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Artificial Intelligence in Higher Education:

From Widespread Adoption to Strategic Integration

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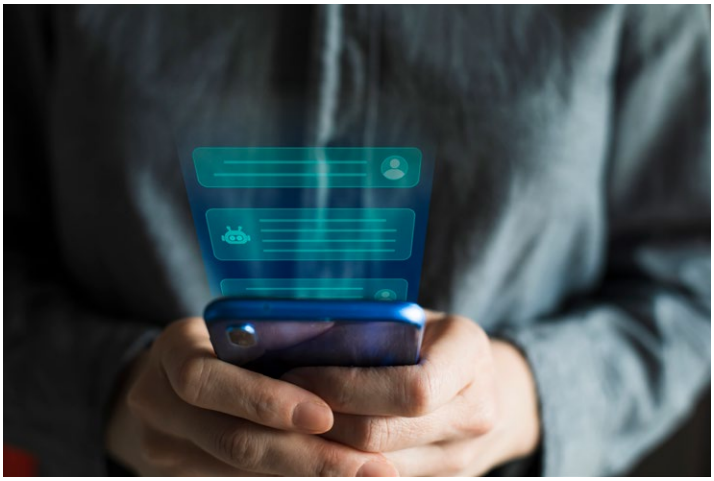
AI adoption in higher education is moving beyond experimentation to intentional, strategic integration.

Artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education is no longer confined to pilots or individual use cases. Over the past year, colleges and universities have begun embedding AI into core strategies and operations. This shift reflects a growing recognition of AI's potential to drive efficiency, improve decision-making, and support long-term goals.

Findings from **Ellucian's 2025 AI in Higher Education Survey** reveal that while personal AI use among administrators is nearing saturation — over 90% report using AI, up slightly from 84% last year — the real story is at the institutional level. Institution-wide adoption surged from 49% in 2024 to 66% in 2025, signaling that AI is no longer a novelty but a strategic priority. Nearly half of respondents (43%) say AI is now part of their institution's strategic plan, and over 60% of executive leaders report dedicated budget allocations for AI initiatives.

This year's survey also highlights evolving attitudes toward AI's role in academia. Confidence is strongest in operational and data-driven use cases, such as cybersecurity threat detection, and predictive analytics for enrollment forecasting. However, skepticism persists in high-stakes areas like admissions and student learning, where trust-building and human oversight remain essential.



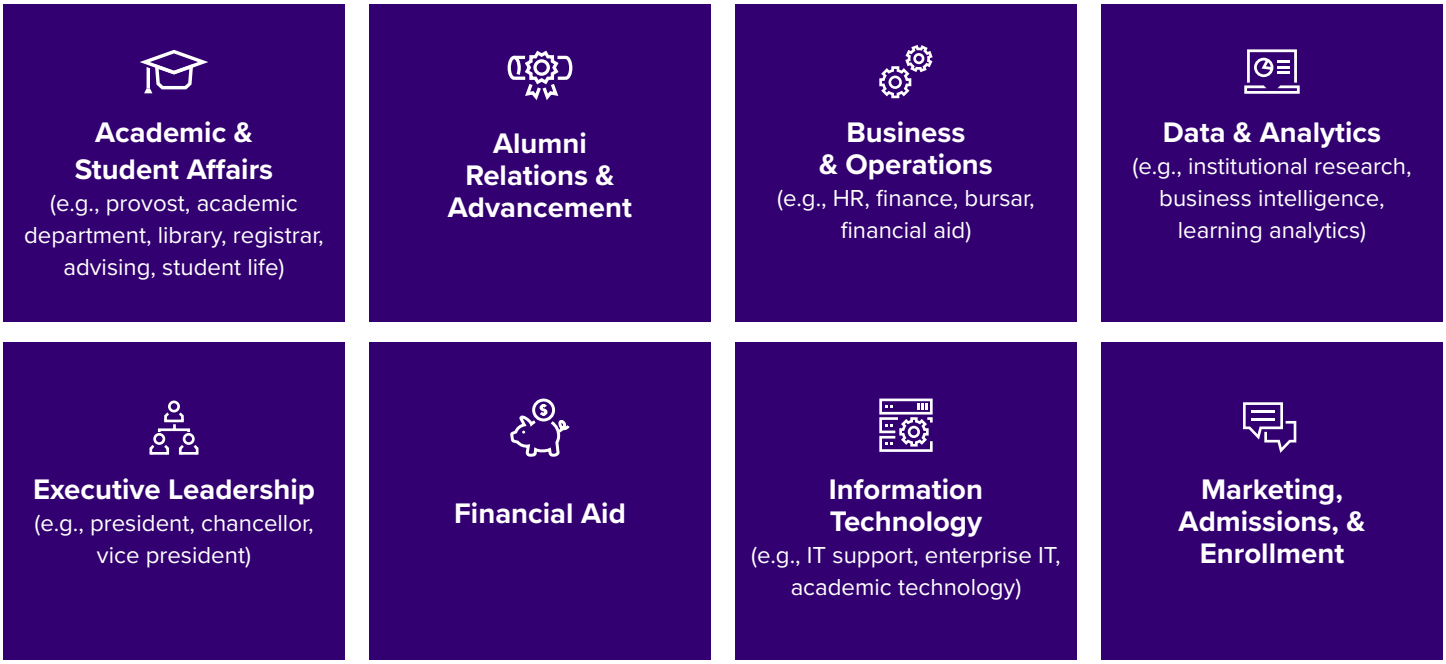
Despite progress, challenges endure. Data privacy remains the top barrier to adoption, cited by more than half of respondents, while new concerns — including environmental impact and role displacement — are emerging. Knowledge gaps are narrowing, yet training remains the most requested resource for the third consecutive year, underscoring the need for ongoing enablement as technology evolves.

This report synthesizes insights from higher education administrators and leaders to explore how AI adoption is accelerating, where trust gaps remain, and what institutions need to do next. It concludes with actionable recommendations for aligning AI strategies with institutional priorities while safeguarding ethics and transparency.

As you explore this year's report, keep the following in mind:

The term 'artificial intelligence' has been applied and interpreted in many different ways. To ensure that responses throughout the survey were appropriately aligned, we provided respondents with a unified definition of AI: *An AI system is a machine-based system that generates outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions by reasoning, learning, and acting in a way that would normally require human intelligence or involves data whose scale exceeds what humans can analyze.*

Respondents were asked to indicate their primary area of responsibility at their institutions by selecting from the following list. This self-identification is used to segment the survey results by functional area throughout the report.



"AI is here to stay, need to be competent in AI to keep up with ever evolving technology."

– Executive Leadership, Public 2-year

"My main concerns are around data privacy, bias in algorithms, and ensuring that AI complements human judgment rather than replacing it."

– Information Technology, Private, Not-for-profit

"I see AI as a valuable tool for improving efficiency and productivity in my work. It can help streamline tasks, allowing me to produce more in a shorter timeframe, and support the development of process improvement strategies. I also find it beneficial for sparking ideas and brainstorming, especially when I need a fresh perspective or quick inspiration."

– Business & Operations, Private, For-Profit

"AI would be beneficial for process improvement and creating more efficient work balances. AI will be beneficial in communicating with students more effectively and building capacity for communicating outside of standard business hours."

– Financial Aid, Public 2-year

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INSIGHT 1

Individual adoption of AI is reaching a ceiling, while institutional momentum is growing.

Across higher education, artificial intelligence is entering a new phase of maturity. While personal use of AI tools among higher education administrators is approaching saturation, institutional adoption is accelerating — driven by evolving strategic priorities, increased resource allocation, and stronger leadership focus. This momentum is expected to continue, with respondents anticipating further growth in institutional AI use over the next two years.

AI adoption among administrators is nearing its natural ceiling, with usage exceeding 90%.

Personal use of AI tools appears to be leveling off, with 91% of respondents reporting some level of use this year compared to 84% last year — a relatively modest increase that suggests adoption is stabilizing.

Meanwhile, the share of non-users who have no intention to adopt AI is steady at 7%, reinforcing that a small but consistent group remains resistant or uninterested in AI adoption. This trend indicates that future growth in AI engagement may depend less on expanding the user base and more on deepening or diversifying current usage.

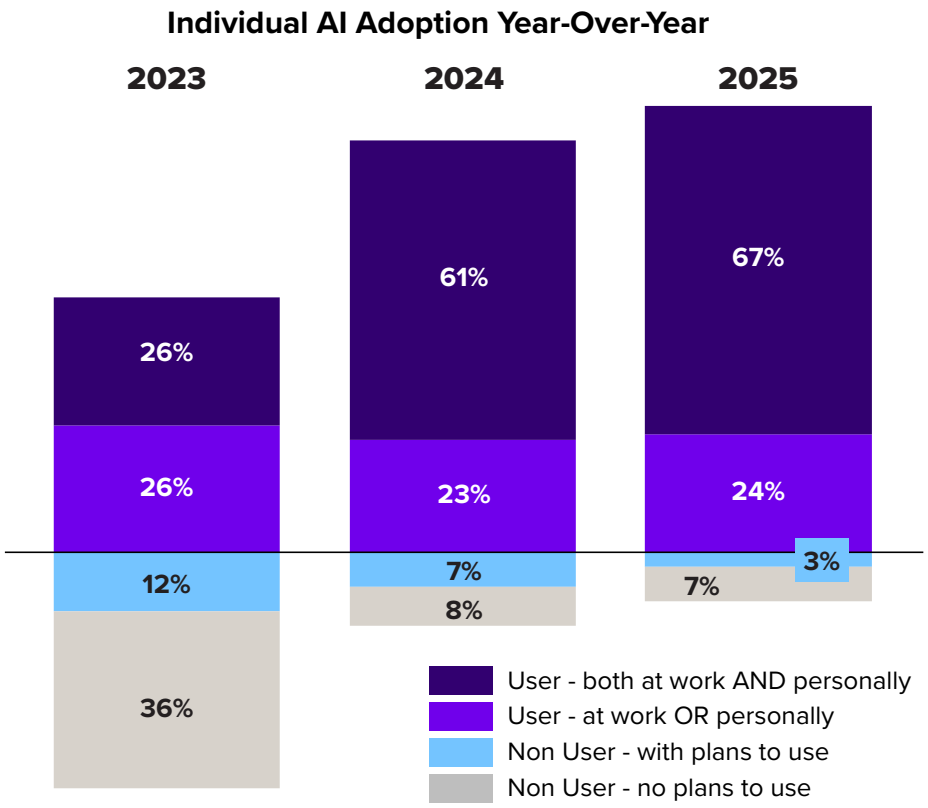


Figure 1: *Survey Question: "Which of the following best describes how you have used artificial intelligence (AI)?" 2023 n = 1383; 2024 n = 445; 2025 n = 779*

