Designing the AI University

From Fragmentation to Foundation

By Jeffrey Selingo

Key Findings

Students are navigating AI without a roadmap.

Across campuses, AI is experienced unevenly—encouraged in some classrooms, restricted in others, and unclear in many—leaving students to piece together a foundational skillset on their own.

The value of a degree is increasingly tied to outcomes.

In a more competitive and skeptical market, institutions must show how they prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

A clear floor, supported by shared infrastructure, is essential.

Every student should graduate with AI fluency, reinforced by common platforms and consistent expectations across disciplines.

The labor market is moving faster than the curriculum.

As AI reshapes entry-level work, employers expect graduates who can apply knowledge, exercise judgment, and work with AI from day one.

Institutions need to move from experimentation to design.

The next phase of AI is not about establishing pilots or policies, but about building a coherent, institution-wide approach to learning.

The degree must integrate work and sequence learning over time.

Colleges should redesign the student experience to embed real-world application and build AI capability progressively—from introduction to advanced use.

INTRODUCTION

Since generative AI arrived almost four years ago, colleges and universities have followed a similar pattern: fascination, then fear, then regulation. Institutions rushed to write policies, restrict use, and prevent misuse, treating AI primarily as an academic problem to police.

Today, most leaders in higher education grudgingly accept that AI is here to stay and their graduates must be fluent in it. But now institutions need a coherent plan for how that actually happens across schools, disciplines, and the full student experience.

Higher education prides itself on moving deliberately. Shared governance gives faculty a central role in shaping academic policy. Academic freedom ensures that what happens in the classroom is largely determined by individual instructors.

But AI is testing the limits of the current model. Across sectors, not just in higher ed, leaders are recognizing that a major shift is imminent. Eight in ten experts interviewed by Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center say AI will play a significantly larger role in shaping daily life and core societal systems within the next decade.[1] Responding to that change, they maintain, requires a coordinated effort at the *institutional* level.

Higher education leaders agree a response is needed but aren't sure what it should look like.

Some are adopting a ***wait-and-see approach,*** encouraging experimentation within departments and schools. This is a strategy advocated by Cal Newport, an influential thinker and professor of computer science at Georgetown University. Newport compares this moment with AI to the early internet era in the 1990s, when colleges rushed to launch websites and build early online courses only to see the landscape quickly shift to mobile and wireless devices as well as fully online degrees. "The university needs to actually see how this tool is being used," he said, "then we can move fast and actually teach about it."[2]

But higher education leaders increasingly fear being overtaken by the technology, because—even more drastically than the internet did—AI cuts to the core of what universities do. If it can generate content, design courses, and even simulate instruction, many are asking, then what's left of the university's core value proposition?

So, some institutions are beginning to move closer to an institution-wide approach. The Ohio State University, for instance, is treating AI fluency as a foundational learning outcome. Basic AI literacy—knowing how the technology works, how to use different tools, how to evaluate their output, and where their limits are—isn't enough, said Ravi V. Bellamkonda, Ohio State's president. Bellamkonda likened AI fluency to foundational knowledge in math, science, and language—acquired in introductory courses and further developed throughout the student's journey. "We're going to ensure that there's a minimum that's met across the university," he told me. "How much more than the minimum is up to the major."

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This is what I call a ***guardrail approach*****,** where leaders set institutional expectations but allow flexibility in how they are met. It encourages more experimentation than a wait-and-see approach by signaling to deans and professors that AI matters, without prescribing every detail.

Neither approach is sufficient for the long term. Both manage this moment but don't address the larger challenge: a growing gap between what colleges promise—a degree that prepares students for life and work—and what students actually receive. AI is reshaping the labor market in real time, and forcing a question institutions have long avoided: what are they actually for? In many ways, higher education remains organized around a model built for a different era: majors, courses, and classroom learning that operate independently of one another.

Why Time Is Running Out for Isolated Experiments

Colleges and universities still have time and flexibility to move from managing AI to designing for it, but the runway is short for three key reasons.

First, students experience an uneven and often incoherent approach to AI. In some classrooms, professors actively encourage AI use; in others, it is banned outright; and in many, expectations are simply unclear. "It's very confusing," is how one University of Michigan undergraduate put it at a conference in Ann Arbor in March 2026. "There is a big lack of consensus overall."

With that lack of clarity, students are feeling unprepared. Nearly 30 percent say their colleges are not adequately training them to use AI, according to the 2026 Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education study.[3] Usage also varies sharply by major. Business, technology, and engineering students are the most frequent users, often because those disciplines actively encourage it, while other students encounter AI far less consistently.

