



# Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use in Academic Operations

## *Between Promise and Practice*

Results of the September 2025 60-Second Survey



**Wendy Kilgore, Ph.D.**

Senior Director of Research  
AACRAO

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# Introduction

**Artificial intelligence (AI)** is being increasingly used for various tasks in higher education and is gaining wider acceptance. This report is based on data gathered from a 60-second survey of AACRAO members regarding the use of AI in academic operations within higher education institutions.

## Definition of Academic Operations

Academic operations encompass many functions and responsibilities in higher-education institutions, including:

- ✓ curriculum management
- ✓ catalog administration
- ✓ classroom scheduling
- ✓ course scheduling
- ✓ faculty assignment and workload management
- ✓ learner-demand forecasting
- ✓ academic-program analysis
- ✓ course-content generation
- ✓ policy-compliance monitoring
- ✓ assessment and accreditation
- ✓ data analysis
- ✓ reporting and learner-pathway optimization



## AI Technology Primer

There are four types of applications of AI in academic operations. Each has a different application.

As survey responses reveal, many institutions cite “lack of knowledge about AI application and ethical consideration” as barriers to adoption. Understanding the various types of AI and their applications can help clarify implementation options. The following framework, adapted from AACRAO’s 2025 research on AI-supported credit mobility<sup>1</sup>, defines the four AI categories, with examples relevant to academic operations.



### Conversational AI

AI systems that process and engage in natural-language interactions with users.

- **Best used for:** Routine inquiries and high-volume learner/staff support that do not require complex decision-making.
- **Academic-operations examples:** Chatbots can be used to answer questions about course requirements, act as virtual assistants to help with registration processes and generate automated communication about academic deadlines.
- **Implementation consideration:** Requires clear boundaries about when to escalate to human staff for complex situations.



### Generative AI

AI systems that create new content based on training data and prompts. They mimic human creativity.

- **Best used for:** Drafting and enhancing written materials; always requires human review for accuracy and tone.
- **Academic-operations examples:** Drafting course descriptions, creating personalized academic plans, generating documentation for compliance processes and producing reports.
- **Implementation consideration:** Output quality depends heavily on the design of prompts and always requires human oversight for accuracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Kilgore, W. and Boeding, J. (2025) “AI-supported credit mobility: Opportunities and challenges in higher-education transfer systems.” American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

<https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/signature-initiative-docs/learning-mobility/learn-commission/ai-support-ed-credit-mobility.pdf>.



## Predictive AI

AI systems that analyze historical data to forecast future outcomes.

- **Best used for:** Resource planning and proactive intervention when there is sufficient historical data available.
- **Academic-operations examples:** Predicting course demand based on past enrollment patterns, forecasting learner success in academic programs and identifying learners most likely to need academic support.
- **Implementation consideration:** Accuracy depends on data quality; may perpetuate historical biases if not carefully monitored.



## Prescriptive AI

AI systems that recommend specific actions to achieve desired outcomes. This is the most sophisticated type of AI. It can help organizations create a blueprint of action to follow.

- **Best used for:** Complex optimization problems in which multiple variables must be balanced.
- **Academic-operations examples:** Suggesting optimal course-scheduling patterns, recommending academic interventions for learner success and proposing resource-allocation strategies.
- **Implementation consideration:** Requires strong data infrastructure and clear parameters for acceptable recommendations.

These four AI types are not mutually exclusive. Institutions may deploy more than one type simultaneously. For example, a chatbot (conversational AI) might use generative AI to craft responses and predictive AI to route complex inquiries to appropriate staff members.

## The 60-Second Survey

A 60-second survey was sent to AACRAO members who are academic-operations professionals at U.S. institutions in September 2025. It asked these professionals to share their institution's approaches to AI implementation in support of academic operations, current usage patterns and future plans. **We received 167 institutional responses.**

As seen in the survey findings that follow, early adopters are most frequently using generative AI for content creation (25 institutions) and conversational AI through chatbots (22 institutions). Predictive and prescriptive AI applications are still emerging in the context of academic operations.

## Two Important Questions to Ask

- 1 **Should institutions invest in AI to support academic-operations functions now, or should they wait?**
- 2 **How do institutions determine if they are ready for AI to support academic operations?**

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**The Bottom Line:** While 85% of respondents believe AI can improve the efficiency of academic operations, most cite resource constraints and knowledge gaps as primary barriers. Eleven percent currently use it. Many report they are in the early stages of implementation, with measurable outcomes still emerging.

Decision-making extends beyond simply choosing from available technologies. As noted in a recent HigherEdDive article<sup>2</sup> there is a “flooded marketplace” of AI products advertised for higher education functions. This can make it difficult for institutions to distinguish between genuine AI solutions and tools with superficial “AI-washing.” AI washing is a deceptive marketing practice that promotes a product or service by overstating the role of artificial intelligence.