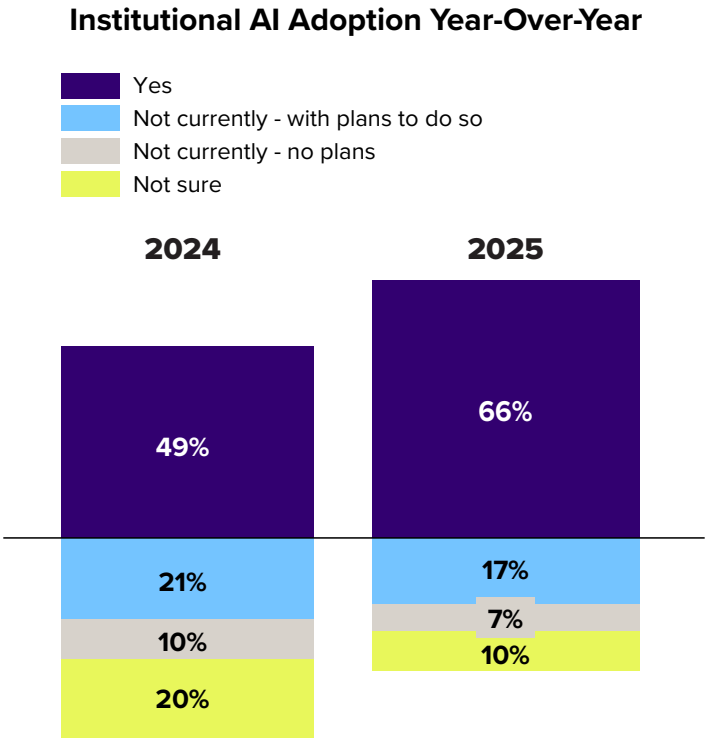


Figure 2: *Survey Question: "Is your institution currently using AI technologies?" 2024 n = 445; 2025 n = 779*

Institutional Adoption Surges, Business Unit Adoption Varies

Even as personal adoption plateaus, institution-level AI adoption is accelerating. Institutional use jumped from 49% in 2024 to 66% in 2025 — a 17-point increase that signals AI has moved beyond experimentation and into mainstream operational and strategic integration. Looking ahead, 88% of respondents expect institutional AI use to continue rising over the next two years.

With adoption largely established and resistance limited, institutions have a clear opportunity to move beyond introductory uses of AI, which tend to focus on experimentation and individual efficiency. The greatest gains now lie in advancing to more sophisticated, integrated applications of AI that are embedded across systems and functions, aligned to institutional strategy, and designed to deliver measurable impact.

2025 AI Adoption by Business Unit

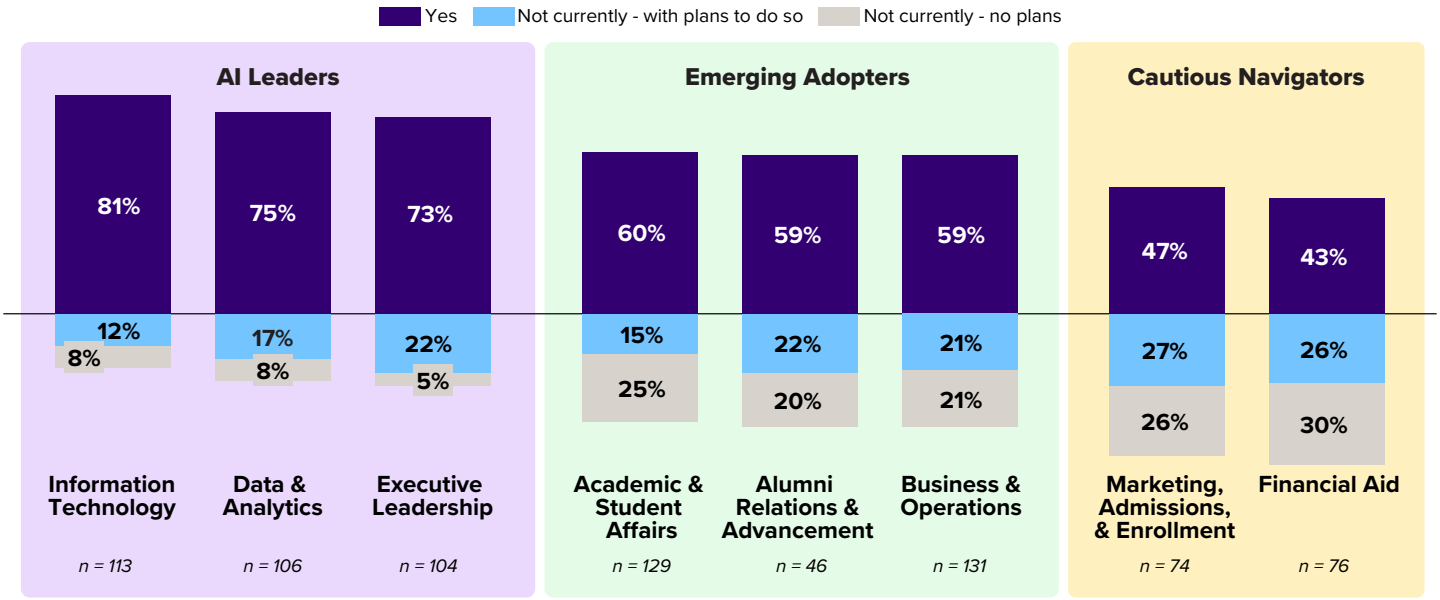


Figure 3: *Survey Question: "Are you currently using AI technologies in your department or business unit?"*

When examining how AI is being implemented across business units, three adoption tiers emerged: **AI Leaders, Emerging Adopters,** and **Cautious Navigators.**

AI Leaders, including **Information Technology** (81%), **Data Analytics** (75%), and **Executive Leadership** (73%), continue to lead adoption across campuses. These departments are often the earliest adopters, leveraging AI to enhance decision-making and infrastructure.

"I work as a data analyst in the Resource Development department of a community college. AI already greatly increases efficiency in proposal development, communications, and data analysis. We would like to do more with AI engagement as well as more data analysis."

– Data & Analytics, Public 2-year

Emerging Adopters, such as **Business and Operations, Academic and Student Affairs**, and **Alumni Relations & Advancement**, show significant momentum and growing interest in AI capabilities, with nearly 60% of respondents from these areas reporting active AI use.

"An agentic workforce could help reduce administrative burden across frontline and operational teams inside any advancement workshop. Tools like predictive modeling and generative AI can help maximize operational efficiencies and focus efforts in arenas that will elevate ROI."

– Alumni Relations & Advancement, Private, Not-for-Profit

Cautious Navigators, including **Financial Aid** and **Marketing, Admissions, & Enrollment**, are proceeding more deliberately. Notably, nearly one-third of Financial Aid professionals report no current plans to adopt AI, reflecting continuing uncertainty or constrained readiness in that space.

"My work is based on human-to-human connection, and as much as AI tries to study, it cannot replace the empathy and personal touch that I bring into work."

– Marketing, Admissions, Enrollment, Private, Not-for-Profit

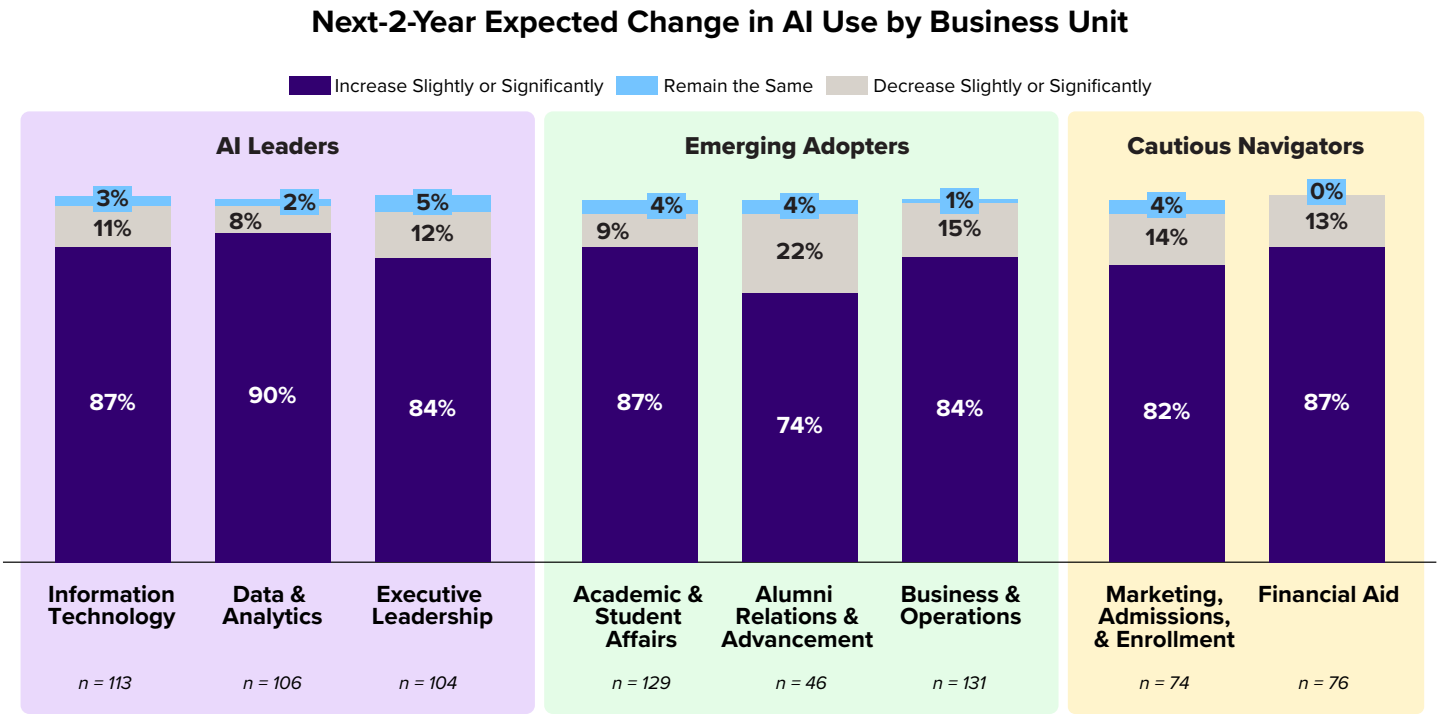


Figure 4: *Survey Question: "How do you think the frequency of AI use in your department will change over the next 2 years?"*

Despite lower levels of present-day adoption, expectations for AI growth are strong, even among our Cautious Navigators. **More than 80% of respondents** in Financial Aid and Marketing, Admissions, & Enrollment anticipate increasing their use of AI over the next two years, indicating growing interest in these tools. Respondents cited practical applications already underway, including AI-powered chatbots to improve customer service, process improvements to expedite application review, automation of routine tasks, and personalized communications — all aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Interest is particularly concentrated around predictive and prioritization use cases. When asked which AI applications they would be most interested in leveraging, 73% of Financial Aid professionals cited the ability to predict financial aid eligibility and optimize award distribution. 73% also selected "Identify suspicious activity in student accounts and flag potential fraud." Similarly, 71% of respondents in Marketing, Admissions, & Enrollment expressed interest in using AI to rank prospective students based on their likelihood to apply or enroll, enabling more targeted outreach and follow-up.

