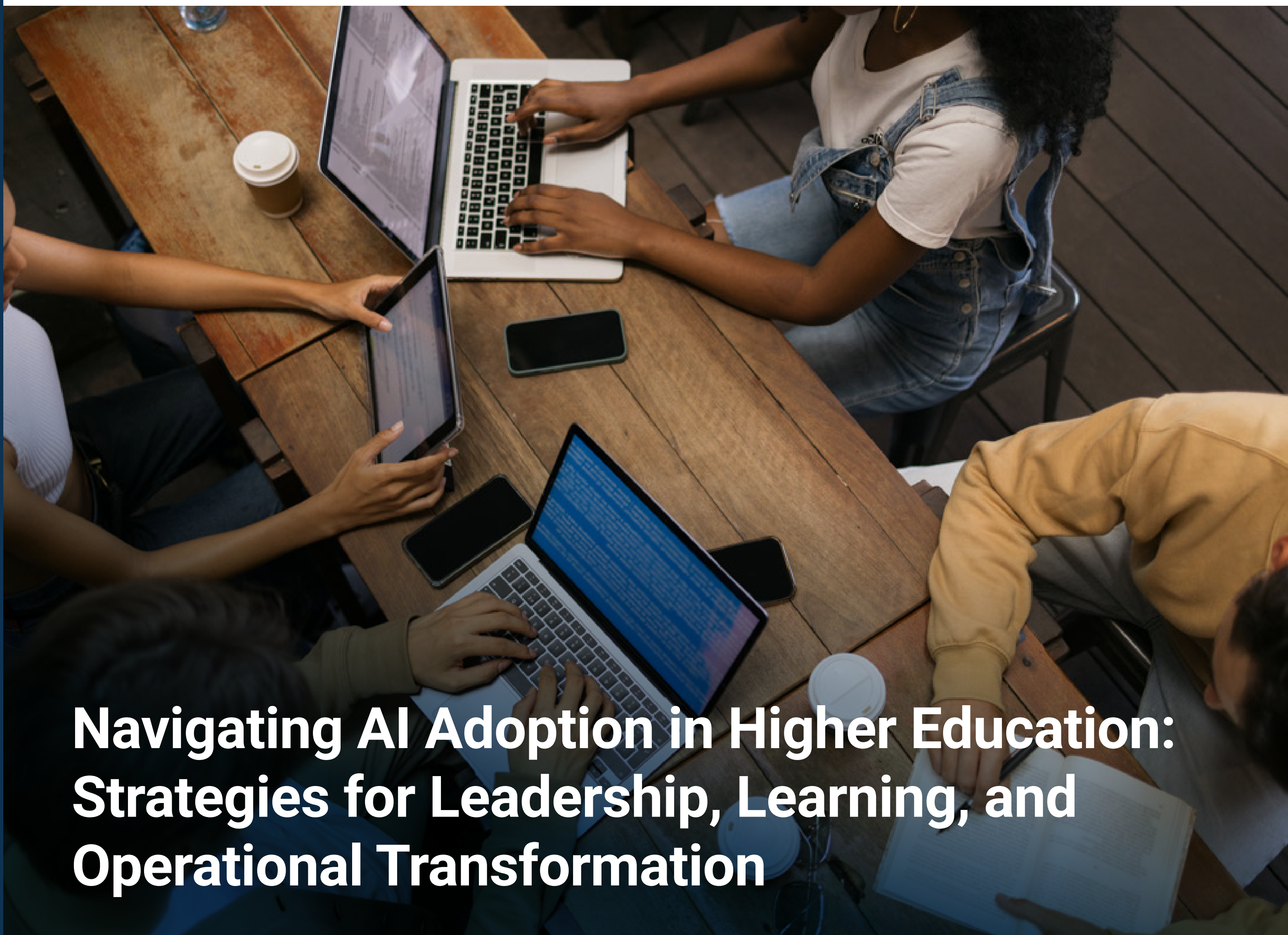


Navigating AI Adoption in Higher Education: Strategies for Leadership, Learning, and Operational Transformation

The New Imperative for Higher Education

Artificial intelligence has moved from an emerging conversation to an institutional priority. As campuses face shifting demographics, heightened expectations from students and employers, and pressure to demonstrate value, AI has become a central lever for accelerating transformation.

