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Navigating the AI Dilemma in Higher Ed:

Insights From a National Survey

Introduction

Higher education confronts a question:

How do we innovate with AI responsibly?

When generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools first became publicly available in late 2022, many educators and administrators reacted with confusion and concern.[1] Much of the early debate focused on whether to ban students from using generative AI.[2]

But that sentiment has shifted. Today, leaders are focused not on whether their institutions should embrace AI but on how to do so to enhance student learning.

To gain insight into their AI priorities and perspectives, Grammarly for Education and Higher Ed Dive's studioID surveyed more than 200 higher ed leaders and faculty across the country. The survey reveals that while educators have developed more positive attitudes toward AI, concrete actions lag behind.

This report digs into the survey results so higher education leaders can better approach this pivotal moment in the AI era. It illuminates the path to AI innovation, as well as the obstacles along that path. Schools that are slow to adapt to AI are bound to fall behind—a cost no institution can afford in the ultra-competitive higher ed landscape.

The report also reveals AI opportunities that most institutions are missing. Schools that seize these opportunities will create better student learning experiences, give their graduates a competitive advantage, and enhance their institutional reputation.

At a Glance

Key findings show positive views of AI:

AI usage

More than **60%** of higher ed leaders and faculty say their institutions regularly use AI tools.

Positive attitudes

Nearly **80%** express positive feelings about using AI tools in the classroom.

AI as an educational priority

More than **80%** say AI is either as important as other educational priorities or even the most important priority.

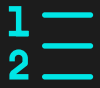
Emphasis on AI skills

Two-thirds consider AI skills and knowledge to be as important as core academics, and another 11% say AI skills are more important.

Other findings show higher ed needs to do more to leverage AI:

Doubts about implementation

Most respondents emphasize responsible use of generative AI, but fewer believe their institutions are effectively implementing such measures.



No clear plan

Enthusiasm for AI hasn't translated into a plan of action, as respondents can't agree on AI priorities.

Higher Ed No Longer Resists AI

Dr. Kent L. Willis, vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at Fresno State University, has seen attitudes toward AI evolve in recent years from concern and even fear to interest. "We've seen the rest of the world—and our students—embrace AI. So more of us in higher education recognize that we need to embrace it also," he says.

Our findings reflect this sharp attitudinal shift in a short time. Back in August 2023, the *Washington Post* reported that AI's rise had "sowed confusion and panic among educators who worry they are ill-equipped to incorporate the technology into their classes."[3]

Now, most higher ed personnel have used AI themselves and are eager to see AI tools in the classroom.

Institutional alignment—the first step toward AI innovation—is solidifying.

Growing positivity around AI:

79%

of faculty and administrators feel positive about using AI in the classroom.

78%

describe their institution's attitude toward AI tools in the classroom as positive.

75%

report experience using AI tools.

62%

say their institution regularly uses AI tools.

From Peripheral Tool to Pillar of Education

Even if higher ed now accepts AI, a question remains: How should faculty and administrators use AI tools in the classroom? Should AI simply enhance existing educational practices or fundamentally shift teaching and learning?

The survey suggests that most personnel see AI not as a supplemental resource but as an opportunity to reinvent the classroom:

82% consider AI to be at least as important as other educational priorities—including 14% who call it "the most important priority."

78% say teaching AI skills is at least as important as core academics—including 11% who regard AI skills as more important.

In a short time, higher ed has shifted from resisting AI to recognizing it as a core component of academic programs, skill development, and institutional strategy.

How AI Can Reshape Higher Ed:
What Survey Respondents Say

Institutions should give high priority to teaching students how to manage AI, including understanding rules, policies, and ethics, so they are prepared to use AI responsibly in their future careers.

AI can provide powerful tools for universities to track how students are doing, predict future performance, and make personalized recommendations.

Promoting collaborative AI projects among students can enhance their teamwork and problem-solving abilities.