Administrators consistently view AI as a means to improve efficiency, streamline workflows, and strengthen student engagement. One Financial Aid professional noted, "AI can analyze large amounts of essays and applications faster than we can to find the top applicants, allowing us to narrow down the pool." Similarly, a Marketing, Admissions, & Enrollment administrator emphasized AI's ability to "identify enrollment trends more quickly and efficiently." Others pointed to emerging use cases in communications and proposal drafting, while underscoring that effective use depends on strong prompts, making prompt engineering an increasingly important skill.

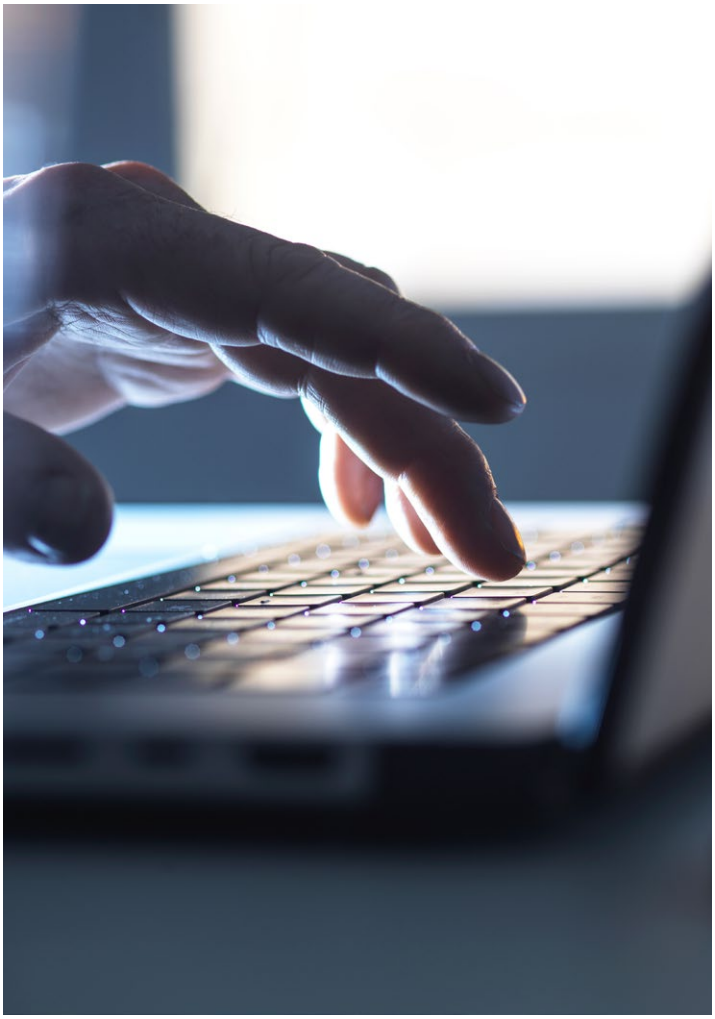
At the same time, practical constraints continue to slow broader adoption. Limited time and resources, the need to protect sensitive data, and concerns about bias in AI-driven outputs all emerged as significant barriers.

As one administrator explained,

"I have not had time or money to explore the technologies available and learn how to use them. My work handles very sensitive data, so it appears very difficult and complicated to use AI for our actual work."

Others expressed caution about relying on AI in high-stakes decisions, emphasizing the importance of transparency, human oversight, and safeguards to prevent unintended bias.

These insights suggest that AI adoption is less about awareness and more about the ability to move from exploration to responsible, high-impact use. While adoption remains limited in some functional areas, the strong willingness to learn and experiment indicates administrators are ready to advance — though the need for training and skill development remains high. As institutions build capacity and confidence, the next phase of AI adoption will focus on embedding AI into everyday workflows and decision-making, balancing efficiency gains with trust, equity, and measurable impact for both staff and students.



Inclusion of AI in Institution's Strategic Plan

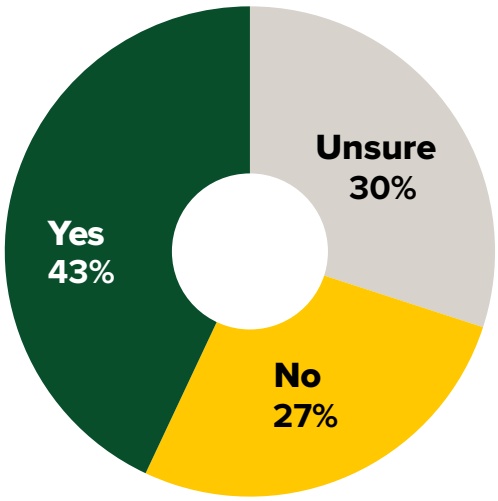


Figure 5: *Survey Question: "Does your institution's strategic plan include a focus on AI?" 2025 n = 779*

Institutions Are Prioritizing AI in the Strategic Plan and Budget

As AI's value becomes clearer, institutions are formalizing their commitment through strategic planning and resource allocation.

Nearly half of surveyed respondents (43%) report that their institution's strategic plan now includes a focus on AI. Another 27% say it does not, while nearly a third are unsure — perhaps reflecting that AI's inclusion in institutional priorities is still an emerging conversation in many settings.

Evidence suggests, however, that the lack of AI in strategic planning is becoming less of an obstacle. The share of respondents who cited the absence of AI in their strategic plan as a barrier to adoption dropped from 13% in 2024 to just 5% in 2025. This decline shows growing momentum toward institutional recognition and formal support of AI initiatives.

Budget earmarks are following the same trajectory. **Nearly two-thirds of Executive Leaders report that their institution already allocates funds specifically for AI-related activities.** Among those, 48% of respondents say they do so through broader technology or innovation budgets, rather than creating stand-alone AI funding lines. Another 21% of executive leadership indicate their institutions are exploring or planning to establish AI allocations in the future, suggesting that financial backing is beginning to catch up to strategic intent.

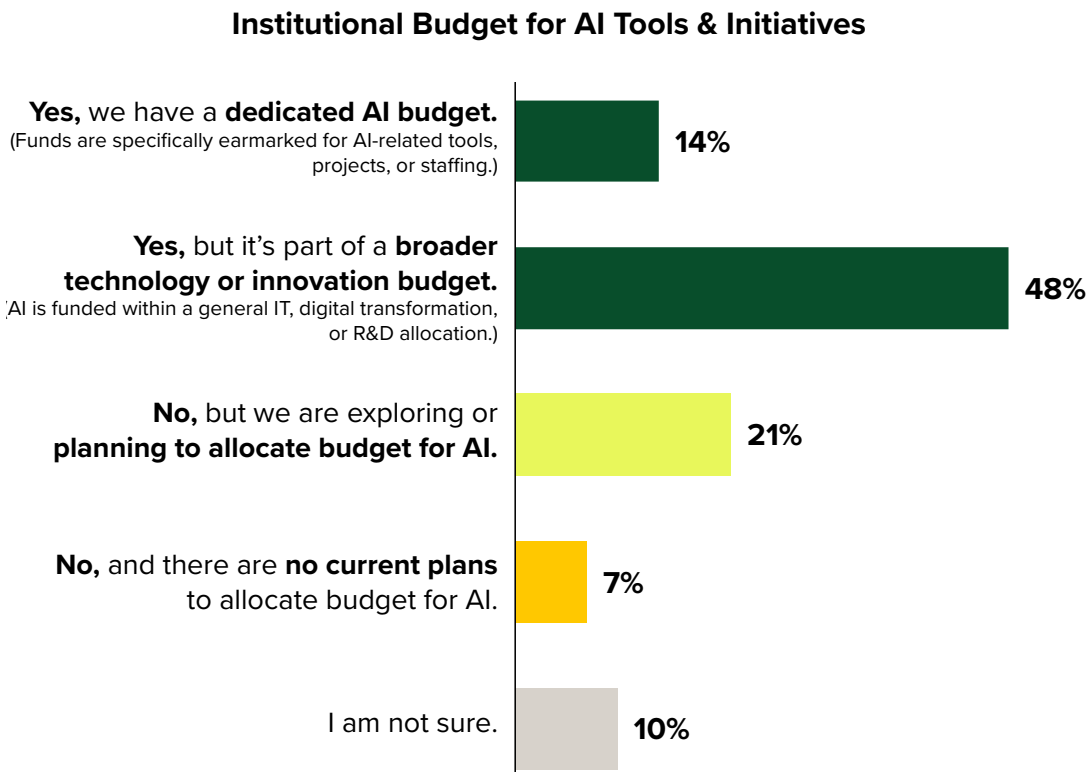


Figure 6: *Survey Question: "Does your institution currently allocate budget specifically for AI-related tools or initiatives?" 2025 Executive Leaders n = 104*

Nearly two-thirds of Executive Leaders report that their institution already allocates funds specifically for AI-related activities.

INSIGHT 2

Trust shapes when and how AI is used in academic and other high-stakes environments.