Faculty are navigating the same uncertainty. At San Diego State University, leaders are trying to address that problem by moving beyond siloed experimentation. A new "AI-ready course design" initiative pays a faculty member from each major to redesign at least one assignment to incorporate AI (with specific attention given to required courses). The goal is consistency: ensuring that students encounter AI in meaningful ways regardless of discipline.

"What faculty need right now are examples," said James Frazee, the university's chief information officer.[4] By building a library of assignments and short faculty reflections across disciplines, the initiative aims to show how AI can be embedded into teaching rather than confined to isolated experiments.

Efforts like this remain the exception. At most institutions, both faculty and students lack guidance and shared norms—while the stakes are getting higher. Artificial intelligence is already shaping how students think about their academic paths: 47 percent of bachelor's degree students say AI has caused them to consider changing their major, according to the Lumina-Gallup study.

As a result of these fragmented efforts, students, instead of building capability over their academic journey, are navigating a patchwork of policies and experiences. As AI fluency becomes a foundational skill in life and work, that inconsistency creates inequity: what students learn often depends on the professors they happen to have.

Second, the labor market is shifting faster than higher education. How much AI is to blame for the fragile entry-level job market remains unclear. Broader economic forces are part of the story. But early signals are hard to ignore.

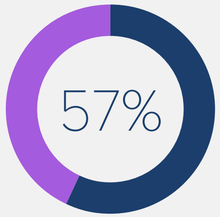
There were 15 percent fewer entry-level and internship job postings in 2025 than the year before, according to Handshake, a job-search platform popular with college students; meanwhile, applications per posting rose 26 percent.[5] The unemployment rate for new college graduates at the end of 2025 was more than a full percentage point above the national average—higher even than for high school graduates.[6]

Voices About AI

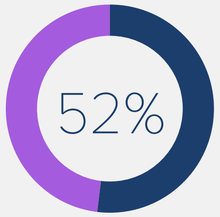
See clips from interviews with higher ed, tech, and workforce experts about why time is running out for colleges and universities to design for AI.

An Uneven and Inconsistent AI Experience for Students

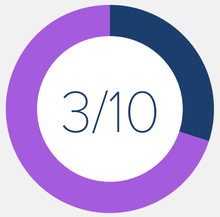
As AI use in college increases, students report a confusing maze of rules and inadequate training…



Percentage of college students who use artificial intelligence in their coursework on a daily or weekly basis.



Percentage of students who frequently experience unclear or uneven course rules about artificial intelligence.

