The AI-Ready Graduate

Harnessing Human Creativity for the Next Era of Work

By Jeffrey Selingo

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the workplace, reshaping the skills companies need in their workers, how they hire, and ultimately how we design products and experiences and engage with each other. Generative AI tools, in particular, such as ChatGPT and the DALL-E image generator, are having the most immediate impact because of the human tasks they can already quickly perform, such as creating text, images, music, and computer code.

The ascent of AI has ushered in a new era of work, where the skills needed to keep up in any job are increasingly churning at a faster rate—making the college degree alone insufficient.

The technology is especially influencing work where creativity is at the core—which is to say almost every knowledge job—including marketing, customer service, and product design. The tremendous potential to revolutionize entire fields challenges employers who need to ensure that workers are prepared for tasks that use this constantly evolving technology. That requirement in turn, has a profound impact on the structure and purpose of those institutions that prepare such workers: colleges and universities.

The race between technology and education is nothing new. Throughout much of the 20th century, education won this race, leading to increased educational attainment and higher incomes, according to the economists, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz. But beginning in the 1970s, technology started to catch up, and by the turn of the millennium, the wage premium a college degree commanded worldwide started to drop.[1] The college wage premium was never going to rise forever, of course, but the return on investment for a degree is uncertain these days, leading to questions about the value of college and resulting in anemic enrollment trends worldwide.

The ascent of AI has ushered in a new era of work, where the skills needed to keep up in any job are increasingly churning at a faster rate—making the college degree alone insufficient. As a result, the growth in education attainment in the coming decades will be a both/and: a degree along with proficiency in creative human skills—critical thinking, exploration, and communication across disciplines.

What Is Creativity? What Are Creative Skills?

When people talk about “creativity,” it’s often conflated with talent in artistic expression and design proficiency. In the higher education context, too many colleges and universities put creativity in a silo and sequester the focus on developing creative skills to the arts and humanities. But creativity, and creative skills, especially for the purposes of this paper are broader: they include the creative human skills known as foundational to 21st century jobs, such as critical thinking, exploration, and communication across disciplines.

In Demand: Tech Fluency and Creativity

The early-career job market, in particular, has shifted in a negative direction, sending a signal to colleges that they need to change how they prepare their graduates. In March 2025, the "recent-grad gap"—the difference between the unemployment rates for young college graduates and the overall labor force—hit an all-time low, a break from a 40-year trend where new grads consistently outperformed the broader labor market.[2]

What changed? **Generative AI now excels at many of the tasks once reserved for entry-level hires: researching, writing, analyzing, designing, and summarizing. It's doing what junior associates in law firms, editorial assistants in media companies, and analysts in finance departments used to do.**

To "ladder over" these entry-level functions and land in what in previous generations would have been their second or third job out of college, young professionals must now bring a skill set that combines fluency in generative AI with human strengths—like communication, problem-solving, and creativity. Nearly two-thirds of human resources professionals say those cognitive and interpersonal skills are just as important as AI capabilities.[3]