Yet, while institutions acknowledge AI's importance, they vary widely in their approach to adoption. The challenge is no longer whether AI will shape higher education—but **how leaders can guide responsible, strategic, institution-wide implementation**.

This white paper distills insights from a national discussion with higher education presidents, exploring how institutional leaders can build AI-ready cultures, strengthen operational efficiency, safeguard academic integrity, and prepare learners for a workforce where AI fluency is essential.

Why AI Matters Now: Key Drivers for AI Adoption

AI is reshaping higher education in ways that touch every part of the institution—from how students learn, to how staff work, to how presidents plan across complex systems.

As a result, higher education leaders are encouraged to shift their mindset from asking whether AI will affect their institutions to how quickly its influence will reshape student learning, daily work, and long-term strategy. The deeper motivations for adopting AI are rooted in the following realities institutions can no longer ignore:

1. Employer expectations are rapidly rising
2. Faculty and students are already embracing AI, whether institutions are ready or not
3. Academic and assessment integrity are coming into question in the age of AI
4. AI can boost an institution's operational efficiency and institutional capacity
5. Institutions can gain enhanced safety, cybersecurity, and risk management through AI
6. AI is accelerating institutional agility

Perhaps the most important theme is that AI increases the pressure for institutions to become more agile. Higher education—long criticized for being slow to adapt—must now operate more like a "nimble startup" capable of testing, evaluating, and pivoting quickly. AI is not just a technology innovation; it is an organizational culture opportunity that requires systems thinking and sustained leadership.

The Leadership Challenge: Moving From Awareness to Action

Most higher education leaders acknowledge AI's importance, but many still ask a defining question:

Where do we start?

AI adoption requires a thoughtful, systemic approach—not a rush toward isolated solutions, quick pilots, or unvetted tools. Here are four areas that presidents should consider:

1. Establishing a Vision Grounded in Mission, Not Hype

While AI discourse can be dominated by buzzwords, trends, and vendor-driven excitement, campus leaders must anchor AI adoption in an institutional mission. AI serves the work of the university—not the other way around.

Institutions that chase technology without a clear purpose risk "drowning in a sea of solutions," like what happened during the adoption of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Instead, articulate why AI matters for students, workforce needs, and academic strengths. Dr. Susana Rivera-Mills, President of Aurora University (IL), reinforced that leaders must communicate this vision consistently to maintain alignment across faculty, staff, board members, and students.

2. Balancing Innovation With Policy, Ethics, and Safety

Safety structures are essential to preventing misuse, protecting institutional data, and guiding ethical adoption. Effective policies include:

- **Centralizing purchasing and tool vetting** because AI's data implications are too significant for ad hoc procurement
- **Moving to secured institutional AI platforms** and away from public tools that may expose student information, compromise internal documents, trigger compliance issues, and violate FERPA or HR confidentiality
- **Creating iterative AI governance** due to rapidly evolving tools, changing faculty adoption patterns, unpredictable experimentation practices among students, new emerging risks, and constant shifts in equity challenges
- **Providing transparent and ethical guidance for students** to avoid confusion on appropriate

academic use and disclosure processes, what the expectations for showing work are, and the ethical guidelines around creation vs. curation

- **Fostering equity** by ensuring students have access to devices, broadband, secure AI tools, and training and support
- **Avoiding overreliance on AI** detection tools since this produces false positives, cannot reliably prove AI use, risks penalizing students unfairly, and creates unnecessary fear

That said, an important point to keep in mind is that guardrails should not serve as barriers to innovation; they are the foundation that allows experimentation to happen responsibly.