Growing AI Enthusiasm, but No Clear Plan

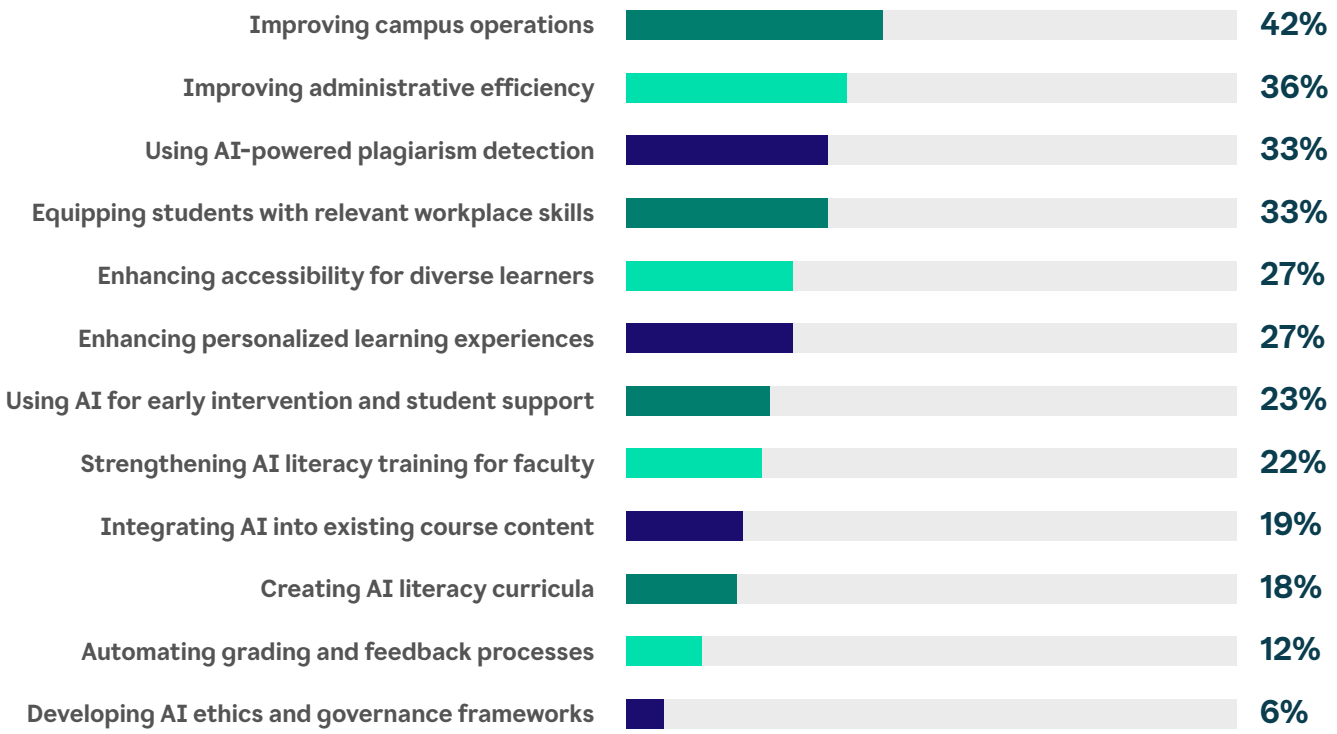
Despite higher ed's growing acceptance of AI, institutions remain uncertain about exactly how to roll out the tools. Marc Watkins, director of the AI Institute for Teachers at the University of Mississippi, offers an important reminder: "We've only reached the end of the beginning for generative AI in education." The Grammarly survey reveals how many issues schools still need to sort out.

This requires setting priorities. The problem is, faculty and administrators have not come anywhere near a consensus on AI priorities. Only 42% of survey respondents identify improving campus operations as one of their top three priorities—and that is the most popular choice.

The survey findings suggest that higher ed remains slow to define and execute an AI strategy. Willis warns that this slow institutional adoption of AI threatens higher ed "because students are way ahead of us." The Digital Education Council's recent global survey confirms Willis's assessment: It shows that 86% of students regularly use AI in their studies.[4]

Higher Ed Doesn't Agree on AI Priorities

The percentage of higher ed leaders and faculty who cite these areas as one of their top three AI priorities over the next year:



Institutions also emphasize the importance of responsible adoption of AI. They clearly want to implement AI ethically, securely, and fairly. There is a similar lack of differentiation among those goals. Although education leaders often speak of "responsible AI," the term proves difficult to define.