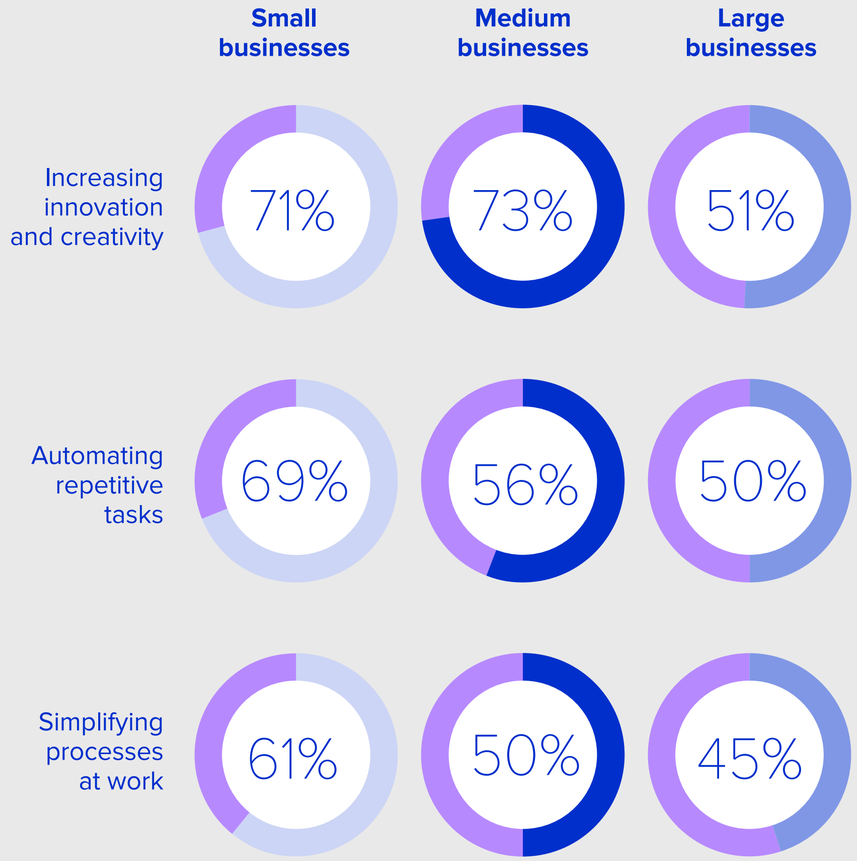
This dual demand—for tech fluency and creativity—is a wake-up call for higher education leaders. Colleges must prepare students to complement, not compete with, technology. That means weaving generative AI literacy throughout the curriculum while fostering the broad, interdisciplinary skills the workforce now prizes *(see Figure 1)*.

Yet many institutions still silo students into narrow majors that don't reflect how the real world works. No single field of study reliably delivers the mix of technical, analytical, and relational skills today's cross-functional teams require.

"AI is leading society to question the relevance of higher education," said Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University and author of *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. "So we must move from teaching knowledge to teaching the integration of knowledge. A machine doesn't understand context. That's the human edge. And it starts with students mastering the integration of tech literacy, data literacy, and human literacy."

This report explores how generative AI literacy has become vital for college graduates and offers a framework for higher education leaders to embed AI fluency across disciplines to best prepare students for career success with in-demand creative and AI skills.

Figure 1. Creativity—and Not Productivity—Is the No. 1 Way Organizations Are Using Gen AI
With businesses using AI for innovation and creativity, they will prize hiring college graduates who know how to employ the technology as an effective partner in their work.



Source: Access Partnership's survey of 2,620 businesses in the US, India, Germany, the UK, and France, 2024

AI and Student Creativity

The good news is that most college students already are well versed in generative AI. A recent survey of students from 16 countries found that 86 percent rely on it regularly for their studies, with more than half using it weekly.[4] The impact on academic performance is measurable and significant: 51 percent of students report earning better grades after incorporating generative AI into their study routines, while 56 percent cite dramatic improvements in their overall efficiency.[5]

What's particularly striking is the nuanced way students approach different applications of generative AI. While they remain cautious about using these tools for traditional academic writing—where questions of integrity loom large—they've enthusiastically adopted AI for creative tasks.

Students are leveraging these technologies to create sophisticated digital presentations, generate compelling visual art, and design professional-quality marketing materials with a confidence that suggests they view creative AI as fundamentally different from other applications.

Academics themselves tend to view AI-assisted creative work through a different lens than they do AI-generated essays or problem sets. Where the latter might be seen as academic shortcuts that bypass critical thinking, creative AI applications are increasingly viewed as tools for empowerment—technologies that amplify rather than replace human creativity. This perceived legitimacy creates what amounts to a judgment-free zone where students can experiment, iterate, and develop their creative skills without fear of violating academic integrity standards.

The democratizing effect of generative AI on creativity cannot be overstated. These tools are systematically dismantling the technical barriers that have long separated creative vision from creative execution. Students who possess powerful ideas but lack formal training in specialized areas like music production, graphic design, or video editing can now bring their concepts to life with unprecedented ease.