AACRAO research reveals “many institutions lack the foundational elements necessary for successful AI implementation.” This includes integrated systems, quality data standards and standardized processes.<sup>3</sup>

The timing challenge adds another layer of complexity. Higher education’s traditional “2-to-4-year policy-development cycles . . . conflict directly with AI’s rapid evolution.”<sup>4</sup> This may require institutions to develop more agile approaches to change management while maintaining academic integrity and thorough evaluation processes.

Given the sample size, data shared in this report should be viewed as **exploratory** rather than **conclusive**. Data represent a valuable *initial* examination of AI’s emerging role in academic operations across higher education. These data offer a useful perspective for institutions considering the implementation of AI to enhance academic operations.

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<sup>2</sup> Unglesbee, B. (Sept. 25, 2025) “The difficult human work behind responsible AI use in college operations” HigherEdDive. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/human-work-responsible-ai-use-college-operations-nacac-2025/761062/>

<sup>3</sup> Kilgore, W. and Sharp, K. (2025) “From research to vision to reality: A blueprint toward a learner-centered credit mobility ecosystem.” American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. <https://www.aacrao.org/research-publications/aacrao-research/a-blueprint-toward-a-learner-centered-credit-mobility-ecosystem>

<sup>4</sup> See note 1

# Current Institutional Approaches to AI in Academic Operations

*This section represents all survey respondents.*

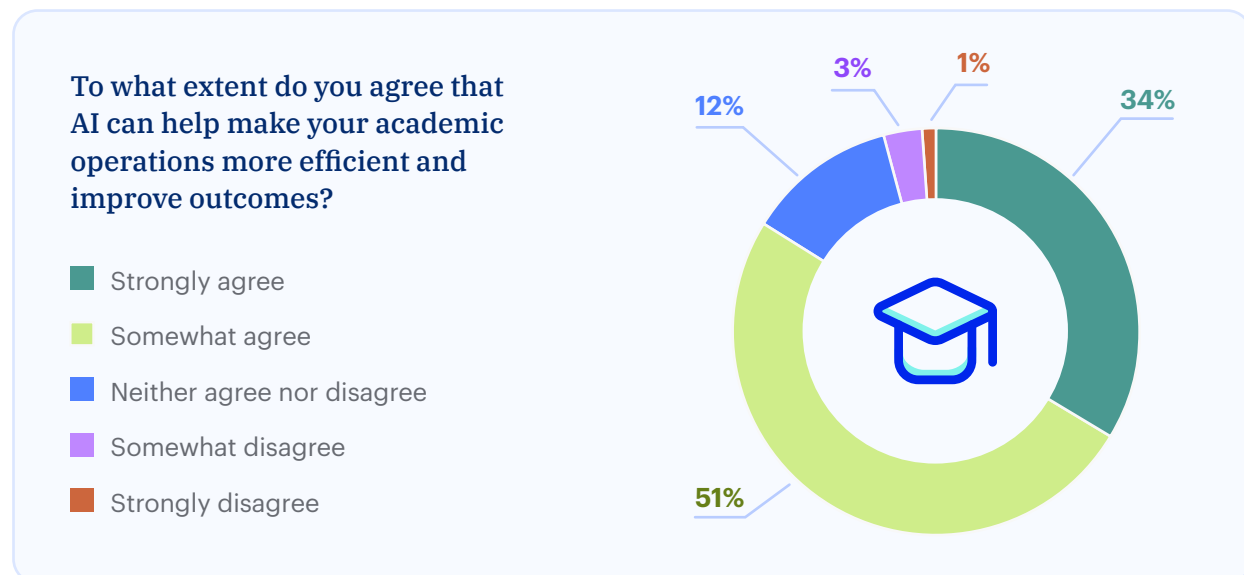
The previous section outlined the strategic challenges institutions face—from navigating a flooded marketplace to addressing foundational infrastructure gaps. The following section reveals how institutions are actually responding. Data paint a picture of cautious optimism. Widespread recognition of AI’s potential coexists with varied approaches to governance and implementation. This reveals both the promise and complexity of institutional change in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Understanding the current landscape of AI adoption in academic operations requires examining implementation rates, organizational structures, decision-making processes and institutional sentiment that shape adoption patterns.

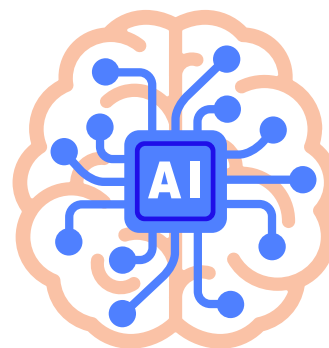
## Confidence in AI’s Potential to Support Academic Operations

**Despite implementation challenges, institutional confidence in AI’s potential remains strong.**

Eighty-five percent of respondents agree (either strongly or somewhat) that AI can help make academic operations more efficient and improve outcomes; 4% disagree. Specifically, 34% strongly agree, 51% somewhat agree, 12% neither agree nor disagree, 3% somewhat disagree and 1% strongly disagree.