Administrators are moving quickly to deploy AI in operational and analytical areas, while adoption in academic and other high-stakes contexts continues to hinge on building confidence and trust. At the individual level, 78% of respondents cite improving efficiency and productivity as their primary motivation for using AI, while 55% point to curiosity about new technologies. Institutionally, AI is increasingly positioned as an enabler of efficiency, insight, and risk mitigation — not a replacement for human judgment — particularly in areas that directly affect students' academic and financial outcomes.

"My main concern is data privacy and ensuring AI tools don't access or expose sensitive student information. I also worry about overreliance on AI outputs without human verification, especially when decisions impact applicants or reporting accuracy. Finally, implementation without proper training could create confusion or mistrust among staff."

– Information Technology, Private, Not-for-Profit

Confidence Is Strongest in Data and Cybersecurity Use Cases

As we saw last year, efficiency and productivity remain the primary drivers of AI use at the individual level. Seventy-eight percent of respondents selected “I want to improve my efficiency and productivity” as their main reason for personally adopting AI, reaffirming that time savings and workload reduction continue to anchor adoption. Curiosity about trying new technologies remains strong, with 55% of respondents motivated by exploration. Support for students is a growing factor at 36%, up 3 percentage points year-over-year.

This focus on efficiency extends to institutional priorities as well. Enhancing operational efficiency remains the top motivator for institutional adoption of AI, likely because its benefits are immediate and tangible — saving time, streamlining workflows, and reducing administrative burden. By contrast, improving student outcomes declined by 9 percentage points, though it still ranks as the second-most important motivator. This shift may reflect the less immediate nature of AI’s impact on student success, where outcomes are influenced by multiple factors. Institutions should continue prioritizing efficiency while intentionally linking AI initiatives to student success outcomes, such as early alerts or proactive support, to build that evidence over time.

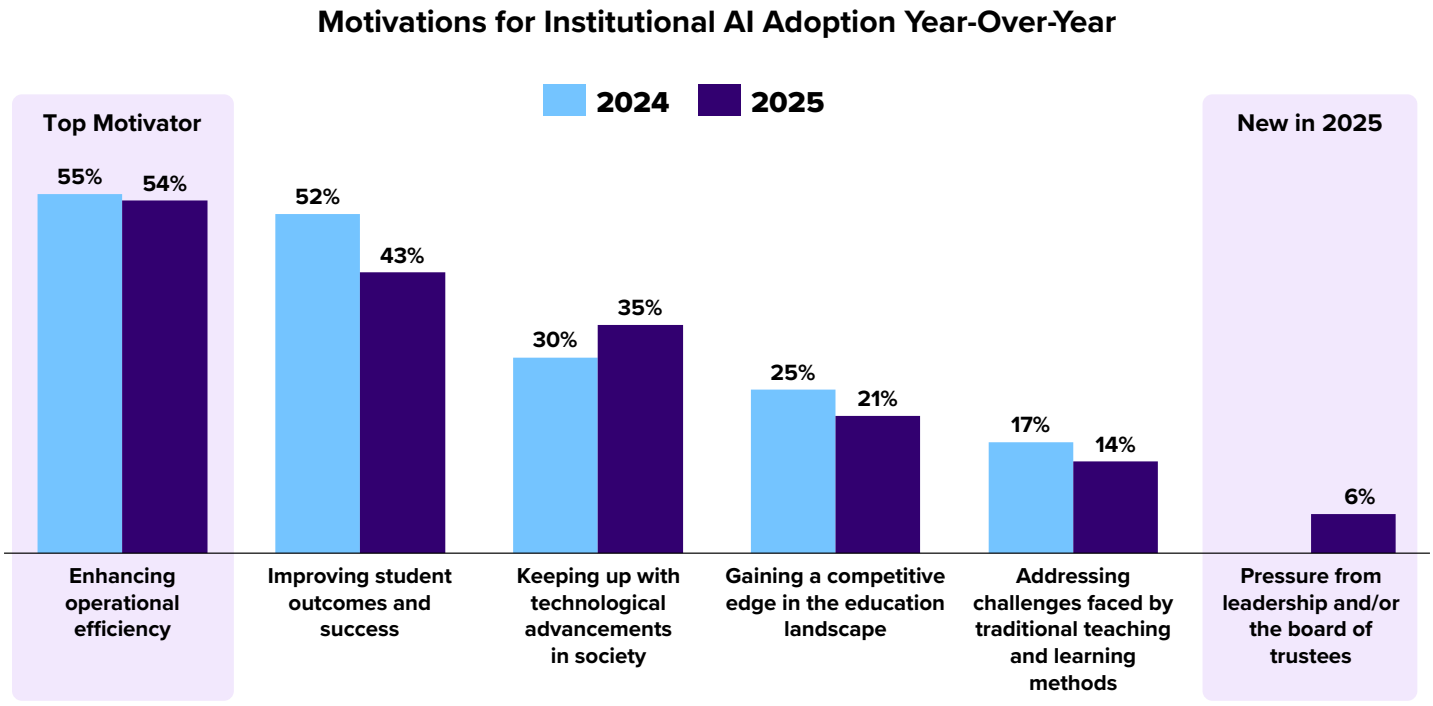


Figure 7: *Survey Question: “What are the main factors driving your institution’s interest in adopting AI? (Select up to 2.)” 2024 n = 439; 2025 n = 775*

Executive Leaders are especially likely to see value in AI applications that improve business operations and analytics — areas perceived as lower risk and capable of delivering high returns. One executive leader shared where they see opportunities for AI to improve work: "I believe AI can help in all aspects of a campus — if we can use it ethically and protect sensitive information. It can help us with mundane functions and allow more time to interact with students and people."

When asked which functional areas would benefit most from AI adoption, more than half of Executive Leaders selected Business & Operations (68%), Data & Analytics (59%), and Marketing, Admissions, and Enrollment (51%). However, **Data & Analytics emerged as the top priority**, with more than 25% of Executive Leaders identifying it as the area that would benefit most from AI.

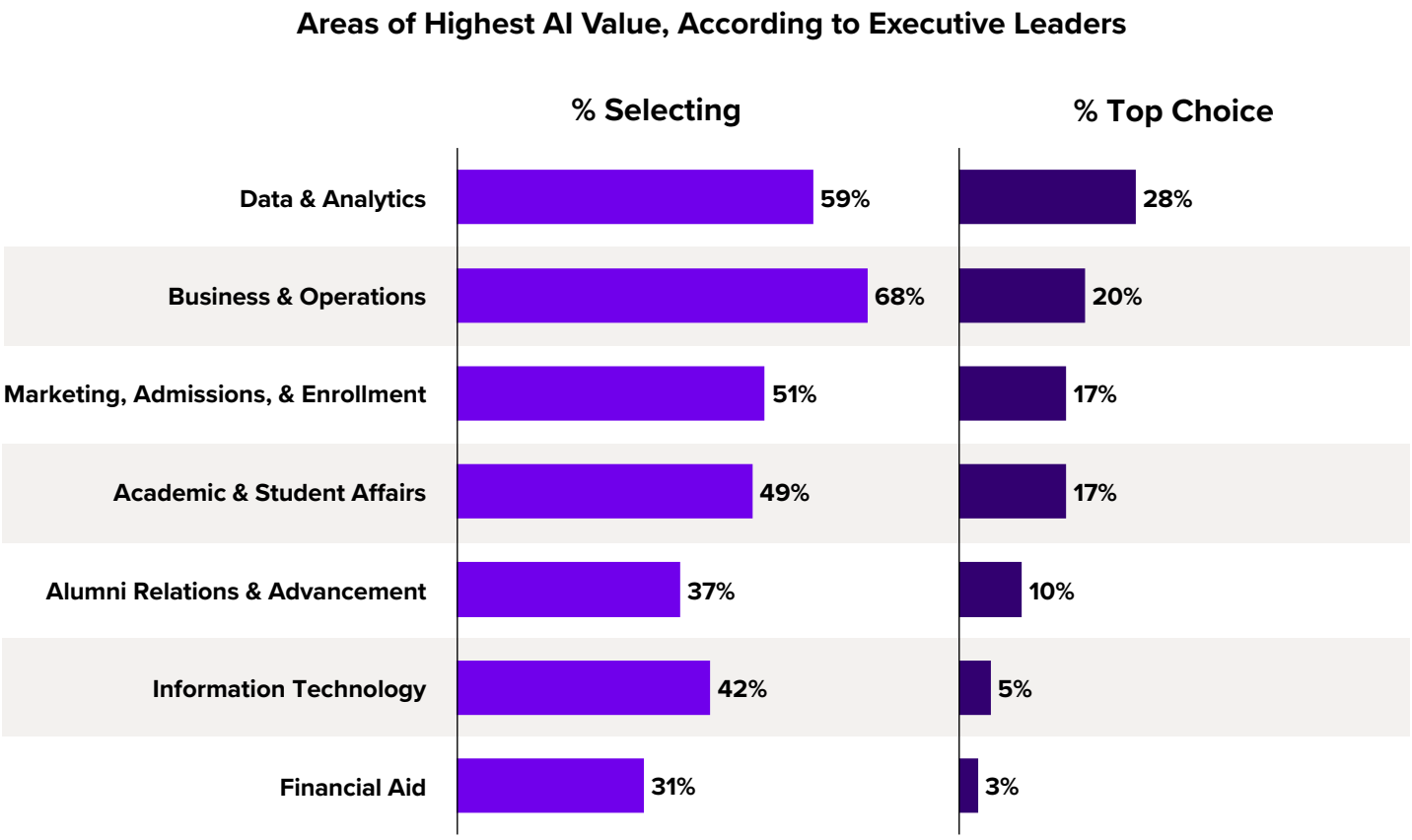


Figure 8: *Survey Questions: "In which areas of your institution do you think AI could drive value? (Select all that apply.)" 2025 Executive Leaders n = 104; "Of the areas you selected, which do you think would benefit the most from AI?" 2025 Executive Leaders n = 103*

New questions in this year's survey shed light on how executive leaders prioritize specific AI applications. To better understand how campus leaders want AI implemented at their institutions, executive leaders were asked to identify the use cases they consider most valuable. Cybersecurity threat detection and response automation emerged as the clear top priority, with 55% of respondents rating it as "very valuable."

This emphasis on cybersecurity underscores that trust in AI is strongest when it is used to protect systems and data rather than make high-stakes decisions about individuals. Revenue and expense forecasting and identifying at-risk students ranked next, reflecting a preference for AI applications that enhance financial planning and student support through predictive insights, rather than fully automated decision-making.