This technological leveling of the playing field explains findings from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's comprehensive study of students ages 14 to 22, which revealed that one-third of them use generative AI to create images, while 16 percent employ it to "make sounds or music."[6]

The implications extend far beyond simple task completion. Students are discovering that generative AI allows them to engage with creative disciplines they might never have explored otherwise *(see Figure 2)*. A business major can now create professional marketing visuals without years of design training. An engineering student can compose background music for a presentation without understanding music theory. This cross-pollination of skills and interests is fostering a generation of more versatile, creative thinkers.

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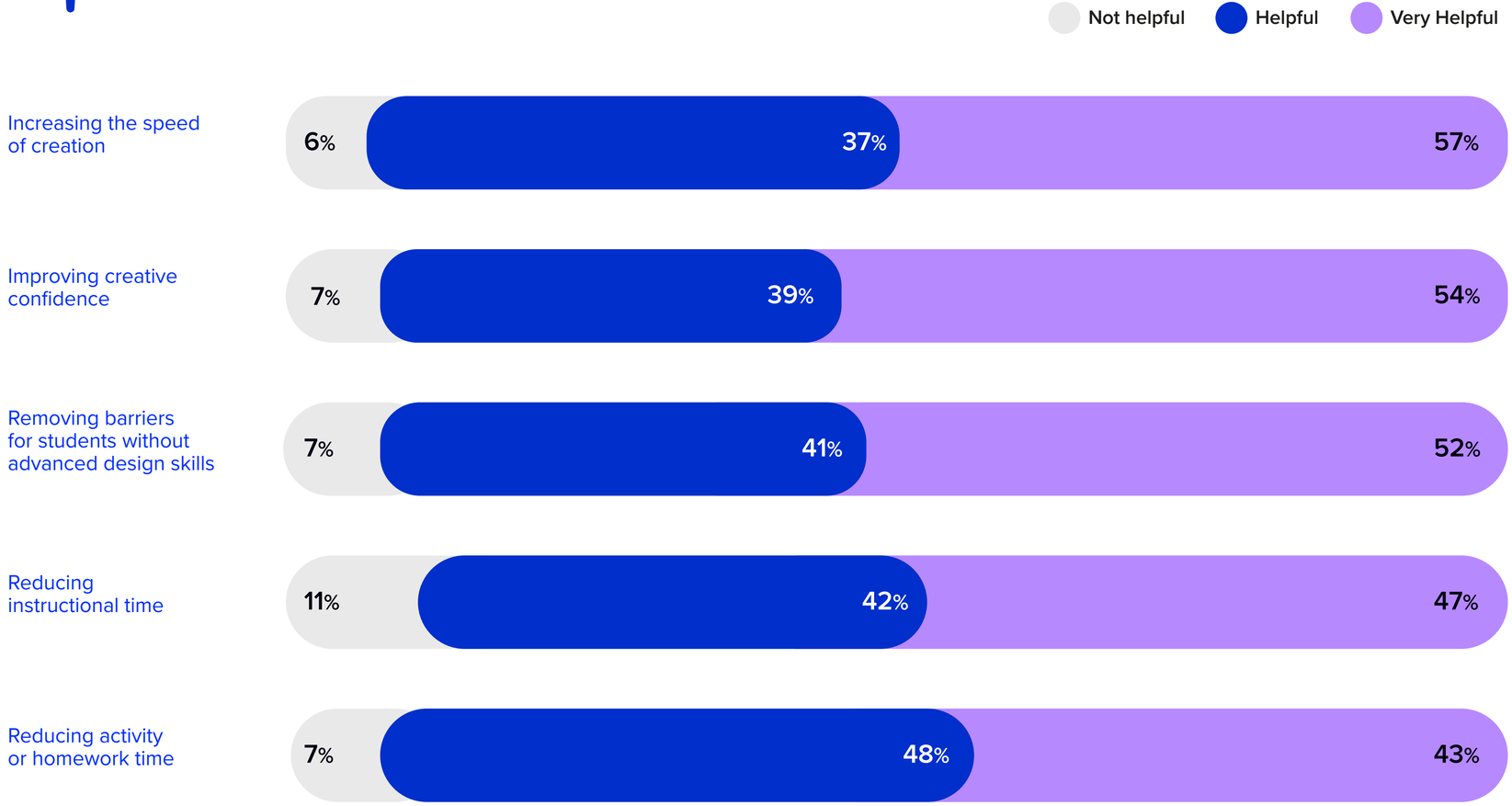
Figure 2. Where AI Is Helping Learners
Areas in which educators find generative AI to be helpful to students for creative projects and multimedia assignments