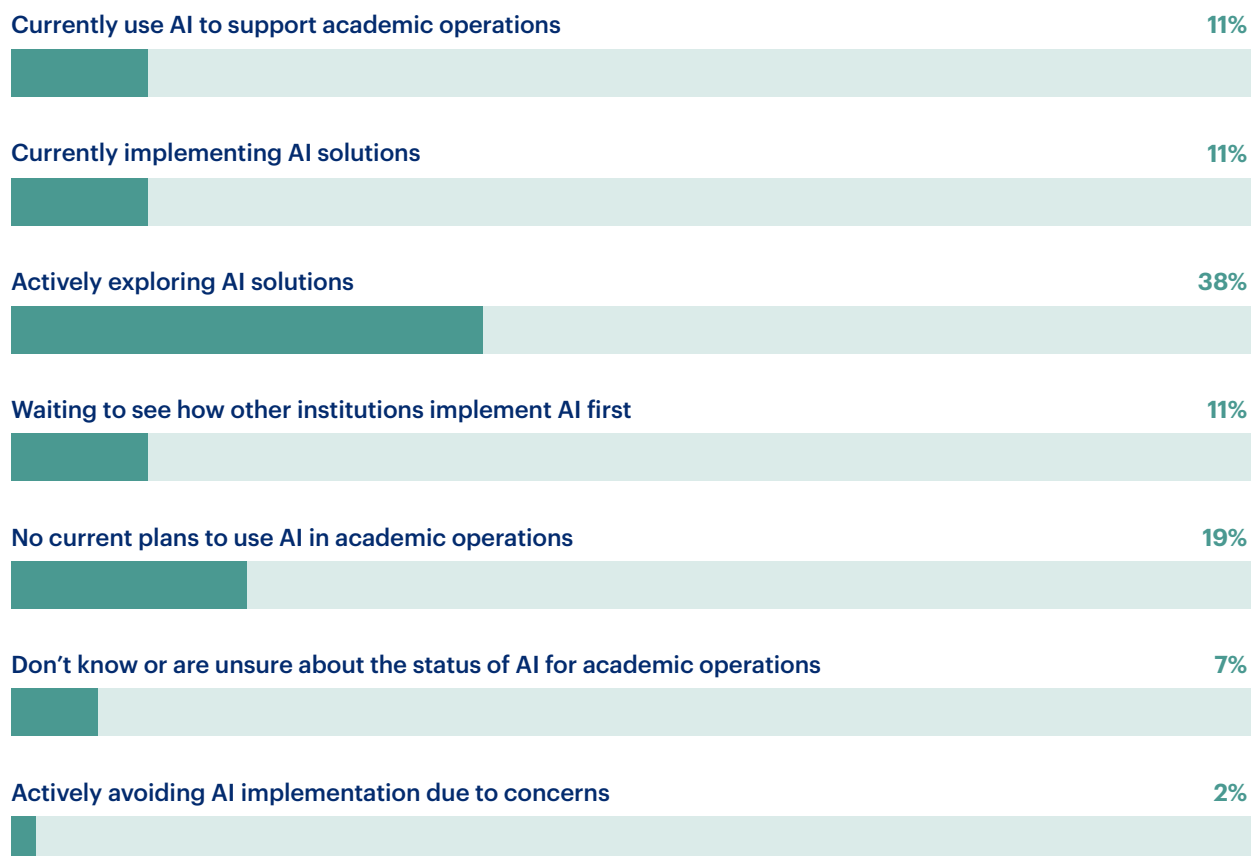
This level of confidence in the potential for AI to improve efficiency of academic operations is similar to 94% of respondents who expressed the same opinion about AI’s potential related to credit-mobility.<sup>5</sup> This widespread belief in AI’s value provides important context for understanding the gap between sentiment and action reflected in current adoption rates.



## Current State of AI Implementation

**While confidence is high, actual implementation remains in early stages across most institutions.**

What is your institution’s overall approach to AI in academic operations (curriculum management, catalog administration, classroom scheduling, course scheduling, etc.)?

