and General Counsel, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Robert MacAuslan**, Vice President, AI, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Shawn Powers**, Senior Director, AI Policy, Southern New Hampshire University
- **George Siemens**, Chief AI Officer, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Sahil Singhal**, Vice President, Machine Learning and Data Science, Southern New Hampshire University
- **Jaymes Walker-Myers**, Vice President, Learning Science and Assessment, Southern New Hampshire University

Contributors

Additional subject matter experts interviewed include:

- **Sarah Egan Warren**, Assistant Teaching Professor, Institute for Advanced Analytics, North Carolina State University
- **Betheny Gross**, Research Director, WGU Labs
- **Alex Kalinowski**, Assistant Professor, Computer Science and Technology, Empire State University
- **Roger Kohler**, Director for AI Solutions and Architecture, Arizona State University
- **Rachel Levy**, Executive Director, Data Science Academy, and Professor of Mathematics, North Carolina State University
- **Caitlin Mills**, Associate Professor, Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota
- **Greg Morris**, Senior Vice Provost of Academic Services, Dallas College
- **Norman Palmer**, Director of Technology Innovation, Complete College America
- **Shankar Prasad**, Chief Strategy Officer, Carnegie Higher Education
- **Andreas Schleicher**, Director for Education and Skills, OECD
- **Diane Shichtman**, Associate Professor, Computer Science and Technology, Empire State University
- **Mitchell Stevens**, Professor, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University
- **Nan Travers**, Director, Center for Leadership in Credentialing, Empire State University (Retired)

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