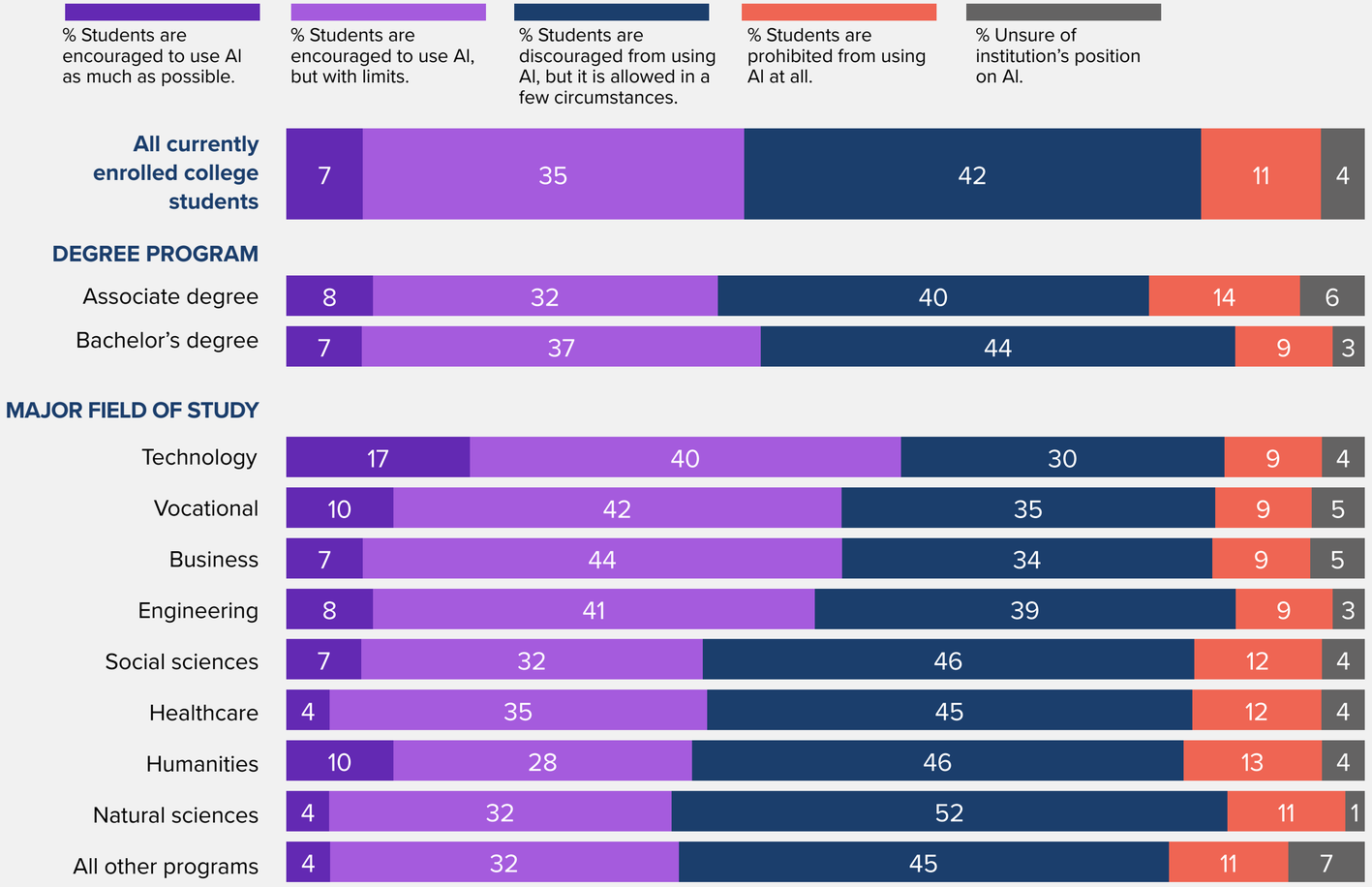


Number of students who say their institution is not adequately training them to use artificial intelligence.

Source: Lumina Foundation-Gallup, "AI in Higher Education," 2026

…which leads to a very uneven AI experience for students, depending on what they study.

As far as you know, which of the following best describes your college's position on student use of AI in coursework?



Historically, new technologies favored junior employees. AI runs counter to that pattern. A study from the Stanford Digital Economy Lab found that employment for Gen-Z college graduates in AI-affected fields, such as software development and customer support, has fallen 16 percent since late 2022, while more experienced workers have not yet felt the same impact.[7]

As Erik Brynjolfsson told me, senior workers rely on “tricks of the trade,” tacit knowledge that helps them recognize when AI is wrong or incomplete. New graduates, by contrast, are competing directly with tools that can perform many of the baseline tasks that once defined entry-level work. For employers, that shift changes the math. Entry-level hiring has always required time and investment. At Raymond James Financial, it takes roughly 18 months for new hires to deliver a return. “It’s real easy to say college students are expensive,” said Simon Kho, who recently led early career programs there. “Not from a salary standpoint, but from the investment we have to make.”[8] As AI takes on research, drafting, and analysis, that investment is harder to justify.

AI is already changing the pathway from college to career moves, and institutions that move slowly risk preparing students for a labor market that no longer exists.

Third, enrollment and financial pressures in higher education are growing more intense. Colleges are competing for a shrinking pool of students, many of them more skeptical than previous generations about the value of a degree.

In that context, AI is a strategic issue. Institutions that can prepare students for the changes in our world will have an advantage in attracting and retaining students. The pressure is especially acute for mid-tier institutions. Research by scholars at Harvard University finds that graduates from these colleges are seeing the steepest declines in employment in AI-affected roles, faring worse than peers from both elite and lower-tier institutions.[9] As researcher Seyed Mahdi Hosseini Maasoum noted, these graduates are caught in the middle: more expensive to hire than peers at lower-tier schools, but without the same perceived skill advantage as those at elite schools.

These three forces point to a common conclusion: managing AI at the margins is no longer sufficient. What’s needed now is a more intentional, institution-wide approach.