3. Sharing Leadership With Faculty and Governance Structures

Both Dr. Rivera-Mills and Dr. Alberto Cardelle, President of SUNY Oneonta (NY), stated that presidents cannot—and should not—dictate the academic dimensions of AI adoption in a vacuum. Instead, curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy are an opportunity to empower faculty. This requires presidents to lead through:

- Transparency
- Collaboration
- Incentives
- Shared governance
- Gradual culture shift rather than mandates

Dr. Rivera-Mills discussed how developing a broad-based AI task force can surpass even strategic planning participation. Institutions can also create campus-wide learning communities or fund internal microgrants to support faculty experimentation. These approaches acknowledge that AI adoption in teaching must come from faculty insight, not administrative directives.

4. Managing Expectations From Boards, Students, and Public Stakeholders

AI is now appearing frequently in board conversations and legislative discussions, creating internal and external pressure to “move fast.” While urgency is real, moving quickly without structure can generate confusion or resistance, since various stakeholders have different expectations. Students expect clarity and guidance, faculty expect autonomy, the board expects a vision, and employers expect graduates who are AI-ready.

Leaders must navigate these competing expectations, often acting as translators between groups that approach AI from very different vantage points—all while communicating realities, dispelling misconceptions, and putting developments into context.

A Three-Pillar Framework for AI Readiness

Leaders must organize their AI strategy around multiple interconnected domains. While each campus is different, there are three major areas where AI reshapes campus behavior and institutional planning: operations, teaching and learning, and workforce preparation.

The following framework reveals how institutions can build readiness step-by-step rather than treating AI as a single initiative or siloed project.

Pillar 1: Operational Transformation

Grassroots Adoption Reveals Both Opportunity and Risk

Much of the AI entering campuses comes through tools institutions already subscribe to, including Microsoft 365 and Outlook, often before formal planning or training begins. In fact, recent research indicates AI adoption by university administrators has doubled in the past year, with 61% using AI in both personal and professional settings, with 93% expecting their AI use to increase significantly in the next two years.[1]

This informal use indicates strong demand for efficiency tools, but also highlights the need for institutional guardrails to ensure consistency, privacy, and security. The fact that this adoption is happening **across ranks**—not only among junior faculty or tech-forward staff—means the need for institutions to act is more imperative, since the practice is widespread.

One strategy is to consolidate all technology purchasing—including AI tools—into a centralized office, as decentralized buying can create security gaps. This requires rethinking the following:

- Software vetting
- Security reviews
- Data protection standards
- Legal and compliance workflows

This structural change—sparked by AI—shows how operational transformation requires governance as much as innovation.

Moving Beyond Pilots Toward Sustainable Processes

Institutions should avoid the temptation of running isolated AI pilots that don't scale. Sustainable operational transformation requires:

[1] Ellucian, AI in Higher Education: Understanding the Present and Shaping the Future (AI Industry Report 2024), Ellucian, 2024, https://www.ellucian.com/resources/industry-reports/ai-industry-report-2024

- Policies
- Training
- Security infrastructure
- A roadmap for integration
- Measurable outcomes

In short, AI success depends as much on operational capacity as on technological capability.

Pillar 2: Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Innovation

AI Has Shifted Focus from "What" Students Produce to "How" They Think

AI is accelerating a fundamental shift in teaching and learning. Not because tools are new, but because they require a reevaluation of how learning is demonstrated and assessed.

This shift mirrors the calculator revolution, shared Dr. Joe Sallustio, Chief of Industry Engagement at Ellucian. Students are now expected to show how they arrived at their work, not simply to produce an output. AI challenges faculty to rethink the "what" versus the "how" of learning and forces deeper engagement with critical thinking, synthesis, and reflection. This forces instructors to:

- Design assignments that emphasize reasoning
- Require students to show their process
- Integrate reflection into coursework
- Evaluate synthesis, not just output

Rather than avoiding AI to prevent plagiarism, institutions should embrace the technology and redesign pedagogy around higher-order skills.