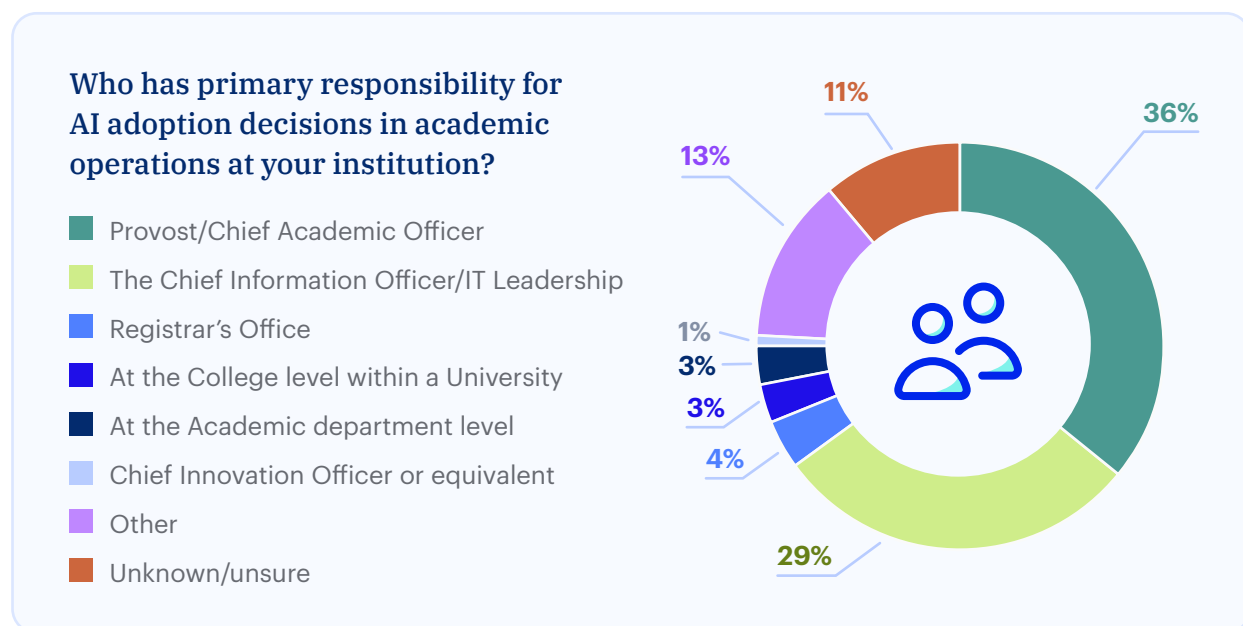


<sup>5</sup>See note 3.

## Decision-Making Authority

**Those responsible for making a decision about using AI to support academic operations vary significantly across institutions.**

The Provost or Chief Academic Officer, such as Provost or VP for Academic Affairs, holds this responsibility at 36% of institutions. The Chief Information Officer or IT Leadership is responsible at 29% of institutions. Smaller percentages report decision-making authority resting with the Registrar’s Office (4%), at the college level within a university, such as a Dean or designee within a college (3%), at the academic-department level (3%) or with a Chief Innovation Officer or equivalent (1%).



Thirteen percent of respondents selected “Other.” Those responses reveal collaborative decision-making models involving multiple stakeholders, including joint academic affairs and IT leadership, committee-based approaches, and in some cases, cabinet-level or presidential involvement. Eleven percent indicated they do not know, or are unsure, who would be responsible for this decision.

## The AI-Tool Approval Process

The varied approaches to decision-making authority are reflected in equally diverse approval processes for AI tools. Specifically, 37% say the approval process for AI tools is the same as that for any other tool, 30% report it depends on the tool and 18% say different stakeholders are brought into the decision process. Fifteen percent are unfamiliar with their institution’s approval process.

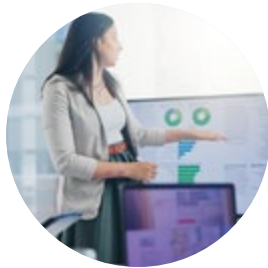
# Institutions Currently Using or Implementing AI for Academic Operations

Among the 38 (25%)<sup>6</sup> of institutions currently using or implementing AI—a small sample—most are in early stages of adoption. Among these early adopters, most launched implementations within the past 2 years. They report facing challenges related to resource allocation, process integration and navigating a rapidly evolving landscape.

## Current AI Implementation: Tools, Applications and Timeline

**Adoption patterns show that generative AI for content and chatbots are most common among this small group of early adopters.**

Generative AI tools for content creation (25 institutions) and AI-powered chatbots for learner and staff support (22 institutions) dominate the technology landscape. This is followed by AI-enhanced reporting tools and automated workflow systems (12 institutions each). More specialized applications, such as machine learning for learner-success prediction, have seen limited adoption (four institutions).



**These tools primarily support data analysis and reporting (21 institutions), learner-demand forecasting (15 institutions) and curriculum management (13 institutions).**

Policy-compliance monitoring, learner-pathway optimization, course scheduling and catalog administration are each used at 10 or 11 institutions. Faculty assignment and workload management remain the least adopted applications; only four institutions report implementation.

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<sup>6</sup>This section represents responses from the 25% (n = 38) of survey participants whose institutions currently use, or are implementing AI to support academic operations. Given the small number of institutions currently using (n = 19) or implementing (n = 19) AI to support academic operations, counts rather than percentages are reported to avoid misleading impressions about adoption rates. In addition, this percentage is a calculation based on respondents who were aware of the status of AI for academic operations at their institution (n = 155). Twelve of the 167 respondents were not familiar with their institution's overall approach to AI for academic operations.

## Most implementation is recent, which is not unexpected given the recent emergence of AI for academic operations.

Two institutions report using AI for 2 to 3 years. Eighteen of the 38 institutions launched AI use within the last year. Twelve institutions have used AI for 1 to 2 years, 10 for 6 months to 1 year and 8 for less than 6 months. See Appendix A for a breakdown of applications, tools and implementation timelines.