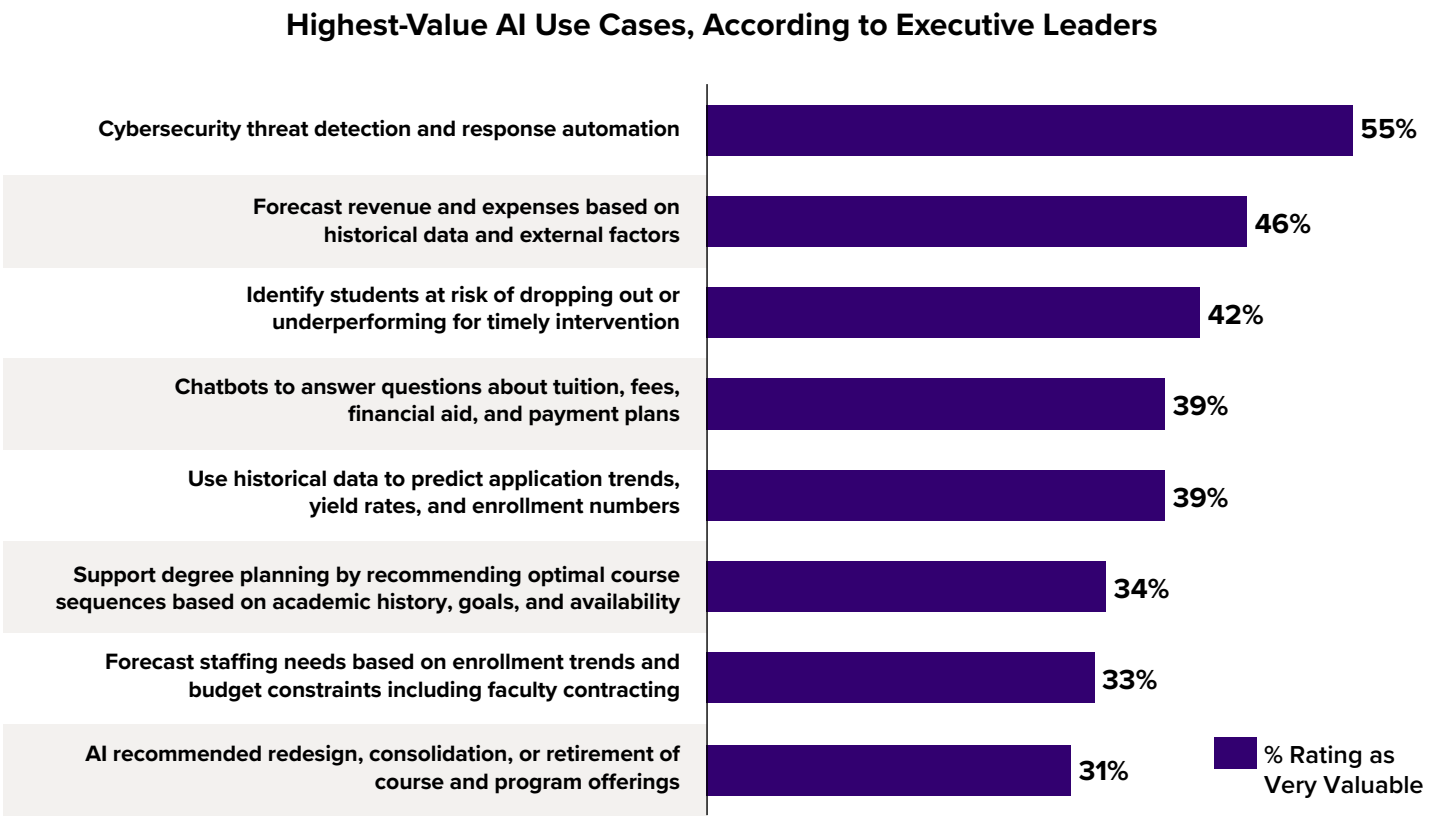


Figure 9: *Survey Question: "Please indicate how valuable each of the following AI use cases would be for your institution." 2025 Executive Leaders n = 104*

> *"Providing enrollment forecasts is very helpful for the organization's admissions, improving the efficiency of accepting students."*
>
> **– Executive Leadership, Public 4-year**

Specific Use Cases Vary Among Departments

While executive leadership emphasizes institution-wide priorities, AI adoption at the departmental level coalesces around targeted, function-specific use cases that deliver immediate, tangible benefits. Across the institution, conversational AI has emerged as the most prevalent application, with chatbots widely adopted to scale service delivery, reduce repetitive tasks, and improve responsiveness.

High-volume, student- and staff-facing functions are leading this trend. In Financial Aid, 44% of respondents report using AI chatbots to answer questions about tuition, fees, financial aid, and payment plans, reflecting both intense information demand and the need for consistent, timely responses. Academic & Student Affairs similarly rely on chatbots to handle routine queries related to registration and advising, cited by 35% of respondents, while Information Technology departments report that 37% use chatbots to reduce help desk tickets and provide instant support for common IT issues. Marketing, Admissions, and Enrollment teams are also leaning on conversational tools, with 36% using chatbots to answer frequently asked questions about application deadlines, financial aid, and program details.

Beyond conversational AI, other departments are applying AI to more specialized operational and analytical needs. Alumni Relations & Advancement is leaning into automation to streamline outreach and administrative tasks, with 37% citing communications automation as a primary use case. Business & Operations teams are using AI to analyze surveys and feedback to monitor employee morale and engagement (29%), while Data & Analytics units are focused on predictive modeling, with 24% reporting enrollment, retention, and graduation forecasting as a current use case — positioning AI as a growing engine for institutional planning.

Business Unit	Top Current Use Cases	Benefits Realized by Current Users
Academic & Student Affairs	(35%) AI Chatbots to handle routine queries about registration, advising and more	**54%** reported the use case improved efficiency / time savings
Alumni Relations & Advancement	(37%) Automate communications and administrative tasks	**48%** reported the use case improved efficiency / time savings
Business & Operations	(29%) Analyze surveys and feedback to gauge employee morale and engagement	**55%** reported the use case improved efficiency / time savings
Data & Analytics	(24%) Forecast student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates using predictive analytics	**60%** reported the use case improved outcomes
Financial Aid	(44%) Chatbots to answer questions about tuition, fees, financial aid, and payment plans	**61%** reported the use case improved efficiency / time savings
Information Technology	(37%) Chatbots to reduce help desk tickets and provide instant support for common IT issues	**60%** reported the use case improved outcomes
Marketing, Admissions, & Enrollment	(36%) A chatbot to provide answers to FAQs about application deadlines, financial aid, and program details	**67%** reported the use case improved efficiency / time savings

Views on student AI use also appear to be evolving. Over 20% of respondents continue to expect students' use of AI for ethical assignment completion to decline over the next two years, suggesting concern that some current uses may be unsanctioned or misaligned with institutional expectations. At the same time, 14% of respondents now say they expect unethical student use of AI for assignment completion to decrease — up from 7% last year — potentially signaling early impacts of clearer institutional guidance, policies, and educational efforts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that administrators see student behavior around AI maturing toward more responsible use. As tools become more familiar and institutions strengthen governance, guidance, and support, student adoption is likely becoming more regulated and ethically aligned — perhaps reflecting the impact of clearer policies, integration into strategic goals, and expanded training that helps students understand appropriate AI use.

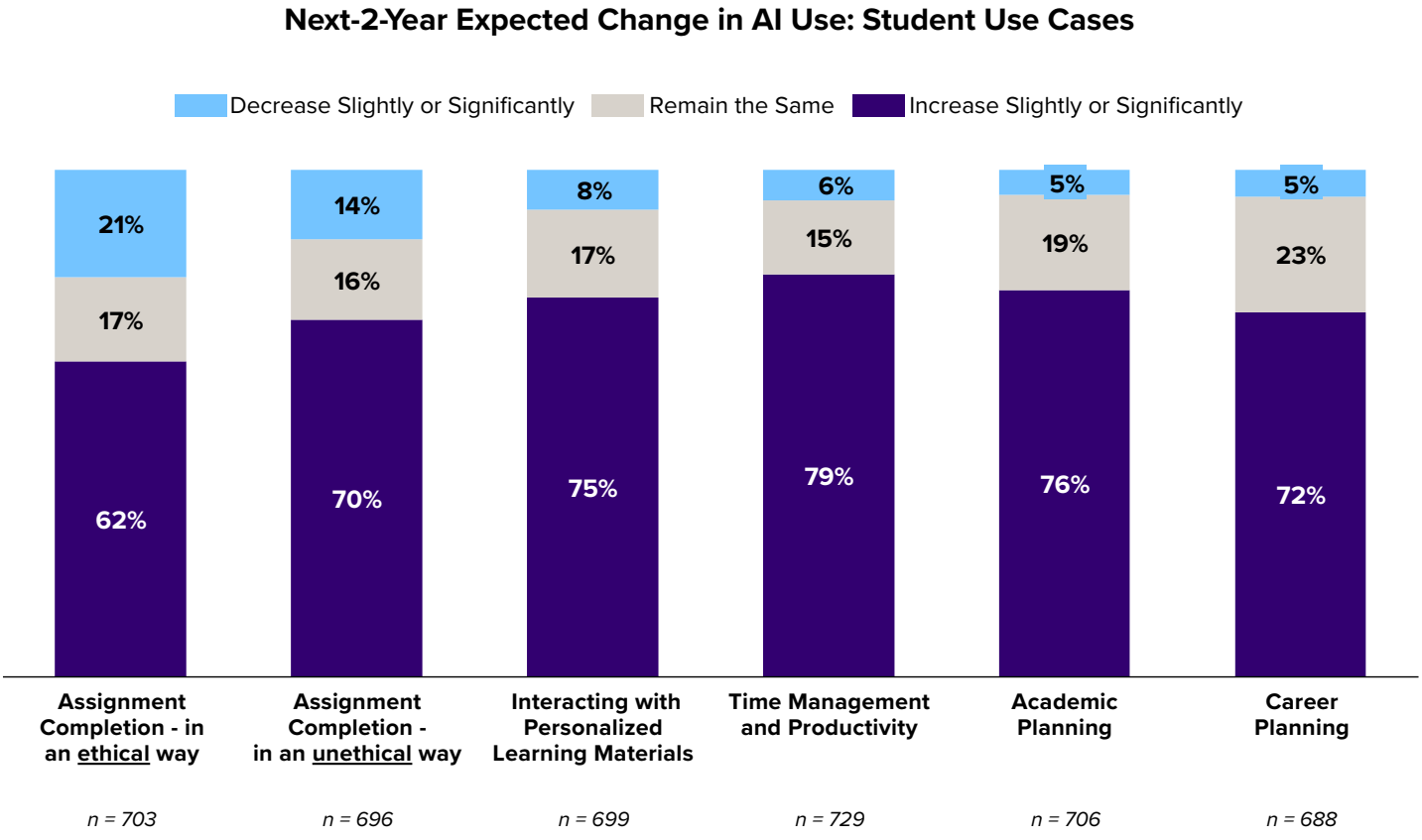


Figure 10: *Survey Question: "Now, think specifically about students at your institution. Over the next 2 years, how do you think the frequency of AI use will change for the following use cases?"*

Skepticism Persists Where AI Influences High-Stakes, Human-Centered Decisions

Even as adoption grows, perceptions of AI's net benefit have softened, particularly in domains closely tied to student learning and access. When considering institutional functions, respondents were less optimistic across the board about AI's ability to do "more good than harm," with average scores declining in every area measured. Nevertheless, ratings remain above the neutral midpoint, indicating that administrators still see AI as capable of improving their institutional functions overall, even if enthusiasm has tempered.