Source: Advanis/Adobe, “Creativity with AI in Education, 2025,” survey of 2,801 educators from the United States and United Kingdom

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The ‘Adoption Gap’: Where Institutions Are Lagging

Higher education’s response to the generative AI revolution reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape of enthusiasm, skepticism, and institutional inertia. While students charge ahead with adoption, colleges and universities are approaching these technologies with a mixture of curiosity and deep-seated caution, creating what some observers have called an “adoption gap” between learners and their institutions.

This institutional response is not evenly spread around the world. Asian-Pacific nations, particularly Japan and Singapore, have emerged as early leaders in AI integration.[7] These countries have not only begun to incorporate generative AI into their curricula but have also made the crucial step of embedding it into teacher education programs—ensuring that the next generation of educators will be equipped to guide students through an AI-enhanced learning environment.

However, this proactive approach remains the exception rather than the rule. A comprehensive global analysis of the world’s top 50 universities revealed a predominant focus on risk management rather than opportunity exploration.[8] Most institutional AI policies fall into two narrow categories: either preventing negative outcomes like academic dishonesty or providing basic guidelines for faculty on using generative AI tools for assessment purposes. This defensive posture suggests that many institutions are still grappling with fundamental questions about AI’s role in education.

The statistics paint a sobering picture of institutional readiness. A recent survey of U.S. college leaders found that only 43 percent believe their institution is doing enough to prepare students for a labor economy fueled by generative AI.[9] An overwhelming majority (93 percent) cited a lack of familiarity with creative AI tools and a lack of training and support (84 percent) from their institutions.[10] Perhaps most tellingly, only 20 percent of provosts who participated in a separate, comprehensive survey report that their colleges have created formal policies governing the use of generative AI in classrooms and institutional research.[11] This policy vacuum leaves both faculty and students navigating uncertain terrain, often relying on ad hoc guidelines or personal judgment rather than clear institutional standards.

Despite misgivings about academic dishonesty and misleading AI results, faculty and administrators recognize that generative AI is a permanent fixture in the classroom and the workplace. A strong majority of faculty (80 percent) believe it’s important to teach students how to use generative AI responsibly, and 78 percent say the technology won’t replace critical thinking or effective communication but will support and enhance them.[12]

Faculty sentiment is clear, but action lags. “If we’re not conversant with and training our students to use and reflect on what will be the most transformative technology of our lifetimes, we’re not doing our job,” said Matthew Kinservik, professor of English and former vice provost of faculty affairs at the University of Delaware, who is helping to lead AI-literacy at the 23,000-student institution. “It is just imperative.”

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AI and Creativity as a Core Job Skillset

The workplace transformation catalyzed by generative AI has fundamentally altered how employers view and value creativity. What was once considered a specialized skill confined to certain roles has evolved into a core competency demanded across virtually all professional domains.

Take recent findings from SkillsFuture Singapore, a government board that promotes lifelong learning, for evidence of this.

Employers say workers in seven out of 10 noncreative job roles need creative skills—like software developers finding ways to make apps more user-friendly, for example, or restaurant managers creating digital content to draw customers and build a brand.[13]

The career impact of creative skills has become quantifiable and substantial. LinkedIn's extensive analysis of professional trajectories over the past three years reveals that individuals who featured creative skills on their profiles experienced salary increases two to three times higher than their peers when changing roles. This pattern held consistent across diverse industries, from technology and finance to healthcare and education.[14] Moreover, these professionals demonstrated stronger overall career growth trajectories, suggesting that creativity serves as a career accelerant in the AI age.[15] In many respects, generative AI is an effective partner for humans, especially for tasks that require creativity, said C. Edward Watson, vice president of digital innovation at the American Association of Colleges and Universities and co-author of the book *Teaching with AI: A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning*.