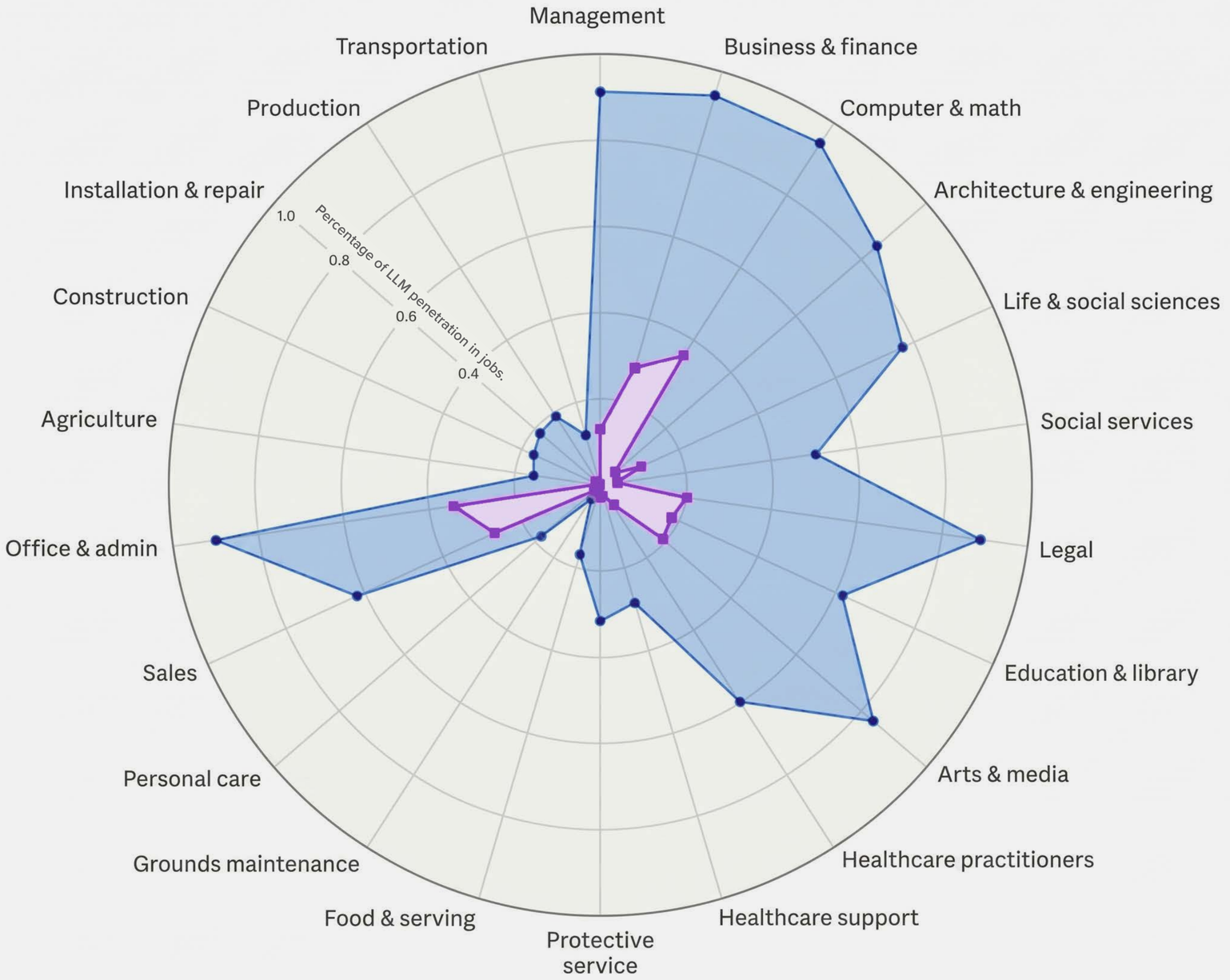
Historically, new technologies favored junior employees. AI runs counter to that pattern.

Voices About AI

See clips from interviews with higher ed, tech, and workforce experts about the new minimum skills every graduate needs.

Job Categories Most Vulnerable to AI Automation

In the spider graph, the areas in purple show what Anthropic, the artificial intelligence company, found in actual use on its platform. Compare those with the areas in darker blue to see the difference between the work AI tools are currently doing and the work they are feasibly capable of performing.



Source: Anthropic, “Labor Market Impacts of AI,” March 2026

Four Strategies for Designing the AI University

Many college and university leaders recognize the urgency around AI but are uncertain about where to begin. What does it mean to move from managing AI to designing for it? How should presidents and provosts rethink the student experience in a world where AI is reshaping both learning and work? And which decisions matter most if institutions are to replace scattered experimentation with something more coherent, consistent, and competitive?

In my research and interviews with more than three dozen leaders—including provosts, faculty innovators, chief information officers, employers, and technologists—I saw a pattern emerging. The institutions making progress are treating AI as a design challenge that cuts across the entire academic enterprise.