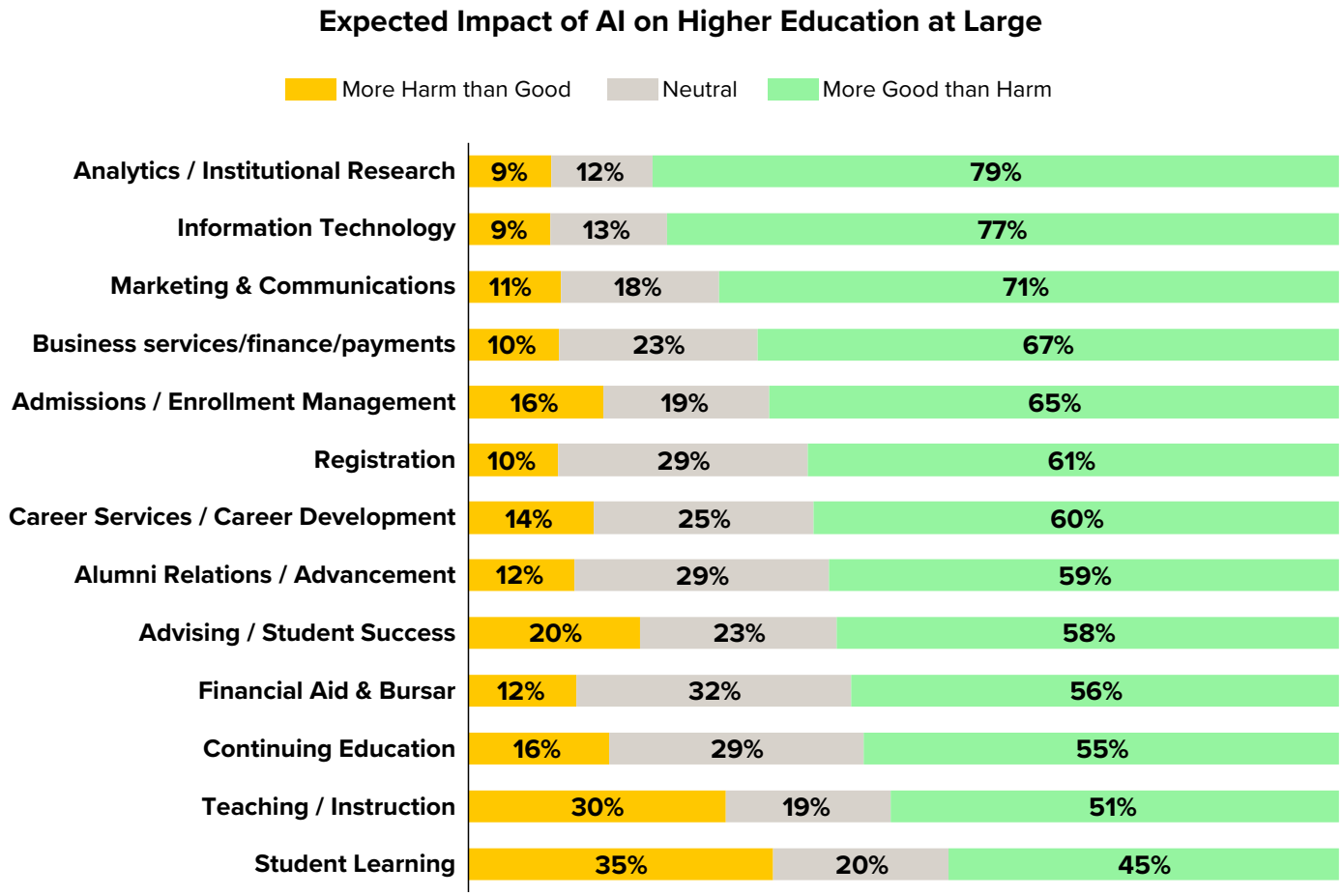


Figure 11: *Survey question: "Thinking about the higher education industry at large, please indicate how you feel the adoption of AI technology will impact the following functions." 2025 n = 779*

The most pronounced decline in perceived net benefit occurred in Student Learning. Last year, 55% of respondents agreed that AI does more good than harm for student learning; this year, that figure dropped 10 percentage points to 45%. This shift highlights growing apprehension about the implications of AI for pedagogy, assessment, and students' development of core skills, even as tools become more embedded in teaching and learning environments.

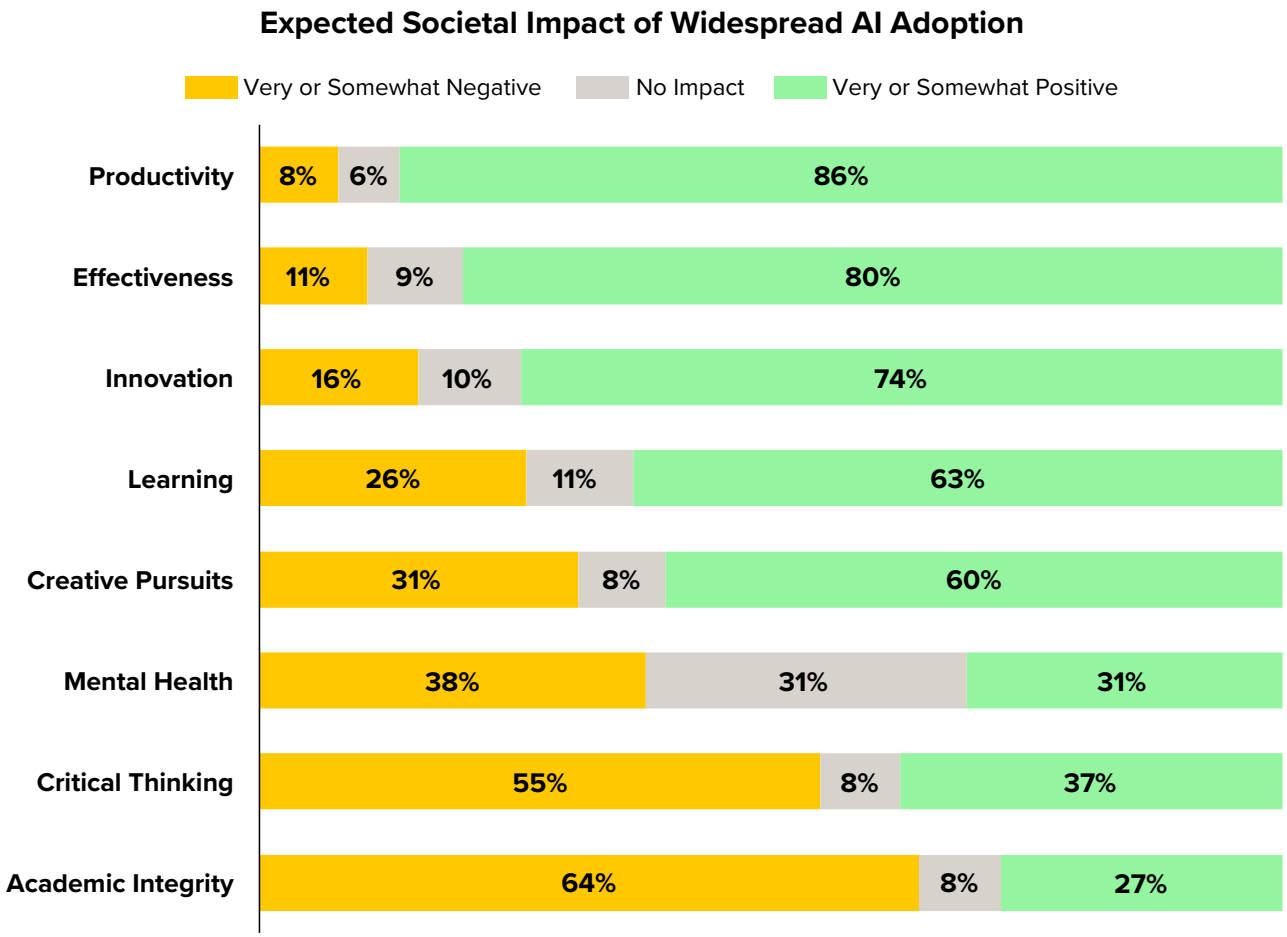


Figure 12: *Survey question: "In general, what kind of impact do you think the widespread adoption of AI technologies will have on the following?" 2025 n = 779*

Perceptions of AI's broader societal impacts, such as productivity, effectiveness, and innovation, remain relatively stable year-over-year. **Academic integrity**, however, stands apart. Last year, only 16% of respondents believed AI would have a positive impact on academic integrity; this year, that figure rose to 27%. While this improvement indicates growing confidence that AI can be part of the solution, through detection tools and redesigned assessments, it also underscores that trust-building remains essential before leaders feel fully assured about AI's role in upholding academic standards.

Persistent skepticism is also evident in which use cases executive leaders deem least valuable. Despite strong adoption and identified use cases, leaders ranked financial aid chatbots and AI recommended course or program redesign and consolidation among the least valuable applications ***(See Figure 9)***.