"As a brainstorming partner, or maybe even an assistant, your creativity married with what AI might bring to the table probably results in something of better quality, and you probably get to that final product more quickly," he said.

A recent study backs up this theory. Participants were asked to write an eight-sentence story about an adventure at sea. Those who used ChatGPT-4 for idea generation produced stories that were rated as more novel and useful than those who wrote without AI support. Participants who could generate multiple ideas with AI produced even stronger results, with stories that were better written, were more enjoyable, and included surprising twists.[16]

In fact, the link between creativity and career outcomes is so strong that the British Council, a U.K.-based global organization for cultural and educational relations, called it "one of the greatest predictors of a job's future prospects."[17] Generative AI is changing the workplace in other ways, too. As AI tools become more accessible, employers are placing greater value on competencies that put them into place, like creative problem-solving, digital content creation, and storytelling *(see Figure 3)*. "Creative processes like graphic design will increasingly be the domain of people with ideas rather than those who spent years honing their technical skills," said Matt Candy, IBM Consulting's head of generative AI.[18] This suggests a future where creative vision matters more than technical execution—a profound shift in how we define and value professional expertise.

Just look to job postings for concrete evidence of this transformation. When Treyarch, the acclaimed developer behind the "Call of Duty" gaming franchise, advertised for an artist/animator recently, it explicitly sought candidates "skilled in digital illustration, motion design, and using generative AI tools" with the ability to "polish 2D art made by humans and generative AI tools."[19] This hybrid skill set—blending traditional artistic capabilities with AI fluency—represents the new creative professional archetype.

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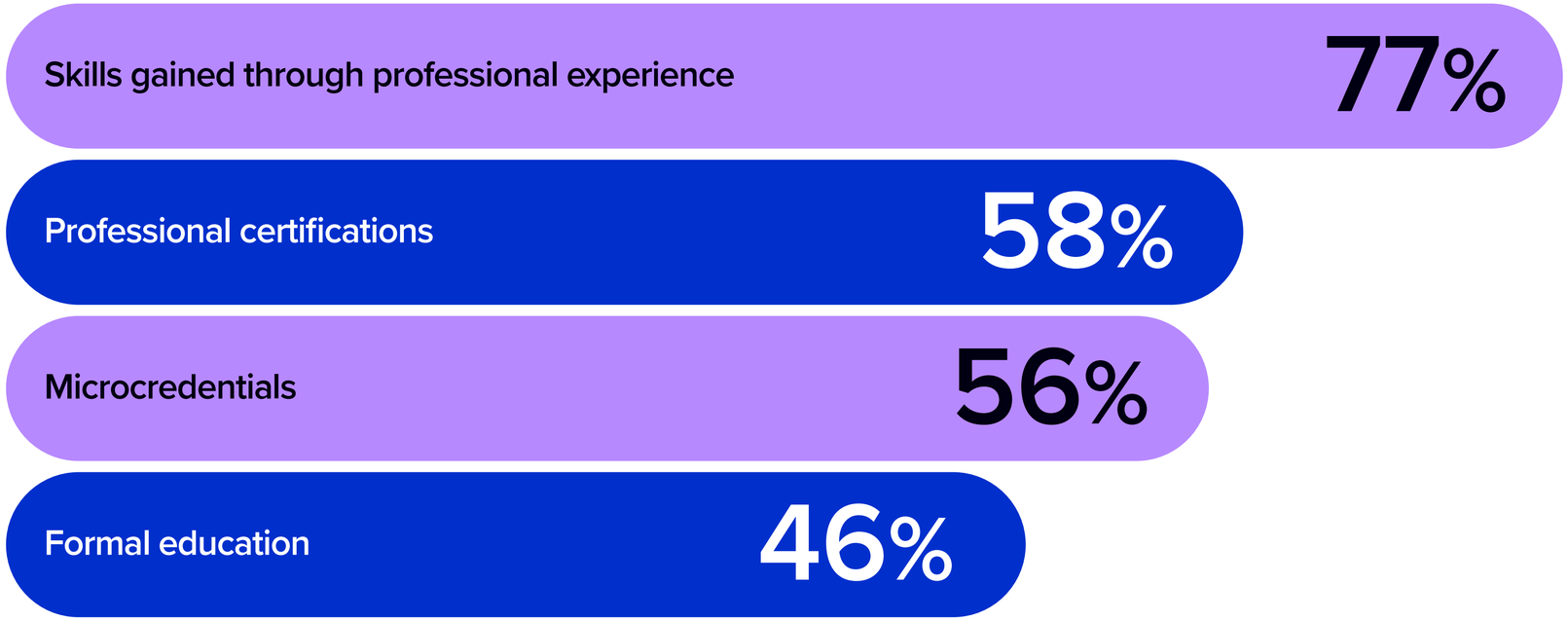
Figure 3. Hands-On Learning More Important than Formal Education in Hiring