What follows are four strategies institutions can use to ensure that students learn about AI not through chance encounters but through coherent experiences.

→ **STRATEGY ONE:**
Establish Minimum Expectations Throughout the Institution

→ **STRATEGY THREE:**
Redesign the Degree to “Ladder Over” Work Replaced by AI

→ **STRATEGY TWO:**
Build Common Platforms as Core Infrastructure

→ **STRATEGY FOUR:**
Sequence Learning Across the Institution

STRATEGY ONE:
Establish Minimum Expectations Throughout the Institution

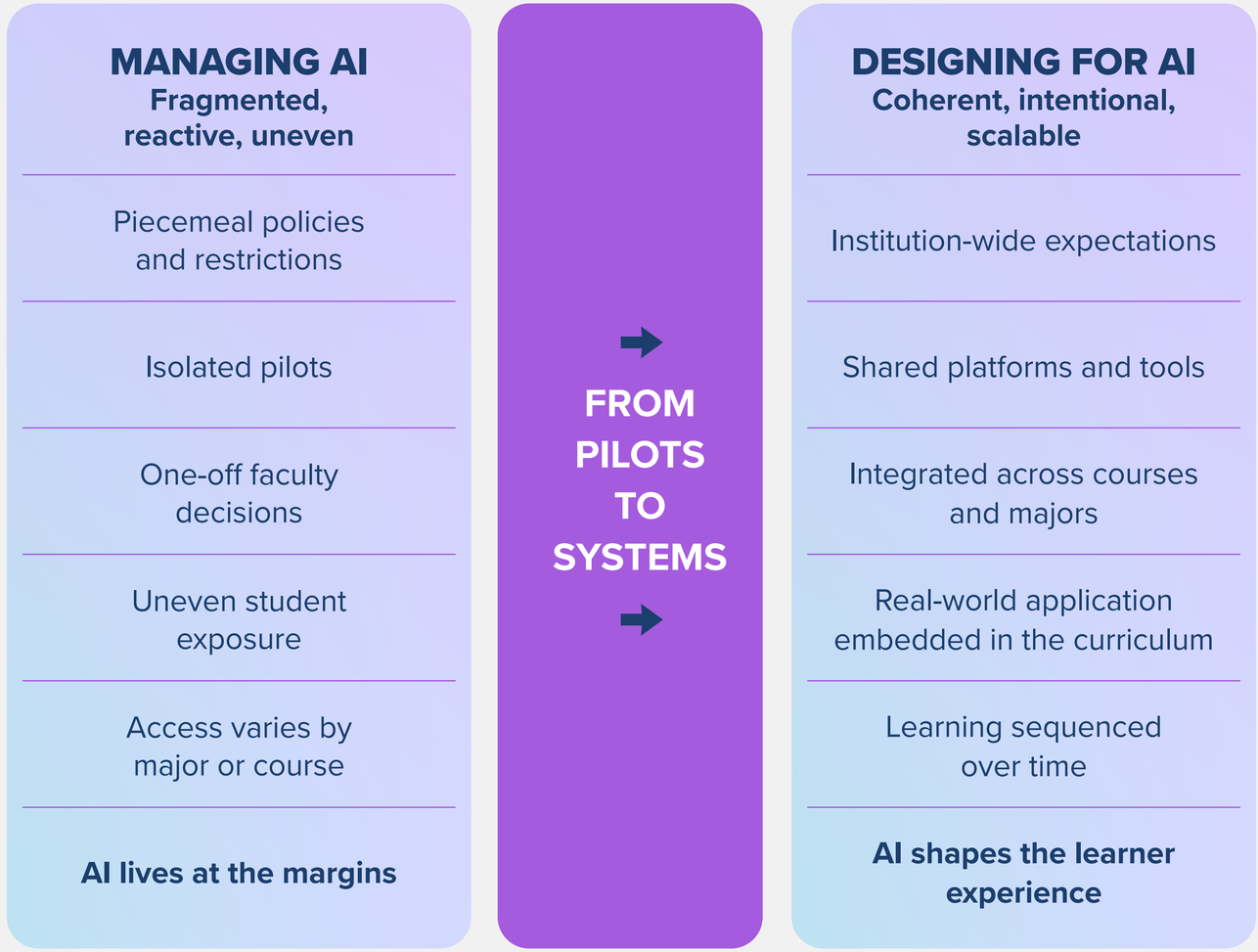
The first step is simple: set a floor, like Ohio State. Every student should graduate with a baseline level of AI fluency.