### 18 of the 38 institutions launched AI use within the last year.



## Implementation Challenges for Current Users

### Despite progress, current adopters face implementation challenges.

The time and resources needed to implement AI emerge as the primary challenge (21 institutions), followed by uncertainty about how AI fits into existing processes (15 institutions) and budget constraints (10 institutions). Eight institutions report feeling overwhelmed by the number of options and the rapid pace of change in AI technology. Seven cite institutional policies as barriers, and five note available tools do not meet their needs.

Among the four institutions reporting “other” challenges, responses include the need for scalability and ongoing support to maintain solutions at scale, accuracy concerns, the time required for training agents, creating effective prompts while ensuring result accuracy and a lack of clarity on appropriate-use cases. See Appendix A for data on implementation challenges.

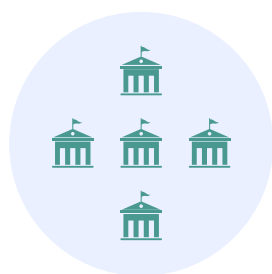


**The time and resources needed to implement AI emerge as the primary challenge.**

## AI-Related Policy Status Among Current Users And Implementers

### Policy development of current AI users is fragmented.

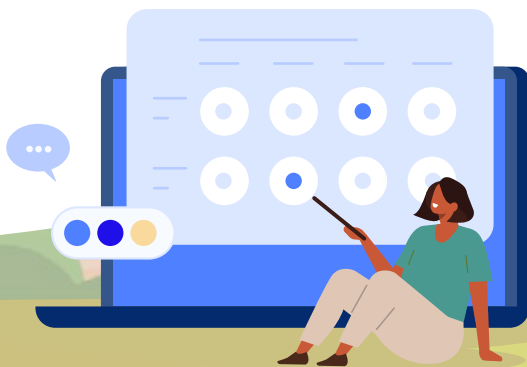
Nine institutions have general AI policies that include academic operations, while another nine are currently developing policies. Only five institutions report having comprehensive AI-governance policies that cover academic operations. Four institutions have established no formal policies, three rely on informal best practices and recommendations, and one uses department-specific guidelines for AI use. See Appendix A for complete policy-status data.



**Only five institutions report having comprehensive AI-governance policies that cover academic operations.**

## Measurable Outcomes

Among institutions that use AI in academic operations, many report being too early in their implementation to measure concrete outcomes. Those reporting measurable results include improved efficiency in learner outreach and enrollment processes, enhanced written materials and documentation quality, better data-analysis capabilities and the development of specialized chatbots for faculty/staff guidance and learner support. A few institutions noted positive impacts on enrollment funnels and workflow automation, though most emphasized their implementations are still in the early stages.



# Nonuser Barriers and Future Plans for AI Use in Academic Operations

The 117 institutions not currently using AI for academic operations represent 75% of survey respondents.<sup>7</sup> While they cite barriers ranging from budget constraints to data-privacy concerns, **most demonstrate a clear interest in future adoption, with 55% planning to implement AI use within 3 years.**

## Barriers to AI Adoption

When asked about barriers to AI adoption, many barriers were cited. These include:



<sup>7</sup> This percentage is a calculation based on respondents who were aware of the status of AI for academic operations at their institution (n = 155). Twelve of the 167 respondents were not familiar with their institution's overall approach to AI for academic operations.

Among those reporting “other” challenges for nonadoption, responses include lack of time and bandwidth to research or implement AI initiatives, concerns about maintaining personal, high-touch campus atmosphere, use is still being explored or in early development phases, competing priorities take up available resources, concerns about loss of human contact and critical-thinking skills, lack of knowledge about AI applications and ethical considerations.

## What Would Enable AI Implementation?

When asked what would need to change to enable adoption, responses reinforce these barriers while providing additional specificity.



**Stronger leadership and governance structures** are needed to champion AI initiatives. Many note a lack of dedicated personnel or executive buy-in to drive implementation.



**Resource constraints** both financial and temporal—are significant concerns as institutions struggle to fund new tools and allocate staff time amid competing priorities.



**Proven Results and Best Practices**—Respondents emphasize the need for proven results and best practices from peer institutions before committing to adoption. They seek clear demonstrations of ROI and reliability.



**Security, data governance and trustworthiness** concerns are repeatedly mentioned, particularly regarding data privacy and the accuracy of AI outputs.

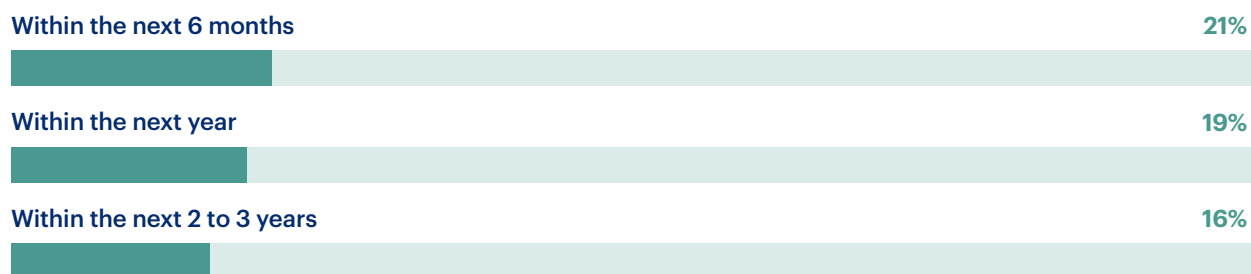


**Cultural change and training** are needed to overcome stakeholder skepticism and to ensure a sufficient understanding of AI capabilities.