This likely reflects discomfort with delegating decisions that shape students' academic and financial futures to AI systems, especially when those decisions carry access or reputational implications. The pattern underscores the need for robust human-in-the-loop safeguards, transparency in how AI-generated recommendations are produced, and strong ethical oversight frameworks to foster broader trust in AI's role in human-centered scenarios.

INSIGHT 3

New concerns about AI are emerging — but data privacy still leads the pack.

Institutions are making clear progress in overcoming earlier obstacles to AI adoption, with Executive Leaders identifying Data & Analytics as the area with the greatest potential to drive value. Yet data privacy and security remain the dominant concern, even as new, more nuanced barriers begin to surface. For the second consecutive year, data security and privacy are the leading barriers to AI adoption, cited by 56% of respondents at the institutional level.

Data security and privacy remain the top barriers to AI adoption at the personal level, cited by 61% of respondents — a slight increase from last year. Meanwhile, several other obstacles are easing: concerns about bias in AI models fell 9 percentage points for personal use, and worries about cost declined six points. Encouragingly, the share of respondents reporting no barriers at all doubled from 5% to 10%, suggesting that for a growing minority, AI is becoming a normalized and manageable part of their work.

Barriers to Personal AI Adoption Year-Over-Year

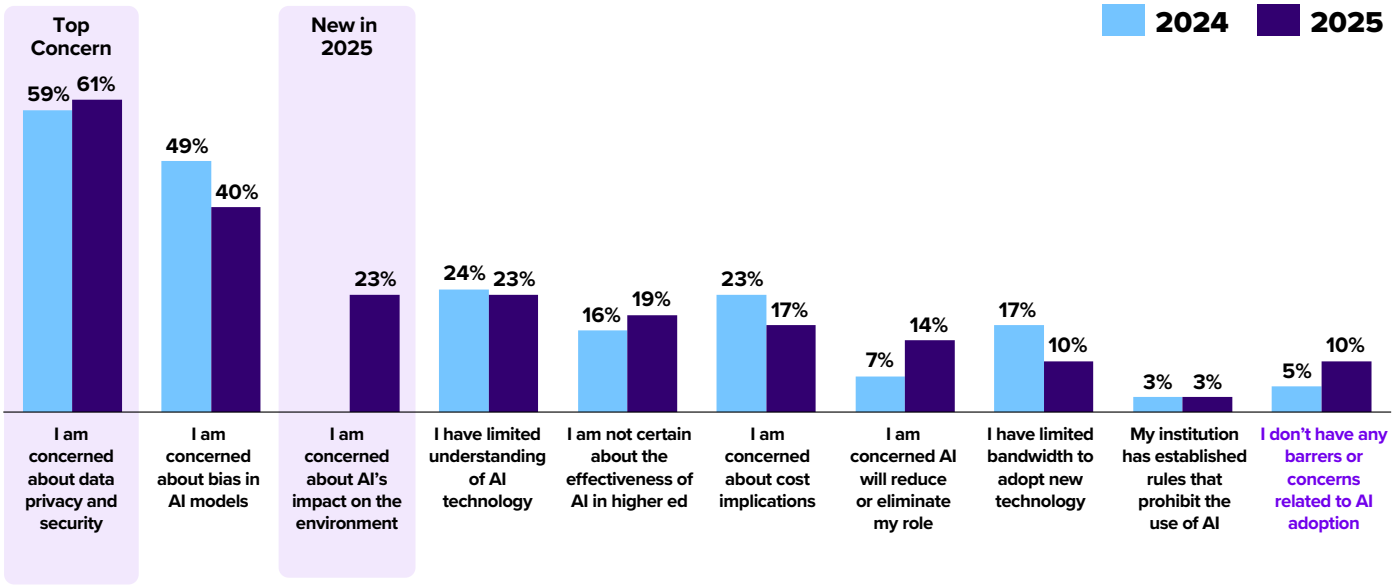


Figure 13: *Survey Question: "What barriers and concerns do you have about using AI? (Select up to 3.)" 2024 n = 445; 2025 n = 779*

New Barriers Are Emerging — and They're Coming in Hot

As AI adoption expands and tools are used more frequently across campuses, a different set of concerns is coming into focus. Some respondents report encountering more hallucinations and confidently incorrect outputs as they work with AI for extended periods, underscoring the need for guardrails and better user judgment.

One Information Technology leader stressed the importance of "adequate training to ensure that individuals understand that the use of AI is a tool, not a replacement for tasks," noting that AI is "very good at being confidently incorrect and inducing hallucinations on itself" and that effective use depends on the ability to recognize and manage these issues.

> *"I have found increased hallucinations the longer I work on a task with my AI tool. The thing is that I can recognize when it's happening. I worry others cannot..."*
>
> **– Academic & Student Affairs, Private, Not-for-Profit**

Environmental impact is also shifting from a peripheral concern to a tangible barrier. Last year, some respondents raised environmental issues in open-ended comments; since then, additional studies have highlighted potential negative impacts of AI's compute and energy demands. Reflecting this shift, a new survey question in 2025 found that more than 1 in 5 respondents now cite environmental impact as one of their top three barriers to AI use.

"I am very concerned about the environmental impacts of AI and would need to be really convinced of its benefits far outweighing the costs to use it regularly in my department."

– Financial Aid, Private, Not-for-Profit

Over 1 in 5 respondents now cite environmental impact as one of their top three barriers to AI use.

"I worry [AI] will mean the elimination of jobs. We are already being forced to do more with less, so I feel I have no choice but to use it. I have a love/hate relationship with generative AI."

– Data & Analytics, Public University

Concerns about AI-related role elimination, while still not a top-ranked issue, are also intensifying: the proportion of individuals worried about job loss tied to AI doubled year-over-year, from 7% to 14%, suggesting growing unease about how automation might reshape roles and responsibilities over time.

Declining Knowledge Gaps Are Tempered by a Persistent Need for Training

Despite these emerging concerns, knowledge and familiarity with AI are improving. The share of respondents who cite limited understanding of AI technology as a barrier to institutional adoption continues to fall sharply, dropping from 44% in 2024 to 28% in 2025. Budget and implementation resources as a barrier to departmental AI adoption also dropped a striking 16 percentage points year over year, likely reflecting the way institutions are now prioritizing AI within strategic plans and allocating dedicated budgets.

Barriers to Institutional AI Adoption Year-Over-Year

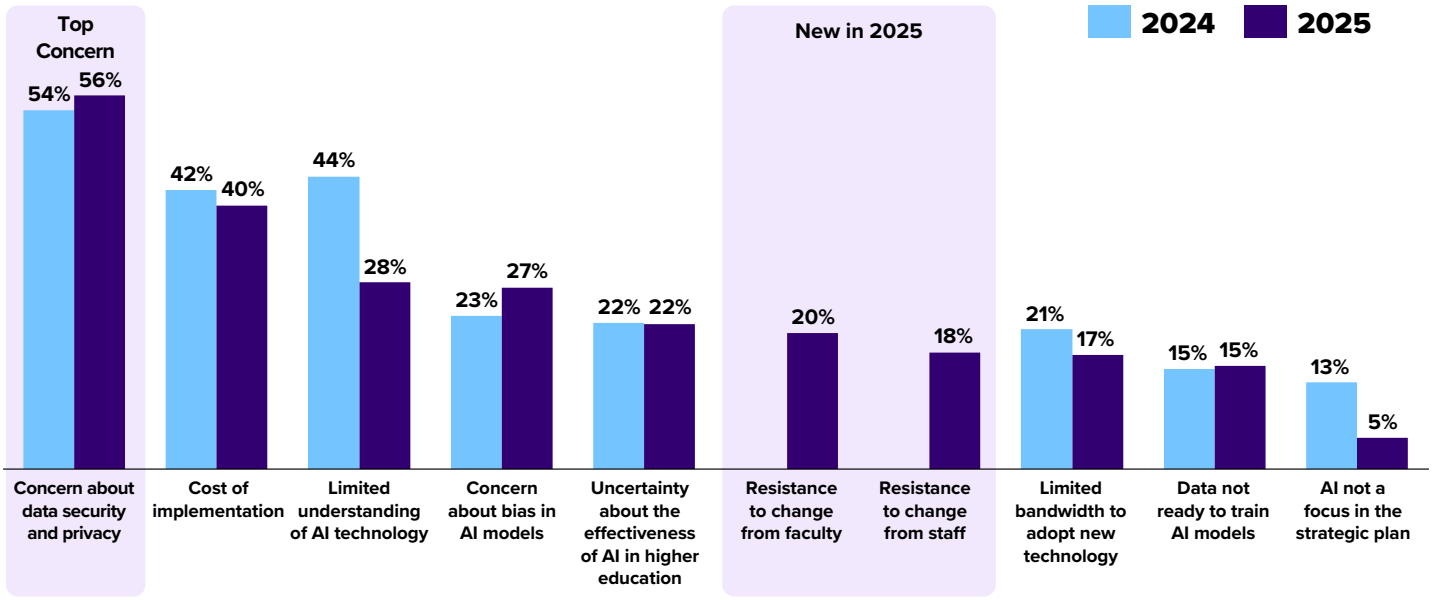


Figure 14: *Survey Question: "What are your institution's main barriers to adopting AI? (Select up to 3.)" 2024 n = 441; 2025 n = 769*

Even with these gains, training remains a critical unmet need for successful implementation of AI technologies. Structured training programs are still the single most cited resource for effective AI adoption, holding the top spot for the third consecutive year.

Many respondents pointed to the need for targeted training in areas such as prompt engineering, data security, ethical use, and integrating AI into daily workflows. Others highlighted the importance of role-specific training that helps staff, faculty, and administrators understand how to apply AI tools responsibly and efficiently in their unique contexts. Demand is particularly acute in Financial Aid, where 83% of respondents say they need training on AI technology and its applications — the highest level of training need reported by any department.