Higher ed personnel also favor having "guardrails" for responsible AI, but they don't agree on what such measures should look like. The most popular guardrail—institutional controls over generative AI feature sets—receives support from only 38% of respondents.

Schools have yet to implement responsible AI measures as effectively as respondents would like. For example, whereas 80% consider data privacy to be important, only 63% rate the implementation as effective. Similarly, just 48% of respondents feel their schools have effectively used AI to complement rather than replace educators—something that 71% consider important.

Grammarly works with more than 3,000 educational institutions and has seen school after school struggle with uncertainty about how to approach responsible AI. To help higher ed institutions, Grammarly has developed a framework for understanding and implementing AI. (See page 9)

Most higher ed personnel identify certain aspects of AI implementation as extremely or very important:

80%
Ensuring students' data privacy and security

75%
Giving all students equitable access to AI tools

75%
Preserving academic integrity

74%
Providing transparency about AI use in decision-making processes

73%
Aligning AI use with ethical standards and educational values

71%
Complementing human educators rather than replacing them

68%
Promoting fairness and eliminating bias

Your Framework for Responsible AI

Higher ed leaders consider many elements of responsible AI to be very important. But if institutions try to address all the concerns at once, they risk taking a "boil the ocean" approach to AI.

To help administrators identify their institutions' priorities, Grammarly has developed a framework for approaching responsible AI. This guide doesn't rank-order the needs. Instead, it shows how the elements relate to one another. By using this framework, institutions can identify where they have gaps and determine their next steps for adoption and innovation.

At the bottom of the framework is security. Every institution must ensure that its technology protects data security and privacy. Such security is absolutely critical. But focusing exclusively on AI security can keep institutions from leveraging AI to support student learning and growth.

The middle layer of the framework fosters transparency. AI policies must be clear and consistently enforced. In implementing AI, schools must consider several questions: Is it easy to explain how the AI tools operate? Are the tools accessible to all students in the same way and to the same degree? Do students know how to use the AI solutions based on their discipline?

The top layer develops trust. The transparency developed at the middle layer breeds trust at the top. When an institution clearly communicates how to use AI and expectations for responsible use, students, faculty, and administrators can trust one another and the tools. Then schools can focus on rolling out AI where it has the greatest impact on student learning. That is where real educational innovation begins.

What Is Responsible AI?

Trust

The future of higher ed innovation

- Student information and AI literacy
- Ethical and effective pedagogical integration

Transparency

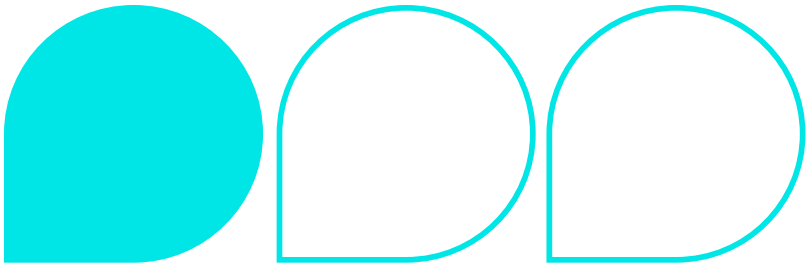
Responsible implementation

- Bias mitigation and equitable access
- Transparency and accountability

Security

Extremely important but table stakes

- Technical safety and reliability
- Data security and privacy protection



What About Innovation?

Because higher ed lacks a playbook for implementing AI, each institution must find its own balance between responsible AI and innovation. However, a focus solely on secure implementation can keep schools from embracing responsible innovation.

Jenny Maxwell, head of Grammarly for Education, says her organization "always comes at AI with the lens of responsible use." But she also encourages higher ed leaders to realize that AI has many uses, from generating text to audio to even visual content. "This is an explosive technology that can do so much more than what first drew headlines," she says.

Generative AI should create "urgency around innovation in pedagogy," Maxwell observes. "AI is a lever that mission-driven educators can use to reevaluate and reinvent how to assess learning."

