



A Leadership Framework for Turning AI Potential into Institutional Value

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved from an emerging presence to an omnipresent force in remarkably little time. Over the span of just a few years, campus leaders have embraced the idea of embedding AI tools in everyday workflows across higher education from administrative operations and planning to communications, data analysis and decision-making.

Yet despite widespread experimentation, many college and university leaders remain uncertain about how to adopt AI responsibly, strategically and in ways that strengthen human judgement instead of replacing it.

Explore the reasons careful consideration should be given to institutional readiness, governance, risk management and practical opportunities for implementation when it comes to adopting AI on campus.

Why AI Demands Strategic Attention

Transformative technology often arrives with promises of efficiency, innovation and progress. What makes AI unlike most other types is the speed of its arrival and breadth of potential applications.

In higher education, leaders are already exploring AI for:

- Administrative workflow automation
- Data analysis and reporting
- Financial planning and forecasting
- Facilities and operations***
- Student support services
- Communications and marketing
- Security and risk management
- Workforce development and training

The wide-scale usage of these potential applications is key to why AI is a leadership issue rather than simply a technology one. As AI becomes embedded in more institutional processes, its influence extends beyond operational efficiency to decision-making, risk management, workforce practices and the student experience. This requires leaders to think not only about where AI can create value, but also how it should be governed and deployed responsibly.

At the same time, institutions are operating within an environment of significant uncertainty. Financial pressures, demographic shifts, staffing challenges, evolving student expectations and increasing operational complexity are forcing leaders to make decisions faster and with greater accountability.

AI offers the possibility of helping institutions process larger volumes of information, identify

Facilities and Operations Snapshot

***Facilities departments manage extensive datasets related to assets, maintenance, planning, utilization and capital projects.

AI is increasingly being explored to:

- Improve project planning
- Analyze facility conditions investment sequencing
- Support maintenance prioritization
- Enhance operational decision-making
- Evaluate and optimize energy performance

While many facilities-focused AI applications remain in early stages of maturity, the potential is significant.

patterns more quickly, and support more informed decision-making. However, realizing these benefits requires institutions to move beyond experimentation and establish a deliberate framework for adoption.

Readiness First

Establishing a deliberate framework for AI adoption begins long before an institution selects or evaluates a platform. One of the most common mistakes campus leadership makes is assuming that AI adoption starts with technology. Rather, successful implementation depends first on **readiness** — the people, processes and institutional capacity needed to support meaningful change.

Before implementing AI, leaders should assess whether their institution has the organizational support necessary to sustain adoption over time.

Key considerations include:

- Organizational buy-in across departments and stakeholders
- A culture that supports experimentation and innovation
- Resources to support training, implementation and ongoing oversight
- A clear understanding of where the institution currently sits in its AI adoption journey

Understanding where the institution currently stands helps determine the most appropriate next steps. For some, that may mean building awareness and identifying low-risk opportunities to explore AI. For others, it may involve expanding pilot initiatives, developing governance structures or investing in more advanced capabilities.

It's also important to remember that not every challenge requires AI. The goal is to solve meaningful institutional problems rather than implement AI for its own sake.

To identify if AI is needed, leaders should focus on identifying:

- Repetitive tasks
- Manual processes
- Data-intensive activities
- Areas where decision-making could be enhanced

By looking into these specific areas, leaders can better determine whether AI is addressing a genuine institutional need or simply introducing technology where it may not be necessary.



The Foundation of Effective AI: Data, Knowledge and Workflow

Readiness alone, however, does not guarantee success. Even organizations that are prepared to adopt AI must ensure the necessary foundations are in place.

Here are three foundational elements that make up successful AI initiatives: Quality data, organizational knowledge and workflow integration.

1. Quality Data

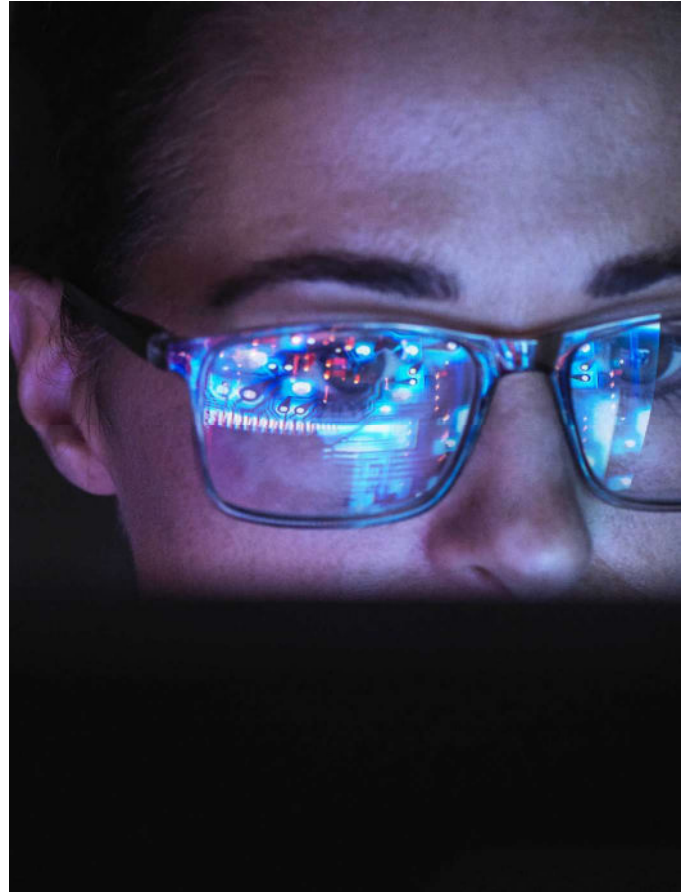
AI can only reason over the information it can access. Poor data does not just simply become better because AI processes it. As a result, institutions with fragmented systems, inconsistent records or disconnected databases may struggle to generate reliable outcomes. Before AI can enhance decision-making, institutions must first understand and organize the information AI will rely upon to generate meaningful results.

