



CHEPP

The Center for
Higher Education Policy
and Practice

AI IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LEARNER-CENTERED INSIGHTS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Research Series Overview and Executive Summary

JULY 2026

Introduction

As soon as ChatGPT was released in November 2022, it became clear that a new era of dramatic technological change had arrived. Only a few years later, about one in six people worldwide use generative AI tools (Microsoft Blog, 2026), and the picture is still evolving for how large language models, machine learning, and other artificial intelligence tools will ultimately reshape daily tasks, jobs, resource management, and labor markets. This reshaping is likely to continue to evolve for the foreseeable future. One sector where these ever-improving AI tools and capabilities promise both enormous opportunities and systemic disruption is higher education.

Surveys reveal that the emergence of AI use in higher education is happening fast. An Ellucian survey of higher education faculty and administrators in 2024 found that 84 percent were using AI either professionally or personally, and 93 percent of administrators expected to expand their AI use to improve operational efficiencies and productivity (Ellucian, 2024). More recently, a 2025 survey of college students by Inside Higher Ed found that 85 percent have used generative AI for coursework in the last year (Flaherty, 2025).

The AI use cases are many and wide-ranging, but a few examples include:

- Chatbots trained on a course's syllabus and content that serve as a 24-hour personal tutor to learners.
- Small language models that enable an institution to safely upload thousands of pages of policy documents to help answer questions related to compliance or accreditation.
- Transcription tools that expand access for learners who are deaf and hard of hearing.
- Generative AI tools that can help faculty improve the quality and tone of their feedback to learners.

Increasingly, press releases announce exclusive partnerships between major AI companies and prominent higher education institutions – Gemini with Florida State University (Dorn & Prentiss, 2025), Open AI with Duke University (Duke Today, 2025), and Anthropic with the University of San Francisco School of Law (Anthropic, 2025), just to name a few. Less visible, perhaps, is the experimentation by learning and technology specialists that is happening behind the scenes, where, for example, they are creating interconnected networks of AI agents and data systems that allow the customization of learning in ways that we have never seen (or imagined) before.

Visions for these new educational horizons are forcing institutions to grapple in new ways with questions like: What does it mean to learn? What are the foundational skills that someone needs to be successful in a rapidly changing environment? What still must be done by humans in the learning process? And what is the role of higher education in a world of large language models and AI agents?

In a recent survey, just over half (55%) of college presidents said that their institution is responding adeptly and appropriately to the rise of AI (Inside Higher Ed & Hanover Research, 2026). The complexity of the task may be a factor.

Institutional leaders need to develop AI strategies that address the various risks that come with AI: the “hallucinations” and inaccuracies still prevalent when using large language models, threats to data privacy, excessive “cognitive offloading” that interferes with real learning (and related issues of academic integrity), potential biases baked into the algorithms that could perpetuate existing inequities, and the environmental costs of AI data centers’ water and energy consumption.

Institutions must also make decisions about adding AI tools to their technology infrastructure, or “tech stack,” and investing in new data architecture, but these decisions may be constrained by leadership, buy-in, institutional approach, and financial resources. As AI integration continues to evolve, learners across higher education may have access to different tools and infrastructure based on any combination of the number of factors mentioned above. Some learners may experience custom-designed AI-driven learning technologies built through in-house research and development processes, while others are limited to off-the-shelf AI tools and systems that offer minimal data privacy or that are designed with little to no higher education involvement.

Because of these fundamental questions and concerns, and because of the speed at which AI capabilities and tools are evolving, there is some urgency to ensure that those in decision-making or regulatory roles have a robust understanding of what is currently happening with AI in higher education, as well as the decisions confronting institutions.