Willis, at Fresno State, agrees. He maintains that higher ed must prepare students for a world that increasingly values those who can adapt to new technologies. "Our ability to deliver a relevant, rewarding, and respected degree program hinges on our ability to prepare students to succeed after graduation," he says.

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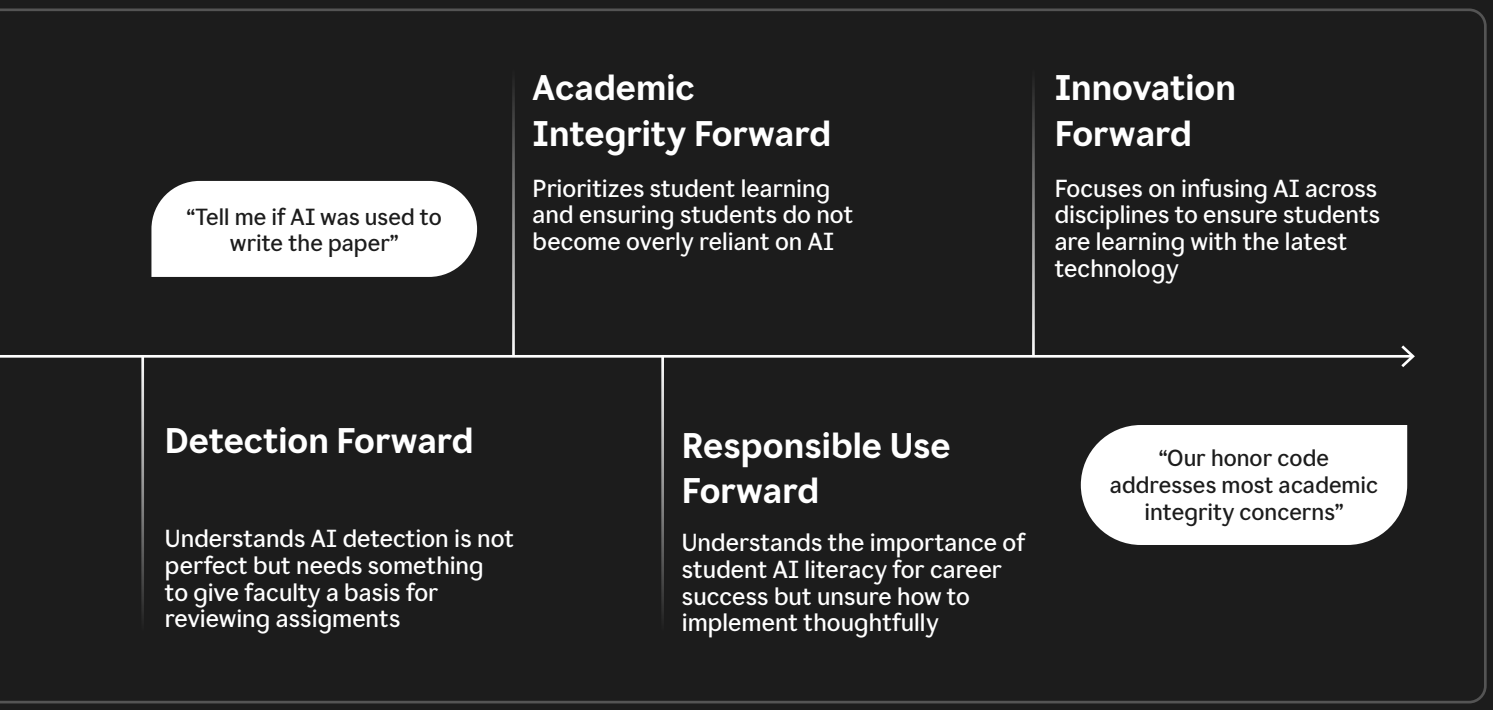
Jenny Maxwell,
Head of Grammarly for Education

4 Approaches to Responsible AI and Innovation

In its work with institutions across all sizes and regions, Grammarly for Education finds that schools tend to fall into four categories in their approach to AI and innovation. The breakdown is meant to give higher ed leaders a sense of where their institutions land and whether that approach aligns with how they view academic integrity and innovation.