Faculty Engagement Is Stronger and Broader Than Expected

Contrary to popular belief, faculty are not resistant to technology. Rather than avoiding AI, faculty across ranks—including senior members—are experimenting with the technology to:

- Build rubrics
- Redesign syllabi
- Create case studies
- Scaffold assignments
- Build learning communities
- Develop new forms of assessment

This can help institutional leaders take the first step toward adopting AI if they have been hesitant to do so, primarily due to potential pushback from faculty.

Student Culture Is Shaping Pedagogy

On the surface, institutions are more likely to act. Students already use AI, and failing to provide clear expectations and structures risks widening equity gaps or compromising academic quality.

However, Dr. Cardelle emphasized that some students are actively resisting the technology, even placing "No AI artwork" stickers around campus. This underscores AI's role not only as a technological disruptor but as a catalyst for debate around authenticity, creativity, and ethics.

These cultural debates influence:

- Classroom conversations
- Academic integrity policies
- Expectations for transparency
- Faculty decision-making

AI is not just a tool in the classroom; it is becoming part of the academic culture that faculty must navigate.

Pillar 3: Workforce and Student Success

Higher Education Must Meet Labor Market Demands

Dr. Sallustio led panelists through a discussion with the conclusion that AI must prepare students for a labor market that is changing faster than campuses typically redesign their curricula. Industry partners increasingly expect graduates to enter the workforce with baseline AI literacy and are already assessing candidates based on:

- AI fluency
- Ethical reasoning in AI-augmented environments
- Ability to adapt workflows to incorporate AI
- Comfort with rapid technological change
- Prompt engineering or tool navigation

Institutions that fail to teach these skills risk graduating students who are underprepared for an AI-enabled workplace. It is therefore incumbent on institutions to adopt curricular and co-curricular alignment.