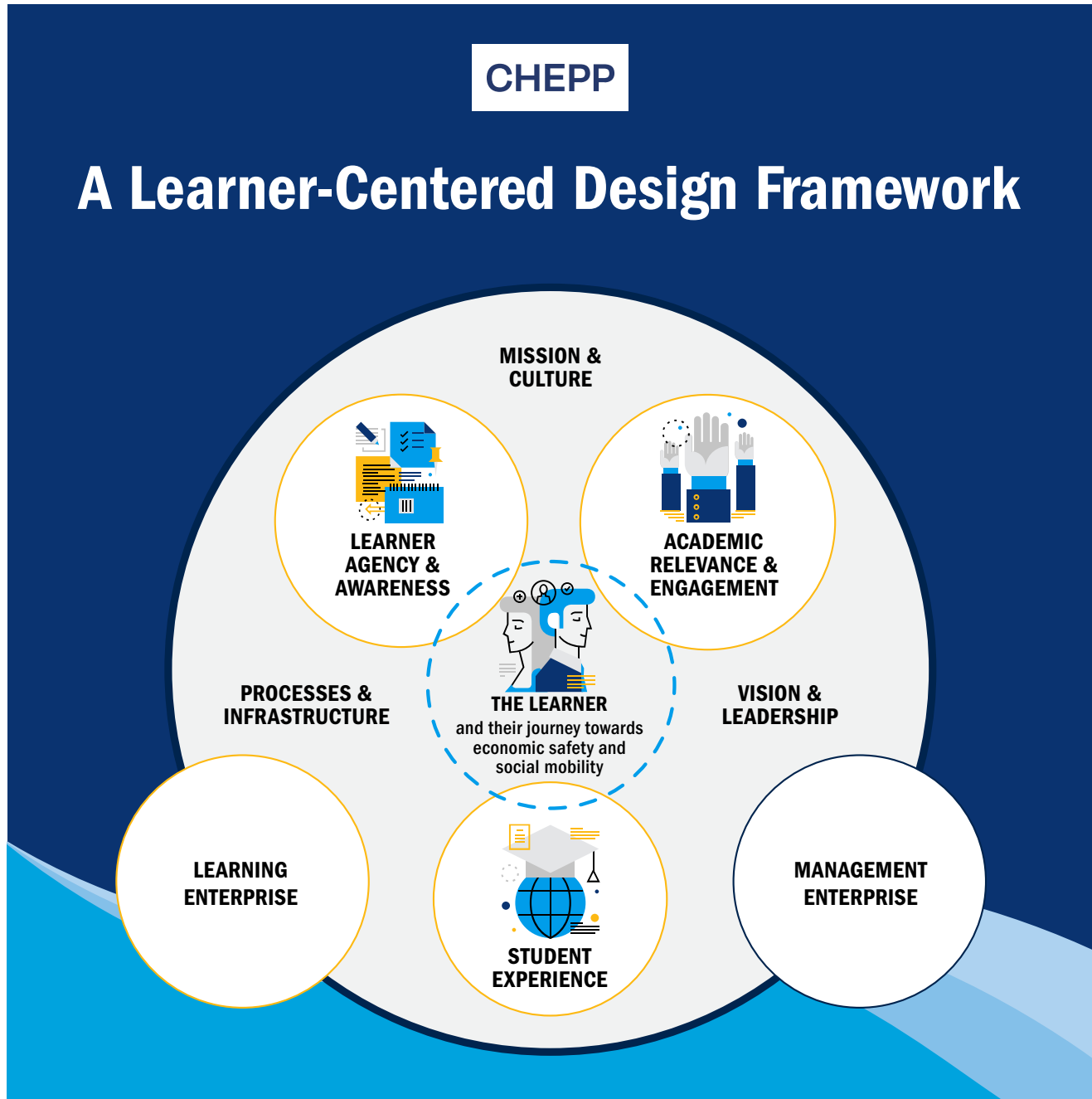
AI Research Series Overview

This series of reports from Southern New Hampshire University’s (SNHU) Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP) is intended to educate policymakers, higher education leaders, and other stakeholders on how institutions are currently engaging with AI tools and capabilities, why their role in shaping AI use cases in learning environments is critical to the future of higher education, how they are mitigating or managing risk factors, and the ways in which AI is showing potential to fundamentally change teaching and learning. Central to these topics are the individual learners: how they are experiencing or benefitting from AI, or conversely, where institutions need to exercise care to avoid potential learner harm. The series of reports are as follows, with the latter two reports being organized according to the learner-centered design framework and its elements (see [Figure 1](#) below) developed by SNHU’s CHEPP:

1. **[AI in Higher Education: A Primer for Higher Education Policymakers and Leaders.](#)** The series includes a primer on AI, how it operates, and what its capabilities are, as of the writing of this paper.
2. **[AI in Higher Education: Teaching and Learning – Applying a Learner-Centered Lens to AI Integration.](#)** The report on teaching and learning provides a robust overview of how higher education institutions must play a critical role in thoughtfully integrating AI into teaching and learning, centering on learners. It includes sections on learner agency and awareness, academic relevance and engagement, and the learner experience.
3. **[AI in Higher Education: Infrastructure and Operations – Key Enablers of AI Strategies.](#)** The report on infrastructure and operations discusses how AI is shifting management, administration, and technology in higher education institutions. It includes sections on mission and culture, leadership and vision, and processes and infrastructure.

The series also includes key decision points for institutions based on AI’s potential, as well as its opportunities and risks to learning, students, and institutions.