For instance, at a minimum, graduates should be able to use generative AI tools to draft, revise, and assess written work; evaluate AI-generated content for accuracy, bias, and appropriate use; apply AI tools to problems within their field of study; and articulate the ethical implications of AI in a professional context.

Some institutions are beginning to build the infrastructure to support that kind of coherence. At Duke University, a faculty steering committee has recommended creating a small, centralized Office of AI Strategy, with two to four staff members, to act as “connective tissue” across schools. Alongside it, a Guidance Hub within the Center for Teaching and Learning would help faculty translate institutional priorities into classroom practice, offering shared syllabus language and a registry of classroom experiments. The aim is not to impose rigid top-down rules, but to create enough shared structure that expectations are visible and consistent.[10]

That distinction matters. “The quest for one AI framework to rule them all is a dead end,” said Angela Gunder, CEO of the consultancy Opened Culture and former Chief Academic Officer and Vice President of Learning at the Online Learning

From Managing AI to Designing for AI



Consortium. “There’s not going to be a checklist that helps us keep pace with the speed of change or the diversity of our learners.”[11] The challenge for institutions is to adopt shared expectations without standardizing every classroom.

After several years of blanket bans on AI, we’re starting to see some attempts to clarify expectations in the classroom: *Here’s what we want you to get out of this assignment. Here’s why we don’t want you to use AI for this assignment. Here’s where we do want you to use it.*

Still, more transparency is needed. As David Hatami, who has worked with colleges building AI policy from the ground up, argues, when faculty members don’t provide clear guidance, they “fail both to encourage consistency and to reinforce responsible engagement with AI.”[12]

At the same time, what employers expect from graduates is shifting quickly. Technical know-how is table stakes, not a differentiator. Employers want to hire people who can use technology in combination with original thinking to frame problems, generate ideas, and apply judgment in unfamiliar situations.

That shift raises the bet for getting the floor right. Without a shared baseline, students develop these skills unevenly, if at all. With one, every graduate can use AI effectively, augmenting their thinking rather than replacing it.

“For all those lamenting the death of the liberal arts, helping students use AI to complement their foundational skills is potentially a rebirth for the humanities,” said Matt Kinservik, a professor of English and former vice provost for faculty affairs at the University of Delaware, which offers a three-course AI program for undergrads in any discipline. The program covers AI fundamentals, ethical implications, and practical applications.[13]

In a world where technical skills have a shrinking half-life, what endures are the competencies that help graduates navigate complexity: discernment about what matters, the ability to get things done, problem-solving without a clear playbook, and the judgment to work effectively with others. AI is shifting the advantage from what students know to how they think, decide, and act on that knowledge.

The best educators are exploring what this can look like. Vince Castillo, an assistant professor of marketing and logistics at Ohio State, has significantly changed his approach to one of his most popular courses, Logistics and Supply Chain Analytics. Many of his business students lack coding skills, a barrier that once separated them from computer-science students. “With AI, they can write commands to get a better understanding of what’s in the data,” Castillo told me. That gives them a clearer grasp of the material, he said, and pushes them to ask more astute questions. “They think more strategically now,” he added.

With a well-designed floor, that kind of learning happens consistently. Students still grapple with complex, ill-structured problems, using AI where it adds value but not outsourcing the thinking itself.

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STRATEGY TWO:
Build Common Platforms as Core Infrastructure

The floor defines what, at a minimum, students should learn. The infrastructure enables them to learn it.

Right now on campuses, access to AI tools is uneven and often unavailable. Some students experiment with the latest models in well-resourced programs or on their own. Others encounter AI only sporadically, depending on their major, their professors, or their ability to pay for tools themselves. The result is not just variation but inequality.

Closing that gap requires institutions to think about AI as core academic infrastructure.

Higher education has solved this problem before with the library. Universities didn't ask every department to build its own collection. They invested in a shared resource, organized to serve all disciplines. AI should be approached the same way. The goal is not standardization of use—departments should retain flexibility—but building a shared foundation that ensures every student has access to the same capabilities.

That foundation creates continuity. When students use a common platform across courses, faculty can see what students have already learned and how they are using AI. Learning becomes cumulative rather than episodic. Instead of starting from scratch in every class, students build capability over time.

This approach also opens the door to more-intentional teaching. The real potential of AI in education is shaping how students learn in real time, said Charles Isbell, a computer scientist and chancellor of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. "Imagine what a difference it would make if, as a teacher, you knew which students were struggling with a concept," he said. "It would change how you teach, how you design assignments, and how students learn."[14]

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Voices About AI

See clips from interviews with higher ed, tech, and workforce experts about why it's time to redesign the degree for an AI labor market.