Detection Forward: Given high student-to-faculty ratios, these institutions want some way to tell whether students have used AI to produce assignments. They understand that AI detection tools aren't perfect, but they seek a basic gauge. The survey suggests that a detection-forward approach remains fairly common: 33% of respondents rank "detection" as a top priority, ahead of student-enhancing experiences.

Academic Integrity Forward: These institutions prioritize student learning and want to prevent AI-generated student submissions. Such schools express concern about adopting AI too quickly, without guardrails in place.

Responsible Use Forward: These institutions recognize the importance of AI literacy for their students' career success. They grapple with how to develop curricula that provide these skills while establishing necessary guardrails. By using the responsible AI framework (see page 9), higher ed leaders can better deliver on this approach.

Innovation Forward: These schools focus on infusing AI tools and literacy across all disciplines. They want to ensure that students learn using the latest technology.

Notably, there is no longer a meaningful group of institutions resisting AI adoption. As the survey findings show, higher ed faculty and administrators are convinced that AI is here to stay. Now, they are focused on finding the best ways to leverage AI to achieve their institutions' goals.

Opportunities for AI Innovation

What does educational innovation look like? Here are three examples:

1 Reimagining Assignments

If institutions truly believe that AI skills are as important as other educational priorities, they need to change how they teach. "At a baseline," Willis says, "we need to think about how we engage students, avoiding assignments that AI can easily complete."

Students aren't going to stop using AI tools. "So it's on the institutions to adapt," Willis argues. "To succeed in life, students need to be flexible and to adapt to change. As teachers and leaders, we need to model that behavior."

Watkins gives an example of how he has adapted his class assignments. "When I assign reading now, I make it very clear to my students when I expect them to do close reading. I'll assign highlighting or digital annotation," he says. "In other cases, though, I'll say, 'I want you to scan these articles. You can use AI. You need to be aware of their arguments so we can have a discussion.'" In other words, he uses the assignments to strengthen different skill sets.

2 Emphasizing Transparency Over Detection

A fair number of institutions prioritize AI-detection tools, but both Grammarly and Watkins emphasize the need for AI transparency. Such an approach fosters trust between students and faculty; it enhances the learning experience, too. Watkins suggests a framework that asks students to reflect on how AI tools affected their learning. He often assigns students questionnaires to prompt such reflections.

This level of reflection excites Maxwell. Faculty want students to develop critical thinking and analytical skills. Business leaders want employees with the same skills.[5] "Now with AI," Maxwell says, "we have a tool that gives students real-time feedback on their arguments and evidence. Students have to reflect on, and defend, why they accepted certain AI recommendations and rejected others."

Crucially, transparency should involve faculty as well as students. "If we ask our students to disclose when they use AI technology," Watkins says, "we should do the same with our instructional design material."

Maxwell points out that Grammarly has developed a tool to foster transparency and trust: Authorship. Authorship allows students to check which parts of their text AI detectors might flag. That way, they can rewrite the content and/or include appropriate citations. Instructors assessing the work can see where the student took content from AI or other sources. Authorship also documents how long students worked on a project, which AI tools they interacted with, how much of the content is theirs, and so on.

With Grammarly Authorship, students have proof that they were in the driver's seat. They can show how they used AI tools not as a shortcut, but to enhance their thinking.

Jenny Maxwell,
Head of Grammarly for Education

3 Thinking Beyond the Classroom

Fresno State has launched a pilot project in partnership with Grammarly, offering a case study in leveraging AI to strengthen student support.

The university extends the reach of its student services by employing Grammarly's AI-powered tools in such areas as career development and learning support. It also offers workshops on using generative AI and scaling Grammarly across the university. The goal? To give students the skills to use AI tools effectively and responsibly.