Figure 1. CHEPP's Framework for Learner-Centered Design in Higher Education



Executive Summary and Key Takeaways

Today's leaders of higher education institutions are facing critical decisions about how AI should be integrated into their enterprises. Similar to business and industry, they have decisions to make about how to apply AI tools and capabilities for administrative, operational, strategic, marketing, and other “management enterprise” purposes. For these functions, AI promises opportunities for efficiencies related to reduced staff time on tasks, expanded analytical capabilities, increased accessibility, or cost savings in support services. Higher education and business leaders alike need to balance those benefits against risks and costs, particularly data security, environmental impacts, AI output quality, and algorithmic bias, to name just a few.

Yet, higher education leadership is also grappling with AI's role in teaching and learning. There are potential opportunities for AI to provide opportunities and benefits to the teaching and learning process, as well as to the overall student experience. And yet, there is a real need to provide clarity around what constitutes responsible AI use, with the boundaries shifting based on the specifics of the course or the degree, the AI tools that are selected, and the specific preferences of an instructor.

There is also an important role for state and federal policymakers as AI becomes part of the fabric of our higher education system. There are, after all, clear lessons learned from recent history with other technological innovations in the learning space, and there is arguably a responsibility for public policy to protect students, public funds, and the strength of our education system. Some of the AI-related challenges facing higher education institutions could be eased with a stronger regulatory environment around AI tools and platforms, particularly regarding data security and output quality. Further, current FERPA regulations were established at a time when AI was not a factor in processes and policies that could ensure a student's data privacy, updating this important law for the current AI environment is overdue. Finally, public policies can play an important role in providing funding for under-resourced institutions to invest in their AI strategies, and to create safe spaces for innovation that respect data privacy while ensuring public funds are used responsibly. Building policy that can evolve with AI as opposed to letting AI grow and regulating later may be an important strategy for policymakers to consider.

Amid these policy uncertainties and the continued evolution of AI capabilities, the role of institutional leaders has never been more important. They have the responsibility of setting their institution's AI agenda and doing so in a way that safeguards learner agency, academic relevance and integrity, and a high-quality student experience.

In setting the AI agenda, leaders should establish a cross-institutional AI taskforce that works to address the following:

- **Centering learners and learning in institutional policies and practices**, with prioritization of safeguards for learner agency, data security, and academic integrity, and for establishing authentic assessment of learning.
- **Providing clear guidelines for responsible AI use** in both teaching and learning as well as in operations and management, with an emphasis on data security, student data privacy, mitigating against algorithmic biases, and the need for critical evaluation and validation of AI outputs. The definition of responsible AI use in teaching and learning should be customized to areas of study, intended learning outcomes, and other academic integrity considerations. The definition of responsible AI use in operations and management should be customized to the specific administrative department, the degree to which internal data is analyzed by AI, the category of internal data to be used, and other criteria relevant to data security, student data privacy, and the integrity of the institution's mission and values.
- **Providing information and training to learners, staff, and faculty to ensure AI fluency** across the campus community. Everyone engaged in teaching, learning, operations, and management should understand what AI capabilities are available, and many learners will need AI skills in the future workforce. In the course of understanding the opportunities and potential benefits from AI, everyone also needs to understand the risks, ethical considerations, academic integrity concerns, algorithmic biases, costs (including environmental), and continued fallibility of existing tools.
- **Investing in data infrastructure** creates more secure data environments, while connecting data systems to maximize the benefits of AI for operational, administrative, research, and strategic purposes.
- **Emphasizing transparency** in how AI is being used across teaching, learning, operations, and management.
- **Treading carefully when replacing human connections with AI tools.** Institution leaders need to consider the relationships between learners and human staff and faculty, as well as the overall culture of the institution, and impacts on learners when making decisions about productive uses of AI in the student experience.

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Contributors

CHEPP is grateful to the authors of this research series, Meaghan Rajkumar, CHEPP's director of research, and our partner, Rebecca Klein-Collins. We are also grateful for the invaluable contributions of the CHEPP staff for their vision, support, and ongoing improvement of this report: Jamie Fasteau and Brittany Matthews.

We are also grateful for the many individuals who informed the series through individual or group interviews. These subject matter experts included university technologists and learning specialists involved with AI development and deployment, administrators setting institutional policy and guidance, faculty incorporating AI tools and skill-building into their courses, and independent non-profit organizations supporting and monitoring these efforts.

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)

Finally, we extend our thanks to the learners who shared their own experiences with AI and their views on how AI is affecting their educational journeys and career plans. Thank you to Today's Students Coalition and SNHU for connecting the authors with these learners. They include:

- **Lenyx Coviak**, Student, University of South Carolina
- **Nicholas Lujan**, Student, Mendocino College
- **Mina Rizk**, Student, Middlebury College
- **Zahra Jafri**, Student, Southern New Hampshire University