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### Despite these barriers, interest in implementation remains strong.

Among the 55% of respondents who indicated their institution has plans to implement AI, they plan to pursue this within:



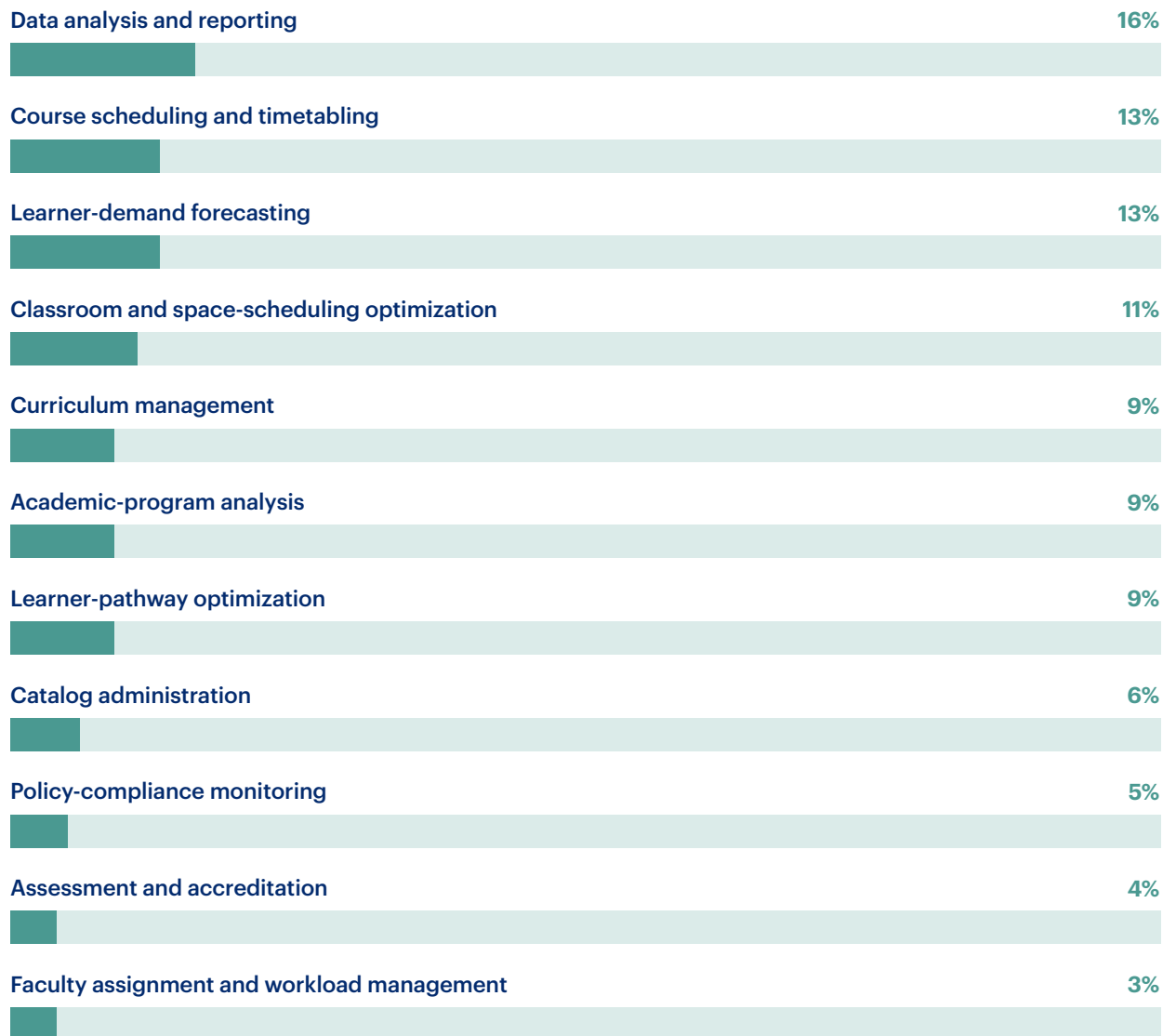
An additional 34% indicate they may implement AI.



11% percent have no current plans for AI adoption.

## Priority Applications for Future AI Adopters

Among institutions considering AI for academic operations, functional priorities reflect immediate operational needs and strategic interests:



See Appendix B for detailed data from nonusers.

### Many respondents emphasized wanting solutions that could save time on manual academic-operations processes and improve operational efficiency.