% of Hiring Managers agreeing that this factor is becoming more influential in hiring decisions.



Source: Edelman survey of 1,500 employers/hiring managers in the United States, United Kingdom and India.

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Building AI Literacy Across the Institution

In my research and interviews with some two dozen leaders, including provosts, chief technology officers, faculty members, and industry experts, I have identified six ways to promote AI literacy across the curriculum—what I'm calling a LADDER approach.

L: Ladder over entry-level work.

The entry rung of the ladder for new college graduates has cracked. Generative AI now handles several of the tasks that once justified hiring fleets of 22-year-olds. Colleges must therefore prepare students to start higher on the value chain by ensuring they take part in more assignments and projects that require judgment, negotiation, and integrative thinking—skills AI can't fake. Career coaching that helps students articulate the distinctive value they add "beyond the bot" is also necessary.

"We're headed to a world by 2030 where 30 to 50 percent of today's knowledge-economy jobs will be gone and that means higher ed has to re-imagine what we're preparing people for—and start now," said Allison Salisbury, a former executive at Guild Education and founder of a venture studio that builds AI companies.

A: Align thinking about how to use AI in higher ed so it's like what students will experience in the workplace.

Employers now ask: *Is this task best for a person, an AI agent, or the two together?* Faculty should pose the same question when designing assignments, assessments, and even office processes. Clear course policies spell out when AI use is expected, allowed, or off-limits, mirroring the task triage students will face on the job.

D: Develop fluency in AI among the faculty.

Faculty need to understand how to use AI tools themselves. These skills could be developed in hands-on workshops or peer-led seminars where faculty share use cases from different disciplines. The American Association of Colleges and Universities created the Institute on AI, Pedagogy, and the Curriculum, an effort led by Watson, the association's vice president for digital innovation, to work with instructors on strategies for incorporating generative AI into the classroom.

"If you're a conventional educator, AI should be breaking the way you teach," said Andrew Maynard, a professor in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society at Arizona State University.

D: Design creative uses of AI both within and between disciplines.

Empower faculty to find practical ways to make generative AI part of the curriculum. At the University of California at Santa Cruz, Benjamin Breen, an associate professor of history, uses simulation experiences in his courses, where students use ChatGPT to generate conversations around an historical moment—from Pompeii to the Cuban Missile Crisis—and then fact-check those for the biases of historical sources.

Other instructors have noted the benefits of using generative AI to create concrete examples for abstract ideas, which make them more relatable and understandable.[20] "When you tell your students to tear it apart and analyze it, they're looking at the technology and they're asking questions about it, too," said Kinservik, the University of Delaware professor.

E: Engage industry and credentialing partners.

In addition to overhauling existing courses, faculty are also supplementing them with short programs, usually just one- to five-hours long, that introduce students to AI tools. These add-ons help students work more efficiently while placing greater emphasis on creativity and communication in their projects.[21]

The programs often confer a certification, which shows what workers can actually do. In fact, 81 percent of global hiring managers say such credentials make it easier to tell if a candidate truly has the skills they're looking for.[22] This is particularly acute in India, where 44 percent of hiring managers ranked professional certifications as the most important factor in demonstrating essential skills, compared with 35 percent in the U.S. and 31 percent in the U.K.[23]

R: Reinforce ethics and reflection among students.