2. Organizational Knowledge

Much of higher education's most valuable knowledge is not stored in databases. It exists within institutional processes, historical practices, departmental expertise and the experience of employees.

Successful AI initiatives therefore require mechanisms that allow organizational knowledge to be incorporated into AI-supported workflows. This may include:

- Connecting AI to institutional systems
- Making internal documentation accessible
- Creating opportunities for employees to provide context and feedback that AI cannot derive on its own



Without this context, AI may provide technically correct outputs that fail to reflect institutional realities.

3. Workflow Integration

Keep in mind that all new AI initiatives should serve to make work easier. This means that all AI should support existing processes by reducing friction, automating repetitive tasks and allowing employees to spend more time on higher-value work. The most effective implementations are often the least disruptive.

For example, AI can help generate drafts, surface relevant information or automate routine steps within an existing workflow, allowing employees to focus on decision-making rather than administrative effort.

The Most Important Principle: Trust but Verify

One of the greatest risks surrounding AI adoption is the tendency to overestimate its accuracy.

AI systems can generate convincing outputs that appear authoritative, but actually contain factual errors, omissions or unsupported conclusions. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as a "hallucination," has been an area of significant focus for AI developers but remains one of the technology's most persistent challenges.

As a result, higher ed leaders should adopt a simple but essential principle:

Trust, but verify.

AI should be treated as a capable assistant rather than an unquestioned authority.

Institutional leaders are encouraged to establish expectations that:

- AI-generated content is reviewed by humans
- Critical decisions are validated using trusted sources
- Data outputs are regularly audited
- Employees understand the limitations of AI-generated recommendations

The objective is not to eliminate AI use but instead ensure that human judgment remains central to institutional decision-making.



Four Questions To Ask Before Implementing AI

As institutions evaluate AI solutions and potential partners, leaders should consider four critical questions.

“Where Does the Data Come From?”

Understanding the origin and quality of an AI system's underlying data is essential because leaders cannot determine whether AI-generated outputs are trustworthy without knowing what information the system is drawing from. The quality, relevance and completeness of the data directly influence the quality of the results.

Individuals should ask:

- What information was used to train the system?
- Is the data relevant to higher education or the specific activities being undertaken?
- How current is the information?
- Does the dataset accurately represent institutional environments?

AI can only make decisions using the information it's given. If that information is incomplete, outdated or inconsistent, the results will reflect those limitations.

“How Is Institutional Data Protected?”

AI systems often require access to institutional information, making data privacy and security critical considerations. Leaders must understand how their data is being stored, processed and used to ensure sensitive institutional information remains protected and compliant with organizational policies.

Before adopting AI-enabled solutions, institutions should understand:

- How data is stored
- How data is processed
- Whether institutional information is used to train external models
- What security controls are in place

By creating this transparency, leaders can verify that AI solutions are handling sensitive information in ways that align with institutional expectations and regulatory requirements.

“How Is Bias Being Addressed?”

Because AI systems learn from existing data, they can inherit or amplify biases present within that information. Understanding how bias is identified and mitigated is essential to ensuring AI-generated recommendations support fair, accurate and responsible decision-making.

Leaders should therefore evaluate whether tools created internally or with business partners have processes for identifying, testing and mitigating potential bias that could affect institutional decisions.

“How Are Results Validated?”

Even sophisticated AI systems can generate inaccurate, incomplete or misleading outputs. Institutions therefore need confidence that AI-generated results are reviewed, tested and validated before they are relied upon for important decisions.

Responsible AI providers should be able to explain:

- How outputs are generated
- What safeguards exist against inaccuracies
- What role human review plays within the process

With that in mind, institutions should be wary of solutions that present AI recommendations as infallible.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence represents one of the most significant technological shifts higher education has faced in decades.

Gordian, a leading provider of facilities intelligence and capital planning solutions for colleges and universities, believes the future of AI in higher ed is not about replacing human expertise but enhancing it. Drawing on its experience in facilities planning, capital management and campus operations, Gordian views AI as a tool that can help institutions process information more efficiently, uncover insights more quickly and support better decision-making.

Whether it's with Gordian's Flash AI Estimating or another form of AI, responsible adoption depends on strong leadership, quality data, organizational readiness, transparent governance and a commitment to keeping human judgment at the center of every decision. Institutions that approach AI thoughtfully today will be better positioned to capture its benefits tomorrow while avoiding many of the risks that accompany rapid technological change.

This white paper is based upon the Ed Talk "AI in Higher Education: Leadership Strategies for Responsible Adoption."

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

To learn more, [watch the Ed Talk](#)

Watch On-Demand

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About Gordian

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