**Note:** Transfer-credit evaluation and transcript processing are the second most frequently mentioned AI applications in open-ended responses. However, these functions fall under credit mobility rather than academic operations, as defined in this survey. This finding aligns with AACRAO's AI use for credit-mobility research, showing 94% of higher-education professionals recognize AI's transformative potential in credit evaluation.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See note 4.

# Assessing Your Institution's AI Readiness for Academic Operations

Drawing on insights from the *HigherEdDive* article, AACRAO's AI credit-mobility research, white paper<sup>9</sup> and the data from this survey, the following self-assessment translates results and field priorities into action areas and diagnostic questions to evaluate your institution's AI readiness for academic operations.

<b>Use case</b>	What specific academic-operations problem are you trying to solve? Could your existing team or tools solve this problem without AI?
<b>Data quality and standards</b>	Are your data systems standardized and machine-readable?
<b>Process standardization</b>	Do you have clear, consistent operational processes?
<b>Vendor evaluation</b>	Are the AI features real and ready for prime time, or are you becoming a beta tester in the "flooded marketplace" of AI products?
<b>Resource assessment</b>	Do you have the necessary technical expertise and time required for proper implementation and ongoing monitoring?
<b>Technology foundation</b>	Have you completed infrastructure optimization, including configuration audits and integration corrections?
<b>Stakeholder alignment</b>	Who needs to be involved in AI adoption decisions? Do you have their buy-in?
<b>Policy readiness</b>	Do you have AI governance policies in place, or are you creating them as you go?
<b>Marketplace navigation</b>	How are you distinguishing between genuine AI solutions and tools with "AI-washing" in the saturated marketplace?
<b>Funding strategy</b>	Have you secured adequate funding?
<b>Training pipeline</b>	Do you have plans for staff training?

<sup>9</sup> See note 3.

## Assistance the Field Is Asking For

Respondents want to learn from the actual experiences of early adopters, rather than theoretical frameworks.



**Best practices and real-world examples**—Compile and share case studies from institutions using AI, including successes and failures.



**FERPA and compliance guidance**—Provide clear direction on navigating FERPA requirements, data-privacy concerns and ethical considerations when implementing AI tools.



**Vendor evaluation support**—Help with vendor assessment, curated lists of available AI tools and guidance on determining which solutions are implementation-ready versus those still in development.

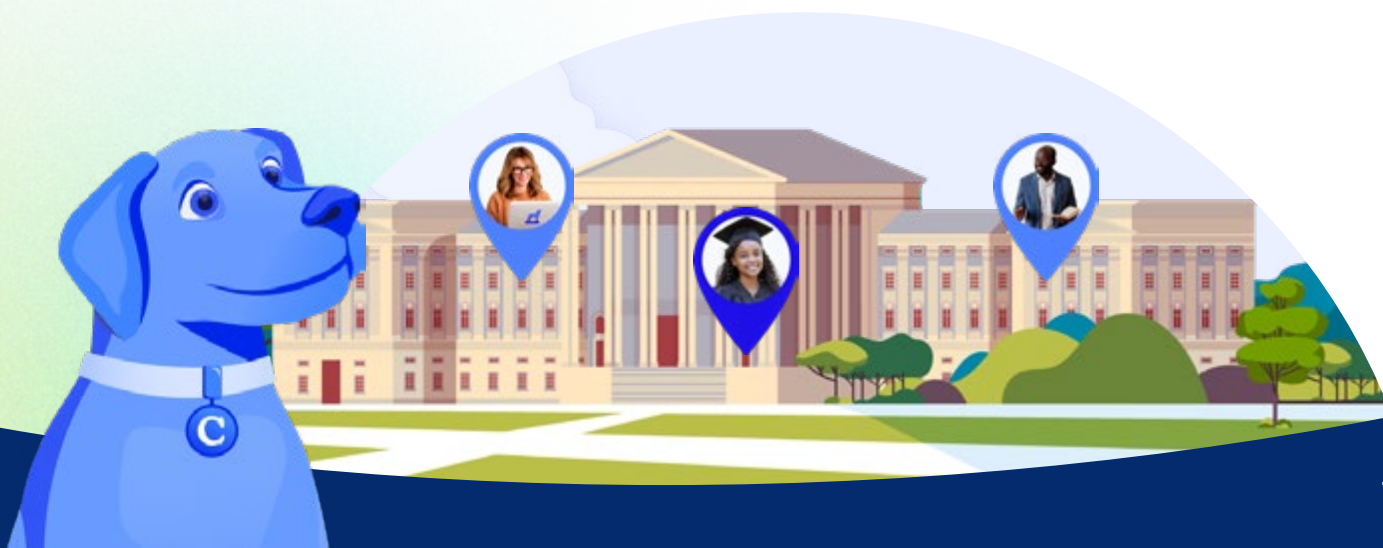


**Educational programming**—Participate in webinars, workshops, roundtables and conference sessions focused on AI implementation, including training on practical skills, such as writing prompts and technical requirements.