Designing the AI University

Such responsiveness would depend on how the tools were embedded into the learning process. Students develop AI fluency not in the abstract but through real assignments within their discipline. Experiences should be built around discipline-specific cases: analyzing data in a business course, drafting and revising arguments in a writing class, or modeling scenarios in the sciences. But those experiences won't scale if every instructor is building from scratch. They require shared tools, examples, and support.

When AI is embedded in courses on a common platform, students learn how to apply the tools, refine their thinking, and build the kinds of durable skills employers are demanding. That's a critical advantage, especially given the disconnect between how prepared graduates are perceived to be and how ready many of them really are. Nearly 90 percent of educators believe their students are prepared to enter the workforce, according to a survey by Cengage.[15] But employers, and even students themselves, are less confident, pointing to gaps in areas like critical thinking, problem-solving, and knowledge application in real-world settings.

A growing number of institutions are treating AI infrastructure less as a collection of tools and more as a shared academic resource. The 23-campus California State University system offers a free AI literacy microcredential to its nearly half a million students. Each module has activities associated with it, and those can easily be updated to keep the microcredential relevant.

The microcredential also makes access to AI more equitable. Designed by San Diego State, it grew out of a regional collaboration with the University of California San Diego and the San Diego Community College District. The basic idea behind it: a student who begins at a community college and transfers should arrive at a four-year university with the same AI foundation as one who started there.

That push was driven by data, Frazee explained. A survey found that students with more devices were more likely than others to pay for premium AI tools—and more likely to say AI was improving their education—revealing a digital divide within the broader conversation about access.

To move from isolated experimentation to coherent learning, institutions must bridge that divide. It's the only way they can begin to ensure that every student develops the skills they will need in an AI-driven world.

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See clips from interviews with higher ed, tech, and workforce experts about what the AI university actually looks like.

STRATEGY THREE:
Redesign the Degree to “Ladder Over” Work Replaced by AI

If the experience gap is real for college graduates entering the workforce, then work can no longer be a side hustle to the academic experience. It needs to be integral to the degree.

For decades, entry-level roles functioned as training grounds. They allowed graduates to learn by doing—for instance, conducting research, building slide decks, and analyzing data. Increasingly, such tasks are automated or augmented by AI, and the work that once helped people learn the ropes is disappearing.

If graduates can no longer “learn on the job” in the same way, then colleges need to help students “ladder over” the work that AI is replacing.

They can start by embedding real-world applications into the curriculum. Models already exist. The co-op structures at Northeastern, Drexel, and the University of Cincinnati alternate work and study. Course-integrated industry projects bring employer problems directly into the classroom. Multi-semester capstones give students repeated exposure to applied work.

But these models need to move from the margins of higher ed to the core. One promising approach comes from the Complete College America AI Readiness Consortium, explicitly designed to tie AI instruction to workplace expectations. Launched in early 2025 with support from Axim Collaborative, the consortium spans dozens of open-access institutions and systems, including the City Colleges of Chicago and the City University of New York.

Across those campuses, students enroll in a set of courses delivered through the experiential-learning platform Riipen, where they work on real-world challenges using AI tools, the kind of applied experience that entry-level jobs once provided. At the City Colleges of Chicago, for example, a course on “Audience-Centered Content Strategy Using AI” explores how generative AI is reshaping communications work. At Cuyahoga Community College, students in mechanical-engineering technology take a capstone on applied AI and automation projects, partnering with industry to solve real problems. And at CUNY institutions, courses in AI and cybersecurity ask student teams to assess digital threats and present their findings.[16]

To make room for work-integrated learning in the standard curriculum, we should start thinking of the degree as a “3- to 5-year flex,” said Randy Bass, vice president for strategic education initiatives at Georgetown University. At Georgetown, Bass also directs The Red House, a research and development arm for curriculum innovation. “We have a flex system now by chaos and negligence,” he said. “Some kids go faster, some kids go slower, but it’s not with any kind of intentionality.”

If the experience gap is real for college graduates entering the workforce, then work can no longer be a side hustle to the academic experience. It needs to be integral to the degree.

One opportunity for innovation is in the fourth year of a student’s undergraduate career. The development of the 3-year, 90-credit bachelor’s degree, approved by several regional accreditors, allows for 3+1 programs (with the fourth year focusing on work). Instead of offering a loose collection of electives, the senior year can function as a bridge to the workforce: a structured sequence of projects, partnerships, and problem-solving experiences that mirror the demands of the labor market students are about to enter.