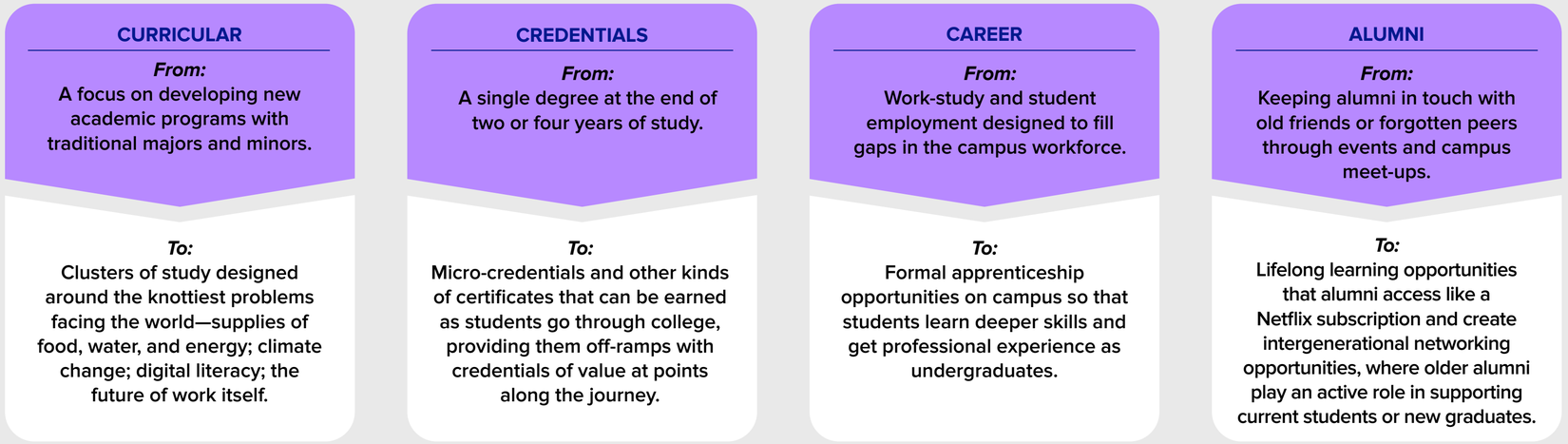
Campuses are learning that true AI literacy combines practical knowledge with ethical awareness, requiring students to understand how to evaluate output, spot bias, and decide when not to use the tool.

"We recognize we need to teach our students how to use AI ethically and effectively. So what are the learning outcomes around that?" said David Slade, the provost at Berry College in Georgia, who attended the American Association of Colleges and Universities workshop.

An essential component of AI literacy is debating its ethical implications and exploring its role in education and the workplace.

Figure 4. Toward an AI-Ready University.

Four areas where institutions can innovate on infusing AI literacy and creativity with learners across the institution:



The Last Word

As artificial intelligence reshapes the workforce landscape, higher education faces both a fundamental challenge and an unprecedented opportunity. The statistics tell a stark story: While generative AI can automate 26 percent of creative work, employers increasingly demand professionals who can harness these tools alongside uniquely human capabilities.

The LADDER framework offers institutions a roadmap for this transformation. But implementation requires more than institutional reform. It demands a cultural shift in how we view education itself.

Students entering college today will graduate into a job market where AI fluency isn't optional—it's essential. Institutions that act now to integrate AI literacy throughout their curricula won't merely survive the disruption; they'll help define the future of work itself. The choice is clear: Evolve to meet this moment or risk irrelevance in an AI-driven economy.

"For a student to navigate four years of college, then to hit the world of work, and not have had any exposure on how to use AI? That's a disservice to the student," said Watson of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. "It's very clear within the world of work that you'll be left behind if you're not using AI."

The time for incremental change has passed. Higher education must embrace this transformation with the same innovative spirit it expects from its graduates.

About the Author

Jeffrey Selingo is a higher education author and strategist who has written three New York Times bestselling books. His next book, *Dream School: Finding the College That's Right For You,* will be 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 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.

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