AI Is Improving Career Readiness Support

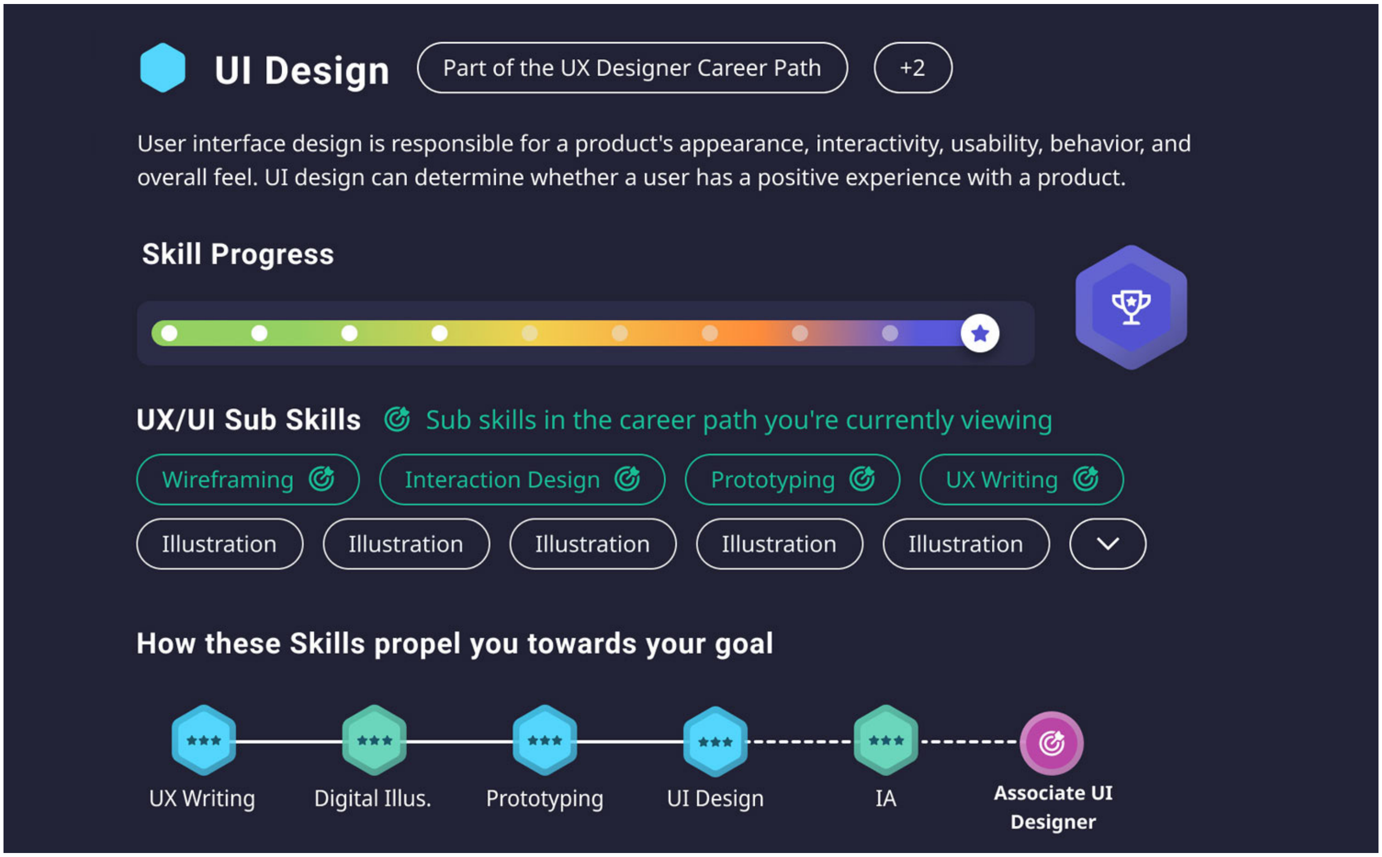
When discussing AI innovations, Dr. Rivera-Mills shared how Aurora University implemented VR-based simulations for job interviews. Students participate in a simulated interview first, then debrief with an AI career coach that analyzes their verbal responses, filler words, tone, self-reflection, and areas for improvement.

This illustrates how AI can:

- Provide real-time feedback
- Track skill development

- Increase student confidence
- Offer practice without needing additional staff capacity

In addition to illustrating how AI is augmenting—not replacing—human advising and instruction, this can be particularly valuable for first-generation students who may lack exposure to professional interview environments.



*Gamified, AI-powered experiences, such as this in **Ellucian Journey**, visualize skills acquisition.*

The 4 Stages of Maturity: Measuring Progress Beyond Pilots

Regardless of how effective an institution's pillar framework might be, what the implementation actually looks like is important. More precisely, institutions are encouraged to move past scattered pilots and isolated experiments toward *sustained, institution-wide AI practice*. Since AI adoption happens unevenly across individuals, departments, and roles, leaders should push toward AI maturity models. These frameworks help **institutions track where they are, where they need to go, and how to measure growth over time.**

This four-stage maturity model focuses on organizational capacity rather than tool adoption, ensuring that institutions track whether AI is leading to meaningful improvements rather than simply expanding experimentation.

1. Experimental Stage — Individual Exploration

This is where most institutions begin, and many still remain: faculty, staff, and students experimenting independently.

At this stage, institutions have little visibility into how AI is being used, which poses risk but also reveals genuine grassroots interest.