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**This research is made possible in part by collaboration with Coursedog**



## Appendix A

### Detailed Data on Current AI Users and Implementers

*This appendix provides a complete breakdown of data from the 38 institutions currently using or implementing AI to support academic operations.*

#### Applications of AI Already in Use or Being Implemented for Academic Operations

- 21 institutions - Data analysis and reporting
- 15 institutions - Learner-demand forecasting
- 13 institutions - Curriculum management
- 11 institutions - Policy-compliance monitoring
- 10 institutions - Learner-pathway optimization
- 10 institutions - Course scheduling/timetabling
- 10 institutions - Catalog administration
- 9 institutions - Course-content generation/editing
- 9 institutions - Academic-program analysis
- 8 institutions - Classroom/space-scheduling optimization
- 6 institutions - Assessment and accreditation
- 4 institutions - Faculty-assignment and workload management

#### Current AI Tools Already in Use or Being Implemented for Academic Operations

- 25 institutions - Generative AI for content creation (ChatGPT, Claude)
- 22 institutions - AI-powered chatbots for learner/staff support
- 12 institutions - AI-enhanced reporting tools
- 12 institutions - Automated-workflow and approval systems
- 10 institutions - Data visualization and analysis platforms
- 10 institutions - Predictive analytics for enrollment/demand forecasting
- 7 institutions - Natural-language processing for policy/catalog text
- 7 institutions - Automated-scheduling optimization tools
- 4 institutions - Machine learning for learner-success prediction
- 7 institutions - Other

### Length of Time in Use

- 8 institutions - Less than 6 months
- 10 institutions - 6 months to 1 year
- 12 institutions - 1 to 2 years
- 2 institutions - 2 to 3 years

### Implementation Challenges for Current Users

- 21 institutions - Time and resources needed to implement
- 15 institutions - Unsure how AI fits into our processes
- 10 institutions - Budget constraints
- 8 institutions - Overwhelmed by the number of options/rate of change in AI
- 7 institutions - Institutional policies
- 5 institutions - Tools on the market do not meet our needs
- 4 institutions - Other

#### **“Other” challenges include:**

- scalability and support to use and maintain solutions on scale
- accuracy concerns
- time taken to train agents, create effective prompts and ensure accuracy of results
- lack of clarity on the appropriate use

### AI-Related Policy Status among Current Users and Implementers

- 9 institutions - General AI policy that includes academic operations
- 9 institutions - Currently developing policies
- 5 institutions - Comprehensive AI governance policy covering academic operations
- 4 institutions - No formal policies have been established
- 3 institutions - Informal best practices and recommendations
- 1 institution - Department-specific guidelines for AI use

## Appendix B

### Detailed Data on Nonusers

*This appendix provides a complete breakdown of data from the 117 institutions not currently using AI to support academic operations.*

#### Primary Reasons for Non-adoption

- 18% budget/cost constraints
- 17% lack of technical expertise/resources
- 16% data privacy and security concerns
- 15% concerns about AI accuracy and reliability
- 10% waiting for technology to mature
- 7% institutional resistance to change
- 7% regulatory or compliance concerns
- 3% lack of suitable AI solutions for our needs
- 3% no perceived need or benefit
- 4% other

#### “Other” challenges include:

- lack of time and bandwidth to research or implement AI initiatives
- concerns about maintaining personal, high-touch campus atmosphere
- still in exploration or early-development phases
- competing priorities take up available resources
- concerns about loss of human contact and critical thinking skills
- lack of knowledge about AI applications and ethical considerations

#### Future Implementation Plans

- 20% plan to implement within the next 6 months
- 19% plan to implement within the next year
- 16% plan to implement within the next 2 to 3 years
- 34% may implement, depending on various factors
- 11% have no current plans to implement

## Top Priorities for Institutions Considering AI for Academic Operations

- 16% data analysis and reporting
- 13% course scheduling/timetabling
- 13% learner-demand forecasting
- 11% classroom/space-scheduling optimization
- 9% curriculum management
- 9% academic-program analysis
- 9% learner-pathway optimization
- 6% catalog administration
- 5% policy-compliance monitoring
- 4% assessment and accreditation
- 3% faculty assignment and workload management
- 3% course-content generation/editing

### AACRAO Resources

Need practical guidance for better academic operations? AACRAO's publication *Academic Operations: The Role of the Registrar* includes comprehensive guidance on key functional areas. Explore this and other resources in the AACRAO Online Bookstore.

Struggling with faculty buy-in? AACRAO Consulting specializes in change management. Contact AACRAO Consulting at [consulting@aacrao.org](mailto:consulting@aacrao.org).

Want to chat with other academic operations professionals? AACRAO's Exchange Community is a great way to connect with others doing this work.

### Want to shape future research?

Contact Wendy Kilgore at [wendyk@aacrao.org](mailto:wendyk@aacrao.org) with your AI challenges and success stories.

**Recommended Citation:** Kilgore, W. (2025). *AI in Academic Operations: The Reality Check on Implementation, Challenges, and Future Directions*. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Washington, D.C.

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