Higher education is no longer about job readiness. It’s about job altitude—helping new graduates enter the workforce above the work AI is already claiming.

STRATEGY FOUR:
Sequence Learning Across the Institution

A floor defines what students should learn about AI. Infrastructure makes that learning possible and accessible. Curriculum redesign integrates “learning by doing” into the degree. But what turns all of that into real capability is sequence. Right now, most students experience AI as a series of disconnected moments. A student might use AI to draft a paper in one semester, analyze data in another, and never connect those experiences into a coherent skill set. What’s missing is a deliberate progression.

Here’s how it can work: In the first year, students are introduced to AI tools and begin to develop a basic understanding of what they can and cannot do. In the middle years, they apply those tools within their disciplines, testing outputs, refining their thinking, and learning where AI adds value and where it does not. By the final year, they integrate those skills in projects and experiences that require both technical fluency and judgment. Several institutions are beginning to establish this progression. The University of Florida, for example, has built a three-level framework—AI literacy, competence, and expertise—that maps to different stages of the student journey. What begins as a shared introduction evolves into discipline-specific application and ultimately into advanced work tied to research or professional practice.

At the most basic level, said Florida’s provost Joseph Glover, the model starts with common courses in AI fundamentals, ethics, and applications. From there, it pushes learning into the disciplines, where faculty integrate AI into existing courses and create new ones tailored to their fields.[17] The result is a sequenced set of experiences that build over time and culminate in more advanced, applied work.

What an AI-Designed College Experience Looks Like

Year 1 **INTRODUCE**	Years 2-3 **APPLY**	Years 3-4 **INTEGRATE**	Final Outcomes **DEMONSTRATE**
→ AI basics → What it can and can’t do → Ethical foundations	→ Use AI in discipline → Test outputs → Learn limits	→ Real-world projects → Work-based learning → Solve open-ended problems	→ AI fluency + judgment → Creativity + execution → Portfolio of applied work

Bringing It All Together

This work doesn't happen on the side of the desk as it has at many institutions for the past several years. Nor does it require a sweeping reorganization or a multi-year strategic plan, approaches that move too slowly.

Many of the recommendations and ideas in this report can be achieved in three key steps.

STEP 1

Institutions should set up a small, focused AI design group with a clear mandate to:

- Map where and how AI currently shows up across the student experience;
- Define a coherent set of institutional expectations for AI fluency;
- Identify gaps in access, instruction, and application across programs;
- Prototype and test new course designs, assignments, and learning pathways;
- Align academic work with workforce expectations and real-world use cases.

STEP 2

Pair step one or follow it with a lightweight governance structure that can move faster than traditional ones. At Duke, the faculty committee recommended elevating AI to a provost-level priority and convening a small Executive Committee on AI to set near-term goals and coordinate decision-making across the institution. The intent is not to centralize control, but to create enough alignment to move quickly as the technology changes.

STEP 3

Over time, the structure can evolve into something more durable, such as an internal AI lab where new models are prototyped, tested, and scaled across the institution. At Duke, the recommendation is for "a lean and agile coordinating office," which it is calling an Office of AI Strategy, to serve as the university's "connective tissue" for AI initiatives "over the next five years (at least) while the higher education landscape seeks homeostasis."

A Final Word

Higher education faces a choice: continue to manage AI at the margins or use it to redesign the student's learning journey at its core.

The urgency is real. Students are already navigating an uneven experience, a shifting labor market, and increasing doubts about the value of a degree. Left unaddressed, those forces will widen the gap between what colleges promise and what students receive.

But they also point to a path forward. Institutions that move now will set a clear floor for AI fluency, build shared platforms to support it, integrate real-world work into the degree, and sequence learning so it builds over time.

This is not about adopting technology faster. It is about designing learning better, including protecting the productive struggle that makes learning real. Done right, it offers something higher education has always promised, only now with greater clarity: graduates who can think, adapt, and create in a world changing in real time.

Jeffrey Selingo is a higher education author and strategist who has written three New York Times bestselling books. His latest book, *Dream School: Finding the College That's Right For You,* was published by Simon & Schuster in September 2025. A regular contributor to The Atlantic and The New York Times, Jeff is a special advisor to the president and a professor of practice at Arizona State University. He also co-hosts the podcast Future U. and writes a regular newsletter called Next. You can find out more about him at jeffselingo.com

Endnotes

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This paper was funded by Adobe. The author retained editorial control. The views and analysis in this report are the responsibility of the author alone.