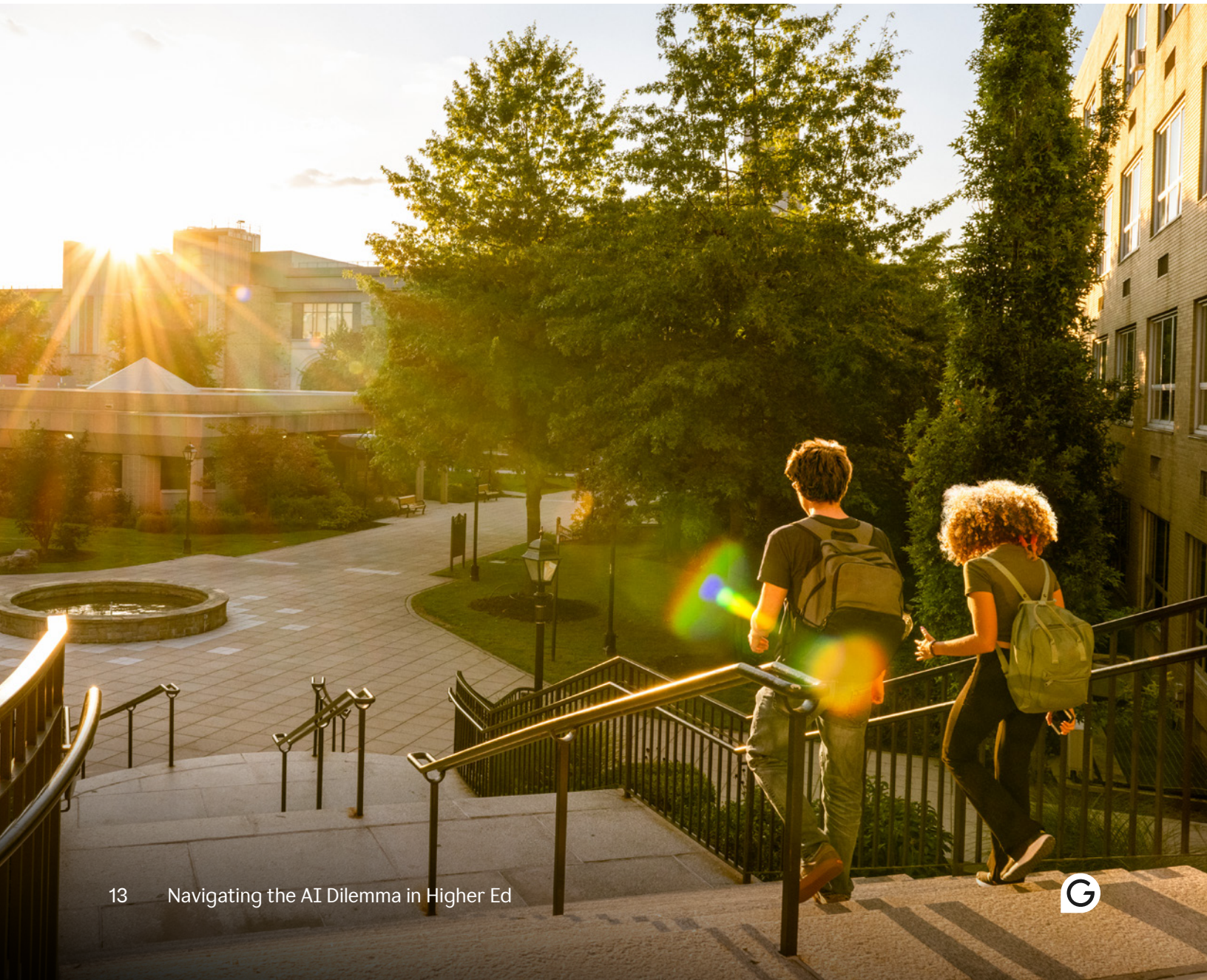
This AI pilot, says Willis, fulfills the goal of increasing the return on investment for a university degree by offering both academic and nonacademic support. It also models how AI can complement rather than replace staff. For example, students can do an initial review of their résumés and cover letters using Grammarly. That frees up the career development team to focus their time with students on the nuances of certain occupations or roles, interview prep, and more.

Conclusion

An Opportunity, Not a Threat

Higher education institutions face intense pressures, including declining enrollment,[6] precarious financial positions,[7] and decreased confidence in the value of a degree.[8] But harnessing AI to innovate will help schools stand out in a competitive field. Institutions must realize that AI is an opportunity, not a threat—and then act on that realization.

By integrating AI into their curricula and encouraging transparency, institutions will prepare their graduates for the modern workplace. They'll also ensure their own relevance in an era defined by technological change.



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