> *"Yes, I am worried that training for the use of AI is lacking therefore it will not be used appropriately."*
>
> **– Executive Leadership, Public 4-year**

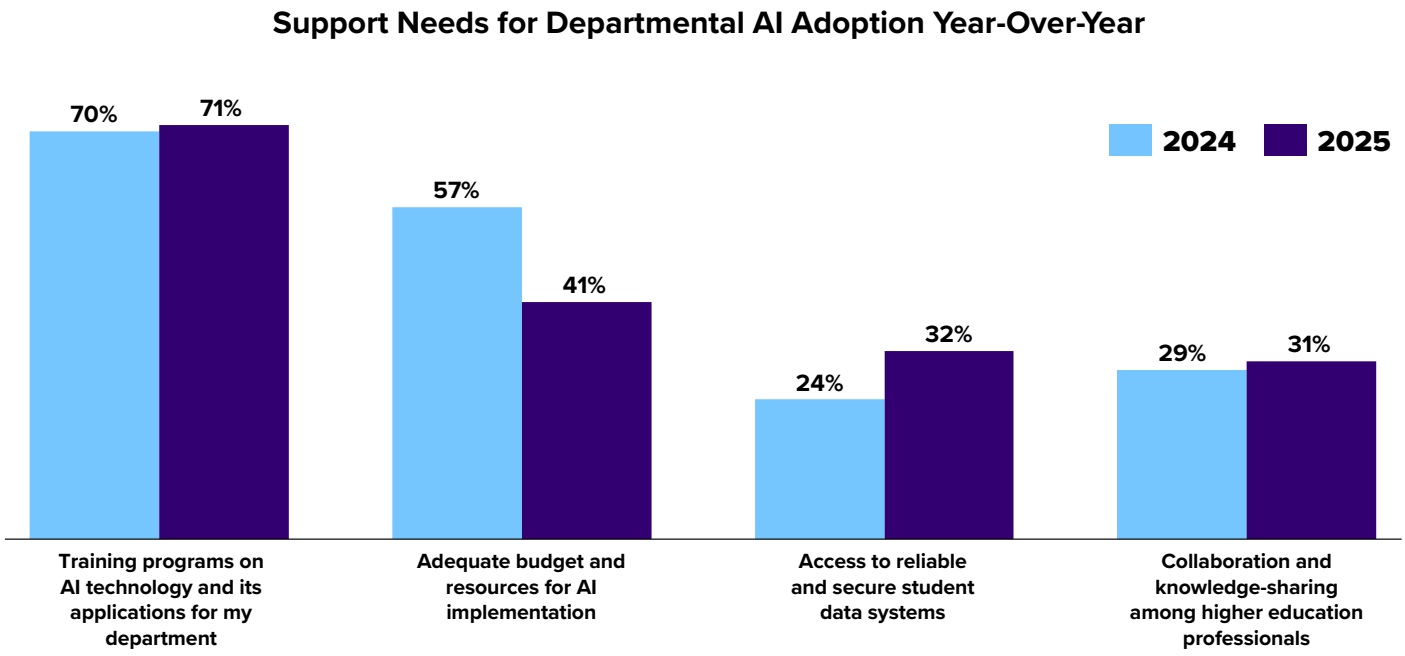


Figure 15: *Survey Question: "What resources or support do you believe would be necessary to successfully implement AI technologies in your department? (Select up to 2.)" 2024 n = 437; 2025 n = 779*

Collectively, the results suggest that as conceptual understanding improves, sustained commitment to developing practical skills, promoting responsible use, and delivering role-specific training will be critical for mitigating persistent risks, maximizing impact, and fostering lasting trust in AI usage across institutions.

> *"Need to educate faculty and administrators on not just how to use AI in their own jobs but on how to help students use it wisely and appropriately so we are skill building across the institution, not just in pockets that are more willing to try it out than others."*
>
> **– Academic & Student Affairs, Public 4-year**

Moving Forward

AI is rapidly reshaping higher education, and realizing its full potential will require sustained collaboration, shared learning, and thoughtful investment. Institutions have a responsibility not only to drive adoption but to do so in ways that protect students and data, uphold integrity, and advance core educational missions.

To that end, this report presents a set of recommendations for institutional leaders. They emphasize intentional strategies that accelerate effective AI use while prioritizing safety, transparency, and access. The recommendations also call on leaders to equip faculty and staff with the skills, safeguards, and governance structures needed to ensure students benefit from AI in ways that enhance — rather than undermine — their learning, agency, and long-term success.

Here's how institutions can strengthen readiness for responsible AI integration...

Build Organizational AI Literacy Through Structured Practice, Not Policy Memos

Task team members with using AI-approved tools weekly for specific projects, then dedicate meeting time to comparing prompts, results, and ethical considerations. This approach trains individuals in real-world application while maintaining institutional guardrails. You're not mandating adoption — you're creating the conditions for confident experimentation.

Start With Common-Sense, Low-Risk Use Cases

Identify low-risk, high-impact use cases where AI delivers immediate value: streamlining administrative workflows, enhancing student communication, accelerating content creation. Small wins build institutional confidence and spark creativity for larger implementations. Strategic transformation doesn't begin with an enterprise-wide AI overhaul — it begins with proof points that change mindsets.

Create Safe Spaces for Tool Exploration Before Committing Resources

Leaders can't imagine use cases for tools they've never encountered. Establish sandboxed environments where faculty and staff experiment with emerging AI platforms without institutional risk. Exposure drives innovation, but only when experimentation doesn't feel like career jeopardy. The institutions that lead AI integration won't be those with the best policies, they'll be those where curiosity is rewarded and failure is treated as data.

Next, build structure and governance...

Deliver Role-Based AI Training

Institutions should implement structured, role-based training programs that build confidence, fluency, and a shared sense of value around AI integration. Tailored for executives, faculty, staff, and student services, these sessions should emphasize institutional goals, approved use cases, responsible and ethical use, and practical tool proficiency. By equipping every role with the knowledge and confidence to apply AI effectively, institutions create a stronger foundation for sustainable innovation.

Socialize and Operationalize AI Strategy

As institutional adoption accelerates, it is critical to clearly communicate and embed the AI strategy across departments. This includes defining the "why," outlining priority use cases, and establishing governance structures and feedback loops that sustain alignment. A transparent, well-socialized strategy ensures consistent adoption, supports change management, and strengthens organizational readiness for continued AI integration.

Align Budget to Priority Use Cases and Expected ROI

Strategic funding is critical to sustaining AI momentum. Institutions should focus investments on three to five high-impact use cases, such as cybersecurity automation, predictive analytics, or student success initiatives, where outcomes can be measured and scaled. Linking budget allocations to expected ROI ensures AI initiatives deliver clear institutional value while promoting accountability and sustainability. Investments should also align with the institution's mission and strategic plan, strengthening stakeholder buy-in and easing change management.

Implement Human-in-the-Loop Safeguards and Transparent Governance

In high-stakes, human-centered areas like admissions, financial aid, and student learning, institutions must build systems that promote ethical, transparent, and accountable AI use. This includes maintaining human oversight, implementing clearly defined governance frameworks, and developing protocols for error detection, auditability, and ethics review. Such guardrails build trust and demonstrate integrity in how AI supports decision-making that affects students and communities.

Takeaway

AI integration isn't just a technology project — it's a cultural shift that requires structured learning, incremental adoption, and psychological safety. Institutions that combine hands-on practice, low-risk proof points, structured training, strategy alignment, and strong governance will be best positioned for responsible, high-impact AI integration.

Appendix A: About the Survey Methodology

Ellucian's 3rd Annual AI in Higher Education Survey is a continuation of a research project that began in 2023 to better understand how higher education leaders perceive and use artificial intelligence technologies and the value these technologies bring to their institutions. This year's survey data was collected between September 15–November 15, 2025, resulting in a representative sample of 779 higher education administrators from over 300 institutions of higher education. The sample was balanced to ensure a broad representation across various institution types, sizes, and job functions.

Appendix B: Overview of administrator survey respondents

779

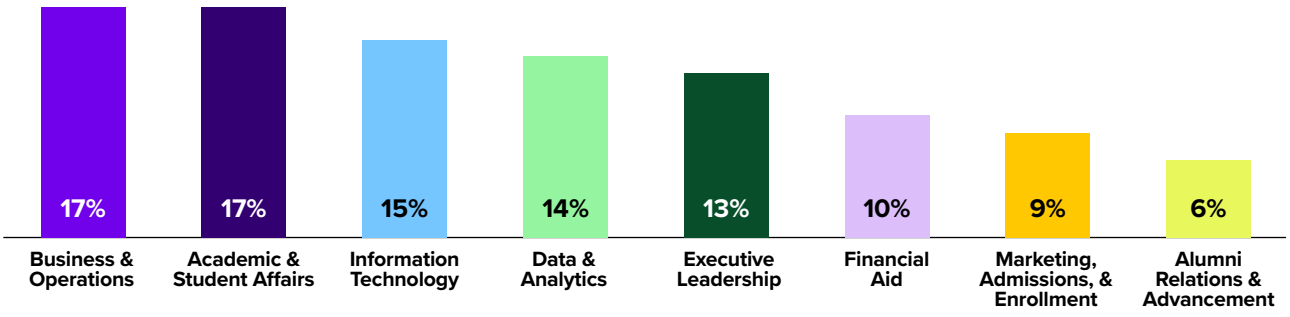
higher education administrators from over 300 unique institutions completed the survey.

Country	n	%
United States	725	93%
Canada	47	6%
Other*	7	1%

*Other countries included: Ecuador, Hong Kong, Spain, and Togo

Role	n	%
Manager / Director	276	35%
Individual Contributor / Staff	274	35%
Executive Leader	128	16%
Faculty Member	55	7%
Dean / Other Academic Leader	46	6%

By Functional Area



By Institution Size and Type

		FTE							
Country	Institution Type	Fewer than 500 students	500-999 students	1,000-1,999 students	2,000-4,999 students	5,000-9,999 students	10,000-19,999 students	20,000 students or more	TOTAL
United States	Private, For-Profit	5	2	4	13	5	6	5	40
	Private, Not-for-Profit	16	22	40	58	29	19	15	199
	Public 2-year	9	11	27	43	34	23	17	164
	Public 4-year	12	28	27	39	59	62	95	322
	TOTAL	**42**	**63**	**98**	**153**	**127**	**110**	**132**	**725**
Canada	Private University	0	0	3	3	0	0	1	7
	Public University	0	1	1	6	3	5	11	27
	Technical Institute	1	0	3	4	0	2	3	13
	TOTAL	**1**	**1**	**7**	**13**	**3**	**7**	**15**	**47**
Other	**TOTAL**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**7**
	GRAND TOTAL	**43**	**64**	**105**	**167**	**132**	**119**	**149**	**779**