2. Emerging Stage — Early Organization and Skill Building

In the emerging stage, institutions begin to create foundational structures. Examples of actions characteristic of this phase include:

- Launching AI task forces with cross-campus representation
- Offering faculty and staff workshops or learning communities
- Gathering early examples of classroom AI use
- Beginning to craft initial guidelines or usage policies
- Identifying risks and gaps (e.g., privacy, access, security)

3. Operational Stage — Integration Into Campus Workflows

Institutions in this stage begin embedding AI into operational processes and academic practices. Several signs of operational maturity include:

- Centralized purchasing and vetting to manage risk
- Secure, institution-wide AI platforms
- Faculty redesigning assignments across multiple departments
- Staff using AI consistently for communications, workflow, and analysis
- Policies being refined and communicated, not just drafted

Operational maturity requires a mindset shift: institutions stop treating AI as a side project and begin integrating it into everyday work.

4. Transformational Stage — Institution-Wide Change and Strategic Alignment

Transformational institutions align AI with mission, strategy, and long-term organizational change. While few institutions have reached this stage, indicators of transformational maturity include:

- AI literacy integrated into general education or foundational curriculum
- AI-enabled experiential learning scaled across programs
- Continuous faculty development tied to promotion or professional growth

- Governance structures that evolve with new risks
- AI competencies aligned directly with workforce demands
- Regular assessment of outcomes (student success, efficiency, equity)

This stage is not defined by high-tech programs. It is defined by structural, cultural, and strategic alignment.

Metrics: What Institutions Should Measure

To avoid superficial adoption, institutions must evaluate impact, not just activity. The following metrics reflect what the panel of presidents and their peers are watching most closely:

1. Operational Efficiency and Capacity Gains

Leaders should emphasize the need to measure how AI reduces workload and reallocates staff time. This is critical for institutions facing labor shortages and increasing service expectations.

Examples include tracking:

- Hours saved through automated processes
- Staff time redirected to higher-value student support
- Reduction in repetitive or manual administrative work

These indicators show whether AI is strengthening institutional capacity—not simply generating exploration.

2. Faculty and Staff Engagement and Skill Development

Leaders are encouraged to monitor the following indicators:

- Faculty participation in AI training
- Number of departments redesigning assignments
- Staff adoption of institutionally approved tools
- Requests for additional support or training

These metrics reflect cultural acceptance and readiness.

3. Teaching and Learning Outcomes

While still emerging, institutions are beginning to examine:

- Whether redesigned assignments improve critical thinking
- How AI-supported feedback tools affect student learning
- Differences in learning outcomes between courses with and without AI integration

This metric focuses on learning quality, not AI novelty.

4. Equity of Access and Student Participation

Together, with their partners, institutions can use AI-enabled insights to close equity gaps and expand opportunities for all learners. They can identify:

- Which students have access to devices and tools
- Usage patterns across socioeconomic groups
- Participation in AI-enabled experiences like VR simulations
- Differences in comfort or confidence with AI tools

These metrics ensure AI does not widen preexisting disparities.

5. Student Career Readiness and Employer Alignment

Institutions can also evaluate indicators tied to workforce preparation, including:

- Student ability to use AI responsibly
- Employer feedback on graduates' AI fluency
- Participation in AI-enabled career preparation activities
- Effectiveness of AI-supported simulations (e.g., interview performance)

These measures align the institution's AI strategy with long-term student outcomes.

Final Thoughts

AI represents more than a technological evolution. It's an opportunity to reimagine how institutions serve students. AI-powered solutions, purpose-built for higher education, are designed to help leaders move from experimentation to transformation, unlocking learning for all and creating a smarter and more connected campus experience. This white paper is based upon the webinar "Navigating AI Adoption in Higher Ed: College Presidents on Student Learning vs Operational Efficiency" with Ellucian Chief of Industry Engagement, Dr. Joe Sallustio and Presidents Dr. Alberto Cardelle of SUNY Oneonta (NY) and Dr. Susana Rivera-Mills of Aurora University (IL).

This white paper and webinar were produced by University Business and sponsored by Ellucian.

To learn more, **watch the webinar**

Watch On-Demand

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